

The Persistence of Mary

I want to explore why Mary has been so persistently important through the 21 centuries that we have been around as a people of God.

I'm interested not just in why we identify with her, but also, in why she persists through the ages.

To begin to get an answer to this question I'd like to go down a kind of litany of her role as found in Scripture.

The first thing we get from Scripture, particularly from Saint Luke, is that Mary is the first disciple, and she remains faithful.

Luke makes this point by telling us that when the Angel comes and asks Mary to become the mother of the Messiah, she says **“yes”** and then remains faithful to that **“yes”** even in the most difficult of times.

So, Luke says this about Mary: she was the first believer in Jesus; She was the first follower; The first disciple; and she didn't fall away in troubled times. And if for no other reason, she thus earns a mark of respect in the early church community.

Secondly, in the gospel, Mary is revealed as someone who keeps God's word. I don't know if you remember that incident when Mary and her relatives were trying to see Jesus, who was in the full bloom of this public ministry,

and there was a big mob around him.

So, they sent word through the mob, and they said,

“Well, Jesus, your mother and your relatives are here.”

And Jesus made this response. He said, ***“But who is my mother, my father, my brother and sister?”***

The one who keeps the will of God.

That's my mother, and my brother, and my sister.”

And in effect what he was saying was that Mary's claim to greatness was not that she was his biological mother, but that she kept the word of God.

That's a remarkable compliment to this persistent woman.

Thirdly, here's where she gets closer to us.

She becomes a representative of all the silenced witnesses and members of the exploited class.

Remember, Mary lived in occupied territory.

She knew what the Palestinians or the black Africans know today.

She knew segregation, she knew a minority place, she knew what it was to be a woman.

She had to keep her mouth shut while Herod

killed the innocent children of Bethlehem.

She had to stand on the fringe of the crowd while she saw her son publicly humiliated, carrying the cross.

She had to stand behind the soldier's spears that formed a fence,

and she could not get to Jesus on the cross to give him some comfort.

That's why people have always related to Mary in the great Pieta, holding the broken body of her son; people can identify with her letting forth the only thing she was permitted to let forth – a cry and a scream, and hard tears.

Those who are oppressed and cannot speak out because they'll be imprisoned or shot, or retribution will be made against their families, they understand Mary. And she understands them.

Any parent who's worried about pornography; any parents who are worried about people coming up to their children and pushing drugs; and parents who are looking at the values of the media, which are horrendous, and who say, ***"We don't want to live like that,"*** but are powerless and helpless to control these things.

You know what Mary means, and why she persists – because we can identify with that woman who is the silenced witness to things that are better; and society keeps her suppressed.

Fourthly, Mary is a faith pilgrim. And people can certainly identify with that. Remember the story in Luke?

The Angel said, ***"You are to be the mother of God."***

And what did she say? She asked the question, ***"How can this be?"*** And how many people throughout the ages, including you and me,

have cried that? ***“How can I tackle this challenge? How can I survive?
How can I begin all over again as a widow?”***

We tend to romanticize the fact that Mary was married to Joseph and she lost him somewhere along the way.

But there's no romance in losing a spouse, and those of you who are widows and widowers know. Or losing a child in crucifixion. Knowing death and separation. Being a bereaved person.

And you ask Mary's question, ***“How can this be?”***

You ask: ***“How can I carry on? How can I survive life?***

How can I get along? I don't know what I'm going to do.

I've just been told I have cancer.

I've just been told I have a short time to live. I've just lost my job.

How can this be?” You are asking Mary's question,

“How can this be?” No wonder Mary persists.

We identify with her questioning.

Next, Scripture says that Mary is the keeper of memories.

Remember what Saint Luke says? She didn't understand these things, but Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

So as other marauders come in and destroy books and destroy monuments and destroy photographs and destroy names, and destroy values, you look to the men and women who kept the memories and treasures in their hearts, people who someday

will retell our story to us when we've forgotten it.

No wonder oppressed people identify with Mary,
the keeper of memories – they look to her
because the oppressors have tried to
erase the people's names and stories out of the history books.

Next, Mary is a model of simplicity.

And I think part of her power and history is due to this.
Because as we get all these very elaborate liturgies,
and all of these very elaborate doctrines,
and all of these very elaborate regulations,
somehow Mary cuts through all that,
and when people are crying out on their sick bed, they simply say,
“Ave Maria.” It's as simple as that.
So, she becomes just a model of simplicity that cuts through a great deal.

Next, Mary is the God-bearer, and of course, that is our role.

She gave forth to the world the living Christ,
and I think people through the ages
have always identified with that role. They say, **“This is my role.”**
Everyone here is to be a Christ-bearer, to birth the Lord
and give him to other people. Mary did that,
and so we recognize that. We have a kindred spirit there.

And finally, I think Mary persists because she has been given to us.

Remember the scene on Calvary?

Jesus is dying. There is his mother.

“Who will take care of my mother when I’m gone?”

So, he turns to John, who represents all the Christian family, and says,

“Son, behold thy mother.” And he gives away his last,
and his most precious possession.

And we are the recipients of that.

That's why Luke has Mary stand up in the temple

and sing her Magnificat and her great prophecy:

“Behold, all generations shall call me blessed.”

And so, from the very outlandish to the very simple,

Mary became significant, and her prophecy comes true.

Whether it is Our Lady of Guadalupe, Lourdes, or Fatima, you name it,
however you feel about these things, behind these appearances,
behind the shrines, behind even the gross exaggerations,
is a woman who won't go away.

Simply because she is just enormously human,

because she is enormously a great disciple,

and because everything in her life has touched our lives.

There's not a tear or a smile of Mary's that we haven't felt.

There's not a question and a hurt and a pain and a suffering

that we can't identify with. No wonder she persists. Amen.