



The Virgin Mary for Luther and Today¹

BETH KREITZER

O Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, you were nothing and all despised; yet God in his grace regarded you and worked such great things in you. You were worthy of none of them, but the rich and abundant grace of God was upon you, far above any merit of yours. Hail to you!²

The Bible is complicated. To start with, it's not a book, but a whole library. Would anyone expect all the books in a library to agree or

¹ In memory of my dad, John, who was always curious about everything: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor 13:12).

² Martin Luther, "The Magnificat, 1521," ed. Beth Kreitzer, in *The Annotated Luther: Pastoral Writings*, ed. Mary Jane Haemig (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 4:342.

Devotion to Mary was already important in the early church, and by the time of Luther had grown into a major part of late medieval piety. Luther was distressed by many of the extra-biblical elements of Marian devotion, and sought to return to the biblical portrayal of Mary's faith and obedience to the vocation to which God had called her.

even make sense together? The writings in the Bible obviously have more connection than most other books that might be haphazardly placed onto the same shelf, but the task still provides a grand challenge to biblical interpreters. When Martin Luther was appointed as professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg in 1512, interpreting the Bible and explaining it to students and others became his job. When he accepted the position, he made a promise to interpret scriptures faithfully, and he took this role and this promise extremely seriously. It was this responsibility to interpret the Bible truthfully and as guided by the Holy Spirit, as well as his teaching role as a professor and a pastor, that undergirded his challenge to the church and his unrelenting drive to rethink all of Christian teaching and practice based on his scriptural insights.

We might imagine that after finally achieving his breakthrough insight—his “tower experience,” as it is sometime known—the implications of “saved by faith through grace alone” would have become immediately clear to Luther; that this final push perhaps led to clarity the way a domino falling starts a chain reaction; or that once the “medieval” scales fell from his eyes, everywhere Luther looked he saw the world, the church’s teachings, the Christian life in a new light. But real life is not like a movie cleaning montage—putting one foot in front of the other does not simply lead to walking cheerfully out the door. It must have seemed a daunting, perhaps even impossible, task to reimagine absolutely everything in light of his new insights, even if he felt reassured that Augustine also agreed with him—not to mention Paul.

Let’s think about this more carefully. It’s a bit difficult for us today, living as we do post-Enlightenment, to appreciate just how much everyday life—and most experiences in one’s life—would have been enmeshed with religious beliefs and practices in the late medieval European world. And like a great game of Jenga, pulling out one piece would have varying degrees of impact on every other piece. While he may have pulled the first blocks out rather innocently, before long Luther realized what was at stake, and *yet he continued to pull out the pieces*. The pieces that were in conflict with the basic teachings of God’s word as he now understood it had to go, and while he trusted in God to keep the structure standing, there were almost certainly times when he feared it would come crashing down. And what did other people think? We know that his opponents were shocked and

disgusted by what they saw as his pride, one of the overweening characteristics of a classic heretic. Since the definition of heresy is stubborn adherence to incorrect teaching, it is no surprise that Luther was accused and then convicted of heresy. One of the reasons heresy was so dangerous at the time was the risk it posed for just about everything people counted on—right belief, for one thing, but also the practices that flowed from beliefs. Heresy could call everything into question, including one's knowledge of and assumptions about the world, about society, about government, even about families, love, and relationships. It threatened the entire structure of the world.

The point of this essay is to look at how the pulling out and rearranging of central pieces of the structure of faith had an impact on one specific area of Christian belief and practice—the beliefs and practices surrounding the Virgin Mary. While this is just one area and, frankly, one that was often ignored in Protestant traditions after the sixteenth century, it was essential to Christian life and belief at the time, and it also parallels the many other seismic changes happening throughout the church after Luther's death. The type of transformations we see in this one area were multiplied and repeated in many other circumstances.

