

# Mary and the Intellectual Life

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## Introduction

Ten years ago I gave a lecture entitled, “Jesus and the Academy.” At the beginning of that lecture, I asked, somewhat facetiously, if Jesus were to be in a university, where would he be found? After mentioning several possibilities, including a faculty position in the school of business where he could “make clearer what belongs to Caesar and what to God,” or in the music department where “he could demonstrate that the two closest things to God are music and love,” or in the department of biology where “he could make it obvious once and for all that the theory of evolution and the doctrine of creation need not be in conflict,” I even wondered whether Jesus might be found in the ranks of the administrators, where, I speculated, “he could provide overall direction for the community, articulate the vision and focus on the common good, but also worry about the budget, law suits, fund-raising and trustees.”

By the end of that lecture, I never really did say where I thought he would be found in the University. Instead, I spent most of the lecture talking about whether faith and reason really go together, the effect that the separation of Church and state has had on the academy, and several other big-picture themes. I concluded that lecture talking about a communitarian ethic, sacramentality and the incarnation. In retrospect, I am not sure that I really handled well the issues related to the topic of Jesus and the academy. But the concern that motivated me to give the lecture—namely, that Christian academics at Christian colleges and universities often have trouble making any direct connection between Jesus and their intellectual work—that concern still remains a real one for me. What’s different is that now, ten years later, I am asking what Mary, the Mother of Jesus, might have to do with the intellectual life—particularly at a Marianist University like this one, or for that matter, any Catholic university. Ten years ago, I thought I really knew some answers to the question I had posed to myself. Now, I am not as confident as I was then that I can address adequately the question I am now posing about Mary’s appropriate relationship to the intellectual life. I might add, however, that I am a bit more optimistic about coming up with something thoughtful than a history professor who, upon hearing of the title of this talk, asked me incredulously, “What does a teenage Jewish girl in a backwater of the Roman empire know about the intellectual life?”

So, why then have I chosen to speak on this topic? Because I think it is important. I also think I can offer some reflections on the topic that will stimulate further thought.

Moreover, I am not going to start this lecture in the way I did ten years ago. Instead of reflecting mainly on the contemporary shape of the academy and big-picture themes, I want to start this time with Mary, and ask what we know about her life in ancient Palestine and how they educated their children then. Then I will sketch several historical developments in Christianity, including a reference to Gnosticism and to the matrilineal education of Jesus exemplified in the late medieval St. Anne Trinity, followed by the impact that women have had who, only a century ago, entered into the universities. I will conclude not with some answers, but with some reflections on how we, as members of the academy, might find it valuable to think about Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

### The Historical Mary

Professor Elizabeth Johnson, the most recent recipient of the Marianist Award, spelled out in her acceptance speech some of what we know about the historical Mary, and what it meant then to be a young Jewish woman raising a child.<sup>1</sup> I note here, as did Prof. Johnson, the difficulty posed by the fact that the New Testament does not give us a lot of information about the historical Mary.<sup>2</sup> However, as true as that observation is, we do know that Mary was the Mother of Jesus and that she and Joseph raised him in Nazareth. And while it is undeniable that the lack of information about someone who has become very important lends itself to lots of projection, not all projection is distortion. Projection can also be an imaginative way to make a reality or a person from another age more understandable. You only have to visit the University of Dayton's Marian Library and look at the nearly 2,000 crèches they have collected to be moved by how people from around the world have pictured, or to use the theological term, "enculturated," the birth of Jesus as real for their own time and culture.

If we stick to the Scriptures, Mary appears as a source of wisdom for Jesus. In particular, we read in Luke, 2:40 that the child Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom." Again, in Luke 2:52 we read that Jesus "increased in wisdom." And in between these two verses, we have the story of Jesus at the age of twelve being found by his parents in the Temple, where he amazed the teachers there with his wisdom. I assume that many of you know that in the first chapters of Luke and Matthew there are some examples of *midrashim*, that is, reflections by the authors that bring home to the Christian community some theological truths about Jesus. *Midrash* appears arbitrary to us moderns who think that the meaning of a text can only be found in the literal sense of a passage; in a culture where that preoccupation with the literal sense is absent, the practice of *midrash*

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<sup>1</sup> I will be drawing here freely from Johnson's book, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (Continuum, 2005), and more recently from her article in *Theological Studies*, "Galilee: A Critical Matrix for Marian Studies," (Vol. 70, 2009), pp. 327-346; I also have found the reflections (sent to me by email) of Fr. Francois Rossier, S.M., the director of the International Marian Research Institute, very helpful.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson cites (in *Truly Our Sister*, p. 96) Raymond E. Brown, "The Meaning of Modern New Testament Studies for an Ecumenical Understanding of Mary," in his *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), p. 105.

