

LET US PRAY - REFLECTIONS ON THE EUCHARIST

Fr. Roger G. O'Brien,
Senior Priest, Archdiocese of Seattle

Article #9, Mary and the Eucharist

A key ingredient of eucharistic spirituality is a living relationship with the woman who stood at the foot of the cross. Every time at eucharist we remember and give thanks for Jesus' dying and rising, we do so in communion with Mary and the entire company of saints.

"If we wish to recover in all its richness the profound relationship between the Church and the Eucharist," wrote John Paul II, "we cannot neglect Mary." (*Eucharistia de Ecclesia*, No. 53) One can say that Mary is a "woman of the eucharist" *in her whole life*. If the eucharist calls "for sheer abandonment to the word of God, then there can be no one like Mary to act as our support and guide in acquiring this disposition." (*Ibid.*, No. 54, emphasis added) He concluded: To celebrate eucharist means "taking on a commitment to be conformed to Christ, putting ourselves at the school of his Mother, and allowing her to accompany us." (*Ibid.*, No. 57)

What does "the school of the Mother of Jesus" teach us? To speak of Mary and the Eucharist is in fact to speak of this 'school'.

We know very little about Mary's life, her chronology, her personality. John McKenzie has observed that there's "almost a total lack of genuine information concerning the life and person of Mary." (*Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 552) Apart from the infancy narratives in the New Testament, Mary is mentioned only in a few shards of the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

One commentator says that we need to respect these 'shards' and inhabit them knowingly, so as to rightly interpret the christian discourse of the gospel writers who present these glimpses of Mary's life connected with the coming of the Messiah and his community.

"This location in the gospels," she adds, "offers reason to think of [Mary] as a woman of faith, one whose life was a 'pilgrimage of faith', in the poetic words of Vatican II." (*Truly Our Sister*, p. 101)

The writer I quote is Elizabeth Johnson, a balanced feminist theologian, whose book, *Truly Our Sister*, seeks to locate Mary in her *own* particular history, a woman with her own life to compose in her encounter with God. I find Johnson's work well done and richly provocative, and so I'm going to draw on it for much of what I have to say.

We need to acknowledge, as a starting point, that the Mother of Jesus has long been symbolized in an extravagant way, as a symbol of the maternal face of God, of the eternal feminine, of the disciple, of the idealized church.

Johnson wonders if we fully appreciate Mary in her *own* history. She observes that “strong emphasis on Mary’ obedience, virginity, and primary importance as a mother shaped a religious symbol that satisfied the needs of a monastic or ecclesiastical male psyche more adequately than it served women’s spiritual search or social capabilities.” (*Ibid.*, p. 7) Johnson’s view is that official church views, shaped by men in a patriarchal context, functioned to define control of female lives.

Johnson affirms Mary as first and foremost *herself*. Not an icon. Not a representative. Not an ideal woman or mother. Mary is first and foremost “a woman of faith [within the communion of saints], a Jewish woman of a particular time and place, with her own familial and social relationships, her own journey toward God, and what turned out to be her historic vocation to partner with God in bringing to birth the Messiah.” (*Ibid.*, p. 70)

The New Testament provides several snapshots of Mary in conjunction with the story of Jesus. In these pictures, Mary does not stand alone. She’s “one of many characters whose free participation is important for the total message of the gospel.” (*Ibid.*, p. 115)

She is unique as Jesus’ mother, and has her own particular history. Yet “her story is woven into the gracious work of the redeeming God along with the others present at the birth of the church.” (*Ibid.*)

Who, then, was this Miriam of Nazareth, and what do these scriptural images tell us about her?

Miriam of Nazareth lived in an economically poor, politically oppressed, Jewish peasant culture, marked by exploitation and publicly violent resistance to the Jewish client leaders set up by the Roman occupying forces in ancient Galilee.

Her faith in God was Jewish: shaped by the covenant forged at Sinai, nourished by God’s saving deeds in history, and expressed in prayer, festivals, rituals, and ethical observance of the Torah.

Her everyday piety was rooted in family morning and evening prayers, instruction in the Law, and observance of purity laws regarding food and sexual intercourse. It was also rooted in the public assembly, or synagogue, on šabbat, when work and business were halted and when all gathered to listen to the scriptures, share in instruction, and join in prayer. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem and generosity to the poor were part of this living faith. Miriam of Nazareth’s was an enduring Jewish identity.



In addition to her political world and the world of her faith, this woman was shaped by her society’s laws, customs, and expectations concerning the respective roles of women and men.

