

Mary, Woman of Faith

The second in the series: IMAGES OF MARY TODAY by Pat Bearsley SM

One of the surprising effects of the Second Vatican Council on the life of the Church in recent years has been the dramatic drop in practical devotion to Mary. And this is all the more surprising when we recall that the Council itself spoke most beautifully of Mary in the last chapter of its great Constitution on the Church.

Moreover, Pope Paul VI actively encouraged devotion to her by proclaiming her "Mother of the Church" and recommending a contemporary form of devotion most eloquently in his *Marialis Cultus*. The official teaching on Mary has never been better, Yet it seems to have been met by a resounding silence on the part of the faithful.

But in reality I think that is not so. No doubt there are many reasons for the seeming lack of devotion to Mary, but here I would like to focus on one which is of great significance to us today.

Those who are lamenting the drop in devotion usually compare today's practice in the Church with what obtained in the years leading up to the Vatican Council. They remember The May devotions, family rosaries, the statues and medals, the widespread celebration of the principal feasts of Our Lady, as evidence of a strong devotion to the Mother of God. They would like to see a return to these practices. But that is not likely to happen; it is a forlorn hope.

What seems to have been happening in the years since Vatican II is a change in our appreciation of Mary and her role in the world today. In an earlier article we saw that throughout the history of the Church the Christian perception of Mary has altered repeatedly in response to a changing world and to the shifting needs and aspirations of the people.

Something similar has been happening again in our own time. The former practices of pre-Vatican II years no longer seem relevant to a great many Christians - not because they were wrong in themselves or not appropriate *at that* time - but because circumstances are now different and we have a different appreciation of Mary. The Mary we related to twenty of thirty years ago is no longer the Mary who appeals to us today. Of course Mary herself has not changed - but our perception of her has. And because of this, what was appropriate then no longer seems appropriate now.

But of course for people who still relate to her as they did before the Church underwent the changes of Vatican II, the former style of devotion is still appropriate. There is nothing wrong with it and they should still feel free to express themselves in a way that suits them. But there is no denying the fact that for large numbers of good people today the old practices no longer suit, because they now see Mary with new eyes and relate to her in new ways.

Changes in appreciation of Mary do not occur in isolation. Typically in the history of the Church changes in devotion to Mary follow changes in other areas of Christian life and theology. If we look to significant changes in the Church since Vatican II, we can see at least three areas where developments have influenced our perception of Mary and her place in our life today: the Church's perception of Christ, of herself, and of the needs and aspirations of people in the world today.

Jesus Christ

Advances in our understanding of Mary have commonly followed developments in the theology of Jesus Christ. Her most glorious title, "Mother of God" (Theotokos - literally "God-bearer") was not immediately recognised in the early Church. (The Scriptures do not mention it.) It was only after three centuries of discussion and debate on the divine and human natures of Christ that the Church as a whole felt confident enough to proclaim that Jesus who is truly a man is also truly God (Council of Nicea, A.D. 325). And then since Mary is truly the mother of Jesus, she must also be the Mother of God (Council of Ephesus, A.D. 431).

Similarly in our own time appreciation of Mary has followed the Church's consciousness of Christ. In the so-called "glorious age of mariology" - the hundred years between the definition of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the definition of the Assumption (1950) - the privileges of Mary were seen in close parallel to the attributes of Christ.

Jesus was untouched by sin, both original and personal; Mary too was preserved from original sin and remained sinless throughout her life. Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven; Mary was raised from death and assumed into heaven. Jesus is the Redeemer; Mary is the CoRedemptrix. Jesus is the Mediator between God and man; Mary is the Mediatrix of graces. Jesus is the Word, the Wisdom of God; Mary is the Seat of Wisdom. Jesus is the source of Grace; Mary is the Throne of Grace. And so on.

This suggests that the way the Christian views Christ has repercussions on the way she / he sees Mary too. For the century prior to Vatican II the predominant christology in the Church was "high" - that is, it emphasised the fact that Christ was God. Thus his power and justice - his kingly titles - were important to Christian consciousness. Similarly Mary was exalted as his partner in salvation (though subordinate to him) and she was hailed as Queen.

However, in the wake of the Vatican Council theologians reacted against what seemed to be insufficient attention given to the humanity of Jesus. In recent times christology has tended to be "low" - that is, it emphasised the fact that Jesus was a man like us. And the aspects of him that appeal to us most today are the ones that stress his humanity - for example, that like us he had to suffer and die, that he was a friend to the poor, consoled the unhappy and forgave the sinner. In our wretchedness, pain and unhappiness we turn to him as our friend and our support.

Woman of Faith

Just as Christ shared with us our human condition - like us in all things but sin - so do we tend to see Mary in the same light. The ancient title "Woman of Faith" has new meaning for us today.

For we see that. Mary's spiritual journey had much in common with our own. The Gospels portray her as someone who travelled a road that was often hard and shrouded in obscurity. The "Sword of sorrow" foretold by Simeon (Lk 2,35) did not pierce her heart only on Calvary. By associating herself so closely with the Saviour, she too suffered all the contradictions that he was bound to cause.

She did not always understand what was happening. She had to ponder the events of her life to see God's hand in the darkness (Lk 2.19,51). At times she misunderstood and had to be challenged by her Son, as when she reproached him for staying behind in Jerusalem (Lk 2.41-50), and when she pointed out to him the lack of wine at the Cana festivities (Jn 2.1-10).

She had to separate herself from the love of her life, Jesus, when he set out on his public ministry, leaving her home alone in Nazareth, and again most cruelly when on the cross he gave her over to become the mother of someone else (Jn 19.25-27).

But despite the darkness, the doubt and the not-knowing, Mary never wavered in her commitment to God. "Let it be done to me according to your word" may have been said only once (Lk 1.38), but it summed up her attitude at the Annunciation and right throughout her life. She was completely at the disposal of God, and if at times she could not see the fullness of his plan for her, that did not cause her ever to withdraw her consent or hedge her commitment with reservations or qualifications. There were no "ifs" or "buts" with Mary. Her faith was whole-hearted and strong. She did not turn back or seek an easier path, even on Calvary when all seemed dark and her hopes dashed.

This is a Mary we can all relate to. Fully a woman, she too had to suffer. Her life was not pathed with roses. At times it was very difficult. She knew joy, but she also suffered greatly. She had to live by faith, and at times, (like us) she wondered what God was up to, what he was doing with her life...

We too are like that. We have our joys and our sorrows. At times we feel God is very close to us and we are confident that we know what he is asking of us. But at other times he seems very remote. Things happen to us which don't seem to fit the original plan (as we understood it), and which are hard to reconcile with his abiding love for us. There are times of pain, darkness and anguish. We are thrown back on faith alone. All other comforts and support are taken away. It is in times like these we need someone like Mary, who went through what we are suffering and who knows what it is like. We need the ***Woman of Faith.***