



PART ONE

*Toward a New
Spirituality of Mary*



CHAPTER 1

A Sacred Pilgrimage with Mary

ALL OVER THE WORLD, GLORIOUS POETRY, STAINED GLASS WINDOWS, SCULPTURES, SHRINES, AND BREATHTAKING CHAPELS have been created by artists such as Matisse, Chagall, and Michelangelo to glorify Mary and honor her memory. Where people are poor, colorful rituals honoring Mary on her Holy Days imprint the bleak cycle of the year with excitement, meaning, and joy.¹ In Eastern Orthodoxy, thousands of icons of Mary are often said to shine with the beauty of the divine energies. In the twelfth century alone, more than fifty soaring cathedrals in the new Gothic style were named for Mary, and to this day they draw millions of tourists each year to feast spiritually on the heart-stopping grandeur of a Chartres or a Notre Dame. Throughout the world, music composed for Mary and images of the Madonna brighten the darkness like living lights.

How many millions of Hail Marys and rosaries are said every day? Estimates vary from millions to billions, but it is said more than any other prayer from the vast global Christian treasury. Each year, some twelve million women and men make pilgrimages to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico alone, and countless millions more travel to Marian shrines all over the world.

Muslims revere Mary more than any other woman in history and regard her as a prophet. An entire chapter in the Qur'an is devoted to her, and many mosques offer prayer niches in the eastern corner that are dedicated to Mary. Devout Muslims make pilgrimages to Marian shrines in the Middle East and all over the world to pray and be with her.

Among the great Eastern religions, Buddhism for much of its 2,500 years and Hinduism for well over 3,000 years have abounded with adored female figures, wise and saintly. Some are *bodhisattvas*, who renounce salvation until everyone has been saved. But there is no single female figure in any religion comparable to Mary. Long before the council of Ephesus formally exalted her with the title of *Theotokos* (Mother of God) in 431, Mary was the most beautiful rising star on the horizon of human history. Today she is more loved and revered, more represented in art and ritual, than any other woman who ever lived on earth. Indeed, some people worship Mary as though she were God the Mother, rather than the Mother of God.

In addition to these many forms of veneration, we should honor Mary also as a mother of a human child who grew up at her side, receiving her love and tender care.



This book invites you on a sacred pilgrimage with Mary that celebrates both her historical life on earth two thousand years ago and her momentous influence on the human heart ever since. *The Way of Mary* gives you an

opportunity to delve into your own spirituality and grow in self-discovery and self-understanding while moving closer to Mary in prayer. The pilgrimage, which you can make in fourteen consecutive days or at as leisurely a pace as you like, is based on fourteen of the most beautiful and moving New Testament stories in which Mary can be seen to play a vibrant, inspiring role. While this book dwells on Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a model for us, she is implicitly present on every page as the heavenly woman clothed in the sun with stars in her hair (Revelation 12:1), who always hears human prayers.

This book helps to bring to the surface a great underground river of love and trust that has flowed from Mary like divine grace since shortly after her death. Although the book is carefully based in Scripture and Mariology, it speaks in the language of love, not dogma. Leaving aside discussions of ontology, this book limns Mary in her full and deep human holiness, beauty, joy, and grief. Her spirit is always held high toward God, as though her soul were drenched in some special strength and grace, even in times of life's hardest realities. Rumi, the master mystical poet of Persia, explains in an exquisite poem, translated by Coleman Barks, how Mary gracefully bears the unbearable, such as the execution of her precious son:

Like . . . a rose as it opens, she leaped, as her habit was,
out of herself into the Presence.

Mary not only embodies the loftiest spiritual potential in human beings as well as the very strengths and virtues we most value and want to realize in daily life, she also leads the life of affection that we all long to lead. And *she believes*. Nothing can extinguish her faith. As a number of Christian writers have observed, and secular journalists have echoed in publications such as *Time*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *The Economist*, Mary is the image of everything a woman or a man could hope to be. It is this whole and gracious Mary to whom I hope you will draw closer in this book: Mary, the radiant exemplar and living archetype; the one-woman model of everything we cherish and long to be.

