

The Holy Name of Mary

by Peter Daino

1. Introduction

As a novice in the Society of Mary, I learned that our Founder, Blessed William Chaminade (d. 1850), chose September 12, the Feast of the Holy Name of Mary, for our patronal day. The reason for this choice is that Father Chaminade did not want to focus on any particular Marian dogma, such as the Immaculate Conception, or any particular Marian devotion, such as the rosary; rather he wanted to fix his disciples' focus on the person of Mary, on the whole mystery of Mary. This, he said, was the meaning of names in scripture. A name expresses who the person is and what they stand for.

Marian scholars tell us that the name of Mary has almost seventy different meanings. This is indicative of the manifold richness of her personality; she, who has inspired I'm sure seventy thousand works of art.

Two interpretations of the name of Mary intrigue me most. The first renders the name to mean "bitterness," a kind of cutting sorrow. The second renders the name to mean "rebellious," as personified in Miriam the defiant sister of Moses.

2. Mary, Dolorosa

The first time I remember consciously reflecting on the Mater Dolorosa was in 1963 at the World's Fair in New York City. My mother and father shepherded us past the funny looking patchwork metal globe, symbol of the fair, up to the Vatican Pavilion. It was dark inside. A moving platform carried my sisters and brothers and me slowly toward a soft light. Then she appeared: Michelangelo's Pieta. The arms were open, the eyes were closed. I knew why the arms were open; as a ten year old I understood maternal solace. I didn't know why the eyes were closed. I remember asking myself: "What is she thinking?"

Now I know. The Dolorosa has appeared to me many times since the summer of 1963. And I know too well now what she is thinking. I wrote this poem about her in 1983.

Night time in squatter's town:
a dry wind blows trash
against cardboard hovels;
the moon slips in and out of dark clouds.

Men at the kiosk drunk on local beer
sing a lusty Swahili song:
smell of urine and boiled cabbage.

Several children sleeping in a shed-size shack;
Dolorosa sitting up in a corner;
an infant girl sleeping in her arms.

Rocking this daughter in her lap,
Dolorosa thinks of all her babies,
and their homes of plastic bits and paper.

The wind reports the sounds
of other families:
some shouting, some weeping.

Listening, rocking and aching,
Dolorosa is praying and hoping . . .
She hears her little daughter groan.

What's more, she hears the Spirit groan!
Indeed, she helps the spirit groan
with her sighs too deep for words.

And so it slips in and out of every hovel,
It blows dreams into the heads of sleepers;
this Holy Spirit, the spouse of Dolorosa.

Yes, as advocate of squatters' town
the Spirit takes up the pleading
of every afflicted heart to Heaven:

“Maranatha, Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus.”
And the Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.”
And let the one who hears say, “Come.”

Mary Dolorosa guides us through grief. She is the Shaman of Sorrow; she knows the secret arteries of the heart where bitterness flows and the circuitous route it must go to drain out. Mary is our mentor in this because she was first the mentor of God.

In his book *True Devotion* St. Grignon de Montfort describes Mary as the one who made God vulnerable. She is the one who gave to God the ability to feel cold, heat, and the point of thorn and nail. Until the Incarnation God did not have this capacity. Through Mary, God received a body and was able to feel pain.

But Mary not only gave God the capacity to feel pain, as Montfort taught; she also gave God the capacity to suffer in a human way. Mary guided Jesus on that journey we all take from animal pain to human sorrow and human tears. She taught God “the how” of our suffering.

The ministry of Mary, teaching God how to cry, is a consequence of her role in the Incarnation. She gave God not only a body that mutely and automatically reacted to pain, that could be crucified and that could cry out, “I thirst,” but also more importantly, Mary gave to God an emotional accessibility to that pain which caused God to lament, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” Mary Dolorosa helped God and she helps us to take what by itself is terrible and brutish, animal hunger, and turn it into something transcendent, the salty tears of outrage.

One day for prayer the women I work with listened to a song inspired by Mt. 2:18: “A cry was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation: Rachel bewailing her children; no comfort for her, since they are no more.” As the plaintive music played the women passed a glass of salt water around the circle. Each woman took the glass, dipped a finger into it, and

placed a few drops of salt water under the eye of the one sitting next to her. Bonded in these tears they joined the songwriter, Colleen Fulmer, in the refrain:

A voice is heard in Ramah,
Hiroshima, Salvador,
Women refusing comfort
For their children are no more;
No garland of lovely flowers
Can dispel the ancient grief
Or silence the anguished voices
That abhor the war machine.

After the song, a member of the group reads the following:

Ramah was the place of a concentration camp to which the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem were taken. Poetically, Rachel, the mother of the tribes is imaged crying for her children who have been lost in Jeremiah 31:15. Crying, grieving, and shedding tears are important. If we deny evil or suppress grief or anger, destructive forces can get stronger.”

During the discussion that ensued the names of other sites of atrocity, African Ramahs, were mentioned: Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and certain slums in Nairobi. The women talked about hunger. They shared their grief over this or that child who had died of hunger. They agreed that tears were a sign of protest.

Our prayer was periodically interrupted by the noise of military planes taking off from the nearby air force base. We were thus reminded that not everyone abhorred the war machine. When we sang Fulmer's song a second time, at the end of the service, I thought I heard louder voices during the second stanza:

If our leaders could look in the eyes
of the children we carry
They would forget the bombs they drop
and their budgets for war.

We concluded this ritual lamentation with the Salve Regina: “Mother of Mercy, our life our sweetness and our hope. To you do we cry poor banished children of Eve. To you do we send up our sighs, weeping and wailing in this valley of tears. Turn then O Gracious Advocate thine eyes of mercy toward us.”

Karl Marx said that “religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature.” Jonathan Swift said that “complaint is the largest tribute Heaven receives, and the sincerest part of it.” Devotion to Mary names the Dolorosa is the one way that Christians have learned to sigh and to complain. She is a mother who listens. She is a mother who lets us cry. “There now,” she says, “it's okay, let it all come out.”

Mary, the Dolorosa, teaches us not to waste our grief. It is a resource that brings power to ministry. At her own Ramah she was pierced by many swords, each sword representing the death

of an innocent massacred by Herrod. These many swords she turned into one ploughshare. A ploughshare of vindication! And this ploughshare, the last innocent, she called Jesus.

Whatever the sword of sorrow, it pierces the heart of a Christian to unleash the river of justice. Grieving is the primal act of social justice. True devotion to Mary Dolorosa turns the sword of sorrow that inevitably pierces the heart of every apostle into the ploughshare he or she needs to dig the garden of God.

The Book of Proverbs says, “The heart of the wise sits in the house of mourning.” That’s true. The heart of Dolorosa is there. But I didn’t know this when I first saw her at the World’s Fair. At age ten I couldn’t possibly know what she was thinking. Her house was inaccessible to me (fortunately). But now, at 38, I have gained entry (fortunately). And from the house of mourning (from so many huts of mourning) I join the Spirit and the Bride in their incessant pleading: “Come Lord Jesus, Come Now!” Mary, Mother of Sorrow, pray with us.

3. Mary Defiant

There is a photograph of Dorothy Day sitting on a lawn chair wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat. She was being arrested by two burly state troopers during a sit-in demonstration for striking farm workers in California. The expression on her face is remarkable. Her jaw is protruding, defiant. But her eyes! They express peace. If one saw only the eyes, one would think she is at Mass. Dorothy Day was in her mid-seventies when this picture was taken. I think it is a beautiful image of deacidified defiance: eyes of hope and a jaw for change. We are now going to reflect on such defiance, what I call Marian defiance: deacidified—holy.

In *Miryam of Nazareth* Ann Johnson says, “According to the American Heritage dictionary the root of the name Mary is the Hebrew ‘Miryam’ meaning ‘rebellion.’ How fitting for a people called to be a people of God, often in conflict with political authorities, whose infant sons were at times systematically slain by alien rulers, to name their daughters ‘hope of change.’”

I agree with Ann Johnson. “Mary” for me signifies rebellion against systems that destroy the lives of children such as the systems of Herod and Pilate—two unjust judges.

Once during a prayer service in early 1992, the women I work with listened to another Colleen Fulmer song inspired by Luke 18: 1-8, the parable about the defiant widow knocking on the door of the unjust judge.

The widow woman's comin'
Bangin' on my door.
Says she wants to see me
but she's been here before
Says she wants. . . .

(During the refrain the women clenched both fists, bent their elbows, and raised their fists just above their heads. They moved their fists as if they were banging on a door.)

Justice for all people,
Peace in every land,
Food to feed her children,
Freedom just to stand

With no more fear of deadly weapons
Corporate structured plans
And no more war.

In the discussion that ensued, again above the military noise of air force engines, the women discussed hunger and considered the identity of the defiant widow. Some said it was God. Many heads nodded. Others said it was Mary. Again, many heads nodded. The point was made that Jesus told this parable when Mary was most likely a widow. He could have had her in mind then. She was after all the one who had taught him the *Magnificat*—a rebel song if ever there was one. Who knows, she might have banged on the doors of Herod and Pilate—a couple of unjust judges certainly deserving to be pestered.

But it was not defiance against political figures that we considered most important in our discussion that day. It was defying that insidious voice that tempts the would-be rebel to comply, to give in to the world as it is. “Nothing changes. Stop kidding yourself,” suggests the voice of resignation. “Make peace with reality. Stop fighting.” This devilish inner voice, we said, was infinitely more dangerous than any human oppressor.

In the novitiate I was told the story of Father Chaminade's last advice to young Marianists. He was standing in the garden near a statue of the Immaculate Conception. Mary, of course, had her naked foot pressing down on the head of the serpent. This is to portray Genesis 3:15, a text that follows the account of the sin of Adam and Eve, when God addressed the serpent.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike at your head,
while you strike at his heel.

Father Chaminade, whose long life had spanned the turmoil of the French Revolution, the wars of Napoleon, the Restoration of the Monarchy, and the July Revolution, put his hand over the heel of Mary and addressed the serpent in a loud voice to dramatize this final discourse to the young Marianists.

Despite everything,
she has crushed your head,
and will crush it forever.

He added:

Let us entrust it (the mission) entirely to
the protection of Mary, to whom her divine son
has reserved the final victory over hell;
let us be, in our humility,
the heel of the woman.

I have often thought of this image. It moves me. The heel of the woman! “Yes! Do it!” I've told myself. “Put your foot down on injustice. Stamp it out! Be Mary; be Church! And

remember that the greatest enemy is not your political opponent but the voice that tempts both of you to silent submission.”

St. Paul tells us that our warfare is not with the political leaders of this world but with demonic principalities and powers, the serpent forces of despair which tempt both oppressor and oppressed into accepting things as they are. The target of our defiant heel is the snake of indifference. And we are assured of victory. “Resist the devil [the Silencer] and he will flee from you” (Jas 4:7).

Fighting a nonphysical enemy, however, does not make our defiance holy. Many would-be saints, for example, have been destroyed by anger—the kind that consumes its victim. Many would-be saints have been so obsessed with evil that they become unlovely, unable to laugh, unsaintly.

What makes for holy defiance then?

The Second Book of Chronicles says, “the battle is not yours, but God's.” (20:15). The Dorothy Day in that photograph knew this. She was sitting on her lawn chair; God was engaged in battle. Likewise, we should remember that as we do our work for children, God is engaged in battle. As much as we love the children and loathe what makes them suffer, God loves them infinitely more and infinitely loathes what makes them suffer. Acting with this secret understanding makes our defiance holy.

At the end of his life when the son of Mary began his defiant march toward Jerusalem he put on a Marian face—the jaw of an outraged mother—and he walked with a Marian step—the heel of the woman. In him, God was lifting up the lowly. In him the massacred innocents were going to be vindicated. I see him marching and singing; yes, now I clearly see him—there he is on that defiant march. There he is, jaw and feet keeping time to a rebel song, Mary's song. Mary, Mother of the Defiant, pray with us.

4. Conclusion

A name, Father Chaminade taught, reveals the identity or the essence of a person. Combining the two meanings for the name of Mary examined here we get “Dolorosa Defiant”—the wounded rebel.

Does the real Mary deserve this name? Who is she? She is the heart that sits in the house of mourning. She is the mother of the massacred who laments the loss of her children. At the same time, she is the person who fights for justice. She demands *Magnificat*. She is the defiant widow banging on the door of the unjust judge.

Yes, Mary deserves the name “Dolorosa Defiant”. She is the mother of the Suffering Servant; she taught the Suffering Servant how to use his suffering to serve the cause of justice. She taught Jesus the ministry of the wounded healer and how to turn sorrow into a remedy.

Applied to a people the name “Mary” can mean the oppressed who hope for change. “Mary” stands for all the broken who have become brave. And we, who call ourselves by the name, must take on the identity: we must become “Marian,” that is, one with the oppressed of our time—hoping for change.