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Mary and Feminism

Charles J. Brady, S.M.

Throughout the centuries pious Christians have outdone themselves in praising the Holy Virgin with extravagant titles. A look in any collection of the praises of Mary will reveal such titles as: mountain, because Mary's virtue elevates her over all other saints; cloud, because she protects us from the heat of God's wrath; cistern, oyster, and elephant.

The twentieth century, however, may be the first century to claim the distinction of suggesting a pejorative therionimic for the Blessed Virgin, namely, that of goat—a Judas goat, who leads her sisters along the path of slavery to traditional, stereotyped roles for women.

This observation is not offered in a frivolous vein. It is intended to call attention to certain difficulties concerning Mary's relation to modern women that have arisen from the revival of the women's movement in the latter part of the twentieth century, so to speak, in the wake of the second wave of feminism.

No attempt will be made in what follows to speak for feminists everywhere. There will be no attempt to label all feminists "Mary-haters." Joan Morris, the author of *The Lady Was A Bishop*, is a good example of the falseness of such a label. She ends her brilliant historical exposé of the deliberate erosion of the power of women in church affairs with a reference to Mary as a model for liberation.¹

What this paper intends to do is present selected voices from the feminist movement and suggest that Marian theology and the work of this Institute would be richer and respond more perceptively to the actual needs of women today, if these voices were accorded a serious hearing.

At this point it would be easy for a devotee of Mary to retreat behind a shell of pseudo-faith and repeat again and again, "Hail Mary, full of grace," not realizing that even this hallowed formula is subject to the vagaries of twentieth century exegesis. Many scholars devoted to Mary translate the Greek, "Rejoice, O highly favored one," and insist this change in translation reveals important new insights about Mary. I suggest in parallel fashion the voices of the new feminism we will hear do not represent an impoverishment of Marian thought, but an enrichment.

At present, the voices from the women's movement concerning Mary are mostly negative. They hold that the Virgin, revered by Christian ages, is either irrelevant, a nostalgic throwback that has little meaning for the present, or a dead weight around

the necks of women who want to free themselves from the bondage of traditional roles. Let us take up these points in turn.

Just as the workers' movement in Europe in the late nineteenth century found organized religion irrelevant, so many feminists today find Mary irrelevant. In a random sampling of twenty-five back issues of women's periodicals (*Rat, Up From Under, Off Our Backs, Women. A Journal of Liberation, Feminist Voice, Everywoman, It Ain't Me Babe, and Notes From the Third Year*) there was only one remark made about Mary, and it was negative:

There could result from this becoming of women a remythologizing of Western religion. If the need for parental symbols for God persists, something like the Father-Mother God of Mary Baker Eddy will be more acceptable to the new women and the new man than the Father God of the past. A symbolization for incarnation of the divine presence in human beings may continue to be needed in the future, but it is highly unlikely that women or men will find plausible that symbolism which is epitomized in the Christ-Mary image. Perhaps this will be replaced by a bisexual imagery which is non-hierarchical.²

Many women in the movement see no need to connect Mary with what they are doing or to ask her blessing on their plans for liberation. In an impassioned plea for women's rights within the Catholic Church, Clara Marie Henning, a candidate for a doctorate in canon law, called for a sisterhood of women who believe in Christ. She did not mention the name of Mary once.³

Even though women in the movement are not professedly Mary-like, the figure of Mary does come up in feminist writings, especially those from a Catholic point of view. These accounts include a certain nostalgia for the past, but this nostalgia soon gives way to an analysis of the feelings of alienation traceable to the cult of Mary. A recent author stated: "To be raised as a Catholic girl is to be raised as much a metaphor as a person."⁴ The shining example that serves as the point of comparison for the metaphor is the pedestalled Virgin, the epitome of Catholic femininity. Jean Crosby demonstrates the mechanism of such a metaphor in her poem, "The Continued Story Of Me":

I wasn't to be real.
I was to be Pure,
Holy,
Perfect,
Absolutely.

