



The Humanity of Mary

By Daniel S. Mulhall



Vienna - The Nativity paint in presbytery of Salesianerkirche church by Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini (1725-1727).

A few years ago, a survey was conducted around the world of parents of young children. The survey asked these parents what qualities they would like their children to have when they grew up.

The researchers were surprised to learn that in every country and culture, parents wanted their children to grow up having the same types of positive qualities: honesty, integrity, courage, religiosity and the like.

As the researchers reported, no parent said they wanted their children to be liars or cheats. The researchers did find wide divergence over what methods parents would use to raise their children to have the qualities they named.

What this research illustrates is that people everywhere have an archetype or an ideal for what makes a perfect human being.

Similarly, if you asked people what qualities they loved about their mothers or fathers, you would probably generate answers suggesting the archetypical

mother or father: kind, generous, encouraging, strict, etc. We have an ideal in mind when we speak of a good mother or father, and all parents are judged against that ideal.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been recognized and honored from the earliest days of the church for her role in salvation history. She is honored with an almost unlimited number of titles by church communities around the world because of her many appearances and also because of her role as the first disciple of Jesus, for which she is rightly known as the mother of the church.

Because little is actually known about Mary from the Scriptures, most of the attributes that have been given her over the years reflect archetypal thinking. This means that Mary has been given all of the qualities that we would expect to find in the ideal mother.

Over the centuries, it has been easy to place Mary upon a pedestal and honor her above all other



The Humanity of Mary By Daniel S. Mulhall cont.



women, making her perfect in the process. But in these efforts to honor her, might we have missed an important lesson by not looking at her as the real woman that she was? Might we have forgotten that she was human, that she struggled as all mothers struggle, that she might have had doubts and fears, that she may not have always felt she lived up to the ideal image of the perfect mother?

Pope Francis has recently made a number of comments along this line. He noted that it was important that we remember that Mary was fully and truly human. She was a woman who by her courageous and faithful actions accomplished extraordinary things.

Mary had a husband. She had a child. She cared for the family and made the family home just as any other Jewish woman would have done in her time, and as mothers all over the world still do today. As Pope Francis has also pointed out, Mary was wonderfully humble.

Nowhere in Scripture is there a suggestion that she thought that she was worthy of the honor bestowed upon her or that she had lived a perfect life and so deserved God's favor. Rather, the message Mary sends is the opposite. She is blessed by her husband and blessed by her son and blessed by God's favor. She is an ordinary mother touched by God's grace. Mary's attitude seems very similar

to the attitude of so many mothers throughout history and still today.

When the church offers Mary as the first disciple or the image of the perfect disciple, maybe it would help if we saw those titles through the lens of ordinary women. Mary's life was lived accepting the will of God and also the mystery that God had in mind for her.

As Pope Francis recently said, Mary's faith was special because she lived it out every day. She engaged in

conversation continually with her God. She understood the world through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Mary's faith, Pope Francis said, was "nourished by her experience as a mother and by her close relationship with her son."

While emphasizing the special role Mary plays in the church, Pope Francis continues to speak about the important role that all women have, especially when it comes to the joyful news of the Gospel. "A world where women are marginalized is a sterile world," the pope said.

Women not only bring new life into the world; they also "transmit to us the capacity to see otherwise" and to "understand the world with different eyes, to feel the most creative, most patient, most tender things with the heart." It is through our mothers, the pope says, that most people are introduced to the faith.

When we honor Mary throughout May, let's also honor the gifts that all women bring to the church and how we come to know and experience the saving love of God through women.

Let us give thanks for everyone who says "yes" to God's invitation, for those who bring forth new life and especially for those who, like Mary, share the gift of faith with the rest of us.

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