Mary and John the Baptist

Our understanding of Jesus in the gospel narratives is helped considerably the more we view him in solidarity with his people. Not only is Jesus frequently surrounded by multitudes, but the everyday concerns and the long-term hopes of those people figured significantly in shaping Jesus’ ministry. In the end, Jesus died because he had lived for his people.

The same point should be made with respect to Mary and John the Baptist. The mother of Jesus is not just an individual with an important part to play within the biblical narrative. She is connected to a line of women that stretches all the way back to Eve, the mother of all the living and (for nothing prohibits our thinking this) the first woman of faith, the first woman to have walked with God. The mother of Jesus stands in solidarity with all the women of the bible, and indeed with women everywhere, particularly with those who are poor.

So too with John. He comes from a long line of Jewish prophets, human spirits awakened and inflamed by the Spirit of God. Yet it was the times in which they lived, as much as the Spirit of God, which called prophets forth. Political and social circumstances served to create the prophet, and perhaps more than any of the official religious leaders the prophets lived and breathed with the life of their people. John the Baptist, without the people of Israel whose lives had come to replace in his soul every trace of egoism and concern for his own well-being, would have been a flat and ultimately uninteresting oracle. In solidarity with the people of Israel, however, especially those
without political and economic voice, John had become a grave threat to Herod’s rule.

From a purely textual point of view, the gospels do not tell us a great deal about these two major figures within the Christian story, but the little they do tell us provides our minds and imaginations with a lot of food for thought. The Church has traditionally viewed John the Baptist and Mary as great advent symbols. Each of them in different ways captures the experience of humanity waiting for the moment of its liberation. John gave dramatic voice to Israel’s ancient hope when he announced the coming of the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11). The angel who had appeared to his father Zechariah foretold of John that he would walk “with the Spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17), while Zechariah himself prophesied that his son would give knowledge of salvation to God’s people (Luke 1:77).

If John gave utterance to Israel’s hope, Mary in her body gave life and form to the promise that God had sworn to Abraham: “that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear.” (Luke 1:74)

Mary declared herself “the servant of the Lord.” She was about to become immersed in the saving design of the God of Israel and to learn, through experience, that absolutely nothing is impossible to God (Luke 1:37). Zechariah prophesied, twice, that the God of Israel would deliver his people from their enemies. In her memorable song, which was equally prophetic, Mary revealed the depth of her own faith in the historical action of God:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,
God had promised her ancestors deliverance, and God was about to fulfill, even to enflesh, that great promise. That is what she believed. That is what she hoped for. And that promise was what suddenly had become really present within her.

Yet for all the mention of angelic messages and people being filled with the Holy Spirit, neither Mary nor John the Baptist were ever exempt from the painful stretching of faith so central to the experience of being a believer. Simeon told Mary of a sword that would pierce her very soul (Luke 2:35), and Mark recalls that at one point she had come with other members of her family to take Jesus back to Nazareth, because they were convinced that Jesus had gone out of his mind (Mark 3:21). The crowd around Jesus was so great that the family could not get close to him. When Jesus learned of her presence he could only answer, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:21). Mary would live to see her son killed, his tortured body hanging for all the world to stare at; but she would also be with the disciples of Jesus in the upper room, praying with them and waiting expectantly, once again, for the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 1:14).

John, on the other hand, would die long before the events of Easter and Pentecost. The great prophet, called before he was even born to be the voice that would cry in the wilderness, found himself silenced: arrested and imprisoned, he would be beheaded for confronting an evil regime with its breach of God’s law. “I tell you,” Jesus said, “among those born of women no one is greater than John” (Luke 7:28).

Luke tells us that at one point John, presumably from his retreat in the wilderness, sent messengers to Jesus to inquire,
“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Luke 7:19) We do not know exactly what prompted John’s question. Perhaps he was scandalized by Jesus’ approach to his mission, for John had announced: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor . . . the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17). But the more apt description of Jesus might have been the hopefulmetext Matthew cited from Isaiah: “He will not break a bruised reed or / quench a smoldering wick / until he brings justice to victory” (Matt 12:20).

