

Part 5: Mary: Icon of the Holy Spirit¹

Mary is the most graced creature to come from divine love. She perfectly accepted and cooperated with the graces given to her by the Spirit. We can say that because the Holy Spirit is “the personified capability for surrender and the actual loving surrender/devotion to the Godhead.”² Mary most faithfully mirrors the Holy Spirit’s uniqueness in this regard. No one is as devoted to God as Mary is, which is done by the grace of the Holy Spirit.³

Now, let’s delve deeper into the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary. I will touch upon some key aspects of Mary’s relationship with the Holy Spirit, which she invites us to be ours if we allow ourselves to follow her lead.

Some early Fathers and writers of the Church attributed to the work of the Spirit the original holiness of Mary, who was “fashioned by the Holy Spirit into a kind of new substance and new creature.”⁴ They reflected on the Gospel texts--, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with his shadow” (Lk. 1:35) and “Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit....She has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 1:18, 20). They saw in the Spirit’s intervention an action that consecrated and made fruitful Mary’s virginity and transformed her into the “Abode of the King,” or “Bridal Chamber of the Word,” the “Temple,” or “Tabernacle of the Lord,” the “Ark of the Covenant” or “the Ark of Holiness,” titles rich in biblical echoes.⁵

They meditated on the mystery of the Incarnation and saw an aspect suggestive of marriage in the mysterious relationship between the Spirit and Mary. Prudentius⁶ described this relationship poetically: “The unwed Virgin espoused the Spirit,” and they called her the “Temple of the Holy Spirit,” an expression that emphasizes the sacred character of the Virgin, now the permanent dwelling of the Spirit of God.⁷

Some Fathers and writers of the Church likened the Holy Spirit to a spring that flowed forth the fullness of grace (cf. Lk. 1:28) and the abundance of gifts. Only by the power of the Holy Spirit, who “overshadowed” her, was Mary able to accept what is “impossible with men, but not with

¹ The Catholic Church sees Mary as an icon or model of the Holy Spirit’s work in the life of the believer. Her unique relationship with the Holy Spirit, from the Incarnation to her role as a disciple, makes her an exemplar for all Christians to follow the Spirit’s lead.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Pope John Paul II, 1992, #724.

³ Frisk, Sr. M. Jean, *The Holy Spirit and Mary*, , Marian Library, University of Dayton, Ohio, <https://udayton.edu/marianlibrary/>.

⁴ *Marialis Cultus*, Pope Paul VI, 1974, #26.

In Baptism, we are given a share in the divine nature, become adopted sons and daughters of God and a new creation. Baptism frees us from original sin and all personal sins, and grants us new life as children of God. It does not completely erase the "frailty and weakness of human nature" or the "inclination to sin. The baptized must "continue to struggle against temptation and disordered desires. That remains as part of our fallen nature and must be combatted with the help of God’s grace received in Baptism and the sacraments.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Prudentius was a 4th-5th century Christian poet from Spain (@348 - @405 AD).

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Pope John Paul II, 1992, #724.

God” (cf. Mk 10:27). “The Holy Spirit will come upon you”—meaning her motherhood will not be the consequence of matrimonial “knowledge.” Instead, it will be the work of the Holy Spirit: the “power of the Most High” will “overshadow” the mystery of the Son’s conception and birth.⁸ This action of the Holy Spirit does not imply a physical or sensual relationship between the Holy Spirit, Mary, and her human soul. Instead, this suggests a profound, mystical union between the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary.⁹

Here, we see the value of referencing the Holy Spirit using masculine imagery. Remember, this is theological language that best communicates the transcendence of God and protects the divine nature from any suggestion of a physical, sensual union. *The Spirit’s action is portrayed as a profound, mystical, and supernatural work rather than a human, physical relationship.* This language upholds the sacred and inviolable nature of the Incarnation, where the divine nature and the human nature are united in the Person of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Incarnation, this action of the Spirit is unique and unrepeatable. Remember, God is neither male nor female. Masculine imagery is theological language meant to assert both of those truths.¹⁰

