

Mary and Spirituality

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A phrase like “Marian Spirituality” is enough to make some people uneasy. Is there not just one spirituality, namely Christian? The issue is not only extremely important but also somewhat complex.

Spirituality

There is a growing literature on the theme of Mary and spirituality.¹ But we need to be alert to several approaches and aspects of the theme. Spirituality is a word that has become quite chameleon: it takes on a different hue when used about various schools or movements identified by a period, place, or institution (e.g. desert, medieval, Dominican, French spiritualities). It is applied to the appropriate response of various states of life (e.g. single, married, clerical, religious spiritualities); it can mean a focus on some aspect or revelation of the Church's life or it can draw attention to the life of some of its members (e.g. Eucharistic, liturgical, liberation, feminist spiritualities). There is also what one might term “secular” and New Age usages: many people will claim that they are not religious but they do have spirituality.

We would need to look at some modern writers to clarify for ourselves the concept of spirituality and thus be in a position to see what a Marian spirituality might involve. Sandra Schneiders who is a strong proponent of spirituality as an academic discipline with its own identity² notes:

Spirituality as a lived experience can be defined as a conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives.., when the horizon of ultimate value is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ and communicated through the Holy Spirit, and the project of self-transcendence, is the living of the paschal mystery within the context of the Christian community, the spirituality is specifically Christian and involves the person with God, others and all reality according to the understanding of these realities that is characteristic of Christian faith.³

Basic to Christian spirituality is the response to God's prior call. Spirituality is experiential and naturally tends to flower in relationships.

There are some preliminary notions that we can clear up immediately. We need to distinguish Marian devotion and Marian spirituality. More than thirty years ago Wolfgang Beinert

¹ See S. De Fiores' heavily foot-noted *Maria nella vita secondo lo Spirito*, (Casale Monferrato: Edizioni Piemme, 1998) and the useful bibliography attached to Jestis Castellano Cervera, O.C.D. “La espiritualidad manana: Una perspectiva actual” in B. Coccia ed. *In Communion with Mary: Our Heritage and Prospects for the Future*. Sassone Seminar June 2001. (Rome: Edizioni Carmelitane, 2003) pp. 105-108.

² See Schneiders' “The Study of Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline,” *Studies in Spirituality* 8 (1988) pp. 38-57. See also following note.

³ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods, and Types” in P. Sheldrake, ed. *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (London: SCM, 2005) p.1.

warned that the crucial issue is to go to the gospel so as to go to Christ and through him to the Father:

Marian devotion has pastoral and existential worth when it reflects this end and is capable of achieving it, we can thus pose the problem of Marian spirituality in this way, which may not please everybody. The formula is this: Marian piety is not identical with devotion to the Virgin; renewal of the later will not automatically renew the former. Marian piety does not in the first place consist of pilgrimages, images, litanies, Marian hymns ... the essence of Marian spirituality is truly found not in the fact that a person prays to Mary, but rather that person prays like Mary. Mary is never the goal but only the model of Christian existence; in that she cannot be replaced.⁴

Here Beinert privileges piety over devotion, and suggests at best that Marian spirituality belongs to *pietas* as he describes it, rather than to devotion.

The Spiritualities of Mary

We need to make a distinction by the spirituality of Mary and Marian spirituality. With Jesús Castellano Cervera we can speak of a descending Mariology which illuminates her predestination and mission; an ascending Mariology as she moves towards the consummation of God's plan for her.⁵ We examine both the spirituality of Mary and Marian spirituality with the modern lenses of scripture, theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, anthropology; we should also take into account of new directions of John Paul II in *Redemptoris Mater*, directing us toward the evangelical figure of Mary, her presence in the Church, and her maternal mediation.⁶

When we look at the spirituality of Mary, we see the great themes of election and grace, freedom and response, she is the woman of faith and servant of the Lord; she embarks on a journey that involves light and darkness; she is the contemplative united to the Spirit and to her Son; she is one of the *anawîm* in solidarity with all peoples, she is indeed *la mujer para los demás* (a woman for others) in the felicitous phrase of Father Jesús.⁷ These themes can be further developed and enriched by contemporary Trinitarian insights.