Jesus might not have been sufficiently prophetic for John, whose sense of urgency could have been heightened by a foreboding over his impending fate, and whose long schooling in the desert had left him impatient for the scorching victory of God’s justice. John was undoubtedly very different from Jesus, as Jesus himself noted:

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Luke 7:34)

To this difference we might add the fact that Jesus would never pass up a village wedding, with its merriment and dancing (John2:1-11); in fact, marriage celebrations provided a favorite kingdom metaphor (Matt 22:1-10). We could also mention Jesus’ welcoming small children, even infants (Luke 18:15); or the fact that he stayed in the homes of everyday people, like Simon, rather than camp out in the wilderness. It would be next to impossible to imagine John the Baptist singing and dancing at a wedding banquet, and he does not seem like the sort of person to whom parents would present their toddlers.
For all his greatness, John marked the end of an era. Jesus implied as much when he said, “The least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7:28). Like Moses, who could only behold the Promised Land from a distance, John would never taste the messianic era.

What stands out, however, is not the ways in which John the Baptist and Jesus were different, but the ways in which the figures of John the Baptist and Mary were alike. Both were people of the Spirit, people of hope and longing, ready to respond in freedom to whatever God might ask. Both were people of the word. Luke writes, “The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (3:2), while Mary exemplified “those who hear the word of God and obey it” (11:28).

Both were people imbued with a sense of divine justice. John was nothing if not outspoken and fearless, and the sentiments in Mary’s great song of praise were nothing if not revolutionary. Both would find their faith in God stretched painfully: John’s wondering whether Jesus was after all “the one who was to come” and his bitter silencing in Herod’s dungeon, Mary’s learning that the way of discipleship counts more than the way of family, and her being drawn into the way of the Cross. And the faith of each was firmly steeped in the promise God had made to their ancestors.

Both demonstrated through their very being, in other words, a profound solidarity with their sisters and brothers. Not only had they inherited the memories that made up Israel’s history of salvation; they also shared the poverty and desperation of those who hungered and thirsted for justice. When Jesus remarked, “Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces” (Luke 7:25), he may
have had in mind that the crowds were too easily bedazzled by the splendor of Herod’s court, or by the lives of the rich and famous. Like bad leaven, the opulence of the palace spoils the imaginations of the poor. John the Baptist hardly belonged to that powerful, wealthy elite. Neither did the woman who was so poor that her child had to be born in what to us would amount to an abandoned garage.

John, of course, was called to be a prophet. Poor Zechariah! Zechariah belonged to the priestly order, and his wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. John had priestly blood in his veins, but he would probably never set foot in the Temple, let alone offer sacrifice. All the trappings of the cult, the official service and prayers, must have remained foreign to John in the Judean desert.

What might have been most disturbing to Zechariah about the angel’s message was not the fact that he and Elizabeth were promised a child in their old age, but that their son would never follow in his father’s footsteps. In fact, the religious establishment at the Temple appears to have flatly rejected John’s baptism and his teaching (Matt 21:25-26). John’s obedience was to the Spirit of God and his loyalty was to the people, not to the official religious leaders of Israel.

By suggesting that these two biblical figures could serve as models for religious life I do not mean that either John the Baptist or Mary lived like vowed religious. By using the word “figures” I am leaning on how the image of each of them has been shaped by the evangelists. We have very few historical details about the mother of Jesus and the Baptist that could broaden our understanding of their role in the gospel story. There are elements in the portraits of each, however, which religious men and women, and indeed which anyone contempl-
lating a vocation to ordained ministry, might reflect on. Yet before considering those elements, there is something we need to examine about religious life itself.

