

SURPRISED BY MARY: TAKING A FRESH LOOK AT THE HOLY VIRGIN

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On July 17, 1987 a man named Robert Arthur Cambridge walked into the National Gallery in London with a shotgun under his long coat. He later testified that he had visited several museums that day, looking for the right object on which to unload his anger. When he walked down the gallery that contained Leonardo's painting *The Virgin and the Child with Saint Anne and John the Baptist*, he pulled out his gun and fired one blast into it.

Mary sometimes sparks violent reactions against religion, or her, or God. **Images of Mary can lead to sudden feelings and emotions from people, even those who may not be religious.** Many times I have seen tears on the faces of people in the halls of art galleries standing before paintings of the Virgin, where most observations of religious art are so cool and detached.

Images of Mary have also caused the mentally unstable to come completely unhinged, as, for instance, when in 1972 a man in New York City climbed onto Michelangelo's *Pieta* (which was on loan from the Vatican) and began pounding Mary with a hammer. He hit her in the face, breaking part of an eye, and he severed a finger on the famous left hand of the Virgin—the hand that is tilted up as if to say, "I accept what must happen to my son."

On April 22, 1988, a 51-year-old homeless man walked into a Museum in Munich and sprayed Albrecht Dürer's *Mary as Grieving Mother* with sulfuric acid he concealed in a champagne bottle. The man wasn't caught until a group of school children came upon him. Stunned, one of the students cried out for him to stop, which he did, setting down the bottle and then finding a guard to explain what happened. The man said he attacked the painting "out of revenge," because of deductions that had been made from his pension. But why did he

choose to walk down several long corridors, selecting a painting of Mary to destroy?

She is an easy target – that blithe, unflinching example of faith. That’s why we often don’t like her. But she wasn’t blithe, or unflinching, or credulous, or simple.

What did she first say, at the Annunciation, when the archangel Gabriel came to tell her that she had been specially chosen by God? Mary does not sound like a ready-made disciple. She is not the cookie-cut, already perfect mold into which God was poured. In effect, Mary said:

“What?!”

The text in Luke’s Gospel (1:26–38) is full of words of hesitancy.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

Then the text continues, by saying: “But she was much perplexed. . . . pondered . . . afraid . . . How can this be?” she said.

Sometime after her shock subsided, she actually then said: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

She believed, and in so believing, became the first disciple of her as yet unborn son. Even so, **she was also the first person in the New Testament Gospel accounts to show us that belief does not come without some measure of question and doubt.**

Centuries of tradition have tended to erase that fact, making the images of Mary into unerring and unflinching gazes of certitude, but don’t believe it. Mary is the chief disciple precisely because she shows us how to wait on God, expect God, have awe for God, and hope for God, but not with an easy credulity. Hers was not an unquestioning belief. What is most remarkable is that these expectations of awe and hope—doubt and faith—began at about the age of thirteen!

Mary's verbal consent was in itself, innovative. In the Hebrew Bible when God comes calling, asking one of his people to do something, there is never a depiction of verbal consent. No one asked Moses if he was okay with it. No one asked David if he wanted to be chosen. No one waited for them to respond. It is as if such a response was completely unnecessary. In contrast, Mary listens, hears, questions, and responds as if to stand up and say "Here I am. I agree."

St. Bernardino of Siena, a fifteenth-century Italian preacher, once explained that it was the angel Gabriel, and not Mary, who was dumbfounded by—or, just simply dumb—in the face of what was being said at the Annunciation. According to Bernardino, Gabriel didn't know much of anything about what he had been sent to tell the girl. He was only the messenger. And by Mary's questions and confident responses, she "confounds the beautiful, dumb blond creature who has just flown into her life with his extraordinary news. . . . [I]t is all too subtle for Gabriel's angelic brain to grasp."¹

Now...I know many people no longer believe some of the things that we say about Mary in the Nicene Creed.