THE WAY OF MARY

Here are the 14 steps of *The Way of Mary*:

1. The Annunciation:
Mary agrees to become the mother of Jesus.
(Luke 1:26–38)
2. The Visit to Elizabeth:
Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth while both women are waiting to give birth. (Luke 1:39–45)
3. The Magnificat:
Mary sings her great song of praise, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” (Luke 1:46–55)
4. The Nativity:
Mary gives birth to Jesus in Bethlehem. (Luke 2:1–7)

5. Pondering Things in Her Heart:
Mary thinks deeply about profound events. (Luke 2:19,51)
6. Simeon's Prophecy:
A sword will pierce Mary's heart. (Luke 2:25-35)
7. Meeting the Prophet Anna:
A woman prophet proclaims the greatness of Mary's son.
(Luke 2:36-38)
8. The Escape to Egypt:
Mary and Joseph become political refugees to save
Jesus from Herod's killings. (Matthew 2:13-23)
9. Finding Her Missing Son:
Mary finds her twelve-year-old son debating with
learned men. (Luke 2:41-51)
10. The Wedding at Cana:
Mary intervenes to help inaugurate her son's public
ministry. (John 2:1-11)
11. At the Cross:
Mary stands at the foot of the cross with her sister,
Mary the wife of Clopas, the beloved disciple John,
and Mary Magdalene. (John 19:25)
12. Jesus speaks to Mary from the cross:
Mary becomes the spiritual mother of all disciples for
all time. (John 19:26-27)
13. Waiting for the Spirit:
Mary prays with the disciples in the Upper Room for
the Spirit of Christ to come. (Acts 1:12-14)
14. Pentecost:
The Spirit of Mary's Son brings sacred gifts of
wisdom and speech. (Acts 2:1-4)

Each of these fourteen steps contains a wide variety of spiritual practices, ranging from methods for entering silence to activities that enliven the mind and warm the heart. Among the practices are meditations, reflections, and ancient and modern prayers. There are also visualizations, artwork, mantras, and ideas for freeing the creative spirit. These practices reflect the spirit of the East in addition to the spirit of the West, bringing together the most effective and sacred purposes of Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi spiritualities. The results are powerful. Ultimately, *The Way of Mary* seeks to nurture the seed of Christ at the ground of the soul, just as Mary, when she was raising Jesus, nourished the deep identity concealed in him. Who better than the mother of the Christ can bring up and nurture Christlike women and men? Everyone touched by her love discovers the strengths and energies and illumined beauty of the soul.

The steps are arranged in chronological order according to Mary's age, beginning when at about fourteen she was invited to become the mother of a son with a world-shattering destiny. Subsequent steps trace her life through ordinary and extraordinary events, all biblically based, until the age of about forty-seven, when the Spirit of her Son descended on Pentecost in about the year 33. After that we have no reliable information, although unverifiable traditions situate her in Jerusalem or in Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) with the beloved disciple, John, or at home in Nazareth for an unknowable number of years. Enchanting legends and lovely works of art depict many

versions of Mary's death, but, sadly, nothing reliable has yet been learned about it.

The Way of Mary uses traditional dates for Jesus' and Mary's lives, although they are not historically accurate since we do not know the precise year when Jesus was born. This book calls the year of his birth 1 and the year of his death 33, although he may have been born several years earlier or later, and gives fourteen as Mary's age at the Annunciation, although she may have been thirteen. In the interest of simplicity, all other dates are calculated on the basis of these two.²

TEACHING HER FUTURE TEACHER

How do you raise your child, how do you interact with him, if he is also the Son of God, the Messiah of your people? That question must have always been present in Mary's mind, in one form or another, from the moment of the Annunciation. And as you watch your baby become a boy with prodigious spiritual and intellectual gifts, and you see more and more clearly that he has been called to history's most extreme religious challenge, how do you teach good manners and correct his grammar, as loving mothers do? It must be almost impossible to understand that one's child is the long-awaited Savior, even though Mary is told many times either explicitly or implicitly who Jesus is: first by Gabriel, the angel sent to invite her participation in redemption; and then by the prophet Simeon at the time of Jesus' presentation in the temple

when he was forty days old. On that same day, the prophet Anna recognized who Jesus was. There is no question, of course, that Mary believed her boy was more God's son than her own; nevertheless, it was a question of being the only woman ever asked to do so much.



To say the least, it is uncomfortable to imagine Jesus' uneducated mother teaching her future teacher, but the truth is, a mother is inevitably her child's teacher, and her influence on him goes deep and lasts for a lifetime. Like all mothers-to-be, since the beginning of time and in every corner of the earth, Mary undoubtedly discussed the situation with her beloved cousin Elizabeth while they waited together for the birth of their sons, with her own mother, and perhaps with a sister and her grandmother, too. As the loving wife of a wise and sensitive man, she unquestionably discussed over and over again with Joseph the great issues of raising this holy child.

When Jesus was twelve, and his parents found him in the temple debating with learned men, it became apparent that he knew who he was. But it seems likely that mother and son had discussed this fact frequently and long before the temple episode.

How then to bring him up? Probably, when he was a baby and a toddler, she treated him with the same love and patience and forbearance that mothers innately have for their children. She bathed and swaddled him, fed him and sewed for him. She fixed and kissed his scratches and

scrapes. She tenderly cared for him and was always present for her son. As Jesus grew older, she showed him how to feed himself, how to be well-mannered at meals and respectful of elders, how to behave with other children. Perhaps ingrained admiration for his mother led to the respect for women that he exhibited throughout his life, even daring to speak with a woman at a well, although the law forbade men to have public converse with women. Probably by her example as much as by her words, Mary taught her son to reflect before acting, to ponder things in his heart before making decisions.

What was it like when Jesus turned three or four, and his uniqueness began to be more and more noticeable? Was it a little like being the mother of Mozart, although in some indescribably greater manner, when little Mozart at the age of five composed the *Andante in C*? Mozart's mother had education to help her understand, while Mary was illiterate. But Mary surpassed all women of all time in insight, wisdom, and faith. She could educate her son through the psalms she sang to him and the Bible stories that Jewish mothers of her era usually knew by heart. Probably she expanded and explicated these stories to evoke insights and original thinking in her child. Perhaps she helped open his mind to the wonder of thinking and speculating and imagining.

Surely she taught him her beliefs and trust and faith in God. Especially important in Jesus' learning process was his mother's constant encouragement. She imbued him with her own *gravitas*, her quiet strength of character. She

taught him to be responsible, most likely by example, but also by correcting him when he failed to live up to her standards and expectations. For instance, when he failed to meet the caravan after Passover and instead sat and debated with temple scholars, she rebuked him with a soft anger born of a worried mother's concern.

She helped him recognize injustice, as she herself had expressed it at the age of fourteen in her powerful Magnificat, and she showed him that it is right to feel angry about injustice and to battle it wherever it occurs. It would be many years before Jesus overturned money lenders' tables at the back of the temple, but perhaps there was a seed of his mother's teachings in that emotional moment. Somehow, probably because of her strong Jewish family tradition—all the convictions, experiential knowledge, and wisdom passed from generation to generation—Mary was able to teach Jesus to confront the power of others, be it spiritual, physical, or military, without fear and with inner calm and faith. How many times did she tell him Bible stories such as that of David and Goliath or Daniel in the Lion's Den?

We do not know exactly why God chose Mary to be the mother of the Messiah, but it seems fair to assume that her mind and spirit and soul reflected what God wanted to see in his Son. A loving mother has a vast impact on her child.

