

Mary, Woman of the New Covenant

Robert Schreiter, C.P.P.S.

Mary in the Life of the C.P.P.S.

Mary has always played an important role in the life of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood. Don Beniamino Conti has already explained the place of Our Lady of the Precious Blood—or the Madonna of the Chalice, as she is also known—in the mission preaching of St. Gaspar and the early Missionaries.

In the course of the Congregation's history, Mary has been honored under a variety of titles. We know, for example, of the importance of the title "Mary, Help of Christians" to the Venerable Giovanni Merlini. For Fr. Francis Brunner, the veneration of Mary was promoted under the titles of Mother of God and the Sorrowful Mother. Fr. Brunner set up a shrine to the Sorrowful Mother in northwest Ohio in 1850, a shrine which continues under the care of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood this day.

In recent years, other images of Mary have been created. Perhaps most notably is that of Mary, Our Lady of the Precious Blood as "*Q'aloq'Lajna' Aj Uk'Tesinel*," her title among the Q'ecqchí in Guatemala. In Q'ecqchí ritual, the sacred cacao drink is served to the chief members of the community, and then to everyone, by the young women of the community. They, in turn, have received this drink from the senior women. It is a ritual which makes and seals a covenant, affirms friendship, and

celebrates life. Fr. Dario Caal of the Central American Mission has developed this image of Our Lady based on this rite. The name “*Qalooq’Aj Uk’Tesinel’*” means “Our Lady who gives us to drink.” In developing this image, Caal has linked the role of women giving life and sustenance to the Community with that of Mary, Our Lady of the Precious Blood.

In this presentation, I would like to explore an image of Mary, related to our spirituality, which was developed by the Adorers of the Blood of Christ (hereafter referred to as A.S.C.) in the 1970s. It is that of “Mary, Woman of the New Covenant.” Mary is first invoked under this title in the A.S.C. *Constitution* in the 1970s, and again in their 1992 *Constitution*. Although relatively little has been written about this title of Mary, the A.S.C. have designed a dramatic statue and chapel to Mary under this title in their convent in Wichita, Kansas.

The development of this image of Mary exemplifies in significant ways the shift from devotion to spirituality in relation to Mary. As was noted in the discussion of a similar shift regarding the Blood of Christ, the move from devotion to spirituality was prompted in the twentieth century by renewal in biblical studies and the liturgical renewal. One of the concerns of spirituality is how we bring the resources of our tradition to bear upon interpreting situations in which we now find ourselves. Spirituality so conceived is hermeneutical, i.e., concerned with interpretation. It realizes that whatever we say about our present situation must be grounded in an appreciation of the best of our tradition. At times that has required a return to those sources, and the capacity to move beyond accretions of piety which give expression to our sentiment regarding someone as Mary so as to forge a new unity with Mary in a way that speaks more directly to our own time. As we saw in the case of the relation of devotion and spirituality in the Blood of Christ, this does not mean rejecting previous images,

but rather creating space for new possibilities.

This is the case certainly with Mary. From the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th, there was an intense development of devotion to Mary among Catholics. The Second Vatican Council had to take that into consideration in presenting a doctrine of the Church. Pope Paul VI's 1974 apostolic exhortation *Marialis cultus* sets out sound principles for elaborating a Marian spirituality today. Pope John Paul II has made the veneration of Mary a cornerstone of his own papacy. In his reign, no major papal document has concluded without a reference to Mary.

In this presentation of Mary as woman of the new covenant, I would like to begin by recalling the discussion of Mary in the life of Christians as was held at the Second Vatican Council. Then I would like to present some of the distinctive features of this title, both as they relate to Mary, and as they relate to a spirituality of the Blood of Christ. Third, I will elaborate this image of Mary in terms of a number of biblical passages where Mary's activity can be interpreted as actions of the woman of the new covenant.

Mary in the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council was convened in 1962, less than a decade after the celebration of the Marian Year in 1954. With that celebration, Pope Pius XII had wished to call attention to a century of unusually intense devotion to Mary.

There was considerable debate in the preparatory commissions of the council about how to address teaching on Mary. A significant group of the council fathers pressed for a separate dogmatic constitution on Mary. This was not surprising, given the interest in Mary at that time. Two dogmas regarding Mary had been promulgated by the Church in those previous hundred years: the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the Assumption in 1950.