“was not regarded as arbitrary but as necessary.”<sup>3</sup> I submit that the finding of the child Jesus in the Temple is also not arbitrary or without important lessons for believers today.

What are some of those lessons? We know that at the time of Jesus the education of the children was the primary responsibility of the mother. There were probably no local schools then; it could be said, then, that everybody home-schooled. Mothers were expected to teach their children their culture and their religion. Culture and religion were not separate then; they were intimately interrelated, and they had very much to do with wisdom. At the age of thirteen, boys were entrusted to their fathers who would teach them a profession. So, at the age of twelve, Jesus was still under the tutelage of his mother.<sup>4</sup> The first lesson, then, is that Mary taught her son about his culture and religion. She taught him, it can be said, wisdom.

In several ways, the Scriptures make clear the prominence of Mary in the early life of Jesus. For example, Luke refers twelve times to the parents of Jesus in the narrative about the finding of Jesus in the Temple. Yet, when the couple finally finds Jesus, it is not Joseph but rather Mary who tells him that “your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety”(2:48). Beverly Gaventa, a Princeton biblical scholar, notes that the usual English translation of the Greek word, *odynoun*, “fails to capture the poignancy” of the word. It would be better, according to Gaventa, to say that “your father and I have been searching for you and have been greatly anguished.”<sup>5</sup> Note that it is not Joseph but Mary who expresses the anguish both of them have experienced. It is almost as if Mary is saying, “Didn’t I raise you with better manners?” That she was responsible for his education is also suggested by a text (6:2) in Mark’s gospel, where we read that the people of Nazareth, after listening to Jesus speak in their synagogue, were amazed at his wisdom. Then they asked if he was not the son of Mary—pointing again, perhaps, to the role that she was understood to have had in his education.<sup>6</sup>

Should we assume, as some early Christians did, that since Jesus was the Son of God that his wisdom was really not taught to him by Mary but rather somehow mysteriously infused into him directly by God? Would this not be a violation of what the Church actually teaches—namely, that Jesus, though divine, is also truly human? Recall that the early Gnostics, those who gave little value to the human and the earthly, but

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<sup>3</sup> John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (MacMillan Press, 1965), p. 575. For a description of *midrash* as a literary type, see Ray Brown, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 1082, where he states that “midrashic interpretation...uses such reflections to make the text relevant to the questions, need, and interests of its audience.”

<sup>4</sup> New Testament scholar John Meyers points out that even though Scripture doesn’t explain the educational process, “...the day-to-day interactions of mothers with children in the household were of foundational significance in passing most aspects of Israelite culture from one generation to another” (cited by Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, p. 202).

<sup>5</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Stressing Mary’s role of educating the child and young Jesus should not diminish the importance of Joseph’s role, brought out more clearly in the first two chapters of Matthew’s Gospel. I was struck by the comment, reported by Elizabeth Johnson made by a Harlem woman who said that the Church should preach less about Mary and more about Joseph, “because he raised that boy like his own kid, which he wasn’t” (*Truly Our Sister*, p. 193).

taught rather that salvation was for the intellectual elite, for those who “know” (*gnosis*)—that these Gnostics taught that Jesus came *through* Mary, like water through a tube, the one not affecting the other. Orthodox Christian replied by stressing the true humanity of Jesus, affirming in the Creed that Jesus came “of” or “from” (*ex Maria*) Mary.<sup>7</sup> The theologians of the early Church also stressed the real humanity of Jesus by citing the text from Galatians (4:4), that he “was born of a woman, born under the law.”

I might also mention here the debate over whether Jesus had siblings. In the Marcan text to which I just referred, the one in which the people of Nazareth were asking where Jesus got all his wisdom—those people not only asked if Jesus was the son of Mary, but they also asked if James, Joses and Judas were not his brothers, and they referred to his sisters as well. Whether Mary had other children has been debated among Christians. The Catholic Church teaches that these others were Jesus’ cousins. The Orthodox Church teaches that they are Joseph’s children by a previous marriage, and many Protestant Church teach that they are the natural children of Mary and Joseph. Whichever tradition one accepts, it is obvious that Jesus was not raised as if he were an only child. And if all of these cousins or half brothers and sisters or siblings were living in the same area, in the same village or in the same cluster of one or two room homes—Jesus was raised in a community, or in an extended family, where the women shared a wide range of responsibilities, first among them the education of the children.

