

THE ART OF THEOLOGY

Mary as Bride of Christ

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Mariology has progressed by applying biblical imagery to the relationship between Mary and Jesus. 'Mother to Son' is supplemented by 'Bride to Husband', which in the high Middle Ages was expressed in powerfully erotic words and imagery. The article traces the theological discussion through patristic writings and then considers some public artworks that show the wide reception of the themes discussed.

Liturgy and theology use paradox to express the mystery of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The central paradox of a mother who is a virgin is enlarged and echoed when other biblical themes are applied to Mary and her Son. St Paul styled Jesus as the Second and Last Adam, Irenaeus (c.130-202) extended that typology to Mary and cast her as the New Eve. The parallel is not exact because Mary is the *mother* of Jesus, while Eve was the *wife* of Adam, yet the power of liturgical imagery and a mystical strand in theology are untroubled by apparent contradiction. Interpreting Mary as a figure representing the Church enabled the Pauline image of the Church as bride of Christ to be applied to Mary. Mariological development progressed more by a series of symbolic leaps than any logical progression. As will be shown this led to imagery of the relationship between Mary and Jesus that the piety of our age finds shocking. One leap in the series is the application to the Virgin Mary of the most erotic section of the Old Testament.

In elegant and sensuous prose the *Song of Songs* of the Old Testament articulates arguably humankind's finest attempt to describe the indescribable—to express in terms of human beauty, God's abiding and loving concern for his people Israel. A lover, described as 'King' (1:4 and 12) or Solomon (3:7 and 9)

and his beloved, identified as 'the Shulamite' (7:1), address each other in verse of the greatest intimacy: 'You ravish my heart my sister, my promised bride (4:9)' he says; 'Let my Beloved come into his garden, let him taste its rarest fruits' she replies (4:16). They are united, divided, sought and found, constantly and seductively seeking each other's presence. Attributed to Solomon but now believed to be of unknown authorship, it is dated to around 900 BC.

This idealized language of love is expressed in conjugal terms. Insofar as it is an expression of God's love for his creation, the greatest and most powerful metaphor is articulated in a manner closest to human understanding—the love of a man for a woman united in a vowed commitment: 'my promised bride' he calls her. The familiarity of these words from the Hebrew scriptures easily found its way into the Gospels and offered a new dimension to the apostles striving as they were, to understand both Christ's human presence and Christ as fulfillment of the Messianic promise. John the Evangelist, for instance, uses 'bridegroom' as a metaphor for Christ's coming (3:29) and mentions, but does not identify, His bride. The Author of the Book of Revelation expands this insight. Here the bride becomes the 'New Jerusalem' and the 'Bride that the Lamb has

married' (Revelation 21: 2, 9-10).

The Apostolic Fathers built on the words of the Gospels so as to establish within the various religious and philosophical currents of the time the identity of Christ as true God and true man.¹ Hippolytus of Rome (d.235 AD) describes the movement of God into the human sphere through the act of procreation:

Being outside of the flesh, the word of God took upon himself the holy flesh of the holy Virgin; like a bridegroom he prepared himself that garment which he would weave together with his sufferings on the cross ... in this way he intended to obtain salvation for man, who was perishing.²

It was Ephrem the Syrian (306-373) who first explicitly identified Mary as the Bride of Christ. This great doctor of Syrian Christianity was one of the first Fathers of the Church to allow living sentiments of love and devotion towards the mother of God to emanate from his writings. He imitates the cadences of the *Song of Songs* in his own poetry, insisting on Mary's sinlessness, her spiritual beauty and her holiness. He reflects on her relationship with her Son who is at the same time the Son of God and the promised One:

For I am [your] sister from the House of David, who is second father. Again, I am mother because of Your conception, and bride am I because of your chastity. Handmaiden and daughter of blood and water [am I] who you redeemed and baptized.³

Ambrose (d.397) added a further dimension; he identified Mary as type and image of the Church. 'Well [does the Gospel say] married but a virgin, because she is a type of the Church, which is also married but remains immaculate'⁴. It was Ambrose who identified Mary as the 'Shulamite' from the *Song of Songs*: 'From the womb of Mary was brought into the world the heap of wheat surrounded by lilies (*cf. Song of Songs* 7:1) when Christ was born of her'. In giving birth to Christ Mary fulfilled Old Testament longing and 'contracted a maternal relationship with all men on a spiritual level. She contributes to the

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building up of the Church into the body of Christ'⁵.

