

Mary, the one who has “got there” - a reflection for August

A former friend and colleague of mine, the Evangelical theologian John de Satgé, reflected on the destiny of the mother of Jesus in his book “Mary and the Christian Gospel”. In this edited passage, he is commenting on some of what the Constitution on the Church (one of the key documents of the Second Vatican Council) has to say about her.

“Mary appears not simply as the pattern of the Church; but as the pattern of the Church on the move, the Church in its pilgrimage as the wandering people of God. This does not simply mean that the Church is a dynamic body without permanent citizenship in this world. That would be true enough, and important, whether it is interpreted traditionally as referring to the life of the world to come, or in the modern, more secular, this-worldly style. [This] perspective on the Church as God's wandering people is invested with a deeply biblical duality. The Church is on a journey, it is in the process of becoming; But at the same time it mysteriously possesses the end to which it is journeying, it is what it is becoming; and it is also the sign of the end to which it is journeying.

Mary is not merely the example for the Church to follow; she sums up in herself all the Church ought to be, and ultimately will be. Mary is the one who has, so to speak, got there. She is the human being, wholly one with all human beings, entirely created, entirely supported by divine grace, from first to last yielded to the Holy Spirit - whose response has been total and who therefore stands in the final state of human fulfilment.

He then cites two key New Testament passages. The first is “Saint John’s great “*beloved, we are God's children now; It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we should be like him for we shall see him as he is.*” The other passage is Paul’s towering affirmation of faith: “*we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose for those whom he foreknew he also pre-destined to be conformed to the image of his son, in order that he might be the first born among many brethren. And those whom he pre-destined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.*”

I believe that just as we see in the theological life of the Virgin Mary, as the scriptures describe her, a model of justification by faith, so we may view the beginning and the end of her story which later traditions have added onto the scriptural depositⁱ not as a distortion from it but as congruent with it and so as legitimate extensions. It is of course possible to hold these doctrines to express them in such a way they do effectively violence to the integrity of the received faith and so come under the hammer of St Paul’s anathema called down on those who preach another gospel”.ⁱⁱ But I cannot see why in themselves they should be thus expressed. It seems to me they fall more naturally under the theological control of the great evangelical centrality of the faith; Mary the woman whose predestination has been advanced to its full term of conformation into the image of God's son and hers; Mary who is called who responded totally; Mary who was justified and rejoiced in her salvation; Mary who has been glorified? If it may be so taken, and Mary may be seen as the one of us who was already “got there”, then it gives great force to the insistence of the Vatican *Constitution* that Mary is a sign of sure hope and solace for the wandering people of God; and it makes her a splendid trophy of the gospel’s grace and power.”

ⁱ He is referring here to the doctrines that Mary was conceived without sin (the Immaculate Conception - commemorated in the window in the south west corner of St Faith's) and that at the end of her earthly life, God took her, body and soul, into heaven (the Assumption.)

ⁱⁱ From the very beginnings of the Church there has been a debate about the rightness of developments in doctrine - at what point does extension or interpretation of "the faith once delivered to the saints" become, as St Paul, put it "another gospel.?"