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The Virgin Mary on Screen: Mater Dei or Just a Mother in Guido Chiesa's *Io Sono con Te* (I Am with You)

Abstract

Guido Chiesa's *Io Sono con Te* (*I Am with You*) offers a unique, albeit controversial take on Mary, the mother of Jesus. Filmed in Tunisia, and subject to criticism by Italian Catholic authorities and film critics alike, *Io Sono con Te* presents a rich anthropological-theological reflection on religion, culture, gender, and sacrifice. Not surprisingly, Chiesa draws on René Girard's scapegoat theory throughout his film as he fashions Mary as the forceful protagonist in a familiar yet controversial story.

Keywords

Biblical Studies, Film, Mary of Nazareth, Motherhood, Italian Cinema, Guido Chiesa, Patriarchy, René Girard, Sacrifice

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Over the years, dozens of films have represented the characters of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary and contributed to their vast cultural legacy. These different cinematic images portray these extraordinary individuals as symbols of compassion and sanctity. Directors from different nationalities and worldviews have dedicated films to Jesus and/or Mary and have explored the intricate and, at times, mysterious fields of faith and history associated with them. They include Catholics, Protestants, Seculars, Atheists like Pier Paolo Pasolini, who directed *The Gospel According to Matthew*, and even Marxists like Jean-Luc Godard, who directed the controversial *Hail Mary*. More recently, a provocative film on the Virgin Mary, *Io Sono con Te* (2010), was made by the former, admittedly agnostic Italian director Guido Chiesa. He declared he made this motion picture with the encouragement of Maevo Corbo, whose religious views highly influenced Chiesa's wife, Nicoletta.¹ Chiesa's film is above all a statement about the nature and role of womanhood. Mary is depicted as a humble Jewish woman, whose status as mother takes precedence over being the *Mater Dei* of Christian doctrine. This essay will focus primarily on Mary's role and life choices as mother of Jesus in *Io Sono con Te* against the background of other films about her and selected biblical-theological sources.

The first question that can arise regards why directors who apparently do not have any relation to religion get involved in screening stories about Mary and Jesus. What is it, exactly, about those two characters in the Scriptures that

fascinate them? The answer may be the result of the intriguing intersection between sacred and profane in their lives and societies. Each of the filmmakers offers a personal interpretation of the daily life of those two particular personages and their perceived impact on humanity. Although a substantial number of filmmakers have explored the persona of Jesus Christ with much acclaim – readers only need to remember *Jesus Christ Super Star* – the cinematography of Mary has received less critical attention despite offering one of the most intriguing and complex characters in the celluloid world.

The film industry has transformed the sacred Scripture into interesting scripts emphasizing the female presence in the “text.” As a consequence, Mary has evolved from a traditionally submissive Jewish woman into a modern fighter who defends and protects her rights, even against the filmmaker’s perception of Judaism’s patriarchal laws. Catherine O’Brien offers a description of Mary of Nazareth that highlights the broad range of her cultural and religious appeal, “she is the principal woman in Christian Salvation History; a symbol of beauty, purity and sanctity; a figure implicated in gender, ecclesiastical and ecumenical politics; and a link between the three Abrahamic faiths as a Jewish mother whose son Jesus is worshipped by Christians and revered by Muslims.”²

Substantial differences are evident between ancient and contemporary viewpoints on Mary.³ In the first century, St. Justin the Martyr (d.165) claimed

Mary was the “New Eve.” He introduced the idea of Mary as the savior for womankind because her obedience negated Eve’s disobedience.⁴ Feminist theologians now reject the “New Eve” idea because it creates a stereotype of the good woman versus the “fallen woman.” Chiesa’s film goes even further beyond contemporary theologians, for his cinematic Mary embodies the figure of the second Eve as the transgressor. No longer the accommodating Madonna who stands at the edge of the crowd, Mary steps to the center stage of salvation history and gives new meaning to words she utters in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). In the light of Mary’s new role as the advocate of the oppressed, she can still be addressed in the words of the ancient *Salve Regina*, “Hail, holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, Our life, our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve.”