The idea of the images of Mary⁸ can be developed to show how Mary responded to God. We can see her, firstly as God's **servant** following the great lines given by Isaiah (42; 49; 50; 53). Like the Servant of Yahweh she was 'chosen and called by God'; she remains faithful despite distress. If we are invited to see ourselves conformed to the image of the Servant of Yahweh, we can surely see Mary mirrored in this prophetic figure. Her loyalty has led to the enrichment and salvation of all God's children. Mary is *the* servant. Service is not a univocal concept today; it is not appreciated our culture. Some kinds of service are acceptable, but the word "servant" is not. One can see parallels between the Christological slavery/service in Philippians 2 and the Annunciation in which Mary declares herself to be God's slave. (Luke

⁴ Beinert refers to Marian piety as Frömmigkeit and distinguishes it from devotion to Mary (*Marienverehrung*). *Maria heute ehren: Eine theologisch-pastorale Handreichung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1977). pp. 13-15.

⁵ Jesús Castellano Cervera, "La espiritualidad mariana," p. 77.

⁶ Castellano Cervera, "La espiritualidad mariana," p. 85.

⁷ Castellano Cervera, "La espiritualidad mariana," p. 95.

⁸ Christopher O'Donnell, O.Carm. "Images of Mary for Today," *Spirituality* 5, pp. 153-156.

1:38 reflects Philippians 2:7). One can also compare the use of the word *doulos* (slave). In Matthew 20:26-28 and Philippians 2:7-8 with Luke 1:38 – *doulé* (female slave); service is thus an important feature of her spirituality.

Secondly, we should also point to her service of the **Word**. Luke presents her as receiving God's word, pondering and proclaiming it (see Luke 1:28-55, 2:1-20) she is the **disciple**, even though the title is not scriptural and Mary can be seen as more than a believer in the gospel texts. Vatican II notes: "In the course of her Son's preaching she received the words whereby, in extolling a kingdom beyond the concerns and ties of flesh and blood, she declared blessed those who heard and kept the word of God." (Mark 3:35 – Luke 11:27-28 – *Lumen Gentium* 58). There is too the famous statement of St. Augustine: "it counted more for Mary to be the disciple of Christ and to be the mother of Christ."

Thirdly, she is a woman of faith who believed against odds; we see her faith at Cana and on Calvary (see John 2:5; 19:25-28a), Mary is surely an example of those praised by Jesus: Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe. John 20:29. When we compare the words of Elizabeth and those of the woman in the crowd in Luke we see Mary as a model of faith:

Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb... blessed is she who believed, (Luke 1: 42, 45),
and
Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you. Jesus said: blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it (Luke 11: 27-28).

As Vatican II so beautifully says Mary embarked at the Annunciation on a "pilgrimage of faith" (*Lumen Gentium*: 58) from the Annunciation to Calvary, Easter and Pentecost. Her faith moreover was mediated (through Joseph, shepherds, Simeon and Anna, Jesus at the age of 12 and later in his public ministry – see Mark 3:31-34) she learns God's plan for the infant Church through Peter (Acts 1:12-20) she does not understand, but ponders (see Luke 1:29, 2:23; 2:50; with 2:19, 51).

Fourthly, with many contemporary exegetes we can see in Luke 1-12 the spirituality of the *anawîm*⁹ the privileged little ones (see Luke 9:48, with 1:48 and Matt 11:25) Finally we can see her as a woman of the Spirit (see Luke 1:35) overshadowed (see Luke 1:28, 30) and awaiting the Spirit at Pentecost (see Acts 1:14, 2:104).

These images point to the way in which Mary was blessed by God and to her response, namely to her spirituality.

Marian Spirituality

We have seen Mary's spirituality: now we look at what a Marian spirituality might be. But firstly we need to look a bit more carefully at the notion. Recently Tina Beattie in a short, compressed dictionary article dealt explicitly with Marian spirituality:

⁹ See B. Buby *Mary the Faithful Disciple* (New York–Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985) p. 71. Buby notes that Luke is the evangelist of the Holy Spirit and of the *anawîm*. Further, see Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 55.