Miriam married Joseph, a faithful Torah observing Jew of the house of David, when she was twelve or thirteen. Joseph supported his family as a worker in stone and wood. He and Miriam were of the artisan-peasant class. Joseph offered the legal protection of paternity to Miriam’s first-born Son, whom she had conceived in what seemed to be dubious circumstances.

In her everyday married life, Miriam of Nazareth engaged in producing, processing, and preserving food, making clothing, teaching, training, and caring for children in the multi-generational compound where she and her family lived.

Given the routine of hard daily labor, she very likely had a muscular body, with Semitic features and Mediterranean dark hair and eyes. She would have been illiterate. (So much for the image of her as an upper-class, beautifully gowned medieval or Renaissance woman, given us in the fanciful art of Christmas cards!)

In this political, religious, and social milieu, Miriam of Nazareth lived her Jewish faith and walked that faith with enormous consequence.

The gospels contain a number of 'mosaic' pieces about Mary. These are glued to the story of Jesus, and need to be viewed both from the perspective of Mary's own political, religious, and social context, and from the whole biblical sweep of God's gracious history with the world. Elizabeth Johnson describes and interprets thirteen of these 'mosaic' pieces, which, taken in full, offer a living image of Mary. I will name these and comment on them briefly.

The first 'stone' of the mosaic, if you will, is Mark's story (3:20-21 and 31-35) about Jesus repudiating his mother and family, when they arrived at Capernaum to get him back to Nazareth (they were concerned he'd lost his mind). Standing *outside* the circle of those to whom Jesus was preaching, Mary hears Jesus say his mother and brothers and sisters are those who do the will of God. Blood ties, in other words, don't guarantee a place in Jesus' inclusive community of disciples, built not on subservience but on collegial relationships.

This vignette offers an image of Mary – outside the circle – seeking the well-being of one she loves. She's a good Jewish mama. She's fearful of where Jesus' ministry was leading him and protective of him.

"Believing in God, Creator and Redeemer of the world," Johnson writes, "this Jewish woman partners the divine work of love by seeking to preserve and protect a precious life," Johnson writes. "No submissive handmaid, her memory moves in solidarity with women everywhere who act critically according to their best lights to seek the well-being of those they love." (*Ibid.*, p. 221)

Mathew's genealogy is a second piece of the New Testament mosaic of Mary. "Abraham was the father of Isaac; Isaac, the father of Jacob; Jacob, the father of Judah and his brothers..." (Mt. 1:2) The genealogy places Mary in the company of unconventional foremothers who stood outside the patriarchal system as agents of God's inclusive action in history.

The genealogy is androcentric without question: not a word about the women who bore the sons of each generation. At the same time, the list contains the names of four women, plus Mary, who found themselves in danger. None are revered Israelite matriarchs (one, Rahab, is, in fact, a prostitute). None were related properly to a man as his wife.

Raymond Brown sees these women and their actions as "vehicles of divine providence, examples of how God moves in and through the obstacles of human scandal to bring about the coming of the Messiah." (*Birth of the Messiah*, p. 73)

God so acts in Mary, siding with this outcast, endangered woman and child. And her memory bears the gospel assurance that the God revealed in Jesus, God's own Spirit, is

with them. The point: insignificant, illegitimate, defenseless, tabooed people all belong to God, and Mary becomes the agent of divine action in history

Another 'mosaic' piece found in Matthew's story of Mary's suspicious pregnancy (1:18-25), which, given her patriarchal culture, surrounds her with social and legal disrepute. In the midst of this trouble, however, something holy is going on. God's Spirit is moving to bring about the birth of the Messiah in this threatening situation. And Mary emerges as the agent of disgrace that turns into grace!

Her story challenges the biased social patterns that created the scandal to begin with. It places Mary in solidarity with women who suffer violence or the threat of violence from patriarchal authority, affirming that God is with them.

Johnson writes: "That the Spirit of God would be with a woman who suffered [such] violence, able to bring good from an inestimably painful situation, embodies the gospel in miniature and is a deep source of hope." (*Ibid.*, p. 230)

Matthew's story of the visit of the Magi (2:1-12) provides a snapshot of Mary as mother, whose child is attended by wise ones (Gentiles, mind you). They come to believe in the Christ, and their tribute signals the attraction of the coming reign of God that will bring salvation and liberation. And all this is experienced in a "house" – a metaphor for the church.

The story of the flight into Egypt (Mt. 2:13-23) lifts up a memory of Mary at the center of terror and displacement, and discloses her as Mother of Sorrow and Mother of Defiance.

