

Blessed Virgin Mary sets heavenly example

From people outside of the Catholic Church, I often hear the question: “Why do you Catholics make so much of Mary?” The simplest answer I can ever give is: “We honor Mary because God honored Mary.”

Mary, essentially, was the first Christian, the one who brought Christ into the world. Essentially, Mary was the first disciple, the first “to hear the word of God and keep it.”

Mary appears in the Scriptures at important moments. Obviously she was there at the beginning of the life of Jesus as his mother. She was there when Jesus worked his first miracle, in John’s Gospel, at the wedding feast of Cana. She was in the background of Jesus’ ministry: “Your mother and brothers are waiting to see you.” She was there at the foot of the cross. She was with the apostles in the upper room when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Mary was present both for the birth of Jesus from the power of the Holy Spirit, and for the birth of the church under the power of the same Holy Spirit.

Who Mary was as a person, or as a personality, is impossible to know. The Gospels are primarily documents of faith grounded in history, not family histories as we might wish they were. Still, it is fun to speculate what Mary was like, and what it was like to be the mother of Jesus.

Back in January, I received a wonderful letter from another writer, Ellan Reynes. Because I don’t have secretarial assistance in any of my many ministries, I’m not usually able to answer most letters. But I did save her letter. Here are some of Ellan’s remarks:

“As a professional writer all my life, I began to think of Our Lady in still another way. I thought of her as an actual mother of a wonderful little boy, then as a mother of a teenager, and then as an almost grown-up son, about to go into the world to do his calling.

“As the days go by, I wonder if her son ever did anything she had to correct him for ... how could you tell God to stop making so much noise ... or to play with the right sort of friends ... or not to track mud into the house? Also I can imagine the fun she might have had teaching him ... laughing with him ... playing games with him. Each day I visualize some other ‘Mother-Son’ relationship.”

Ellan Reynes then asked me: “Does this kind of thinking appeal to you? Just a thought. Is it wrong?”

Yes, that kind of thought does appeal to me. No, it’s not wrong. In fact, such thinking reveals why Mary has been so popular with ‘average people’ throughout the centuries. We often forget that for most of human history, most people couldn’t read or write. Theological terms of scholars, such as Incarnation or redemption, would have had little meaning. But a mother and child was something everyone could understand. A mother grieving at the foot of the cross could explain redemption in a way that nothing else could.

Put simply, Mary is one of us, and she helps us to understand Jesus as one of us. Often we so focus on the divinity of Christ that we forget his humanity. Mary helps us to ground our faith in a God of history who also works in the history of our individual lives.

Most of us feel that we have fairly insignificant roles on the stage of life. Mary reminds us that God “lifts up the lowly.” By identifying with us in our lowliness, Mary opens us to the God who wants to live in us and through us.

One final quote from Ellan Reynes letter: In speaking about a sermon of a wonderful priest, she writes, “He spoke about Our Lady more as a person than I had ever thought of her, and suggested we not only pray to her but talk to her. I have been doing this ever since, and she has saved me from trouble many times.”