Marian spirituality can only be understood as authentically Christian when it is an integral part of the life of faith, it invites the believer to deepen his or her relationship to Christ, to become incorporated into the community of the Church, and to seek a harmonious balance between the active and contemplative dimensions of a faith expressed in prayer and social action.¹⁰

She notes the difference between East and West

Marian spirituality developed along different lines in the Eastern and Western Churches. While the Orthodox Church still draws on the early tradition to represent Mary as an iconic maternal figure who communicates awe and compassion, humility and glory, Western spirituality has reflected cultural and historical influences so that devotion to Mary bears the marks of evolving and sometimes contested beliefs and practices.¹¹

The difference between East and West is even more significant. The East does not evidence the split between theology and spirituality so frequently deplored by Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

In general one can say that Eastern theology is characterized by a tight union (*stretta unione*) between spirituality and dogma, so that spirituality is the vision from within the dogma, whilst dogma is the normative expression of spirituality: dogma without spirituality would be ideology and spirituality without dogma would be pietism.¹²

The recent ARCIC statement concurs:

In the late Middle Ages scholastic theology grew increasingly apart from spirituality. Less and less rooted in scriptural exegesis, theologians relied on logical probability to establish their positions and Nominalists speculated on what could be done by the absolute power and will of God. Spirituality, no longer in creative tension with theology emphasized affectivity and personal experience, in popular religion, Mary came widely to be viewed as an intermediary between God and humanity, and even a worker of miracles with powers that verged on the divine, this popular piety in due course influenced the theological opinions of those who had grown up with it, and who subsequently elaborated a theological rationale for the florid Marian piety of the Late Middle Ages.¹³

We can look more closely at Marian spirituality beginning with contemporary liturgy. In the

¹⁰ Tina Beattie, "Mary and Spirituality," *New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (London: SCM, 2005) p. 424.

¹¹ Tina Beattie, "Mary and Spirituality", p. 425.

¹² E.G. Farrugia, "Spirito Santo e teologia orientale" in *Dizionario dell'Oriente Cristiano* (Rome: Pont. Inst. Orientale, 2000), p. 722.

¹³ *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ. The ARCIC Agreed Statement* (London–Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005) n.43, pp. 40-41.

1986 collection of votive Masses in honor of our Lady there is available General Introduction with draws on *Marialis Cultus* and liturgical texts to speak of the union of the worshipper with Mary.¹⁴ One of the Masses “Mary, Mother and Teacher in the Spirit,” is based on the Carmelite feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.¹⁵ Here there are two main ideas: Mary is model for Christian holiness and she is Mother who draws us on that way.

Many Spiritualities

We have mentioned earlier the multiplicity of spiritualities. Where then does Marian spirituality fit in? But first we need a word about how spiritualities differ. All Christian spiritualities will have common elements: sacraments, especially Baptism and Eucharist; the word of God, prayer, faith, hope, and love, both of God and neighbor. The difference lies not in that one spirituality will have faith and another substitutes hope. The one mystery of Christ, which is a sharing in the life of the Trinity through grace in faith, hope, and charity, is found in a variety of spiritualities, all of them based on the one New Testament revelation. All genuine spiritualities must have the whole of Christian doctrine in an ordered and holy life. But the emphasis will differ, Carmelite spirituality emphasizes prayer, Mary, and the word of God, more perhaps than other spiritualities. Franciscan spirituality has a major focus on poverty and on the humble humanity of Jesus.

To understand how spiritualities are all the same and all different, the best analogy may be from life. We will recognize as being “American” three citizens of the United States who are of different ethnicity. Each will have the same limbs, the same bodily functions, and so forth, but they can be identified both as Americans and as members of their different ethnic groups. The elements are all the same, but the order, the balance, the emphasis will be subtly different. Another example might be yard full of building materials: hundreds of cubic feet of similar blocks, hundreds of square feet of timber, and hundreds of feet of wire, pipes, etc., three builders could take the same materials, even perhaps the same amount of materials, and build very different single story bungalows, each having living space, kitchen plumbing, and two bedrooms, one might have two bedrooms the same size, another might have one large bedroom and a smaller one; the same for the living space related to the kitchen. We would not identify the different houses seeking what extra materials were used in one rather than another. The structure and order would be different.¹⁶

But such considerations about the various spiritualities do not fully apply when we look at Marian and other spiritualities. There is a significant, but often overlooked essay written in 1960 by Hans Urs von Balthasar where he argued that Marian spirituality underlies all others.