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made...*

*For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.*

What a shame, I think, that something so beautiful could become a victim of our Enlightenment rationality. "How do you know for certain that it is true?" "Can you prove it?" are irrelevant questions, I think. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. As we pray, so we believe. I pray the Angelus, particularly in the season of Advent:

¹ This phrase is Ingrid Rowland's characterization of Bernardino's 1427 sermon, taken from "What the Frescoes Said," by Ingrid Rowland, *The New York Review of Books*, October 20, 2005, 37.

The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary,
And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.

Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.
 Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the
 fruit of your body, Jesus.
*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now
 and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

Behold the handmaid of the Lord;
Be it done unto me according to thy word.

And the Word was made Flesh,
And dwelt among us.

Pray for us, O holy Mother of God,
*That we may be made worthy of the promises
 of Christ.*

Pour forth, we beseech thee, O Lord, Thy grace
 into our hearts, that we to whom the Incarnation
 of Christ Thy Son was made known by the message of
 an angel, may by His Passion and Cross be brought to
 the glory of His Resurrection. Through the same Christ
 our Lord. *Amen.*

In the Gospel of Mark, chapter nine, a father of a sick son came to Jesus and asked him for healing: Jesus said to the father, "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

What a sentence! I believe; help my unbelief!

We don't have to know things for certain. We CAN'T know things for certain. Faith is believing and hoping for more belief.

The effect of Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* has been tremendous in our churches. The portrait of Mary Magdalene in the book and in the film (which is now available on DVD) has caused many people to become interested in spiritual things over the last few years. People are desiring to understand things about the early Church that they previously never considered. How was the canon agreed upon? What role did women play in the ministry of Jesus, or in the first

centuries of Christianity? What happened to Jesus and his followers after the crucifixion?

I have seen how these questions have caused some Episcopalians to leave their parishes, disillusioned. But I have also seen how the same questions have driven others to services, to adult education, to explore more. I hope that we can keep asking the questions, and encouraging others to ask them, too.

But I also believe that it will be the Virgin Mary, and not Mary Magdalene, who will revitalize the Church universal in the years ahead. But only if we begin to see her for who she really was.

One of the dominant images of Mary that we inherited from the early Church fathers is of her as a refined, graceful, obedient young woman. Men—who represent ninety-nine percent of the authors who have praised Mary in print over the last two millenia, because the writings of women were rarely preserved—seem to love to focus on the beauty, charm, and grace of the little woman from Nazareth. Pre-marital virginity, which is the only quality we seem to really know for certain about Mary from the initial description of her in the Gospels, takes on much greater proportions in the minds of the men who have admired her. The patristic and medieval commentators on scripture clearly wanted Mary to be the ideal woman, right down to physical type.

One western monk who lived and wrote during the Roman era, explained with great certainty in one of his treatises: “Her complexion was the color of ripe wheat, and her hair was auburn. Her eyes were bright and keen, and light brown in color, and the pupils were of an olive-green tint. Her eyebrows were arched and deep black. Her nose was long, her lips were red and full, and overflowing with the sweetness of words. Her face was not round, but somewhat oval. Her hands were long and her fingers also.”²

Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200-80), the teacher of Thomas Aquinas in Paris, wrote many pages about Mary’s physical beauty, as well, as if it really mattered or was knowable. When he wrote his commentary on the Song of Songs, he saw Mary in the figure of the beautiful woman depicted there. Song of Songs 1:15, for instance, reads “Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves.”

² Epiphanius, quoted in *Spiritual Writings on Mary: Annotated & Explained*, ed. by Mary Ford-Grabowsky; (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2005); 39.

Albertus Magnus went on to explain that every part of Mary's body—including her shoulders, lips, and feet—were lovely.

Another medieval monk, Eberhard of Saxony, wrote these words in praise of Mary's beauty: "God on His throne desired thy beauty and wanted / O crown of womanhood / to look on thee with passion." Bonaventure, one of the earliest followers of St. Francis of Assisi, wrote: "Hail to you, heavenly lily. Hail to you, most graceful rose." In his *Paradiso*, Dante wrote of Mary's lovely smile and charms beyond expression. We find none of this in the Bible.

These qualities of the idealized Virgin became spiritual ideals for centuries of both Christian women and men.

