**Praying to Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit**

In the tradition of the Church, Mary has been called the "Dove of God."[1] This symbol does not describe her purity, beauty, gentleness, and humility. It was chosen precisely to indicate her similarity and intimate unity with the Holy Spirit, so much so that his symbol became her symbol.[2] That leads us to pray to Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit. I suggest choosing a particular icon of the Annunciation of Mary or Pentecost. The internet can introduce us to a variety of Marian icons. Choose one, enlarge it, and you are in business!

The Annunciation is an appropriate context for us to reflect on the role of Mary and her relationship with the Holy Spirit. That relationship is so intimate that Mary can be described as an icon or image of the Holy Spirit. Before we unpack that, let's pause and consider the unique role that icons, as an art form, play in fostering prayer and meditation.

An icon is a sacred image. It is holy because icons represent windows or doorways to the heavenly world, which is otherwise invisible to us on Earth. They reveal the wonders God has accomplished on earth through the incarnation, the saints, and the Church. The artistic style unique to icons is meant to evoke the "heavenly dimension" of the subjects represented rather than their natural or earthly visage. While Western Christian art of the last centuries favors the natural depictions of subjects, Eastern Churches have remained committed to using them to evoke and represent heavenly realities.

One way of appreciating icons is to see them as visual renditions of the Scriptures. They invite us to stop and dwell on particular moments in the life of Christ as well as the lives of the saints.[3] Icons invite us to slow down and ponder the sacred mysteries being depicted. That is very Marian or Marist. Recall that after the arrival of the shepherds during the nativity, Luke tells us, "And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Later on, after Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple, they return to Nazareth," and his mother kept all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51).

Now recall these words of Fr. Colin, "Marists are to think, judge, feel, and act like her in all things." That certainly includes thinking, judging, feeling, and acting like her toward her Son. Meditating on the sacred mysteries is being like Mary, who pondered all these things in her heart. Again, icons are meant to help us ponder and meditate, and for Marists, in the spirit of Mary. As such, they are invitations to dwell upon, spend time, or "waste time" with the sacred mysteries they depict.

Entering into the sacred mysteries represented in an icon requires concentrating on the image to notice all the details and inscriptions on the icon. The colors, facial expressions, hand gestures, clothing, lettering, etc., have meaning. The very act of contemplating them will promote interior silence. All the other voices, memories, and concerns accompanying us as we contemplate the icon will gradually fade into the background as we "listen" to the icon speak to us.

The unique power of an icon transports us into a world of wonder and awe as the heavenly realities or spiritual truths reveal themselves through the images displayed in the icon. An icon becomes a window through which we gaze upon the spiritual reality, revealing itself that would be otherwise invisible.

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

[2] Ibid.

[3] "Sacred images in our churches and homes are intended to awaken and nourish our faith in the mystery of Christ. Through the icon of Christ and his works of salvation, it is him, whom we adore. Through sacred images of the holy Mother of God, of the angels and of the saints, we venerate the persons represented" (CCC 1192).

Notice that speech has no role to play in this form of prayer. The Catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church puts it this way. "…the main organ of our communication with God is not our lips, which pronounce the words, but our eyes. With our eyes, we look at the image to contemplate the imaged Person" (CUCC 703).

When contemplating an icon, please pay attention to the feelings the icon evokes, the particular image or specific part of it that captures our attention, and the thoughts it inspires. Like Mary, we have entered a receptive mode, meaning we react to what we view. In this way, the icon speaks to us. Remember, the icon is a window through which we look heavenward, allowing and hoping God will touch our hearts and enlighten our minds.

The artist does not want the Christian to admire the icon as a beautiful piece of art. Instead, the artist intends to draw us into prayer, raising the mind and heart to God. The artist, also called the "writer," does not sign their icons like contemporary artists who sign their paintings. That is because the icon's purpose is not to praise the artist's talents. Instead, an icon is to facilitate an encounter with God.[4] From the Marist perspective, this is an example of being "hidden and unknown."

Much more can be said about how icons promote prayer and meditation.[5] This very brief excursion into the world of icons is meant to introduce us to this spiritual practice and acquaint us with some basic knowledge about the purpose of an icon and how to contemplate Mary as the Icon of the Holy Spirit.

