

Oh, With What Joy

written by Boreta A. Singleton, RSM



*Oh with what joy we sing of Mary; a woman of great love
Whose openness and loving kindness gave birth to God's own son
Mary oh so gentle and discreet, be with us as we pray*

To know the whisper of His presence; the wonder of His love!^[1]

This song, written in the 1970s sums up my childhood impression of the mother of Jesus, Mary of Nazareth. My parish church had a painting of her: blonde hair, blue eyes to match her azure robe, floating with folded hands on a cloud atop a crescent moon. She seemed so detached and unaware of real life, unlike my own mother and grandmothers. In school we girls were told not to whistle or chew gum because it would make the Blessed Mother cry. This set her apart even further from real life.

I was asked to join the children's choir in First Grade, on the edge of Vatican II, and so I began learning some of the well-used Marian Latin Hymns like *Salve Regina* and *Regina Coeli*. Setting commonly used prayers to music is a wonderful way of memorizing the prayer in addition to learning the Gregorian Chant attached to it. Our choir also learned hymns with English lyrics; these were more understandable but still made Mary feel very ethereal to me. For example, "On This Day O Beautiful

Mother,” written by Louis Lamibilotte, SJ (1796-1855) is still popular in the canon of Catholic hymnody. In an article written in a periodical entitled “Caecilia” in 1953, Father Francis Brunner wrote, “ Catholics in America have been the heirs of a sentimental and subjective hymn tradition that, for some reason or other, has taken a deep and fast hold on the fancy of the average person.”^[2] I would argue that this is a rather harsh assumption; however, there are some hymns that have sentimental value among Catholics; ones that have survived long after Vatican II and are still popular today. I believe that this hymn is one of them. Why? Let us examine the refrain and verse one:

Refrain: *On this day, O beautiful Mother,
On this day we give thee our love.
Near thee, Madonna, fondly we hover,
Trusting thy gentle care to prove.*

*1. On this day we ask to share,
Dearest Mother, thy sweet care;
Aid us ere our feet astray
Wander from thy guiding way.*

Certainly this hymn expresses maternal care, as we would expect children to be near their mother. Mothers help their children to stay on the positive path of life, as verse one invites the singer to ask Mary to assist them in being a good child. Of course, we can imagine that Mary would have nurtured and cared for Jesus in the same way that any mother would want the best for her child. However, I believe that the few Gospel passages that give voice or action to Mary portray a mother with depth and complexity. Mary is a very passive figure in this hymn; like the painting in my childhood church, she seems to be disconnected. Perhaps the Catholic imagination wants to keep her contained in this role. Another popular hymn, “Bring Flowers of the Fairest” by Mary E. Walsh,^[3] is still used for May Crownings of Mary. Honoring Mary in this manner is a very common practice among Catholic parishes and schools. This hymn seems to be one of the few (if not the only!) which is specifically written for an honoring of Mary in May.

*1. Bring flowers of the fairest
Bring flowers the rarest,*

*From garden and woodland and hillside and dale;
Our full hearts are swelling,
Our glad voices telling
The praise of the loveliest flower of the vale!*

Refrain: *O Mary, we crown thee with blossoms today,
Queen of the Angels, Queen of the May.
O Mary, we crown thee with blossoms today,
Queen of the Angels, Queen of the May.*

*2. Our voices ascending, in harmony blending,
Oh! thus may our hearts turn, dear Mother, to thee;
Oh! thus shall we prove thee
how truly we love thee,
How dark without Mary, life's journey would be. Refrain*

In the second verse, the text implores Mary to accompany us. I find the last line particularly intriguing: “How dark without Mary life’s journey would be.” This seems to me to reflect the *need* for Mary’s protection without God’s initiative. It also reflects a piety that is consistent with 19th century theology. In an article by Robert M. Andrews of the Catholic Institute of Sydney Australia, he references the response of John Henry Newman to a Church of England friend, John Pusey (1866.) Among other complaints, Pusey states that Catholics tend to deify Mary. Newman sets him straight on this issue but also emphasizes the difference between faith and devotion; it is a crucial consideration.^[4] In other words, faith in God and devotion to Mary can be hand in hand, but, of course, the emphasis is on God’s initiative in our lives and in Mary’s life.

