

process which of course closely paralleled the streamlining of the liturgy into a rather bland and wordy ritual.

But the minimalist assumptions of the reformers entirely misread the direction of the culture, which would soon explode in every kind of extravagance, to the point where familiar gaudy statues, for example, would seem, if not exactly good art, at least fascinating objects to those whose aesthetic explicitly rejected criteria like "taste," "balance" and "restraint."

The Council fathers did not foresee feminism and hence did not foresee the inevitable revival of Marian interests under feminist auspices, after feminism had first given Mary a rude push towards oblivion by stridently rejecting the images both of virgin and mother which she represented and with equal stridence smashing the pedestals on which women figuratively, and Mary literally, had long dwelt. Rather than Mary's being an ecumenical embarrassment, suddenly she became for liberal Catholics an invaluable resource of which their Protestant sisters might well be envious.

The spirit of sobriety which was imposed on Marian devotion at the time of the Council was also based on a chaste historicity - devotees were not to go beyond what the relatively few Marian biblical texts would bear. Feminists, on the other hand, have by now totally abandoned even the pretense of this historicity. Thus on the one hand they engage in utterly baseless historical speculation (Jesus's father was a Roman soldier, his mother a rape victim) or merely use Mary as a rich symbol, to be shaped, reshaped, and exploited in whatever

ways serve the interests of the feminist movement.

Ironically, the hoary Protestant charge that Catholicism turned Mary into a goddess is now literally true, since the feminists who claim her do not even care about her historical reality but merely treat her as a symbol, readily set alongside Aphrodite or Astarte. Thus, as with everything else which touches the Faith, it is now left for orthodox Catholics and faithful Protestants to begin again to explore this profound and so often misunderstood area of Christian belief. Questions of gender and of human sexuality are at the heart of the contemporary religious crisis, and nowhere does it seem more promising to begin to resolve them than with the Virgin Mother herself.

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Misgivings About Mary

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Nowhere is the gulf dividing Catholics and Protestants wider than on the subject of Mary. Those conservative Protestants with whom Catholics increasingly find that they discover common ground, in defending Christian morality and the historic core of Christian revelation, are precisely the kind of Protestants who most quickly object to what they consider Catholic distortions in this regard.

Given their assumptions, these Protestant misgivings are also quite understandable, since an appreciation of Mary's place in the economy of salvation required centuries of inspired theological meditation on the relatively few biblical texts that mention her. Looked at merely through common sense, there is validity in the Protestant argument that, if God intended Mary to have a crucial role in the lives of Christians, she ought to have been featured more prominently in the New Testament.

But it is not a Catholic conceit to think that the Bible is a dense repository of divine truth in need of careful and continuous interpretation in order to fathom its depths. Without such a process it would be relatively easy to make the secularist error of seeing Jesus as merely an exalted moral teacher who ran afoul of the religious authorities of his time. Protestants who in principle balk at a serious consideration of Catholic Marian doctrines are inconsistent,

for example, in accepting the doctrine of the Trinity, a word which nowhere appears in the Bible and the very concept of which is by no means obvious there.

Protestantism as a whole has a bad conscience about Mary, not in the sense that Protestants realize they are slighting her but in that the strong anti-Marian reaction of the Reformation period has frozen later Protestants into a permanent state of aversion to taking Mary seriously, except in marginal ways.

Thus in the annual reenactments of the Nativity scene which take place in Protestant as well as Catholic churches, Mary seems usually to play almost a background role, the entirely appropriate focus on her Son allowed to obscure even the central place which mothers occupy at the births even of merely human children, as though family members are so enamored of the new child that they ignore the woman who brought it into the world. Thus the fear of exaggerating Mary's importance causes her to be denied even ordinary human recognition.

Some churches in the Anglican communion are dedicated to St. Mary, but otherwise she is so honored only among Catholics and Orthodox. But some Protestant denominations do name churches after biblical saints - Peter, Paul, John, Stephen - and it is illogical that there is no St. Mary's Methodist Church, for example. However unwilling Protestants may be to accord her extraordinary honors, there is surely no warrant for considering her less holy than Jesus's apostles.

Some historians have identified Catholicism as a feminine religion,

Protestantism (and Islam) as masculine, part of that categorization deriving from how each church views the role of Mary. The masculine religions are so unwaveringly monotheistic that they shun honoring Mary lest there be any suggestion that she is being deified. Not surprisingly, these masculine religions have historically slighted the distinctively religious role of women, however much they have valued women in their ordinary social roles.

So the failure even to acknowledge St. Mary, and to extol Mary as an exemplar for women, has over the centuries deprived Protestant women of what ought to be their chief model of Christian womanhood. Ironically, Protestant women seem more likely to look to Old Testament figures like Ruth or Naomi, as though the coming of Mary's Son made no difference in the way women ought to live.

But, like many other things which helped provoke the Reformation, the authentic cult of Mary was difficult to separate from its numerous excesses, some of them theological (the proposal, now seemingly dormant, to name Mary "co-redemptrix"), most of them perhaps matters of taste or proportion (gaudy statues and lachrymose hymns).

Marian devotions began in the early Middle Ages in large measure as part of the wider process of discovering the merciful face of God, and no symbol was more immediately accessible in this regard than that of the kind mother. But the comforting figure of Mary with her infant Son on her lap itself ought to have precluded later distortions which held that, even though

Jesus is humanity's mediator with the Father, Christians some how also need Mary to mediate between themselves and Jesus.

That such an idea gained so much currency in popular piety over the centuries, to the point where in some cultures Jesus became a remote figure indeed and all attention was lavished on his mother, shows the inherent danger of attitudes underlying the Marian cult, the familiar reality whereby one's vices are likely to be a distortion of one's virtues. The emotional accessibility which Mary offered sinful supplicants easily released emotions which became more and more extravagant over time.

Thus the de-emphasis on Mary which the Second Vatican Council seemed to authorize had several causes - ecumenism, a more careful approach to biblical texts, that desire to purify and prune back the lushness of devotional life which was one of the principal goals of the liturgical movement. (After hearing for years Gounod's "Ave Maria" sung by weepy tenors and sopranos I found it a cleansing revelation to hear, for the first time, the same text sung in plain chant around 1955.)

But with Marian devotion as with almost everything else, Catholics have come full circle since the Council. In a way the keynote of the conciliar reform of piety was sobriety, and Catholics were instructed to stay close to the actual words of Scripture, to rein in their subjective yearnings, to keep their attention focused on core doctrines. (Mary as significant solely because she was the mother of the Redeemer). It was a