The reimagining of Mary in *Io Sono con Te* may be liberating for some, but it is definitely problematic. One particular concern that creates tension for most of the directors working with Mary as subject is the Annunciation, which is extremely important to the Scriptural narrative as well as to visual depictions such as frescoes and icons. When Mary is the protagonist, the encounter with the divine messenger is omitted. For example, in Rossellini’s *The Messiah*, Mary is first introduced at the Nativity. Other directors with secular backgrounds bypassed the divine presence, representing the Annunciation in artistic and original ways: bright lights, voices off screen, or in very realistic ways,

introducing Gabriel as Mary's uncle, as in Godard's *Hail Mary*. Perhaps the reasons to abstain from representing the Annunciation in a literalist fashion are found in the desire to promote a respect for the Scriptures, and the firm belief in recreating a believable story without succumbing to speculative-religious imagery that may fail to meet the expectations of viewers.

With regard to the Annunciation and other key moments, Chiesa's *Io Sono con Te* embraces a remarkably original position regarding Mary, thus creating a certain tension across religious, secular, and humanist lines. Chiesa's intentions express an artistic choice regarding a theological aspect that allows viewers to reimagine Mary of Nazareth through the power of religious imagination. By focusing on Mary's humanity instead of the divine at work within her, Chiesa's narrative allows viewers to consider the nature and role of Mary as a woman, and consequently as mother. Chiesa, for instance, denudes the Annunciation scene from any angelic intervention, recreating an earthy Mary who is milking sheep. Mary is indeed center stage as the film opens up to a stark landscape echoing the bleating flock in her care. As the film later reveals, sheep such as these are designated victims and destined for sacrifice. When the curtain of animals surrounding her is drawn back, we see a young woman in the midst of an experience, which seems equally perplexing and comforting. Milk, mentioned as a sign of grace in the opening monologue and an ancient symbol of fertility, now spills back into the earth. Milk will become the gift that Mary will share with her

child, Jesus, despite the warnings of those who consider such succor to be unclean in the first days of the child's life. While there is no basis in Jewish law or tradition for such a startling taboo, it does further the filmmaker's Marian narrative. By choosing that first scene as the introduction, Chiesa places Mary as the unqualified protagonist of the film. This perspective is heightened as viewers are introduced to an older Mary, who, remembering her life, recounts the story via a flashback. Chiesa does not leave the viewers with any doubts as to Mary's role in his film; she is the undeniable protagonist.

Numerous male and female characters appear in Chiesa's film, even fictional characters like Joseph's overly patriarchal brother, Mordecai. Nearly all the men represent power or submit to the ancient patriarchal hierarchy, which rules the society. Those who in a burst of wisdom can escape from it are, nevertheless, still unable to do anything against the oppressive authority that Chiesa has constructed. The common thread that runs throughout the film is found in the female characters, including Mary's cousin Elizabeth and, most importantly, Hanna, Mary's mother. She is the person that convinces Joseph of Mary's honesty, who plans Mary and Joseph's wedding, and defies Joseph's brother to protect Mary. Hanna's behavior will set the example for Mary, who will educate Jesus according to her conduct. Additionally, Mary is a scandal, not only because she offers her breasts to her newborn, but because she raises questions, refuses to answer reproach with reproach, and most of all because she

rejects what Chiesa – despite the longstanding Jewish law and tradition grounded in the Covenant of Genesis 17:13 – considers the contagion of violence ritualized in circumcision. Chiesa claimed to have taken some of these concepts from the non-canonical *Protoevangelium of James*, thus creating unusually powerful and influential female characters that challenge male authorities.⁵