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In order to see just how transformative Luther's ideas were in this one particular area, as well as the ways in which they were not, it is worth considering how an average person of Luther's day would have experienced Mary in their daily life. Unlike in America today, religious life, beliefs, and practices in late medieval Europe were not kept neatly separate from daily affairs—the separation of church and state, the secular versus the sacred, was not part of people's lives and certainly would not have been valued. The sacred was enmeshed with the profane, in public as well as in private spaces. People attended masses, feasts, and other liturgical celebrations. They participated to

various extents in the sacraments, but probably far more in paraliturgical practices such as pilgrimages, processions, daily prayers, music, etc. The saints and Mary were essential both to the “official” practices of the church and to the cultural and personal practices so common to daily life.

There were a number of great feasts or holidays within the church that celebrated the events of Mary’s life. The feasts with a scriptural basis—the Annunciation (March 25), the Visitation (July 2) to Elizabeth, and Mary’s Purification (February 2)—were amplified by festivals celebrating events in Mary’s life drawn from other texts, such as the widely known second-century *Protoevangelium of James*. The New Testament Gospels tell us almost nothing about Mary’s life and background prior to the annunciation, but stories from other sources—some as ancient as the canonical texts—filled in the gaps to explain about, for example, Mary’s parents and wider kinship, her upbringing and education, and her early dedication to God. The *Protoevangelium* also discussed Mary’s conception and birth, while later texts included stories related to her death. Many of these events were gradually introduced into the church’s calendar cycle of feasts and memorials, with the most important celebrations reserved for events in Jesus’s and Mary’s lives. In the late medieval period, along with Christmas and the celebrations of the Triduum, where Mary was obviously present and recognized, and the feasts drawn from Luke’s Gospel mentioned above, Christians would have also celebrated Mary’s Nativity (September 8), Mary’s Assumption (August 15), her Presentation in the Temple (November 21), and her Conception (December 8). Mary’s Conception was a relatively recent festival, introduced into the Western church, like so many feasts, after long recognition in the Byzantine church. It celebrated the miraculous conception of Mary by her mother, St. Anne, and although it was a contentious topic among theologians for centuries, average Christians would likely not have been impacted by the debates.³ Instead, they would have seen and participated in the pageantry, music, and liturgies of the feasts. During these festivals, altarpieces filled with scenes from the lives of

³ One good resource, among many, for the history of Marian doctrines is Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Specific essays on the Immaculate Conception can be found in Sarah Jane Boss, ed., *Mary: The Complete Resource* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Jesus, Mary, and the saints would be opened, and processions of relics and images would wind through the towns, while other items such as candles and bundles of herbs would be blessed and taken home for devotions and as protection for farms and livestock.

During the festivals of the church year, average Christians, at least in towns and cities, could have heard popular preaching in the common tongue. This exceptional preaching encouraged emotional reactions and often focused on encouraging devotion to Jesus, Mary, and the saints. The preaching orders of the Franciscans and Dominicans, among others, greatly influenced Marian piety through their open-air preaching and traveling revivals, as well as by promoting devotions such as the Angelus, which was a threefold repetition of the Ave Maria prayer at the ringing of the evening curfew bell.⁴ Sermons from the late medieval period stressed Mary's human qualities, her humility, and her human emotions, particularly painting Mary as a human mother, both to Christ and to all Christians. But Mary's motherhood was balanced by an emphasis on her intercessory power and her high position as the Queen of Heaven, who wielded great influence with her son.

Outside of church festivals, Mary and the saints would have regularly appeared before the eyes of average Christians. Inside churches, statues and paintings of Mary were ubiquitous, showing images from her life as well as from the life of Jesus. Particularly popular in this late medieval period were images of Mary with the infant Jesus, or conversely, Mary as the sorrowing mother, either at the foot of the cross or holding the body of Christ. These images stressed Mary's role as the human mother to Christ, thus serving a theological function proving Jesus's humanity and salvific connection to us, but also a religious and emotional function so essential to her popularity. The statues and paintings of Mary were often objects of devotion, even outside of liturgical or paraliturgical celebrations. They could be carried in processions, be decorated with crowns or robes, and receive votive gifts, perhaps from those who had a prayer answered through devotion to that particular image. A number of Marian images were believed to work wonders, and the reputation

