

What Marianist Spirituality Is for Me and How It Works

by Peter Daino, SM

1. Introduction

An important turn in my spiritual life began when I read Father Chaminade's reflections on Jesus, son of Mary. For me, Chaminade's most important insight is that Jesus resembles Mary—that he was formed by her. This leads one to ask: “**How** is Jesus like Mary?” There have been many answers to this question. Some say it is his gentleness. Some say it is his obedience. Some say it is his Jewishness. And, of course, Mary and Jesus do share these family traits.

But, for me, when I ask the question—“How is Jesus like Mary?”—I think of the little passage in St. Mark where Jesus, on his journey to Jerusalem, sets his face like flint. I could imagine that look: his strong jaw pushes out in the direction of his destination, while all the other facial muscles concentrate energy in his determined eyes. This look of defiance, this “flint-facedness” is a family trait that I believe Mary and Jesus **shared**. My reason for this conjecture is developed in the last section of this paper in a meditation on Matthew's story on the slaughter of the innocents.

If the physical characteristic is flint-facedness, the interior characteristic is what I would call “mother courage.” Jesus describes best this characteristic of his when he compares himself to the mother hen who gathers her young under protective wings. Whether hen or lion, female animals display a startling ferocity when their young are threatened. It is this feminine strength, this parental perseverance that I term mother courage. Jesus is truly called mother in this sense. He is the Son of God who became the Son of Mary (God with Marian features) for the salvation of the world.

I can claim, however, that mother courage comes out of my **experience** of Africa, my experience of ministering to African women.

In this paper I will present three images of Mary: Holy Bard, *Stabat Mater*, and Mother of Defiance. For the last one I will also share with the reader something of how images arise in my spiritual life and how they serve it.

2. What Marianist Spirituality Is for Me

a. Mary, The Holy Bard

In testing out various methods of prayer, I have tried meditating without images. One releases all words and all images from the mind, and enters “the void.” Breathing slowly and deeply, one is alone with the “nothingness.” It can lead, say many great spiritual writers, to a profound encounter with God. But that has not been my experience.

My spiritual life is awash in imagery. It is, perhaps, the complete opposite of today's antiseptic, empty church interiors where the angel paintings on the ceiling have been whited out and all the statues of saints relegated to the church basement.

For me, Marianist Spirituality is richly imagistic. My basis for saying this is my understanding of how Mary's experience of God was mediated.

What in the Gospels mediates Mary's experience of God?

- a poem recited by an angel
- a song inspired by a visit to her hill country cousin
- dreams recounted by her husband and by the magi
- temple liturgy
- listening to her child tell a story
- a wedding miracle
- words from the cross

Mary's experience of God was mediated by poems, dreams, stories . . . by The Word, by The Image. And that, too, is how I experience God.

For me, God is a storyteller, a painter, an image-maker whose presence is mediated through his/her art.

What do I mean when I talk about God's art?

Of course, there are pretty things in the world. And these pretty things mediate God's presence to me. But pretty things don't challenge me, or change me.

The most powerful mediation of God's presence, for me, is through God's Masterpiece—Jesus Christ.

The Word of God is the Art of God . . . so well executed that the Art and the Artist are One.

Jesus Christ was born of Mary. She participated in the artistry of God.

As Divine Poet, the Father speaks the Word. And Mary, the Holy Bard, teaches the Word to speak.

At the Incarnation, Mary not only gave Jesus Christ a body, a body that could feel pain; but she also taught him, as other mothers throughout history have taught their children, how to process that pain: to cry salty tears, to feel emotion, to passionately oppose evil with a face set like flint, to deliver a message of defiance to the oppressor who inflicts pain. This is why I say that Mary taught the Word to speak.

Mary is the one who translated the Eternal Word into human language. She gave the Eternal Word human adjectives, human nouns, and human verbs. Mary taught the Word to speak.

And the Word, Mary taught to speak, is not pretty. Rather, it challenges. It cuts like a two-edged sword. It brings down the mighty from their thrones: justice happens. It establishes a new order.

Mary taught the Word to speak. She is Servant of the Word. If the Word is Divine Poetry, Mary is the Holy Bard.