One final point about the historical Mary. There were no books then. There were, of course, parchment scrolls but peasants were unlikely to possess these. And even if they did, it is unlikely that any of them could read (though we know from several Gospel texts that Jesus did read). To understand the process of education at the time of Jesus, we need to understand something about oral culture, which for us moderns is relatively hard to grasp, flooded as we are by print, easily accessible books and libraries, to say nothing of the internet. On the other hand, recall how many people today seem to be able to remember and repeat the lyrics of dozens of songs. They know the words of songs by heart. How do they learn them so well? By listening to them repeatedly. And it is not just the repetition of the words, but words that are wedded to music with a beat and a memorable melody. In an oral culture, people entrusted with education passed on their culture through stories, songs and poems, made even more memorable by joining them, especially in the children’s religious education, to rituals, songs and prayers.<sup>8</sup>

The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament indicates that the primary location for teaching wisdom was in the family: “the home may be regarded as perhaps the original site of wisdom teaching, before and after such teaching became professionalized among the sages.”<sup>9</sup> It is, therefore, quite reasonable to think that Mary, the teenage Jewish mother in a rural village taught Jesus his culture and religion through a highly sophisticated and pedagogically effective oral culture. What are some of the most important themes of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament?

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, p. 205.

<sup>9</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (Eerdmans, 2002), 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, p. 4.

## The Wisdom Movement

The wisdom literature includes Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, but also, from the Apocrypha, Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach) and the Wisdom of Solomon. What is so unusual about this literature is that unlike the Pentateuch and the prophets, which concentrate on the God of the history of salvation, these books really focus on what it means to be an educated person. As Roland Murphy, the Old Testament scholar explains, what is typically Israelite and Jewish is not to be found in these books: “There is no mention of the promises to the patriarchs, the Exodus and Moses, the covenant and Sinai, the promise to David (2 Sam 7) and so forth.”<sup>10</sup> Rather, the wisdom literature is really about education. It has to do with how to bring up children, how to educate them.

Murphy thinks that the personification of wisdom as a woman, that is, as “Lady Wisdom,” is “the most striking personification in the entire Bible.”<sup>11</sup> Christians are tempted to see an actual person in speaking of Lady Wisdom, something that would be impossible for Jews, especially because of the strict monotheism that characterized their beliefs in the post exilic period. Christians tend to think of wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit. They also, since the fourth century, begin to speak of Mary as a source of wisdom, and then even as the Seat of Wisdom. Proverbs 8 is a key text for the personification of what Christians would later call Lady Wisdom. Proverbs has her stress the honesty and integrity of her message; she teaches truth and justice (8:7-8).

Wisdom literature taught that creation, being the work of the Creator, reflects the Creator (Wis. 13:5). So the more that God’s creation is studied, as we do in the University, the more we come to an insight into the nature of God. We can discover a certain order in creation (I am not referring here to what today is called the “intelligent design” argument for God’s existence). If we are able to decipher that order and live according to it, we will reflect wisdom which brings happiness with it.

Catholics call the ability to see God and God’s hand in all things sacramentality. As a university community, it is important to realize that learning about creation implies learning from those who have spent their lives learning about creation—learning from their wisdom as well. According to wisdom literature, wise people in Israel dialogue with wise people elsewhere in the world and learn even from them about God and creation, since every wise person who uses his or her intelligence in order to understand the world and their place in it may contribute to the general understanding of creation and its author.<sup>12</sup> The author of the book of Wisdom assures the reader that to seek wisdom is more important than seeking gold and silver, since wisdom makes us friends with God (7:14).

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<sup>10</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, p. 1. The only exceptions, Murphy adds, are very late additions (Sir. 44-50 and Wis. 11-19).

<sup>11</sup> Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, p. 133.

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted for Fr. Francois Rossier, S.M., for these reflections.

