

Mary: A Woman of Persistence
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I want to explore with you why Mary has been so persistently important through the twenty centuries that we have been around as a people of God. I'm interested not just in why we identify with her, but also in why Mary persists through the ages. To begin to formulate an answer to this question, I'd like to examine a Litany of her role as found in Sacred Scripture.

The first thing we get from Scripture, particularly from the Gospel of Luke, indicates that Mary can be considered the *first disciple* - a disciple who remains faithful. Luke makes this point by telling us that when the angel comes to Mary and asks her to become the mother of the messiah, she responds with her unconditional "yes" and remains faithful to that "yes" even in the most difficult of times.

Luke says this about Mary: she was the first believer in Jesus; she was the first follower; the first disciple; and she didn't fall away in times of trouble.

Despite all that happens to her and the society around her, she trusts in God - unquestionably. And because of this trust she is able to persevere. And if for no other reason, she earned a mark of respect in the early church community.

Secondly, in the Gospel, Mary is revealed as someone who *keeps God's word*. Remember the incident when Mary and her relatives were trying to see Jesus when he was in the full bloom of his public ministry and there was a mob around him? They sent word to Jesus through the crowd. "Jesus, your mother and relatives are here to see you." And Jesus responds, "But who are my mother, my father, my brother and sister but those who keep the Word of God?"

In effect what he was saying was that Mary's claim to greatness was not that she was his biological mother, but that she kept the word of God. In the face of all obstacles - she keeps the word of God. And that is a remarkable compliment to this woman.

Thirdly, and here is where she gets closer to us - Mary becomes the *representative of all who struggle*, all who suffer - the silenced witnesses and members of the exploited class.

Remember that Mary lived in occupied territory. Mary knew what it was like to be oppressed. She knew tyranny. She knew what it was like to be a refugee. She knew what the Palestinians or the Black African or Kosovar or Sudanese know today.

She knew segregation, she knew a minority place. She had to keep her mouth shut while Herod systematically killed the innocent children of Bethlehem.

Mary stood on the fringe of the crowd while she saw her son publicly humiliated, carrying the cross. She had to stand behind the soldier's spears that formed a fence, and she could not get to Jesus on the cross to give him comfort - the comfort a mother needs to give a child who is in need.

And that is why people have always related to Mary in Michelangelo's masterpiece - The "Pieta" - Mary holding the broken body of her son. People can be identified with her letting forth the only thing she was permitted to let forth - a cry and a scream, and hard tears. Those who have lost a child, those who are oppressed and cannot speak out because they will be imprisoned or shot or retribution will be made against their families - they understand Mary. And she understands them.

Any parent who is worried about violence or someone robbing their child of their innocence or who worry about child abuse or pornography - parents who are worried about people coming up to their children and pushing drugs; parents who are looking at the horrendous values of the media, and who say, "We don't want to live like that," but are powerless and helpless to control these things; you know what Mary means, and you know why she persists.

We can identify with that woman who is the silenced witness to things that are better; and society keeps her suppressed.

Fourthly, Mary is a *faith pilgrim*. And people can certainly identify with that. Remember the story in Luke: the angel said "You are to be the mother of God." And what did she say? She simply asked "How can this be?" And how many people throughout the ages, including you and me, have cried that? How can I tackle this challenge? How can I survive? How can I deal with suffering? How can I begin all over again as a divorced or widowed?

We tend to romanticize the fact that Mary was married to Joseph and she lost him somewhere along the way. But there is no romance in losing a spouse. Or losing a child in crucifixion. Knowing death - being a bereaved person.

And you ask Mary's question, "How can this be?" You ask: "How can I carry on? How can I survive life? "How can I get along?" The discovery of a terminal illness. Trying to grasp and comprehend the end of life. The loss of a job. Rejection.

The feeling of hopelessness and despair. And you ask, "How can this be?" You are asking Mary's question. "How can this be?" No wonder Mary persists! We identify with her questioning.

Scripture also tells us that Mary is *the keeper of memories*. Luke tells us that she didn't understand these things *happening* to her or the events surrounding her but she treasured them in her heart. So, as other marauders come in and destroy books and destroy monuments, and destroy photographs and destroy names, and destroy identities, and destroy values, you look to the valiant men and women who keep the memories and treasures in their hearts, people who someday will retell our story to us when we have forgotten it. No wonder oppressed people identify with Mary, the keeper of memories - they look to her because the oppressors have tried to erase people's names and stories out of the history books.

Next, Mary is a *model of simplicity*. And I think part of her power in history is due to this.

As we get all these very elaborate liturgies, and all of these elaborate doctrines, and all of these elaborate regulations, somehow Mary cuts through all that, and when people are crying or in their sick bed, or feel like giving up, they simply say "Ave Maria." It's as simple as that. Mary is the model of simplicity that cuts through a great deal.

Next, Mary is the *God-bearer*, the Theotokos - and of course, that too is our role. She gave forth to the world the living Christ, and I think people through the ages have always identified with that role. They say, "This is my role." Everyone here is to be a Christ-bearer, to birth the Lord and give him to other people. Mary did that, and so we recognize that. We find a kindred spirit there.

And finally, I believe Mary persists because *she has been given to us*. Remember the scene at Calvary? Jesus is dying. There's his mother. "Who will take care of my mother when I'm gone?" So he turns to John, who represents all the Christian family, and says, "Son, behold thy mother." And he gives away his last, his most precious possession.

And we are the recipients of that. And that's why Luke has Mary stand up in the temple and sing her Magnificat and her great prophecy: "Behold, all generations shall call me blessed."

And so, from the very outlandish to the very simple, Mary becomes significant, and her prophecy comes true. Whether it's Our Lady of Guadeloupe, Lourdes, Fatima, LaSalette or Knock, you name it, however you feel about these things - - - behind these apparitions, behind the shrines, behind even gross exaggerations, is a woman who won't go away.

She persevered in the struggles, the suffering, and the questions in her life. She persists in ours simply because she is just enormously human, because she is enormously a great disciple, and because everything in her life has touched our lives.

There is not a tear or a smile of Mary's that we haven't felt. There's not a question and a hurt and a pain and a suffering that we can't identify with. Its no wonder this gentlewoman - this woman of faith - this woman of humility continues to be important to us. Its no wonder - in our day and age - she persists!