The mother of Jesus was willing to spend and be spent in the journey of raising her child, and she is willing to do the same for us. Entering into a relationship with her by

practicing the steps in this book is to learn for yourself that “there is no limit to the holiness one can attain through closeness to Mary.”³

While Jesus nurtures human spirituality through unforgettable sayings and stories, his mother inspires us less through words than through her actions and the essence of who she is. While Mary’s ultimate meaning and the reasons for our fascination with her have to do with her place in heaven at the side of her son and with her significant role in redemption, her earthly life holds immense importance as a model for our own. Mary is the very picture of our human potentials and possibilities, and she left us a path that we can follow.

She is a wisdom teacher, a teacher by example who excites the spiritual imagination as no other woman ever has, inspiring women and men across time to follow her path of transforming love. Of all the words spoken by women preserved in the entire history of writing for well over three thousand years, probably nothing has been as studied and cherished generation after generation as Mary’s song of praise, the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. . . .” Her outburst of joy has incomparably rich meaning for women, since it originates in Mary’s greeting to her cousin Elizabeth, when the two women were waiting to give birth. Meeting at such a sacred time of life, they bonded immediately and deeply, as women from time immemorial have tended to do.

The Mother of Jesus is the exemplar of all human lives, men’s as well as women’s. In essence, Mary shows us all

how to *be*: how to be a believer; how to be waiting for the Spirit; how to be in grief and happiness, in the face of mystery, in relationship to other people, in relationship to God. And she has much to teach us also about *doing*, in the sense of doing the right thing at the right time for the right purposes. For example, when she took charge at Cana, she turned around a downward spiral of events and helped to inaugurate her son's public ministry. Scholars have barely begun to grasp the enormity of her proactive stance and decisive actions on that day.

Sally Cunneen, the author of the book *In Search of Mary*, explains why she models her life on Mary's:

[Mary] is a genuine model to me now as she was not when I was young. As a pregnant mother and as witness to the cross, she testifies to the joy, the pain, and the promise of all human life. She unites the power of what early centuries saw in her as "male" virtue with the demanding human virtue of compassion. Above all, she reminds me of God's insistence that all creation and every human being, no matter how poor or powerless, is truly significant. How could that message be sent more pointedly than by the story of the son of God born in a stable to a poor woman? Yesterday, today, and tomorrow, the image of Mary calls on us to be strong and creative in our responses to the sacred potentialities of all life.⁴

Ultimately, Mary is a model of how to live. One of the holiest and most human instances of this occurred at the Annunciation, when she was invited to give birth to

Jesus. How better to show us the way than through her positive, welcoming response to the greatest challenge with which any woman has ever been presented? She knew it could not be easy or always joyful to be the mother of the Messiah, nor was it easy to find her voice when she finally spoke. On the contrary, it took tremendous courage to lift up her heart in trust and agree to an overwhelming destiny.

Mary's response to Gabriel was simple, yet majestic and overflowing with humble confidence in herself and in her God: "Let it be." That is all she said. Yet these words have become a hallmark for Christians because they speak volumes about her inherent wisdom—and the spiritual potential in every human heart. This example alone of the way Mary is and what she does is enough to explain her role as the outstanding female model of all time, a beautiful and powerful star who outshines the world's entire heritage of queens, heroines, and goddesses.

Let us thank God that Mary shines over the sea of the soul. Let us pray with Pope John Paul II, who loved Mary and dedicated his life to her: *Totus tuus*, "all yours." Mary, I am all yours.



CHAPTER 2

A Path We Can Follow

BEFORE WE TURN TO THE STEPS ON *The Way of Mary*, let us consider some areas that will aid us in our journey. Familiarity with these will prepare us for what comes in the steps.

FREEDOM OF THE SPIRITUAL INTELLECT

A beautiful painting of Mary by Georges de La Tour called *The Education of the Virgin* (now in the Frick Collection in New York) portrays Mary as a young student absorbed in book learning under the tutelage of her mother. Light pours from Mary's face, and she holds a candle in her hand, hinting at the illumination she both brings to and receives from her education. Of course, in real life, neither Mary nor her mother would have received any formal education, but de La Tour's radiant scene depicts Mary convincingly as being deep in thought while her eyes shine with love, and she is clearly very close to God. Today we would call the remarkable attribute that de La Tour makes visible her great spiritual intellect.

