

MARY'S PILGRIM JOURNEY WITH THE SPIRIT

Sr. Shalini Mulackal, PBVM

Shalini Mulackal is a Presentation Sister from India. She has been a professor of Systematic Theology at Vidyajyoti College of Theology in New Delhi. She has been a visiting professor to a number of Theological faculties in India. She has presented papers at national and international seminars. She is a member of India Theological Association and has served as its first woman president. Currently she is the coordinator of the Formators Programme at UISG, Rome.



Introduction

Like all humans, Mary of Nazareth was a pilgrim on this earth. The knowledge we have of Mary today is not only from what is written about her in the Bible but also from faith reflections of Christians over the centuries, their devotions and their faith experiences of praying through her intercession. As the understanding of Jesus and his mission grew in the early Christian communities, so too the understanding of Mary and her role in God's salvific plan. In this process, certain legends, apocryphal writings, archaeological evidence, the geography of Palestine and the memory of Mary preserved in certain locations by the early Christians helped to give a better picture of Mary and her faith journey.

From what is written about her in the Scripture, one can get a fairly good idea of the person of Mary. She comes across as a woman of deep faith in God. Like any other mother, she nurtured the infant Jesus to his adulthood. She helped the growth of Jesus in his consciousness. She supported him as he learned to walk, taught him to talk, to respond, to pray and to manifest the usual signs of love. She allowed him to grow as an individual with freedom.¹ In that process, together with her husband Joseph, she willingly

accepted all the difficulties that came her way in protecting Jesus from all dangers. The flight into Egypt with the infant and looking for the lost boy in the temple are two of the difficult and anxious moments she underwent as a mother.

However, Mary's role was not limited to being the biological mother of Jesus. She followed him and was his strongest support in his mission until he breathed his last on the cross. Besides, the few scenes which the four Evangelists present before us suggest that Mary was a person who was sensitive to other's needs. Even before someone asked for help, she reached out and helped them. Her visit to her elderly cousin and her intervention at the wedding at Cana are windows that allow us to have a glimpse of a woman who was sensitive to the needs of others and reached out to be of help.

But Mary did not walk alone. She had a companion all along the way. That companion is none other than the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. This paper is an attempt to understand Mary's pilgrim journey with her soul companion, the Holy Spirit.

Our Context

I believe the purpose of this reflection is not merely an intellectual exercise but much more a spiritual exercise of the heart. Mary responded to life in a context very different from ours. But reflecting on how she responded to her context by being attentive to the whisper of the Spirit, will enable us to respond creatively and daringly today to the varied needs of people and the earth made poor and vulnerable.

Our world today is very different from that of the 1st century Palestine. Everything is moving so fast due to advancement in science and technology. Our life is made more convenient and easier with new equipment that comes to the market. There are new machines to help us in our daily chores, be it in the kitchen, in the garden or workplace. We need not go to the market for shopping. Every transaction can be done sitting at home. Moreover, we can communicate with others at any time from any corner of the world with ease.

