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The FURROW

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Kathleen Coyle

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PART I

The recent callous murder of Ashling Murphy, going for a run along the canal in Tullamore, in broad daylight, has led to an outcry against the pandemic of global violence against women. This outcry led to candle light vigils for Ashling in towns and cities throughout Ireland, England and Scotland, and to numerous discussions on femicide on television and the daily papers. This reflection is one small response to the emerging consciousness of the appreciation of the lives of women. It wishes to ask if certain traditional images of Mary of Nazareth have legitimated women's oppression. This short reflection hopes to offer a corrective to a few of these traditional images – many of them constructs of the patriarchal mind – which commends submission as the most commendable virtue for women. Christian women are asking what forces are at work in the deep ambivalence of Christianity towards them? There is a certain urgency to this search, for this new worldwide awakening of an appreciation of the feminine is calling us to retrieve the historical Mary of the gospels as she treasured, preserved and pondered, “all these things in her heart.” (Lk 2:51).

MARY, A MANY-SIDED SYMBOL

Down through the centuries Mary has been a pervasive presence and a many-sided symbol and her cult has nourished the religious imagination of Christians with what George Tavard so aptly calls the thousand faces of the Virgin Mary.¹ She has remained a woman of mysterious power in the Christian tradition when women

1 George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), a Michael Glazier book.

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themselves had little power. Like other religious symbols, the Marian symbols have accumulated layer upon layer of meaning that have gripped people's allegiance over a long period of time. However, while there is strong evidence that Mary is still a religious symbol of enduring power in the Christian tradition, she remains an ambiguous one, especially for women, for the passive virtues of submission, humility and docility have been projected on to her. Rosemary Haughton is critical of some contemporary images of Mary: She says her image has been modified to meet the current requirement "tilted head, wilting body, resigned expression; and women and most especially religious women, were required to identify with this model. Many did so, internalizing to such an extent that no other way of being devout could be imagined."² These images have led to some bizarre expressions in popular preaching and devotions. The British historian and mythographer, Marina Warner, in her book *Alone of All her Sex*³ holds that such an understanding of Mary – as timid and taking directions from others – helped to define the shape of the feminine ideal for centuries. Warner adds that these traditional images of Mary have often legitimated rather than challenged women's subordination and have functioned to keep them oppressed. Elizabeth Johnson adds, "traditional demands for conformity to the patriarchal order and for obedience to male religious authority figures ... make women shudder before this text and reject it as dangerous to physical and psychological health as well as to a liberating spirituality."⁴ Samuel Rayan, the Indian Jesuit has remarked that the Mary of traditional theology is a sort of "dehydrated Mary, who has to be liberated to be truly human."⁵ Three random examples of Marian images - the Eve-Mary parallelism, Mary's '*fiat*' at the annunciation, and the Marian apparitions of the 19th and 20th centuries – will bear this out.

The Eve-Mary Parallelism: Ben Sira, writing in the second century BCE states bluntly that sin and death came into the world through a woman. He says, "From a woman was the beginning of sin, and because of her we all died. (Sir 25:24). On the contrary, in the Genesis account, woman is given the name, Eve, which means mother of the living. By contrast, Ben Sira makes her the mother of death. Anna Primavesi remarks "The connection made by Ben Sira

2 Rosemary Haughton, Unpublished paper, p. 15.

3 See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: University Press, 1976), pp. 68-78.

4 Elizabeth Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 94. See also Kathleen Coyle, *Mary, So Full of God, Yet So Much Ours*, (Manila: Logos Publications, 2010), pp.60-70.

5 Samuel Rayan, "In Defense of Balasuriya," *The Tablet*, 1 November 1997, p. 1394.

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between sin, death and woman has been so accepted into Christian consciousness that it has been assumed that as God did not want her to eat (sin), neither did God want her to die. It was her own fault and she did both.⁶ Added to this confusion, literal interpretations of the Genesis 3 narrative and the “fall” that treated the myth as history and confused it with an Augustinian interpretation of original sin has done enormous harm to generations of Christians. As we begin to expose the bias against women in these canonical interpretations, and the inferiorization of women presumed in the exegesis, we will see Eve in a new light. As Eve, and by extension, all other women are given their rightful place, it is hoped that the Eve-Mary parallelism will lose its significance, so that women will no longer have to live within the shadow of the apple of Eve.