Oh, passionate one,
Reformer, fighter,

Mentor of Logos,
Holy Bard,
Make God's Word
Speak to me, and
Speak through me
To undo the old;
And to create
This tired earth
anew.

b. Mary As Stabat Mater

There is a message for us in the person of Mary at the foot of the cross. She bravely stands there as Jesus hangs in torment. She stands beside Jesus as others have stood beside those unjustly persecuted. She is visible in others who have taken a stand for the oppressed, others such as Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Steve Biko, Jerzy Popieluszko. Like Mary these witnesses of conscience have stood beside the powerless: there, with her, they have stood against systems of injustice, against "the principalities and powers."

At the foot of the cross Mary was standing up against all that brings down the poor. She stood on Calvary's hill as a witness, a lone witness. She stood in protest. That is how she shared in the exaltation of her son in his hour. She did not cower, she did not run, she did not excuse, she did not compromise with injustice. She **pointed** to it as she stood at the foot of the cross.

The fortitude of Mary, standing **beside** the outcast and standing **against** the "mighty on their thrones," is a humble courage. It risks everything for love. The way she stood beside her condemned son is the way hundreds and thousands of people today stand beside the oppressed. She stood. They, perhaps, march. But the purpose is the same: not to run, not to cower, not to excuse, rather to point to injustice. To point by standing.

And what did her standing there do for Jesus?

I believe that Jesus had a final temptation as he was dying. The Father of Lies whispered in the ear of the crucified: "Humanity is irredeemable." In his agony and abandonment, Jesus was subject to the most fundamental temptation: despair. Why did he not give up? What was the consciousness of Jesus at that grim moment?

His mind was focused on something beyond his pain. According to Biblical scholars, the crucifixion portrayal of St. John reveals the consciousness of Jesus as triumphant. He had anticipated being "raised up" on the cross, and he considered it the signal of his victory. In spite of the suffering, and over against the temptation to despair, Jesus focused his attention upon the fruit of his passion. In Mary, Jesus was gazing upon redeemed humanity.

Mary is the dawn of the Parousia. The crucified one saw in her the treasure for which he was paying the price. He saw millions of the dispossessed (*Stabat Pauper*) standing in possession. He saw millions of refugees (*Stabat Exsul*) standing at home. He saw millions of oppressed people standing liberated. He saw you and me, as we will be someday, standing in the glory of our risen bodies.

In Mary, Jesus saw the new humanity (the Immaculate Conception) for which he was dying. He could gaze through her, as through a window, to see the working of the Father, the Potter at the wheel, molding the future human race. She was then, as always, the woman of promise: the mirror of redemption.

3. How It Works

In the two images above, Mary is shown as the mentor of Jesus. As Holy Bard, Mary gives human expression to the Eternal *Logos*. With human syntax and human grammar, she teaches the Word to speak. As *Stabat Mater*, Mary keeps vigil at the foot of the cross. She stands there—the Immaculate Conception—sign to Jesus of what all humanity would become because of his sacrifice. Thus, Mary helps Jesus to overcome the last temptation—that he suffers for nothing.

These images come from my journal writing. Much of my spirituality comes from my journal writing. In this section, I would like to demonstrate how journal writing can implement Marianist Spirituality.

A great deal of my journal writing is taken up with the topic of suffering. On pages of notebooks, enough to fill two small boxes, this topic is reviewed, re-examined, and reformulated.

Recently I was looking through my journals for 1986-1989, and I discovered an interesting development. The question I asked of suffering changed. In the beginning I was asking “Why?” But over time I stopped asking that question. Another question slowly surfaced: “How?”

The early journals are filled with splotches of ink when in anger I pressed down too hard on the pen; and every other page has a messy erasure, the remains of something too emotional. The latter journals have fewer splotches and fewer erasures. Something has happened to the grief. My relation to it was different. There was less seething and sentiment. There was more decision. There was more resolution. And there were plans. I filled many pages of notebooks with ideas about how my community and I could address the causes of suffering.

