

# Mary: Model for our Pilgrimage of Faith

by Fr. Gene Berrette MS

## Bringing Mary out of Eclipse

It is no exaggeration to say that Marian devotion suffered a diminution during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Some blame the Second Vatican Council; others hold theologians at fault. And yet no council has ever spoken so beautifully of Mary as does *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 52-69. Prominent theologians such as Karl Rahner, Schillebeeckx, and even the non-Catholic Max Thurian have written exquisitely on Mary. Bishops' conferences have issued pastoral letters on Mary, such as the American Bishops' beautiful letter, *Behold Your Mother*.

The eclipse perhaps came as an overreaction to excesses that at times existed in some Marian devotions; the eclipse also may have come because our attention was focused on other essential aspects of our Christian, ecclesial life.

But Mary is so integral a part of the fabric of our faith that she cannot remain in eclipse. In fact, in Argentina, Cardinal Primates, in a conference to members of the Council of the Congregation, went on at great length to emphasize that it is Marian devotion that has preserved the Christian faith of the Latin American people over the centuries. This great gift cannot remain in eclipse.

## Mary, Our Mother

In proclaiming 1983 the Holy Year of the Redemption, Pope John Paul II wanted to put dramatically before our eyes and our hearts this life-giving reality that is Mary, Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church; your mother and mine. We are not dealing with pious images or metaphors nor with devotional projections; we are dealing with a reality present to us. Do we recognize this presence? Is it vital for us?

Permit me to use an analogy to help me get my point across. Walk outside and look up into the air. Do you hear music or voices and see images? Of course not. And yet that seemingly clear air is full of sounds and images. And yet all you need is a radio or TV and clock in order to capture them. You hear the music and the voices, you see the pictures. All you need is the proper instrument, properly tuned and with a power source.

It is the same thing with the presence of God, the Lord, the Spirit – and yes, of Mary. They are real presences. But unless we have our minds and hearts empowered by the Spirit, attuned in faith, then there is no way that we can be aware of these presences; no way that we can respond to them; no way that we can be touched and transformed by them.

Many of us need a polishing-up of our Marian devotion, to enter more deeply into the richness and profound meaning of a Marian spirituality.

As John Paul's 1987 [encyclical Redemptoris Mater](#) suggests, it is a question of seeing Mary as part of our "life of faith." Mary is the prototype for our own stance before God and the world. Mary has led and continues to lead the way on our pilgrimage of faith. Recognizing that and actively drawing strength from that reality is one way of insuring that Mary will no longer live in a sort of eclipse.

This is not the place for a treatise on the fundamentals of a Marian theology. I simply encourage you all to give *Redemptoris Mater* a prayerful, meditative reading. The encyclical, plus chapter VIII in *Lumen Gentium*, gives an excellent summary of Mariology. I simply want to point out some aspects of Mary that can touch our life of faith – points that may be light and food for our own journey.



## Mary: Model for Our Pilgrimage of Faith

A recurring phrase in the pope's encyclical is Mary's place in the "pilgrimage of faith" (6,14,25, and 26 especially). The whole image of the pilgrimage of faith is a dynamic one capturing the movement, the evolution, the story of a people, of individuals.

What is this "pilgrimage of faith" that the Church has lived out through space and time in her individual members? The pope says that its essential character is interior, a "question of a pilgrimage through faith, by the 'power of the Risen Lord,' a pilgrimage in the Holy Spirit" (*Redemptoris Mater*, 25).

The essential element of this interior pilgrimage is the response that each person gives to the encounter with the Holy Spirit. The faith-response of yes – of fiat, a total obedience of faith to the Spirit inviting into

God's plan – creates a receptive space for the conception and birthing of Jesus. This pilgrimage of faith is of crucial importance not only because of what it accomplishes in the individual, but more because of what is accomplished through the individual: making Christ present in the world.