Released in Italian with English subtitles, it was Italian audiences who first responded to Chiesa's startling Marian makeover. The Vatican decided to approve the screening of *Io Sono con Te* in religious movie theatre associations, but some Italian Catholic viewers labeled the film as blasphemous. They noted that Chiesa's re-reading of the Scriptures created controversies regarding certain topics, especially his portrayal of a Mary with "attitude." One of the "infamous concepts," which many Italian Catholic women disputed, was Mary's pedagogical education of Jesus. In the online news site of *Sale della Comunità* (an association of movie theaters, which is located in different provinces within the Ambrosian Diocese and handles film selection and distribution), one of the female critics, Arianna Prevedello, assertively stated:

The cause of a stir in the story of Mary and Joseph is not so much the predictable 'I do not know man' (Lk 1:34), but more the attitudes and decisions that the 'chosen' does during pregnancy and early childhood of Jesus. What is causing the scandal is the pedagogical and educational

approach that Mary introduces to Joseph and the community of Nazareth of two thousand years ago.⁶

Prevedello, together with several other critics, are referring particularly to the scene where the young Jesus is walking around a well ignored by Mary and the other farmers. The magi scholars from the East, who recently visited Herod's court, notice this "risky" situation. They create a stir based on the fact that Mary does not immediately run to rescue her young son. At this point the editing pace becomes fast and tense; the soundtrack enhances this moment of anxiety until Mary runs up, grabs the young Jesus, and embraces him. In this simple gesture, she attempts to dispell any negative assumptions the scholars might have formed regarding her supposed lack of care. Mary's humble declaration of blind trust in her young son's judgment creates disbelief among some of the magi scholars and, obviously, many Catholic viewers. Another contested scene is the portrayal of Jesus in the temple at Jerusalem, where he decides to leave the side of Mary and Joseph to stay and talk with the elders. In other previous films such as *Jesus of Nazareth*, this episode in Luke's Gospel (Lk 2:48) is represented as an anxious passage, where Mary and Joseph are unaware, scared, and desperate because Jesus has disappeared. For his part, Chiesa decides to represent a calm and confident Mary, who is certain of her son's safety. Thanks to illuminating flashbacks, she manages to figure out Jesus's intentions. Mary's heightened consciousness about Jesus's duty is also part of the controversy, since Chiesa

affords Mary knowledge that exceeds what Luke's Gospel portrays and is unlikely from a theological point of view. As Chris Maunder notes, "Mary's awareness was not fully formed until the crucifixion."⁷

Mary's determination to safeguard herself and her son's rights is clearly portrayed in this film; Chiesa gives her a strength that is rare in any other representation of Mary. She is certainly "full of grace," but here grace functions within her Jewish community to challenge and change prejudices displayed by Jews and Romans alike. One example is the village fool, who is another extra-biblical fictional character created by Chiesa. This man is an outcast in the community who, nevertheless, has been fed by Mary. Banished from the synagogue as unclean, he tries, unsuccessfully, to reintegrate himself into the community thanks to the encouragement of Mary and Jesus. Another example of Mary's strength of character is the birth scene. Previously in the film there is a detailed passage, with close ups, of a cow giving birth in complete solitude without any human intervention. Chiesa decides not to show Jesus's birth, thereby maintaining a respectful awe for the event. However, the parallel between Mary being alone and the cow being alone and the absence of "cinematographic" strict traditional Jewish laws regarding childbirth is understood by the viewers. Chiesa utilizes Elizabeth's pregnancy to demonstrate how Mary confronts Jewish laws. According to Chiesa, new mothers were not allowed to breast feed babies and could not touch anyone for forty days because they were considered impure.

Given her actions contravening these supposed laws, Mary becomes a mimetic model who evokes conflict. During her visit with Elizabeth, her cousin, the pregnant Mary affirms the goodness of Elizabeth's body and the milk of her breasts, and urges her to face the nightmare of exclusion that haunts her. While Chiesa succeeds in creating the tension that is integral to his interpretation of Mary, it is clear at this point that he has himself transgressed, since there are no historical sources or any other evidence in Jewish law and tradition to suggest this first century Jewish community, or any for that matter, practiced the specific laws Mary contravenes.