⁴ Donna Spivey Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 29.

of such images often spread far and wide, encouraging masses of pilgrims to travel to the sites.⁵

Our average Christian might well have had personal devotions to Mary as well. Since they were probably not literate—only a small portion of the population was—their devotion might have included ritualized prayers like the rosary, which was available to almost everyone. The rosary, a series of repeated prayers interwoven with meditations upon the lives of Christ and Mary, was thought to weave a *Rosencranz*, or garland of roses, that would sit upon Mary's head. Our Christian might have even belonged to a group, called a confraternity, dedicated to praying the rosary at specific times. Even more generally, our average Christian would know that the month of May was dedicated to Mary, many flowers were named in her honor, and even the ladybug, “our Lady's beetle” or *Marienkäfer*, with its seven spots, was meant as a reminder of Mary's seven joys and seven sorrows.

Mary was present every day in the lives of medieval Christians. She was the powerful Queen of Heaven, Mother of God (*Theotokos* is an ancient title given to Mary), but also the human mother of Jesus, able to experience and know all the joys and sorrows of God's people. She was the bridge between the human and the divine, one whose intercessions could not fail to be heard. And she was an object of devotion and dedication for *all* Christians. One might think Mary would be recommended particularly to women as an example or as an intercessor in circumstances particular to women's experience, such as childbirth; this was often the case with some saints, but was less true with Mary, who was a truly universal saint.

Mary's universality did not mean, however, that there were no criticisms of the pious beliefs and behaviors associated with her. Some popular movements, especially the *Devotio Moderna*, turned away from external forms and instead focused on interior devotion to Christ. The famous humanist Erasmus likewise stressed the centrality of Christ to the Christian life and poked fun at rampant superstitions surrounding Mary and the saints, as well as anything that verged on the magical. Erasmus was troubled by any suggestion that Mary or other saints had their own wonder-working powers, and he criticized

⁵ Bridget Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic Piety, 1500–1648* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 76.

those who shifted them from objects of imitation to figures on par with ancient gods and goddesses.

Like Erasmus, Luther also was disgusted with the simplistic, superstitious attitudes and practices he saw around him, and he was highly critical of his own behavior as a young man. He recounted stories that showed how he had placed his trust in the saints and their intercession, including the famous tale of how he vowed to enter a monastery if St. Anne would save him from a lightning storm. In order to attain a particular blessing, young Martin fasted on bread and water on Saturdays to gain Mary's favor, since Saturday was one of the days of the week particularly dedicated to Mary.⁶ Like many medieval Christians, Luther feared Christ as an angry judge and saw Mary as a merciful intermediary, a mother not only to Christ but also to all Christians.

After gaining his insights into salvation by grace alone, Luther began to reconsider seriously Mary's role in the Christian life. Mary states in the Gospel of Luke, "All generations will call me blessed" (1:48), but what should that actually mean? In his 1521 commentary on the Magnificat, Luther struggled with the idea, and he concluded that when people call upon Mary, they should understand that the power to make things happen belongs to God alone: "We ought to call upon her, that for her sake God may grant and do what we request."⁷ She is not a goddess (although he did assert in this commentary that "Queen of Heaven" is an accurate title for her), and she has no power on her own to dole out rewards to those who dedicate themselves to her. By the writing of the *Smalcald Articles* in 1537, Luther had come to realize that asking Mary and the saints for their intercession with God was both dangerous and distracting, and like the excessive devotion shown to Mary by medieval Christians, it should be discontinued. Jesus is not simply a strict and frightening judge for whom Mary is the merciful foil. Instead, Christians can go straight to Jesus and ask for whatever forgiveness and help they need. In his Magnificat commentary, Luther insisted that Mary as a faithful believer would be offended by the presentation of her as a necessary, merciful intermediary with her son, just as she would be horrified by the idea that she

⁶ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 71 vols. to date (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–), 25:210. Hereafter, cited as WA.