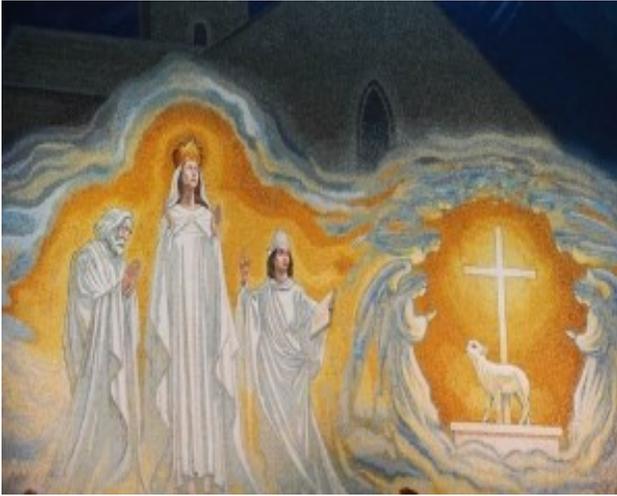
And Mary, in a unique and special way, is present to and part of this ongoing pilgrimage. "Mary is present, as the one who is 'blessed because she believed,' as the one who advanced on the pilgrimage of faith, sharing unlike any other creature in the mystery of Christ. . . . Among all believers she is like a 'mirror' in which are reflected in the most profound and limpid way 'the mighty works of 'God'' (Redemptoris Mater, 25). Mary is the prototype and model for all faith-pilgrims. And what can we learn when we look at her response? We discover that "to believe means 'to abandon oneself' to the truth of the word of the living God . . . accepting fully and with a ready heart everything that is decreed in the divine plan . . . a complete openness to the person of Christ, to his whole work, to his whole mission" (*Redemptoris Mater*, 14,39).

This total acceptance, this total giving of oneself to God's plan, is evident throughout Mary's life: in the fiat of the annunciation moment, in the journey to Bethlehem and the birth in such humble surroundings, in the flight to Egypt, in the "ponderings in her heart" during the early years, in the intercession at Cana, in the years of remaining in the background during the preaching, teaching, and healing and on the fringe of the crowds adulating or condemning, at the foot of the cross, and then in the midst of the apostles for the empowering on Pentecost. Certainly it is not difficult to see in Mary the total gift of her person to serving the saving plan of the Father.

Unique? Yes, Mary is. And yet we share in the same call, the same mission. As the American bishops stated in their pastoral letter: "Mary conceived in her womb. First came Mary's faith, then her motherhood. Faith is the key. . . . All who truly follow Christ become 'mothers' of Christ, for by their faith they bring him to birth" (*Behold Your Mother*, 71). This radical response of faith, as Cardinal Ratzinger effectively stated in his homily at St. Mary Major's on June 10, 1987, shows that Mary is "above all the sign of the fecundity of faith in history." The fecundity of faith is that it brought forth Life itself, which is Jesus. Jesus is God's supreme entrance into history. It is in Jesus that God once and for all puts history on the road of salvation, of liberation, of completion. Jesus is the ever-present Life that transforms history. What better way, therefore, to (deepen our faith) than to look at Mary, the supreme example and model of the power of faith to bring Jesus into the world?

# Our Lady of Knock

by Fr. Duggan



Knock is a manifestation of the mystery of redemption wrought by the Lamb of God. By a felicitous symbolism conceived in heaven, the Queen of Knock reveals in her person something of that singular grace and beauty conferred on her by this mystery. . . . She appears as the climax of human redemption. This unique completion of redemption in Mary has already crowned her in heaven as the divine ideal which foreshadows the absolute victory and transfiguration awaiting the Church on its entry into eternity.

—Father Hubert, O.F.M.  
Cap.

Devotion to Mary is integral to the faith of Ireland. St. Patrick not only entrusted his missionary work to her intercession but he also sought her continued presence with the Irish people.

**The apparitions.** God rewards fidelity: Knock is a simple village of hardworking, God-fearing farmers. The evening of August 21, 1879, will never be forgotten by the inhabitants of this village in County Mayo.

