



The Story of Mary

**A Pastoral Letter from Peter Elder Hickman, Presiding Bishop
to the Communities and People
of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion**

My Dear Sisters and Brothers,

The story of Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ, begins as the story of a young Jewish girl in ancient Palestine – a girl of whom we know relatively little. Yet, this story has become a brilliant light of hope and liberation for countless generations around the world. We find a mirror for each one of us in the very simplicity of her life. In the eyes of the world Mary achieved no great historical deeds, and rose to no positions of importance in her day. In this, she is like most of us – caring for our families, working at the tasks of each day, and praying for the ones we love. It is precisely in this simplicity that Mary reflects a sense of courage and faith – a sense of the divine presence that transformed her life at its core.

We recognize her connection to us in the troubles of her young life. Though our Catholic tradition honors her as the Blessed Virgin Mary, the scriptures tell a story of a young betrothed woman of faith, faced with a pre-marriage pregnancy, misunderstanding, and the scrutiny of others. She is loved nevertheless by her fiancé, Joseph the Carpenter. The story continues with the trials of the newly married couple facing homelessness, then political persecution as they flee from their homeland. It is also a story of immigrants who must live as “strangers in a strange land,” as aliens in a foreign country called Egypt. How they resemble the troubled and the poor among us!

Mary, too, becomes for us the connection to the Jewish roots of our faith tradition. Mary is the symbol of the people of Israel. She is the flower of the nation who, in the fullness of time, brought forth the fruit of her womb, Jesus. In the Hebrew Scriptures Israel is espoused to Yahweh their God. Mary gives birth to Jesus, the Son of God, and the Son of Israel. The ancient Hebrew motif in the stories of the miraculous nature of the conception and birth of such Biblical heroes as Isaac, Samson, and Samuel is perfected in the familiar nativity story of Jesus

The image of Mary does not stop with these infancy narratives of the gospels. For we see in Mary an image of true discipleship – the story of our own growth in faith, often overcoming discouragement and anxiety. Like modern mothers, Mary is the mother who loves her son, despite her inability at times to understand him. In Luke’s gospel she searches for the 12-year-old Jesus, after losing him during the family pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus responds to her anxious search for him by saying, “Didn’t you know that I had to be about my Father’s business?” Not comprehending, she faithfully “pondered these things in her heart.” This is the image of faith, even in the face of doubt.

Just as Israel is described by the Hebrew prophets as the Spouse of Yahweh so Jesus is described in the New Testament scriptures as the bridegroom to whom is betrothed the

Church, the Bride of Christ. Just as Israel is the heir of the promises and blessing given by Yahweh to their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, when He said, "I will make you the father of many nations," and "In you will I bless all the nations of the earth," so Jesus, as the son of Israel, becomes the heir of the promises and blessing of Israel. The Church, too, becomes joint heirs with Israel in these same promises when Jesus declared to the Church, "Behold your mother." The Mother of Jesus is the Mother of the Church. The Church is the daughter of the nation of Israel. In Mary Israel becomes the mother of the Christian Church. In her Judaism gives birth to Christianity!

As we honor Mary our Mother so we must honor the people of Israel. As we honor Israel so we honor Mary the mother of Jesus our Messiah. So we can see in all of this that there is no place for anti-Semitism in the Catholic Church. We are to love Israel even as we love our blessed mother, Mary. The destinies of both Israel and the Church are inextricably bound together to the end of time by the same Shekinah, who led the Children of Israel from the bondage of Egypt into the place of freedom, who is identified as the Holy Spirit, poured out within the hearts of Christians, leading us out from the slavery of injustice into the marvelous freedom of the children of God.

For Catholics, as for Orthodox Christians, Mary reflects the image of God. The Orthodox Church teaches that we are being divinized – transformed into the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). Mary is the icon of that transformation – fully divinized, fully transformed by the glory of God. This is the reason she is given such high honor. She is the perfection of the Christian – one so aligned with Christ that she shares in the light of the divinity of her son. This is the deepest meaning of what Catholics call her "Assumption," and what Orthodox Christians call her "Dormition" ("falling asleep"). As she passed from this earthly life, she was fully embraced into the life of God – a future which awaits us all.

In Christ we celebrate the image God's life poured into human existence. In Mary we celebrate a human life being taken up into the very life of the holy Trinity – the divinization destined for us all. The ancient Christian writers were so struck by this connection of Mary to Christ that they identified her with "the woman clothed with the sun," a phrase found in the Book of Revelation which refers to the Church. Mary stands for the Church – a people clothed with God's light. She is the first Christian – the first to receive the good news of Christ and to respond with trust. In giving birth to Jesus, she brought forth the story of the Church – all those who would follow her "yes" to the call of God.