Below is an entry from my journal written during a period of my life when I was moving from the “Why” of suffering to the “How.” I think it illustrates the function of journal writing in Marianist spirituality.

a. Mentor of the Defiant

1) The Decision

“I almost lost my mind. Three days made me fear the worst. And look at the muddy state of your prayer shawl.” Mary is walking slowly now, wanting to take in all Jesus is telling her.

“I got tangled up, all right.” The twelve-year-old is smiling, obviously happy to be with his family again.

“What was your first reaction?” Mary asks.

“When I found the body, I felt ill. But the response of the soldier surprised me.”

“Why? What did he do?”

“It wasn’t so much what he did. It was the matter of fact tone in his voice.” Jesus looks ahead at the dirt road that wriggles down the hill of Jerusalem.

“What did he say?” Mary asks.

“He casually told me to remove the shawl and to surrender the body. He said that this was a routine matter—I should not get involved. The government would bury the corpse.”

“Did you believe him?” Mary raises her eyebrows.

“Why not?”

Mary stops walking and pulls Jesus to the side of the road. “What do you think the child died from?”

“Hunger,” says Jesus.

“And what is the cause of the hunger?” Mary asks.

“The Occupation?” Jesus is unsure.

Jaw tightened and extended, Mary says, “We have been exporting food to Rome for decades now while our people languish.”

“The soldier admitted the child’s death was truly sad. He told me, ‘Things like that happen.’”

Mary doesn’t say a word. Pilgrims pass by, hurrying down the hill. Jesus continues, “The soldier told me, ‘If you want to survive in this world, keep quiet and look the other way.’”

“Then they detained you for three days?”

“Yes,” Jesus said, “to educate me.”

“About what?” Mary’s nostrils flare.

“Occupation philosophy.” Jesus answers.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a kind of stoicism. One doesn’t make so much fuss about a discovered corpse. I ought to have reported it and left the rest to the authorities.” The twelve-year-old boy looks up at his mother with a confused expression on his face.

“What in your behavior,” she asks, “offended him?”

“I should not have cried out,” Jesus says. “They didn’t like all the noise.”

“What else?” Mary asks.

“Holding the dead child was bad enough,” Jesus answers. “But, wanting to bury the child, wrapping the corpse in my shawl, was completely out of order and none of my business.”

“And what is the proper response to the death of the innocent according to the occupation philosophy?” Mary demands.

His jaw sagging, Jesus responds, “Indifference.”

Mary has never told Jesus about the events surrounding their exile in Egypt. He only knows that the family lived there for a couple of years before returning to establish a home in Nazareth.

She was afraid to tell him. She wanted to protect him. Not that she felt easy about hiding things from him. In fact, she struggled for ten years over whether to tell him.

But losing Jesus for three days occasions a new round of debate on the issue. She questions herself: “How will the news of the massacre of the innocents affect Jesus? Will it make him morbid, angry? Will he become pessimistic about humankind? What impact will this news have on the formation of his character?”

“Let’s keep walking,” Mary says. Mother and son descend the hill. Neither speaks.

Mary continues to ponder: “Things like that happen?” “Routine matter?” “Keep quiet?” Mary hates these statements of the soldier. She recognizes the Silencer.

“Occupation philosophy?” “Look the other way?” “None of your business?” “Yes,” she says to herself, “This is all very familiar.”

Mary decides. “I’m going to tell him. I must tell him . . . so that he learns to spot the Silencer.”

She speaks to Jesus. “We are not going back to Nazareth today. We are taking a side trip.”

“And what about father?” Jesus asks.

“He has business to finish at home. He will go ahead of us to Nazareth. We will see him there the day after tomorrow. I am sending a message to the front of the caravan where he is walking with friends—probably talking with them about your ordeal. Now, let’s take our leave.”

They leave the caravan and stride off in an eastward direction. With her son at her side, Mary walks quickly and with determination toward Bethlehem. The look of her face is defiant, her jaw set like flint.

2) The Disclosure

Mary tells Jesus about the dust cloud, and dropping the water skins, she tells him about running home. And she tries to tell him about what she saw from the rooftop.

“Your playmates, I mean, the children under two years old, I mean, well . . . my son I don’t know how to tell you this.”

Jesus waits and listens.

