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**MARY: INTERCESSOR ON OUR BEHALF, ONE WITH
US IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS, AND
WITNESS TO WHAT WE MAY BECOME IN CHRIST**

*Ross Mackenzie, Ph.D.**

I invite you to journey with me in imagination to places where I have found my own joyful mysteries of Mary—Mary, intercessor on our behalf; Mary, one with us in the communion of saints; and Mary, witness to what we may become in Christ.

St. Giles' Cathedral: Mary as Intercessor on Our Behalf

Come first to St. Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh. The name "Cathedral" is title of courtesy only. The origins of the church lie somewhere in the eleven hundreds. I was ordained in St. Giles according to the ordination rites of the Church of Scotland.

The Church of Scotland is Reformed and Protestant. Yet the first Scottish reformers clearly thought of themselves as in continuity with the Church Catholic from the beginning. In the curious phrase of the Scots Confession, the church is "Fra Adam." They meant, to use the language of the Confession, that "there has been, now is, and to the end of the world will be, one Kirk," one company and multitude of men and women who rightly worship and embrace God by true faith in Christ Jesus.

The Confession assigns no place to Mary in the work of salvation. So out she went within a generation from Protestant devotion in Scotland, and out went the Marian spirituality that had sweetened the labors and sufferings of people from the valleys of the Orkney Islands to the slums of Edinburgh's High Street.

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To be fair, the reformers feared what the cult of Mary was doing to the faith once delivered to the saints. Was the church in its devotion to Mary, they asked, not building on another foundation than that of the prophets and apostles? A Mariology out of control had adorned her with titles that Scripture could not follow.

I was ordained to be true, at least in part, to that anti-Marian tradition. As a good Calvinist I was intellectually clear about one thing: that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and ourselves.

Then came the nudge.

Every Sunday in St. Gile's we heard ancient words made fresh in the celebration of the Lord's Supper: "Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy holy name, evermore praising Thee and saying, 'Holy, holy, holy.'"

With all the company of heaven! That must then mean at the least—or so I reflected—that in this celebration of the Lord's Supper we were one with all those who had ever come to St. Gile's in generations before us: one with working men, who left the High Street closes for their daily labor, with hands calloused and bones sore; one with the children, unshod, dribbly-nosed, and ill clad, who scampered in the bleak back alleys like rabbits; and one with the clog-footed women you could see daily sweeping clean their tenement stairs. For centuries, they had all come to St. Gile's in feast and famine. Had they not prayed often, too, to the Mother of God, who swept the stairs at Nazareth, in a prayer like this from pre-Reformation Scotland?

O Mary Virgin! And O Holy Son!

Bless ye the house and all therein.

Bless ye the food, bless ye the board,

Bless ye the corn, the flock, and the store.

What time to us the quarter was scarce,

It is thou thyself, Virgin, who was mother to us.

"Thou thyself, Virgin, wast mother to us." This was the touch that came in St. Gile's, light as gossamer, so gently brushing the skin you did not notice the lure of the eternal seeping

through the material, into the kirk where John Knox had thundered out his reforming message.

What could it mean to pray to Mary? I asked. What is it to ask Mary to pray on our behalf? The ensuing years enlarged the answers to these early questions.

Bill Arnold, former dean of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, had served on the staff of a Presbyterian church in Louisville in the late 1960s. He received a call at two one morning. The caller was in agitation: "You're a minister," she began. "Let me ask you this. On the day of judgment, are those who have died first judged before the others who die after them?"

Hardly awake from sleep, Bill asked her cantankerously why she had called him at that hour of the morning. "Well," she said, "your name was first on the Yellow Pages under clergy."

She continued. Her son had never made anything of his life. At high school he had been arrested by the police many times. He drank too much. He got hooked on drugs. He made a girl pregnant. He joined the army and was sent to Viet Nam. On a night maneuver he had been ambushed and killed. "On the day of judgment," she said, "before he's judged and condemned, I want to speak a good word for him."

"I want to speak a good word for. . . ."

It was a Reformed and Protestant theologian, Congregationalist Peter Taylor Forsyth, who wrote, "To enter Christ is in the same act to enter the church which is in Christ." Now that, if it means anything at all, means that Christ has chosen never to be alone. We know Christ only in the communion of the Holy Spirit. We ask the saints to pray for us, because they are praying in harmony with Christ. If that is true of them, it is supremely true of Mary. She is the intercessor *par excellence*. In the excellence of her humility, she is never more attentive to human need than when she sees the hungry hunger or the thirsty thirst; never more mother than when she brings them and their need to her Son.

At the wedding in Cana, Mary gave herself completely to her Son. In this way she played her part in revealing God's glory in the sign that was then given by her Son. On our part, when we are present in a situation of need, when we speak a good word for, when we stand with someone in need, the fact that we are

present alters the situation, because God is present through our faith. To honor and love Mary as intercessor on our behalf means that contemplation and action are inseparable. It means not only that she stands for us in our own need, but that our honoring and love of her are our stimuli to pray for others and to find ways of being with them in their need.

The Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father, *Ut Unum Sint*, has helpfully identified areas in need of fuller study before a true consensus of faith can be achieved. It appropriately calls on us to a study of the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God and icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ's disciples and for all humanity. It is gratifying, however, that an orientation toward such study can be found also, particularly in the last thirty years, in many ecumenical groups, such as the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Reformed theologian Karl Barth, Episcopalian John de Satge, Methodist Marcus Ward, Presbyterian Kathleen Norris and many others have played their own part in what the Encyclical calls "the necessary purification of past memories"—including, I must say, the notoriously anti-Catholic, and therefore anti-Marian, vindictiveness that mars much Protestant history.

Iona: Mary in the Communion of Saints

The second holy place to which I invite you is the bleakly beautiful Island of Iona. Two names will inevitably be associated in any history of Iona. The first is that of Columba, who landed on the island in 563 with twelve companions. Iona was his base of operations for thirty-five years. From Iona, missionaries, teachers, agriculturalists, musicians, and healers, as well as priests, brought the Gospel of Christ and Celtic culture to the Picts of Scotland and to the English from Northumbria to East Anglia.

The second name associated with Iona is that of George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community. In 1930, he went as parish minister to Govan, an industrial town on the River Clyde, famed for its shipbuilding, but cruelly hit by the depression. Eighty percent of the work force was unemployed. On a pastoral visit, MacLeod came to a local hospital, bringing

holy communion from the church to a shipyard worker who was dying of hunger. When he later returned to the parish church, MacLeod was aghast at the contrast: the church, whose central act is the sharing of bread, had lost its commitment to share bread with the hungry poor.

MacLeod came to Iona from Govan with his twelve companions, in 1938, to form the Iona Community. Columba and MacLeod, separated by 1400 years, were in many ways remarkably alike: veterans of war and, because of that, lovers of peace; aristocrats, who never lost the common touch. They shared three convictions. First, the world is disintegrating for loss of community. Second, the Gospel is about building the beloved community, the church, through Christ the Master Carpenter. Third, only in the shared life of this beloved community will people come to understand the covenantal nature of faith.

In the cloisters of the restored Abbey is a bronze statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Entitled "The Descent of the Spirit," it is one of three cast by Jacob Lipschitz, an Orthodox Jew. Courageously, and against the prevailing anti-Catholic currents of his time, George MacLeod refused to take no for an answer, until the statue—the gift of a generous American woman—was given the most public place of the community's life.

Lipschitz early in his life had fled from a pogrom in Eastern Europe, one not initiated by, but certainly not resisted by, the Orthodox Church. He was in Paris when the looming Nazi threat from Germany forced him to take refuge in New York. In that city he was informed, shortly after his arrival, that the terms of the lease did not permit Jews in the city apartment. Lipschitz's response to a lifetime of oppression was to cast the statue. One copy stands in Iona; a second in New Harmony, Indiana; and a third in Haute Savoie, France. The statue carries a legend in French on the back of its canopy: "Jacob Lipschitz, a Jew faithful to the religion of his ancestors, has made this Virgin for the good understanding of people on earth, that the Spirit may reign."

Over the years I have returned to the statue, and allowed it to press its message upon me. More accurately, prompted by the statue, over the years I increasingly turned to Mary, Mother

of our Lord, and—learning from her—have pondered what the New Testament scholar G. H. C. MacGregor called “the relevance of the impossible.” “How can this be?” is Mary’s question at the Annunciation.

How will it ever be possible for us to coexist? We Catholics and we Protestants in Northern Ireland? We who are for abortion rights, and we who see the inherent connection between nonviolence and a pro-life position on abortion? We Black, white and colored in South Africa? We black, poor, and oppressed in the inner city, and we who sing “Jesus loves me” in a suburban church? We Palestinians and we Jews in the Mar Homa settlement near Bethlehem? These are all part of the largest of all questions: How is it possible that God can have a place in a universe for which neither Stephen Hawking nor the Hubble telescope have found evidence?

On the island of Iona, I came to learn what it means not only to ask questions about the seemingly impossible, but also to have Mary with us in the communion of saints, Mary who, in the face of the impossible, opened herself to what God would do through her for the life of the world. The question implicit in the song put into Mary’s mouth—“On whose side does God stand?”—receives its answer. God calls all humanity. The salvation in Christ is universal. To say that God has come to the help of Israel means that God intends to put down the mighty from their seat and lift up the powerless. So when black people, or women, or gay people, or the oppressed, say Yes to their humanity by affirming their blackness, or their humanity, or their dignity, their Yes is an expression of God’s reconciling act in Jesus Christ. To use the language of the Encyclical Letter, it is, therefore, our task and bounden duty to be involved in “bold projects” aimed at inculcating respect for the rights especially of the poor, the lonely, and the defenseless.

Blanca Martinez, works with alienated youth in Dallas. She made an electrifying speech at the National Peace Summit in Santa Cruz: “When Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross, he could have called down all of his angels and kicked some butt. But he forgave those who crucified him. The only reason we want to knock each other down is because we don’t feel good about ourselves.” That may lack the Anglican propriety of “He

hath put down the mighty from their thrones," but it is a wonderful witness from a woman whose own soul magnifies the Lord, and who feels and finds herself daily aided by Mary, "the woman for all seasons and all reasons" (Jaroslav Pelikan).