This proposal was rejected by the majority in favor of devoting a chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*. The reason for this was a fear on the part of some of the council fathers that veneration of Mary had reached exaggerated proportions in some quarters. In the 1950s there had even been discussion of proclaiming Mary co-redemptrix and mediatrix of all graces. While this responded to the experience of some of Mary's mediation on behalf of the faithful, it would have had serious and perhaps erroneous impact on doctrinal development.^a

Instead, chapter eight of *Lumen gentium* was devoted to Mary as she was to be understood in the context of the Church. Again, a group lobbied for proclaiming Mary Mother of the Church. But in the final redaction of the document that was rejected, Mary was presented instead as a model of the Church. As the first disciple of Jesus, she is in turn for all of us a model of discipleship. Such a position corresponds more directly to the biblical evidence. In the Acts of the Apostles Mary is present at the birth of the Church at Pentecost (Acts 1: 14). For that reason it would be more proper to say that it was the Holy Spirit who gave birth to the Church or, that the Church was born when water and blood flowed from the pierced side of Jesus on the cross at Calvary (John 19: 34), an idea favored among some of the fathers of the Church in the Patristic period.

Much of the Marian piety of the 19th and 20th centuries focused nearly exclusively on Mary's relation to Jesus. What the council fathers appeared to have intended in *Lumen gentium* is to situate Mary more clearly in God's overall plan of salvation, that is, both in relation to the Father and to Jesus, and also in relation to the unfolding of the Church and therefore to us. By

^aA campaign to revive this movement occurred again in the 1990s, but was rejected by the Roman curia.

invoking Mary as the model of discipleship in following Jesus, Mary assumes that place in salvation history.

Mary and Spirituality of the Blood of Christ

Significant in the title of Mary as Woman of the New Covenant is the emphasis placed on *woman* rather than the more traditional title *mother*. Honoring Mary as Mother of God received dogmatic confirmation at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and has held a special place in the hearts of Catholic and Orthodox Christians (for the latter, as the *Theotokos*, or *God-bearer*) ever since. As the one who bore Jesus, her motherhood links her to God's plan in history in a unique way. It also links her to all of God's children. Mary as Mother has been, and will continue to be, central to our faith.

To focus on Mary as *woman*, on the other hand, provides a two-fold focus especially fruitful for a spirituality of the Blood of Christ. By calling her "woman of the new covenant," Mary is situated in the larger plan of God's saving action in our world. Her status for us is first and foremost guaranteed by her "fiat," her "yes" to being part of God's saving action among us. She does not create this action; she consents to be part of it. This larger action is salvific for Mary as it is for all of us. Her fiat directs our attention to what God is doing, rather than focusing it upon her own self. For no matter how central a role we accord Mary in what God has done for us, it cannot be forgotten that she, too, is a recipient of God's grace. That is why the proposed title "co-redemptrix" is misleading at best, and heretical at worst.

But that *caveat* having been given, we can return to contemplating her role as a vital participant in God's elaborating a new covenant for humanity. Even though most of the references to Mary in the New Testament occur before the inauguration of the new covenant in Christ's Blood in his passion and death, they carry a special importance for us because they anticipate what that new covenant is to become. By following the actions of

Mary in those stories, we learn more about what the new covenant is to become for us. For even with the hindsight of two millennia, we must admit to ourselves that that covenant is still unfolding for us and before us. Mary's actions can continue to serve us as a guide to what we as disciples are to become, and what that still anticipated covenant is to be for us.

In a spirituality of the Blood of Christ, Mary is at once a central figure in the story of the covenant, and also the first recipient of its benefit. It is in this sense that the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and of the Assumption must be understood. Mary led us in trying to grasp the meaning of what the shedding of Christ's Blood means for us. In line with a more integral understanding of the meaning of the Blood of Christ within the Scriptures, one must begin with God's offering to us again and again a covenant. It is God's covenanting action which gives the Blood of Christ its special significance, as we have already seen. So this approach to Mary calls us to following out Mary's role in God's action of covenant.

The other side of a contemporary spirituality of the Blood of Christ has to do with how the "cry of the blood" invites us to re-enter the "call of the Blood." From this perspective, Mary as woman calls to mind the new awareness of women in much of the world today. The second half of the twentieth century has been a time when the status and appreciation of women in human society has been undergoing fundamental re-evaluation. In the setting of the First World, there has been a struggle for greater equality of women with men. This struggle has been in turn taken up in the poor Two-Thirds World, which has meant emancipating women from undue subjugation to men, but especially also providing them with opportunities for education. The endemic poverty in the world is one of the most urgent challenges to justice today. Experts have noted time and time again that the single most important factor in raising people

out of poverty is better education for women. Women who are literate and receive education are better able to care for their families in matters of health and nutrition. By allowing them greater status, they improve society as a whole.