**Religious life and the Church**

Whether communities are contemplative or active, or a combination of the two, what typifies and unites all forms of religious life is their commitment to, and insertion within, the life of the Church. The most obvious contribution of contemplatives, and indeed of all religious and those who take upon themselves the commitment to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, is that they pray through the whole of their lives for the good of God’s people. Many of our greatest spiritual writers have come from the ranks of Christian contemplatives. Their insight into the dynamics of faith and growth in the interior life, even their psychological insight into the human condition and what it means to be a human being, has helped many of us to find our way as believers making our way through the world.

The active or apostolic communities have served the Church in innumerable ways, not only through the example of their faith and prayer, but also through their preaching, through the ministry of spiritual direction and hearing confessions, through education, attending the sick and the founding of hospitals, orphanages, schools, printing presses, agricultural cooperatives, and so on. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine what Western culture would look like today had the Church not been present to it through the great service of the apostolic communities.

But another contribution of religious communities to the life of the Church has been that from within them men and women have explored different paths to God as they grew in prayer and holiness, and in times of great social and cultural
upheaval have even charted new spiritual ways. Particularly in periods of uncertainty and doubt, of religious crisis brought on by a world that may be changing too fast or confronting believers with too many problems and pressures, religious life becomes a kind of laboratory of the spirit.

In our own day, for example, the Church will probably have to depend upon the experience of Christian contemplatives as it makes its way through the intricacies of a dialogue of the spirit with the major religious traditions of the world. We need people like Bede Griffiths or Thomas Merton, who can give us both confidence and a sense of direction when it comes to approaching the religious experience of non-Christian faiths. Or to take another example, the well known “preferential option for the poor,” which arose from the heart of a church suffering politically and oppressed economically, has become a spiritual first principle—an essential building block of Christian spirituality in our time—as a result of its incorporation within the daily practice and prayer of apostolic religious. In the laboratory of religious life, in other words, the preferential option for the poor has been “authenticated” as a privileged route to God.

Within religious life, men and women have found the spiritual room they need to explore dimensions of God’s action among us and in the world around us. The fruit of their experience, both individually and corporately, builds up the body of Christ. They never know where prayer will take them, or where the Spirit will lead them. But if they were to give up struggling with prayer out of fear of where it might be leading them, or because, like Mary Magdalene, they are reluctant to let go of the familiar Jesus, then ultimately the Church itself is going to suffer.
What would have happened if Charles de Foucauld had shied away from the impulses in his prayer and imagination that were luring him to identify with the poor of the North African desert? What would have happened if Mother Teresa had rejected the insight she had when she saw a beggar dying outside her convent gate? The parable about the steward who buried his talent in the ground might be a warning of the danger of running away from the totally unexpected experiences of the Spirit which God entrusts to us: “I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours” (Matt 25:25). Those were not words the Master wanted to hear.

Both Mary and John the Baptist faced a new and different experience of God, and they responded magnanimously and with deep faith. We get a better sense of the personal cost to John when we recall the religious background of his parents and his being rejected by the priestly class from which they descended. To be a person of the word is to surrender one’s mind and imagination to the Spirit, and to render oneself open to directions which until now have been untested. And who appreciated that lesson better than Mary? When she replies to the angel, “Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38), she is exemplifying that daring yet fearful openness to the Spirit which is, I believe, an essential characteristic of religious life.

Mary and John the Baptist as prophetic models

The first observation to make might be that religious life at its liveliest is also dangerous. Religious life is a thing of the Spirit, a feature easily overlooked because we are so accustomed to viewing religious congregations and orders as solid institutional fixtures within the Church. But the older forms of religious life can disappear almost as easily as they
began, and new ones can emerge to take their place. The words of John the Baptist deserve to be heard and pondered repeatedly: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8).

