



# **The Believing Woman**

**The Virgin Mary in the Theology of St. John**

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“Many other signs also Jesus worked in the sight of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing

you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:30f). John finishes his gospel with these words<sup>1</sup> and indicates his purpose in writing—to give the testimony of Christ's words and deeds in order to generate, increase, and perfect the faith of Christ's followers. Faith is, therefore, the fruit to be obtained from John's gospel. In this article, after commenting on the meaning of *faith* and *sign* in Johannine thought, I intend to present the figure of Mary, the Mother of Christ, as the model of faith for the Christian.

John's gospel is a theological work. It cannot be seen as a biography of Jesus, but rather it must be accepted as the result of the theological tradition of a Johannine school, developed over a span of several decades. Nor is it a work intended to fill up the gaps in the Synoptic gospels. The fourth gospel is unique, independent, and complete. The author's intention is to present a *person*, the Son of God made flesh, the summit of God's revelation and the source of Christian life. John expects the reader to accept this person, and to commit his life to him. This response by the reader is the Johannine concept of *faith*. "For John, being a believer and being a disciple are really synonymous, for faith is the primary factor in becoming a Christian."<sup>2</sup> For John faith is not only the intellectual assent to God's revealed truth; it is a fully human activity that involves the whole person, it has a "dynamic nature,"<sup>3</sup> it changes the whole life of the individual.

This faith, so fully alive, is constantly requested by Jesus in John's gospel. He does this by means of *signs*. This is a technical term (Greek *semeion*) which is applied to any manifestation of Jesus' glory intended to lead the individual man to belief. Actually, all of Christ's words and deeds are signs, especially in the highly theological context of John's gospel, but the evangelist selected seven principal signs of a miraculous nature to reveal Christ's mission in a special way. John presents these seven signs to help the reader to rise up to another level of life—that of faith in Christ. But it is *faith* which is stressed by the evangelist, not the wonderwork. The miracle itself is actually de-emphasized; it is narrated in a few unspectacular words, and the evangelist immediately goes on to the theological level. In the two Cana miracles—the water changed into wine (Jn 2:1-11) and the cure of the official's son (Jn 4:46-54)—the faith which resulted is explicitly, though briefly, mentioned; of the other five signs, three—the cure of the paralytic (Jn 5) and the unit formed by the multiplication of the loaves and the walking on the water (Jn 6)—are followed

by long theological discourses of Jesus, and two—the man born blind (Jn 9) and the raising of Lazarus (Jn 11:1-44)—are set up as almost theatrical episodes that dramatize Christ's claims for belief. In Jn 6 Christ is the Bread of Life, in Jn 9 he is the Light of the World, and in Jn 11 he is the Resurrection and the Life. In all seven cases, Christ manifests himself through the sign and through the subsequent words, thus enabling the believer to advance through faith to the theological level of Christ's revelation.

This approach based on faith is intended for the reader, but of course it pertained first of all to the people who actually entered into contact with Jesus in John's gospel. This petition to advance through faith to the deeper theological level of Christ's life is the full import of all the attitudes, works, and discourses of Jesus. The Baptist, the disciples, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the blind man, Martha, Pilate, "the crowds," "the Jews," in short every single person who has a part to play in John's gospel is invited to have faith in Jesus and to commit his life to him. Some do and some do not. But in all cases a choice is presented, and the individual must make a decision.

Among all these Johannine figures, the mother of Jesus has a very special place. She appears only twice, at the marriage feast of Cana and at the foot of the cross, but these two scenes are of primary importance in John's gospel. Cana, because it is the beginning of the signs, where, moreover, the full meaning of *sign* is explicitly indicated by the evangelist. Calvary, because Christ's death is the sign *par excellence*, presented by John within a theologico-prophetic framework, and, together with the resurrection and the ascension, is the climax of Christ's glorification. Both scenes, Cana and Calvary, must be considered as primarily Christological; their Marian aspect, though important, is only secondary. The main thrust is Christ's manifestation.

The event of Cana has been the object of an enormous amount of scholarly research. The cryptic dialogue between Jesus and his mother has been interpreted in many ways, and almost every author has come up with a different solution, varying from harsh refusal to absolute acceptance of Mary's request—if it was, in fact, a request. It would be impossible to indicate here all these interpretations, but some examples will show how they differ from each other. First, the term "Woman" for a long time has been a source of embarrassment for Mariological scholars, who cannot dismiss the strangeness of such an address. The whole expression (literally translated) "What to you

and to me, Woman? My hour has not yet come" (Jn 2:3) is rendered according to the scholar's interpretation: either a refusal to act on Christ's part, or an acceptance of his mother's suggestion, like "Why hesitate? The hour of my passion, when miracles will not be performed, has not yet come,"<sup>4</sup> or "What is there to separate us? We are fully agreed; has my hour not yet come?"<sup>5</sup> There is also the question of whether Mary was asking for a miracle or simply stating a fact with her words "They have no wine" (Jn 2:3), and of the apparently sudden and incomprehensible change of Jesus' mind, who first indicated that his hour had not yet come, and then proceeded to perform a miracle.