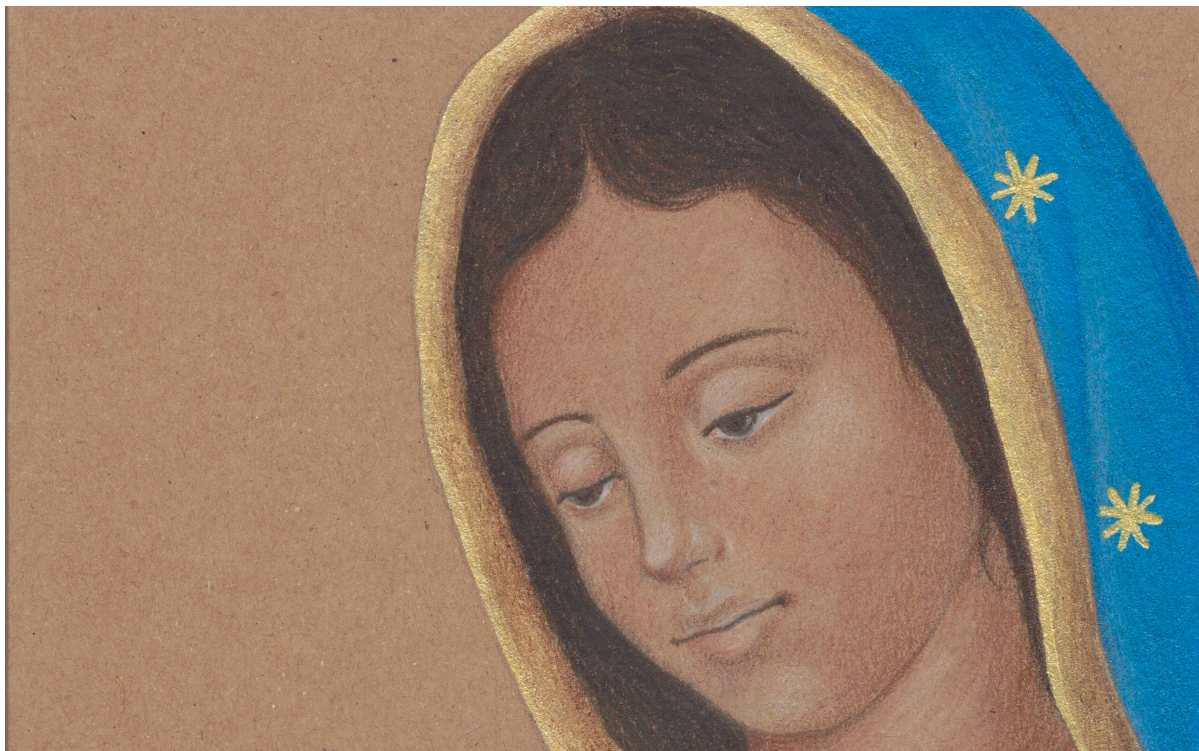
However, there is another side to our present context. Cherished human and Christian values are fast disappearing. The family, the basic unit of society is no more a safe and secure place as more and more families are breaking down. There is an increase in crime and violence. There is an upsurge in addiction to narcotic drugs, alcohol, internet devices and pornographic materials. As a result, our society suffers from trust deficiency. It is difficult to trust even one's own spouse, parent or children. People prefer to make short term commitments rather than long term ones. A culture of consumerism, individualism and materialism is being promoted in order to sustain a capitalistic ideology that benefits a few and disadvantages the majority. As a result, the socio-economic and political systems are built up more on selfishness, greed, and the desire to accumulate power and control than on service, welfare and common good.

It is in this context that we reflect on Mary, an ordinary woman who lived more than two thousand years ago in a remote village in Galilee known as the 'Galilee of the Gentiles.' She can make a difference in our lives if we too are prepared to walk with the Spirit as she did at every moment of her life.

The Identity of the Holy Spirit

Before we look at Mary and how she walked with her soul companion, the Spirit, it is important to know who this Spirit is. Of course, for us Christians, the Spirit is the Third

Person of the Blessed Trinity. According to Judeo-Christian understanding, God had been revealing Godself to humanity from the time of creation. The climax of God's revelation came in and through Jesus Christ. It is through his life, death and resurrection that Jesus revealed who God is and what God's plan for us and for the whole world is. Reflecting on the life of Jesus, the early Christian community was gradually led to the belief that God is a communion of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



During his life on earth, Jesus taught his disciples to pray calling God 'Abba Father.' Before his death, he assured them a helper, an advocate he would send after his resurrection. With the powerful experience of Jesus' resurrection, the disciples began to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God and Lord. At Pentecost the disciples who were praying in the upper room together with Mary experienced the power of the Spirit descending on each of them as promised by Jesus (Acts 2: 1-4).

The Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity. In the Book of Genesis, we see the Spirit of God hovering over the formless void, seeking to stir the cosmos from its powerlessness to fullness of life. (Gen 1: 2). According to St. Augustine, the Holy Spirit is the one who frees creation from its natural limits and makes it capable of receiving God.² In the Hebrew language the Holy Spirit is called *Ruah*, the wind and breath that blow over the universe creating a loving relationship between God and humanity. The same breath of God is breathed into the man's nostrils and the man became a living being (Gen 2:7).

The specific character of the Spirit, therefore, is to be "exhaled" or "breathed out" from the Father and the Son.³ In other words, the Holy Spirit is the one who gives efficacy and makes real the action of the Father and of the Son throughout the history of salvation. The Church Fathers express this reality in their classic formula, "All good comes from the

Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit."⁴ What do the Fathers mean when they say "in the Holy Spirit?" It means that "the ineffable mystery of God becomes *experience* for the believer only through the power of his Spirit."⁵ The biblical picture of the Spirit on the whole is that of a force that stirs life to greater life.

