

MARY: CONTEMPLATIVE REALIST

Notes on Feminine Spirituality

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Someone — I think it may have been Cardinal Newman — once described Mary as our only savior from an abstract Christ. What he meant, of course, is that Mary, in her Jewishness, her womanhood, her humanness, provided the vital unifying link between Christ and history, between Christ and flesh, between Christ and earth. To those who would see Christ in terms of some impersonal force or some vague Christ-consciousness, Mary provides the concrete facts that ground Christ in real earth, real flesh, real human blood, sweat and tears. Christ is the son of an obscure Jewish girl. He is the carpenter of Nazareth with hands roughened and stained with varnish and and with sawdust in his beard.

We know all this, of course. Yet, despite our knowing, it is so easy for us to allow Christ to become an abstraction: a disembodied ideal in the vague shape of man, a convenient figure on which to hang our more enlightened prejudices, a useful facade and cover for our own secret ambition to be the savior of the world.

An abstract Christ can be very useful. If we have a penchant for philosophy, Christ and his words can be used to buttress our own rational systems of thought. If we are politically minded, Christ can be used as a striking banner to wave in protest against an unpopular establishment. If we are theologically minded, Christ can be the object of our cool analysis and scrutiny — no longer the God-Man nailed to a cross but a sacred biology specimen pinned to our dissecting table. If we are sentimentalists, Christ — the Christ of pretty posters and of bad religious art — can provide us with warm cuddly feelings; and his words — though never his harder sayings — come effortlessly to our lips. If we are religiously or liturgically minded, Christ makes a splendid figure around whom we can weave our devotional fancies or exercise taste for ritual and rubric.

It is easy — deadly easy — to follow an abstract Christ: a Christ who just happens to side with my own preferences and opinions; a Christ neatly conformed to my own petty image and likeness; a Christ whose presence in my life makes no threat, poses no danger, makes no ultimate demands of me.

Mary is our savior from such an abstract Christ.

Abstraction and the love of abstract things is a peculiarly masculine quality. This is not so surprising when we recall that men, having no possibility of carrying new organic life within them as women do, turn by necessity to works and creations of the mind, to buildings, art, business, law, crime, and the like. Men are not so close to life — to organic nature and its rhythms — as women are.

We can see something of this in the Gospels. Christ's own disciples, mostly men, tended to follow an abstract and idealized Christ. When they were faced with a bloody and beaten Christ on the road to Calvary, when their "abstract" Christ stumbled and bled, when their ideals and dreams were shattered on the cross, the disciples ran away. They could not bear so much reality.

The women remained. In their quiet strength, in their natural familiarity with blood and tears, they found this bloody, beaten Christ a reality to be attended to, a living man needing their comfort and their consolation.

A real Christ was exactly what they understood. Pain, suffering, death — these things they understood, yet not as philosophers sitting back in their study to ponder the eternal verities, but precisely as women, and most importantly as wise women.

Like that mad, wise figure in Yeats' poems, Crazy Jane, they were not appalled or scandalized by the fact, so startling to the masculine mind, that "Love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement." For these wise women — and they knew this not from theory but experience — life began in blood and pain, and as often as not ended in blood and pain. No social reformer, no political idealist, no utopian philosopher would ever convince them otherwise. They knew. They were wise.

It is interesting that the word wisdom, at least in those wise languages that recognize the sex of a noun, is a feminine word: the Greek *sophia*, the Latin *sapientia*, the Spanish *la sabiduria*, or the French *la sagesse*. It is interesting too that these all stem from a single root meaning: to taste, to relish the flavor, to savor. These words all relate to the word sap, the life-juice of a tree, the blood of the plant.

The feminine wisdom of woman is that in place of theories about life — about Christ — she relates directly to the concrete and the real; she drinks the sap of life and experience, whether it be bitter as gall or sweet as wine.

Wisdom seeks, not ideas about Christ, but Christ himself, even an unbeautiful and bloody Christ — a *real* Christ.

It is no accident that the Church has always applied the Old Testament passages about Wisdom (always spoken of as a woman) to Mary the mother of Christ. One of Mary's ancient titles is *sedes sapientiae*: Seat of Wisdom.

Mary's wisdom, the wisdom of woman, consists in her clear and uncluttered openness to reality. Like any woman, she knew an empty space within her, an emptiness waiting to be filled with life; not with an idea or a theory or a plan, but with life, bloody in birth, bloody in death, and often sorrowful.