Throughout the centuries, Mary has given hope to the oppressed and comfort to the sick. In the Western Hemisphere, Our Lady of Guadalupe became a tender image to the poor native peoples who were often exploited. Her dark features resembled theirs, and her robes were those of a pregnant Aztec princess about to bring new life into the world. This image of Guadalupe would become the banner of liberation for the people of Mexico – her shrine in Mexico City one of the most visited in the world.

Recently, Marian devotion has been scrutinized, and sometimes downplayed as sentimental – off-track from a supposedly more enlightened faith. Marian images were said to reduce the role of women in the Church, limiting them to domestic life and placing them under the will of men. However, this is not the biblical image of Mary. In Luke 1:46-55, we find the greatest song of liberation in the scriptures placed into the

mouth of Mary, who receives the transforming news of Christ as a daughter of Israel, a people oppressed by others for so long:

My soul proclaims the greatness of God,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
Who has looked with favor on this lowly servant
From this day all generations will call me blessed:
You, O God, have done great things for me,
and holy is Your Name.
You have mercy on those who fear you
in every generation.
You have shown the strength of your arm,
and scattered the proud in their conceit.
You have cast down the mighty from their thrones
and have lifted up the lowly.
You have filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich you have sent away empty.
You have come to the help of your servant Israel,
for you have remembered your promise of mercy...

It is my hope that this letter will lead to a re-examination of Marian devotion within our Communion. Mary is not a threat to the leadership of women in the Church; she is a sign of perseverance through oppression. Mary held to her faith in the face of her son's death, and through the biblical period when the authorities persecuted the first Christians. Her presence with the disciples is noted in the Acts of the Apostles, when the Holy Spirit comes upon them in the feast we celebrate as Pentecost. For Mary, this fulfills the first coming of the Spirit upon her, at the announcement of her role as the mother of the Messiah.

Mary is called the Mother of God. Our Orthodox sisters and brothers put it in another way: Mary is *Theotokos*. In English this literally means, "The God-bearer." Such an image of bearing the divine Christ into the world again becomes an icon for our own identities. We spiritually bear Christ into the world every day through our lives – our actions and our words. But these lofty thoughts remain just thoughts unless Mary becomes more than a picture for candles and devotion in a corner of the church.

The best known devotion associated with Mary is the rosary. It is a simple prayer to follow, but leads to profound spiritual transformation. The rosary teaches the importance of silence, and concentration on the presence of God. The mysteries of the rosary are not just old stories from the Bible. They are images that reflect the various joys and sorrows of our own lives. The rosary is a commitment to prayer. Those with regular devotion to the rosary are transformed into people of wisdom and peace.

It is easy to find short instructional booklets on the rosary – the traditional recitation of the rosary, and the recitation of the rosary with scripture quotes. The point of these aids is to help us begin to pray. This is a central meaning of Mary's iconic presence for the Church: Mary is the image of the Christian at prayer. She prayerfully pondered the events of her life in the light of faith. She is led by the Spirit of God into times of joy (Luke 1), and sheltered by God's providence through dark times of danger (Matthew 2:16). In all these biblical scenes, Mary finally returns to silence – a place to encounter

our deepest self, and to encounter God. Mary's life is a message of hope and courage, and most deeply a message of trust. Such trust is only discovered through prayer.

I encourage you to begin your own Marian devotion. Perhaps this might be a thoughtful daily recitation of the *Magnificat*, from the first chapter of Luke's Gospel; or you might be drawn to the rosary. Some pray before a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe, or another image of Mary from around the world. Different styles of prayer fit our different personal experiences and cultures. Marian devotion inspires us to make our lives sacred by remembering God's presence and guidance through the day. This is the beauty of prayer.

I close by drawing your attention to the words of Mary at the wedding feast at Cana. She instructed the wine servers to "Do whatever he says," – to follow the instructions of Jesus. Ancient Christian writers found inspiration in these words from John 2:1-11, for these words are at the very heart of the Christian call. The lesson goes even further because, when the wine servers bring great jars of ordinary water to Jesus, they find the water transformed into the best wine.

We, too, are called by Mary to "Do whatever he says." We bring our ordinary lives to Christ, and find them transformed into extraordinary lives of compassion and peace. May you find the courage of faith that Mary found early in her life. May you imitate her hope, bringing the love of her son, Jesus, into your own life and into the life of the world around you.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

✠ *Bishop Peter*
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