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Brían de Búrca

Mary, Our Lady  
of Faith: Mother  
of the Church –  
‘the first and  
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# Mary, Our Lady of Faith: Mother of the Church – ‘the first and most perfect of Christ’s disciples.’ (2)

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In Part 1 we looked at texts in the Infancy Narratives that touched on Mary’s faith from the Annunciation to the finding of the child Jesus in the Temple at the age of 12.

The final paragraph of Part 1 is, I feel, a good summary of that section.

“Mary did not grasp immediately all that she had heard but listened willingly, letting the events sink into her memory seeking to work out their meaning. Mary’s was a life in the process of becoming – no final answers yet available. Along this journey of faith, her great “Yes” at the Annunciation must be repeated over and over again, without her ever fully understanding the mysteries to which she is responding.”

We now move on to take a look at Mary’s continuous *developing* trust and faith in some of the texts dealing with Jesus’ public ministry.

## 1. MARK 3:7 - 6:6A : JESUS AND HIS NEW FAMILY

*He went home again, and once more such a crowd collected that they could not even have a meal. When his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, convinced he was out of his mind ...*

*His mother and brothers now arrived and, standing outside, sent in a message asking for him. A crowd was sitting round him at the time the message was passed to him, ‘Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside asking for you’. He replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking round at those sitting in a*

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Brían de Búrca OMI ministered for many years in Britain and the continent. He is now retired. Part 1 of this article was published in the March 2023 issue of the *Furrow* 74:169-177.

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*circle about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother.'*

Early on in his ministry in Galilee, the Jesus of Mark's gospel began to attract questioning and opposition from Scribes and Pharisees and Herodians (Mark 2:7; 16, 18, 24; 3:6, 22) even though he showed himself to be a powerful healer (1:21-45) and teacher (2:1- 3:5).

The next group of opponents to emerge came from Jesus' own family: the relatives wanted to seize him and stop his ministry on the grounds that he was 'out of his mind'. Then when Jesus heard that his family were asking for him, he effectively denied that they constituted his real family and looking around at those in a circle around him said: "*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*"

There seemed to be tension within Jesus' family. Mary, his mother, was there among them.

Notice too that his blood family did not join the crowd who were seated around him, but remained '*outside*' asking for him to come out (Mark 3:32b-34). The family's assessment of Jesus' situation was very similar to that of the scribes (cf. Mark 3:22). Jesus' response was to redefine the meaning of family.

See also Mark 6:1-4 where Jesus visits Nazareth. "*And Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is only despised in his own country, among his own relations and in his own house' (6:4).*" This scene gives support to the contention that Jesus' own natural family neither understood nor honoured him.

The negative picture Jesus' natural blood family received here is troubling, especially for Catholics and many other Christians for whom Mary has a very special place, and family life in general is highly valued. This section from Mark will, I think, always give problems to many.<sup>1</sup>

We must take care not to read into this passage the idea that Jesus did not care for his mother. There is a theological issue involved in this passage. To belong to Jesus depends on faith, not on blood. His affection for his mother is not the issue, discipleship is.

Elizabeth A Johnson gives an interpretation of these passages from Mark that speak to me.

“... Standard commentaries on this passage hold that at the very least Jesus' Mother and brothers misunderstood him. Perhaps they did ... It might just as well be the case, though, that they understand him only too well, and sought to forestall

1 Brendan Byrne SJ *A Costly Freedom. A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008, Pp. 75-76.

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what they saw as inevitably disastrous consequences. Parents whose children take risks to follow their dream in dangerous situations know the feelings well: the fear, the pride, the effort to protect. In Miriam of Nazareth's case, as one Jewish writer observes, 'This son...roams around the country and creates unrest. He does things that are dangerous: danger threatens from the Jewish authorities and from the hated occupying power of the Romans. He puts *the whole family at risk*.' Making this trip, the unnamed mother of Jesus gives the lie to passive obedience as the key to her nature. Who better to have organised such a family expedition? In response to his behaviour, which not only "rejected village norms for eldest sons" but also opened the door to disaster for himself and his kin, she and his brothers took action that they considered to be for his own good. They set out to fetch him home. Propelled by the Spirit to follow his own calling Jesus moves on without them ...

... Miriam of Nazareth, who, no stranger to Roman violence and the havoc it could wreck on human lives, goes to persuade her child out of the line of fire ... Full of concern for the one she loves, Miriam of Nazareth does not have the New Testament to help her interpret God's designs. Embarking on a mission that fails, she stands "outside" with an anxious mind and heart ... Believing in God, Creator and Redeemer of the world, this Jewish woman partners the divine work of love by seeking to preserve and protect a precious life. No submissive handmaid, her memory moves in solidarity with women everywhere who act critically according to their best lights to seek the wellbeing of those they love."<sup>2</sup>

These words from Johnson sum up beautifully all that Mary was going through as she watched her son's mission and ministry develop. She was faithful, pained as a mother, believing but not understanding.

