



Truly Our Sister: A Conversation with Elizabeth Johnson on Mary

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I was raised in a Lutheran home, educated at a Lutheran college, and trained at a Lutheran seminary. During much of that time, it never dawned on me that so many Catholic parishes were St. Mary's this or that, while no Lutheran parishes that I knew of bore this name. Mary for me was the mother of Jesus, a woman brought out for the Christmas pageant each year, sometimes mentioned if she came up in the pericope for a given Sunday, but generally, a woman revered and petitioned by that other group, the Catholics.

Somehow, along the way, Mary came to play a larger role in my devotional life. The rosary began to intrigue me, I read around in mariology, tried to take a class on the topic while at the Washington House of Studies in D.C. (but couldn't get in), read around in the doctrine of the Theotokos, and all the while, slowly became sympathetic to the Catholic devotion to Mary.

I am not alone in this devotion. I have Lutheran friends in graduate school who specialize in mariology as an avocational theological interest. A Lutheran woman and colleague in missions asked for a rosary for her birthday. And more than one friend, all now former Lutherans, have converted either to Orthodoxy or Catholicism, either way increasing their Marian devotion and practice.

During this time of increased devotion to Mary, I knew I was vulnerable to

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the myriad ways Marian devotion can tend towards sentimentalism and romanticism. Furthermore, so much of what passes for the doctrine of Mary is influenced and shaped by individual and communal experiences of Marian appearances, post-biblical reflections on Mary and her life, and various tendencies towards the idealization of an eternal feminine.

Thus, it was with delight that I discovered, quite by accident during an amazon.com moment, Elizabeth Johnson's *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*.¹ Professor Johnson does not seek to present the full teaching of the Catholic church on Mary. Instead, after brief reflections on what she calls "fragments from the rubble," Johnson proceeds with "a modest proposal," which is precisely and skillfully introduced in the opening sentence of her book. "This book proposes that one fruitful approach to the theology of Mary, historically the mother of Jesus, called in faith the *Theotokos* or God-bearer, is to envision her as a concrete woman of our history who walked with the Spirit" (xiii). As a result, the bulk of her book is devoted to historical inquiries into Galilee and Mary's political-economic world, Second Temple Judaism, and the social-cultural world of women. The final 114 pages of her book are devoted to close readings of biblical texts evoking the "dangerous memory of Mary," and finally presenting Mary as "Friend of God and Prophet."

What follows is an extended e-mail dialogue with Professor Johnson, to which she graciously consented in the summer of 2004, following close on the heels of the publication of her book.

CLINT: If I am reading you correctly, it is not necessary to understand the virgin birth as parthenogenesis in order to confess the virgin birth in faith. Rather, virginity has to do with independence for the woman, and is related to Mary's free assent to the work of the Spirit in making her the *Theotokos*. Is this correct?

ELIZABETH: I'm not sure you hit the nail on the head with this one, though what you say does reflect some aspects of what I think. Basically, the virginal conception (which is different from the virgin birth) is a christological truth, not a doctrine about Mary. In Scripture, as I try to show on pp. 251–254, the Spirit's overshadowing Mary signals that God is doing a new thing here. God is taking the initiative. As in Gen 1 when the Spirit moves over the chaotic waters and in Exodus with the cloud and pillar of fire leading the people and in the transfiguration scene in the gospels, the words used by Luke point to the creative presence and action of God doing a new thing in the world. The conception of Jesus told in this language means that who Christ is cannot be traced to the efforts of human beings alone. His origin is in God. He comes to us as a gift of God, at the Creator Spirit's own initiative. It's kind of like *sola gratia* in a different setting.

As you note, women today also read the scene as a marvelous story of how

¹Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

God and a woman can bring about the Messiah, without the help of men, which symbolizes both women's spiritual empowerment and also a critique of patriarchal power. This is a great gain toward understanding the proper relationships among human beings.

But the heart of the text is theological, saying a truth about Christ.

CLINT: I'd like to hit the nail on the head with this one, so we'll try a second time (and point taken, the virginal conception is a different issue than the virgin birth). I'm not quite sure, given the context of its usage, what Carsten Colpe means when he insists that the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary is "the opposite of human procreation" (253). I understand that it is different, but why opposite? To ask it another way, you emphasize that God is not a sexual partner but a creative power in the begetting of Jesus, but why is God's being a creative power set in opposition to the procreative understanding traditionally ascribed to the Holy Spirit in the virginal conception? Or we could point out what might be obvious—God is present and "creative" in many situations, and God's Spirit is with us, empowering and protecting in many situations as well. But humans, at least a vast majority of the time, only experience the procreateness of God through childbearing when there is sexual intercourse involved (or the technologized versions of the same). So what about Mary?

ELIZABETH: Regarding the creative action of God and procreation: As I point out on pp. 227–233, thinkers from the second century on have put forth at least four interpretations, namely, that the child was conceived by Mary and Joseph having sexual relations, or that an unknown man seduced her, or that she was raped by the Roman soldier Panthera, or that this was a biological miracle. This last became the teaching of the church. Even here, however, no mechanism is ever described. Given that the Holy Spirit is the creative agent and given that there is a tradition of considering the Spirit in feminine imagery, it is too naive to posit the Spirit as the male sexual partner of Mary.