As evening came, a steady downpour began. Few were outside, but those hearty souls noticed a heavenly light emanating from the village church. An elderly lady saw the light. She looked at it intently and then cried out, "The Blessed Virgin!" A man ran through the streets shouting, "Come quickly! The Blessed Virgin is here at the Church!"

Witnesses, comprised of all ages, saw a heavenly apparition on the exterior of the southern wall of their parish church, St. John the Baptist. For more than two hours, Our Lady, St. Joseph and St. John

the Evangelist were present on that gable. To their right, and in the middle of the gable, there was a plain altar and on it a Lamb was standing. A large cross was behind, and above, the Lamb. This scene was enveloped in the brilliance of heavenly light, and angels hovered about the Lamb.

Since then, some have referred to Our Lady of Knock under her ancient title, Queen of the Angels. Many people today attribute the sanctity of family life, remaining strong with the Irish people, to the special grace that this vision at

Knock represents.

**The Lord's messenger.** Peace resides in the heart of the Virgin's Son. Those who seek peace seek God. Those who seek Him find Him. At times, He sends His mother to earth, clothed with her divine maternity and power, but still a sister and mother to all humankind.

The Irish people have always understood that there is nothing divine about Our Lady; she is *not God*. Mary is a human being, a sister to humankind, as well as mother. However, she is the mother of Jesus the Christ, who is divine as well as human. Therefore, she is the mother of God. She has no power of her own, but she is, and always will be, the mother of the most powerful person who ever walked the earth.

She has been assumed into heaven now to be with her Son. Sometimes she comes to earth as a heavenly messenger, sent by her Son, and she then appears to people. When she speaks, she brings no new messages, nothing that is not contained in the biblical teachings of Jesus. She represents Him to us, and she calls upon us to have sorrow for sin, to repent and turn to God.

The Church officially investigated this happening at Knock in 1879, and again in 1936. It was found that the witnesses were believable and that there was nothing contrary to the faith.

knelt in prayer at the apparition wall.

**The Great Famine.** It is recorded that Mary said nothing at all during these apparitions. She simply came to her people, to be with them in their hour of need.

The years preceding the apparitions were the most tragic years in the history of Ireland. Famine and unimagined misery

engulfed the entire Catholic country. Ships took away cattle and grain, and the people were left to starve. Priests often anointed as many as 40 parishioners a day with "extreme unction" as they faced death. The magnitude of such suffering was unimaginable.

The west suffered more than other parts of Ireland. The population of Ireland had been halved. The Irish had then become the most emigration-oriented people in the entire world.

In 1879, the potato crop was threatened once again. Rents rose; money was borrowed; evictions occurred daily. People became desperate.

## The Christian ideal.

Our Lady does not exist in isolation. She is the type, the figure, of the Church. Mary is what we are destined to be. When we speak of Mary, we speak of ourselves; we state the Christian ideal of Mary and womankind.

As has been proclaimed before, in her life and person Our Lady expresses to perfection what it means to believe, to love and to be loved, to be graced and to be saved. She is indeed redemption's finest hour.

To accept, freely and without reservation, God's salvation in His Son, Jesus the Christ; to accept and to fulfill one's function in redemption; to bring our grace-life of service to the salvation of others — this is to be Christian.

**Mary's yes to God.** The work of the Church and each Christian is to continue Mary's unqualified yes to God at the time of the Annunciation. Her yes brought God to birth on earth. This links God with His people. It is a yes that continues a share in her Son's redemptive task.

Mary, like all mothers, did not know where her yes to God would lead her. She was not given an outline of her life: giving birth to her Son in a Bethlehem stable, the flight into Egypt, 30 years in the obscurity of Nazareth, and then through Jerusalem to the foot of the cross.

Mary's message remains the same as it was at Cana: "Do whatever he tells you."

Jesus teaches us not to judge and not to condemn others: the Pharisees do that. Rather, we should look into our own hearts.

May Mary, mother of the Lord, woman of the Magnificat, who identified herself with the *anawim* of this world, obtain for us courage to challenge the mighty and to put ourselves at the service of her Son and His kingdom of justice, peace and love. May we always pray: