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We fly to your patronage,
O holy Mother of God;
despise not our petitions
in our necessities,
but from all dangers
deliver us always,
O glorious and blessed Virgin.

—*Sub Tuum Praesidium* (third-century Egyptian papyrus)

Introduction

Imagine Christianity without Mary.

Just try.

Of course, in one sense it's quite impossible, since Christianity is about Jesus, word-made-flesh, born of a virgin. You can't have the Christian story without that.

For a moment, though, move beyond the simple facts of history. Consider your understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, living, worshipping, and serving him in this world and hoping for eternal life in the next.

Imagine trying to do that without Mary in the room.

Even if Mary doesn't play a huge role in your devotional or spiritual life, the results of that mental exercise might surprise you.

Why is that? What is missing when we take Mary out of the picture?

Simple. We are. Without Mary, we risk Christianity becoming nothing more than an idea.

The devotion to Mary that is so important to Catholicism and Orthodoxy is rich and complex. It can be—and has been—explored in theological, spiritual, psychological, cultural, mythological, and literary terms. No woman has been written about more; no woman has been imagined or invoked more.

That's astonishing when you remember who we are talking about: a Jewish woman who lived in the backwaters of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago. A nobody, it would seem, logically speaking. Humanly speaking.

How many women lived two thousand years ago? Plenty.

How many Jewish women lived in Galilee? Several. But we remember *her*. We venerate and honor her. We name our children and churches after her. We hang her image around our necks and in our homes. We call her Our Lady, Our Mother.

But why is that? What do we see in her? What hopes are met in her story? What truths does she embody for us? What has she done for us?

Is she a mirror?

A window?

A door?

This book explores that question, but not in an abstract way. Although it touches on historical questions, it's not a history or apologetics book. Nor is it a work of theology or an expert examination of spiritual, typological, or mythological themes.

Mary and the Christian Life is simply an exploration of what the title implies. As disciples of Jesus, we all are committed to deepening that relationship every day we're on earth. We seek to open ourselves more completely to whatever it is Jesus would have us do here, to live so that it is no longer myself but Christ who lives in me for the sake of the world—the whole world. That's the Christian life (Galatians 2:19-20).

Mary can help us on that journey. Like all the saints, she can help us through her example and through her prayers. But of course she is not like any other saint in one important way: the way she is related to Jesus. She is his mother. She carried him in her womb, cared for him as her baby, child, and adult son, and as his mother, watched him die and cared for his dead body—the same body she had borne within her.

So there is something more about Mary, something vital in her that is accessible to us whether we are a man or a woman, whether or not we have ever been married or had children.

MARY BRINGS US CHRIST'S NEARNESS

Without Mary we are doomed to live according to our own ideas, our own inadequate understanding, our own reductive way of looking at things. And when this happens, Jesus himself becomes an abstraction. The only thing that saves us from the temptation of making him who was “begotten, not made” according to our own image is the presence of his Mother. Mary visits us to bring us Christ’s nearness.

—Peter John Cameron, OP, *Magnificat*, May 2007

THE CHURCH JOURNEYS ON THE PATH OF MARY

Strengthened by the presence of Christ (see Matthew 28:20), the Church journeys through time towards the consummation of the ages and goes to meet the Lord who comes. But on this journey—and I wish to make this point straightaway—she proceeds along the path already trodden by the Virgin Mary, who “advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and loyally persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross.”

—Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 2

We have few moments of Mary's life recorded in Scripture, but each one of them seems to have the power to speak to us, because each of them mirrors moments in the life of every disciple of Jesus: moments in which we hear good news, respond, praise, ponder, suffer, and rejoice.

These moments, these sketches of Mary, scattered through the gospels, are not simply glimpses of how to meet a challenge, be faithful, or maintain hope in adversity in general terms. They're not scenes from a greeting card or a motivational poster. They are about Mary's very specific relationship to Jesus.

Mary's relationship to Jesus is anything but abstract. It is the most concrete relationship between two people we can imagine—a mother and her child. As we consider Mary, as we get to know her better, as we immerse ourselves in her story and the story of God's presence among her people, the people of Israel, the story of our own faith grows deeper roots, opens up, and at the same time startles us with its intimacy.

The reason, then, why it is so strange to us to even imagine a Christianity without Mary is because our faith in Jesus isn't abstract, either. Jesus isn't God become an idea, a concept, a picture, a myth, or an ideal. Jesus is God become human, in this world, for this world. For us. God Made Man in the midst of our human existence.

How can that be? What does it mean? When God dwells among us, what next? Mary's very concrete, very real relationship with Jesus points us to the answers—answers that allow us to open our own lives in our own version of Mary's *fiat*.

Too often, when we are presented with the whole concept of religion, we experience an almost reflexive word association. They say "religion;" we think "have to." Even the best-intentioned of us can be tempted to associate elements of obligation

with our religious commitment. What do we *have to* believe about Mary, we wonder? Why *must* we hassle with these teachings, this presence of Mary?

It might be more helpful and more true to the reality of how the Christian faith came to us and developed over the millennia if we tried to shift our paradigms. Devotion to Mary in Christianity was not imposed from above by religious authorities. There were no commissions that planned out the structure of the rosary and then forced the unwilling to recite it. (Devotions to Mary that developed over the centuries are described at the end of each chapter.) This woman's presence as such a favorite companion on the Christian journey wasn't mandated or legislated.

No. What happened is that Mary's story and identity had its own power that moved Christians from very early on. They found that their faith in Jesus was deepened and strengthened when they consciously invoked Mary as their companion, for in Mary they discovered that the human being who knew Jesus most intimately was one of them.

It is hard enough to understand the mystery of God. God, all-powerful, eternal, all-knowing Truth and Love (and sometimes it is that last aspect that is most mysterious of all to us), so far above us, yet knowing our hearts better than we ever could. How can we know him?

God knows this, and because he does, and because he loves, he comes among us as one of us, speaking our language, touching us, feeding us, laughing and weeping with us, suffering alongside us, dying.

Another mystery all its own. We see God among us, our creator come to redeem us from our sin and give us life. But how are we to respond? What do we say? What do we do?

Enter the girl from Nazareth.

“Rejoice!”

Instead of seeing Mary, on the one hand, as a set of doctrines and on the other, as a set of interesting devotional practices, perhaps we could see her as she is: a gift from the God who knows our limitations, our dilemmas, and our fears. A God who chooses to be conceived within the womb of a woman whose presence, response, words, and actions can help us live out the concrete reality of faith in the One she so concretely bore within her womb, and followed with her eyes and heart the rest of his earthly life.

So what does Mary have to do with the Christian life? Quite a bit. As a disciple, as a pilgrim, she shows us how to respond to God’s surprising grace and faithful promise. But she is more than an example. As millions of Christians throughout history have found, Mary doesn’t only walk ahead of us. She walks *with* us as well. 