

“Mother Mary, the Juiciest Tomato of All”
Some Reflections for the School Administrators’ Conference
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Prelude Remarks

Perhaps a few of us may remember Sister Corita Kent who, in one of her dayglo serigraphs, claimed that Mary was the “juiciest tomato of all.” Not everybody shares her opinion. Some have said that Mary was lost after Vatican Council II, which is history now for many of you, rather than lived experience. For most Protestants, she was lost from about 50 or 100 years after the Reformation. She even got lost among some Catholics before Vatican II, during the Jansenist or quietist period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These purists and rigorists of an Augustinian bent found devotion to her too easy, too filled with mercy rather than justice, too apt to lead people to see in her an icon of what is lovely and beautiful in creation. But ordinary people, as well as many saints, Blessed Chaminade among them, opposed this Jansenist influence.

On the other hand, some have asserted that Mary never got lost, even after Vatican II. For sure, if she was lost, she has made a remarkable comeback. A few years ago, the magazine *Life* claimed she was the most pictured woman in the world. Many Protestants have recently appropriated Mary and have written spiritual books about her. And reluctant Catholics, such as novelist Mary Gordon, have spoken of her as “Mother and Queen, [in whom] we see, enfleshed in a human form that touches our most ancient longings, the promise of salvation, of deliverance, through flesh, from the burdens of flesh.”¹

All these comments are but a prelude to asking you a question, “What is your take on Mary?” As administrators, you lead a school in the Marianist tradition, and Mary is central to that tradition. So, how do you deal with her in your own life (What is your take on Mary?) and as the chief high priest or priestess of the school culture for which you have a major responsibility?

I would like you to spend a few minutes reflecting on the question and then jot down some of that reflection. After this period of individual reflection, I will ask you to get together with two other people near you and share something from your response. Following this, I will invite people to share what came from your reflection and conversation.

Reflections

Even though I participated in May processions in elementary school and was part of high school living rosaries, I never felt drawn to Mary. For some reason I had an aversion to her. I don’t think I would have ever made a special effort to stop at the Mary statue of then Purcell High School to pray. Several years ago on a very hot, humid night around midnight, I looked out from the air-conditioned dining room of the Marianist community

¹ Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), p. 306).

at Moeller High School and saw a young man kneeling in front of the Mary statue in the courtyard. I was moved by his devotion and example, but I do not think I would have ever done that as a high school student.

All this may sound surprising because right out of high school I went to the novitiate of the Society of Mary. I did not do it because the congregation was dedicated to Mary. I did it because I wanted to be a teacher; I wanted to serve the Church; I admired most of the Marianists I had for teachers; and I felt drawn to what I experienced among them, something I would later call Family Spirit.

Obviously, feeling this aversion and being a member of a society dedicated to Mary caused me some cognitive dissonance, as psychologists say. I am mentioning all this because some of you may have felt or continue to feel a certain uncertainty and distance from Mary. And perhaps that causes you some cognitive dissonance in your role as a guardian of the mission.

When I began a serious study of the scriptures in the seminary—which for Marianists is also an academic program in theology—I had a kind of intellectual conversion. I realized how much she is part of the scriptures. Next to Jesus, no character in the New Testament has as much attention paid to her or him as Mary. It is impossible to tell the story of Jesus without reference to her. Also, from a theological and psychological point of view, Mary is central to the story of her son. When I became a priest, I had to preach about Mary on her feast days, and this made me ask the following question: “How do I make sense of this woman to myself so I can make sense of her to some of the people who are in the assembly?” I mention this because often when we have to speak or write about some topic that seems foreign to us, really wrestling with it helps us to allow what at first seemed strange to become more a friend to us. For some of you, that may also make sense in terms of your responsibility in the school you lead.

I don’t think I have ever gotten to the point of feeling deeply emotionally attached to Mary. Since I live a lot of my life in my head, maybe intellectual conversion is enough. However, I look forward someday to visiting Lourdes because my novice master told me that would make a difference to my affective life.

I am moved by how so many people everywhere find relationship to her a genuinely affective, holy experience and how easy it is for people, including myself, to revert to Marian prayers in troubled moments and at odd moments. Alice McDermott, a prize-winning novelist, records such a recollection at a strange moment in her recent novel, *After This*. Michael, the nonchurch-going college-age son of a Catholic mother in the 1970s, was lying side-by-side naked with his girlfriend after they had tangled like nymphs and satyrs and the words came to him:

“Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy. Our life, our sweetness and our hope. . . .”