In preparation for her role as the Mother of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, and in anticipation of the graces from Jesus’ death and resurrection, a special grace was given to Mary so that her very being was in complete harmony with God’s purposes from the moment of her conception. In other words, God could ask anything of Mary, and she put up no resistance. Try living like that for one hour or a minute! St. Maximilian Kolbe observed: “The nature of the union of the Holy Spirit and Mary consists in the union of wills. Mary identifies so thoroughly with the will of God that one can speak about a quasi-incarnation of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ The Evangelist Mark describes this union of wills between the Holy Spirit and Mary as the power of the Holy Spirit, “overshadowing” her. This enabled Mary to accept what is “impossible with men, but not with God” (cf. Mk 10:27).

None other than Satan himself has affirmed the profound holiness of Mary. Satan’s original sin was to question God’s decision to incarnate as a human being rather than as an angel. Fr. Chad Ripperger, an exorcist who had encountered Beelzebub (Satan) during one of his exorcisms, reported that Satan’s initial task was to enlighten the mind of Mary. However, when Satan saw

⁸ *Marialis Cultis*, Pope Paul VI, 1974, #26.

⁹ According to the Catholic Church, mysticism refers to a profound spiritual experience of intimate union with God. This goes beyond ordinary prayer and meditation and cannot be produced by human effort. It is a participation in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments and an intimate union with God.

The Catholic Church identifies four degrees of mystical union: 1) Incomplete mystical union (prayer of quiet), 2) Full, semi-ecstatic union, 3) Ecstatic union, and 4) Transforming or deifying union (spiritual marriage). The Church cautions that these mystical experiences, when accompanied by visions, revelations, and miracles require prudent evaluation since they can be manipulated by the devil.

The Catholic Church affirms that Mary’s relationship with God was marked by an exceptionally intimate and mystical union with God. It is described using sensory language such as seeing, hearing, or touching the divine. (See the Catholic Encyclopedia, The Encyclopedia Press,

¹⁰ To say that the Holy Spirit dwells in Mary is not to say the Holy Spirit is Mary. As we have seen, pantheism proposes that god is a force that is one with the created world. This leads to the worship of created beings as if they were gods themselves.

¹¹ Anne Marie of Jesus, O.C.D., podcast, Trinity Talks: *Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit*.

her interior beauty, he couldn't bring himself to share her with God. He wanted her for himself. He also wanted that beauty but knew he would never be like that.¹²

What made her beauty so indescribable was her willingness to sacrifice for God *without once counting the cost to her*. She just said yes, and she did this *over and over again*. She always took herself out of the equation. There was this complete selflessness about her that Satan knew he would never attain. Her complete abandonment to God distinguishes her from all the saints and angels. That explains why devils and demons fear the appearance of Mary, which includes seeing the face of Mary, more than Jesus during an exorcism. As if this were not bad enough, the devils admit being subject to a woman is like adding salt to the wounds.¹³ Evidently, they suffer from male chauvinism, which might explain where the roots of that sin originate.

The above description of Mary's power over demons, which comes from Christ, would be included in Fr. Colin's vision that the Church has a Marian face. It is also included in the Church's understanding of Mary as a type or model of the Church and discipleship.

With the above in mind, not all agree with Fr. Colin's vision for the Church with a Marian face. Some bemoan that the Catholic Church has become too feminized and, therefore, too soft. They argue this explains why the Church is unattractive to men who like to get things done and fight the battles of the Lord. I note that Fr. Colin wanted the whole Church to be Marist in spirit if not in name. He did not see a conflict with that, and the Marists fighting the battles of the Lord under the banner of Mary.

Recall Satan's fear of and grudging respect for Mary and her willingness to sacrifice herself over and over again to serve God, no matter the personal cost. He recognized the interior beauty of her soul that he wanted, but he would never attain. That causes him to cower in fear and submit to Mary when she makes her presence known and reveals her face. Her appearance announces that the resistance of the devil during an exorcism is over. That is real spiritual strength: firm, confident, and far from soft.