South India: Mary as Witness to What We May Become in Christ

The third holy place to which I will take you in imagination is Kerala, South India. The tradition of the Orthodox Christians of India is that in the year 52, St. Thomas the Apostle landed on an island near Cranganore. From the fruit of his early missionary work there, the Malankara Orthodox Church has grown into a position of respect and equality among the Orthodox family of churches.

When I taught in the Orthodox faculty in Kerala, my host, Father Thomas, frequently invited me to visit congregations throughout the state. Once, hearing more laughter than I thought was appropriate for a decently conservative sermon, I asked Father Thomas if he had, indeed, been translating my sermon. "Oh, yes," he replied with a twinkle in his eyes, "word for word. Of course, I added just a little spice to make it more interesting."

On the twenty-first anniversary of his ordination, Father Thomas was at a celebration of the Holy Qurbana in the village church. It was the church where he had been baptized and confirmed, where he had received first communion, and where he had been ordained to the priesthood. It was a Marian feast that day. Without prior notice, Father Thomas invited me to preach on the Gospel of the day, John 2.

The waiting congregation sat on the earthen floor, his own mother among them. My poor sermon went in this fashion. I recall only three sentences:

Mary had given Jesus birth for such a ministry as this. She is the one who notices what is lacking in the community, who sees emptiness where there should be joy. She is the one who brings us a future that the gloom of the present failure keeps us from seeing.

In his presidential lecture to this society in 1995, Fr. Walter T. Brennan asked: "What can the Church offer to all persons of

good will in every culture?" The question is excellent. It is central for Christian faith. I would like to look more closely at both terms: church and culture.

We must address the question of the church in the world, as Vatican II did in its splendid Constitution "The Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et spes*). But the church's address to the world—its evangelization of the world—is only the beginning. We must also look to the end of the process, and attempt to sketch what it means to speak of *the world in the church*. We need to work our way to a theology of the world and of the human creation we call culture.

In the Greek patristic tradition, Christ is the great Healer who has come to restore in us the image of God. Christ has also come to prepare the secret germination of the kingdom of God in the creation itself. In the suggestive phrase of Paul Evdokimov, the world, "like an immense parable . . . gives us a reading of the divine 'poetry' written in its flesh." Everything can be an image, a likeness, a participation in the economy of salvation.

It was this sense that elicited in Dostoevsky his deeply felt conviction about beauty: "Only *beauty* is absolutely indispensable," he wrote, "for without beauty there is nothing left in the world worth doing." Beauty, however, is not always true. It enchants, by revealing God's own immutable beauty. It is also ambiguous and deceptive. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we mean, may all things come to the beauty and fullness that God intends. And let our role, as good and faithful servants, be to learn how we may help bring that beauty and fullness to our part of the world.

I have the privilege of serving in an Institution that for nearly 125 years has striven to present a remarkable blend of the arts, lifelong learning, physical recreation, and religious worship. In a place of great natural beauty, Chautauqua has brought a wealth of humanly constructed beauty to those who pass through its gates.

What is it to minister—to be a deacon—in such a place? It is, I believe, to help bring beauty and fullness to a part of the world—to aid in the process by which those involved in art and learning help to build human existence as God intends it to be. My task is to help those involved in either cultural, reli-

gious or recreational programs be grateful that they are not just doing religious, artistic or recreational work. They are doing the priestly work of receiving the good that God has given us and sharing it with others. The task is to interpret how our whole cultural life—from symphony to country Western, from Mahler's Second Symphony to the Dave Brubeck Quartet—is somehow part of the larger liturgy that goes on all the time in the cosmos. "Ring out, ye crystal spheres," was John Milton's response to the morning of Christ's nativity. "Ring, ring, ring!" is the swinging twentieth-century echo from the Count Basie Band. To be mediators or transmitters at our own level, in our own spheres, of anything that reflects the glory, truth, and grace of God, is to do the duty of those who try to be faithful in responding to God's call.

According to ancient tradition, Mary is "the new Eve." She is the new life, "the true mother of the true life," to use the words of St. Germanus. In the lovely line from the Akathist Hymn, she has "greened anew the pastures of delight." She is the one who points us to a future that the gloom of our present culture keeps us from seeing. She reveals to the world its body and soul, for she gives to the world the one of whom the prolog of John speaks: "Everything that was created received its life from him." Padraic Fallon asks in his poem, "How was she to know she corrected / The very tilt of the earth on its new course?"

Mary, bearer of the One through whom we know the fullness, truth, and grace of God, is therefore a sign for us that indeed we can body forth the beauty that reveals to the world its body and soul. We can read and even help write the divine 'poetry' written in its flesh. We *can* give the little extra push that tilts the world on a new course. Mary is that kind of sign for us and for the world. So let us bless "her who is worthy to be blessed and glorified of all the generations of the earth, the holy, the exalted, the glorious and Ever-virgin Mary, Mother of God."