He thought how even after you’d disentangled yourself from everything else, the words stayed with you:

“To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve, to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us, and after this our exile show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb. . . .”

Words you could dismiss as a joke as readily as you could claim them as the precise definition of everything you wanted.²

Is it not the case that sometimes, as with Michael, at the strangest times, prayers addressed to Mary that we learned long ago or images of her emerge in our minds and hearts?

I also find that Mary sparks the imagination and evokes a sense of beauty. Moreover, I believe that some of the best things I recognize about myself have been nurtured by belonging to a community dedicated to a woman, Mary.

Because I asked you about your take on Mary, I thought I should be honest about my own. And I thought this truncated spiritual travelogue might be a small catalyst to a few to chart their own spiritual journeys.

All these musings are a preface to a few imaginative, meditative experiments, trying to encounter Mary of the Gospels, Tradition, and experience from the context of being leaders of Marianist school communities.

At one time it was popular to say that the school acted *in loco parentis*, in the place of the parents. With today's litigious society, I do not know if you still say that?

Certainly, Mary was a parent—in fact, that is the main reason we remember her, venerate her, and call her holy. Sally Cunneen has written, “probably no other work is as difficult as parenting. You have to provide nurture and support, then let go, but still remain available even when older children think they don't need or want you, always hoping for friendly relations on an equal basis.”³ I would imagine that you who are parents would agree. Cunneen continues, “As surely as being in a foxhole motivates the religious impulse, so does a parent's concern for the good of a child. It is concern of a high order, since it is on behalf of someone else.”⁴ When I read these words, I thought of a poem by Louis Simpson titled *The Goodnight*. The poet, looking at his daughter in bed, reflects:

The lives of children are
Dangerous to their parents
With fire, water, air
And other accidents;
And some, for a child's sake
Anticipating doom,
Empty the world to make
The world as safe as a room.

But, he also knows, as he continues his poem:

A man who cannot stand
Children's perilous play

² Alice McDermott, *After This* (Waterville, ME: Wheeler Pub., 2006), pp. 185-86.

³ Cunneen, p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 50.

With lifted voice and hand
Drives the children away.
Out of sight, out of reach,
The tumbling children pass;
He sits on an empty beach
Holding an empty glass.

Perhaps many of you have felt similar feelings and struggled with similar tensions in rearing your children. If you think of your role as in any way characterized by the term *in loco parentis*, then perhaps these concerns have also characterized your ministry.

Mary, the parent, certainly knows this dilemma of parenthood, and I would like to look at a couple of examples of it in her life that may resonate with being the leader of the school community.

First, there is Mary at the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee (Jn 2:1-11)—she is there specifically as the Mother and as the Woman, a title reaching back to the beginning of creation, to the first mother, to Eve. She stands there as one who is attentive (a way of being that the Jesuit philosopher, Bernard Lonergan, claims is essential to authentic existence). Her attention is not self-preoccupation but turned outward toward others, toward the bride and the groom and to Jesus. In fact, we might say that Mary's whole experience of life, "as it develops from its earliest beginnings, is an experience for others, for all."⁵ She sees the situation as it is, she recognizes the need, and she responds.

What makes her pay attention to this need of the bride and groom? First, perhaps, because she is married. At this moment, she knows better than Jesus at this point in his ministry, what it costs to be connected to another human being in marriage—to live off a promise—and how anything, even something that may seem as trivial as no wine, can pose a threat to it. Her attentiveness is also empathy . . . the ability to pass over into the other and feel the other's situation; as well as compassion . . . the ability to feel with and for the other. Second, she is attentive because she knows the truth that she is connected to the bride and groom as she is to everyone; that no human, not even Jesus, can be indifferent to that; that to be human is to be bound as in a web to all humankind, both near and far.

But according to Lonergan, though attention is necessary, it is not sufficient. Among other things, one must be responsible in terms of what one is attentive to. Mary is not content to rest in knowing the situation, but she takes responsibility for what she sees and for what she imagines can be. So she acts. Even though she is a woman, she speaks in public. She says to Jesus, "They have no wine." She presents the problem, knowing that there is something that Jesus can do, undeterred by his comment about the hour, because she senses the truth that the universal hour is prefigured in particular moments where particular people, not abstractions, are in need.⁶ She sees possibility where Jesus does not. In fact, Frances Queré, a French Protestant commentator, claims that "after having given birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to Christ again at Cana, forcing him to overcome his fear of committing himself to the ministry that would lead him to the cross."⁷

⁵ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), p. 339.