A spirituality centered on the attitude exemplified by Mary, is... not just one spirituality

¹⁴ *Collection of Masses on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 2 vols: Sacramentary and Lectionary, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992). Vol. 1, “General Introduction,” n. 13.

¹⁵ *Collection of Masses on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 2 vols: Sacramentary and Lectionary, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), n. 32. Vol. 1: Mass text 249-25 1, preface n.32, p. 148; Vol. 2: Readings, Pny. 8:17-21, 34-35 or Isa 56:1, 6-7 with Psalm 15 and gospel Matt 12:46-50 or John 19:25-27, or general appendix III, 19–Mark 3:31-35.

¹⁶ See Christopher O’Donnell, O.Carm., “Core Marian Themes in the Carmelite Order” in *Carmel and Mary: Theology and History of a Devotion* (Washington: Carmelite Institute, 2002), p. 82.

among others. For this reason, although Mary is an individual believer and, as such, the prototype and model of all response in faith, she resolves all particular spiritualities into the one spirituality of the bride of Christ, the Church. What we learn from Mary, a lesson valid for all times, is that the response of the Handmaid of the Lord to the Word working in her all his will in such a special and unique manner—is not just one particular theme in theology. What is special in Mary’s spirituality is the radical renunciation of any special spirituality other than the overshadowing of the Most High and the indwelling of the divine Word... The idea of making Marian spirituality one among other is, therefore, a distortion.¹⁷

The paradigm of all response to God is thus a Marian one. Balthasar is asserting that any authentic spirituality will therefore be Marian, even if this is not explicated. To be Marian or not is scarcely an option for a genuinely Christian spirituality. If we look at what would commonly be called particular spiritualities, we see that though each has a focus, the whole of any spirituality is really an articulation of Mary’s total “yes,” patterned on her expression of life of the Trinitarian and the practical implications of this foundational response to God’s Word. These are indications in contemporary thought which suggest that authentic spirituality must be Marian. To grasp fully Balthasar’s meaning here we should remember that in the 1960’s he saw the Church as having a Marian and a Petrine dimension. Later he moved to seeing the Church constituted by four founding figures: Peter (institutional), Paul (missionary), John (contemplative/mystical) and James (law and tradition). Mary was not on the same level, but above these, giving each of them their meaning and vitality.

Marian spirituality will always reflect a particular time and culture. Thus in the later Middle Ages, Mary was no longer seen as the majestic maternal presence of the early medieval Church, but as a tender and compassionate mother. In the years following the Black Death, images such as the *mater dolorosa* and the *pietà* suggest an association between the suffering of the people and the suffering of the mother of the crucified Christ.¹⁸

Marian spirituality means adopting a set of values, attitudes, and activities that help us to respond to God’s plan for us and to insert us into the relationship with Mary that Christ wants for us.¹⁹ The concretization of the elements of such spirituality will again reflect times and cultures. It will demand contemplation of her, as well as communion and identification. It will involve taking up the characteristic of her life. In the language of Fr. Jesús, it should give rise to an epiphany of Mary in the life of the Church, so that we too bring forth Jesus in the Church.²⁰

Marian Mysticism

We begin with Spain and its golden age of Mary and of mysticism. There are many excellent studies on Mary in the works of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. In Mariology as

¹⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Spirituality” in *Word and Redemption, Essays in Theology 2* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965), pp. 97-98.

¹⁸ Tina Beattie, “Mary and Spirituality” *New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, p. 425.

¹⁹ Tina Beattie, “Mary and Spirituality”, p. 425.