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My fundamental position about the historical root of the virginal conception agrees with the biblical scholar Joseph Fitzmyer: "What really happened? We'll never know." Since the popular imagination has slipped into the idea that God acted as the male sexual partner in this conception, I spend a lot of energy deconstructing this notion. This does not mean that God could not have done so. There is no opposition between the creative action of God and procreation, in principle. My point is, though, that such is not the theological heart of the Christian belief: "Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary."

CLINT: Proclamation and preaching are important and integral loci of the Lu-

theran tradition. When I read your book and then note the placement of the Magnificat at the beginning of Luke, it is my sense that Mary is one of the first preachers in the gospels, and certainly the first female preacher. Can you say more about what this means for the ecclesiology of the church as it relates to gender?

ELIZABETH: The implications of the Magnificat for women in the church are many (271–274). Fundamentally, these words signal that the lowly will be lifted up. Insofar as women have not functioned or been treated equally in the churches, either in theory or practice, they count among the lowly (though thankfully that is beginning to change). The Magnificat urges even greater efforts in this regard, in light of God’s design revealed in this song.

CLINT: From an interpretive/theological perspective, is there a difference between preaching (say the preaching that goes on in Acts, for example) and prophetic singing (the songs sung by Hannah, Mary, etc.)? How does this relate to the ordination practices of our churches?

ELIZABETH: Obviously, there are differences among the churches here. I also draw attention to the feminist critique I made of Luke-Acts on pp. 213–216 and 301–302, in view of which Luke is not a reliable historical guide to what women did and how they preached in the early decades of the church. Luke had a different agenda. But women did preach in an apostolic way, even though he did not see fit to record this. So in truth, I do not see any direct connection to the ordination practices of the churches.

CLINT: My question here has more to do with the fact that Mary speaks/sings the Magnificat than it does with the actual content of what she speaks forth (as important as that content is). If we look at the text from a rhetorical perspective, it is a song and sermon placed very early in the Gospel of Luke, and placed on the lips of Mary. If we take Luther’s observation to heart, that “she sang it not for herself alone but for all of us, to sing it after her,” should we not say, and encourage the church to practice, the continued singing of this song not by a solo female voice with male priestly accompaniment, but rather with the full voice of the choir summoned forth by God to preach the gospel?

ELIZABETH: I agree—the Magnificat is a song for the whole church to sing.

CLINT: How has your participation in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue influenced the shape of your mariological proposal?

ELIZABETH: For eight years the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue dealt with the question of Mary and the saints. I learned ever so much by participating—about the sources we both use, the different methods we use to read those sources, and what common ground we might share. The resulting book, *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary*,²

²H. George Anderson et al., *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992).

tells the tale. For me, this experience of ecumenical dialogue did shape my proposal about Mary in myriad ways. The feminist reflection of women around the world also shaped my proposal. I cannot really say which was more influential.

CLINT: I can see an influence of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue as well as the influence of feminist and other liberation perspectives on your proposal. Would you say you are also influenced by post-structuralist or neoliberal proposals in any way? I see this influence especially in the early part of your work, your emphasis on “fragments in the rubble” and your subsequent “modest proposal.”

ELIZABETH: Both “fragments among the rubble” and my “modest proposal” came to me not from post-structuralism but from feminist theory. To universalize one’s own experience is oppressive to others, as women have learned from centuries of male domination in Christian thought.

CLINT: Many readers of *Word & World* are Lutheran pastors and laypeople. Can you share (a) the most significant thing you learned from your Lutheran interlocutors as you participated in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue and (b) the one thing you would like to share with this audience regarding the future of Marian theology in the life of the Lutheran churches?

ELIZABETH: Sorry, but there is not one single thing that stands out in my mind that I learned about Mary from this dialogue. I did learn about the heart and soul of the Lutheran Christian vision; what makes Lutherans “tick” spiritually. And I learned how to engage in dialogue from a Catholic perspective with the Lutheran tradition of faith.

As I have written elsewhere, as a result of the Reformation disputes, Catholics developed a severe case of fixation on Mary, and Protestants developed a severe case of amnesia. The time is now upon us for these polemical stands to melt away and for us to seek new understanding together. My book hopes to make a contribution to that goal. Other new books by Protestants on Mary, such as *Blessed One*³ and *Mary, Mother of God*⁴ (a collection of ecumenical essays dealing with the doctrinal title of “Mother of God,” most of them from a biblical perspective; many good insights; valuable also for “breaking the ice” and bringing this subject into Lutheran conversation) are attempting the same thing. The future of a theology of Mary in the churches should be that it has a gentle, empowering place in our overall appreciation of the word of God.