Chiesa seems to veer toward an Islamic interpretation of Jesus's birth, inasmuch as in the Koran, there is no part for Joseph. It is Mary, who in solitude and alone, gives birth to Jesus. In fact, in *Io Sono con Te*, Mary defies everyone, even Joseph, who goes out in search of assistance for his pregnant wife. Upon his return - via a magnificent frontal shot - he finds Mary holding baby Jesus. In a striking manner, this scene identifies Mary as the narrative locus of agency and underscores the "demasculization" of Joseph that is not reversed until he confronts his brother Mordecai later in Jerusalem. Chiesa's approach is unique; he goes beyond two common Mariology theological perspectives: the "Christocentric Mariology", which relates to a subordinated role of Mary to Jesus, and the "Cristotypical Mariology", which gives Mary something of a redemptive role.⁸

Consequently *Io Sono con Te* works as a forceful statement on the nature and the role of womanhood in the process of salvation.

One more area that highlights the independence of Mary is the contested scene where she forbids Jesus's circumcision. Here, of course, Chiesa's move is once again problematic from a historical and even from a contemporary perspective.⁹ Given the central place of circumcision in the Jewish Scriptures and culture through the ages, it takes a heady dose of imagination to conceive such a scenario.¹⁰ The shocking significance of her action is best understood by exploring how the "scapegoat mechanism" influenced Chiesa's interpretative stance toward Mary. Those familiar with René Girard's intellectual project will find the fine threads of the scapegoat theory woven throughout *Io Sono con Te*.¹¹ In the film, various images of sheep at pasture - led through the alleyways, born on the backs of temple-bound pilgrims, and sacrificed by priests - set the stage for an extended reflection on the cultural-religious dimensions of violence. What is surprising, however, is that Mary of Nazareth, not Jesus, becomes the scandalous model of mimetic desire and resistance to sacrificial violence. From a theological perspective, the film argues that Mary is more than the classical mediatrix of redemption and harbinger of grace; she is a protagonist of salvation in her own right alongside her son.

In Chiesa's film the natural relationship between a mother and a son is intertwined with scenes of unnecessary violence of every type - verbal, social, and

physical, thus portraying the filmmaker's particular version of the stark reality of the Jewish milieu during Mary and Jesus's time. The Romans are portrayed as merciless soldiers, who treat Jews like Mary as slaves using gratuitous violence to rule over them. Jews are represented as simple people who fear and blindly follow God's rules, over against Roman laws and the instinctive guidance of nature. Mary goes so far as to challenge the biblical law – as depicted by Chiesa – and pleads for mercy instead of sacrifice. Haunted by her own memories of a circumcision she witnessed, the soon-to-be mother of Jesus plots and plans to avoid subjecting her son to such horror and urges Elizabeth to do the same. In time Elizabeth and Zechariah mime Mary's own desires, embody them, and are scapegoated by their community through exile.

It is Jesus who best exemplifies the experiential nature of mimetic desire, as he grows to want what his mother Mary desires. He learns from his mother to turn the other cheek and progresses in wisdom. On the other hand, when the young boy tries to imitate his father, a carpenter, Jesus smashes his own foot with an oversized hammer. When the magi scholars or "wise men" come searching for the Messiah announced by the stars, they encounter a child without fear; he is raised by a mother who does not hesitate to nurture her son according to her own nature. As the truly wise among the sojourners note, there can be no better education for the Messiah. They should resist the desire to teach him esoteric sciences, and instead, let go, and simply head home.

Mary's powerful personality is highlighted even more by the colors that she wears. They do not belong to the traditional iconography of the Virgin (blue and white) and additionally, do not belong to an authentic historical reconstruction. Mary is wearing the colors red and orange for a major portion of the film. These bright and bold colors are typically reserved for the sinner Mary Magdalene in iconography of most other films that deal with biblical stories. Mary's red and orange robes, which mark her out as the transgressor, stand out in contrast to all the other characters, especially men, who wear brown and black clothes.