I invite you to apply that knowledge now by contemplating the icon of Jean-Claude Colin. This icon is displayed on the back wall of the Esmond Brady Chapel of the Holy Family. The icon, the story of its creation, and its explanation can be found at https://www.jeanclaudecolin.org/resources/images-and-icon#icon-explained.

Let's return now to Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit. Contemplating Mary at the Annunciation, she responds to the angel with the total gift of herself. Her very being became a gift to God when she said yes to her vocation to be the Mother of Jesus, which she did freely, totally, and joyfully. Those qualities are also descriptive of the divine love that constitutes the inner life of the Trinity and which the Holy Spirit breathes into Mary and all believers. To breathe in her Spirit is to breathe in the Holy Spirit. Of course, I am speaking mystically.

Note the allusion to the Holy Spirit when Fr. Colin describes the spirit of Mary: "*…let them (Marists) continually strive to draw upon her spirit and breathe it: a spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbor….*" Intimate union with God can easily be associated with the Holy Spirit, about whom we said earlier, "The Holy Spirit is the personified capability for surrender and the actual loving surrender/devotion to the Godhead."[6] 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."

Fr. Ellerman, SM, '58, when asked, "What are Marists to breathe in?" responded by saying Marists are to breathe in Mary's spirit of humility, self-denial, and intimate union with God. We call that prayer or contemplation. "What are Marists to breathe out?" Fr. Ellerman, SM '58, answered by saying Marists are to "breathe out" an ardent love of neighbor. We call that ministry, the apostolate or service. The latter reminds us that breathing in the spirit of Mary, a spirit of intimate union with God, is a gift (grace) of the

[4] Frisk, Sr. M. Jean, *The Holy Spirit and Mary*, Marian Library, University of Dayton, Ohio, https://udayton.edu/marianlibrary/.
[5] For more information, go to *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1162, 1161, 2705, 1159, 1192, 2131.
[6] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* Pope John Paul II, 1992, #724.

Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the intimate union of love between God the Father and God the Son. Grace is never given only for one's benefit. The gifts of the Spirit are meant to build up the Church and benefit the world through ministry or service.[7]

As I mentioned, Mary has been called the Dove of the Spirit. That image indicates her similarity and intimate unity with the Holy Spirit, so much so that his symbol became her symbol. That is why we can say that breathing in the spirit of Mary is to breathe (pneuma) in the Holy Spirit.

That is also why we can say that Mary reveals the Holy Spirit, who, through her, highlights and affirms the necessity of integrating feminine imagery into our relationship with God and our life of faith. It provides a much-needed balance to the Church that historically has associated masculine imagery with the triune Godhead to protect and emphasize God's transcendence. That has resulted in largely neglecting using feminine imagery, which is associated with the personified capability for the actual loving surrender/devotion to the Godhead, who is the Holy Spirit."[8]

Mary most faithfully mirrors the Holy Spirit's uniqueness in this regard. No creature is as open, receptive, and eager to respond to the Spirit's promptings as Mary. This is done to her by the grace of the Holy Spirit, with whom she was and is most open, receptive, and eager to cooperate. This docility to the promptings of the Spirit is essential to being a disciple of her Son, and this is why the Church proclaims her to be the model of discipleship.

We end this reflection where we began when I introduced Mary as the Dove of God. Mary is associated with the symbol of the Dove, which is also the symbol of the Holy Spirit. While remaining a creature, her similarity and intimate unity with the Holy Spirit is such that his symbol became her symbol. In meditating on Mary, we see through her how the Holy Spirit relates within the triune Godhead (intimate union) and is at work in the Church (humility and self-denial) and the world (ardent love of neighbor). That is why Mary can be called the Icon of the Holy Spirit.

[7] For more about breathing in the spirit of Mary, go to the Marist website, Fr. Rowland's Writings, and click on the topic, *The Essence of Marist Spirituality.* Then, click on *Part 3: The Essence of Marist Spirituality is to be Mary*.
[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* Pope John Paul II, 1992, #724.