²⁰ A theme developed by Bi. Titus Brandsma, O.Carm., (d. 1942) in various places, e.g. *Carmelite Mysticism: Historical Sketches*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (Darien IL: Carmelite Press, 1986), pp. 33-34, 59.

in many other respects, St. Teresa of Avila entered into an existing heritage which she made her own and developed. After her mother's death she dedicated herself to Mary (*Life* 1:7). She constantly refers to her own wearing of Our Lady's habit. She had mystical experiences in which Mary appeared to her (*Life* 33:14). She advised imitation of Mary, a theme already abundantly developed in the medieval period. Her notion of prayer as friendship and intimate relationship (*Life* 8:6) is reflected in her Marian devotion. An important feature of her piety is her very strong and close bond with St. Joseph. She also adopted an older practice of seeing Mary as the true prioress of the community (*Relax. spirit.* 25). St. John of the Cross, however, does not mention Mary very often in his extant writings, but the references are highly significant: Mary is the supreme contemplative (*Ascent* 3:2, 10); the Incarnation is pondered through the mind of the eternal Trinity and through the eyes of Mary (*Romance on the Incarnation*).

There were also many other Carmelites writing on Mary in the period 1550-1650. There were some more original writers as in the Zaragoza Monastery of the Incarnation (after 1588). There we should note in particular Maria Escobar (d. 1634) who proclaimed herself a slave of Mary and received many mystical graces in and through Mary. It is well known that Cardinal Bérulle (d. 1629) who brought the discalced nuns to France from Spain in 1604, failed in his attempt to impose the devotion of slavery to Mary on them. This theme in post-Reformation Carmelite Mariology deserves further study; it certainly antedates the "True Devotion" of St. Louis Grignon de Montfort (d. 1716).

In the Low Countries we have the important Marian mystic, Maria de S. Teresa Petijt (d. 1677) and her director the Venerable Michael of St. Augustine (d. 1684) whose mysticism has been described as "contemplative life of God in Mary and of Mary in God." But there is no confusion of the divine and the human: there is indeed union with Mary, but this has its fruition simultaneously in God. The earlier stages of this life, called "Mariform" by Michael, consists in being always alert to Mary and to God, so that one does only what is pleasing to them. This might be said to belong more to the ascetic life, since one can choose to have Mary in view and, with the aid of grace, cultivate a relationship with her, the union with God through Mary, however, is mystical given by God as a special gift.

In Italy we have extensive Marian writing, the Neapolitan Carmelite foundress, the Venerable Seraphina of God, Prudentia Pisa (d. 1699), is yet another with experiences of Marian Mysticism. The writings of St. Mary Magdalene de Pazzi (d. 1607) speak frequently about the beauty of Mary and of her purity, but they are more reminiscent of visions of the Mother of God common to other mystics like St. Teresa than of mystical union with Mary.

The Carmelite Marian mystics have their experiences not only as special and personal gifts from God, but also in order that they might teach the Church. The Mariform mysticism of Mary Petijt is not something eccentric in the history of spirituality; it teaches the whole Church something important about the journey to God. What may not be explicit in other mystics is very clear in Michael of St. Augustine and in Mary Petijt, namely that divine union comes about through a person becoming more closely clothed with the virtues of Mary, and through her continuing presence and accompaniment. Theirs is the most dramatic and the most sublime expression of the truth continually expressed in all Carmelite Marian writings,

namely the motherly presence of Mary accompanies the Carmelite always and growth in holiness is found through opening oneself to her presence and motherly care, the fact that a reading from Michael of St. Augustine I proposed for the Solemn Commemoration of Our Lady of Mount Camel is surely an indication to the Order to reflect on the journey to Jesus through Mary.

Conclusion

In cultivating a Marian spirituality we look to the vision of Vatican II:

In celebrating the annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honors the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, with a special love. She is inseparably linked with her Son's saving work. In her the Church admires and exalts the most excellent fruit of redemption and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 103).

Our Carmelite way has been marked by looking on the Virgin Mary and Mother of God as Mother, Patroness, Most Pure Virgin, and Sister. These are not only aspects of her life that we imitate, they are the ways she comes to us, and we come to her in a relationship of love; in the end, spirituality is about relationships with God who comes to us as Trinity and who has given us Mary as a way. We come to God not just by imitation being like Mary, but with her who is, as the tradition of the Eastern icons constantly shows, the *hodigitria*, the one who points the way, this same tradition points to a parallel between the East and the Carmelite tradition: Mary's protecting veil, *Pokrov*, finds its western counterpart in the Scapular which in its fullest sense sums up the Marian spirituality of the Carmelite Order.