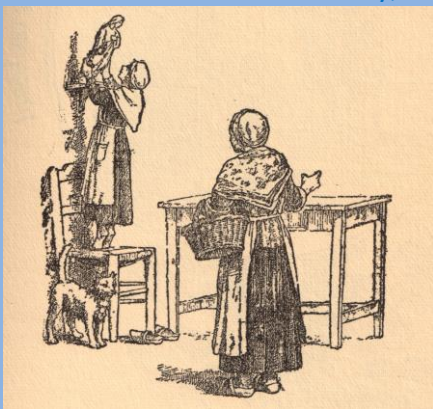




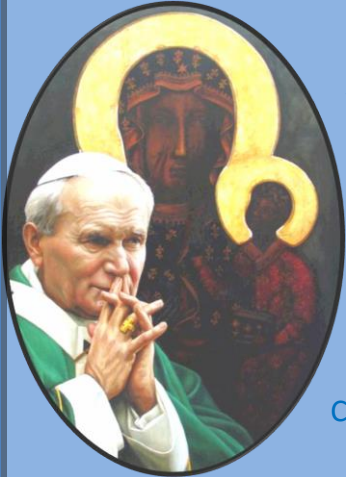
Mary in Art

Many of you are probably familiar with the story of St. Therese of Lisieux. She was just a young girl when her mother died. Her devoted father and beloved sisters made every effort to help Therese through this loss. Yet when her older sister, Pauline, who had been a second mother to her, entered the Carmelite monastery, the stress and strain of this additional departure threw the young Therese into a sad state. The family feared the worst – would they lose to grief their youngest member? They prayed to Our Lady of Victories and St. Therese was cured. St. Therese relates how this occurred through an image of our Lady; this image is now known as *The Virgin of the Smile*. I will read to you her account which is related in her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*.

“Finding no help on earth, poor little Thérèse had also turned toward the Mother of heaven, and prayed with all her heart that she take pity on her. All of a sudden the Blessed Virgin appeared *beautiful* to me, so *beautiful* that never had I seen anything so attractive; her face was suffused with an ineffable benevolence and tenderness, but what penetrated to the very depths of my soul was the *‘ravishing smile of the Blessed Virgin.’* At that instant, all my pain disappeared, and two large tears glistened on my eyelashes, and flowed down my cheeks silently, but they were tears of unmixed joy” (93-94).



The Little Flower is not the only one who received special graces through an image of Our Lady. St. Catherine Laboure, after her mother died, climbed on chair in order to reach the family’s statue of Mary and told Our Lady, “You will be my mother now.”



One cannot think of Blessed Pope John Paul II without two images of Our Lady coming to mind: Our Lady of Czestochowa and our Lady of Fatima. Being a son of Poland, he had a great devotion to the “Black Madonna” of Czestochowa. In addition, he attributed the protection of his life to Our Lady of Fatima; the failed



assassination attempt took place on the anniversary of her appearance to the three shepherd children. A year later, he traveled to Fatima to thank her personally by crowning her statue, the crown containing the bullet that struck him.



Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity kept a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes close by her as she was dying, invoking our Lady under the title, “Janua Coeli” (Gate of Heaven).

I am sure that we all have some special story about an image of our Lady, oftentimes making that image our favorite. These images have been given to us to help us in our lives here on earth. Just as the picture of a beloved family member or friend is consoling to have as a reminder to us of his or her presence, so do we have these holy images to remind us of Jesus, His Blessed Mother and the Saints.

While He was dying on the Cross, Jesus gave us His Mother to be our Mother. Our Heavenly Mother gives special care to her children on earth and we need reminders of her special protection of us. Blessed Pope John Paul II, in *Redemptoris Mater*, writes,

Images of the Virgin have a place of honor in churches and houses. In them Mary is represented in a number of ways:



as the throne of God carrying the Lord and giving him to humanity (*Theotókos*);

as the way that leads to Christ and manifests him

(*Hodegetria*);



as



a praying figure in an attitude of intercession and as a sign of

divine presence on the journey of the faithful until the day of the Lord (*Deësis*);

as the protectress who stretches out her mantle over

the peoples (*Pokrov*);

or as the merciful virgin of tenderness (*Eleousa*). She is



the



usually represented with her Son, the child Jesus,

in her arms: it is the relationship with the Son

which glorifies the Mother.