Mary's 'fiat' at the Incarnation: The story of the angel's annunciation to Mary is often interpreted as if she was suddenly surprised by the angel's visit and her response has unfortunately been understood as a childish unreflective reaction to the message of the angel, a passive submission to the will of God. Mary, submissive and subordinate is a domestic model of female obedience; her *fiat* has traditionally been interpreted in terms of subordination and self-sacrifice and her response has been unfortunately held as a model of holiness especially for women. The Second Vatican Council, in reference to the Annunciation expresses this bias, “In subordination to Him, and along with Him, by the grace of Almighty God, she served the mystery of redemption.” LG (56).

The Marian Apparitions of the 19th and 20th Centuries: In these apparitions Mary appears pleading, threatening, or weeping and her messages and secrets are related to the contemporary troubled world situation. Her repeated requests to Bernadette at Lourdes and her fear-laden denunciation of Communism at Fatima in 1917, called for rosary crusades as a counterbalance to the threats of nuclear war. Her apocalyptic warnings speak of chastisement for the sins of the world because an angry God's justice demands immediate chastisement. However, people can be reconciled to God by prayer and fasting. “Communist Russia was Mary's enemy, and so all those who combated Communism were her friends. I recall vividly reading pious pamphlets associated with support for right wing politics in the Iberian Peninsula, a celestial endorsement of the regimes of Salazar and Franco.”⁷ Sarah Jane Boss has remarked that “the medieval representation of the Virgin

6 Anna Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 226.

7 Eamon Duffy, “May Thoughts on Mary,” *Priests and People*, May 1991, 193.

as a physical mother and bearer of God, has been gradually supplanted in Catholic devotion by images of her in the 19th and 20th century apparitions, as a prayerful young woman whose body has no ostensible association with maternal functions, Yet, she has remained, and ensures us that she will always remain very approachable.⁸

PART II

RETRIEVING THE MARY OF THE GOSPELS AS THE SPLENDID ICON OF THE LIVING GOD.

A study of the Christian scriptures and the long Christian tradition which emphasize that Mary's distinctiveness lies in her faithful partnership with the Holy Spirit that led her to become the mother of God's divine Son with whom she forms a bodily, psychological and social relationship. She needs to be retrieved as "the splendid icon of the living God," the icon of Trinitarian love that sensitizes us to the immensity of divine mystery and therefore carries a transforming power that brings about a sacred change in people's lives.

But first, let us turn to first century Palestine, then the gospel of Luke, and the long Christian theological tradition. We will situate Mary in her village world of first century Nazareth, and then allow Luke to form a definite portrait of her, as he allows her to speak for herself.

MARY: A SYMBOL OF ENDURING POWER IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

Mary of Nazareth was not a rabbi; she left no record of prayers or writings yet her theological voice has given the Church its most sung hymn of praise, the *Magnificat*. History has no record of her except through the documents of the first Christian community and these are annoyingly brief. Paul doesn't mention her name. The contrast between the little biblical evidence about her and the persistent interest in her over two thousand years is striking. From the scanty biblical evidence has grown a complex and sometimes exaggerated history of Marian devotion which has become central to the spirituality and art of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. She is honored in paintings and poetry, cathedrals and churches, stained glass windows and statues. She has inspired some of the loftiest architecture, and cathedrals like Chartres de Paris and Notre Dame de Reims have been built in her honor. The persistent interest

8 Boss, Sarah Jane, *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Grace in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 40.

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in her after two thousand years is not easily explained away. It is thought-provoking to inquire why, since the Middle Ages Catholic pilgrimages have mainly focused on Marian shrines. Recent statistics show that the numbers who visit the Marian shrine in Velankanni in South India outnumber those of Lourdes in France.

