

Advent 2003

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

In my first Advent letter, 11 years ago, I focused on Mary the Mother of Jesus, describing her as the ideal disciple, the first of all saints, a model believer standing before God with humility, confidence and freedom. Today, in this 12th and final letter, having reviewed many of the other characters on the Advent stage, I return to Mary, but from a very different perspective. I ask you to meditate with me this year on the “historical Mary.” The question I pose is this: what do we really know about the woman whom God called to be the mother of his Son and whom we also call the Mother of the Church? I am convinced that her life was quite different from the idyllic portraits that artists have painted and from the rhapsodies that poets and musicians have composed.

Mary was actually called Miriam, after the sister of Moses. Most likely she was born in Nazareth, a tiny Galilean town of about 1600 people, during the reign of Herod the Great, a violent puppet-king propped up by Roman military might. Nazareth seems to have been of little consequence for most Jews (“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”, Jn 1:46). It is never mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures, nor in the Talmud. Mary spoke Aramaic, with a Galilean accent (cf. Mt 26:73), but she also had contact with a multilingual world. She heard Latin at times as it slipped from the tongues of Roman soldiers, Greek as it was used in commerce and educated circles, and Hebrew as the Torah was proclaimed in the synagogue.

She belonged to the peasant class, which eked out its living through agriculture and small commercial ventures like carpentry, the profession of both Joseph and Jesus. This group made up 90% of the population and bore the burden of supporting the state and the small privileged class. Mary and Joseph’s life was grinding, with a triple taxation burden: to Rome, to Herod the Great, and to the temple (to which, traditionally, they owed 10% of the harvest). Artisans, who made up about 5% of the population, had an even lower median income than those who worked the land full-time. Consequently, in order to have a steady supply of food, they usually combined their craft with farming. The picture of the “Holy Family” as a tiny group of three

living in a serene, monastic-like carpenter's shop is very improbable. Like most people at that time, they probably lived in an extended family unit where three or four houses of one or two rooms were built around an open courtyard, in which relatives shared an oven, a cistern and a millstone for grinding grain, and where domestic animals also lived. Like women in many parts of the world today, Mary most likely spent, on the average, ten hours a day on domestic chores like carrying water from a nearby well or stream, gathering wood for the fire, cooking meals, and washing utensils and clothes.

Who were the members of this extended household? Mark's gospel speaks of Jesus, "the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here among us?" (Mk 6:3). Were these "brothers and sisters" children of Jesus' aunt (cf. Jn 19:25) and therefore cousins? Were they Joseph's children by a previous marriage? We do not know their precise relationship to Jesus and Mary, but it seems likely that they all lived in the same compound.

In Palestine at that time, women ordinarily married at about 13 years of age in order to maximize childbearing and to guarantee their virginity, so it is likely that Mary's espousal to Joseph (Mt 1:18) and the birth of Jesus occurred when she was very young. Luke indicates that Mary gave birth to Jesus during a census required by the Romans around 6 B.C., in a cave or stall where animals were stabled. A feeding trough served as his crib, as today poor refugees use cardboard boxes and other homemade artifacts as makeshift beds for newborn infants.

It would be a mistake to think of Mary as fragile, even at 13. As a peasant woman capable of walking the hill country of Judea while pregnant, of giving birth in a stable, of making a four or five-day journey on foot to Jerusalem once a year or so, of sleeping in the open country like other pilgrims, and of engaging in daily hard labor at home, she probably had a robust physique in youth and even in her later years. We err when we picture her as the gorgeously dressed, blue-eyed, blond-haired Madonna painted by Fra Lippo Lippi who often adorns Christmas cards (mine included!). Whether she was beautiful or not, she would have had Semitic features like those of Jewish and Palestinian women today, most likely with dark hair and dark eyes.

It is doubtful that she knew how to read or write, since literacy was extremely rare among women of the time. The culture was highly oral, with public reading of the scriptures, the telling of stories, the recitation of poems, and the singing of songs.

Her husband Joseph seems to have died before Jesus' public ministry began. We know that Mary herself, however, lived throughout that ministry (Mk 3:31; Jn 2:1-12). Her separation from Jesus as he went out to preach was probably very painful for her. In a passage that has always embarrassed Mariologists, Mark tells us that Jesus' family thought him mad (Mk 3:21), but what mother, upon seeing her son challenge Roman authority rather dauntlessly (this often meant death!), might not have said to him: "Are you crazy?"

