

1-25-2010

Why Study Mary?

François Rossier

University of Dayton, frossier1@udayton.edu

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Recommended Citation

Rossier, François, "Why Study Mary?" (2010). *Marian Library Faculty Presentations*. 3.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/imri_faculty_presentations/3

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*An address by Father François Rossier, S.M.,
at his installation as director of the
International Marian Research Institute on January 25, 2010*

Why Study Mary?

According to the tradition of the People of God, whenever one tries to account for the whys and wherefores of a reality, one has to look at its origin, to tell how it came to be. For instance, in order to explain why the human person is sinful, the story of our first parents is told in the book of Genesis, or, in other words, the book of the origins.

As heirs of this tradition, and as we—the University of Dayton community—are invited to find an answer to the question, “Why study Mary?” we need to look at the multiple stories that reveal the origins that led to the existence of a Catholic and Marianist University such as ours, moving from the most specific to the most generic: the origins of the Marianist story, the Catholic story, and the University story.

The beginning of the Marianist story can be traced back to the inspiration of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, which he received while he was praying at the Marian shrine of Our Lady of the Pillar in Zaragoza, Spain, where he was in exile during the times following the French Revolution. There, he was convinced that the Blessed Virgin Mary called him to found the Marianists.

This call—Blessed Chaminade made it clear—requires a specific response from the Marianists, that is, from those who are named after Mary. As he wrote in 1839 (*Letter to the Retreat Masters*, August 24, 1839), “What is specific about us [Marianists] is that we devote ourselves to Mary in order to make her known, loved, and served. For we are thoroughly convinced that we [Marianists] shall never bring people back to Jesus except through his most holy Mother.”

This, then, is the essence of what the mission of the Marianists is: to bring people to Jesus through Mary. As a work of the Marianists, the University of Dayton aims at that mission. There are, of course, many ways such a mission can be carried out. And it can be phrased in different ways, too. Fundamentally, however, the goal remains: to bring people to Jesus. And the Marianist means also remain: to do this through Mary.

At a University, one of the privileged ways of carrying out this mission is, of course, through teaching—imparting the knowledge of Mary. If “our [Marianist] spirit is”—as Blessed Chaminade wrote in a *Letter to Mother Xavier* (October 8, 1839)—“one of zeal, zeal for the glory of God through the knowledge and love of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” it is because, as he wrote again to Brother Clouzet (December 3-5, 1831), “We can say that the knowledge of the Blessed Virgin leads us to a much deeper knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

One main reason the knowledge of the Blessed Virgin leads us to a much deeper knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ is apparent at the starting point of the history of Catholicism or Christianity.

The story of Christianity began some two thousand years ago when a young woman of Galilee, after having asked about the meaning and the method, said “yes” to the message of the angel sent by God. The Incarnation could then take place, which is the specificity of Christianity.

Christianity is about Christ, and what is so specific about Jesus Christ is that he is both fully divine and fully human. Jesus is fully divine because he is the son of God. Therefore, if we want to understand who Jesus is, in himself and for us, we have to look back at his origins; we have to study God. Since the word for “God” in Greek is *Theos*, we have to study theology. However, if we limited ourselves to doing so, we would get a deeper understanding of only one-half of Jesus’s identity. Jesus is fully divine, but what is unique about him is that he is also, and at the same time, fully human. And Jesus is fully human because he is the son of Mary. The Son of Man is the son of that human being who is Mary. Therefore, if we want to fully understand who Jesus is in himself and for us, we have to look back at his origins and to study not only theology, but also Mariology.

The same conclusion is reached in a Letter from the Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation* (March 25, 1988): “Considering the importance of the Virgin in the history of salvation and in the life of the People of God, and after promptings of Vatican Council II and of the Popes, it would be unthinkable that the teaching of Mariology be obscured today.”

As the Church started to organize its reflection and teaching on the revelation in Jesus Christ, it founded, in the thirteenth century, the institution known as the university. At the origin of the rise of the universities (Bologna, Paris, Oxford), there is, then, the initiative of the Church. The Catholic Church founded the university as an institution where theology could be investigated and taught as a field of study.

The word “university” comes from the Latin word *universus*, meaning “totality.” This is the equivalent of the Greek word *katholikos*. Étienne Gilson, a famous French medievalist who taught at Harvard, stated that, in the Middle Ages, the university was primarily a school of theology, because theology was understood as the knowledge necessary for human beings to attain their end. In this context, theology is the only knowledge that matters, that encompasses everything (from faith to reason), that leads us from our origin to our end.

Interestingly, when the Second Vatican Council’s dogmatic *Constitution on Divine Revelation* describes the story of theological reflection within the tradition, it situates Mary at its origin: “This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For, as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.” (*Dei Verbum* 8, November 18, 1965).

The texts of Luke 2:19 and 51 are about Mary who, twice, is said to treasure and ponder these things in her heart. In fact, and chronologically, Mary can be seen as the first Christian theologian, as the first one who treasured up all she could see, hear, touch, about Jesus, as the first one who took care to find out what all that could mean. As theology is “faith seeking understanding,” that woman, Mary, is therefore at the origin of theological reflection. She led the way. She is an example to follow.

