



Mapping our devotion to Mary

Marian devotion runs deep in Catholic and Orthodox prayer and devotion, and has a surprising reception in many of the churches of the reformation. Yet it is a complex belief, somewhat akin to an orchestral arrangement of interwoven themes and movements. As we enter the month of May it is worth discerning some of the melodies that are at play in our liturgical and devotional responses to the Mother of God.

One prominent refrain, perhaps the earliest and most significant, is centred around Christ rather than Mary. Jesus' birth from Mary, recorded in the scriptures and celebrated in the earliest baptismal creeds, is a central statement of faith in Christ as fully human. This was vital to rebuffing attempts to deny that the divine could so mingle with material humanity, 'infected' as it was often then thought by matter and the reality of the body. Theologically Mary is pivotal to any true understanding of the nature of Christ: the ancient church soon celebrated her as the *Theotokos*, the bearer of God. There is a second theological movement to our score. Mary is also understood as the mother of all Christians, and indeed as mother of the church.

These rich theological underpinnings have been in parallel with a broad and energizing range of devotions to Mary, the human being, the woman, the one who is vitally interested in our welfare. Devotion to Mary and interest in her life have been long running currents in Christian prayer, art and devotional practice. Again these became important in tandem with the development of spiritualities that were intensely interested in the humanity of Jesus. These were especially marked during the middle ages, and are at their most edifying when kept closely aligned to the person and role of Christ.

As a central figure in the incarnation, a theological touchstone for belief in the humanity of Christ and a woman close to all Christians, Mary now takes her place as the first amongst the saints. In this she is an example to all and able to take up our intercessions and place them before God. In particular Mary is given prominence as a figure of hope against despair, with her sorrows before the Cross offering strength to many who face unbearable hardship.

A further canticle is woven throughout our musical score. This is Mary as the first of the disciples, a thematic that Martin Luther also found refreshing. Here is the woman of the Magnificat, singing that her soul glorifies the Lord, that her spirit rejoices in her saviour, and that God has done great things through her. Yet this is God's work, especially

directed at the poor, and holy is the name of God (Lk 1:46-55). In Mary we have a disciple who leads us to further compassion, mercy, integrity and justice.

There is no single chord or series of notes that can encapsulate our devotion to Mary, yet there is one single theme that runs throughout the whole of the score: everything authentically Marian leads to Christ.

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