

Mary, Mother of Our Lord
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WHAT DO YOU SEE?

What do you see? This past week I read of a psychologist who first showed Americans individual pictures of a chicken, a cow and hay and then asked which two went together. Most said the chicken and the cow because they're both animals. But most Asians, on the other hand, said the cow and the hay since the cow depends on the hay. We are more likely to see categories; Asians are more likely to see relationships. We tend to be a society with an individualistic mentality; countries like China and Japan are more collectivistic and put emphasis on social contexts.

It would be interesting for me to show you pictures of Christian symbols and ask what you see or what each one represents? A cross. A candle. An altar. A bowl of water. A bible. Bread and wine.

Today I want you to look at an icon of Mary. What do you see? It may depend on how you were raised and what associations you have with Mary. For some Christians she is honored and an important part of their spirituality. For others, she is just a part of the manger scene that we get out at Christmas and then put away for the rest of the year. Sure, we sing about her in Silent Night—*Round yon virgin, mother and child*—but we dare not say or do too much more, for we're protestants, after all!

We have a number of pictures of Mary in the scriptures. The angel Gabriel appears out of the blue to announce to the young, unwed Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus. We have the picture of Mary visiting her cousin and Elizabeth announcing that Mary is blessed among women. We have the picture of Mary singing God's praise in today's gospel, even as she is the prophet who proclaims good news for the poor, the lowly, the hungry. We have the picture of Mary giving birth to Jesus and then pondering this great mystery in her heart. We have the picture of Mary standing at the foot of the cross. And we have the picture of Mary in the upper room, waiting with the other disciples for the Holy Spirit to descend on them.

Holy Trinity is somewhat unique in that we have icons all around our worship space. Many of us did not grow up with icons, an essential part of Orthodox worship and spirituality. Yet in our ecumenical age we are able to receive and treasure gifts from other traditions. What do you see when you look at an icon? Maybe just a picture of Mary, or St. Francis, or another saint. But icons serve a different purpose than art in Western Christianity. An icon is considered less a painting than an encounter. Its purpose isn't simply to delight the eyes, but to inform the soul.

What do you see when you look at an icon of Mary? We have a number of them in our space today as well as other representations of Mary. This past week I taught Vacation Bible School on Monday and had three groups of three to seven year olds! The story for the day was the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and telling her that she would be the mother of Jesus. I told them that Mary was the most famous woman in history and showed them a book of pictures of Mary. There were paintings and icons. She was seen differently depending on the time and culture. Her skin was black, brown, white, tan. Sometimes she was a peasant and sometimes a queen.

But most of them include the infant Jesus. A seminary professor was once discussing icons with his students. And he said unless somewhere in the church there is a portrayal of Jesus in his mother's arms, you don't have the full picture of Christ. For us Mary is the primary reminder of the incarnation, that God becomes enfleshed and is born through us. When we look at her we see that human love, nurture and tenderness are at the heart of God's revelation to us. Mary represents the feminine side of our faith: pregnancy, waiting, patience, growth, birth, life.

One of the titles given to Mary in the early church was *theotokos*, the God-bearer. Through Mary the holy One is born among us. In that sense she is the Mother of God. But there are implications for us! St. Francis said that we are also Christ's mother, when we bear his spirit in our hearts and bodies and bring him forth by holy actions which give light and example to others.

But what about the chicken and the cow and the hay you ask? In our very individualistic society Mary is a reminder of God's love for all people, especially those who are marginalized, poor, hungry, lowly. Mary sings of an upside down world where the rich and the haughty and the powerful and overfed are sent away empty. And the hungry are fed with the

good things of God's mercy. Sometimes we are the ones with *so much materially* that spiritually we actually be the poor ones. Nonetheless, Mary is a prophet, calling us to look beyond ourselves and to yearn, pray and work for a world where are all God's children are clothed, loved and fed.

What do you see when you look at a photograph of yourself? Is it the way you look: facial expression, your hair, clothes, color, light, angle, that kind of thing? But what if you looked in the mirror or at a photo, and saw yourself as an icon? An icon of God's presence? Like Mary, you are highly favored, called to bring the holy to birth in yourself and to our world. Look deeper. Look into your soul. Your hopes and dreams, your sadness and your joy. All that it means to be human! All part of God! And then see yourself as part of something greater than yourself. Part of the human family. Part of the people of God. Part of the church.

What do you see? You too are an icon. With Mary, ponder the mystery. And ponder the call.