Religious should not console themselves that they are special and their existence is assured because they descend from Benedict, or Francis of Assisi, or Ignatius Loyola, or Teresa of Avila, any more than the Baptist’s audience could reassure itself by laying claim to the patriarchs of Jewish faith. Or to state the matter positively, spiritual identity is established by a person’s practice, not by religious lineage.

Mary and John lived dangerously, prophetically, for they had both been pulled into God’s ancient yet steady reach toward Israel and indeed toward the whole human race. Only one thing would matter from the moment of their being called, and that was the great promise of God. Within a short time after the birth of their son, Mary and Joseph would be refugees in Egypt, just as their ancestors had once been. But this would be just a small taste of what lay ahead. For John, the future spelled imprisonment and death.

The second observation is that religious life, at its best, is anything but conventional. Some would say it is countercultural, and that point is well taken. But religious life is unconventional because it bypasses the ordinary and not simply because, like a sign of contradiction, it is inherently opposed to earthly power and pretension. The religious establishment did not greet John’s preaching and baptizing by the Jordan with enthusiasm. “Who are you?”, they wanted to know, and “Why then are you baptizing?” (John 1:19, 25). They were offended. The word of God had bypassed the priests and Levites in
Jerusalem; it had bypassed the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. In fact, the word of God had done an end-run around the institution itself and settled upon the son of a priest, who preferred the desert to the splendor of the Temple and the solemnity of the cult.

In Mary’s case, there was nothing conventional about her becoming a mother. Here the eye of our faith perceives something extraordinary, something akin to John’s claim that God could raise up offspring to Abraham from the stones of the earth. “For nothing will be impossible with God”: that was the message to Mary, but it was also a message for the whole people of God. God brings new life to barren wombs and to women advanced in years, and God even brings life out of the normal course in order to give hope to all men and women who live in disgrace, or in poverty, or in slavery, or in fear. By meditating on the figure of Mary, religious steep themselves in the mystery of the God who does impossible things in order that all things might be possible for us.

Religious life, at its best, is a school for prayer. That John prayed is something we can safely assume. He did not attend synagogue services each Sabbath, and he may never have celebrated the Passover festival in Jerusalem. But the desert was Scripture’s rich symbol of Israel’s encounter with God. It was the place through which Elijah passed on his way to Mount Horeb, to speak with God directly. The desert was a place of prayer. Jesus himself would retreat there. And of Mary, Luke records that she was very religious in the traditional sense. She went to Jerusalem to present her young son to the Lord and offer sacrifice (Luke 2:22-24), in the long years at Nazareth she treasured events in her heart (2:51), and at Pentecost we find her praying with the other disciples in the upper room.
At the same time, however, both John the Baptist and Mary had to learn something new about God, something that went beyond what they may have learned from their parents, or childhood religious services. Each had to face something darkly mysterious about the God of their ancestors. Matthew intimates that Joseph found the account of Mary’s being with child too much to accept; he would have broken his engagement to her, quietly, had it not been for his dream (Matt 1:18-21).

It is hardly likely, however, that Mary faced only one such crisis in her life. The episode where Jesus’ family believed he had gone crazy must have been another. What was she to make of the reports that her son was getting into arguments with religious authorities, confronting demonic forces, or incurring the hatred of local landowners by calling for the remission of debts? And when the final days arrived, what a dark night her faith must have endured, as she watched helplessly while those menacing clouds gathered over her son!

To say that religious life is a school for prayer is to learn from the example of these two figures that openness to the Spirit sometimes paves the way for revolutionary experiences of God. By “revolutionary experience,” I do not mean the sort of mystical experiences of the classical ascetics who secluded themselves from the world in order to center themselves completely upon the divine mystery. Rather, I have in mind people who are basically rather ordinary, but the God to whom they responded was a God who involves himself in our history. That God pulls down rulers from their thrones and exalts the lowly. That God raises up children to Abraham even from the stones in the ground. That God confronts kings and princes with their crimes, and that God calls for the greatest debt relief humanly imaginable.
In short, the God of Mary and the God of the Baptist was not a God of silence and dust-free majesty, not a God who was willing to share authority and dominion with the Caesars and Constantines of history, and certainly not a God who craved human approval or official religious certification.