Where does she get such power over demons, the archenemy of human beings? It is found in her docile spirit that allows the Holy Spirit to enjoy complete and total cooperation with her to accomplish God's purposes. Perhaps some would see that as being too passive and weak. That is the feminine way of being strong. Critics of a supposedly overly feminized and soft Church should remind themselves what St. Paul said, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

Remember, Karl Barth's observation, "World history is the story of men! However, *in order to give God alone all the honor* in the greatest work of world history [the Incarnation], here God

¹² Podcast, "Fr. Chad Ripberger Reveals the Forgotten Secrets of the Fallen Angels," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9MrhlqgWwg&list=PLW_4XnaIiYS2eZURXK77g6uA9AnZngOeP&index=109.

¹³ Ibid.

excluded the man and his doing.”¹⁴ The masculine penchant to take charge, move forward, and achieve the objective, whatever the cost, brings the temptation to hog the spotlight and take all the credit. More importantly, the unspoken assumption underlying all that is “When I am weak, I am *not* strong.” In choosing Mary as the model of discipleship, God is making it clear that it is only when we are weak, meaning, when we are completely docile to the promptings of the Spirit, then we are strong.

Let’s look at a masculine way of saying the same thing. St. Paul, who asked the Lord three times to remove a thorn in his flesh, received this answer: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” St. Paul continues, “I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12: 9-10). Hear in these words, his willingness to sacrifice himself repeatedly, to serve God no matter the personal cost. See his desire to put the needs of his ego aside. That is real strength. It is also real power that Fr. Colin would want Marists to identify with, as opposed to the use of worldly power that is manipulative and coercive, which he condemned.

Those who criticize the Church for being feminized and soft should remind themselves that Mary is the model of discipleship. They should follow her orders and “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). That means allowing the Holy Spirit to enjoy complete and total cooperation with them to accomplish God’s purposes. That means being willing to sacrifice for God without once counting the cost. That means saying yes to the Spirit’s promptings over and over again. *That means taking themselves out of the equation, and refusing to first count the personal cost* before saying yes to serving God’s purposes. Those who believe the Church has become too feminized and soft are welcome to test that assumption by modeling their discipleship after Mary, a woman, and do as she did and still does.

Let me conclude with this thought. I want to end by reflecting on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the infant Church at Pentecost, a favorite motif for Fr. Colin. There, Mary, the Mother of Jesus, present in the Upper Room (Acts 1:12-14; 2:14), provided the Church Fathers and writers with ample opportunities to gain new insights concerning the ancient theme of Mary and the Church. Many sought the Virgin’s intercession to obtain the capacity for Christ to dwell in their soul from the Spirit. For example, Saint Ildephonsus¹⁵ prayed, “I beg you, holy Virgin, that I may have Jesus from the Holy Spirit, by whom you brought Jesus forth. May my soul receive Jesus through the Holy Spirit by whom your flesh conceived Jesus.... May I love Jesus in the Holy Spirit in whom you adore Jesus as Lord and gaze upon Him as your Son.”¹⁶

Ildephonsus prays for a mystical union with Jesus, which is brought about by an action of the Holy Spirit. What the Holy Spirit was able to do for Mary, a woman, to conceive and bring forth

¹⁴ *Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 1927, p. 278.

¹⁵ *Catholic Encyclopedia* “Mystical Theology,” The Encyclopedia Press, 1913.

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Pope John Paul II, 1992.

the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, Ildephonsus, a man, prays to receive Jesus through the Holy Spirit so that Jesus may be conceived (born) spiritually in his soul. Like all believers, he desires the Spirit to overshadow and dwell within his soul so Christ may be spiritually conceived and formed within him.¹⁷

Mary is a type and model of the Church. She wants each member of the Church to conceive Jesus spiritually. This enables us to say that the Church is the mystical body of Christ, and is how the Church is to continue the Incarnation of Jesus in the present and future. Pope Paul VI explained that what the Church says about the action of the Holy Spirit in, through, and on the Church is what the Church has already said about Mary. That is why we can say that the Church sees herself fulfilled in Mary.¹⁸ It also explains why we can say that Mary is a type or model of the Church.

In the last reflection, I will speak about how to pray to Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁷ That is a level of grace and sanctification that does not rise to that of the Incarnation which is a unique and unrepeatable event.

¹⁸Ibid.