NAZARETH: A SMALL AND INSIGNIFICANT GALILEAN VILLAGE

First-century Galilee was part of the vast Roman Empire which grew by conquest. The world in which the stories of Mary evolved was a Jewish one, governed by Roman rule. It was a rural region whose peasant villages are usually described as spatially and psychologically “closed” and “narrow.”⁹ Socially, villages were bound together by ties of kinship and patronage. Homes were neither internally nor externally spacious. “Rooms were small, ceilings were low, and outside passage ways between dwellings were rarely more than a yard wide. Life was communal; privacy like individuality was minimal.”¹⁰ Scholars estimate that during the time of Jesus, Nazareth had a population of about 300 to 500.¹¹ The Hebrew Scriptures do not mention it; neither does Josephus who names 45 villages in Galilee.¹² There were no paved streets, no public buildings, no public inscriptions, no marble or mosaics or frescoes and there were no luxury items of any kind.¹³ Village life in this hamlet – an agricultural hamlet of about twenty houses and one hundred and fifty residents – proved to be very simple. “It was a small Jewish village, without any political significance, preoccupied with agriculture, and no doubt, taxation.”¹⁴ It was a technically peasant agrarian society and like the rest of Palestine was under the explicit governance of Roman prosecutors.

Nazareth was about three to four miles from the Roman city of Sepphoris but situated off the main road. Mary was the wife of a *tekton*, a Greek word that designates a carpenter, a stonemason, a joiner or a combination of all these skills. Being primarily an agricultural village, Nazareth, a small farming village in fertile, lower Palestine probably could not provide enough business for a *tekton* but fortunately for their family, Joseph and Jesus would have worked on construction projects in Sepphoris – the three

9 Anne Hennessy, “Marian Mysteries in the Public Ministry of Jesus,” *Review for Religious*, November-December (50) 1991, p. 915.

10 Ibid.

11 Johnson, *Truly Our Sister, A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p.141. I am indebted to Johnson for many of the insights about first century Galilee.

12 Johnson, “Galilee as Matrix for Marian Studies,” *Theological Studies*, 70 (2009), p. 332.

13 Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, p. 143.

14 Ibid., p. 144. See also Coyle, pp. 57-60.

or four miles to the city was a short walk for the people of that time. During the Roman occupation Galileans were triply taxed. It was especially severe to have to pay “the traditional tithe for the Temple in Jerusalem, a tribute to the Roman emperor, and a third tax to the local Jewish client-king through whom Rome ruled by proxy.”¹⁵ In Galilee, under Julius Caesar, as much as a quarter of a year’s harvest could be levied as taxes to Rome. Add to that the amount skimmed-off by local chieftains like Herod the Great and by agents hired to do the collecting. The reign of his son, Herod Antipas (20 BCE – 39ACE) was the political context of Mary and Joseph’s adult lives.

MARY OF NAZARETH, A JEWISH GALILEAN

History has no record of Mary or “Miriam” as she would have been known in Galilee. She lived in Nazareth and would have had no social standing because of her youth, her poor family background, and her female gender. Like other women of her time she lived as a Jew in a restricted environment using the family courtyard or the village square only when men were not present or when the women were properly chaperoned. It was in this small village where Mary, a Jewish Galilean, spent most of her years and as a Jewish mother, together with Joseph her husband, brought up her son Jesus as a Jew. From the style and content of Jesus’ adult preaching, and personal religious behaviour saturated with Jewish belief, we can reasonably suppose that his parents ran an observant household. It was in this environment that they nurtured, protected, cared for and educated him.

