

WHAT IS
Mary
ALL ABOUT?



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*Mary kept all these things,
pondering them in her heart.*
—Luke 2:19

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WHAT IS MARY ALL ABOUT?



The question in the title could be answered many ways—as it has been for centuries. Varied cultures across time have been drawn to Mary, and have represented her with a huge diversity of ethnicities, appearances, and qualities. Her followers have praised her and prayed to her in words ranging from the sublime to the sentimental. There is, it seems, a Mary for all times, all peoples and all seasons. Mother of peace, she is truly a citizen of the whole world, a member of every era in human history.

It's probably impossible to summarize the abundant literature, art, scholarship and popular devotion that has coalesced around Mary. But from this richness we might draw crucial themes that permeate her life. They will serve as steppingstones in this exploration of what

she's all about. We'll start with her biography, then look at her qualities and our responses to her.

The Story

Scriptural references to Mary are few. (Some joke they could fit on a post-it.) They are briefly summarized here, but such an overview can't substitute for reading the full biblical accounts. In John's gospel, she is mentioned only twice: at Cana and at Calvary. The synoptics (mostly Luke) fill in with the Annunciation, Visitation, birth of Jesus, his presentation in the temple, the family's flight into Egypt, losing him in Jerusalem as a youngster, a few references to her during his public ministry, then at his death. Acts 1:14-15 names her as present at Pentecost.

To "flesh out" this skeleton a bit, we first meet Mary when the archangel Gabriel announces her pregnancy.



She responds with great humility: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Then she journeys to her cousin Elizabeth, whose pregnancy in old age has also been announced by the angel (these were days without phones or e-mails). Little is said beyond their

initial exchange: Elizabeth welcomes the girl as one who is “blessed among women.” Mary responds with the “Magnificat”: “my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46). This canticle echoes back to Hannah her foremother, the mother of the prophet Samuel, and resounds with the promise of justice in the future. Despite the questions and fears she must have carried, Mary praises God who has been merciful to her personally and to all peoples. This God will overturn the unfair order of the world, restoring justice to the poor and hungry.

The scriptural account of Jesus’ birth leaves much to the imagination—instead, countless Christmas carols and art works have given many people their images. We know only that there was no room for Mary and Joseph at the inn, and that Mary “wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger” (Luke 1:7).

Fulfilling the law of purification, the parents present him at the Jerusalem temple, offering a sacrifice of two turtledoves or pigeons. There, the elderly prophets Simeon and Anna praise God for the child, as a light for the people and the glory of Israel. Simeon also warns Mary



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that her soul will be pierced, which many see as a reference to her suffering during Jesus' crucifixion.

Matthew's account (2:1-23) adds the visit of magi to the little family. Their search, following a star, for



the “king of the Jews” prompts the paranoid King Herod to order a slaughter of

all children under age two. Warned in a dream, Joseph and Mary escape to Egypt until they are told in another dream it is safe to return to Galilee.

The next reference to Mary comes in the agonizing search when the parents are separated from the child during a journey to Jerusalem for the Passover. When they find Jesus after three days of searching, he seems puzzled by their anguish. That story concludes with a reference to Mary's cherishing the memories (see “Wealth,” below).

During Jesus' adulthood, Mary makes only cameo appearances. She prompts Jesus' first miracle, the turning of water to wine at the wedding feast of Cana (John 2:1-11). There she models the ideal parent of the young adult, and the mature person of prayer, simply

stating the need in four words, “they have no wine,” and trusting God to take care of it.

Mary and “Jesus’ brothers” appear again in Mark 3:31-35, where he appears to dismiss them, saying that everyone who follows him has that close relationship. While this reassures Jesus’ followers, it may have seemed like a blow to Mary. He must have trusted her to understand the paradox: that these new friends were as dear as she was and that at the same time, she still enjoyed a unique and privileged closeness.