Sometimes she embraces him with tenderness

(*Glykophilousa*); at other times she is a hieratic figure,

apparently rapt in contemplation of him who is the Lord

history” (33).



of

Using this quote from *Redemptoris Mater* as a backdrop, this

talk will examine how Mary, represented in art, can help guide our life of faith; we can see at least five different aspects related in her paintings or statues: important teachings we gain from her images; images that show us her example; images that relate to us her humanity; images that remind us that she is watching over us; and images that express she is guiding us to eternity.

However, before looking at specific images, I would like to start with why devotion to Our Lady is so important. Devotion to our Lady means having a deep love for her expressed in having images of her, seeking her intercession, following her example, keeping her ever close to us. Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman had a strong devotion to Our Lady, even during his Anglican days. Later as a Catholic, he noted, with concern, that losing devotion to our Lady soon leads to losing devotion to her Son, Jesus, the Word Incarnate.

Look at the Protestant countries which threw off all devotion to her three centuries ago, under the notion that to put her form their thoughts would be exalting the praises of her Son. Has that consequence really followed from their profane conduct towards her? Just the reverse, - the countries, Germany, Switzerland, England, which so acted, have in great measure ceased to worship Him, and have given up their belief in His Divinity; while the Catholic Church, wherever she is to be found, adores Christ as true God and true Man, as firmly as she ever did; and strange indeed would it be, if it ever happened otherwise" (Saward, 145).

We should not worry or fear that devotion to Our Lady will lead us away but rather will strengthen our belief in Him.

In addition to the doctrinal aspect, devotion to Our Lady helps form the whole person; Our Lady shows the feminine aspect needed in the Church. Hans Urs Von Balthasar explains another consequence of a lack of Marian devotion,

Without Mariology, Christianity threatens imperceptibly to become inhuman. The Church becomes functionalistic, soulless, a hectic enterprise without any point of rest, estranged from its true nature by the planners. And, because in this manly-masculine world, all that we have is one ideology replacing another, everything becomes polemical, critical, bitter, humourless, and ultimately boring, and people in their masses run away from such a Church (Saward, 150).

Mary reminds us of our need to be receptive and open to God, listening always to His voice, having the contemplative spirit.

Now that we have reviewed the importance of devotion to Mary, we need to look at the importance of images. This goes back to the beginning. When God created us, He created us body and soul; we are not pure spiritual beings – we are not angels. One cannot emphasize the body over the soul or the soul over the body; we are both body and soul. Our body can lead us to God, if we use our five senses in a way that glorifies God. He has given us the created world, which He called good, to appreciate and enjoy; we can learn about Him through His created world. If you have every been taken aback by a beautiful scene in nature or become breathless at the sight of a sunset, a waterfall, a new-born baby, then you have experienced the beauty of God found in His creation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in the section on art and beauty makes this connection: “Even before revealing himself to man in words of truth, God reveals himself to him through the universal language of creation, the work of his Word, of his wisdom: the order and harmony of the cosmos...” (2500). The writer of the book of Wisdom states, “Now if out of joy in their beauty they thought them gods, let them know how far more excellent is the Lord than these; for the original source of beauty fashioned them” (13:3). Everything created points back to the beauty of the Creator.

From the beginning of human civilization, man has in some way tried to imitate the beauty of creation through art. Art is, in a small way, a participation in the creation of God. Dante, the great Italian writer, states that if nature was God’s child than art would be God’s grandchild (Saward, 90). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes,

Created ‘in the image of God,’ man also expressed the truth of his relationship with God the Creator by the beauty of his artistic works. Indeed, *art* is a distinctively human form of expression; beyond the search for the necessities of life which is common to all living creatures, art is a freely given superabundance of the human being’s inner riches. Arising from talent given by the Creator and from man’s

own effort, art is a form of practical wisdom, uniting knowledge and skill, to give form to the truth of reality in a language accessible to sight or hearing. To the extent that it is inspired by truth and love of beings, art bears a certain likeness to God's activity in what he has created. Like any other human activity, art is not an absolute end in itself, but is ordered to an end nobled by the ultimate end of man" (2501).

Only human beings can be artists. As much as we enjoy our pets, they can never create a beautiful masterpiece. It is interesting that the writer of the second creation story in Genesis shows God building up Adam out of clay, like a craftsman forming a piece of pottery. Artists are called to participate in the action of God; therefore, they are called to bring out in their art the good, the true and the beautiful of God's own creation.