Mary and the Spirit

Mary of Nazareth, an ordinary village girl, played a unique role in God's plan of salvation. Therefore, it is impossible to think of Mary, "the unique member of the Church, and its type and outstanding model in faith and charity" (LG 53) without thinking about the Spirit. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary teaches that though Mary was a creature who stood in need of redemption, yet in view of the role she was called to play, she was preserved from original sin. In other words, Mary was redeemed in a unique and perfect way. It was not through her merit but God willed Mary to be conceived in her mother's womb without the stain of sin. This action of God in Mary was made operative through the Spirit. So, from the first moment of her existence, she was the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (LG 53). At the annunciation the Angel addressed her as "full of grace" which means "full of the Holy Spirit." The Spirit of God dwelt in her and the Spirit companioned her all through her life.

The Spirit puts Mary in communion with the whole Trinitarian life. John Damascene says, "The Father has predestined her, but the Spirit has visited, purified and made her holy and, so to say, irrigated."⁶ Mary was gradually transformed by the Spirit. It was so deep that it permeated her whole being. A 14th century Byzantine writer, Theophanus of Nices, says, "Mary was united to the Spirit, author of life, right from her origin; all that she was experiencing in her existence was being shared with the Spirit, since her participation in the Spirit had become a participation in the being."⁷

Mary's uniqueness and her holiness spring from the way she cooperated with the action of the Spirit. Far from being passive, she was an active agent. Walking with the Spirit was nearly perfect in the life of Mary. She was conjoined at every moment of her conscious life with the stirrings of the Spirit in her heart. The Spirit dwelt in her and she was in constant communion with the Spirit.

That does not mean life was easy for Mary. Think of a teenager consenting to give birth to a child just before her marriage! That is what Mary did when she was called by God for a unique mission. She did not consult her parents or even Joseph, her betrothed. The indwelling Spirit of God prompted her and gave her courage to say that daring "Yes" in spite of the adverse consequences the decision would have. Knowing well what shame this pregnancy would bring upon her and her family, Mary still decided to align with the Spirit of God. At that moment of her free consent, Mary moved to a new level of consciousness. She realized that this overshadowing of the Spirit was an indwelling reality effecting a miracle in her womb, that of God taking flesh within her.⁸

Mary faced other difficult moments, too, with courage and trust. It was not easy for her to accept that the people of Nazareth, including her kith and kin and neighbours rejected Jesus and even tried to kill him (Lk 4: 14-30). In Mk 3:21, the family was waiting to "seize" him because he was "beside himself." How did Mary withstand such ordeals as a mother? The climax of her suffering of course, was seeing her beloved son unjustly accused and sentenced to death. How did Mary stand beneath the cross, watching Jesus dying a most cruel death? We can find answers to such questions only in the light of her pilgrim journey with the Spirit. The Spirit gave her strength, courage and hope to face the most painful moments in her life.

There is a story of the rain maker which gives us another aspect of Mary who was filled with the Spirit.⁹ The story is of a Chinese village that did not have rain for a long time. They consulted many magicians and sorcerers but their rituals and incantations did not bring rain. Finally, the villagers met a little old man and begged him to come to their village and bring them rain. He asked for a little hut and sat there for three days. And then the rains came! He did not do anything, but his *presence* brought the rain. Such rainmakers are bridges between God and humans. When their quiet presence is around, things happen. Mary is the greatest rainmaker the world has ever seen. She did not do much in human terms. But she was such a *presence* that wherever she appeared, the Holy Spirit burst in new and exciting ways.¹⁰

Joseph was the first one to experience this newness. When he had almost made up his mind to divorce Mary privately, the Spirit of God through a dream, assured him that Mary was innocent and that he must take her as his wife. We see Mary going with haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth who needs assistance because of her pregnancy at an advanced age. Mary's presence brings the Holy Spirit to both Elizabeth and her child. The child leapt with joy in her womb and Elizabeth, like a prophet, gave a loud cry and said, 'Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb' (Lk 1: 41-45). Mary then sang her beautiful song of victory and revolution under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Like many young climate activists of our time, the young Mary gives articulation to her dream of a society where the hungry will be fed and the lowly will be raised (Lk 1: 46ff). Maloney beautifully expresses this when he says, 'Wherever Mary went, the soft dew of God's Holy Spirit fell gently upon all, stirring the seeds of divine life within their hearts.'¹¹

We recall other instances when Mary's presence brought joy to people. The despised shepherds of Bethlehem "found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger" (Lk 2:16) and their hearts were filled with joy. "And they went back glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen" (Lk 2: 20). The Magi, too, were filled with joy when they received an outpouring of the Spirit through the presence of Mary.

The presence of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh (Mt 2:11).