John tells us that Mary was present at Jesus' crucifixion (cf. Jn 19:25-27),

though the other evangelists are silent about this. At that time she was probably close to 50 years old, well beyond the age at which most women in that era died. She lived on at least into the early days of the Church. Luke states that she was in the upper room in Jerusalem with the 11 remaining apostles “who devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women ... and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14). The lovely paintings and icons of Pentecost that we see, picturing the Spirit descending on Mary and the 11 apostles, hardly do justice to Luke’s text which indicates that she was there with a whole community of 120 persons.

After Pentecost, Mary disappears from history. The rest of her life is shrouded in legend. An active imagination easily wonders: What memories, hopes and strategies did she share with the men and women of the new, Spirit-filled Jerusalem community? Did she live on peacefully in Jerusalem as an old woman, revered as the mother of the Messiah? Did she express her views about the inclusion of the Gentiles? Was she quiet or outspoken? Did others come to her for advice? We do not know. It would seem that she died as a member of the Jerusalem community, though a later tradition portrays her as moving to Ephesus in the company of John the apostle.

Why do I focus this year on the historical Mary? For two reasons.

1. Her history brings her nearer to us. While there is an alluring quality to the gorgeous Madonnas painted by medieval artists, this first-century Jewish woman living in a peasant village was much more like billions of people today. While her culture was quite different from that of 21st century, post-industrial society, it was not unlike that of thousands of villages which continue to exist in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Her daily life and labor were hard. With Joseph, she raised Jesus in oppressive circumstances, struggling to pay the taxes by which the rich became richer at the expense of the poor. As events unfolded around her, often to her surprise and even shock, she had to figure out continually what God was asking of her. Like the vast majority of people in world history, most of Mary’s life went unrecorded. She just lived it faithfully, in the words of Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium*, 58), as a “pilgrimage of faith.” She found an abundant reserve of energy in her trust in the God of Israel and in her solidarity with the growing community of Christians who experienced the promise of life in the death and resurrection of her son.

Even though, as it has canonized saints, the Church has customarily emphasized martyrdom, asceticism, renunciation of family and worldly possessions, or lifelong dedication to the sick, the poor, and the imprisoned, today we recognize more and more that holiness consists mainly in persevering fidelity in the midst of everyday life. This is what the “historical Mary” says to us. She looked for the word of God in people and events, listened to that word, pondered it, and then acted on it. She repeated again and again and again what she said to Gabriel: “Be it done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

2. Today we recognize her Magnificat as a rousing freedom song of the poor. Mary, the lead singer, epitomizes the lowly of Israel, those marginalized by society, for whom there is “no room in the inn” (Lk 2:7). God is her only hope and she sings the divine praises with exuberant confidence. While it may be difficult to imagine this revolutionary hymn coming from the mouth of a Madonna painted by Caravaggio, it is easy to envision it issuing from the lips of the historical Mary. Galilee was the spawning ground for first-century revolts against a repressive occupying power and its taxes. The Jerusalem Christians, who, with Mary, were the nucleus of the post-resurrection Church, suffered from real hunger and poverty (cf. Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1-4; Rom 15:25-26). With the members of this community, Mary believed that God can turn the world upside-down: that the last are first and the first last: the humble are exalted, the exalted humbled; those who save their life lose it, those who lose their life save it; those who mourn will rejoice, those who laugh will cry; the mighty are cast down from their thrones, the lowly are lifted up. She and they were convinced that in God’s kingdom the poor are first, and the prostitutes, the publicans, the outcasts of society eat at the table of the Lord. The historical Mary herself experienced poverty, oppression, violence, and the execution of her son. Her faith is deeply rooted in that context. Before the omnipotent God, she recognizes her own “lowly estate.” She is not among the world’s powerful. She is simply God’s “maidservant.” But she believes that nothing is impossible for God. In the Magnificat she sings confidently that God rescues life from death, joy from sorrow, light from darkness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian-martyr executed by the Nazis, wrote this:

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is that passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerless of humankind.

I join with Mary and with you in singing her vibrant song this Advent. May it be both praise of God’s power and prophecy of a world to come.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General