Yet, art is not an end but rather a means to lead us to our final end, namely Heaven. It is to draw our hearts and minds to God in order to honor and glorify Him. John Saward, in his book [The Beauty of Holiness and the Holiness of Beauty](#), writes, "Art not only presupposes religion, it also bears witness to the God whom religion worships" (Saward, 74). Art, if it is executed correctly, will be a way of giving honor to God, aiding in our worship of God.

Yet many times, we encounter people who do not understand the Catholic use of statues and images. Doesn't this go against the first commandment's prescription of not creating graven images? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* assures us: "Nevertheless, already in the Old Testament, God ordained or permitted the making of images that pointed symbolically toward salvation by the incarnate Word: so it was with the bronze serpent, the ark of the covenant and the cherubim" (2130). Following this article, the Catechism goes on to state, "Basing itself on the mystery of the incarnate Word, the seventh ecumenical council at Nicaea (787) justified against the iconoclasts [image breakers] the veneration of icons – of Christ, but also of the Mother of God, the

angels and all the saints. By becoming incarnate, the Son of God introduced a new ‘economy’ of images” (2132).

The Incarnation changes everything. Jesus, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, creates a revolution by taking on our human nature in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. What God has spent thousands of years preparing us for in the Old Testament now makes sense. The incarnation is the basis for why we have images and how to best understand those images. Pope St. Gregory II states,

If the Lord is not incarnate, then His holy image, according to the flesh, should not be painted. If He was not born in Bethlehem of the glorious Virgin Mother of God, if the Magi did not bring Him gifts..., if He did not accomplish things beyond expectation, then such things should never be painted....But if all these things have been accomplished,...I would, were it possible, that the heavens, earth, and sea, every animal, plant, all other creatures, should publish them abroad by words, by writing, or by pictures (Saward, 91).

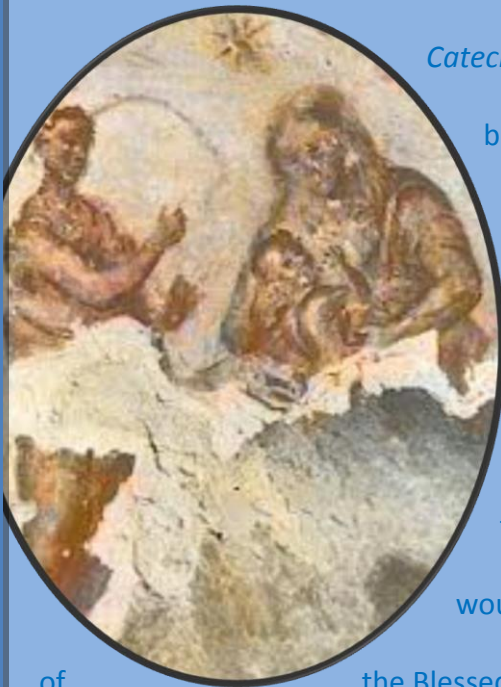


Mary was a key figure in the incarnation of Jesus. We can learn much about her and God’s plan when we study her images. First, images teach us the truths about our Lady; they are a catechism in pictures. In medieval time, great care was given to the stained-glass windows and stone carvings in the magnificent

Cathedrals as this was the way most of the people learned the Bible stories as well as the doctrine of the faith. Most people in the middle ages spent their days working in the fields; they had little time to read or even learn how to read. The Church ensured that the faithful would have another way to learn the truths of the faith: through images. We see a complementarity at work here between revelation and art. John Saward writes, “The dogmas of

the Church's faith are not only the subject matter of her art but the condition of its possibility. The beauty of Christian art – the icon, the hymn of praise – flows directly from the truth of Christian Revelation” (88). Art is given the content from Revelation in which to express its beauty and Revelation has the medium of art in order to speak its truth.

To illustrate this point, I have selected a few key images. One of the earliest images that we have of our Lady is a third century fresco found in the Catacomb of Priscilla, a fragment, which shows three figures and a star. It may look vaguely familiar to you; if you have a copy of the



Catechism of the Catholic Church, it is one of the four images found

beginning the four different parts of the catechism. The

explanation from the Catechism reads: “This image, among the

most ancient in Christian art, expresses a theme that lies at

the heart of the Christian faith: the mystery of the

incarnation of the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary.” Since

the fall of Adam and Eve, God had foretold of a Savior whom he

would send to redeem the human race. Jesus, the second person

of the Blessed Trinity, took on our human nature in the incarnation. He did

not just appear on the earth which many of the Greeks gods and goddesses were said to have

done. Jesus took on flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary; He is like us in all things but sin – He

even has a mother like the rest of us.