Simeon and Anna were two other persons who experienced deep joy in the presence of Mary with her infant. Taking the infant into his arms Simeon prayed, "Now Master, you can let Your servant go in peace...because my eyes have seen the Salvation which You prepared for all the nations to see..." (Lk 2: 29). Later Mary brought joy to the couple and their dear ones in Cana by her intervention in their time of need.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, Mary's quiet presence amidst the disciples continued to release the Holy Spirit in greater abundance which in turn filled their hearts with joy. Thus, Mary played a great role in nurturing the early Christian community, the body of Christ, as she nurtured her child in Nazareth and helped him to grow in wisdom.

Mary's Invitation to Consecrated Women Today

"Mary is what we are to become," says George Maloney.¹² This is a great challenge placed before us as consecrated persons in the Church. First and foremost, Mary invites us to become conscious of the indwelling Spirit within us. At Baptism and Confirmation, we have been given the outpouring of the Spirit into our hearts. Our religious consecration is nothing but living our baptismal consecration in a better and deeper way. Consecrated

life is a life lived in the companionship of the Spirit. Like Mary, we are called to make the Spirit our soul companion and soul mate. It is a call to be in deep union with God. This was the primary goal and purpose of this form of life from the very beginning when it started in the desert - an intense seeking for God.

Mary was a synodal woman particularly when it came to walking together with the Spirit. The Spirit and Mary were 'together on the way.'

Like Mary, we are called to be women who are capable of pondering everything in our hearts. This pondering allows us to be in touch with the indwelling Spirit. We are fortunate that religious life is organized in such a way as to allow space and time for such pondering. The quality of our pondering will determine the quality of our presence. It is not our ministries that define who we are as consecrated persons in today's world but the quality of our being. How is the quality of my being, my presence reflected in my relationship with God, with others and with the universe? Do people feel comfortable in my presence? Do I radiate that inner joy which is the gift of the Holy Spirit?

Today many religious congregations are facing death, diminishment and eventual closure or completion. It is not easy to face this reality. Mary, standing at the foot of the cross with courage and hope coming from her deep union with the Spirit, can be a model for all those who are facing death in any form.

The present situation of the world needs prophets and mystics. Prophets to speak the truth, to announce the good news of God's unconditional love and to denounce all that is evil and against God's plan and purpose for humanity and the world. Filled with the Spirit, Mary sang her song of revolution, a song calling for a reversal of values and attitudes. We remind ourselves that we cannot shy away from our prophetic role in the Church and society as vowed women. Mary calls us forth to be prophetic women of our times.

While acknowledging and appreciating the great work women religious are doing in different parts of the globe, in reaching out to the unreached, people on the peripheries, the vulnerable, the abandoned, we keep reminding ourselves that we cannot be complacent. We need to pay attention to new needs that are calling and to respond to those under the inspiration of the Spirit.

Conclusion

Mary was a synodal woman particularly when it came to walking together with the Spirit. The Spirit and Mary were 'together on the way.' From the very moment of her existence till she was assumed to heaven, body and soul, she experienced the indwelling power of the Spirit. More than any other human being, she collaborated with her synodal partner, the Holy Spirit. Consequently, there was a qualitative difference in her presence, a presence that brought joy and comfort to those whom she encountered.

Mary is a special model for consecrated persons. She teaches us how to walk in company with the Spirit and to face the difficult and challenging situations of our life and that of the world around us. She is truly our elder, our sister, who has gone before us showing the way to befriend the Spirit and to become a comforting presence in a hurting world.

- 1 See Bernard Haring, *The Song of the Servant: Biblical Meditations on Mary, the Mother and Model of the Church*. Great Britain: St. Paul Publications, 1977, 79.
- 2 St. Augustine, *The Trinity*, 14:8, 11. As quoted in *Your Spirit, Lord, Fills the Earth*, Official Catechetical Text in Preparation for the Holy Year 2000, Prepared by the Theological- Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1997, 15.
- 3 See *Your Spirit, Lord, Fills the Earth*, 14.
- 4 See St. Athanasius, *Letters to Serapio*, 1: 24. As quoted in *Your Spirit, Lord, Fills the Earth*, 15.
- 5 *Your Spirit, Lord, Fills the Earth*, 16.
- 6 *Homilies on the Dormition*, I, 3. As quoted in *Your Spirit, Lord, Fills the Earth*, 66.
- 7 *Talk on the Mother of God*, 30. *Ibid.*
- 8 See George Maloney, S.J; *Mary: The Womb of God*. Denville, New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1976, 77.
- 9 See Dr. Irene Claremont de Castillejo, *Knowing Woman*. Harper-Colophon, N.Y., 1973. As quoted in George Maloney, S.J; *Mary: The Womb of God*, 82.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 George Maloney, S.J; *Mary: The Womb of God*, 84.
- 12 *Ibid*, 94.