The great Augustine of Hippo (d. 430 AD) confirmed this theology:

How is it that you do not belong to the Virgin's birth, if you are members of Christ? Mary gave birth to our Head, the Church gave birth to you. Indeed the Church also is both virgin and mother, mother because of her womb and her charity, virgin because of her integrity and piety.⁶

The double thread of Mariology—Mary as Mother and Mary as *Ecclesia*/spouse was set to music in the Akathist Hymn c. 5th-6th cent. It has been attributed to many, to Romanos the Melodist (sixth cent), to George of Pisidia (seventh cent), Germanus of Constantinople (eighth cent). It is the most profound and ancient of all Marian hymns, poetic, theological and contemplative, every alternative stanza finishes with 'Hail Mary Bride'. It is sung to this day in the Eastern Church.⁷

Despite the conjugal imagery it is clear

from the beginning that it was all to do with virginity. This glorious nuptial language translated from the Old Testament to the New, was to be lived in the mind, in the realm of imagination, exultation and sublimated desire. As Marina Warner points out, the love songs of Solomon and the Shulamite were predominantly applied to the love of Christ and the consecrated life of virgin or nun.⁸ The counter-intuitive ideology surrounding Mary's place as mother, spouse and bride of the *Song of Songs* and type of the Church, limited this fragile understanding to the learned and cloistered.

It was not until the twelfth century that Mariological mysticism reached its high point in the impassioned love and language of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). In a series of eighty-six sermons on the *Song of Songs* Bernard identified Christ as the lover of the Old Testament, as love itself and Mary as both bride and spouse. Bernard's commentaries 'took a surprising turn towards heightened eroticism paralleling explicitly spiritual adoration with the act of sexual love'⁹. Both carnal and spiritual love is expressed in the same language. According to Bernard, carnal love disturbs the spotless soul, however, pure love, the leap of the soul towards God as love itself, restores prelapsarian purity—that idyllic state before the Fall.¹⁰ That pure love took a further step in Bernard's theology; it was expressed most intensely in the visual sign of motherhood—that of the mother feeding the child from her breasts, in the milk which gave life to the human form. In this case it should be remembered that milk was understood at the time as processed blood so that milk represented both human nourishment and Christ's supreme sacrifice.¹¹ That love was both gendered and genderless. Christ became both lover and mother. Writing to his community Bernard says: 'suck not so much on the wounds as on the breasts of the crucified ... He will be your mother and you will be his son'¹².

Bernard of Clairvaux's emotional prose was not entirely original. He was responding

to the discourse of the age. It is not surprising that at the same time as he was formulating his theology, the High Middle Ages was captured by ideas of courtly love. Courtly love was the 'pure love' of the troubadours. Tied initially to the love poems of Ovid, courtly love was the unrequited love of knight or courtier for an unattainable noblewoman expressed in elevating music and emotional and erotic verse. Such love was a secular version of Bernard's spiritual yearnings but it gave him the language and the disposition to allow his imagination full reign.

Some early attempts had been made to illustrate the mystical and ambiguous relationship between Christ and his mother. These were limited to illuminations that accompanied texts from the *Song of Songs* in Bibles and manuscripts. It was not until the twelfth century that artists sought to translate such complex theological concepts into public art. Eighteen months after a visit by Bernard to Rome, Innocent II commissioned a vast mosaic that enshrined the 'passionate imagination of the saint who engineered it'¹³.

In the central apse of S. Maria in Trastevere a mosaic, created in 1140-1143, shows a crowned Mary the Mother of God as both Queen of Heaven and *Ecclesia*, the embodiment of the Church. Seated close to her Son on a back-veiled throne Mary, dressed in the robes and jewels of a Roman princess, unfurls a scroll which reads: *Leva eius sub capite meo et dextera illius amplexabit me* (His left hand should be under my head; and his right hand should embrace me - *Song of Songs* 8:3). The book on Christ's knee repeats a phrase inspired also by the *Song of Songs*: *Veni electa mea, ponam in te tronam meam* (Come my beloved and I will put my throne in you)¹⁴. Mary and Christ are identified as the lover and the spouse. The intimacy of the words is repeated in the gesture: Christ encircles his Mother within his right arm. From an abstract concept, Mary becomes a living, visible woman, loving and loved in turn but she is always less than her son. Art has a language of its own

and the importance of the subject is often shown by size. Thus in the mosaic Mary is smaller than Christ, she sits at his right hand, her fingers, while still holding the scroll, point to her son who is at the same time the Son of God. Amidst a blaze of gold, Mother and Son reign together in glory but they reign together in the intimate union of mother and spouse, son and Son.