This image is also a good reminder to the faithful that God does not go back on His promises. In this image we have another figure besides the woman and her child; we have a man pointing to a star. We are all familiar with the star being a part of the nativity account read each

Christmas but we may wonder from where did it came. While the Chosen People were wandering in the desert, a wicked king hired a prophet, or seer, from the East to curse God’s people. Try as he might, Balaam could not utter a curse against them. Instead, he uttered blessings. One of those blessings became the prophecy which states, “a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Num 24:17). Throughout the Old Testament, we see God’s promises and, in the New Testament, each one of those prophecies being fulfilled throughout the life of Christ.

While this image from the Catacomb of Priscilla is the most ancient image of Our Lady and points to Mary as Mother of God, Mary’s Immaculate Conception made her Divine Maternity possible. This truth is expressed in the image of Our Lady of Grace. I would like to specifically highlight a sometimes missed part of the image; she is standing on a snake. The snake reminds us of the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve found in the beginning of the Bible; the devil appeared as a snake and tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God. When God confronted Adam and Eve in the garden, He made a prophecy; this passage was directed to the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers; He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel” (Genesis 3:15). The Church believes that Mary is the fulfillment of Genesis 3:15, the proto-evangelium – or first good news. Since Eve is not at enmity with satan, this other woman has to be one who has never been



touched by sin. Mary is the one at enmity with the devil; she was untouched by Adam’s sin.

In this next image, that of the Annunciation, we see this scene of the fall of Adam and Eve then

being connected with Mary's "yes" at the Annunciation. In this image by Fra Angelico, in the front the angel appears to Mary asking her to be the Mother of God, to give Jesus flesh, and in the background, we see Adam and Eve being driven from the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve reject God's plan for them; Mary accepts God's plan for her.

In this image of the Annunciation, Mary receives the word of God from the archangel Gabriel, who is dressed as a deacon. One of the roles of the deacon is proclaim the Gospel; here Gabriel is portrayed as bringing the Good News to Mary, the good news of our salvation.



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Some of the early Church Fathers called Mary the "New Eve": where Eve failed, Mary succeeded; where Eve disobeyed, Mary obeyed. Eve's "no" is in sharp contrast to Mary's "yes." St. Irenaeus specifically remarked that the knot tied by Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience.

Recently, we were introduced to the image of Our Lady as the untier of knots. This might be an image many of us can relate to; we have all been in situations that seemed hopeless, comparable to a knot that won't come undone. We can turn to our Lady whose nimble fingers can help unloosen any bind.



In addition to the dogmas of Mary's Immaculate Conception and Divine Maternity, the intriguing world of the icon expresses the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity. Mary is shown with three stars: one on each shoulder as well as one on her forehead. We call her ever-virgin,

which means that she was a virgin before the birth of Christ (she conceived Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit), during the birth of Christ (his birth was miraculous), and after the birth of Christ (she and Joseph never came together as man and wife).

The last major dogma of our Lady is her Assumption, body and soul into Heaven. There are many images that show her being taken up to Heaven. In some she is being carried aloft by the angels; in others, we see the apostles finding at her tomb roses in place of her body. I thought I would use another image for this Dogma, that of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In 1531, our Lady appeared to St. Juan Diego as the woman of the book of Revelation. The twelfth chapter of John's Apocalypse recounts the vision of a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars. This is the reading used for the Solemnity of the Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven; the Church has selected this passage for our meditation on Mary's place in Heaven. Our Lady of Guadalupe appears as a native of that region; the sash indicates that she is with child. She is in front of the sun and standing on the moon which show her to be greater than both but, yet, her head is bent down in prayer to the One who is greater than she. After Mary appeared to Juan Diego and left her image on his tilma, nearly 10 million people in the New World converted to the Catholic Faith; they abandoned idolatrous practices and embraced the true faith due to Our Lady of Guadalupe. In addition, "Guadalupe" means "she who will crush the head of the serpent".





