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# *Marian Mariology*

## Chapter 9



The veneration of Mary, when properly understood, permeates the entire life of the Church; it is a dimension of dogma and of piety, of Christology and of ecclesiology. This dimension needs to be made explicit today in connection with the problems of humanity. Mariology expresses something fundamental to the Christian life itself, to the Christian experience of the world.

Sound Mariology has always been understood in Christological terms. If the Gospel revealed nothing more than the fact that Jesus Christ, God and man, was born of Mary, this alone would be sufficient for the Church to love her and to draw theological conclusions from pondering this relationship of Mother and Son. We need no other revelations. Mary is a self-evident and essential *datum* and dimension of the Gospel.

Chapter one centers on Catechesis flowing from Byzantine Marian spirituality with commentary by Brother John M. Samaha, S.M. Chapter 2 discusses Mariology today with commentary by Rev. Professor Michael Lapierre, S.J. The remaining chapters are commentaries on various Marian topics by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J. (1914– 2000).

## Chapter 9

### **Mary, Model of Faith for Priests**

*by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.*

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There is no doubt that the Blessed Virgin promises to become a providential means of assisting the Church in the future even as she had so mightily helped the Church in critical times in the past. After all, she is and had most solemnly been declared by the Vatican Council as Mother of the Church for the best of reasons. As Mother of the Church she may be assumed to protect and provide for the faithful in times of great need, as ours certainly are, and this no less than she helped to nurture the mystical Body in apostolic times. We speak of Mary being the Mother of Christ twice over; the mother of the physical Christ whom she brought into the world and the mother of the mystical Christ whom she also nurtured and continues to care for until the end of time.

But there is one aspect of Mary's role as Mother of the Church that deserves more attention than it has been getting, namely, her role as the pattern of faith that we are all to imitate. Whatever else we say about the Church in modern times, we must say it is going through a crisis of faith. Hence the dire need of a model for us to follow if the faith that was purchased and still is being paid for with the blood of so many martyrs is to grow in the hearts of believers and propagate among the millions who after 1900 years have not yet even been evangelized. I strongly recommend careful reading and prayerful meditation on Pope Paul VI's most important declaration on

evangelization, his Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi", issued to the Catholic world in December of 1975.

There is no better pattern for imitation of the faith than Mary who, next to Christ, is the perfect example of what we should be. But unlike Christ, her holiness was founded not on vision but on faith, where she and we are so totally in common. Our focus of reflection is more specific, however. We wish to consider Mary not only, though also, as the paradigm of faith for Christians. A pattern is a model or an exemplar that one can profitably imitate; a paradigm is the fundamental pattern. Mary is the fundamental pattern for Christians to imitate in the practice of the faith. She is the most effective model of faith not only for all Christians, but, for our purpose, especially for priests.

In these reflections we will address ourselves to two simple questions and answer them briefly but pointedly: first, "Why is Mary specially appropriate as the model of faith for priests?" And, "How can the practice of faith teach all the faithful, but especially priests, to live more faithfully our Christian commitment, and priests their priesthood to which her Son has ordained them?"

### **Mary's Nearness to Her Divine Son**

First, why is Mary the perfect model of faith for priests in the Catholic Church? This should not be a difficult question to answer. The reason, ultimately, is her close intimacy with Jesus Christ comparable to the intimacy that a priest is expected to have and cultivate in virtue of his office.

Where shall we begin to describe Mary's nearness to her divine Son? He was near her because He was within her during the nine months of His conception in her womb. He was near her as the one she brought forth at Bethlehem and as the one she nursed; as the one she clothed and fed in infancy. And, we might add, Christ being an infant (which means "speechless" - He was "the speechless one"), how near she must have been when she first taught Him how to use His lips. She must have told Him to watch hers, and then He imitated His mother.

He was the one she spoke with and cared for and talked about all through His days at Nazareth; the one who was constantly on her mind during His public life; the one she accompanied on the way to Calvary and with whom she remained as the valiant woman to the last as He expired on the cross. Mary would have made a good nurse; she was not afraid of blood.

