

Finding renewal in veneration of Mary

One of the marvelous treasures Catholics possess is their understanding of and devotion to Mary, mother of the Lord. This is something upon which we might ponder and pray as the Church approaches the Feast of the Assumption, Aug. 15.

While many other Christians also claim and share this treasure, how unfortunate that some God-fearing people do not cherish and value the magnificent gift of Mary in their lives. To know and love the Blessed Virgin Mary and to give her prominence in our faith life is a special gift of God. Jesus Christ himself has given us the example of how to cherish this gift of his mother and ours. He invites our cooperation with her to present him, our Redeemer, to all people.

We should be reaching out to her to help put us in closer touch with her Son.

All Christians, not only Catholics, know and revere the Virgin Mary in the New Testament. How can she be

overlooked in Scripture? Here we encounter the appearance of an angel to tell her she is to be the mother of Jesus, the savior; the birth of Jesus in a stable; the fretful mother looking for her child during a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem; her intervention at the wedding feast at Cana; her deep sorrow at the foot of the cross; her calming presence waiting Pentecost.

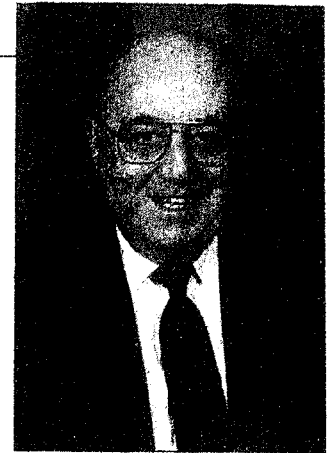
Theologian Lawrence Cunningham has observed: "The New Testament portrait of Mary is, like everything in the biblical text, artlessly simple, tantalizingly enigmatic, and religiously inexhaustible."

To appreciate how inexhaustible the New Testament verbal portrait is, simply trace the development of Marian theology and devotion. From Christianity's origin, both its leaders and followers have engaged in frequent, passionate, and thoughtful consideration of Mary's role in the mystery of Christ and of the Church. Professor Cunningham reminds us that the pursuit of deeper and more complete

understanding of Mary "helps to explode the oft-repeated charge that Mariological beliefs are late accretions to Christianity."

The universal acclaim of Mary throughout history is nothing short of phenomenal. The greatest painters, sculptors, composers, poets, authors and scholars repeatedly paid tribute to her, and did so rhapsodically. To name but a few, consider the inspiring poetry of Dante, the stirring music of Bach and Schubert, and the soulful art of Fra Angelico, Giotto, Murillo.

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Raphael and Michelangelo. They and others have consistently sung Mary's praises in the media of their expertise.

Historically we may cite two reactions that adversely affected our appreciation of and devotion to Mary. The Protestant Reformation is the first. In the words of Lawrence Cunningham, "Despite a lingering devotionism in the writings of Martin Luther, veneration of the Blessed Virgin was swept away with the same vigor and finality as monastic institutions, a celibate clergy, the Mass in Latin, and devotion to other saints. For the Reformation, devotion to Mary derogated from the worship of Christ."

The Catholic Counter-Reformation was the second reaction, and also proved unfortunate by swinging to the opposite extreme. In the effort to combat the Protestant errors, it "protesteth too much." Some made Marian devotion a litmus test of Catholic orthodoxy. They pushed devotion to Mary to the limit, almost seating her on

a throne next to God, or promoting bizarre devotional practices. The consequent reaction was damaging. Some devout Catholics who mistook the extremism as authentic were turned off and turned away from the genuine devotion that is part and parcel of the glory and beauty of Catholicism. Paradoxically some of the extremists were theologically well educated.

The Second Vatican Council restored balance and set Marian devotion in proper order. The Council fathers exhorted "theologians and preachers of the divine word to abstain from all gross exaggerations as well as petty narrow-mindedness in considering the singular dignity of the Mother of God." After rejecting "sterile or transitory affection," and "a certain vain credulity," Vatican II situated Mary and Marian devotion firmly in the total context of Catholic faith.

Christian life without Mary is inconceivable!

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