The wisdom literature offers important lessons for educators. When a child is born, the work of education must be taken up; otherwise, a child will lack a language and other important human skills for learning and friendship. Therefore educators (first the mother, then both parents but also other teachers) can be understood as collaborators with God in the work of creation. I am not speaking here only of the various human arts, like music and architecture, but also, and especially, in the work of that masterpiece of creation which is the human being. In other words, educators share in God's project of creation. The book of Wisdom (11:24-25) tells us that God willed creation out of love. If God acted out of love, then educators should also love their students and desire their very existence. In a defining moment in human history, Mary, God's friend and collaborator, consented to, and yes, even desired the very existence of Jesus when she said to the angel Gabriel, "yes," *fiat mihi*, let it be unto me. Mary becomes the mother of Jesus and his educator. Mary's contribution to the mystery of redemption did not end with Christmas. It extends well beyond that momentous birth. Fr. Rossier offers an interesting way to think about Mary as an educator when he writes: "the parallel between Mary and an educator is strengthened by the fact that she is the only mother in human history whose child existed before being conceived in her womb; likewise, an educator agrees to collaborate in the education of a child—a student—who has already existed before their first encounter."<sup>13</sup>

Before moving on to two other historical points, we may ask why this Wisdom literature personifies wisdom, why it refers to wisdom as Lady Wisdom? After surveying the scholarship, Roland Murphy concludes that there is no satisfactory answer. He does not see as adequate the argument that wisdom is personified as a woman because the Hebrew noun, *hokmah*, is feminine gender. Nor is it sufficient to say that the wisdom literature was developed mainly to educate young men. And though the education of young men by women says something important about the role of women in Israelite society that has been passed over for centuries by male Biblical commentators, Murphy thinks we still have many unanswered questions about Lady Wisdom as she is understood in the Wisdom literature.<sup>14</sup> Despite no satisfactory answer to why the wisdom literature personifies wisdom, Mary, whom Christians called the Seat of Wisdom, educated Jesus.

The second point, important for anyone associated with the Marianist Family, is that Blessed Fr. Chaminade, the founder of the Marianists, commented a great deal on the Wisdom literature. In the first volume of the two volume collection of his writings about Mary, Chaminade actually quotes the Old Testament (276 times) more than he does the New Testament (245 times). He is especially fond of the wisdom literature, citing texts from Psalms 45 times, and Proverbs and the Song of Solomon 35 times each and the

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<sup>13</sup> Francois Rossier, S.M., email dated July 27, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Roland Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, p. 146. As for a helpful description of Lady Wisdom, Murphy cites Burton Mack: "She is a teacher, one who shows the way, a preacher and a disciplinarian. She seeks out human beings, meets them on the streets and invites them in for a meal. The bewildering sexual aspects include sister, lover, wife and mother. She is the tree of life, the water of life, the garment and crown of victory. She offers to human beings life, rest, knowledge and salvation" (n. 22, p. 149).

book of Sirach 47 times.<sup>15</sup> Chaminade wrote about Mary as the Mother of Wisdom, which indeed she was, since Christians, following St. Paul, believe that Jesus is the Wisdom of God. Drawing also on texts from the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation, he developed a profound Marian apostolic spirituality focused on the formation of lay leaders and institutions for social change. More about Chaminade later.

### **Women, Education and Universities**

So far we have considered first the historical Mary and the role that women in rural Israel played in educating their children. Then we described the importance of the Wisdom literature and the way it influencing the education of children. Now I wish to mention two more historical developments that might influence the way we think about Mary and the intellectual life. The first takes us to the late medieval period when the cult of St. Anne appears prominently in art and statuary. Already in the middle of the twelfth century, in the western portal or entrance of the Chartres cathedral, we find an image of a woman who represents Grammar, or *ars grammatica*, which was the first subject that students all over Europe had to learn in the universities, which were just then being founded. Enter that same cathedral and one also finds in the great northern window an image of St. Anne and her child Mary.

The stories about St. Anne are not in the four Gospels; they are, rather, in the apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James*, and therefore do not have the same authority as the canonical gospels. Nevertheless, they provide us with some interesting examples related to the theme of this lecture. According to the *Protoevangelium*, Anne and her husband, Joachim, had no children. When an angel visited them and told them they would have a child, Anne told the angel that she would dedicate the child, boy or girl, to God. Joachim wanted the child at age two to be brought up in the Temple. Anne persuaded Joachim to wait till their daughter was three, when she went to live in the Temple where she was taught to read. From the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, priests in the Byzantine traditions preached sermons that described Mary, who was the Mother of God, as possessing the wisdom of Athena.<sup>16</sup> In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, St. Albert the Great, the teacher of Thomas Aquinas, taught that Mary had been a master of the seven liberal arts. In that same thirteenth century, artists created a stained glass window in Chartres that portrays Mary sitting with four other students being taught by a teacher.