As we turn to a priest, is not his life so much like Mary's in his own closeness to the physical Christ in the Eucharist? It is the lips of a priest that

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bring down Christ on the altar, and his words that make possible the renewal of Christ's death in the sacrifice of the Mass, as I learned the first time I genuflected at the altar after my first consecration. Talk about having to make an act of faith, to believe that what you said changed bread into Christ!

It is the hands of a priest that handle the sacred elements which contain the person of Christ the Son of God but also the Son of Mary. It is the person of the priest to whom the eternal high priest continues His presence in our midst no less (though now invisibly) than He was present among His contemporaries in Palestine. He is just plain here. No wonder the priest has been par excellence identified in Catholic history as the "alter Christus" (the other Christ), since he more than any other Christian is privileged to deal on such close terms with the Savior.

But for this very reason, the priest must learn from Mary that just being close to Christ is not enough. Judas was close to Christ when he kissed Him. Pilate was close to Christ when he condemned Him. Those who scourged Christ were close to Him when they shredded His body with thongs. Those who placed the crown of thorns on the head of Christ were very close to Him, as were the executioners who nailed Him to the cross. Unlike these but like Mary, the priest must not only be close to Christ; he must also be familiar with Christ. You see, closeness is of body, familiarity is of spirit.

A priest must not suppose that nearness is the same as intimacy, or that proximity is the same as familiarity. What a mistake and by now what a tragedy, because unless this closeness or physical nearness is cultivated to become also spiritual intimacy, it can degenerate first from casualness and indifference to a positive cynicism and the most incredible distance in spirit from the Christ that a man is, perforce by his office, near to physically.

It is true of any two people. A husband and wife while living together in physical cohabitation must really either begin to grow in love, in spiritual intimacy, after their courtship or their physical nearness will become painful and, if it gets too bad, unbearable. There is no one from whom we can become more estranged than the one who is near us in body but from whom we have become separated in soul.

Let me add some observations which are meant not only for priests, but all those who in any way are called upon to assist priests. All the faithful have a God-given responsibility to help priests grow in that intimacy with Jesus on which all their efficacy in the priesthood depends. Of course they can validly administer the sacraments and offer the Mass, no matter how unholy they may be. But how sadly we know the consequences of unholiness in the priest, in whom the faithful should see their Savior.

This familiarity applies to all of us, because we are all called upon to grow in intimacy with Jesus, but especially it applies to the priest; it requires, first of all, sacrifice of other intimacies to which we have no right. A priest grows in familiarity with Christ as

patient loyalty by entrusting her to His newly ordained priest and beloved disciple, John. This entrusting was meant to be more than symbolic. It is profoundly significant when we consider that not only was Mary entrusted by Christ to John, but John was entrusted to Mary.

What the Savior did on Calvary He has been doing ever since. He has confided His mother to be the mother of priests, to lead them and teach them in many ways. But in no way is Mary more necessary to the priests of the New Testament than as the one to teach them what it means to believe in her Son. It means to participate in His cross.

Priests are chosen to be partners in the Savior's work of redemption, to save a sinful world from its folly and bring it to the wisdom of God. But souls are not redeemed except by blood, either the physical blood of martyrdom or the spiritual blood of pain. Mary shed her blood in spirit, in union with her dying Son. She wants all, especially her priests, to learn from her to do the same. Every priest who is seriously trying to live his priestly life in today's world knows what this means. We priests need to be reminded of our noble responsibility. But mainly, we need to have someone show us the way. Mary, the Virgin Most Faithful, makes the road very plain.

The beauty of this mystery is that already in this life and not only in the life to come, those who have resolved to suffer with Christ discover what happiness there can be in total submission to the divine Will, even when this Will presses hard on our own and makes demands on our generosity. After all, what greater joy can anyone, surely a priest, ask for here in this world than the joy of total surrender to the Son of God, who is the Son of Mary.

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Pagan mysticism, in spite of the word "mysticism" which is not appropriate, is all preoccupied with self. How we can be deceived! We have to be very careful in not being too ready to admire pagan mystics' endless hours of meditation, because most of the meditation of these non-Christian mystics is on self, on the ego. That is not the mysticism of Mary. It is not the mysticism of Christianity. Mysticism that is authentic gives, it loves, it goes out of self.