Ever the protagonist, the Virgin's character is at the same time in line and in contrast with the Gospel accounts. There is a "Mary Full of Grace" who will raise a child capable of moving within a totally different realm from those marked by their guilt, and filled only by blind obedience. She is also the "Mary Mother of Mercy," who, regarding the sacrifices, the violence, and the shedding of blood, definitely declares that "God does not ask sacrifices but mercy."¹² Consequently, mercy, not sacrifice, is the canticle of Mary in *Io Sono con Te*. Her husband Joseph, while often doubting as the Scriptures suggest, comes to embrace his wife's willingness to resist the chimera of violence masquerading as obedience in Chiesa's imaginative, albeit deeply flawed construction of Jewish belief and practice. At one point, when Joseph worries about the law and circumcision, Mary states he wants Jesus to be cut, because someone cut him.

Joseph eventually stands up to his brother Mordecai in Jerusalem. Although thousands of lambs are heading for sacrifice, he refuses to offer his wife and daughter. Indeed, Joseph now wants what Mary desires; consequently, father, mother, and son are excluded from the greater family of the Jewish people, who lived in accord with law and tradition.

That unforgettable line Mary utters about circumcision, sacrifice, and mercy is amiably interpreted by Nadia Khlifi, who plays the young Mary in the film, with her graceful smile, and determined eyes. Nadia comes from Tunisia, the country where Chiesa shot almost the entire film, and where he cast the majority of the actors, giving the film something of a “biblical feel.” He is thus able to avoid, with various degrees of success at least for some, the process found in previous films where Mary and Jesus had suspicious Anglo-Saxon appearances.

Furthermore, Chiesa is one of the few directors who employs a younger actress for the role of Mary at the time of the Annunciation, a mature performer (Rabeb Srairi) as the adult Mary, and a third, older, actress as the elderly Mary narrating the film. The oldest Mary (not listed in credits) starts the film telling the viewer her story, and she concludes her account by turning to the camera with a whimsical smile, leaving viewers to watch her walk away from a grotto into an overexposed bright light in the desert. This concluding scene has various interpretations, including that of Enrico Bernard in the *Rivista Luci e Ombre*, who

compares the older Mary to the abstract emblem of *Pietas*. He further maintains that contemporary viewers see Mother Teresa of Calcutta as a human emblem of *Pietas* as well.¹³ As attractive as this poetic comparison may be, it divests Mary of her principal role in *Io Sono con Te* as a strong female protagonist, who lived before, during and long after – despite Jesus’s death.

From a critical, cinematic point of view, certainly *Io Sono con Te* can be easily placed within the current, and unfortunately rare category of “contemporary Italian art films” that stand out in contrast for style and themes from *en vogue cinepanettone* and *Itallywood* movies. As noted earlier, the fresh perspective of Chiesa’s did not meet with favor from Italian audiences, who deserted the film perhaps because of their incapacity to view a version of the Gospel story that contravenes popular piety and acceptable cinematic narratives of the past. However, according to Chiesa himself in *Rivista Luci e Ombre*¹⁴, Italian viewers are flawless. He believes that the film was unable to appeal to a larger audience due to a lethargic distribution that did not believe in the commercialization of *Io Sono con Te*.

Despite or perhaps even because of the criticisms leveled against *Io Sono con Te*, Chiesa’s film deserves further screening, study, and interpretation. In particular, scholars in the realm of religious and biblical studies will find much to critique in Chiesa’s reimagining of Mary, but he undoubtedly opens up new vistas

that are worth exploring. Gently stripping Mary from the influence of divine powers, Chiesa effectively explores various issues: women's rights, motherhood, gender relations, poverty, power, oppression and sacrifice. Viewers cannot help but consider numerous contemporary questions thanks to Chiesa's creative cinematography. The Mary revealed in *Io Sono con Te*, according to some viewers, is a blasphemous character; on the other hand, others see her as a brave woman, who advocates for social justice by any means. Mary protects Jesus and other children from seeing and undergoing violence, helps the poor and ostracized on the fringes of society, fights for her rights, and wants her own child to be educated. According to this film, Mary is not just the "New Eve," or a saintly *Mater Dei*; rather, she is a strong, conscientious woman who thinks and acts independently from any man as she embraces motherhood with a natural simplicity. She is "blessed among all women" in more ways than one.

