

A New Order in Mary

Mary, Mother of Our Lord
Is.61.7-11 Gal.4.4-7 Lk.1.46-55

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More than one person along the way has noted how heavily weighted the Judeo-Christian tradition is AGAINST women. You can't avoid recognizing it. It's in our long history of male dominance in church and synagogue. It's all over the Bible -- recognizable in injunctions of how women may or may not act, speak or be seen, and recognizable in the major figures of the Bible. Think about those for a minute. How many major figures can you name from either Testament who were women -- compared to how many MORE who were men?

In the Old Testament, God describes himself to Israel as the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and not the God of their mothers Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel. Although significant, their contribution lies in the background.

Jesus had twelve male disciples whose names are clearly recorded. And all the gospels say that there were women disciples too. Yet only a few of their names are recorded. They too remain largely in the background.

Like it or not, we must reckon with the fact that the Bible was written in cultural conditions in which women were little more than so much property belonging to their male lord. If the woman was looked to for anything, it was for her role as caretaker, wife and mother -- and that's all -- while the man was free to aspire to and pursue anything that life had to offer.

I suppose you could say it starts off rather badly for women right away in the Garden of Eden. Eve is the one who succumbs first to sin and then leads Adam into doing the same. God then gives the man dominion to reign over the woman, I suppose as a corrective for her weakness. Yet it's not long before sin turns the man's dominion into domination, and his reign becomes a reign of terror and slavery over the woman. So it goes for the children of Adam and Eve and the generations of history who follow in the Old Testament.

Many people today -- including most modern-day feminists -- would suggest that nothing really changed in the New Testament and in the rest of the history of the Church. But I would like to suggest that there was something different. God works something new here in the New Testament, and it comes to bear on the woman whose day we celebrate today, Mary of Nazareth.

As Christian tradition has come to call her, Mary is the New Eve -- a New Eve who brings about a new race of God's children, the New Israel, born through her Son. If the first Eve failed the test in disobedience and gave all women a bad name henceforth, then this second Eve is the model of obedience. The angel Gabriel

announces the birth of the Messiah through her, and she responds obediently: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Lk.2:38).

At first glance, I suppose this could appear to be another appeal to what women have always provided in their role as spouse and mother. But not so. There is no sexual union here. Mary remains a virgin. Nor is this conception or the resulting motherhood forced upon her. Mary is approached as an independent person -- fully human and fully capable of saying no. Her cooperation in God's plan of salvation is essential. And when that cooperation is given, God's word does act upon her. She conceives, yet remains a virgin.

This is no small thing here in history. When before had a woman occupied such a place? When before had a woman been able to say no? When before had a woman been given such independence apart from a man? Her position in life is altered. If Eve is overshadowed by the dominion of her husband Adam, then the old order is turned around here. Mary is given pre-eminence over her husband Joseph. The man, who usually calls the shots and runs things, must now take the passive role.

The poet W.H. Auden caught the major turn-around nature of this situation in his Christmas poem, "For the Time Being," and made it very clear when he told all men:

For having reasoned -- 'Woman is naturally pure
Since she has no moustache,' for having said,
 'No woman has a business head,'
You must learn now that masculinity,
To Nature, is a non-essential luxury.

Collected Longer Poems, p.152

That turn-around nature of this salvation work doesn't stop here either. Through Mary's cooperation, God brings forth a New Man, a New Adam. Again, if the Old Adam could not be obedient to the command and will of God, then this New Man in Jesus Christ could do it perfectly -- even if that obedience meant giving up his life. Everything that had been, would now be made new without the taint of sin and without the domination and separation that went with it. The old order would be entirely changed and wiped away.

And so we hear Christ preaching the dawning of the kingdom of God, in which sins are forgiven, the dead are raised to life, the poor hear good news, captives are released, the blind are healed, and the oppressed set free -- including women oppressed by male domination.

And so we hear Mary sing in our gospel of the scattering of the proud, the humbling of the powerful, the lifting up of the lowly, the feeding of the hungry -- while God looks with favor upon her lowliness as a woman and exalts her as the Mother of God.

And so we hear the Apostle Paul preaching the end of divisions of old, such as "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female." Now "all are one in Christ Jesus" he says (Gal.3:28) -- thus freeing people from all the dominations of the old social order.

And so we hear the Evangelist John preaching that the Christian Church has become the New Israel, the New People of God, "born not of blood or of the will of the

flesh or of the will of man," as was the case in Old Israel, "but [born] of God" through Jesus Christ (Jn.1:12-13).

It would be untrue to say that since this work in Jesus Christ, there is no more domination, no more sexism, no more discrimination between races and peoples. The news has been filled with it recently up in New York. Sin was not simply eradicated at one moment in history. The old order still exists in the world, and you can still see it in some parts of the New Testament and in the Church and world today. But sin and the old order are passing away. God is making all things new, says St Paul (2 Cor.5:17).

The significance of Mary, in this context, is that even before Christ was conceived and born, the new order begins with her. The old begins its passing when God approaches her with salvation in his hand. Mary is pivotal in salvation history. She is primary and essential to the Church. And that's why a day to honor her like today is important to the Church as well.

As God accorded to her full humanity and dignified her independence in his request for cooperation in salvation, so he does to us all. We too are accorded full humanity and dignity by God's offer of salvation that graces us. We too, like her, can say no. But we too, like her, can be graced with power from on high and brought to eternal life if we would but receive God's word and will for our lives, as shown in his Son Jesus Christ.

Let us always remember what God has done through Mary and her Son. And let us pray that God will liberate us as well from the influence of the old domination and bring us to newness of life -- even life eternal with Mary and her Son in heaven.