

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:  
*How I Overcame my Fear of Mary*

My earliest recollections of the Blessed Virgin Mary come from caroling in my Presbyterian Church. Advent is almost the only time we ever mentioned her. I remember singing: "Silent night holy night/ All is calm, all is bright/ Round yon virgin mother and child." In my grammar school naiveté, I misunderstood the words of this Catholic hymn. I thought we were singing about a "Round, Young Virgin." For the rest of the year, the only other times I heard about Mary were when we recited the creed ("Born of the Virgin Mary"), and when we criticized Catholics: "Why do you worship Mary? Why not pray only to Jesus?" Eventually, I imbibed all the revulsion, fear, and loathing that a Protestant could muster against Catholic devotion to the Mother of God.

Today, I am a Catholic who is happy to call himself a devoted son of Mary. What I learned from tradition, Scripture, and the Second Vatican Council helped me overcome my fear of Marian devotion. Here's how:

As a Protestant studying Church history, I was impressed by the witness of the earliest Christians. The same men who wrote the early creeds and confessions that we sometimes recited also had an exalted view of Mary. Those who handed on the apostolic tradition about Christ, the incarnation, and the atonement also handed on a tradition that assigned her the greatest honors. Leading Christians of the second century called her the *Second Eve*. Evidence from the third century reveals prayers for her intercession under the title *Mother of God*. They celebrated her as the "Blessed" and "Only Pure."

When I saw this strong witness from the earliest centuries I was stumped. If only a few Christians had embraced these "errors" (as I saw them), it would have been easier to dismiss. But as the trail of evidence got thicker, I found that devotion to Mary and the saints was ubiquitous. By the fifth century, the universal Church was defending Marian devotion as part of the deposit of apostolic faith. How could I embrace the Nicæan Creed and its teaching on the Trinity, but reject the Council of Ephesus which had upheld a tradition just as ancient?

This forced me to consider *why*? Why did modern Catholics and early Christians think it necessary to pray to Mary and the Saints? Why not just go directly to Jesus? The reason, I found, was thoroughly biblical. God does not *want* to save us only as individuals, but as a community, a family, a new People of God. St. Paul says God's plan from the beginning was that those who were "far off" might "be brought near." Christ would "destroy the dividing wall of hostility." He would "create in himself one new man in place of two." (Ephesians 2:13-15)

Scripture teaches that God wants His graces to be distributed to some people through other people, to build up these bonds of charity and communion. St. Paul says God's plan from the beginning was that "the manifold wisdom of God might be made known through the Church." (Ephesians 3:9) Ministers of the Gospel are "God's fellow laborers." (1 Corinthians 3:9) And this relationship does not end with death. St. John depicts the saints in heaven worshipping God, and offering up as incense the prayers of the Church on earth. (Revelation 5:8; 8:4) Should we be surprised that God, who is a Trinity of Persons, eternally in communion, should desire our

salvation to reflect his own inner nature? As Christians are we not destined to partake of that nature? (2 Peter 1:4)

The Second Vatican Council emphasized that the Church is the new People of God, and that our union with that People does not end with death:

Therefore the union of the wayfarers with the brethren who have gone to sleep in the peace of Christ is not in the least weakened or interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the perpetual faith of the Church, is strengthened by communication of spiritual goods. (*Lumen Gentium*, 49)

The council situated the Blessed Virgin Mary within that communion of Saints. ("Because she belongs to the offspring of Adam she is one with all those who are to be saved.") But the Council taught that her place *within* that communion of saints is unique. She gave birth to the Head of which we are the members. In a very real, albeit mystical, way she is Mother of the Church as well as its chief and first member. Citing St. Augustine, the Council writes, "She is 'the mother of the members of Christ . . . having cooperated by charity that faithful might be born in the Church, who are members of that Head.'" (*Lumen Gentium*, 53)

In a way, my early misunderstanding of Silent Night was not all that bad. In my mind, Mary was *round* with child, the Christ child. It remained only for me to learn how she was my mother in being the mother of Jesus, how she was Mother of the Church in being the Mother of God. This Advent, rejoice that God gave us a Mother, knowing that God wants us to be saved in this way:

Beneath your compassion,  
We take refuge, O Mother of God:  
do not despise our petitions in time of trouble:  
but rescue us from dangers,  
only pure, only blessed one. (*Sub tuum*, circa 250 A.D. The earliest known Marian hymn)