

# Mary

## Fruitful in the Spirit

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The seventh in the Series: IMAGES OF MARY TODAY, and the third of four reflections on Mary and the Holy Spirit. Written by Pat Bearlsey SM.

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In the last two articles we have reflected on Mary and the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the Gospel story where she becomes the mother of Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Now let us turn our gaze to the end of the Gospel story where Mary becomes the mother of the Church, the mystical body of Christ. In this article we shall reflect on Mary on Calvary, and in the following articles we shall look at her at Pentecost.

John's Gospel is the only one which places Mary on Calvary. Luke does not mention her there. But then he is the only writer who places her at Pentecost. So in this article we shall concentrate on the fourth Gospel, leaving Luke's evidence for later consideration.

John's Gospel is written from a theological perspective quite different from the one used by Luke. Yet it is very interesting to see how they express the same truths in their own distinctive ways. Whereas Luke spreads the deep truths of Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost over a period of more than forty days, John tends to telescope them all together into his rich depiction of the drama on Calvary.

For John Calvary is the climax of his Gospel story. Paradoxically it is at once the scene of Christ's degradation and his glorification. It is the moment when Jesus comes into his "hour". As Jesus himself said just before the Last Supper: "Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you most solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest." (Jn 12; 23-24)

By submitting to death, Jesus returned to his Father, to the glory whence He came. "Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to pass from this world to the Father." (Jn 13;1 ) Outwardly on Calvary all seemed lost. The disciples certainly thought so. But in reality by dying Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil. They had done their utmost to destroy Him. There was nothing more they could do. But despite their most powerful efforts Jesus still emerged the victor. The Father through the Spirit raised Jesus to glory and victory. "Father, the hour has come: glorify your Son, so that your Son may glorify You." (Jn 17;1)

As Jesus approached this supreme moment He turned to His mother and entrusted her to the care of the Beloved Disciple. This last act of the dying Jesus is rich in meaning at several different levels.

On the one level Jesus, ever true to His nature, is looking to the good of others: He is caring for the welfare of His mother. One could well understand if at this supreme moment in His personal struggle between life and death He became wrapped in His own concerns. But no, He sees His mother standing at the foot of His cross and He knows that with His imminent death, she will be left alone in the world - a widowed woman bereft of her only means of support and livelihood. And in Jewish society of that time, without the modern benefits of social security and pensions, that would mean a condition of great poverty and hardship. And so He turned to the one friend who had remained loyal to Him and entrusted His mother to his care. "And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home." (Jn 19; 27)

At another level we can see that this episode is a final stage in the progressive poverty of Jesus as He undergoes His passion. When He is arrested He is stripped of the support of all

His friends, betrayed by one and deserted by the others. At the house of Caiaphas His reputation is destroyed as He is falsely accused of sedition and condemned for blasphemy. And then before Pilate He is deliberately stripped of every vestige of human dignity so as to arouse the sympathy of the mob - "so disfigured did He look that He seemed no longer human" (Isaiah 52;14) - a cruel plan that went disastrously wrong when they howled for His blood instead (Jn 19;1-6). And on Calvary He was subjected to a last indignity - stripped of His wretched garments, He was exposed to the gaze of a rude and scoffing multitude. His poverty seemed complete.

But as He hung on the cross, Jesus Himself saw that He still had something. His mother was standing loyally there, suffering intensely for and with Him. So that His sacrifice, His poverty, should be complete, He voluntarily gave her away too. In His last act on earth He deprived Himself even of His mother's love, so that totally poor and clinging to nothing of this world He could return to the Father.

How this too must have added to Mary's suffering! What a wrench to her mother's heart to be told by her Son that she must leave Him and cherish another as her son! At that moment she would not have wanted anyone else. All she would have wanted was her own Son in her arms and a stop to His suffering. But He did not accept her comfort. Instead He gave her to someone else.

And she accepted it, as she accepted all the mysterious and hard things that had happened to her ever since she had consented to become the mother of the Messiah. Her faith had never been stronger nor more needed than as she stood beneath her Son on Calvary.

And now after committing Mary to the care of the Beloved Disciple, Jesus knew that all had been accomplished (Jn 19; 28). There was nothing left for Him to do. And so He bowed His head and "gave up His spirit" (Jn 19; 30).

These last few words give us a clue to an even deeper meaning underlying this precious text. The phrase "gave up His spirit" is a rather unusual one in Greek. It obviously means "He died", but the more common expression (which we find in the parallel passages in the Gospels of Mark and Luke) is "He breathed His last". By choosing this unusual expression John is alerting his readers to something of great significance in the death of Jesus.

In giving up "His spirit" Jesus is not merely exhaling His last breath. He is also breathing forth the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Jesus. And on whom does He breathe His Spirit? On that little community of disciples gathered at his feet - his Mother, the Beloved Disciple, and the other holy women. And at that moment the Church was born, for the Church is the community of followers of Jesus who live by His Spirit.

And so in the Johannine scheme of things, the disciples did not have to wait till Pentecost before receiving the Spirit. There was no wait of forty days. There was no time gap between the death of the earthly Christ and the birth of the mystical Christ. As soon as the earthly Christ ceased His mortal life the spiritual Christ came into being in his Church.

Mary thus became the first member of the Church, and in giving her to be the mother of the Beloved Disciple (who represents all disciples) Jesus also made her the mother of the Church.

Confirmation that we are justified in reading this deeper significance into the words "He gave up His spirit" is provided a few verses later. After Jesus died, "one of the soldiers pierced His side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water" (Jn 19; 34).

This incident is presented as the fulfilment of a prophecy made earlier in the Gospel. In chapter seven we read: "On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood there and cried out:

"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me! Let him come and drink who believes in Me. As scripture says: From His breast shall flow fountains of living water" (Jn 7; 37-38)

The evangelist then goes on to tell us what this means: "He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in Him were to receive; for there was no Spirit as yet because Jesus had not yet been glorified." (Jn 7; 39)

Now on Calvary Jesus' hour has come: it is the hour of His glorification. His breast is pierced and living water, the Holy Spirit, flows forth onto Mary and the small group of disciples gathered below, who are now filled with the life of the Spirit. And the Church is born.

The symbolism is rich. Another interwoven thread can be discerned which highlights further the significance of this climatic moment. The water and the blood also signify the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist which have their source in Jesus. The little community of the first disciples are brought to life as the church through the water of Baptism flowing from the side of Jesus, and are nourished by the blood of the Eucharist that streams from His sacred Heart. Thus as He dies Jesus gives His church both life and food drawn from His own body.

St John accomplishes in his Calvary scene what St Luke spread out in his accounts of the Last Supper (Institution of the Eucharist), Calvary (death of Jesus) and Pentecost (coming of the Holy Spirit). What is of special significance for us here is that by placing Mary on Calvary John has shown her to be the one who witnesses to the glorification of Jesus (an Apostle), as well as one who receives the Holy Spirit in the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist (the first disciple).

Thus on Calvary Mary is shown to be mother, disciple and apostle. And this is accomplished by the dying Christ as He breathes forth His spirit on Mary and the newborn Church.