By the fourteenth and fifteenth century, we find dozens of images, stained glass windows and statues that depict St. Anne, often with book in hand, teaching Mary (sometimes as an infant or as a child, and sometimes as the young mother of Jesus). Mary

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<sup>15</sup> See Bertrand Buby, S.M., *Scripture in the Marian Writings of Father William Joseph Chaminade* (North American Center for Marianist Studies; Dayton Ohio, 2000), Monograph Series, Document #44, page 2. citing the work of Fr. Jean Baptiste Armbruster, S.M.

<sup>16</sup> Pamela Sheingorn, “‘The Wise Mother’: The Image of St. Anne Teaching the Virgin Mary,” in *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, edited by Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Cornell University Press, 2003), p107. *Pseudo Matthew*, another apocryphal gospel, states: “No one could be found who was better instructed than she (Mary) in wisdom and in the law of God, who was more skilled in singing the songs of David (Psalms) also p. 107.

often has a book in her hand, as she passes on to Jesus what she has learned from her mother, Anne, Jesus' grandmother.<sup>17</sup> Many of these artistic renderings portray Mary learning very much like children who were then being taught in the monastic schools of the twelfth century. In all of these works, the book that St. Anne holds is open, unlike the closed book that appears in most art portraying other saints.

All these matrilineal trinities underscore the simple incarnational truth that Jesus was educated by a woman who was educated by a woman. Whether Anne or Mary could actually read is not the point, nor should we be concerned about the historicity of St. Albert's pious opinion. The point is that Christians in the late middle ages understood that the wisdom that Jesus embodied came to him through human means, certainly specially graced human means—namely, through Mary whose primary responsibility was to educate Jesus in the Jewish culture and religion of the day. I would suggest then, in this context, that when we think of Mary, we think of education.

The second historical development I want to mention is the entrance of women into higher education. We know that some women were literate, especially those who were monastics, for example Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). And then there was also the daughter of Thomas More, Margaret, whose expertise in the Latin language was well known. While monastic schools from the sixth century on admitted boys, most boys for most of history received no formal education until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women's academies date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but again, only for the daughters of the affluent. In the mid-nineteenth century a number of women's colleges were established in the United States, but it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that women in any numbers began to be admitted to universities.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only 1% of the US college-age population, nearly all males, attended colleges and universities. It was not until 1920 that women won the right to vote. And it was not until after World War II that they were allowed to study theology at the graduate level. This would not have happened without the leadership and courage of the visionary Sr. Madaleva (1887-1964), who founded the Graduate School of Theology at St. Mary's in South Bend. In his 1963 encyclical, *Peace on Earth (Pacem in terris)*, published shortly before he died, Pope John XXIII identified as one of the major movements of the twentieth century, what could be called a "sign of the times," the women's movement. He wrote, "Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life."<sup>18</sup>

I realize that much of this history may already be familiar to you. What you may not know, however, is the significance that Walter Ong, S. J., the 1989 recipient of the Marianist Award, gives to the entrance of women into universities. Ong claims that education in the West, especially Catholic education, was *agonistic* until the 1960s when it became largely co-educational. He refers to this change as an "in-depth revolution" that has remained mostly under the radar. By *agonistic*, Ong means that a certain enmity

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<sup>17</sup> Ayers Bagley, [http://iconics.cehd.umn.edu/St\\_Anne/St\\_AnneText.htm](http://iconics.cehd.umn.edu/St_Anne/St_AnneText.htm).

<sup>18</sup> John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, paragraph 41.

existed between the teacher and the (male) student. The subject matter was organized as a “field of combat, to purvey, not just to test, knowledge in a combative style.<sup>19</sup> The Latin word “campus,” refers us back to a staging area for the Roman armies just before they marched in parades. The medieval universities stressed the importance of formal logic, held debates and taught rhetoric. Students were taught to defend theses through oral argument. The structure of the question in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa* begins with objections to a thesis, followed by an answer with proof, and finally gives a response to the objections. Oral skills favored polemics, or arguments. Plato, if you recall, opposed writing, because it detracted, he thought, from the primary goal of education—to become a public speaker, a debater. Public speaking was highly prized; elocution contests continued at major universities until after World War II. The learning of the Latin language had become a sex-linked language, a sort of puberty rite that marked a boy’s exit from his family and entrance into the tribe. About the only remnant of the *agonistic* character of the medieval university is the defense a doctoral student is expected to give before a board of examiners comprised of professors from the university.<sup>20</sup>