Religious life is a school for prayer, as the desert was for John, as Nazareth was for Mary, and as the world is for us today. There is, then, a boldness to the prayer of religious men and women, proceeding, as it does, from an encounter with the God who teaches from the heart of the world. Religious thus help the whole community of faith to hear with greater clarity the word of the Lord in our time. They are unafraid when that word comes to them other than from the Temple, or from the priests and religious experts; or when that word points towards possibilities of being and doing that seem radically incompatible with our present ways of thinking and acting. We might even say that if religious life encounters no resistance whatsoever, it has probably failed us.

Finally, religious life, at its best, is a realized solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed people of the world. The religious vows, when embraced in the spirit of the kingdom, orient men and women toward the poor and the disenfranchised of every time and place. Zechariah’s prophecy about redemption and about being saved “from the hand of all who hate us” is one that might be prayerfully repeated by every father and every mother who have longed for a better life for their children.

The deliverance Zechariah longed for never came to Israel. But then God’s salvation was never intended exclusively for Israel, either. The only practical and enduring solution to the deliverance Israel had been praying for was not a Messiah as a
single individual, but a messianic people. That is, the deliverance we seek must come from a people committed to the kingdom of God: from men and women who, in imitation of Jesus, dedicate themselves unreservedly to the cause of God’s justice and love. For every age looks for redemption. Every age needs liberation and salvation, to have its sins taken away, to have the yoke of slavery lifted from its shoulders, to have the scourge of poverty and injustice removed from its midst.

Religious life at its best makes visible, just like sacraments do, a vibrant oneness with the poor of history. The poverty of religious life does not consist of an inner detachment from material things because of a universal ascetical ideal that says detachment is good for the human spirit. At its core, religious life spells solidarity with others, above all with the innumerable others who do not belong to religious communities. In that solidarity, something of God is known. There is a lesson about God which cannot be learned in any other way apart from solidarity with men and women at the bottom of our societies. And there is an experience of God unique to making and living an option for the poor.

Religious men and women, at their best, are gifted in the way they point to the presence of God in the most unlikely places. Certainly, no one would have thought to look for something of God in Nazareth! That was the disciple Nathanael’s first thought: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John1:46) The priests and Levites who asked John to give them his credentials surely did not expect the word of God to be thriving by the banks of a river, among the unlettered masses that traveled to listen to John. And because their hearts were hardened, those officials could never have heard that word, no matter how convincingly John had spoken.
The figures of John the Baptist and Mary are rich, powerful symbols. To think of John apart from the crowds who came to hear him, or to think of Mary apart from the generations of believers who came before her, would be to distort the Church’s remembrance of them. They are not just two solitary individuals; they are symbolic embodiments of the hope and aspirations of men and women from every time and place. They are people who lived from the word of God. In the world of the gospel, Mary as a woman represents a marginalized class: defenseless, powerless before the law (Luke 18:1-8), easily cast aside (Mark 10:1-9), often poor yet devout, whose faith was easily manipulated by unscrupulous scribes “who devour widows’ homes” (Mark 12:40).

To imagine Mary without all the other women of the gospel story would be to deprive the symbol of some of its power. But to divorce her from the women of history, especially those whose sad, tragic plight has made them mothers of the crucified ones of every time and place, would be to erase her solidarity with her son. Indeed, Mary is the woman of a million faces.

Religious life is a sacrament of solidarity, a school of prayer, a laboratory of the Spirit. It draws its vitality from the gospel story. There religious life finds the enduring spring of its hope, and there it recovers the images and symbols by which it constantly renews itself. “For nothing will be impossible with God”—a message pondered, tested and verified in one’s own life—are the words to which religious life continually gives fresh form and substance.

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