The next references are to Mary at the crucifixion, a heart-breaking scene where she must watch her beloved son suffer acutely. John (19:25-27) records Jesus, even in pain, being tenderly concerned for the plight of a woman without a man in his society. Jesus gives Mary into the care of the beloved disciple, who many believe represents all humanity. The words “here is your mother” make Mary the spiritual mother of all people.



Although there is no scriptural account of a post-resurrection appearance to Mary, St. Ignatius Loyola and

many others believe that Jesus must have come to her first. We can only imagine her delight, seeing his tortured body returned to life.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, she joins the small cluster of Jesus' followers in prayer when the Holy Spirit fills them with energy and vision at Pentecost. From this, many scholars infer that she must have been a guiding force for the early years of the Christian community.



The only two church doctrines about Mary are the Immaculate Conception (that she was conceived without sin) and the Assumption (that she was taken bodily into heaven without death). Both sprang from popular devotion. An interesting dynamic occurs between what the people believe about Mary and what the church officially teaches. In a sense, one stream feeds another. The doctrine gives birth to the flowering of popular piety. And that warm affection, which inspired the doctrine, balances the more thoughtful approach.

The Appeal

Imagine having a friend so compassionate and wise that everyone is drawn to her. Even surly teenagers take refuge in her serenity. People who have experienced great loss know she understands their pain. Those who meet her want to be near her because they feel happier, more affirmed in her presence.

Medieval artists represented Mary with a large mantle, sheltering her many children. Although they may be jostling and arguing with each other, her maternal care for each one is unbounded. The Muslim holy book, the *Koran*, mentions her thirty-four times.



While Marian devotions once divided Catholics from other Christian traditions, some Protestants are discovering her attraction. While it's hard to summarize all her qualities, some of the primary ones follow.

Trust

The bare outlines of Mary's story begin with Luke's account of the angel Gabriel bringing startling news. She is, it seems, to have a most unusual child, even though she isn't married. Mary responds as most people would

under the circumstances: she's puzzled and troubled. She asks a natural question, "how can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Lk. 1:34)

When Gabriel reassures her that God's power will overshadow her and the child will be holy, her response is filled with trust in God and God's power to do the impossible. That theme must have continued throughout her life, as she watched her son take on a bewildering ministry, heard accounts of the miracles he performed, and dreaded the inevitable clash with authorities which prompted his crucifixion. Mary doesn't waste time quibbling with God's design; she accepts it wholeheartedly.

Wealth



We're not talking about dollars, stocks or bank accounts here. Dante called the Self "a sure wealth that has nothing more to seek." In that sense, Mary had a wealthy Self. Luke tells us she "*treasured* all these things, pondering them in her heart" (2:19). Only one who could find blessing in what appeared disastrous could cherish such memories.

At times when others might rage (the unjust torture and crucifixion of her innocent son), she is attuned

to God's mysterious ways. Her trust didn't blunt her suffering—she was thoroughly human. But that quality did give her confidence that no matter how dark the circumstance, God was present with her.



This wealth overflows, as surely Mary consoled Jesus' grieving friends and encouraged them as they began the community that would remember him. Her wealth continues to support those who pray to her and find consolation in her presence.

What is the source of her serenity? Mary must have remembered the long history of her Jewish people. She knew how God had remained faithful to her ancestors even when they turned from God. What God had done in the past, God would do again for her, and for all of us, in the present.

The Feminine Face of God

Mary is not divine. Indeed, her appeal springs from her being fully human, one like us. At times when the church has been especially hierarchical and male-dominated, people have turned more to Mary. Popular myth calls her "the back door into heaven," which suggests an unnerving, punitive God, but also speaks volumes

about confidence in Mary. When God was wrongly portrayed as authoritarian and rule-oriented, peoples' deep longings turned towards Mary's gentle compassion, fidelity, nurture and healing. In many ways she is the idealized mother, who never grows crotchety or tired, who never fails her children. She is like the woman in Jesus' parable of the lost coin, who overturns her house to find the coin, then celebrates with friends and neighbors when it is found. So too, God passionately seeks out each human being, and in Mary we meet a most appealing face of God.