It is not difficult to imagine Mary busy processing food, sewing, and gardening for members of her household. Samples of her housekeeping are reflected in Jesus’ parables about placing yeast in three measures of flour (Lk 13:20-21), patching an old garment with a piece of new cloth (Lk 5:36), or pouring new wine into old wineskins (Lk 5:37-39). Her situation was typical of countless women “who experience powerlessness, low social status and lack of formal education that result in poverty.”¹⁶ However, like other Israelite women, she would have exercised control over critical aspects of household life. The home of Joseph and Mary would have been punctuated by the rhythm of daily prayer, the weekly Sabbath observance, and the seasonal festival pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem as ordained by the Torah. As a first-century member of an oppressed peasant society, Mary entrusts her life at a pivotal moment in salvation history to her transcendent and gracious God.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

¹⁶ Johnson, “Galilee as Matrix for Marian Studies,” p. 335.

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A JEWISH GIRL IS CALLED AND COMMISSIONED AS PROPHET
(LK 1:26-38)

It was while living in the remote impoverished village of Nazareth under the colluding domination systems of the Roman Empire and the Jewish Temple¹⁷ that Mary, a young girl of about twelve or thirteen years old, contemplated the sacred and penetrated the mystery of her divine calling.

The story pattern of her call and her commissioning to be a prophet is modelled on that of Moses. All five elements of the story present in the call and commissioning of Moses are also present in the call and commissioning of Mary: the angel appears to Moses in the burning bush; he hides his face in fear; God signals God's intent to deliver an enslaved people; Moses objects; finally God's assurance is given, "I will be with you." Then Moses begins his life's mission as prophet and liberator of enslaved people for which his free assent is necessary.¹⁸

Luke's story, phrased in post-resurrectional language, offers us a definite portrait of Mary and allows her to speak for herself. In her call and commissioning the angel greets her, "Hail favoured one, the Lord is with you" – a formula used to greet a person chosen by God for a special purpose in salvation history; like Moses she reacts with fear and receives the classic encouragement not to be afraid; the messenger announces that she will conceive a child who will be Son of the Most High. She objects: "How can this be?" and is given the assurance that the Holy Spirit will be with her. Like Moses, this Jewish girl is commissioned to carry forward God's plan for redemption, and for this her free assent is essential. As Moses' encounter with the divine transpires in the solitude of the desert at the burning bush,¹⁹ so the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and overshadows her in a theophany by which she "encounters the mystery of the living God, the gracious God of her life,"²⁰ and prepares for the coming of the Messiah. Her commissioning for a prophetic task is in a long line with that of God-sent deliverers at significant moments in Israel's history. The announcement of her Son's birth also follows the pattern of the significant children who are called for a special mission – Ishmael to Hagar, Isaac to Sarah, Samson to Hannah, John the Baptist to Elizabeth, and now Jesus to Mary.

17 Sandra Schneiders, "Call, Response and Task of Prophetic Action, *National Catholic Reporter*, Jan 6, 2010.

18 Johnson, "Mary of Nazareth, Friend of God and Prophet," *America*, June 17-24.

19 Johnson, *Dangerous Memories*, p. 88

20 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

THE ANNUNCIATION: A MESSAGE OF EMPOWERMENT

In Luke's Annunciation story we see Mary in her simplicity and inexperience being addressed by God "who greets her, blesses her ... and makes her a mysterious promise: Jesus the Messiah will dwell in her woman's body."²¹ Luke introduces this powerful Annunciation narrative with the word "behold" – a word that introduces a very significant message, "behold you will conceive"; "behold your kinswoman"; "behold I am the handmaid"; "behold all generations." And that significant message is that the Messiah that has been awaited for centuries is coming into our world when the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary. The words "come upon" in Greek refer to a physical movement conveying the notion of onrushing, overpowering vitality and energy, suggesting that the divine presence is creating something new. The Spirit "came upon" David after Samuel's anointing; Isaiah foretold that the Spirit will "come upon" us from on high (Is 32:15); the Spirit "came upon" the community in Acts 1:8. Unfortunately Christian imagination has interpreted this Lukan text in a literally sexual way.²² J. A. Fitzmyer, the well-known scripture scholar courageously writes, "When Luke's account is read in and for itself – without the overtones of the Matthean annunciation to Joseph – every detail of it could be understood of a child born to Mary in the usual, human way." The role of the Holy Spirit would consist then in the special sanctification of Jesus, making him 'holy' and 'Son of God.'²³ Luke wishes his community to appreciate that the Spirit that "came upon" Mary, also comes upon his community, creatively empowering each of them to offer the compassion of God to the powerless in their community. That same Spirit comes upon us, creatively empowering us to offer the compassion of God to our communities.