The Franciscan saint Bonaventure (1221-1274), followed Bernard's passion for the mystical union bedded in the *Song of Songs*. Saint Francis himself had couched his dedication to the virtue of poverty as 'Lady Poverty' in terms of marital love; his own symbolic marriage to the Virgin became the subject of artistic fantasy.¹⁵ Bonaventure was to follow with his own commentary, which further developed the intimate nature of Mary's relationship with her son.

It was left to the artist Cimabue (1240-1302) to convert those religious concepts into visual form and he embraced Bonaventure's understanding. The position of Christ and his mother/bride becomes more explicit in a fresco in the Upper Church apse of San Francesco, Assisi.

Cimabue ends his life cycle of Mary with a central Assumption that responds to Bonaventure's writings yet draws directly on the artistic conventions of the age. Ancient images portrayed sexual love with a contrived overlapping of the legs. Relationship is conveyed, it is one of possession, but little warmth is shown. Illustrations for the *Song of Songs* were to provide a licit visual convention for conjugal love. An Austrian model book dating from the 13th cent from which artist's could draw inspiration, shows a fully clothed couple surrounded by offspring, seated together with their arms around each other in a loving embrace, the man has his leg placed over his wife's left thigh. It is emblematic of the relationship between 'physical and emotional intimacy and procreation in legitimate marriage'¹⁶.

Cimabue's fresco adopts this convention.

Christ and Mary are shown seated on a single throne within an ascending mandorla (an almond-shaped aureole of light surrounding the figure of a holy person, most often used for the figure of Christ). Mary is typically shown on Christ's right as she is shown in the mosaic in S. Maria in Trastevere and in most other heavenly scenes of the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin, a pattern established in the Old Testament where the Queen is described as sitting at the right hand of the King (Kings 2: 19, Psalm 44:10). In this fresco Cimabue departs from the tradition. Mary is shown to the left of Christ emphasizing explicitly the line from the canticle that says: 'His left arm is under my head' (*Song of Songs* 2:3). He sits with his left arm high around her shoulder, his right hand clasps hers, she rests her right hand on his shoulder and leans her head against his cheek. While their upper extremities are joined in a tender embrace again there is a break from the accepted convention, here it is Mary's leg that is placed over Christ's thigh.

Due to deterioration of the fresco the imagery of Cimabue's painting had for many years remained largely unresolved. In 1956 an art historian, Millard Meiss, discovered a long-ignored winged altarpiece in the collection of the Rothschild family the central panel of which replicates, almost line for line, Cimabue's fresco. This has enabled a closer analysis of the manner and meaning of the iconography of Cimabue's work.¹⁷ The Rothschild panel, now known as the Stella Altarpiece, the work of the Cesi Master (c. 1298-1305), visualizes in brilliant colour the relationship of Christ as bridegroom and Mary as his bride from the *Song of Songs*. Dressed in a bejeweled gown, Mary and her son are backed by a star-filled firmament. Again the figures are seated enthroned within a mandorla their upper bodies locked in the same intimate embrace. Christ has his left arm around his mother's shoulders, she looks downwards, resting her head against his cheek her right hand on his shoulder. Their other hands rest tenderly

on each other's. Christ's feet are bare and rest on the lower arc of the mandorla.¹⁸ One of Mary's shod feet is placed beside her son's, the other hangs free, high above the edge of Christ's gown. Her left leg is clearly raised, crossed over and placed over the left thigh of her son 'taking him into her possession as she did in taking him into her womb'. Mary is of her son as he is of her. The sexual connotations of these works have long been observed.¹⁹ There is, as Lavin states, a 'problem of decorum implicit in the image of Mary and the adult Christ locked in a passionate embrace'²⁰. Here the words of the *Song of Songs* and the intuitions of the Church Fathers are interpreted in a visual form which is at the same time both sexually confronting yet theologically sound. The frankness of this iconography gives another dimension to the ponderings of the theologians. In all its colour and beauty something more has been added, an aesthetic value that makes the concept more than words, theology has been made visible.