For us as Christians, it is not only these matters of justice and human promotion which obtain. More fundamentally, it is an article of Christian faith that human beings, men and women, are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1: 27).

Just as Mary's role in the enactment of the new covenant as found in the Scriptures must be recalled, so too, following the "cry of the blood," we need to pause to consider what the covenant means for us in our own times. I have tried to elaborate a spirituality of the Blood of the covenant on other occasions. Let me summarize the major points here.

A spirituality of the covenant has three characteristics: commitment, connection, and communion. It is first of all about commitment, that is, God's steadfast mercy manifested to us in covenant, staying with us and accompanying us in good times and bad, when it is easy and rewarding and when it is difficult. God's steadfast mercy is one of the distinguishing features of the divine in the Scriptures. Second, covenant is about connection, that is, the establishing and sustaining of relationships. Belonging is one of the most important needs of us as humans, and covenant spirituality requires special attention to our relationships: with God, with one another, and with ourselves. Third, covenant is about communion, that is, going so deeply into those relationships that we discover the reconciliation God offers us, a reconciliation we cannot find in and of ourselves. Reconciliation is an acknowledgment, and a participation in, God's healing a broken world and bringing it to a new place.

With that in mind, let us turn now to how Mary exemplifies discipleship for us, how she is indeed woman

of the new covenant, and how her actions in the Scriptures help us respond to the cry of the blood and to the demands of the new covenant in our world today.

Mary in the Scriptures as Woman of the New Covenant: Commitment

In the Scriptures, Mary teaches us about covenant commitment in a number of ways. Think first of all of her “fiat,” her “yes” to God in the annunciation (Luke 1: 26–38). In the story, here is a young unmarried woman from an insignificant village in an insignificant country, being asked by an angel to play a role in God’s action in the world beyond that never was asked before of a human being. Her question to the angel is telling of the awesome thing being asked of her: how can she, an unmarried young woman, become the bearer of a child of such importance? Yet she gives her assent, not knowing what the outcome will be. She commits herself to a path into the future, because she experiences how God is committed to her.

In the midst of this story, we cannot but think of the struggles that mothers undertake for their children and their families today. Think of rural Africa, where women often have to walk long distances to gather water and to find wood for cooking, then tend to the gardens where food is grown, and then care for their children as well as be responsible for the cooking and providing of everything for their families. Think too of the many places in the world where single mothers carry out all of these responsibilities alone, and what it means not only to be able on a day-to-day basis to achieve all of this, but also what it means to maintain one’s dignity in society in the midst of being considered by some in the wider society as a “sinner.” We see, in Luke’s account, how Mary’s first act after the angel leaves her is to set out to care for her aged cousin Elizabeth, who is also with child (Luke 1: 39–56). Even though Mary herself is pregnant, she stays with Elizabeth for three months.

Second, Mary shows commitment in her prophecy. Her conception of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit carries with it an anointing of the Holy Spirit. Out of her lowliness she is able to praise the great works of God (Luke 1: 58–79): how God works through the lowly, filling the poor with good things, and sending the rich away with empty hands. In her prophetic praise of God, she reminds us that it is women who bear the brunt of poverty in our world, and that God stands by those who are poor even when they are abandoned by the powerful of the world. Given such a prophetic text as the Magnificat, it is no wonder that the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua in the 1970s forbade it to be recited publicly in church services!

But there is another side to prophecy as well. It is brought out in the prophecy of Simeon in the temple (Luke 2: 33–35), where he says that a sword of sorrow will pierce her heart. Her heart will be pierced with sorrow and disappointment, just as her Son's shall be upon the cross (John 19: 34). To commit oneself to the new covenant means going at times against what direction the world seems to be moving, and running the risk of having our own hearts pierced as well. Mary shows us the way on this.

Mary shows us a third thing about commitment. As events unfolded, we are told "she kept all things in her heart" (Luke 2: 51). In having to carry in her heart her own feelings, as well as the burdens of others, Mary shows herself to be a true disciple of Jesus. Jesus invites the disciples to come to him with their heavy hearts to seek comfort and relief, and to learn how to carry those burdens as he carries them (Matt 11: 28–30). Those who hear the cries of suffering of others can hear God speaking in those instances in a special way. We, too, in our discipleship, are often called upon to carry the burdens of others, to carry within ourselves the pain of the world which God will one day transform.

Mary as Woman of the New Covenant: Connections

Part of building covenant, as we have seen, is learning how to make connections, how to develop and sustain relationships within the context of commitment. Mary shows us the way in two stories from the Gospel.

