

Mary, our Jewish Mother

Thoughts for Marian Feast Days

In circles of interfaith dialogue it is sometimes said that while most Catholics today are quite comfortable with the idea that Jesus was Jewish, Mary is a different story. No, no, not Mary. Surely Mary was a Roman Catholic! (Perhaps even Irish Catholic!)

Light-hearted as the comment may be, it signals how far we have come as a Church in embracing our Jewish roots, and the distance yet to be covered. For although many Catholics nowadays would have some appreciation of Jesus as a first-century Jew, there is far less similar comment about the Jewish identity of his mother. The picture of Mary as an observant Jew, faithful to the God of Israel, shaped by the covenant of Sinai—who went to the temple, prayed Jewish prayers, had Jesus circumcised, kept the sabbath, observed Jewish dietary laws as well as purity laws relating to menstruation and childbirth—is not the image usually promoted by traditional Marian piety.

Why is it important to acknowledge Mary as a Jew? Given the two thousand years of development in Christianity, haven't we 'moved on' from our Jewish roots?

Certainly, there are persuasive arguments from the perspective of Jewish-Christian dialogue that call for a deep and lasting appreciation of Mary's Jewish identity. To universalise the symbol of Mary through Christian art and ritual to the extent that the historical context of her earthly life is all but forgotten has unfortunate and dangerous consequences. Not only does it remove the Jewish people from our religious worldview, it robs us of the depths of our own Christian faith experience which cannot be grasped fully except in relation to the story of Israel; a living story which continues to speak to the world today.

At yet another level—at the level of personal spirituality—Mary's Jewishness is vital. For Mary is more than a symbol or a theological datum. She is a real woman. If we truly love Mary as a person, if we draw close to her as disciple, mother and sister in faith, then how can we not love her Jewishness? If it was important to her, why would it not be important us? How can we not experience deep affection for the religious tradition which was at the heart of her life and which continues to hold fast to the God of Abraham and Sarah? Can we honestly imagine Mary, as a daughter of Israel and faithful one of God, turning her back on her own people, being dismissive of her own religious traditions? Do we imagine the glory of heaven eliminating the gift of her earthly Jewish story? Rather, should we not imagine her identity as a daughter of Israel being celebrated with astonishing clarity?

Amidst the wealth of Marian devotion that abounds in parishes and which has a time-honoured place in the great Christian tradition, perhaps it is time, in response to Vatican II's historic leadership in Jewish-Christian relations, to raise the profile of Mary as a faithful Jewish woman.

Of course, to do so will naturally lead us to contemporary traditions of Judaism; it will lead us to listen to the voices of actual Jewish people today. And that is precisely the point. Parish Marian devotions have the power to lead the Church, not only to expressions of faith that are coherent within a traditional Catholic framework, but to practical steps in reconciliation with the Jewish people.

We can imagine Mary, 'Miriam of Nazareth,' rejoicing in that.

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