Feminists will rightly point out that we often make the mistake of seeing Mary as little more than subservient to the will of a masculine God, his angels, and the husband who was appointed to care for her. **Mary can easily become what feminist scholars would today call the first of the *domesticated goddesses*—which is not intended to be a complement to her, or to us.** An imposed super-femininity emasculated her strength and wisdom.

But, there are other traditions—traditions that we should know. Mary wasn't just refined and beautiful. Early gospels of the life of Mary—documents that did not make it into the canon of the New Testament—provided background for understanding Mary before the Annunciation. The Christians of the early centuries understood these things, and read these non-canonical gospels about Mary.

Mary of Nazareth did, after all, have an identity outside of what happened to her, then and there, at the Annunciation. Chief among these gospels is a text known as *The Gospel of the Birth of Mary* first written in about 150 A.D., a fascinating text which illuminated Mary's virginity, and her relationship with Joseph. It is also from this apocryphal text that we have the traditions of who Mary's parents were (Anna and Joachim), and the animals that were present at the Nativity, among other things.

The Gospel of the Birth of Mary (which is also called *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, given an unreliable legend that it was written by the same person who wrote the canonical gospel of Matthew) tells of a young girl who was sent to live in the home of the high priest, and who dedicated herself to lifelong virginity, becoming, in a way, the very first nun. The story of her first entering the Temple at age three

goes like this: "And the priest received her, and kissed her, and blessed her, saying: 'The Lord has magnified thy name in all generations. In thee, on the last of the days, the Lord will manifest His redemption to the sons of Israel.' And the priest set her down upon the third step of the altar, and the Lord God sent grace upon her; and she danced with her feet, and all the house of Israel loved her."

We see scenes of Mary teaching the priest in the Temple, rather than the reverse—scenes, in fact, that would have allowed Christians of an earlier era to better understand what was happening when they read the New Testament story of the boy Jesus lingering behind in Jerusalem to learn in the Temple, while his parents were searching for him. Mary had done the same thing as a child.

Mary's wisdom was clear long ago. Up until the time of the Reformation, she is often shown with a book on her lap at the moment of the Annunciation. In Fra Angelico's painting, "*The Annunciation*," for instance, Mary is sitting in a portico with a book on her lap, reading, when the archangel Gabriel, arrives with his heavenly message. She wasn't working in the house, or sleeping, or talking with her parents or friends—she was studying. There are many popular images of Mary at study, throughout history.

She is both a path to God, available to us, as well as a symbol of wisdom in and of herself—a guide. **The more protestant our minds are, the more that we quibble with the simple notion of considering Mary alone—apart from her son, Jesus.** But this doesn't need to threaten the theology of Protestantism; it serves to remind us that we must be remade in the image of the motherhood of God, imaged for us in Mary, just as we have been made in the fatherhood of God, through Christ, the divine Son.

Not only is Mary the chief connection we have to Christ, she is his throne—his "Throne of Wisdom," as it was said during the Middle Ages. When the magi arrived on the Epiphany, Jesus could have sat alone (well, maybe not literally, but figuratively), meeting them on his own terms, a child facing the wisdom of the world. But, why isn't he pictured that way, by the great artists who have taken this subject up? Mary was his birth mother, but she was also his primary companion. We have no biblical stories about Jesus with his playgroup. Mary was his playmate, his teacher, his comforter.

Saints are not only biblical and historical figures from the past that are long gone; they are alive and waiting for us, cheering us on. They are

that marvelous “cloud of witnesses” spoken of in the New Testament book of Hebrews, but even more than that, they are not just watching; they are listening and even accompanying us on the way. This doesn’t mean that we try and reproduce their lives in our own; we have a deeper work of our own to do.