### 2 LUKE 11: 27-28

*Now as he was speaking a women in the crowd raised her voice and said, 'Happy the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked!' But he replied, 'Still happier those who hear the word of God and keep it!'*

St Augustine said that Mary conceived Christ through the ear. The process of conception was begun by Mary *hearing* God's Word and *acting* upon it.

2 Elizabeth A Johnson *Dangerous Memories. A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture*, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004, Pp. 38-44.

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Mary was blessed as mother of God's son, but her greatness, her blessedness lies in her unconditional saying 'yes', both in word and deed to God's gifts to her. "*I am the handmaid of the Lord let what you have said be done to me.*" And remember Elizabeth's third blessing: "*Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled.*"

St Augustine has left us a famous interpretation of this passage:

"Mary did the Father's will and it is a greater thing for her that she was Christ's disciple than that she was his mother. It is a happier thing to be his disciple than to be his mother ... See if it isn't as I say. The Lord was journeying on and the crowds were following him. He did a work of divine power and this woman in the crowd cried out: '*Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked.*' But they must not think that blessedness lay in bodily relationship. So what did the Lord answer? '*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.*' Therefore Mary is blessed because she heard the word of God and kept it. Her mind was filled more fully with Truth, than her womb by his flesh: Christ the truth is in Mary's mind, Christ made flesh is in her womb. Greater is that which is in her mind than that which she carried in her womb."<sup>3</sup>

Strong and amazing words from St Augustine!

### 3 JOHN 2:1-11

*There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee. The mother of Jesus was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited. When they ran out of wine, since the wine provided for the wedding was all finished, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' Jesus said, 'Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not come yet.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' There were six stone water jars standing there, meant for the ablutions that are customary among the Jews: each could hold twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants. 'Fill the jars with water,' and they filled them to the brim. 'Draw some out now' he told them 'and take it to the steward.' They did this; the steward tasted the water, and it had turned into wine. Having no idea where it came from - only the servants who had drawn the water knew - the steward called the bridegroom and said, 'People generally serve the best wine first, and keep the cheaper sort till the guests have had plenty to drink; but you have kept the best wine till now.'*

3 Sermo 25, 7-8. For those praying the Prayer of the Church, you will find this sermon in the Office of Readings, 21st November. 2nd reading for the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

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*Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs at Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him.*

The ministry of Jesus began with his presence at a wedding in the Galilean village of Cana in Galilee. Prompted by his mother, he rescued the situation for the young couple when the wine ran out. We may think this is no big deal compared to situations of human need that he will remedy later in the story. But weddings at the time involved the entire village and also visitors from elsewhere. For the families involved, to have the wine run out would have been a great humiliation. For generations, the village memory would be, “Oh, that was the wedding where the wine ran out!” According to the wedding custom of the time, it was the bridegroom’s responsibility to provide the wine for the celebration. That is why at the end of the episode the master of the feast called out the bridegroom and pointed out that, contrary to best practice, he had not served the best wine first but kept it till last, when everyone already had plenty to drink (vv. 9-10).

“The Mother of Jesus – she is not called “Mary” in this gospel – notices the lack of wine and calls her son’s attention to it (2:3). I find it appealing that what she notices and is concerned about is not some moral or religious issue but the very down-to-earth practical matter of the wine running out, including the shame and embarrassment that this could bring. There is no good reason to doubt that the one we continue to honour as our prime intercessor before the Lord is just as concerned with our smallest as well as our greatest needs.”<sup>4</sup>

At the wedding in Cana, when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to him, *‘They have no wine’*. If the reply of Jesus to his mother *‘Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not come yet’* is surprising, equally surprising is Mary’s reaction to it. In the face of a rebuke, she told the servants *“do whatever he tells you.”* She told the servants in a carefully worded command, that they should put into action *anything* that he told them to do. She was the first person in the gospel to show that the correct response to the presence of Jesus was to trust in his word.

### 4. JOHN 19:25-29

*Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. Seeing his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his*

4 This section on John 2:1-11 is heavily influenced by Brendan Byrne S.J., *Come to the Light: Reflections on the Gospel of John*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2021, Ch 4, The Wedding at Cana.