In order to understand Cana, we must remember that, as a *sign*, it is primarily an invitation to faith. The literal meaning, so confusing, must be illuminated by the deeper theological meaning. The dialogue seems to be artificial and does not flow naturally; possibly it has been summarized by the evangelist in order to present his theological lesson. The hypothesis that an affirmative answer has been replaced by a negative theological one does not have many followers.<sup>6</sup> In any event, the evangelist has preserved what he thought was sufficient to express the theology of the occasion. Mary is requesting, if not a miracle in the strict sense, at least a special intervention on Christ's part. What is important here is to realize that there is an incipient faith in her, strong enough to ask for something. "She thus represents, at the outset of the scene, the messianic faith which will be stirred up in the disciples after the miracle."<sup>7</sup> But this faith is not yet the faith that Jesus desires. The Son is going to help the Mother elicit a superior kind of belief. This can explain the strange dialogue that follows. Christ's use of "Woman" is not disrespectful; it is theological. Christ wants Mary to understand that their former relationship of mother-son is at an end; he can no longer be restricted by family ties. Until now, he has remained under her shadow at Nazareth; from now on, she must be under the shadow of his public life. He does not belong to her anymore. This may be the sense of "What to you and to me?," a common phrase which in the Bible almost always implies a separation. In a sense, Mary has ceased being Christ's mother.

It is interesting to note that this same theme is present in Mary's appearances in the Synoptic gospels. The Lucan infancy narrative presents Mary in a humble position, and her attitudes is one of patiently accepting what she does not understand. Later on, during

the public life, both when Mary and Jesus' brothers come to see him (Mk 3:33ff and parallels) and when a woman in the crowd extols Mary (Lk 11:27f), Jesus again places family ties under the ties of his Father's will.

At Cana, Christ mentions his *hour*. In the context of John's gospel, this hour is that of Christ's return to the Father, through his glorification. This gives the clue to Christ's answer. He is not refusing to act; rather, he is directing his mother toward his hour, asking her to subject her petition to a higher will, to a mysterious order, *in faith*. This Mary does, and leaving everything to Jesus' own understanding of his mission, asks the servants to obey him. Thus, the evangelist shows the method used by Jesus to instruct his mother. He helps her to make an act of faith in him, and, through the sign, elevates and perfects that faith.

The scene on Calvary is the counterpart of the wedding at Cana. There are several similarities: Mary is present with the nucleus of the Christian Church; at Cana with the recently called disciples, on Calvary with John and the faithful women. In both cases, Jesus addresses his mother as "Woman" and separates her from himself. And in both cases, after his words to Mary, Jesus performs the sign.

There are many interpretations given to Christ's words, "Woman, behold, your son . . . Behold, your mother (Jn 19:26f).<sup>8</sup> Some authors center their attention on the disciple, "the new Christ," whose mother is Mary. Others see in Jesus' words his filial love, that takes care of the mother he is leaving alone on earth, and even a testimony to Mary's perpetual virginity. There is the further implication of Mary's spiritual maternity over all Christians, represented by the faithful disciple. And, finally, there is the view of Mary as the type of the Church, separated from Israel in order to adopt the Gentiles. But here I would like to see these words in their relationship to the dialogue at Cana, emphasizing the place of faith in the context of the sign.

Christ's death is presented by John, as I said before, in a messianic framework. He does not simply relate the events that took place; he paints a theological picture with a definite goal in mind. The scene on Calvary (Jn 19:19-37) consists of five prophetic episodes clearly delineated:<sup>9</sup>

(a) Immediately after Jesus is crucified, John records the inscription written under Pilate's order, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King

of the Jews." Although this does not fulfill a specific prophecy, it is prophetic in the sense that the Messiah was expected to be David's heir to an eternal throne (cf. Ps 110 and Lk 1:32) and also a fulfillment of Jesus's own confession before Pilate (Jn 18:37).

(b) The soldiers divide Christ's garments for themselves, thus fulfilling Ps 22:18.

(c) Jesus speaks to his mother and his disciple.

(d) After exclaiming "I thirst" and being given common wine (fulfillment of Ps 69:22) Jesus cries out "it is consummated!" and dies.

(e) Finally, Christ's heart is pierced with a spear, and the evangelist affirms that this action is the fulfillment of two texts: Ex 12:46, which refers to the paschal lamb, and the eschatological utterance of Zac 12:10.

At the very center of such a carefully planned narrative, the words of Christ to Mary and John, which are motivated by love, clearly acquire a theological meaning. The use of "Woman" here throws light on the same expression at Cana. There is again a separation, an explicit subjection of the mother-son relationship to God's saving will, through faith. This aspect of belief, already clear at Cana, becomes on Calvary completely messianic. The reader is immediately reminded of two other texts where a "Woman" plays a very important role. In Gen 3:15 Eve hears the prophecy about the struggle between "her seed" and the serpent's descendants. In Rev 12:1ff a Woman gives birth to a male child, in the midst of pain and anguish. Although these two passages are *not* literal references to Mary, in the whole context of biblical prophecy and messianism they become related to the Woman on Calvary as symbols of the Redeemer's Mother.