Two further examples dating from the first half of the fourteenth century can be found in the *Capella della Madonna*, Sacro Speco, Subiaco and the Monastero di Santa Maria di Monteluca, Perugia. Both adopt the same intimate positions for the upper bodies of Mary and Jesus but the legs are placed side by side.

Such visual and philosophical theology would make little sense in today's world defined as it is by a broad-based relativism. The hard-edged sexuality of our times leaves little room for the concepts of pure beauty and pure love expressed in terms of unrequited conjugal love and obvious sexual expression. Ideas of the beautiful have changed. Bernard's mystical meanderings would seem simply the overcharged fantasies of a disturbed mind. He was a product of his times. His birth at the high point of the Middle Ages allowed him an emotional vocabulary which transcended human experience and acknowledged a world which could only be described in the language of

ecstasy.

The theologian Richard Viladesau describes what he refers to as 'the moving point of view'. From earliest Christian times, he says, the primary role of art was at the service of religion. Post-Reformation ideology and iconoclasm changed that trajectory forever. Freed from such restraints art became increasingly secularized. Profane subjects came to dominate painting. A broad generalization sees Romanticism and landscape surrender realism to impressionism and to a later pursuit of the transcendent. In a post-modern world the 'subject matter of painting becomes painting itself'. The process, the viewing, the methods and materials 'canvas and paint, colour and form' carry an aesthetic value of their own.²¹ Art, once God-centered and implicitly accessible to the masses, now assumes an elite status, revealing itself only to the initiated. It cannot now be captured for a single cause; it must operate at its own level, open to the interpretation of the individual viewer. Unconstrained by an underlying and rigid theology, art accesses a spirituality, an internal thought process, which need have nothing to do with religion but simply seeks to awaken the viewer to a different mode of thinking and seeing.

There is a theory that people are affected by the art they see. An early writer, Giovanni Dominici in his *Rule for the Management of Family Care* (1403) suggests that if a child is to be brought up 'for God' they should be surrounded by beautiful things, images of Christ, Mary and the Saints, in order that they may have a 'desire for Christ, hatred of sin, disgust at vanity and a shrinking from bad companions'²². If this could still be so then what more beautiful way to describe God's love for his Church than in the embrace of a son for his mother, a man for his bride. The power of the image to traverse the immensity between things of heaven and those of earth is now little intimated or even understood. In an ultimately pragmatic world something beautiful has been lost.

NOTES

1. Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991): 27.
2. Christ and Antichrist 4; PG 10, 732; GCS 1, 2, 6-7 quoted in Gambero, 87.
3. Gambero, 108 ff.
4. Quoted in *Lumen Gentium*, no. 63.
5. *De institutione virginis* 94; PL 16, 342 quoted in Gambero, 198.
6. Sermo 192, PL 38, 1012-13; NBA 32/1, 52 quoted in Gambero, 223.
7. Gambero: 338
8. Marina Warner, *Alone of All her Sex* (London: Vintage, 2000): 126.
9. Marilyn Aronberg Lavin and Irving Lavin, *The Liturgy of Love. Images from the Song of Songs in the Art of Cimabue, Michelangelo and Rembrandt* (Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas): 25.
10. Warner, 128.
11. Caroline Walker Bynum 'The Sacrality of Things: An enquiry into Divine Materiality in the Christian Middle Ages' in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 78: 3-18 (12).
12. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (London: University of California Press, 1982): 117-119.
13. Warner, 122.
14. This is a direct quotation from an antiphon for the feast of the Assumption found in the eighth century *Liber Pontificalis*. Warner, 122.
15. Lavin, 31. See: Maestro delle Vele, *The Marriage of Francis and Lady Poverty* (1320) fresco, Lower Church San Francesco, Assisi.
16. Lavin, 18.
17. Lavin, 16.
18. See Bridgeman Art Library, Maestro di Cesi.
19. Lavin, 17.
20. Lavin, 26.
21. Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000) pp. 80-107.
22. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989): 4.

Mary and Christ enthroned: Apse Mosaic of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome, ca.1140 AD.

