

Mary, the Feminine Face of God

written by Aline Paris, RSM



Mary is not God, she is not a fourth member of the Trinity. However, for many Catholics Mary provides 'a', if not 'the' major connection with the divine; for some she is even the primary connection with God and the spiritual life. For many, Mary makes God approachable and gentle. I am always surprised at the practice in many churches of the praying of the rosary before the daily Mass. I've even experienced some parishes that end the Prayer of the Faithful with a Hail Mary which follows a litany of "Lord, hear my prayer". It gives one the feeling that the people are "hedging their bets" just to make sure that the petitions get heard in heaven. In personal prayer, also, communication with Mary is significant. I had a friend who in her last illness could only pray the rosary even though it had not been part of her spiritual practice for many years prior to her illness. So, what is the longing that is so deep within the spirituality of many? What is it in us that needs, not only a connection with the divine, but one that needs it to have a "mother-touch"?

Mary Aquin O'Neil has given us in *Original Grace*[ii](#) a profound and challenging study of Mary in Catholic theology and Liturgy, particularly with the changes in Marian

spiritual practice that resulted from Vatican II.[\[ii\]](#) As rich as the renewal of the liturgical and biblical movements that came from the Council were, the cult of Mary has diminished. O'Neill suggests that the Council was very aware of the sensibilities of Protestant scholars in attendance as they explored the place of Mary in theology and worship. Even Catholic theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson looked at Mary in a new light, as our sister in the faith, as the model of true discipleship.[\[iii\]](#)

Hopefully, though, the biblical movement that resulted from Vatican II has helped us to expand our images of God and recognize that there are in fact feminine images of God in the Sacred Scriptures. In the Hebrew Scriptures the tender and faithful love of God is maternal, "does a mother forget the child of her womb, neither shall I forget you." (Is 49:15). Or this love is fiercely protective, "I will attack them like a bear robbed of its young." (Hosea 13:8). Or it provides comfort, "As a mother comforts her son, so shall I comfort you." (Is 6:13). Another strong feminine imagery is that of the eagle who bears her young on her wings, especially when she teaches them to fly.[\[iv\]](#)

A popular hymn, especially for funerals is "On Eagle's Wings"[\[v\]](#) by Michael Joncas but do people who sing it think more of a male eagle representing God when in reality it is usually the mother eagle? In the Gospel of Matthew this image is carried out with the image of a chicken, Jesus says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how many times have I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings." (Mt 23:37)[\[vi\]](#) This scripture seems to be applied to Mary in medieval art under the title of Our Lady of Mercy.[\[vii\]](#) Therefore, the feminine imagery representing God is present in scripture but has not been stressed or worse, even ignored.[\[viii\]](#) So, the longing for the feminine will find some satisfaction in a spirituality that includes a relationship with Mary who becomes the face of God.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we are given several names for God, but the most personal one is announced to Moses when he is called to Holy Ground, to receive his call to return to Egypt. In the dialogue, Moses asks God for an identifying name, God responds *YHWH*, (Ex 3:14). God identifies God's self with an active term, *I AM*. This is a term that is gender neutral.[\[ix\]](#) However, in the Jewish tradition, this personal name for God was deemed too sacred to be said by ordinary humans. As a result, *YHWH* was replaced in the Jewish cult with *ADONAI*, translated as "Lord", a masculine term, so no longer gender neutral. God was now definitely associated with maleness.

With the post-Vatican II biblical and liturgical movements, new music appeared on the

scene, music which allowed congregations to participate more fully. Several pieces of music were composed using *YHWH* which have become favorite hymns because of the approachability of God, hymns such as, “Yahweh, the Faithful One” or “Yahweh, I know you are near”, both by Dan Schutte and the St. Louis Jesuits. Many Catholics appreciated the closeness with God by praying to God on a first-name basis, as *YHWH*. However, concern for ecumenism was also prominent in the post Vatican II Church, therefore, any official Catholic statements needed to be aware of the sensitivities of other denominations or religions. Such was the case with the use of *YHWH* in some of our music. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), out of respect for our Jewish brothers and sisters requested the elimination of the sacred name of God in our hymnology. As a result, some hymns were altered.

So, if language about God had to be primarily male-centered, how could the gap of a more feminine approach be filled? A spirituality about Mary may help fill the need. In one of my graduate courses, one of my Protestant students shared in class that Protestants had a harder time thinking of God in the feminine because they didn’t venerate Mary. The student recognized the richness and balance that a spirituality which included Mary brought and, therefore, could widen her God-centered spirituality. Undergraduate Protestant students also often had no little appreciation for Mary; she was only Jesus’ mother; therefore, she lessened in importance once the Christmas story was finished.

Realistically, though, how important is the need for a mother? One of the significant things about the death of George Floyd[\[x\]](#) was his repeated calling for his mother. This struck a chord with many people because it resonated with them. Perhaps this is why Mary is so powerful in people’s prayer lives? She fills a need and a longing for God, she provides the “mother-touch”. For many she is the primary face of God, a face that is both maternal and caring. Mary herself has many faces. She is portrayed in every culture. She is the black Madonna, the Asian Madonna, the Latina Madona, the white Madonna, etc. She can understand the human condition because she herself was human. She knew the joy of holding a newborn infant, the wonder of nursing a baby, and the pain of losing a child. She resonated with human experience, therefore those who pray to her sense that she understands and can help them.