Returning to the canonical New Testament, one sentence from Luke’s Gospel says volumes about who Mary really was: “Mary kept all these things pondering them in her heart” (2:19 RSV). Such a statement does not mean that she simply thought about heavenly things; it says something about her wisdom. She was not a quick or careless thinker. Bernardino of Siena takes this notion a bit deeper, in another passage from that famous sermon delivered in 1427. Bernardino spent two hours relaying to his audience what he called the twelve qualities of the Virgin Mary. Number one was **her intelligence**. Despite our inherited images of Mary as a servant of a masculine God, her wisdom stands out most of all. **That pale-skinned, blue-gowned, lovely-faced serene and refined lady of millions of plastic statues has very little to do with the real Mary.**

Thanks to some scholarly approximations, in recent decades we have come closer than ever to understanding more about the historical person, Mary of Nazareth. Archaeology, sociology, and historical investigations into first-century Judaism and the role of women have helped us to paint a picture of who she might have been. There is Mary (or Miriam, as she would have been called in Hebrew) the Mother of God, the object of devotion and the subject of numerous minutiae of theological speculation, but there is also Mary, the simple woman who became the mother of Jesus. By all of the earliest accounts, she was unmarried and pregnant, poor and insignificant, a woman living in an occupied country. One recent biographical description of her goes like this:

She is thirteen. Short and wiry, with dark olive skin. The trace of a mustache on her upper lip, soft black down on her arms and legs. The muscles are hard knots in her arms, solid lines in her calves. Her hair is almost black, and has been folded into a single braid down her back for as long as she can remember. The weight of it raises her chin and makes her walk tall, as she has learned to do when carrying jars of water or bundles of kindling on her head. You don’t bend under the burden. You root

*into the ground and grow out of it, reaching up and becoming taller.*³

Feminist religion scholar, Mary Daly, who has centered her academic career around the re-defining of words that we thought we already knew, defines *virgin* this way: “Wild, Lusty, Never captured, Unsubdued Old Maid; Marriage Resister.”⁴ Although intentionally provocative—aiming at the prejudices of men—Daly might be closer to the truth than we sometimes think. If Mary’s virginity was life-giving and fruitful, wild and unsubdued, her spirit becomes all the more appealing for us today, and her wisdom all the more penetrating, as well.

Her *Magnificat*, for instance, was a rebellious act of courage. **The *Magnificat* is what we have come to call the short speech that Mary gave, just after the visitation from Gabriel. It is taken from Luke chapter 1, verses 46-55:**

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendents forever.*

Did you know that public readings of the *Magnificat* were banned during the 1980s in Guatemala? The government deemed it politically subversive. The same was true in Mexico

³ Lesley Hazleton, *Mary: A Flesh-and-Blood Biography of the Virgin Mother*; (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004); 1.

⁴ Mary Daly, *Webster’s First New Intergalactic Wickediry of the English Language*; (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); 176.

during the period of time that Graham Greene wrote about in *The Power and the Glory*. The same was true in Spain during their Civil War.

In the early 1600s when Christians were often burned at the stake in Japan, sympathetic on-lookers would quietly intone the *Magnificat* while witnessing the crime.

Mary lived in a country that was a lot like the Japan of the 1620s or the Guatemala of the 1980s. Basic freedoms were denied and to say things that Mary sang with confidence was to act subversively. **When Mary declared that God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones,” anyone listening at that time would have known she was talking about Herod the Great and what was happening in the Roman Empire.**

When she announced that God has “**sent the rich away empty,**” hearers would have immediately thought of Herod—and the powerful—again, and those benefiting from heavy taxation. She was speaking like a prophet.

When she proclaimed that God “**has lifted up the humble**” and “**has filled the hungry with good things,**” Mary’s listeners would have turned their attention to poor people like Mary herself. Had Mary sung this song in Nazareth among the peasants they may have shouted “Hallelujah!” and “Amen!” and rioted.

It was not long after Mary sang her *Magnificat* that those wise men arrived from the East and informed King Herod that an infant recently born would one day become king. We all know what Herod did, his fear was so great.

Mary’s *Magnificat* threatened the powers that be, and that ruled unjustly. No preacher could have said it better!

Jesus echoed her, years later, in his Sermon on the Mount. He surely learned more from his mother than from any other, single person.