⁶ Ibid, see p. 362 for Mary's sense of truth.

⁷ Cunneen, p. 54.

And because Mary sensed the truth, took the initiative and spoke, Jesus acted. The waters blushed in his presence, the bride and groom were spared, the disciples believed, and the first sign of Jesus' ministry was enacted.

It seems to me that as leaders of the school community, you also need the authenticity that comes with attentiveness: attentiveness to other administrators, faculty, staff, students, parents, members of the board, and the larger community, as well as attentiveness to organizational systems, trends, relationships, etc. Like Mary, this attentiveness will implicate you in acts of empathy—passing over into others, e.g., faculty members, parents, students—in which you are called to exercise the self-possession of being able to see things from a viewpoint other than your own. This attentiveness also means compassion, not only seeing things from the other's perspective but also being able to feel with and for the other. This attentiveness calls you, like Mary, to responsibility which entails action. It is not at all inconceivable that attentiveness could paralyze a person, to so perplex the individual that she or he would not know what to do. But a real leader has to act, and a very important aspect of acting is seeing and making connections. In fact, one famous educator whose name I cannot recall claimed that all learning involved making connections. As leaders of school communities, you have to make connections and support connections among the various constituencies within the school and outside the school, ultimately calling the community to act on the conviction that everyone is finally connected to everyone else. Very often, the leaders' action involves them in speaking, as Mary did. Again attentiveness to what is said and how it is said is important, as it was to her.

One could imagine the exact opposite of what I have detailed. A leader could exhibit an attentiveness that was a neurotic self-introspection which led him or her only to attend to how he or she was perceived, which resulted in a feeling of responsibility only for himself or herself and acting only on behalf of himself or herself. Perhaps, returning to Mary at Cana can be a way of keeping one's attention focused in the right direction.

Though I have not dealt with it, at Cana we can see some of the tension a parent has to endure with children who have grown old enough to think they clearly know their own mind. That is what one feels in the question, "Woman, what is it to you and to me?" But that painful distance is even more pronounced in Mark. The passage reads, "And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. . . . And looking around on those who sat about him, Jesus said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother'" (Mk 3:31-35). Some scholars link this passage to a few lines earlier, where the readers are told, "Then Jesus went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. And when his friends heard it, they went out to seize him, for they said, 'He is beside himself' [in other words, 'He is mad']" (Mk 3:19-21). At this point in the ministry, Mark suggests a profound rift between Jesus and his family, including his mother. He violates one of the most sacred precepts in Judaism and in most ancient cultures, the importance of the ties of blood in a family. It is difficult for us to imagine how shocking and preposterous such words must have sounded to the crowd and how deeply they cut the family. But the Gospel reports no recrimination on the part of the family. We might imagine that Mary ponders this painful moment in her heart, just as she had pondered so many perplexing experiences with her son in the past.

Perhaps it is a stretch, but one can imagine situations where leaders of schools are in a similar situation as that of Mary. For example, despite all the successful efforts to build Family Spirit among the various constituencies of the school, a student, a faculty member, a group of staff, some parents, or a few board members engage in some action that tears at the fabric of the community. In such instances, a leader might find her or himself perplexed like Mary, wondering why the action happened, what the motivations were . . . needing time to ponder the situation. She or he may feel that what was done was a direct, personal insult, not unlike the hurt Mary must have felt. It seems Mary did nothing but endure it. Maybe that's all the leader can do at the moment. Though I am no fan of the organizational theorist, Margaret Wheatley, perhaps this might be a time to let things fall apart awhile before taking action. Or maybe consequences need to follow the action, but not recriminations. Turning to Mary and pondering what she felt may provide strength in a similar difficult situation.

In this situation and others recorded in the Gospel, Mary exhibits great self-possession and strength. It seems that the source of these virtues and others is her "sureness that God cares for her personally."⁸ This certainty is evidenced in the first lines of the *Magnificat*. In the tradition of the holy women of Israel, Mary sings:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaid.
For behold, henceforth all
Generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me
and holy is his name. (Lk 1:46-49)

Von Balthasar has claimed that "Because of her immaculate nature, she always feels and senses that which is unsurpassably truthful."⁹ Here, Mary certainly recognizes the truth. She begins by acknowledging that all she is and has is a gift from God—from the beginning of life to her call, it is all gift. Whatever she is, it has been done by the one she calls her Savior. That is not simply her truth, but what is true of all of us. To recognize that it is all gift, all grace, is to experience personal freedom and the beginning of self-possession and confidence. She personifies humility, for humility is to recognize and live by the truth. And for some reason she will never fathom that God has chosen her to be called blessed by all generations. She knows in her mind and heart what should give us all a sense of surety, that God personally cares for us and continues to love each of us individually as God daily gives us a created participation in his Being.