All these agonistic practices disappeared, according to Ong, almost overnight in the United States in the 1960s, when women began to enter universities, especially Catholic universities, originally intended only for men. The following things happened when women arrived:

- (1) Latin was dropped, first as a means of instruction and then as a required subject;
- (2) the agonistic, thesis method of teaching was replaced by less combative methods;
- (3) written examinations were substituted for public oral disputations and examinations; and
- (4) of course, physical punishment was minimized or suppressed.<sup>21</sup>

Catholic seminaries preserved the *agonistic* culture the longest; there, the culture of Latin and learning philosophy and theology in Latin persisted relatively intact in some places until the late 1960s. But during a two year period, from 1967 to 1968, St. Louis Divinity School ceased using Latin as a language of instruction, dropped the method of using theses for instruction, dropped staged disputations and oral exams as integral parts of the curriculum, and admitted women.<sup>22</sup> Ong believes that these were not four unrelated changes; he believes that they were of one piece. Others cultural and historical factors were also surely in play—such as the trauma of two world wars, the holocaust, and the movement for greater “relevance” in the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the causes of these deep changes in high education, the entrance of women played a key role.

If I might interject a personal note here, I lament the loss of the study of Latin. Without knowing that language, many important medieval texts that would shed light on

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 121.

<sup>20</sup> Ong, pp. 119-134.

<sup>21</sup> Ong, pp. 135-136.

<sup>22</sup> Ong, p. 139.

<sup>23</sup> I thank Prof. Fred Jenkins, Associate Dean of the University of Dayton Libraries, for this reflection.

the history of women, and certainly on the history of reflection on Mary, are in danger of being overlooked now. I would also hate to see the great tradition of Gregorian chant lost to the Church as well.

If this collapse of an agonistic tradition of education were not enough, consider also the profound change represented by the sixteen documents of Vatican II, which also took place in the 1960s. None of the Council's sixteen documents, though written in Latin, contains a single *anathema sit*, or condemnation. Vatican II has been called a pastoral council. Some have argued that this means that nothing really changed since no new dogmas were proclaimed. One has only to read Jesuit historian John O'Malley's latest book, *What Happened at Vatican II?* (Oxford, 2008), to realize that very much indeed has changed. And while it is true that no new dogmas were officially proclaimed, several dogmatic teachings underwent important development which opened avenues for ecumenism, interreligious dialogue and religious freedom.

In another O'Malley book published in 2004, a significant change at Vatican II is described primarily by the language with which its texts were written.<sup>24</sup> O'Malley writes that before Vatican II, conciliar documents typically adopted a "prophetic" style and language, often denouncing teachings and practices that they opposed. The documents of Vatican II are written in a more open and less combative style, and more in the style similar to a homily or a commentary. Although O'Malley doesn't use the same words as Ong, both point to similar major changes.

Being attentive listeners, you may be asking yourself at this point, "Just where is Heft going with all this?" That's a fair question. My answer is that I am not quite sure. I do, however, believe that somehow the emphasis on Mary as a teacher of wisdom as someone who learned from her mother and passed on what she learned, and more, to her son Jesus, the entrance of women into higher education, and the profoundly different tone that the bishops (yes, all males, and yes still writing in Latin) used in writing the documents of Vatican II—that all these developments are somehow related. But I am not sure just quite how. Perhaps some of you can see more clearly than I just how they are related.

### **Suggestions for Thinking about Mary Today**

Let me try to make some connections by way of a conclusion. What are some of the things that, given these reflections, we might profitably think about concerning Mary today? First, it seems counter-intuitive that since Vatican II Mary would play an ever greater role in ecumenical and interreligious dialogues. I say counter-intuitive because in the 1950s Mary was a point of deep division, especially between Protestants and Catholics. But the bishops of Vatican II, instead of devoting a separate document to Mary, decided by a narrow vote to include what they wanted to say about Mary in the document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. In essence, this decision placed Mary not above nor apart from, but right in the middle of the people of God where she became the

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<sup>24</sup> John O'Malley, S.J., *Four Cultures of the West* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

“faithful disciple,” to use the title of a book by my fellow Marianist Fr. Bertrand Buby,<sup>25</sup> or, to say it another way, she became *Truly Our Sister*, to use the title of another book by Professor Elizabeth Johnson.