⁷ Luther, "The Magnificat, 1521," 350.

somehow earned or deserved to be the mother of God. Her humility was not apparent in the great honor she had been given, but instead in her attitude toward this great honor—she remained “simple in heart” and gave all the glory to God alone. As a faithful believer, Mary knew that no one could earn the honor of bearing the Son of God, even if she had made a vow of lifelong virginity (which she had not, according to Luther)—such a vow would have made no sense in Mary’s time. A vow of virginity was in no way required or even commended by God, Luther noted, and it was in fact counter to God’s explicit command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). It was only necessary in Luther’s eyes, following a long tradition in the church, for Mary to be a virgin because her physically pure state protected Jesus from contamination of the flesh through a sinful conception. She was not “full of grace” in such a way that she was perfect, divine, or in any way able to provide blessings or miracles to her devotees. Mary was indeed “full of grace,” as the Ave Maria notes, but only in the sense that God had chosen her and was gracious to her.

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How then, according to Luther, should Mary be treated or remembered by Christians? Luther famously noted that Christians had a great deal of freedom: in areas in which they were not bound by God’s commands or Scripture, they were free to practice their faith as they chose. While they should not maintain practices that would be a stumbling block to others, Luther felt that some aspects of medieval Christianity, such as images within churches, for example, were essentially “free”—there was nothing wrong with maintaining them. So once the problematic aspects of devotion to Mary were removed, the value of her life and example could and should be celebrated and meditated upon by Christians. According to Luther, Mary was one of the great heroes of the Bible. Accepting God’s word in the annunciation against all human reason and experience was nothing short of

miraculous, as miraculous as the Incarnation itself. She never became proud, despite the high honor given to her, but instead, as we see in her song of praise, the Magnificat, she gave all the glory to God alone and remained humble and pure of heart. She put her faith into action by serving her cousin Elizabeth and by obeying the law when it came time to pay the temple tax. Technically, Luther noted, since Mary was still a virgin she did not need any purification ritual, but she chose to participate to avoid any offense to others.

When it came to theological doctrines about Mary, Luther remained fairly traditional. Although he rejected titles for Mary that tended toward the superstitious and excessive, he insisted that the title of *Theotokos*, or “Mother of God,” was both true and essential to the faith. This title was affirmed at the Council of Ephesus in 431, particularly to help clear up any confusion over Christ’s true nature as both fully human *and* fully divine, but also to recognize a devotion to Mary that was already very popular. Likewise, Luther accepted that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life, although as we have already seen, he rejected the idea that she made any sort of vow to maintain it. The virginal conception of Jesus and the so-called Virgin Birth were established very early in the church’s tradition, mainly to protect Christ’s sinless humanity. Mary’s role as the *Theotokos* gave her a unique place within all of humanity and one in which she has no equal: “namely, that she had a child by the Father in heaven. . . . No one can say anything greater of her or to her.”⁸

While Luther accepted the doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity, and likely did so because of the long-held and deeply rooted connection between sexuality, impurity, and sin, his perspective on her sinlessness is more complicated.⁹ At this time, the Immaculate Conception of Mary was still a topic of discussion among theologians—it was not until 1854 that Pope Pius IX declared it a dogma—so the situation of Mary relative to personal sinlessness and to original sin more generally could still be discussed. Augustine had famously suggested that we must make an exception when it comes to Mary and original sin, but while that cliffhanger helped to spur popular devotion

⁸ Luther, “The Magnificat, 1521,” 347.