And the definition of that was laid out by someone else.⁵

These elements are found detailed at length in *Aphrodite at Mid-Century* by Caryl Rivers, a lively account of a Catholic girlhood that includes sodalities, May Queens, novenas, and the Marian Year. Ms. Rivers reflects on the feelings of alienation she

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experienced. She begins by quoting from an issue of her school newspaper devoted to the Marian Year:

Mary's sanctity was measured by how many clothes she washed, how many meals she prepared, how many kindly little offices she performed on behalf of her family and neighbors. In her greatness, Mary never rose above the little things done by slaves, servants—and mothers!⁶

She then comments how Mary was presented as a model women (for her submissiveness, not for her excellent qualities or abilities) and as a paragon of unattainable purity (bleached clean of any trace of human sexuality). These comments are representative and instructive enough to be cited in full:

How could we identify with the Mary that was proffered to us? This perfect, patient, smiling, sinless paragon. She shared with the rest of womankind the physical act of birth, but she did not share the universal human act that for all other women made birth possible. She was the Blessed Virgin. Her virginity was stressed to an extraordinary degree. If she was perfection, and she was Virgin, were not all women who did not share her condition soiled to some degree? It did not occur to us that this emphasis on the virginity of Mary was part of a legacy of medieval ascetics who saw women as low creatures, temptations placed in the middle of the road to heaven. We were told that it was through Mary that God raised womanhood. Raised us from what? We never thought to ask. But we knew that the nuns regarded human sexuality as a baser part of our nature, rather than as a normal part of the human personality. The Madonna-whore view of women prevailed, though it was never said quite that way. So we prayed to this shining symbol, this moon of perfect womanhood who floated in the heavenly ether beyond our reach forever. Like some character from Greek mythology, she was hurled from the common clay of earth, from the sweating, vile cowards, into the firmament to become a star to light the way of men forever. But was it exaltation—or exile?⁷

The negative effect of this alienation is explored by Carol Anne Douglas in her short novel, *Mary Anti-Mary*, printed in full in the Christmas edition (1973) of *Off Our Backs*. In the first part of the novel, a twentieth century apocryphal gospel, Ms. Douglas gives her personal remythologized gloss of the sections of the Gospels concerned with the Blessed Virgin. She presents Mary as a sympathetic, sensitive person who is alive to those around her and one of the few who understands and is receptive to the message of her son. *Mary Anti-Mary* may be compared to *The Last Temptation Of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis. Besides showing the human side of Christ, Kazantzakis universalized Christ, seeing in him a perfect example of the struggle in man between the flesh and the spirit. Ms. Douglas uses Mary as a symbol for a human life that has been taken by religion and inflated with mystical and mysterious purpose until it becomes unreal. In the second part of the novel the forces

that dogmatized Mary are seen at work in the upbringing of a Catholic girl.

Mary, the perfect virgin, is presented so vividly to the young girl as an ideal that she identifies herself with Mary, and begins to think she is Mary living in the twentieth century. At the end of the story the young girl, now a young woman, enters a secular college and in a flash of insight sees what her upbringing has done to her. It is too late, however. She has so internalized her identification with Mary she now wants to become an anti-Mary and start an anti-Mary movement to destroy the forces that are killing her.

Traces of this negative evaluation of Mary may be found outside the feminist movement. Urban G. Steinmetz in his book, *The Sexual Christian*, bitterly castigates the traditional presentation of Mary:

. . . then, as I started to grow older, I developed a growing revulsion to the sickly, sentimental hogwash about Mary that permeated every facet of Roman Catholic life and worked its righteous destruction in every Catholic institution. I can say with absolute certainty that no marriage can survive a consistent belief in the Mary I was taught.⁸

From the above it can be seen why Mary may be styled a Judas goat.⁹ For the devotee of Mary this is a hard pill to swallow. If the feminist observations are correct, however, it is a pill that must be swallowed to remedy disastrous imbalances in our image of Mary. The case may be stated as follows:

Mary is the ultimate focus of a male projection determined to put women in rigid categories, where they are defined (and controlled) in function of the stereotypical roles—Madonna, virgin, whore—they fulfill, and not in function of personal qualities or capabilities. Catholics have grafted onto Mary stereotypical characteristics of woman internalized from their society and turned her into the heavenly exemplar and guardian of all that is “feminine.” Thus, besides her legitimate role in the economy of salvation, Mary has been forced to serve as a symbol and “watch-bitch” for chauvinistic, male supremacist societies. This rigid categorization inhibits dealing with women on a personal basis. So long as Mary blinks on/off in pristine neon purity on her pedestal, the patroness and protectress of the *status quo*, women can be hoodwinked into remaining docile in their Teflon II coated manacles.

Mary Daly saw this clearly at the beginning of the second wave of feminism. She did not rule out devotion to Mary, but she did point out the dangers of the pedestal and the distortions possible in Marian devotion:

What it (both the pedestal and the de-humanization of Mary) can spawn is that dream world which is precisely the “metaphysical world of woman,” the ideal, static woman, who is so much less troublesome than the real article. Since she belongs to “another world,” she cannot compete with man. Safely relegated to her pedestal, she serves his purpose, his psychological need, without having any purpose of her own.¹⁰

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The question must be raised at this point, "What has the foregoing to do with Marian theology in general and the work of this Institute in particular?" The problem is complex and cannot be addressed fully in a brief presentation such as this. Several points, however, may be made.