The verb “to treasure up” translates the Greek verb *symballein*, which literally means “to put together,” which is the proper role of human reasoning. When we reflect, we put pieces of truth together and look at the possible result. The verb *symballein*, in this sense, is typical of Mary as seen throughout the New Testament. It also means “to bring together” (and we find in Mary a prototype of the “both ... and ...” so typical of Catholic theology). It is typical of Mary “to bring together”: in her womb, the divine nature and the human nature were brought together in the person of Jesus.

In Greek, the verb opposed to *symbollein* is *diaballein* from which the English noun “devil” is derived. The devil is the great divider who works through lying and misleading (see Genesis 3). Blessed Chaminade saw defeating all heresies, in particular indifference to divine revelation, as part of Mary’s mission. When the universities were founded in the Middle Ages, a new field of study was soon added to theology, namely philosophy, for the Catholic tradition has always affirmed that human reason can, though partially, access the same truth that is fully disclosed to us through revelation. Both revelation and reason, both grace and nature, are to be brought together.

Mary welcomed the full divine revelation in the person of her son, but she had also to apply her reason in order to grasp what this person meant. She is the first one to bring together revelation and human reason in order to understand Jesus Christ. As the first Christologist, Mary opens the way to future theologians. Her example is given to us by Jesus himself. Blessed Chaminade cherished the Gospel pericope of John 19:25-27, where we see the mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple standing at the foot of the cross and witnessing the death of Jesus. As Jesus is beginning his journey back to the Father, he establishes a relationship between his mother and his disciple. As a son to his mother, he is replaced by a disciple, and as a master to his disciple, he is replaced by a mother. Then the disciple welcomes her. In Greek, this same verb is otherwise used by John only to describe how the people welcomed Jesus and his teaching.

The beloved disciple welcomes the mother of Jesus because he has to learn from this woman. Of all the witnesses of Jesus, Mary is the only one who was present both at the birth and at the death of the Messiah. Of all those who welcomed the coming of the Word into our world, she is the one most impacted by the Incarnation. She was even physically transformed by it. Of all the followers of Jesus, she is the only one who resembled him even physically, that is, concretely.

In Mary, we have the full and concrete revelation of how a human creature is to respond to the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Karl Rahner describes Mary as the “perfect Christian.” Mary’s example is not only the perfect one; it is also the first one, the inaugural one, the foundational one.

We study Mary because there is no better example that could help us to understand what it means to respond to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. We study her because she is both mother and first disciple of her son, because as such she is the concrete and complete example. As Joseph Ratzinger once wrote, what is characteristic of Mary is her concretizing function. She performs this function in a twofold manner.

First, through Mary, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is God made tangible, concrete, accessible to our senses. In Jesus Christ, we have the full revelation of God because the Word made flesh has become fully accessible to our senses, and knowledge always comes to us, human beings made of flesh and blood, through our senses. A person deprived of senses cannot learn anything. In Jesus Christ, God can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, and, in the Eucharist, even tasted or eaten. Mary’s contribution to the Incarnation was to provide the Son of God with a human body, with flesh and blood. In becoming the human mother of God, Mary performed her concretizing function: she enabled God to become accessible to our senses; she allowed God to become tangible.

Second, as the human collaborator of the Holy Spirit in the Incarnation, Mary helps us to get a sense of God’s action and presence in our world. Consequently, in perfectly welcoming the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, Mary also performed her concretizing function as she became the perfect example of the human creature’s response to this revelation.

Divine revelation looks for a response—hopes for a response from us. In Jesus Christ, God is reaching out to us, expecting a positive reply from us. “I, the Lord, your God, teach you what is for your good, and lead you on the way you should go” (Isaiah 48:17). The knowledge imparted to us by theology or Mariology is not an end in itself. We

study theology, we study Mariology, because they teach us to attain our end, which is to have a share in the community of love founded on the Trinity. It is not knowledge simply for the sake of knowing. This knowledge teaches us what response God expects us to give to his revelation in Jesus Christ.

The example of Mary helps us to get an accurate sense of such a response. It is the example of a concrete person, of a woman, of a mother. Here, we finally grasp the main reason we study Mary. As in the case of theology, the object of Mariology is not abstract, is not a body of knowledge or a set of laws and doctrines. The object of Mariology is a person, a concrete individual. At first sight, it might seem odd to dedicate a research discipline—one of these things ending in “-ology”—to the study of a particular human person. A person, however, is precisely particular, because it is only by this uniqueness that a person can be truly loved.

God himself is love (1 John 4:8). He so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16). That Son, Jesus Christ, loved his own in the world, and he loved them [us] to the end (John 13:1). That end is ascertained once Jesus has given his mother to his beloved disciple (John 19:7-28). This is why God’s revelation in Jesus Christ came to us with one commandment: Love your God with all your heart [...] and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:33).

Ultimately we study Mary not in order to accumulate knowledge, but because, knowing her leads us to loving her. That was Blessed Chaminade’s experience. He invited the Marianists not only to know Mary, but also to love her, to serve her. Who can be more easily loved than a loving mother? Here too, Mary performs a concretizing function as she speaks to our hearts and helps us to give this response of love that God expects from us. Mary was not only the first theologian; she has also become a perfect pedagogical tool for those who study theology as they wish to reach their end.