This surety is important in every walk of life and especially for anyone who ministers in a high school.

Let me put this another way. In a book called *Good High Schools* Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot wrote that in high schools that were good enough she found "teachers were fearless in the face of adolescents." I suppose that applies to the head or principal teacher and even to the president. Unless we are sure of ourselves, we are not going to have the

⁸ See, Cunneen, p. 53.

⁹ Von Balthasar, p. 362.

kind of fearlessness that students respect. Remembering that what is true of Mary is fundamentally true of ourselves is the source out of which to draw our basic surety.

That surety served Mary throughout the Gospels but especially at the foot of the cross. Mary stands there believing, despite what must seem absurd, her son, God's son, dying on a tree. Like Eve, how easy it would have been to believe that God did not have her best interests at heart (Gn 3:4-6). The anguish and the absurdity are reason enough for her to turn away. But, she stands there—looking on the broken body of her son, her flesh and blood, all that a mother can give—believing. She stands there—not wails, swoons, collapses, or breaks—but stands silent and ready. There is nothing for her to say—there's no initiative for her to take. Calvary is not the same as Cana. She is not only the mother, she is also the martyr, the witness—the one who looks on, who does not turn away, who does not despair or give up, who testifies publicly, in a place where women do not belong, next to a criminal on a cross. She is the one who appears to do nothing but does what is required, stands and waits.

Sometimes leaders of school communities also have to be martyrs, witnesses, standing, often silent because there is nothing that can be said, nothing that is an improvement on silence, or because they are not free to speak. Looking at Mary at the cross can be an inspiration to be like her, standing both bold and watchful.

My final reflection on Mary is drawn not from Scripture but from experience and Tradition. Of all the great women of world religions, like Kali or Amaterasu or Kwanon or Tozi, only Mary, the faithful Jew, like her Son, seems capable of passing into every clime, taking on the features and color of every nation, and capturing the imaginations and hearts of artists and people everywhere. Not only Catholics or other Christians, but also Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Animists are drawn to her, the Mother of Mercy. For example, before He Qi was Christian and an internationally famous artist, it was Mary and her child that inspired him. As a middle school student during the cultural revolution in China, he was confined to a countryside Maoist camp. To avoid hard labor, he began painting pictures of Mao, much in demand at the time. He wrote:

One day I happened to come across a very old copy of a magazine that contained a picture of the painting "Madonna and Child" by Raphael. I was extremely moved by this painting. At the time of the Cultural Revolution the atmosphere was one of struggle, of hatred, of criticism. . . . It was hard to find any images of peace. So, you can imagine how I felt when I saw this picture, with the Madonna smiling and the little baby Jesus also smiling out at me. I was deeply moved and touched, and felt a great sense of peace. After this, I did portraits of Chairman Mao by day and then, late at night, I did some copies of the "Madonna and Child," both sketches and oil paintings. I gave some of these copies to friends to encourage them, too. To this day I still keep one of those oil paintings, and recently a famous woman writer who was my neighbor during those times told me that she still has one of the "Madonna and Child" sketches which I gave her.

He Qi follows in a long line of artists, beginning with the movement of Christianity beyond the borders of Israel, who have painted her as one of their own people, both as peasant and queen.

Mary has the capacity to draw people, young and old, to her, despite nationality or religion. As a leader in a school that is hopefully marked by diversity, turning to her and pondering her unifying power may be helpful in bringing genuine unity in the midst of the diversity of the community.

Having concluded my reflections, I ask you to divide into five groups of about eight people per group and share whatever you wish about Mary and her relationship to you and your ministry. As possible discussion starters, I offer you the following questions:

1. Have you ever written a travelogue of your spiritual journey?
2. Do you ever think of your ministry as *in loco parentis*?
3. Describe your experience of attentiveness.
4. Do you sense with Mary that everything is connected to everything?
5. Do you think that how things are said (syntax) is as important as what is said (semantics)?
6. If you were Mary, how would you have responded to Jesus in Mark's Gospel?
7. From what do you draw your surety?
8. Are you a martyr (witness)? If so, in what way(s)?
9. Do you feel that reflection on Mary as Mother of All People is help for reflection and action regarding your role in bringing unity in diversity?
10. What has been your experience of parenting?

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