Mary gets angry. “No one should have to say what I am saying, and no one should have to listen to it.”

Jesus is quiet.

“I really don’t know how to tell you about this, but you are the sole survivor of a massacre that took place ten years ago in Bethlehem.” Mary looks up at the sky. She shakes her head.

“What?” Jesus is incredulous.

“I did not think human beings were capable of such brutality. But I saw it myself. Roman soldiers came and slaughtered forty infants your age, and you are the only one who escaped.” Her voice is cracking. She speaks about the massacre as if it happened an hour ago. The event is close to her, consuming her. There is wetness and rage in her eyes.

“I would like to know more.” The twelve-year-old has a vacant expression on his face.

“Would you like to go to their grave?” Mary asks.

“Yes.”

“And after that,” says Mary, “I’d like you to visit one of the mothers who lost a child that day.”

“Fine.”

After a day’s journey, they reach Bethlehem, and Mary takes Jesus right on to the children’s grave. There is a stand of trees there—young trees about ten years old. The setting sun is at eye level and it is casting long shadows around the spot where the survivors stand.

Mary reaches for Jesus. She holds his hand firmly. “A child’s death is something to get angry about, my son. You should not keep quiet. It is not routine, and I do not want you ever to look the other way.”

Jesus looks with admiration at this woman.

“None of your business?” Mary squeezes his hand tightly. “Your Father’s business is justice. You must be about your Father’s business.”

She releases his hand. All is still. After a few minutes Mary proceeds with a strange litany.

“Jacob,” she shouts and adds, “Never again!”

“Aaron,” she shouts and adds, “Never again!”

“Tobias,” she shouts and adds, “Never again!”

Mary announces each child’s name from memory and adds, “Never again!” She then repeats verses from the book of Lamentation, words that seem as familiar to her as water and salt.

Worn out from weeping are my eyes,
within me all is in ferment;
My gall is poured out on the ground
because of the downfall of the
daughter of my people,
As a child and infant faint away
in the open spaces of the town.

They ask their mothers,
“Where is the cereal?” — in vain,
As they faint away like the wounded
in the streets of the city,
And breathe their last
in their mothers’ arms.

(Lam 2: 11-12)

Jesus’ shoulders are in spasm, his sobs choke him. He can’t swallow. He is gasping for air through his mouth; Mary stands beside him and holds him up. She teaches God to grieve.

“Try breathing this way. Yes, that’s better. Now, pray with me: ‘Cry out to the Lord . . .’”

Jesus continues the verse:

Moan, O daughter Zion!
Let your tears flow like a torrent
day and night;
Let there be no respite for you,
no repose for your eyes.

Rise up, shrill in the night,

at the beginning of every watch;
Pour out your heart like water
in the presence of the Lord;
Lift up your hands to God
for the lives of the little ones.

(Lam 2: 18-19)

After praying in this fashion, mother and son remain quiet for another hour. Then Jesus goes off to speak with one of the bereaved mothers. Mary, staying behind at the gravesite that night, keeps vigil.

3) A Grief Described

Soft light from the Menorah candles makes shadows around the empty dishes. The room is redolent with the scent of bread, onions, and olive oil.

“. . . and the dust cloud disappeared long before the wailing did.” Rachel concludes her description of the massacre.

“Tell me,” Jesus says, “about your life since then.”

“It has been slow going. I have sometimes felt mute, and at other times I have lamented and complained to God. But I am happiest when I work. I suppose you could call my different states of mind, phases of grief. But it isn't quite as clean as that. It is hard to describe.”

“Please, try.” Jesus insists.

“When it first happened I was speechless. I did not want to be around people. I wished to feel it, but I couldn't. I wished the hurt would come so I might heal. But nothing happened. I was numb.”

“And then?”

“I began to pray. And my feelings slowly returned. I shouted sometimes. Often I wept. That is how I got the name, Rachel.”

“I see.”

“Yes,” continues Rachel, “the tears came after the numbness. And, for me, it was like a rain after a long drought. The most important thing is that I was able to talk to God again. Though, admittedly, all I did was complain.”

“How long did this go on?”

“Until,” says Rachel, “I was able to light the Menorah candles again.”