Since the Council, there have been fruitful dialogues about Mary between Lutherans and Roman Catholics and Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Recently deceased Chiara Lubich founder the Focolare Movement, officially named the Work of Mary, made inter-faith relations one of the Movement’s most important initiatives. The response by members of other religions has been extraordinary. Instead of focusing on doctrines, Lubich focused on the love of Jesus who comes to us through Mary.<sup>26</sup> Besides this interfaith outreach, the Movement also, again in the name and under the banner of Mary, has established throughout the world little cities with training programs and economic cooperatives which help the poor but still make a profit.

As I mentioned earlier, Blessed Chaminade, over a hundred years before Chiara Lubich’s Work of Mary, recognized the need for lay leadership and dedicated himself to the formation of lay communities of faith for the transformation of the structures of the world that diminish human flourishing—and all of this in the rich context of the French School of Spirituality, Christo-centric, free of prescribed methods of personal prayer, and open to do whatever the Lord Jesus asks. It seems to me that the Focolare Movement and the Marianist Family have much in common, and would benefit by closer ties.

Mary seems to be a bridge between Christianity and Islam. The Qur’an mentions Mary by name 34 times, presenting her as a model affirming her virginal conception of Jesus. One Sunni scholar, Yusuf Ali, says of Mary, “Chastity was her special virtue: with a son of virgin birth, she and Jesus became a miracle in all nations.”<sup>27</sup> Still another striking example: only 7% of the population of the war torn island of Sri Lanka (total population nearly 20 million) is Christian, but during the feast of the Assumption this past summer over 500,000 people, including tens of thousands of Buddhists and Hindus— who fought against each other in the civil war—together thronged the roads to Madhu to honor the Mother of Madhu, represented by a 500 year old statue of Mary that miraculously escaped any damage during the previous quarter century of war. With

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<sup>25</sup> Bertrand Buby, S.M., *Mary: The Faithful Disciple* (Paulist Press, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> In a text entitled “La Magna Charta,” Lubich comments on Mary’s visit to Elizabeth: “Our Lady didn’t go to Elizabeth in order to sing the Magnificat, but in order to help her. So with us, we should not go to our neighbors in order to reveal to them the Christian treasure that we carry in our hearts, but in order to carry with them their sufferings and burdens and share their joys and responsibilities. Then if we do this in a complete (perfect) way, it will not be long until we can open our hearts to our brother in order to share with him our richness and to love together the One who pushes us to see each other and treat each other as brothers” (translated by Amerlia J. Uelmen, unpublished paper, “Mary, Model of Dialogue in the Thought, Work and Writings of Chiara Lubich,” p. 17).

<sup>27</sup> Michael L. Fitzgerald, “Mary as a Sign for the World According to Islam,” in *Mary in Time and in Eternity*, eds. William McLoughlin and Jill Pinnock (Gracewing; Herefordshire, 2007), p. 298. British theologian Tina Beattie writes about her experience as a volunteer in helping Lourdes pilgrims take baths in its healing waters. She was very impressed with another volunteer and asked what parish she was from. The woman replied that she didn’t have a parish and was a Muslim. Years before she visited Lourdes with her ill son. She mentioned that Muslims honor Mary and that she had no problem taking part in the ritual of the baths (Beattie, “An Immense Material Presence,” *The Tablet*, Sept. 13, 2008, p. 9).

thousands of these pilgrims singing *Ave Maria*, one Tamil woman, who lost two of her sons in the war and has a third still missing, said, “The Virgin has brought us together. She has given us hope. It is now up to us to live together.”<sup>28</sup> Who could have guessed a century ago that the Mother of Jesus would be such a magnet and force in ecumenical and interreligious dialogues. Is not this remarkable development a deserving focus for more extensive research and theological reflection?

Second, returning to the discussion of the historical Mary, I think that careful historical studies keep our feet on the ground. That is to say, while theory has its place, we need to pay special attention to what we can learn about Mary from history. Hans Kolvenbach, the recently retired superior general of the Jesuits, remarked that for real solidarity to take place, more than concepts are needed. Solidarity with others also requires connections—concepts and connections. In the past decades, we have benefitted greatly by inter-testamental studies that have given us a much better grasp of times and places where Jesus and Mary lived. These studies help us to connect with them in their human realities. Historical studies have helped us refrain from idealizing them, robbing them of their Jewishness and their humanness.