Here, Mary is in solidarity with the millions of refugees struggling to survive in a harsh world even today. For, in Egypt, Mary and Joseph experienced the tribulations of foreign workers. Mary was a displaced, poor, courageous woman. Her story, echoing Israel's exodus and exile, tells how God's saving power works *in the midst of*, not apart from, the struggles of history.



"The good news of the gospel," Johnson writes, "is that the advent of God focused in Jesus, who is described not only from Abraham and David but also from the defiantly lamenting Rachel and the threatened, fleeing, defiantly surviving Mary, compassionately overcomes the worst outrage. This is the Christian hope." (*Ibid.*, p. 247)

In Luke's annunciation story (1:26-38), we are given Mary as disciple, not in the historical sense, but in the existential sense that she heard the word and freely acted on it.

Luke combines two conventions of biblical narrative in this story: birth announcement, and the commissioning of a prophet. Mary is a woman commissioned by God (one can say, a prophet), engaged for the prophetic task in a long line of God-sent deliverers positioned at significant junctures in Israel's history.

Her consent underscores her conscious and active faith as one who hears God's word and keeps it. Luke's intent, unfortunately, is subverted by the language of slavery; centuries of patriarchal interpretation labeled Mary's calling herself "the handmaid of the Lord" as submissive obedience, and held that as an ideal for all women in relation to men. But in this story, Mary exercises independent thought and action, questions, and takes counsel with her own soul. As a self-determining act, she decides to proceed, a choice that is hers, that

changes her life, and that opens a new chapter of God with the world. Jesus was born of a liberated, mature woman who had her own mind and will.

And her choice reminds us that the Holy One calls *all* people, women included, and gifts them for their own task in the ongoing history of grace.

The story of the visitation (Lk. 1:39-56) presents us with the memory of Mary joyfully welcoming the liberation coming to fruition in herself and the world through the creative power of the Spirit. Her *Magnificat* is the New Testament's great song of liberation. While evoking God's deliverance of enslaved Israel, it praises God's continuing action to redeem the lowly, including Mary and all marginal, exploited people.

Indeed, her song chronicles God's mercy to all oppressed people. By God's action, the social hierarchy of wealth and power, of poverty and subjugation, is to be turned upside down. Johnson says that Mary's song about God's dominion over those who dominate "rings with support for women in the struggle against male domination as well as against racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and all other demeaning injustice." (*Ibid.*, 271) In addition, her song has powerful spiritual and structural consequences for the church, whose direction and leadership has ended up exclusively in the hands of men.

Luke's account of Mary giving birth (2:1-20) offers the memory of Mary as a poor woman among the poor, in labor and bloody, and attentive to how God's Spirit was at work in her life. The Messiah comes from among the lowly people of the earth, born in an unfamiliar place to a displaced couple, and laid in a box not unlike what poor people today sometimes appropriate. Real blood was shed by a woman laboring in childbirth for the first time – and this was holy. Mary, not fully grasping these events, listened nonetheless willingly, letting the events sink into her memory, and seeking to work out their meaning.

Yet another piece in the 'mosaic' is the story of Mary presenting her child in the Temple. (Lk. 2:21-40) Here, Mary celebrates her child-birth in accord with prescribed Jewish ritual. She's heartened at Simeon's proclamation that salvation has come in this child, and at Anna's continual praising of God and speaking about the child. She does the ritual action with Joseph, with whom she is bonded in marriage. God has blessed her relationship with the man with whom she shared her life. Her *married* status is as important as her status as virgin mother.

Another part of the 'mosaic' is the story of the finding of the young boy Jesus in the Temple after having celebrated Passover in Jerusalem. The parents, shaken on not finding their son with relatives at the end of a day's return journey, go back to Jerusalem and look for him. One senses the joy and suffering of married love in the relief and anger that Jesus' parents felt after discovering their twelve year old in the Temple. For his part, Jesus distances himself from his parents' concern, and declares his primary allegiance to God's business.



Mary and her husband were companions in faith and married collaborators in childraising. In that relationship, Mary is no passive partner, but speaks out and takes initiative. Together, Mary and Joseph make a home that nurtures life. The story discloses Mary to us as a parent, with a maternal heart vulnerable in all of her familial relationships. In all of these, Mary walked faithfully with God.

In the Cana story (Jn. 2:1-11), Mary becomes an active spokeswoman of hope for people in need, and an apostolic witness leading others to Christ. “*They have no wine.*” Mary named the need and took persistent initiative to solve the problem, and because of that a bountiful abundance flowed among the guests. She was not passive. She acted. She was not receptive to the order of the male. She went against his wishes.