Not the least problem that a priest faces in his pastoral, academic or administrative life is the hard alliance he must make between prayer and external activity. So true is that, that some have almost given up the effort to reconcile what must be reconciled if a priest is to minister effectively to the people. Hence the value of reflecting on Mary's example of faith that nourishes prayer indeed, even a deep and intimate union with God, yet a faith that does not remain sterile, but becomes fruitful in the practice of outgoing generosity.

But we have one more level of reflection on the character of Mary's faith. It was a much-tested faith. It is not for nothing that Mary has been called the Mother of Sorrows, or that the Church has been speaking of her as the Queen of Martyrs. When, at the Presentation, Simeon told Mary that "a sword will pierce your soul", he also gave the reason why: "...so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare".

We believe that after Christ no one suffered more, among His believers, than Christ's own mother. Her faith cost her immensely; she paid dearly for believing that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled. The promise was fulfilled amply and magnificently and gloriously, but only after Christ's Resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit, whom He sent. But during His mortal life, He involved His mother in every aspect of His passable mortality, which means His suffering mortality. Thus He left her as the best evidence we have that to believe in Christ is to suffer with Christ; and that the measure of our willingness to sacrifice is the index of the depth of our faith.

How we all, but especially Christ's priests, need to learn this hard lesson from Mary. A priest believes he has been called to join in the priesthood of Jesus. Priesthood, he knows, means to sacrifice. What he must also know is that the closer a person is bound to Christ in the redemptive work of saving souls, the more he should expect to share with Christ in His sacred Passion. These are not idle words, and they are no mere rhetoric. They are borne out in the lives of the great priests of history, whether canonized or known to God alone. To a man they were priests who not only offered the Holy Sacrifice in the person of Christ, but who offered themselves, because they suffered for Christ as part of the holocaust on the altar. Yet, like Mary, they considered themselves blessed (which means happy), because what was promised to them also was fulfilled. What is the promise? The promise is that to share in Christ's sufferings is to share in Christ's joy.

It is comforting to recall that while on the cross the Savior paid tribute to His mother's

he sacrifices all other familiarities that are incompatible with his priesthood - and don't tell me that does not mean sacrifice! But that is the first price of the priesthood: the sacrifice of all intimacy that is incompatible with familiarity with Jesus.

It means effort. If we are to grow in intimacy with anyone, we must necessarily have that person on our minds. We love only what we know; and we love only as much as we know, though we can love less. But we won't love more. If the priest is to grow in intimacy with Christ, he must have Christ always on his mind.

If anyone is to grow in intimacy with the Redeemer, he must keep Christ in his heart. Our hearts, being made to love, can go in only two possible directions: either towards creatures or towards God. And they go in the direction of God only insofar as they do not indulge in but rather give up and mortify going out to creatures. Reread some of the most frightening passages in St. John of the Cross. "The heart of man," he says, "was made for God; and it can love God only by giving up creatures." "Only", so that whatever creatures are loved, are loved only because of and insofar as the love of God dominates our hearts.

And finally, to grow in this indispensable intimacy with Christ, a priest must pray, pray for the grace to do what Christ especially wants him to do, to be to the faithful Jesus on earth. It is for this reason that the faithful must pray and sacrifice for their priests, because in the Providence of God the Church's well-being, her very existence in any period of history or region of geography, depends on the sanctity of her priests. Another word for sanctity is "familiarity with Jesus Christ". So much for part one.

### **How Mary's Faith Teaches Priests**

We now ask, "How does Mary's faith teach priests?" This is our main concern here, to see how Mary's manner of acting on what she believed can teach all the faithful, but especially priests, to do the same. What were the qualities of Mary's faith that a priest should imitate?

Mary's faith was a trustful faith. Hers, therefore, was a faith built on confidence. At the Annunciation, as Luke describes the event, Mary was invited to become the mother of the Holy One who was to be called the Son of God. Remember, unlike us, she had none of the evidence we now possess to the truth of the Incarnation. She was the one who got the Incarnation started: there was no incarnation before the Incarnation. She had none of the centuries of believers that we do to build our faith upon as on a secure refuge for reason to undergird the faith. She stood alone as the

bridge between the Old and New Covenants; it was her faith that bridged the two Testaments.