“Oh?”

“Right after the massacre, I extinguished the candles at your mother’s house. And for many years I could not light the candles.”

Rachel pauses.

“But after months of lamentation, and after all my complaining to God, for some reason, I just began lighting the candles again. I can’t explain why, or precisely when I started feeling different.”

“What is this different feeling?” Jesus asks.

“Courage.” Rachel looks intently at Jesus.

“I want to defy the darkness—the dark, dark, silent force of resignation. And so, I light candles and tell the story.”

“What do others do to defy that silent force?”

“Your mother’s form of defiance is what I call the ‘intrepid return.’”

“What do you mean?” Jesus says.

“She came out of Egypt. Like Moses she crosses the Red Sea. In this act of defiance, she marches against Caesar and Herod and all the ‘mighty in their thrones.’ She returns with the hunted king.”

Jesus ponders.

“Visiting the graves of the innocents,” Rachel continues, “is another example of your mother’s defiance. She returns to the site of the massacre. And she remembers.”

Jesus looks out the window, toward the gravesite where Mary is keeping vigil, and recalls his mother’s necrology of “never again.”

“There are deaths,” Rachel says, “which scandalize us. We don’t want to remember these deaths. We don’t want to hear the names of the people who have died these deaths. There are deaths that are so stupid, and so pointless . . . and so, so useless that . . .” Rachel vigorously wipes her eyes with both fists. She bites on her lower lip and knits her brow. She waits until her voice returns.

Looking out the window into the moonless night, she continues, “Such deaths make me wonder whether my life, or your life, or any life is just a chance event. Such deaths make me wonder whether my existence is a random, meaningless confluence of vapors. Is it that we live in

a universe that is basically a stupid, stupid place? That is the question my grief poses, and that is why grief is so much like fear.”

Jesus listens, deep in thought.

“So you see, dear child, if we keep silent, if we never speak the names of the innocent dead, we are no longer just wondering whether the universe is a stupid place. If we keep silent about such inane deaths, then we are admitting that, indeed, the universe is a stupid place and nothing better can be expected of it.”

Rachel stands up and walks toward the burning candles. “When we keep silent about the victims of atrocity, such as our Bethlehem infants, then we turn these victims of atrocity into martyrs for the devil . . . martyrs for despair and disbelief.”

Rachel gently places her hand at the base of the Menorah. “Your mother gave this to me. She is the one who helped me to understand all that I am telling you tonight. She has been my guide through the phases of grief. She is the mentor of the defiant.”

The boy Jesus looks up at Rachel and notices how beautiful she is in the soft glow of the candle flame. He puts his wet palms together and says, “Tell me, shall I, too, pass through these phases of grief?”

“You have already started. Mary and you recited lamentation prayers together, and you cried. Thank God for those tears. They came to you swiftly.”

“And what about defiance?” asks Jesus.

“You will learn first what defiance is not. You will learn that defiance is not obstinacy or hatred or violence.”

“What is it then?” Jesus asks.

“It is taking a stand—a stand for the Kingdom of Heaven—all the while loving those you oppose.”

“And what will this cost me?”

“Everything,” says Rachel.

No one spoke for several minutes. Then Jesus sighs and nods his head slowly as if saying “yes” to some unspoken request. He gets up to go.

Rachel moves over to him and grasps the boy’s left shoulder with her muscular hand.

“I have waited many years to meet you, the sole survivor. Our talk has convinced me that you are going to redress the heinous injustice to children perpetrated here.”

Jesus doesn't answer.

"Remember, my dear child, all your playmates who died in this village live on in you. Make them martyrs for God. In this world gone wrong put things right."

She pauses and takes a deep breath.

"I do not understand why this world is so full of grief. But that is not the most helpful question one can ask about grief. No, no. The most helpful question one can ask about grief, Mary asked me many years ago. And now I ask you: 'Whom will your grief serve?'"

Jesus stares at Rachel for a long while. And then he walks over to the burning candles, lifts the Menorah from the table and places his still dirty prayer shawl, as an altar cloth, beneath it. "Thank you, and farewell," he says, walking out the door. "I must be about my Father's business."

b. A Marian Method of Prayer

St. Luke tells us that Mary pondered various events in "her heart." The event occurs. Then she ponders.