After these considerations we may return to the elements of *sign* and *faith* in the Calvary scene. In Johannine theology all the words and works of Christ are signs of his unity with the Father and credentials of his saving mission. They invite faith, or, even more, demand the acceptance of this Person and complete commitment to him. But the greatest sign is Christ's death. It is not only the climax of his glorification (a constantly recurring theme: "for John the whole life of Jesus is in the fullest sense a revelation of his glory"<sup>10</sup>) but also the perfect proof of his union with the Father and his fulfillment of the Father's will. Christ is never so much aware of his

Sonship and his love for the Father than at this moment, when he readily gives his life away for the salvation of mankind. His work completed, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come forth from God and was going to God" (Jn 13:3),<sup>11</sup> gives himself up with absolute freedom.

But, precisely because Christ's death is the perfect *sign*, it is also the most radical call to *faith* and the most complete demand for personal *commitment*. It is impossible to imagine what a profound crisis it must have been for Mary to see her Son die. As had been foreshadowed at Cana, here she is asked to give up her Son, without understanding and in the utter darkness of faith. And she does so; her "fiat" had never been interrupted. Begun in Nazareth, it forms the background of her whole life, and when "the hour" comes, she brings her "fiat" to perfection with her complete act of faith in Christ and her absolute surrender and commitment to him.

With all this in mind, I think it is clear that Cana and Calvary have primary importance in John's gospel in terms of *sign*, and that the Virgin Mary is the model for all Christians in her response in terms of *faith*. In fact, it is difficult to conceive of a situation where faith is more necessary than in the relationship between Jesus and Mary. She had had, after all, the closest contact with his humanity, which, being a sign of his divinity, constantly demanded her belief during his life, but especially at his death. "Because she is also the blessed believer it will be necessary for her to accept in faith the sacrifice of her Son. She will also know the temptations of doubt. The reality of the suffering of her Son will penetrate her being as a test of faith in his messianic mission, and in his nature as Son of God."<sup>12</sup> It was only with the completion of Christ's glorification—the resurrection, the ascension, and the outpouring of the Spirit—that Mary finally came to the understanding of her own life and role. She is, therefore, the model of man's acceptance of Christ, because she herself had to *grow in faith*. Every sign given to the world was also intended for her, and she had to be faithful to grace, like all other human beings. She was blessed, because she believed (cf. Lk 1:45).

Finally, there is another element. Mary is seen in Cana with the new disciples at the inception of their faith in Christ, and on Calvary she accompanies John and the faithful women in their crisis of faith. (And, using another source, Acts 1:14, we see her present in the Cenacle with the disciples when the Spirit brings their faith to perfection). Mary is not merely the model of the individual Christian in

his acceptance of Christ. The central position she occupies in these important events makes her, above all, the symbol of the whole Church. She represents the faith of the Church both at Cana and on Calvary. These ideas are clearly present in the Documents of the Second Vatican Council, which refer to Mary's "pilgrimage of faith,"<sup>13</sup> declaring her "the image and first flowering of the Church as she is to be perfected in the world to come,"<sup>14</sup> and proclaiming Mary "the Mother of the Church."<sup>15</sup> Thus, basing its doctrine above all else on Mary's faith, the Church has clearly expressed the meaning of the Mother of Christ as that of the Believing Woman, and, moreover has declared that "knowledge of the truth Catholic doctrine on Mary will always be the key to the exact understanding of the mystery of Christ and the Church."<sup>16</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Most biblical scholars see Jn 21 as a later addition by the gospel's final redactor. Jn 21:24f, the second conclusion, reflects Jn 20:30f, the first conclusion, but does not mention faith explicitly.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29 (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), 512.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 513.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Juan Cortés Quirant, "Las Bodas de Caná," *Marianum* XX (1958), 155-89.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Peinador, "La Respuesta de Jesús a su Madre en las Bodas de Caná," *Ephemerides Mariologicae* VIII (1958), 61-104.

<sup>6</sup> This seems to be the idea behind the interrogative answer of Jesus referred to in footnote 5, and advocated by Boismard, *Du Baptême a Cana* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1956), 157. Cf. also Michaud, "Le signe de Cana dans son contexte johannique," *Laval Theologique et Philosophique* 18 (1962), 239-85; 19 (1963), 257-83.

<sup>7</sup> Max Thurian, *Mary Mother of All Christians* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 134.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 145-8.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 150-1 and Max Zerwick, "The Hour of the Mother," *Catholic Mind* 63 (June 1965), 13-9.

<sup>10</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 69.

<sup>11</sup> This sentence appears before the washing of the feet at the Last Supper, but it can be used as a prelude to the climax of Christ's glorification, his death-resurrection-ascension.

<sup>12</sup> Thurian, *op. cit.*, 107.

<sup>13</sup> Walter M. Abbott, ed., "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," No. 58, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, America Press, Association Press, 1966), 89.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, (No. 68), 95.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Paul VI's address at the close of the Second Vatican Council's third session, Nov. 21, 1964, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* LVI (1964), 1015.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* (*Cognito verae doctrinae catholicae de Beata Maria Virgine semper subsidium erit efficax ad recte intellegendum mysterium Christi et Ecclesiae*).