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*mother; 'Woman, this is your son.' Then to the disciple he said, 'This is your mother.' And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home.*

*'My hour has not yet come', Jesus said to his mother at Cana. In John's Gospel Jesus' hour comes on the Cross, and Mary reappears. We saw at the wedding in Cana that Mary, the mother of Jesus, led the way as the first among all believers. She was the first to come to faith, prepared to entrust herself completely to the word of Jesus: 'Do whatever he tells you'. She is there, faithful, at the cross, along with the Beloved Disciple. They are models of faith and love. "Seeing his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother; 'Woman, this is your son. Then to the disciple he said, 'This is your mother'. And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home."* The passage affirms the maternal role of Mary in the new family of Jesus established at the cross.

"The mother is now part of a new people who live by faith and love – the Church of Jesus Christ. There is now a place and a people where Jesus will be received. The mother of Jesus, 'the woman' has now become a 'mother' in this new situation which will lead the way in that process. Her relationship to the Church is not only as another disciple. She is not 'sister' to the disciple, she is not just another member of this new place and people. She is 'Mother'."<sup>5</sup>

The fourth evangelist has brought the New Testament reflection on the person and place of Mary among us to a conclusion...she is the Mother of the Church

### 5. ACTS OF THE APOSTLES: 1:12-14

*So from the Mount of Olives, as it is called, they went back to Jerusalem, ... and when they reached the city they went to the upper room where they were staying; there were Peter and John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Jude son of James. All these joined in continuous prayer, together with several women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*

In the Acts of the Apostles, when they return to the upper room in Jerusalem after the Ascension we are told that the Apostles *'joined in continuous prayer, together with several women,*

5 Francis J. Moloney SDB, *Mary, Woman and Mother*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1988, p 50.

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*including Mary the mother of Jesus.* Mary is there as part of the Church awaiting the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

### CONCLUSION

The New Testament gives a consistent picture of Mary's faithfulness and trust from the Annunciation to the Coming of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles.

Mary did not grasp immediately all that she had heard but listened willingly, letting the events sink into her memory and seeking to work out their meaning. Mary's was a life in the process of becoming – no final answers yet available. She remembered, she stored, she pondered, trying to make sense of all.

“A young Jewish woman vulnerable to violence in a patriarchal setting; a friend of God who made her own difficult choices with courage; a prophet whose word announced the awesome reversals of God's coming will bring about in this world; a married woman who toiled hard with her husband to provide for their family; a woman with a questioning mind who pondered what God was doing in the midst of her life; the mother of the itinerant preacher Jesus terribly worried about his ministry; a middle-aged woman whose agonized grief over the public execution of her firstborn connects her with legions of bereaved women; an elder in the budding community of the early church. She kept faith. We remember her.”<sup>6</sup>

Mary met the requirements of discipleship in an outstanding way. There is one thought running through these New Testament texts. While Mary is the mother of God's Son, she is first and foremost a disciple, not in the historical sense that she accompanied Jesus during his ministry, but in the sense that Mary above all others is the one who heard the Word of God and acted trustingly upon it. Mary's faithfulness and trust in God's Word runs right through from the Annunciation to the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles after the resurrection. Pope Paul VI wrote:

“First, the Virgin Mary has always been proposed to the faithful by the Church as an example to be imitated, not precisely in the type of life she led, and much less for the socio-cultural background in which she lived and which today scarcely exists anywhere. She is held up as an example to the faithful rather for the way in which, in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God (cf. Lk. 1:38), because

6 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture*, p.36



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she heard the word of God and acted on it... She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and the most perfect of Christ's disciples."<sup>7</sup>

Like Mary, our life-stories are also touched by events which we cannot understand. Sometimes it is only in looking back that we can see God's presence in these events. Mary's story is close to our story. Mary is blessed not simply because she gave birth to a child, the Son of God. She is blessed because she heard, believed, obeyed, kept, pondered the word, and continued to act on it. Mary is, truly, our model in faith.

7 Pope Paul VI *Marialis Cultus. Apostolic Exhortation for the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to The Blessed Virgin Mary*, # 35.

**Going Forward.** The reputation of Catholic Christianity has suffered in recent years for a variety of reasons. However, we're left with a question. Because the Church has so obviously let people down, do we leave, or do we stay? There are compelling reasons on both sides. Expressed more colloquially, it's a matter of deciding to stay inside the tent with the possibility of contributing to change, or staying outside the tent looking in. Christian communities, as discussed in the previous chapter, are made up of saints and sinners. Sinners can do irreparable damage. Do we embrace the reality of failure or allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by it? Good decision-making, according to St Ignatius of Loyola, involves careful attention to the kind of space we're in and how that's inspiring a decision. This chapter aims to look to the future and consider faith based on the four apostolic preferences of the Jesuit order

— JIM MAHER, S.J., *Reimagining Religion: A Jesuit Vision*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2023, p.99.