The first is the story of the wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1–12). Here Mary shows herself attentive to the needs of the young bridegroom and bride in the midst of their celebration of commitment to each other. They have run out of wine. With no more wine, the celebration will come quickly to an end. By not providing enough wine for the wedding feast, the families of the bride and bridegroom are showing themselves to be inhospitable, less than gracious hosts, and less than committed to the relationships which such feasts reaffirm.

She turns to Jesus for help, and gets a rather cold and curt reply. It doesn't fit into Jesus' plan. But she persists. There are some things more important than preset timetables. Jesus' timetable will have to take second place to the needs of this young couple just married, and to their future relationships with their families and friends.

Jesus relents, and the wine which results is a surprise: it is better than the first wine which had been served. Struggling to make relationships work, and to sustain them in moments of crisis often brings surprising results. We come to a new place, a place we could not have anticipated. Even Mary, in her persistence, could not have predicted the outcome. In this incident Mary teaches us that our reliance on the steadfast care of God can lead us to places which we might not have anticipated, places that surpass our well-laid plans.

A second incident from the Gospels teaches us something about the other side of making connections: a challenge to what we thought were our commitments. In the story in Mark 3: 31–35, Jesus is teaching inside a house, and is alerted that his mother and his brothers are

standing outside. They have come to take him home, because they cannot figure out what has happened to him. Jesus' life had taken a sudden turn, a turn which has taken him away from his village and his family. When Jesus hears that they are waiting outside, he delivers a sharp retort, saying that those who are listening to his preaching are his true mother and his true brothers.

Our sustaining of relationships often hits moments of crisis. One of the most common to be experienced is that moment when children become adults, and go their own way. This is hard for parents to accept, for families to imagine that relationships could be—and may have to be—otherwise. Jesus in this story seems to call for a break in those relationships within his family that have heretofore obtained. But he does not reject his mother and his brothers. He says, rather, that to be a mother and a brother is more than a claim of bloodline. To be a mother and a brother is to do the will of God. And doing the will of God may call us from time to time to accept another and a larger pattern of relationship than the one we may have settled upon. Thus, we can be happy and fulfilled in the ministry we are doing, but are at one moment called by the Community to take on a larger responsibility, such as that of formation. Having been a formation director myself for six years, I know and would easily concur that there are more satisfying and fulfilling ministries than formation work. But formation of candidates for the future is an essential service to the larger Community. And someone must do it.

In the story, Jesus and his brother receive this rebuke from Jesus, but the rest of the Gospel story indicates that they did not abandon their relationship with Jesus because of it. They were able, under his urging, to find a wider relationship to include those relationships of the past, yet bring them further. To live in covenant means facing those moments of crisis, and to be able to enter new paths while remaining faithful to those initial commitments.

Mary as Woman of the New Covenant: Communion

Mary's deep communion with God, and her deep communion with her son Jesus in the Gospel stories give us models of how to live in communion in the new covenant God is offering us. We can point to three moments in her story which give witness to this communion.

The first is in the birth of Jesus. The picture of Mary adoring Jesus in the crib in Bethlehem shortly after his birth is one of the favored images of communion we have in Western art. It presents a kind of communion that only a mother can have with a child she has born but also, for us, a contemplation of God's wondrous action in our world. But communion is tested. Matthew's Gospel recounts how Mary and Joseph had to flee with their newborn son to a foreign country to escape the madness of Herod (2: 11–15). Becoming a refugee means not only leaving one's home, but losing all safety as well. Mary knows the plight of the more than one hundred million people today who are displaced persons or refugees. To travel with a newborn child to a strange place without any support of a larger circle of family continues to occur today. Even though some exegetes present this dramatic story as a literary trope, I have encountered numerous refugees and migrants who take great comfort in this story: Mary knows what it means to be a refugee, and that is a great comfort for them. Even though covenant relationships promise safety, relationships and care, these things are sadly missing in many people's lives today. Looking toward the new covenant with Mary can provide hope for those so profoundly disconnected from their families and homelands.

The second story of Mary's communion with Jesus draws out these tragic implications. In John's Gospel, we are told that Mary stood at the foot of the cross while Jesus was dying (John 19: 22–27). That the career of Jesus as a prophet of God would end in cruel and summary execution as an enemy of the Roman state was a

crushing disappointment. The sword once prophesied has now pierced her heart. Mary stands there with all the women whose sons are abducted and “disappeared,” with all those women whose sons are arrested on trumped-up charges and left to rot in prison, a dooming of dreams and of a better life. Things often end this way for the poor—crushing of dreams and hopes, with nothing left but the void of disappointment. Her own life of commitment and fidelity to Jesus faces another threshold of communion in facing the end of Jesus’ life, an end which appears to be the dashing to the ground of promises and possibilities. It is in such moments of anguish, where presence seems to have been replaced by a yawning absence, that communion sometimes (but not always) finds a deeper source.