Another well-known Marian hymn that was heard in my elementary school days and is still sung frequently today is “Immaculate Mary.” This hymn, composed by the French priest Jean Gagnet in 1873, was written to accompany pilgrims on their procession to the Marian shrine at Lourdes. Originally, he wrote eight verses set to a known French tune, but expanded it to sixty to ensure singing while processing. The version we sing today has been edited several times over the years, most recently by Brian Foley in 1970.^[5] This is the text we sing today:

*Immaculate Mary your praises we sing;
You reign now in heaven with Jesus Our King.
Ave, Ave, Ave Maria; Ave Ave Maria!*

Singing the familiar first words of the Hail Mary in Latin as the refrain of this hymn helps everyone to make a connection to Mother Church.

Our collective Catholic theology post Vatican II seems to have a more realistic view of Mary as wife and mother. In *Lumen Gentium*, a sentence from article 56 says: "Embracing God's salvific will with a full heart and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally as a handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son, under Him and with Him, by the grace of almighty God, serving the mystery of redemption. Rightly therefore the holy Fathers see her as used by God not merely in a passive way, but as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience."

Mary seen as not being passive connects me to the following hymns that see her in a more active role:

First, Rory Cooney's "Canticle of the Turning," which was composed in 1990. Rooney composed this version of Mary's Magnificat as a response to the Advent call for our repentance.^[6] The Irish tune "Star of the County Down" provides an intense driving melody which fits the refrain:

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring;
let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near
and the world is about to turn!^[7]*

For me, this hymn is very clearly focused on God's message of justice for all as Mary proclaimed it through her Magnificat and as her ancestor Miriam proclaimed in the Hebrew Scriptures. It also gives me a fresh look at Mary as one who, in the words of *Lumen Gentium* above, freely cooperates in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience."

The second hymn, "Ave Maria Madre de Dios" by John Agnotti is more of an

intercessory prayer linked to the Hail Mary. I find its use of percussion, solo and choral voices in the hymn a beautiful and modern manner of affirming Mary's motherly role in our lives. The refrain is very simple:

Ave, ave, ave Maria; Madre de Dios. ^[8]

I also think that something so singable as this refrain is a beautiful way of inviting congregational singing with the familiar first words of the Hail Mary in both Latin and English.

Finally, a word about African American Spirituals and Mary. These songs, used among African American slaves prior to the Civil War in the United States, often had both Biblical and coded messages regarding many things, including escape. Singing while working in the plantation fields would have been a common event, but certain songs took on a meaning of their own. In my research, I only found two songs that could come under this category which reference Mary. The first, "O Mary Don't You Weep" is a reference to Miriam, the sister of Moses and Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus. There is no specific reference to Mary the Mother of Jesus, but just the title of the song could refer to the suffering and death of her Son. Here is one version of the lyrics of this song which does not refer to Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus but anticipates the joys of heaven :

Refrain : *O Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn,
O Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn;
Pharoh's army got drowneded,
O Mary, don't you weep.*

*1. Some of these mornings bright and fair,
Take my wings and cleave the air.
Pharoh's army got drowneded
O Mary, don't you weep. [Refrain]*

*2. When I get to Heaven goin' to sing and shout,
Nobody there for to turn me out.
Pharoh's army got drowneded
O Mary, don't you weep. [Refrain]*

*3. When I get to Heaven goin' to put on my shoes,
Run about glory and tell all the news.
Pharoh's army got drowneded
O Mary, don't you weep. [Refrain]^[9]*

There are many versions of the lyrics, but this is my favorite version sung by the late Sister Thea Bowman which has similar lyrics to the ones quoted above. ^[10]

The last hymn I will mention here is "The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy." This is a song from the Caribbean, attributed to two composers: James Bryce, who was 92 in 1942, and the Jamaican singer Oswald Dunbar in 1962 adapted it from a Jamaican folk song. ^[11]

*1. The Virgin Mary had a baby boy,
The Virgin Mary had a baby boy,
The Virgin Mary had a baby boy and they say that His name is Jesus.*

Refrain: *He come from the glory, He come from the glorious Kingdom;
He come from the glory, He come from the glorious kingdom.
O yes believer, O Yes believer, He come from the glory,
He come from the glorious kingdom!*

*2. The Wise Men saw where the baby born, repeat 3 times)
And they say that His name was Jesus. (refrain)*

*3. The angels sang when the baby born, repeat 3 times)
And they say that His name was Jesus.(refrain)^[12]*

I have sung this simply beautiful hymn for many years at Christmas time. It does not fit into the form of a traditional Christmas carol. Although Mary is not given a prominent role in the song, I imagine her in the earthy setting of the stable, holding Jesus, and being present to the angels, shepherds, Magi and any others who came to bear witness to the Newborn King. The song encourages me to be a believer in the glorious Kingdom that the Christ Child brings.