But it does not end there! We are told in the Gospels that Mary also acted. She took action at Bethlehem, at Nazareth, at Cana, at Calvary. Mary experiences, she ponders, and then she acts.

This sequence of experience, reflection, and action might be called the Marian method of prayer. It is a simple method and commonly practiced. Many painful experiences, for example, are "processed" in this way.

My meditation on Mary as Mentor of the Defiant grew out of one such painful experience. I recount the experience below to give the reader an idea of what prompted my unusual interpretation of the Massacre of the Innocents.

c. Silence Is Not Always Golden

"I can take care of that for you, if you like?" The nurse seems so serene.

"Can you give us a minute?" I say.

I look down at the body of the child cradled in my arms. He is smaller than most boys a year old. He probably never had a full stomach in his short life that ended fifty minutes ago.

"What about a funeral," asks his mother.

Looking around the emergency room of Kenyatta, the national hospital of Kenya, I think about this young woman and her son, strangers to me until today.

They appeared at our woman's center, Maria House, about ten in the morning. Our social worker saw that the boy was seriously dehydrated and breathing irregularly.

But the social worker could not get the little child to keep down any fluids. Suddenly the little boy stopped breathing. I attempted mouth-to-mouth resuscitation but to no avail. The child only vomited into my mouth some breast milk from his stomach, turned his head away, and died.

The trip to the hospital was too quiet. The mother did not wail, something I had come to expect from African mothers who lose a child. The silence finally made me look over to the young mother.

Her eyes were cast down, but she wasn't looking at the sickly three-year-old girl whom she held in her limp arms. I looked hard to catch the sight of tears but there were none. The woman's face was flaccid, her expression blank. It seemed that the capillaries of her cheeks and jaw should be streaming with Novocain, so slack was every facial muscle.

It was frightening. She did not seem to be there. Her mind and feelings were somewhere else. Her eyes said, "I am absent." I was driving to the hospital with a dead boy and a muted mother. . . .

"What would you like to do with the body?" The nurse has returned to the emergency room bench where we are sitting.

"Sorry, we haven't yet decided," I say.

"I'll give you time." The nurse nods to the mother and hurries off.

"What about a funeral?" the mother asks again.

"You are barely surviving yourself. And look at your little daughter." I look down at the linoleum floor and think:

This girl is very sick. Both she and her mother are dressed in rags and haven't eaten for days. They have no place to sleep but the streets. What they need is medical attention, food, and some kind of accommodation. I can telephone the Missionary Sisters of Charity who run a shelter for the indigent and everything will be taken care of. Let me do this for her. But I'm not bringing her back here to hassle with the mortuary and all that red tape. It would also take days to get a cemetery plot and a casket. Forget it. I know what I'm doing. There is nothing else that can be done for this boy.

I turn to the mother, "Let the hospital take care of it." I look away and add, "I don't think a funeral will be necessary."

The mother stiffly nods her head in agreement and says, "It doesn't matter."

"There we are," says the nurse as I hand her the boy's body. "We'll take care of this right away. It happens all the time. No sense in making a fuss."

And we didn't.

I look over at the mother and she looks at me. Neither of us say a word. But we know what we have done.

Silence is not always golden, sometimes it is yellow.

4. Concluding Remarks

This incident took place in early 1989. It took me a year of reflection and writing to “process” it. So I have only taken the first two steps in the Marian Method of Prayer: experience and pondering.

But there is something that I must still do for that boy who died. Though I could not prevent his death, I can prevent him from becoming a martyr for the devil. I can snatch his memory from the grip of the Silencer—that force of evil which would have us forget, turn the other way, consider it another’s business. Mary always and everywhere opposes the Silencer and his philosophy of resignation. She, the *Mater Dolorosa*, recommends funeral and lamentation. She insists that Christians name the victims of atrocity and damn the unjust conditions that slaughter the innocents.

I have experienced. I have pondered. I must now take some action to “redress” the death of that child. That would represent the third step in the Marian Method of Prayer.