Knowing the great prerogatives that God has blessed Mary with, we should seek to imitate her. There are many images which highlight her virtues and lead us to imitate her. Of course this brings to mind the image of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The image of the Immaculate Heart of Mary has many aspects of her virtues. First the heart represents her entire being; as we have seen from her life as recorded in the Sacred Scriptures, she was given over totally to God. Next, the three roses represent three specific virtues that Mary lived out and that we are called to imitate: her humility, obedience and purity. The flame indicates yet another virtue, her burning charity. Finally, the sword piercing her heart draws us back to the prophecy of Simeon which was fulfilled throughout her life, culminating in the Passion of her Son. Her Immaculate Heart is full of meaning for all Christians.



Having beautiful images draws us to beauty. John Saward writes, "The holiness of beauty is ordered to the beauty of holiness. Sacred art is intended to encourage saintly life. Both are transparent to Christ, radiate the splendour of His truth" (Saward, 84). We, too, are called to be transformed like Our Lady. John Saward again relates, "When Dante reaches Paradise, St. Bernard tells him that contemplating the countenance of the Mother is the best way of preparing to see the

glorious face of the Son: 'Now to that face which most resembles Christ lift up they face; its radiance alone can grant to thee the power to look on Christ" (Saward, 123).

Another way of describing this study is through contemplation. I am using contemplation in the sense of delighting in God's beauty, taking time to reflect on God's goodness. Contemplation draws us into divine life. When we are only focused on the things of this world, we turn inward and do not see all the beauty that God has before us; this tends towards hopelessness.

St. Thomas Aquinas addresses this focus; when he was asked about living out the virtues, he stated, "if you seek an example of humility, look on the Crucified" (Saward 85) For us it could be, if you seek an example of how to live one's daily, look on Mary.



We are very fortunate to have many images of our Lady that show her doing the normal things of

everyday life, those things that fill

our day, like cooking and cleaning, going to the story. It is very consoling to know that Mary did many of the same tasks that we did. This helps us to sanctify the many duties that we perform throughout the day. How often when cleaning or baking or doing manual labor do we think of the Holy Family? We have images that give us some insight into the everyday life of Jesus, Mary and Joseph during those hidden years. When a married friend of mine was expecting her first child, she envisioned an image of Mary holding up the baby Jesus, swinging him

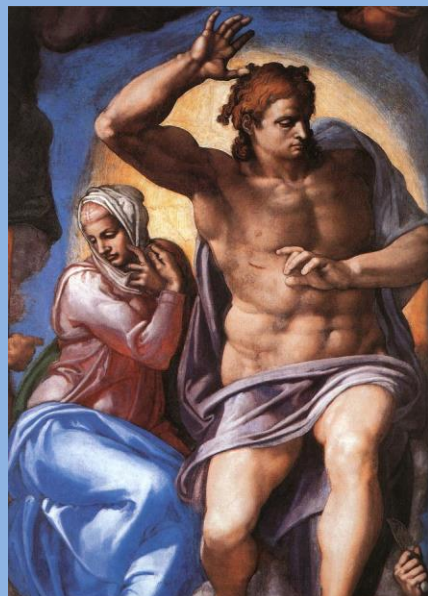


around and laughing. She told her mother of this image, hoping two sets of eyes would be able to find this picture. Her mother was not very optimistic about finding this representation. It wasn't but a few days later and, in a shop, she found a small statue of Mary, holding up the infant Jesus, just as she had imagined.

In our everyday lives, we need to know that our Lady experienced those things we experience; in addition, it is good to know that she is with us in the difficult moments. She is the Mediatrix of all graces; we can turn to her as she is watching over us. Mary, given to be our Mother at Calvary, will not rest until all her children are in Heaven. She participated in the passion of her Son; she is given the role in Heaven to shower us with graces. John Saward writes, "By God's will, no lovely gift comes to us except through the hands of Mary" (Saward, 144).



The image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help is a good reminder of her protection for the child Jesus; after being told by the angels about the Passion He was to undergo, He ran to His Mother's arm, nearly losing His sandal in the process. In His mother's arms, he found refuge. Mary will assist us in our need, not only giving us actual help but also the comfort and solace that only a mother can give.



Finally, we pray that Mary will be with us at the hour of our death, we turn to her especially as we look to eternity. This life is not the end; we are awaiting a new Heaven and a new earth. Mary is our guide, our beacon, leading us to Heaven. She

is our Lady of Hope, the eschatological icon of the Church; since she, one of the human race, is in Heaven, we have this hope that one day, we, too will be in Heaven.

May our Lady continue to smile on you as you continue to seek to grow in greater devotion to her.

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