First, the accusation that Marian theology is responsible for maintaining a sexual stereotyping that some modern women find offensive and deleterious should not be dismissed out of hand. No thorough study has yet been made on this point. Given the situation, it would seem appropriate to examine the double duty a patriarchal piety and theology have demanded she perform. This Institute could break some ground by exploring criteria for separating the important role Mary plays in the economy of salvation from the roles imposed on her by a chauvinistic society. The task is not an easy one; stereotypes are hard to break. Wolfgang Lederer, for example, in his book, *Fear Of Women*, after a thorough psychological, sociological, and anthropological investigation of the various myths about women, demonstrates how difficult it is for a man to release his grip on the image of the Eternal Feminine:

Woman, anyway, has no use for freedom: she seeks not freedom, but fulfillment. She does not mean to be a slave, nor unequal before the law; nor will she tolerate any limitations in her intellectual or professional potential: but she does need the presence, in her life, of a man strong enough to protect her against the world and against her own destructiveness, strong enough to let her know that she is the magic vessel whence all his deepest satisfactions and most basic energies must flow.¹¹

Second, Marian theology and this Institute should address themselves to a re-evaluation of a Marian title which has had a certain currency in the past and possesses great potential for the present situation, namely, Mary as sister. Bourassé¹² and Maracci¹³ list the title and give the different applications made by preachers and theologians. Mary is variously called sister of the Christian people, sister of the angels, sister of virgins, sister of the eternal King, our sister (because we are all children of Adam), and many others.

Today, perhaps, the title should be used absolutely, without qualification to signify the solidarity that exists between her and all women. This title would not lend itself to cooptation if it were seen in light of St. Luke's presentation of Mary. This leads me to my third and final point.

Marian theology and this Institute should explore the significance of Lukan theology for feminist thought. In his annunciation scene it is a woman, not an Abraham or a Moses, who stands at the threshold of a new era of salvation and ushers it in with her personal, "Fiat." Mary is an active, not a passive participant in the economy of salvation. Again, although Luke does not have women present at the Last Supper, Mary and the women who followed Jesus were present at the beginning of the third stage of Luke's presentation of salvation history, that is, at Pentecost where they share fully in the outpouring of the Spirit which marks the dawning of the age

of the Church.

Finally, for Luke, Mary is the crossroad of the Old and New Testament, the perfect exemplar of the *anawim*, the personification of an approach to God that is non-exploitive and open to all, both men and women, who know their need for God and for each other.

I hope your time here will be productive, and, since there is such a good mix of men and women, besides theology I hope there is some room for consciousness raising.

NOTES

- 1 Joan Morris, *The Lady Was A Bishop* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973), p. 158.
- 2 Mary Daly, "The Spiritual Dimension of Women's Liberation," *Notes From The Third Year: Women's Liberation* (an annual published by a women's collective: P.O. Box AA, Old Chelsea Station, New York, N.Y., 10011), vol. III, p. 78.
- 3 Clara Maria Henning, "The One Sisterhood," reprinted in *Catholic Mind*, November, 1973.
- 4 Margaret Langhans Lusky, "A Portrait Of The Woman As A Girl Catholic," *Commonweal*, Jan. 11, 1974, p. 365.
- 5 Jean Crosby, "A Continued Story On Me," *Women and The Word: Toward a Whole Theology* (a mimeographed publication which can be obtained from Office of Women's Affairs, 2465 Le Conte Ave., Berkeley, Calif. 94709), 1972, p. 56.
- 6 Caryl Rivers, *Aphrodite At Mid-Century* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973), pp. 160-161.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Urban G. Steinmetz, *The Sexual Christian* (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Abbey Press, 1972), p. 15.
- 9 The term is mine. I have not seen it used in feminist publications, but I believe it does give symbolic expression to a definite trend of feminist thought.
- 10 Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 119.
- 11 Wolfgang Lederer, *The Fear of Women* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1968), p. 285.
- 12 J. J. Bourassé, *Summa Aurea de Laudibus Beatissimae Virginis Mariae* (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1866) vol. X, cols. 288-292.
- 13 Hippolytus Marracci, *Polyanthea Mariana* (Rome. Heredum Corbelletti, 1964), p. 460 f.