⁹ The irony of Luther suggesting that Scripture has “no evidence to the contrary” (WA 51:176) regarding Mary’s virginity, and then having to interpret the mention of Jesus’s siblings as referring to cousins, is not lost on a modern reader.

to Mary, it also led to centuries of often contentious debate. Like the great majority of theologians in his time, Luther accepted that Mary received a special blessing of purification from sin at some point before her birth, but he also noted in a 1520 sermon that we cannot form a doctrine about it, since there is no evidence in Scripture related to it. Simply put, this was not a terribly important point for Luther, even when talking about Mary (although the authority of a pope to declare such an idea a “doctrine” absent scriptural evidence would be an entirely different matter!). He treated Mary’s Assumption in a similar manner. Mary’s assumption (body and soul) into heaven was the basis of a widely popular festival in the late medieval period. It was at the heart of many of the Marian titles and privileges (e.g., Queen of Heaven) and was seen as confirmation of the bodily resurrection that eventually all Christians would enjoy. But in order to avoid confusion and limit superstition, Luther restricted official holidays of the church to those with biblical warrant.

So, how influential was Luther when it came to Mary? It is important to remember that Luther was not the only one, nor even the first, to criticize medieval devotion (official or unofficial) to Mary and the saints. And within Protestant movements, many other reformers were more extreme than Luther when it came to rejecting devotion to the saints—Zwingli and Calvin were two of the most obvious. In non-Lutheran areas affected by Protestant transitions, iconoclasm, or the “breaking” of images (which could mean destruction, defacing, or removal), was a sporadic event from the 1520s up through the 1560s. The strict “cleansing” of churches from Roman Catholic influence, including Mary and the saints, was widespread among Protestant groups.

Within Lutheran communities, there was continuity with pre-Reformation traditions in at least some ways—theologically, but to a certain extent in practice as well. Pre-Reformation art survived in many areas, and while its usage was reformed, the transition was not as extreme as in other places. That said, the areas of Marian devotion that Luther considered problematic (direct intercession to Mary, prayers for miraculous interventions, belief in wonder-working images, and so on) were immediately discouraged or quickly abandoned. Devotion to Mary, and a focus on the saints more generally, became one of the flashpoints for Catholics in responding to Protestant critiques. The triumphalistic Baroque Catholicism of the Council of Trent and the

Tridentine era tended to celebrate and promote more elaborate and expansive devotion to Mary, with grand new churches being built, pilgrimages encouraged, and new titles given to her. Apparitions of Mary also became much more common after the Reformation and the Council of Trent, and while very few of these apparitions have been approved by the Catholic Church (and the faithful are not required to believe in any of them), they have had a major cultural impact when it comes to knowledge about and belief in Mary.

The ultimate point is that there are cultural and, to a certain extent, theological differences between Catholics and the various Protestant churches (not to mention the Orthodox traditions!) when it comes to Mary. The wooden blocks that Luther removed did not end up collapsing the entire structure, as some had expected, but people did ultimately end up with a church and a Christian life that looked dramatically different from the one before it. One's evaluation of that life will be different depending on where one stands. However, it is clear that Protestants have not taken seriously, or at least not seriously enough, the role that Mary could, and probably should, take in the Christian life. Can we take the words of Luke seriously—"and all generations shall call me blessed" (1:48)—and limit Mary to a few pericopes and church services during Advent, Christmas, and Holy Week?

However, it is clear that Protestants have not taken seriously, or at least not seriously enough, the role that Mary could, and probably should, take in the Christian life.

My recommendation for non-Catholic Christians is threefold: meditate, celebrate, and imitate. As you read Scripture and seek inspiration and understanding through the Holy Spirit, meditate upon Mary, her life and her words, her role in Jesus's life and the early church. Celebrate her significance, the graciousness of God, and the mighty handiwork of the Creator that she reveals in her story. And finally, imitate her faithfulness, her humility in the face of an incredible miracle and honor given to her, her obedience to and acceptance of God's word and actions in her life, and in turn her own expression of God's love and mercy to her son and to others in

her life. There is no one right way to honor Mary, but taking steps along this path will ultimately lead in the right direction—to a closer relationship with Christ. ⊕

BETH KREITZER is the academic director of Fusion Academy Minneapolis in Edina, Minnesota, a one-to-one private school for middle and high school students. She has degrees from Stanford and Duke and has spent her career teaching students from children through adult college and seminary students. Her current favorite other activity is singing Renaissance music and chant with the St. Mary's Basilica Cathedral Choir.