Motherhood

Women who are childless have prayed to Mary. Women whose children are having problems have prayed to Mary. Monks who had few relationships with women were devoted to her. Rulers have put their countries under her protection. What accounts for her broad, perennial appeal?



The mother and child archetype speaks to all humanity. It echoes back to the days when we were closely connected to a mother, who met most of our needs. Few would argue that the relationship was perfect. But in Mary, we can make the case for the mother without flaws who understands us completely and

never lets our imperfections block her love. She is the ideal mother we long for or want to become.

And judging by how well Jesus turned out, she must have been extraordinary at mothering him. We can see many traces of her influence. Surely his Beatitudes echo her “Magnificat.” He must have learned the scriptures, songs, Jewish customs and prayers from her—so well that he quoted a psalm even as he was dying. She expressed her concern for the wedding party at Cana who had run out of wine even before he apparently noticed the predicament.



Mary, who welcomed strangers (shepherds and magi) to the Bethlehem stable must have planted the seed of inclusivity deep in her son, who welcomed the outcasts of his society (tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers). She must have sensitized him to human need and taught him to respond with compassion. His relationships with women such as the Samaritan woman or Mary Magdalene broke the taboos of his time. Surely his attitude towards women was shaped by the first, most wonderful woman in his earthly life.

Praise

Mary teaches us to praise in places and at times when it seems the least obvious response. In circumstances where anyone else might grumble, such as birth in a stable, a sudden journey to Egypt with an infant, or painful separation from her young son, she praises God. We all know how much easier it is to be around



people who are positive and upbeat. Magnify that a few million times, and we've got Mary.

She must have been keenly sensitive to the preciousness and brevity of human life, more aware than most of us that our time on earth is limited. Because she knew so much darkness, she must have appreciated the light more intensely. Mary understood better than anyone ever has that humanity's task on earth is to seek out abundant opportunities to be dazzled and delighted, to praise God.

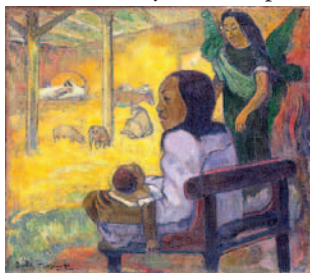
Prayer

Marian feasts include Mary, Mother of God (Jan. 1), the Annunciation (Mar. 25), Visitation (May 31), Assumption (Aug. 15), Our Lady of Sorrows (Sept. 15), Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8), Our Lady of Gua-

dalupe (Dec. 12). Responses to Mary can be spontaneous and individual or formal and public such as novenas, processions, May crownings and rosaries. Many people are familiar with the “Hail Mary,” which constitutes most of the Angelus and the Rosary. The Memorare begins “Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession was left unaided.” Another beautiful prayer to Mary is the Litany of Loreto. Some of the images for Mary found there are: Queen of Angels, Star of the Sea, Mystical Rose, Gate of Heaven, Morning Star. St. Francis of Assisi called Mary Christ’s “palace, tabernacle, robe and handmaid.” No wonder she has prompted so much art!

Art

Just as Mary has inspired prayer and poetry, so artists have depicted her in a multitude of ways. Their portraits reflect their own ethnicity: so this most likely dark-skinned, dark-haired woman of Palestine often appears as a blue-eyed, blonde Scandinavian or an Asian in a kimono.



Model

Regardless how Mary is portrayed, she gives us the ideal to which all humans aspire. She shows us what a human being, fully alive, can be: God's vessel, in whom God's mysterious plan plays out and comes to fulfillment.



When we negotiate life's difficult passages, such as unplanned pregnancy, poverty, exile, fear, wrenching separations, mystifying children, bigotry, violence or tragic deaths, we can follow Mary who also endured these ordeals.

An ordinary woman in a remote village, member of a minority oppressed by conquering Romans, she had a tremendous effect on the world. Her experience proves that NO human life is small or unimportant. If we too respond generously to God's initiatives, we too can carry the "family resemblance," looking like our Mother Mary at a deep level within.