We should do away with the modern invention—since the Reformation and then the Enlightenment—that we stand before God alone, face the Last Judgment alone, and we must face up to obedience and fidelity alone before God. Kierkegaard emphasized this side of faith and talked at length about “**the individual**” who is the only reality of faith. I

don't think so. There are saints—and Mary is chief among them—past and present who are in your corner, rooting for you. Praying for each other and living in community are two realities in Christian faith that are not bound by space and time.

Mary doesn't want to be a theological argument. She's not a sticking point. She is the Mother of God and a mother for all of us.

We enter the world ready to see, want, seek, and recognize our mothers. In the West, at least, Eve and Mary are the primary symbols of motherhood. Other images sometimes replace traditional mothers in the human imagination: We have seen eras, for instance, when nation and country become like mother. Also, we often feel the embrace of "mother" on oceans, in forests, and perhaps, cathedrals. Western religion has focused us on two, primary mothers: Eve's motherhood somehow failed, and Mary's motherhood represents a restoration, a kind of wholeness.

If all of this sounds too Catholic to your ear, it is because I want more of a catholic imagination and approach to the world and to my faith. When the Protestant imagination focuses on the gulf that separates us from God, the Catholic imagination sees the sacramental nature of all that is around us. **While Protestant spirituality focuses on the Word of God (preaching it, hearing it, applying it) in order to repair the separation that divides us from God, Catholic spirituality focuses on finding, lifting, and releasing the Spirit of God that is sometimes hidden or latent in the world around us.**

Catholic priest and novelist, Fr. Andrew Greeley, explains:

Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the

*objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace.*⁵

Archetypes of our ancient, religious imagination—inherited from generations of our ancestors—are always with us, bubbling beneath the surface of our conscious selves. The motherhood of God is one of these archetypes, an idea that is common in many religious traditions, as is sainthood, or the possible culmination of the divine and the earthly within us. Not that it will happen today, or even necessarily in our lifetimes, but that it will happen in God’s time.

Both of these archetypes are central to understanding why images and legends of the Virgin Mary, if not dogma about her, still draw us today. In other words, we don’t always “decide” to turn our attention to Mary. It may even be somehow hard-wired into us. **As Rowan Williams recently said, Mary “stands for the making strange of what is familiar and the homeliness of what is strange.”**⁶

The central act of Mary’s life was one in which she was also acted upon by God. She had the option to say no. But she didn’t say no, and her womb became a “strange heaven,” in the words of poet John Donne. This description perhaps best summarizes the feeling that many people, all of us on-lookers, have toward Mary’s life and vocation. It was strange indeed—but a strangeness that we can come to understand more fully.

We should conclude almost where we began, where this all began—at the Annunciation to Mary. This most remarkable event in history is also the most painted one. There are more paintings of the Annunciation than of any other scene in history. And it causes us to reflect: Where does salvation begin and where does it end? Perhaps the answer is that it doesn’t. We are involved in a continuing circle of connections to heaven and earth that began somewhere between the beginning of time, the Incarnation, the Annunciation, and the Cross. And it never really ends. As Rowan Williams explains about icons that picture Mary pointing to Jesus and Jesus looking back at her: “So she looks at us, urging us by her gesture *not* to keep our eyes on her face but to follow the hand that points to Jesus; he looks at her, drawing us back to her face; and the face that is the object of Christ’s loving gaze

⁵ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*; (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001); 1.

⁶ Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin*; (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2002); xv.

is precisely the face that looks not to him but to us, eager for our looking to be turned, converted, to *him*.”⁷

The Annunciation is God at home in us, in the very stuff of us. It is God’s surprising insistence that we are where redemption for the world begins. If the Cross is the accomplishment of salvation, the birth of God in Mary is its consummation. Beginning at the Annunciation, Mary slowly came to understand the strange mystery inside of her, and then all around her. She is the chief symbol of his humanity and her strange heaven is what is possible in all of us.

Still, one might ask: “Why bother? Why is understanding Mary important?” And I want to leave you with this thought St. John of the Cross wrote the following poem to answer the question, Why?

*The Virgin, weighed
with the Word of God,
comes down the road:
if only you’ll shelter her.*

Mary brings us to Christ. She points us to Jesus. And she will do that, again.

⁷ Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things*, 9-10.