A Google search of Marian Shrines in the world provides a multitude of sites. The quick total of shrines in the world is 377, not counting the many grottos that are on parish grounds and even in private homes. Surprisingly, the most heavily visited is not

in France nor Italy, nor the Philippines, nor the United States, it is Our Lady of Suyapa in Honduras. I had an experience in Lourdes, France which demonstrated to me that faith and confidence in Mary among the faithful. I sat at the grotto and watched many pilgrims come to reverence the site of Mary's appearance. An elderly woman approached the grotto and stopped below the statue of Mary. She had a big shopping bag, and she began to pull out clothing and pictures and she rubbed each on the rock below Mary's feet. I realized that she was invoking Mary's blessing on her loved ones that she had brought with her in her shopping bag. I decided to follow her example; I had a friend who was pastor of a parish named Our Lady of Lourdes, so I bought a plaque of Lourdes for him and the parish and approached the rock. I put the plaque on the rock and prayed for Mary's blessing on him and the parish. As I was praying water from the feet of Mary came down and dropped over the plaque. It was a moment of awe.

We can also look at the number of major Marian feasts in the liturgical calendar. Several of these are parallel to the life of Jesus:[\[xi\]](#) Two of these are significant enough to be considered Days of Obligation in the United States.

- Conception (December 8 and March 25)
- Birth (September 8 and December 25)
- Naming (September 12 and January 3)
- Presentation in the temple (November 21 and February 2)
- The sorrows of Mary and the passion of the Christ (September 15 and Holy Week)
- The Assumption of Mary and the Ascension of the Christ (August 15 and 40 days after Easter)
- The Queenship of Mary and Christ the King (May 31 and last Sunday of liturgical year)
- The Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus (August 22 and Friday after the octave of Corpus Christi)

In addition, there are many lesser feasts such as national or local ones. Many religious communities, such as the Sisters of Mercy, have their special Marian feasts. So, we who are Catholic can understand the confusion of some of our Protestant friends as to why we hold Mary in such high esteem and celebrate her so much.

Another area that we can experience Mary as the face of God is in the Litany of the Blessed Virgin. Some of the qualifiers that are mentioned of Mary most certainly are God qualities:

- Mother of mercy,
- Mother of divine grace,
- Seat of wisdom,
- Cause of our joy,
- Comforter of the afflicted.

Lastly, think of the time in our lives that needs the “mother-touch,” that is at the time of death of loved ones. A young couple I know lost their son, Joshua, very tragically when he was six years old. During the week before he died, he was in his bedroom for a while and when he emerged his mother asked him what he had been doing in there. He responded, “I was talking to Mary.” When asked what he and Mary had talked about he answered “basketball.” After his death, the couple remembered that day and felt great comfort from the experience. They truly believed that Mary had been preparing their child for death, removing any fear.

It is also at funerals when consolation is so desired. Just think of how many funerals include an Ave Maria as a Communion meditation. In the Franco-American culture the favorite hymn that was always included at the end of the funeral liturgy was “J’irai la voire un jour.” The thought is the desire to be with Mary.

J’irai la voire un jour (I will go see her one day)

Au ciel, dans ma patrie (In heaven, in my homeland)

Oui, j’irai voire Marie (Yes, I will go see Mary)

Ma joie et mon amour (My joy and my love)

Refrain: Au ciel, au ciel, au ciel j’irai la voire un jour (In heaven, I will go see her someday)

Au ciel, au ciel, au ciel j’irai la voire un jour (In heaven, I will go see her someday)

In the Latino culture there is a similar hymn, “O Maria, Madre Mia” which makes me connect with my own Franco culture:

Oh Maria, madre mia, O Consuelo del mortal

(Oh Mary, my mother, oh consoler of mortals)

Amparadme y guiadme a la patria celestial

(Carry me and guide me to the celestial homeland)

So, Mary is not God, she is not the fourth person of the Trinity, but she surely is the Face of God for through her we see God.

[i] O’Neill, Mary Aquin. *Original Grace. The Mystery of Mary*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023. Published posthumously.

[ii] See O’Neill, Chapter 3

[iii] Johnson, *Truly Our Sister. A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*. New York: Continuum, 2003.

[iv] Ex 19:4; Is 40:31; Ps 91 :4.

[v] Michael Joncas, 1976. The song was originally composed for a friend’s father’s funeral.

[vi] Parallel text in Luke 13:34.

[vii] Medieval artistic portrayals of Our Lady of Mercy depict Mary with a voluminous cloak, under which is a large gathering of many people.

[viii] A good resource is a “Madeleva Lecture” given by Sandra Schneiders. Published as *Women and the Word*. Paulist Press, 1986.

[ix] In the first creation story, God creates the human, the *adam* (literally ‘earth creature’) male and female in order to be God’s image. (Gn 1:27).

[x] Killed by police in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. The officer knelt on his neck for over 7 minutes during which time he was heard to call for his mother.

[xi] O'Neil, 112.



image: "Mama" icon by Kelly Latimore (2020)