In Mary, the spiritual intellect is free and active in everyday life, as it can be in us.

One of the Christian mystics remarked, "See how our eyes shine when we talk about God." The more we converse

in the family or in our community or with friends about divine things, the more we develop our spiritual intellect. The more we look, the more we are able to see. The more we pray and search for God's holiness in everything and everyone, the closer we come to having a clear and open mind that, like Mary's, reflects the light of God.

THE SACRED FEMININE

It is in part because of Mary's perfect embodiment of the feminine and her vast richness of female experience that art, music, literature, and history have perpetuated her story, generation after generation, for two millennia. Today's electronic media show clearly that no other woman has ever been as revered, loved, and prayed to as she.

The New Testament depicts Mary's femininity in many stories, and they are all reimagined and retold in this book over the course of the fourteen steps. For example, her meeting with Elizabeth on Day 2 of the pilgrimage records deep feelings of intimacy and joy in another woman's company. Day 3, still with Elizabeth, shows the feminine ease of connectedness. At Cana on Day 10, her profoundly felt compassion and caring save a newly married bride and groom from embarrassment. On Day 1, the power of female intuition helps Mary say yes at the Annunciation. In the Upper Room on Day 13, when she prays with the disciples for the Spirit of Christ to come, her capacity to wait evokes thousands of years of women waiting: waiting for the right partner, waiting for a sick person to heal or

for a dying person to die, waiting for a husband to return, waiting for a child to be born, waiting for the children to come home from school, waiting for a daughter to leave home to marry, waiting to sew the final thread in a beautiful quilt of life.

It is especially significant that Days 1 through 4, almost a third of the pilgrimage, are concerned with the miracle and wonder of the female body, conceiving and growing a child inside, giving birth, and feeding the baby milk made inside herself. It is important to realize, however, that the uniquely feminine imagery of pregnancy and all that it entails applies not only to women who become mothers. It applies as fully to all other women and also to all men, because it symbolizes the fullness of the divine in Mary—precisely as it symbolizes the indwelling of Christ in ourselves.

THINKING WITH LOVE

When something profound occurred in Mary's life, when an event was amazing, mysterious, confusing, or painful, she turned inward to consider it contemplatively in the silence of God. It is likely that she trained herself when she was very young to pause and turn inward to search for the truth and understand the experience before speaking or reacting, before reaching conclusions, or before making a superficial response.⁵ It is as though she wanted, first, to drink from the soul's inner well of wisdom that transforms ordinary human behavior into a spiritual act. So you will

find as you follow *The Way of Mary* that there is a moment of spiritual surrender between an experience and her response to it that creates enormous interior space for not only grace to enter, but also God's love. A poem about Mary by the masterful poet Rumi speaks movingly about these kinds of issues. In the poem, he imagines Mary at the Incarnation, confronting Gabriel's frightening surprise with great holiness, saying to herself before she replies to the angel: "I'll hide inside God." This is a beautiful example of *thinking with love*, and Rumi, like hundreds of Christian saints, urges us to do the same, to be like Mary, to say what Mary said, to think and speak lovingly.

Another example of *thinking with love* comes from a non-Christian friend who gave me the following account of a meeting he attended with the Dalai Lama:

The Dalai Lama was in a conference with five people when a monk interrupted to give him a message. The Dalai Lama wept for several minutes, then informed the group that the previous night, Chinese soldiers had tortured and killed 120 Tibetan monks and nuns. He finished by bowing his head and saying, "Now let us pray for the Chinese."

If you have explored the rooms of your soul with a reliable spiritual guide, you may have perceived a beauty in the soul that is mellow, like candlelight at dusk. Mary radiates this loveliness as no one else, and she can bring it out in ourselves. Emulate her way of *thinking with love*, and she will be there in your striving.