After reflecting on writing this article I noticed on the first Sunday of his papacy, Pope

Leo XIV stood on the balcony at St. Peter's and intoned the familiar Catholic prayer, Regina Coeli. I think he surprised the crowd with his resonant voice. As I watched on TV, I joined in with all who were singing along with him:

Regina Coeli, laetare, Alleluia;
Quia quem merusti portare, alleluia.
Resurrexit sicut dixit, alleluia;
Ora pro nobis Deus, alleluia!
Queen of heaven, rejoice, alleluia.
The Son whom you merited to bear, alleluia,
has risen as he said, alleluia.
Pray for us to God, alleluia.^[13]

As the people in St. Peter's Square sang along in Latin with Pope Leo XIV, I can imagine many were transported to a time when during the Easter season they sang this Marian chant in their own churches. That experience may have happened many years ago or recently. We will continue to sing hymns to honor Mary and the saints just as we sing hymns to honor God. As the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy from Vatican II states, "The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art."^[14]

^[1] *Oh With What Joy We Sing of Mary*, Monks of Weston Abbey, ©1972, 1994 The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, Inc.

^[2] "On This Day O Beautiful Mother- by Jeff Ostrowski [www.https://www.ccwatershed.org/2013/03/02/day-0-beautiful-mother-blacklisted/](https://www.ccwatershed.org/2013/03/02/day-0-beautiful-mother-blacklisted/) 2013

^[3] *Bring Flowers of the Fairest* by Mary E. Walsh, St. Basil's Hymnal, 1889

^[4] "What Newman's Letter to Pusey (1866) tells us about Mariology and Marian Piety" December 1, 2021 by R. Andrews, <https://www.newmanreview.org/catholic-devotion-to-the-mother-of-god->

[what-newman-s-letter-to-pusey-1866-tells-us-about-mariology-and-marian-piety/#_ftnref1](#)

[5] Sing of Mary: Giving Voice to Marian Theology and Devotion by Stephanie Budwey, p. 132. Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2014.

[6] “December 19: Canticle fo the Turning.” <https://barngeseworship.com/2021/09/08/december-19-canticle-of-the-turning/#:~:text=Because%20Cooney%20wrote%20the%20hymn,literally%2C%20to%20turn%20around>).

[7] “Canticle of the Turning.” https://youtu.be/F9QeTmRCpW4?si=H20nOop4jlm_c2PG

[8] “Ave Maria, Madre de Dios” by John Agnotti. Sung by the Choir of the Church of St. Francis Xavier, 2020. https://youtu.be/nQU_r1B58yE?si=x3oIzrU_0KbtLWMd

[9] AME Zion Hymnal, # 618, https://hymnary.org/text/some_of_these_mornings_bright_and_fair_t

[10] “O Mary Don’t You Weep” in Songs of My People, Sister Thea Bowman, <https://youtube/vsZ7SwU74EQ?si=B6x83-tZQq-GW2p9>

[11] Christmas Song: The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy, Diana Leagh Matthews, December 11, 2022 <https://dianaleaghmatthews.com/christmas-song-the-virgin-mary-had-a-baby-boy/>

[12] “The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy.” https://www.christmassongsandcarols.com/products/the-virgin-mary-had-a-baby-boy?srltid=AfmBOoqk4nPjG7ATFiSMvcqvuhshzJSx5kwQvKWdDfFpJcXl9gYB4cC_

[13] “Regina Coeli” in English, <https://www.usccb.org/prayers/regina-caeli>

[14] Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vatican II, #112, 1963.



image: The choir at the profession of temporary vows ceremony of Boreta Singleton, RSM, on March 1, 2025, in the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception in Watchung, New Jersey