CLINT: In addition to your words “gentle and empowering,” I might add “win-some,” because your modest proposal is that as well. It has certainly encouraged me to challenge in my own theological work the selective amnesia so common to Lutherans. As you evoke the “dangerous memory of Mary,” you have as your goal a “multifaceted, living memory-image of Mary within the cloud of witnesses that

³Beverley Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, eds., *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

⁴Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Mary, Mother of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

shares in the quality of ‘danger’ insofar as it awakens resistance, births wisdom, and inspires hope for the flourishing of women, indeed of all human beings and the earth, as beloved of God” (217). What follows this quote is really, if I might use the idiom, the meat and potatoes of your book, and it is simultaneously gentle, empowering, and winsome. How do you see these texts speaking particularly to the Lutheran amnesiacs? What do we especially need to hear?

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ELIZABETH: To understand that the confession of salvation *solus Christus, sola gratia*, does not preclude relationship with our fellow redeemed sinners in the communion of saints, including Mary; to take more seriously the biblical texts about Miriam of Nazareth; to weave her into liturgy and preaching in appropriate ways, along with Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the other disciples, whose fidelity and creativity carried the life and message of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ forward into history.

CLINT: Have you had a chance to read *The Virgin of Guadalupe*⁵ by Maxwell E. Johnson? It is making the rounds in my colleague group, especially those pastors working with significant Hispanic populations in Chicago, Madison, and Milwaukee. Maxwell Johnson is a well-respected theologian in this area.

ELIZABETH: I have not read Maxwell’s book on Guadalupe. About apparitions, they belong to a different type of devotion than the approach I am working out in *Truly Our Sister*. Elsewhere I have written about their value. But they do not arise in an approach that is based on Scripture, that searches for the historical woman who responded to the Spirit in her own time and place, and that remembers her as our companion on the journey today.

CLINT: Your key theological insight, that “Mary is a woman of Spirit,” has both eschatological and communal dimensions. You understand Spirit-Sophia as “the living God who is still here, the ever-coming power of the future acting to bring all things to fulfillment...[as] empower[ing] profound interconnection between all manner of creatures as history rolls on” (306). Here you have put your finger on two profound insights of twentieth-century reflections on the Spirit: God’s Spirit as one coming from the future in freedom, and God’s Spirit as profoundly grounding *communio*, both in God and in God’s life with God’s people and God’s creation. It is my understanding that your previous books go into some of these topics in greater depth. Can you comment?

⁵Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Virgin of Guadalupe: Theological Reflections of an Anglo-Lutheran Liturgist* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

ELIZABETH: The Triune God is a mystery of relation, of deep, incomprehensible relation at the heart of the universe. We sum it up by saying, “God is Love.” In my book *She Who Is*,⁶ I explore at length what this means for human life and society, including male–female relationships. In *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*,⁷ I bring this into the natural world. And in *Friends of God and Prophets*,⁸ where the Spirit is the heart of the communion between the living and the dead, I trace the eschatological dimensions.

CLINT: Finally, now that the book has been out for a while, what have been some surprises/challenges/new insights that have come about through a public readership reading the book?

ELIZABETH: *Truly Our Sister* is currently being translated into German, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Greek(!). By now I have received written responses from readers of the English version on literally every continent except Antarctica, e.g., Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, India, Ireland, England, Germany, Spain, South Africa, Ghana, Mexico, Peru, Australia, Canada, and across the United States. The book was just awarded “Outstanding Book of the Year” by the College Theology Society (June 2004), and received the book award in the “Academic” category from the Catholic Press Association. In addition, I cannot keep up with the invitations to come and speak about this subject.

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The surprise in all this for me has been how intensely positive the response has been. Not just positive, but over the top. Many Catholics had given up reference to Mary in their own faith orientation because of the traditional type of devotion and theology that seemed “mushy and sentimental.” Many more mature Catholic women have developed an antipathy to Mary because preaching and magisterial teaching, emphasizing her obedience, have “used her as a stick to beat smart girls with” (Mary Gordon). To discover that there are rock-solid grounds in Scripture for reference to her and to discover that she can be liberating to women and to discover that her dangerous memory can empower the whole church—well, it seems many people took to this approach “like a flow of water on thirsty ground” (from one letter). Some, having been fed on a diet of Renaissance art and American

⁶Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

⁷Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist, 1993).

⁸Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

kitsch, really love the historical approach, rediscovering her village and Jewish roots. One woman who runs a soup kitchen in Houston, Texas, wrote that she sees such connections between the poverty in Galilee and in the inner city where her clients struggle to survive. A missionary in Peru wrote that the social justice orientation of the book had changed the preaching of their team. One priest in Portland, Oregon, wrote to say he had used this book in giving a weekend retreat to eighty women; they loved it so much they didn't want to leave. The letters are wonderful.

My hope—and warning—is that in rediscovering Mary according to their own theological tradition, Lutherans do not repeat some of the mistakes that Catholics are trying to get out from under, especially in terms of gender stereotyping. This is a book written with the vision of women and men together forming the church as a discipleship of equals. That is part of its attraction, I think, because such a state is still a dream in the Catholic church.

CLINT: What is your next major theological writing project? Has writing this book sent you in any new directions for future work?

ELIZABETH: My next writing project is in the field of God and ecology, environmental ethics. Like the Mary book, this is a subject I have been teaching for some time, and would like to explore in a book about the theology of God. ⊕

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