¹ Guido Chiesa, "Io sono con te: genesi di un film" in Atti del Convegno "Cristianesimo e Cinema" (Foggia, 25-28 ottobre 2011): 1. Accessed on December 30, 2013. <http://guidochiesa.net/media/opera/nicoletta-micheli-e-guido-chiesa/io-so/Genesi%20di%20un%20film.pdf>. The authors of this article would like to thank Katherine Owen at Flagler College and Katherine Wrisley Shelby at Boston College for their editorial assistance. We also owe a debt of gratitude to the editor and anonymous peer reviewers at *The Journal of Religion and Film*.

² Catherine O'Brien, *The Celluloid Madonna, From Scripture to Screen* (London: Wallflower Press, 2011), 1.

³ On the various interpretations of Mary through the centuries, Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). With a particular focus on Mary's Jewish background and Judeo-Christian relations, see Mary C. Athans, *In Quest of the Jewish Mary: The Mother of Jesus in History, Theology, and Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

⁴ O'Brien, *The Celluloid Madonna*, 1.

⁵ On the variety of sources that inform Chiesa's hermeneutic, see Chiesa, "Io sono con te: Genesis di un film," esp. 14-15 on the question of circumcision.

⁶ Arianna Prevedello, "Il 'Maternage' di Guido Chiesa," *SDC: Sale della Comunità Cinema Teatro Cultura*, November 2010, accessed November 5, 2012, http://www.saledellacomunita.it/sale_della_comunita/news_mediacenter/00002383_Il_maternage_di_Guido_Chiesa.html.

⁷ Chris Maunder "Mary in the New Testament and Apocrypha" in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, edited by Sarah Jane Boss, Oxford University Press, USA; 1st Edition (July 26, 2007).

⁸ O'Brien, *The Celluloid Madonna*, 22.

⁹ Mary's resistance to circumcision in *Io Sono Con Te* comes at a time when the practice of circumcision is questioned on various grounds in some contemporary cultural circles. On this issue, with reference to the debate in San Francisco, see Adam Cohen, "San Francisco's Circumcision Ban: An Attack on Religious Freedom?" in *Time*, June 13, 2011. Accessed 08.16.2013 at <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2077240,00.html>.

¹⁰ Douglas A. Knight and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 264-269.

¹¹ On Guido Chiesa's *Io Sono con Te* and René Girard, see Cynthia Haven's Blog for the Written Word, *Io Sono Con Te: A film with a René Girard p.o.v.* <http://bookhaven.stanford.edu/2011/02/io-sono-con-te-a-film-with-a-rene-girard-p-o-v/>, accessed April 13, 2013. Girard's scapegoat theory and understanding of mimetic desire offers a critical tool for the interpretation of religious films, see for example: Timothy J. Johnson, "The Hermeneutics of Hyper-Violence: Gibson's Christ, Girard's Scapegoat and the Franciscan Response.," *AFCU Journal* 5, no. 1 (2008): 26-34.

¹² Guido Chiesa, *Io Sono Con Te* (Italy: Bolero Film, 2010, DVD).

¹³ Enrico Bernard, "Io Sono Con Te, di Guido Chiesa," *Rivista Luci e Ombre* 1. (January 2013): 86-88, accessed January 15, 2013, <http://www.rivistalucieombre.com/>.

¹⁴ Guido Chiesa, "Il futuro del cinema e i miei (pochi) neuroni rimasti." *Rivista Luci e Ombre* 1. (January 2013): 51, accessed January 15, 2013, <http://www.rivistalucieombre.com/>.

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