"[T]he power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35b). The overshadowing signifies powerful, divine protection and refers to the indwelling, saving presence of God, a presence that protects, directs and liberates, just as the cooling shadow of a tree or a wall protected the people of Palestine from the heat of the noonday sun. When Moses pitched his tent the cloud overshadowed it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Ex 40:35).

21 Camina Navia, *Mary of Nazareth Revisited*, "The Many Faces of Mary," *Concilium*, Diego Irarrazaval, Susan Ross and Miriam Therese Walker (London: SCM Press, 2008/4), 25.

22 See changes to the Apostles' Creed in the New Roman Missal; the old version: "He [Jesus Christ] was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary," has been changed to a more literal, direct and earthy, "who [Jesus Christ] was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. . ."

23 J.A. Fitzmyer, "The Virginal Conception of Jesus in the New Testament," *Theological Studies* 34, 1973, 566-7.

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When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, the cloud overshadowed him. The overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, offering her a message from divinity, was one such moment for Mary. The same life-giving Spirit is now creating a new moment in her life and in our world. The same Spirit “comes upon” us and “overshadows” us today. Like Mary, certain times and places in our lives are saturated with holiness. We cherish the experience of such graced moments when we sink into contemplative silence or when we creatively offer the compassion of God to the lonely and the wounded of our world.

MARY IS COMMISSIONED FOR A MOMENTOUS TASK

The Annunciation story is one of empowerment. A young woman is offered a mission: “The Lord is with you ... Do not be afraid ... you have found favour with God . . . you will conceive and bear a son ... the Son of the Most High ... and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:28-33). Although centuries of patriarchal interpretation have emphasized Mary’s submissive obedience, the Lukan narrative does not talk about a passively perfect young woman overwhelmed by divine duty, but about a self-possessed poor maiden who finds favour with God and is willing to cooperate with a wild plan of salvation. By contrast, Luke presents her as an autonomous person, courageous and creative. She is not paralyzed by timidity; she discerns the voice of God in her life, commissioning her for a momentous task and freely committing herself to her calling. In collaborating decisively, her choice not only changes the whole of her life but that of humanity as well. Every free response to a divine invitation is a faith response, that is, a faith manifesting itself in obedience (Rom 1:5).

When Mary is greeted by the angel and invited to participate in God’s saving purpose she responds to the news of Jesus’ conception with the words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be done with me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). What was unique in Mary was her hearing the word of God, pondering over it and responding to it by her life. What Mary does at that moment is consistent with her lifelong courageous faith and strength of commitment. Luke ends his reflection with a seemingly insignificant statement, “And the angel left her” (v. 38). Mary, a young Jewish woman is on her own now; she assumes responsibility for carrying out God’s mission by contemplating the sacred in her life and together with Joseph bringing up her son, nourishing his Jewish faith, and living her life in compassionate service. Commitment to God’s mission will demand the ultimate sacrifice; she will witness the execution of her son by crucifixion at the hands of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

Luke in his gospel presents her as contemplative and committed, collaborating decisively with God's call for her, and her choice not only changed the whole of her life, but that of humanity as well. Mysteries invite and demand repeated contemplation and the mysteries in Mary's life, as offered to us by Luke, invite us to contemplate the mystical experiences that nourished her throughout her impoverished and restricted life in Nazareth. In the words of Eamon Duffy, "In her conceiving and childbearing heaven and earth were wedded beyond any possibility of divorce; a stupendous miracle has occurred which raised human nature to heaven itself."²⁴ She is the splendid icon of the living God who sensitizes us to the immensity of divine mystery.²⁵ The foundation of Luke's portrayal of her as mother and disciple is laid in his gospel's infancy narrative. Her journey to the divine within was both an invitation (Lk 1:26) and a process (Lk 2:19), always inviting her to see her son and his mission and the daily social and political events that impinged upon her life with more compassionate, humane eyes. Her life was life as it was seen through the Father's eyes. Killian McDonnell catches a glimpse of this image in his delightful poem:

In the Kitchen: In the Sixth Month the Angel Gabriel ...²⁶

*Bellini has it wrong
I was not kneeling
On my satin cushion
Head slightly bent.
Painters always
skew the scene,
as though my life
were wrapped in silks,
In temple smells.*

*Actually I had just
come back from the well.
Placing the pitcher on the table
I bumped against the edge,
spilling water on the floor.*

*As I bent to wipe
it up, there was a light*

24 Duffy, "True and False Madonnas," *Spirituality*, September-October 2001, vol 7, no 8, 315.

25 Tony Kelly, "From Myth to Reality," Talk given at Marist Conference of Marian Theology, Hunter's Hill, Sydney, Australia, 1995.

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*against the kitchen wall,
as though someone had opened
the door to the sun.*

*Rag in hand,
hair across my face,
I turned to see
who was entering,
unannounced, unasked.*

*All I saw was light
white against the timbers.
I heard a voice I've never
heard greeted me,
said I was elected, would
bear a son who'd reign
forever. The spirit would
overshadow me.
I stood afraid.*

*Someone closed the door
And I dropped the rag.*

“PONDERING THEM IN HER HEART” (LK 2:19)

The phrase “pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19; 51) is reminiscent of texts from Israel’s history where persons ponder over the significance of revelatory events (Gen 37:11; Dn 7:28). It also points to the integration of revelatory experience that engenders insight and commitment to a life of faithful discipleship – “the sort of pondering that allows for previously unimaginable interpretations of the events and world around us.”²⁷ Since she was in a bodily, psychological and social relationship with the Messiah, she is too complex a figure to limit her presence to that of disciple. As mother of the divine and human Christ she represents the presence of the divine among us in an exceptional way as centuries of Christian art and liturgical celebration have tried to express. Luke repeatedly invites us too to tiptoe into the sacred God-spaces in our own lives – lives of reflective pondering. Pope Benedict XVI in invoking Mary in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (On Christian Love) prays: “You abandoned yourself completely to God’s call and thus became a wellspring of the goodness which flows forth from him.”²⁸ He then prays that we too may become “fountains

27 M. Ko, *Magnificat, El Canto de Maria de Nasaret*, pp. 23-25.

28 Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est., On Christian Love* (December, 2005)

of living water in the midst of a thirsting world.”²⁹ – a world that is thirsting to end the pandemic of global violence and is inviting us to breathe new life and new energy into our relationships, so that we may live in compassionate communities and experience the peaceful presence of the divine permeating our lives as we live in God’s ecstasy.³⁰

29 Ibid.

30 Beatrice Bruteau, *God’s Ecstasy: The Creation of a Self-Creating World*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 39.

Joy. Speaking of the signs of holiness in today’s world, Francis outlines some of the features of Christian joy. He commences with the affirmation that ‘far from being timid, morose, acerbic or melancholy, or putting on a dreary face, the saints are joyful and full of good humour’. After presenting a biblical account of joy, culminating with quotations from John’s Gospel, the Pope affirms that while ‘hard times may come’ the experience of ‘supernatural joy’ cannot be overcome because it brings ‘deep security, serene hope and a spiritual fulfilment that the world cannot understand or appreciate’. In the terms of the Fourth Gospel itself this is a joy that the world can neither give nor take away.

– KEVIN O’GORMAN, SMA, *Divine Diamond: Facets of the Fourth Gospel*. 2021, (Dublin: Messenger Publications), p. 46.