To the startling message of the angel — that she will mother God's son — Mary rejoins not with a philosopher's question or the theologian's fascination with an interesting paradox. She asks one question — a woman's question: "How shall this be since I know not man?" (A realistic question if ever there was one!) The angel says: "The Holy Spirit will do this." And Mary — wise Mary, Mary the eternal woman — accepts at once in perfect simplicity the paradox that baffles and confounds all of masculine logic and reason: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, Let it be done to me as you say."

Madeleine L'Engle, in her wonderful journal *The Irrational Season*, captures this wisdom in a verse:

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.

At the moment of Mary's YES, the real Christ came into the world. The one the prophets had dreamed of and longed for and described in mighty words became flesh. By her openness to God's reality Mary became pregnant with the creator of life. The unschooled girl made real what mighty prophets could only stammer about as they tried futilely to capture in speech the Unspeakable, to capture in thought the Unthinkable. What these wild visionaries saw only in their dreams, Mary carried alive and kicking in her belly.

Who of us is truly wise? Who of us is willing to let go of his abstract Christ and let the real Christ into our empty hearts? We know only too well that wisdom does not come cheaply. It costs, as T. S. Eliot reminds us, "not less than everything."

Yet Mary shows the way of surrender, of letting go of the clutter of thoughts and ideals about the Christ we would prefer, and letting the real Christ invade the emptiness and solitude we discover within us during prayer. The real

Christ will bring us pain. He will surely break our hearts. He will shatter all our treasured illusions. Yet he will also never abandon us. He will never stop loving us.

The abstract Christ that we cling to may be inspiring, noble, attractive; it may fill our life with great plans and hopes and ideals. But the one thing our abstract Christ will not, and cannot do, is love us. An abstract Christ cannot fill us with the sap of life, cannot bring us to relish and savor the whole of earthy creation. And this alone is wisdom: to savor, to taste, to enjoy all of life as it flows from the Father's hands.

We who would be truly wise must crucify our abstract Christ so there may be room in us, as in Mary, for the real Christ to be born in the stillness and silence of contemplation and prayer. In the silent empty womb of the heart, we must wait in patience for the Holy Spirit to make us pregnant with the real Christ, to set flowing in us the vital sap of wisdom, to give us the taste of new wine, to initiate us into the wise realism of Mary, the model of man and woman at prayer.

Some years back I began working on a novel in which a young man, disillusioned after the loss of his abstract Christ, wanders lost about the world seeking meaning. He comes at last to visit a monastery and makes there a discovery that opens his mind and heart in wisdom — the wisdom of Mary, the wisdom of woman.

Wandering the cloisters of the abbey, he found the statue. It was carved in wood and was very old.

Scarred with age, the face of the woman held him in thrall, under the spell of strong yet gentle eyes. There seemed beneath the painted surface a quiet radiant power rooted deep in the core of the wood. This woman had known unearthly joy and had drunk too of earth's cup of sorrows. Before her one could stand and feel accepted. No matter what evil one had done, no matter what horrors haunted one's waking mind, here one could stand under the limpid scrutiny of those eyes and one would feel understood. Here good and evil seemed not to matter. She was at home with both. She had mothered infinite goodness; she had seen infinite goodness slaughtered before her eyes.

Life had not to explain itself before this woman.

The young man stood, awed, beneath her — confused, despairing, bitter; and she took each of his wounds and placed it in one of hers.

He was healed.

He had despaired of life until he had discovered this source of life — this mother — and had seen that even life's source shared his pain; that the mother of life suffered and was happy, each in its turn. No longer would he refuse life because it was bitter or sad or ugly, for it was, in its very source, each of these things — and more.

A current pulsed through him, an urge to explode with song, to make furious love to the earth and the sun and the stars; to worship — Yes! But what would he worship? To direct it to any one thing seemed to be to diminish it. His worship must go far beyond this statue, this woman. For he understood that she too felt worshipful before the richness of life — the vast ambiguities of existence held together in strange and marvelous cohesion.

No, it was not life he would worship, nor earth, nor stars, nor statue, nor self. What was it then?

He knew only that the object of his worship would include yet transcend all these things; that death itself had no power to destroy him or this world or the stars; that there was — mysteriously — a power greater than the immense longing of his heart.

Without the vital sap of feminine wisdom, the tree of spirituality can only wither and die. Without such a wisdom informing it, all of theology becomes dry and tasteless. Religion reverts to mere formalism, devoid of life-giving mystery. So we can read in the history of the Church.

The hope of today's Church is that once again men and women have begun to perceive, still in shadows and dim forms, something of the profound mystery of the womanhood of God. So startling a perception, if not repressed but nurtured, can only have wide and deep repercussions, both for the Church and for the spiritual life of modern men and women.

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