Her words ring with prophecy for all seeking fulfillment and just treatment – all, women and men, who have no wine, no security from bodily violation, no equal access to education, health care, economic opportunity, political power, cultural respect, respect in the ministries and governance of their church, dignity due persons created in God’s image and likeness.

“*Do whatever he tells you.*” She alerts the servants to listen to Jesus’ word and follow his way. Mary joins the company of her sisters in John’s gospel, the Samaritan women, Martha of Bethany, Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, “as an exemplary woman disciple among other disciples, recognized by the love and apostolic witness to Christ that they gave.” (*Ibid.*, p. 293)

At the cross (Jn. 19:25-27), Mary is a Jewish mother suffering painfully. She is also linked at the cross with the gift of the Spirit and the foundation of the christian community. Her place at the cross, Johnson suggests, “conjures up all the anguish and desolation a woman can experience who has given birth to a child, loved that child, raised and taught that child, even tried to protect that child, only to have him executed in the worst imaginable way by the power of the state.” (*Ibid.*, p. 294)

The memory of this suffering Mary empowers our church’s women and men to say “STOP! No more violence. No more killing. No more war, greed, tyranny – a cry “for a world shaped according to God’s reign which will be a world with no more sorrowing mothers.” (*Ibid.*, p. 297) This memory invites the option of non-violence to stop violence as the only appropriate expression of faith.



Theologically, this memory links Mary with Jesus, at the end of his life, bringing into being a community in the Spirit that flowed from his side on the cross (water, evocative of baptism; blood, evocative of eucharist). The Mother of Jesus was confided to the beloved disciple in this community, both being partners in the family of disciples (a family representative of the larger church).

Finally, Mary was with all those gathered in that upper room at Jerusalem who were filled with the Spirit (Acts 1:14-15 and 21:1-22). One hundred and twenty persons made up that company, Galilean disciples and family members of Jesus. Filled with the Spirit at the start of the story of Jesus, Mary – an older woman now, marked with the struggles of a hard life – receives a fresh outpouring of the Spirit, and raises her voice in praise and prophecy with the others.

Mary is a member of this community. She joins the women disciples and apostolic witnesses who are founders of the church, along with Peter and Paul and other men (though their trajectories would efface the women’s in the inspired records). Mary is not at the center of the church. She’s not the one and only ideal member of the community. She is “one unique member among other unique members, the whole group living by the power of the Spirit and seeking to bring that warmth and light to the world.” (*Ibid.*, p. 303)

Through all her life, Mary struggled to negotiate the challenges of faith. She kept faith in her gracious God. Johnson underscores this: “The presence and power of the Holy Spirit of God - Sophia, surrounded [Mary’s] particular concrete life, fraught with moments of intense joy and suffering, along with stretches of unremarkable, graced dailiness, calling her ever forward. Walking by faith, not by sight, she composes her life as a friend of God and a prophet, one who actively partners the divine work of repairing the world. (*Ibid.*, p. 209)



his entire biblical mosaic discloses Mary as a friend of God and a prophet in the church. We remember her as a woman of the Spirit, and her life gives us many lessons of encouragement. She is a companion with us in our journey of discipleship, encouraging us to go forward as friends of God and prophets ourselves. Paul VI held Mary up as “an example for the way in which, in her own particular life, she fully accepted God’s will (see Lk. 1:38), because she heard the Word of God and acted on it, and because charity and a spirit of service were the driving force of her actions.” (*Marialis Cultus*, No. 35) She is, “one of our race,” he said, “a true daughter of Eve”, indeed “truly our sister, who as a poor and humble woman fully shared our lot.” (*Ibid.*, No. 56)

No wonder, then, that whenever we celebrate eucharist we join together in prayer with her and all the communion of saints. If we walk faithfully with God as she did, we will live eucharistically – as faithful friends of God and as Spirit-filled prophets.

John Paul II’ words are powerful: “ In the Eucharist, the Church is completely united to Christ and his sacrifice, and makes its own the spirit of Mary. [As her Canticle] ...is first and foremost one of praise and thanksgiving, ...[so is the Eucharist first and foremost praise and thanksgiving.] “Mary sings of the “new heavens” and the “new earth”...and these find in the Eucharist their anticipation and in some sense their program and plan. [Every time we celebrate this mystery of our redemption,]...the seeds of that new history wherein the mighty are “put down from their thrones” and “those of low degree are exalted” (Lk. 1:52) take root in the world.



“The *Magnificat* expresses Mary’s spirituality, and there is nothing greater than this spirituality for helping us to experience the mystery of the Eucharist. The Eucharist has been given us so that our life, like that of Mary, may become completely a *Magnificat*.” (*Eucharistia de Ecclesia*, No. 58)