She was a young girl who had just heard a strange, we may be sure heretofore unseen messenger call her "full of grace", and ask her to consent to becoming the mother of the Savior. How strange of God. Really, how normal of God! God asks us to do His will. She consented, and the second person of the eternal Trinity was conceived in her womb, but only because she had first conceived Him in her mind by faith. As all the Fathers of the Church testify: she was worthy to conceive in body, because she had first conceived by faith in spirit. But that was only the beginning.

After she had conceived without carnal intercourse, Joseph her husband soon discovered she was with child. Grace began the Incarnation, but now nature took over. Now this is really strange of God. Having invited Mary to become His mother, and having inspired Joseph to become Mary's spouse, you would think that Joseph would have been given some explanation. Trust God to leave us in the dark. The narrative in Matthew is one of the most poignant in the annals of revealed history.

Her husband Joseph, being a man of honour and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally. He had made up his mind to do this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus, because he is the one who will save his people from their sins.'

How odd of God, we are tempted to say, to wait so long to tell the one person who had the most human right to know how Mary had conceived. This also says something about Mary's ability to keep a secret. What a lesson to women; but how important it is to everyone, especially in today's much too communicative world, where the very word "secret" has almost lost its meaning, where everything is blazoned across the pages and the media of the world.

By our human standards it was strange of God. Really, though, it was predictable of God who wished in this way to give all of us, but especially priests, a perfect example of trusting in Divine Providence and not for a moment doubting that what God has initiated He will also always carry through-note the divine adverb "always". That's all we have to know, that God starts something. What He most wants of us is total and unwavering confidence in His care.

Mary knew how to believe trustfully as Christ began His physical existence in her womb and as He began years later His public ministry of the Word. We all know the situation well. There was a wedding at Cana of Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there along with the Savior and His disciples. When the wedding feast ran out of wine, immediately Mary noticed it. Without a moment's hesitation she went to her Son to tell Him simply (as all mothers do-their sons never grow up), "They have no wine." After all, she had been in the habit of telling Him what to do for so many years.

Even Christ's apparent rebuke did not stop her from promptly going over to the servants and telling them, "Do whatever He tells you" - talk about a woman having her mind! She knew her boy. Whatever learned exegetes think Christ told His mother, she knew what He said. Six large stone jars were then filled with water at Jesus' command, and as the poet says, "the water recognized its Maker and blushed". The water had become wine through the power of Christ no doubt; but only because of the trustful faith that Mary had in her Son's divinity.

Not only was Mary's faith trustful; Mary's faith was charitable. The same event at Cana also reveals the fruitfulness of Mary's faith in the practice of good works. It is not commonly adverted to that what Mary believed she also put into practice and specifically in the practice of charity.

Reread the famous thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Remember? There is one passage that is frightening: "Though I have faith that moves mountains, but have not charity, I am nothing" I have lost more than one friend and more than one audience when I have said and spelled out that orthodoxy of faith is not enough. It is not enough to be strong in faith, even militant in defense of the truth. We must also love. Orthodoxy alone save no one; it must be orthodoxy and charity.

Mary was the most orthodox of Christians-what a statement. It is not just her soundness of faith that we are called upon to imitate; it is her soundness of faith fructified in charity. No sooner was she told that she was to become the mother of the Most High, and pronounced her Fiat, than she set off on a long journey to assist her kinswoman Elizabeth who, the angel intimated, was already in her sixth month and might need help. And commentators have always remarked on what Luke said " ...and she hurried." They add, "Love is always in haste."

Love is not ponderous, it is not cautious. Love wants to do, and if there is one failure in love, it is that it is impetuous in its desire to give. Love runs. And we know this is not just locomotion through space. Being advanced in years, Elizabeth would need help. So Mary went to help her. What a sublime lesson in mysticism, doing good. That, by the way, is the only authentic mysticism in the Catholic Church, a mysticism that does good.