The third story of Mary finds her present together with the disciples in the Upper Room, where the Holy Spirit descends upon them at Pentecost (Acts 1: 12–14; 2: 1–4). For Mary, it is the second account we have of the Holy Spirit descending upon her, the first having been at the annunciation. I do not think we should read this as some kind of reward for Mary having remained faithful. It is, rather, the kind of rebirth we ourselves experience when we have been taken through failure, disappointment, the loss of our dreams, into what seemed to be a dead-end absence of all that has sustained us. To experience rebirth at those moments profoundly reorients our lives. It allows us at some point to see that past, not as failure, but as perhaps what we needed to experience in order to comprehend where we are now. Mary has trodden that path with us. From the uncertainty of beginnings, into the thrill of first achievement, through many twists and turns along the way, into what seemed like final disappointment, Mary, the woman of the new covenant, walks with us. From her we learn how to live through the awe and the ache, the beauty and the burden, the fragmentation and the fulfillment of the promise.

Conclusion

Those who experience the profound moment of reconciliation in their lives, when God brings them to a new place which they could have never imagined in their suffering, can understand most fully how Mary is the woman of the new covenant. In a spirituality of the Blood of Christ, which traces its way through covenant, through suffering, to new possibilities in hope, Mary provides us a sure and steady guide. In her life she has revealed to us the meaning of what it means to be loved by God, what it means to stand with those whom God loves in a special way even as the world rejects them. She stands there, too, waiting for us at Pentecost, to receive gifts we could not have anticipated or imagined.

Mary, Woman of the New Covenant, pray for us.

This article was originally presented at the workshop for C.PP.S. formators in July 2003.

The article as it appears in this file is taken from

C.PP.S Heritage I: Historical Studies, ed. Jerome Stack, C.PP.S.
Carthage, Ohio: The Messenger Press, 2005

~~di Gesù Cristo per infiammare i cuori dei fedeli all'Amore del Nostro Divin Redentore Crocifisso, published for the first time in 1820 without the author's name. Later, after the death of Bishop Vincent Mary Strambi (1745–1824), a Passionist, it was always published with his name. The true authors, however, were Strambi and Bonanni (cf. B. Conti, "Il mese del Preziosissimo Sangue," in A.M. Tiracca, ed., *Il mistero del Sangue di Cristo nella Liturgia e nella pietà popolare*, H, Roma 1989, 291–292).~~

~~²⁸Gaspar del Bufalo, *Scritti spirituali*, I, Roma 1995, 503. This selection, copied by Missionary D. Pietro Torsani, is found among many outlines for preaching sent to him by St. Gaspar (cf. *Ibid.*, 491–506). Thus in my editing of this volume of the *Scritti spirituali* I considered the selection to be erroneously attributed to St. Gaspar, since it is a quotation which belongs to the meditation of the seventh day of the book, *Il mese santificato* of Strambi-Bonanni.~~

~~²⁹*Ibid.*, 190.~~

~~³⁰*Epistolario*, III, 398, Letter 1214.~~

~~³¹Denzinger-Schonmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (1965), 2803.~~

Robert Schreiter, C.PP.S.

¹Dario Caal, C.PP.S., "Qaloq'Lajna'aj Uk'Tesinel: Our Lady of the Precious Blood," *The Cup of the New Covenant*, no. 2, April, 1997, 10–11.

²See for example, Antonio Paquea Márquez, "Maria, Mujer de la Nueva Alianza: La Misericordia tiene rostro materno," *IV Cuartas Jornadas de Espiritualidad de la Preciosa Sangre* (Cáceres, 1999), 90–98; Robert Schreiter, "Mary, Woman of the New Covenant," *Newman Review* 3(2002); Angelita Myerscough, "Woman of the New Covenant," *The Cup of the New Covenant*, no. 14, 2002, 4–6.

³Robert Schreiter, "Covenant: Making Connections," *The Wine Cellar*, no. 5 (February, 1996), 5–12; "Spirituality of the Covenant," *Acta of the XVII General Assembly, C.P.P.S.* (Carthage: The Messenger Press, 2002), 136–151.