Recently, two women writers have drawn attention to the consequences of losing a sense of the particulars within human experience. Mary Gordon, a Catholic novelist, believes that abstraction is one of the twin dangers of the religious life (the other is dualism). By abstraction, she means the “error that results from refusing to admit that one has a body and is an inhabitant of the physical world.”<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, the Episcopal priest, Barbara Taylor Brown, rejects “any religious definition of goodness that leaves the body behind.” She states that God knew that the Word had to become flesh, since “the disciples were going to need something warm and near that they could bump into on a regular basis, something so real that they would not be able to intellectualize it and so essentially untidy that there was no way they could ever gain control over it.”<sup>30</sup> No one knew the body of Jesus better than his Mother, who nursed him, changed his diapers, and held his beaten body at the foot of the cross. A historically and biblically rich understanding of Mary inoculates us against the danger of abstraction.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, noting that Jesus especially welcomed children, asks how those who do theology can afford to work in spaces where women are absent and children hidden away.<sup>31</sup> Thanks to the women’s movement,

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<sup>28</sup> Amantha Perera, “How the Mother of Madhu Survived a Civil War,” in *Time*, August 31, 2009, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Gordon, “Getting Here from There: A Writer’s Reflections on a Religious Past,” in *Spiritual Quests: The Art and Craft of Religious Writing*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Taylor Brown, “Our Bodies, Our Faith,” in *Christian Century* (January 27, 2009), p. 24. She cites with approval a hymn by Brian Wren, one stanza of which reads: “Good is the flesh that the Word has become, good is the birthing, the milk in the breast, good is the feeling, caressing and rest, good is the body for knowing the world, Good is the flesh that the Word has become.”

<sup>31</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgment* (Eerdmans, 2000), p. 63. Williams is actually commenting on the idea originally broached by Donald Nicholl, layman, theologian and father of a family.

laywomen and men are now studying theology together, often with their children in tow. The theology that is being written in such environments is different than what was written in male celibate communities. This is not to say that such theology is, for that reason alone, going to be better theology—I think it is too soon to tell since we have been working in this new human environment now for only a few decades, and then only in a few western universities.

Perhaps I should make explicit here something that may until now has been only implicit. When we think about Mary and the intellectual life, we can look to the experience and wisdom of men as well as women. I am not suggesting that a greater awareness of Mary’s importance in academic work can be found in some special “feminine” approach to intellectual work. Remember that the idea the idea of Wisdom as feminine has be used as an image of Jesus as well as of Mary, and reminds us that God is beyond gender.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, real changes are afoot. Theologians today employ many methods for doing theology and take up many themes in fresh ways—I am thinking here not only of theologies of sexuality and simplicity, but also environmental and liberationist themes. Many of these works take up issues of how to live as committed Christians in a pluralistic and consumerist society, and in a world where the gap between the rich and the poor ever widens.<sup>33</sup> How to live is certainly the preoccupation of the Wisdom literature we discussed earlier. A careful study of the times and places of the lives of Jesus and Mary makes the Gospel commitment to the poor and to women and children clearer, especially since throughout history they are the ones who bear the worst brunt of war and violence.

### Conclusion

As I now conclude these reflections, I am quite aware of how disconnected they may seem to be. My intention has been modest, however. If I have been able to raise issues that emphasize the importance of studying Mary and her continuing influence in the world, I am then satisfied. The themes I’ve touched upon—the historical Mary, the wisdom literature, the role of women in education of children and more recently their impact on the shape of higher education, need further reflection. There is good reason to think that continued study of Mary has a place in the intellectual life of a university, certainly this university, especially when the intellectual life is understood as rooted in history, in traditions of wisdom, and in a commitment to the poor and the lowly. Indeed, a peasant teenage woman who spent most of her life in a backwater of the Roman Empire has much to teach us about the intellectual life.

The University is centered on the intellectual life, which for Christians means wisdom—neither only credentialing nor even just scholarship. We need to look to the figures who embody this for us and ask ourselves what a university might look like that

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<sup>32</sup> Professor Una Cadegan brought this point to my attention.

<sup>33</sup> See Sandra Mize, *Joining the Revolution in Theology: The College Theology Society, 1954-2004* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

too seriously the vision of Wisdom personified in the text (7:7-11) from the Book of Wisdom, which was the first reading in last Sunday's Eucharistic liturgy:

I prayer and prudence was given me;  
I pleaded, and the spirit of wisdom came to me.  
I preferred her to scepter and throne,  
and deemed riches nothing in comparison with her,  
nor did I liken any priceless gem to her;  
because all gold, in view of her, is a little sand,  
and before her, silver is to be accounted mire.  
Beyond health and comeliness I loved her,  
And I chose to have her rather than the light,  
Because the splendor of her never yields to sleep.  
Yet all good things together came to me in her company,  
And countless riches at her hands.

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