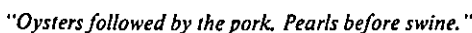


CENTRAL COAST NEWS



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# Handmaid Or Feminist?

More and more people around the world are worshipping Mary—and it's led to a holy struggle over what she really stands for

By RICHARD N. OSTLING

When her womb was touched by eternity 2,000 years ago, the Virgin Mary of Nazareth uttered a prediction: "All generations will call me blessed." Among all the women who have ever lived, the mother of Jesus Christ is the most celebrated, the most venerated, the most portrayed, the most honored in the naming of girl babies and churches. Even the Koran praises her chastity and faith. Among Roman Catholics, the Madonna is recognized not only as the Mother of God but also, according to modern Popes, as the Queen of the Universe, Queen of Heaven, Seat of Wisdom and even the Spouse of the Holy Spirit.

Mary may also be history's most controversial woman. For centuries Protestants have vehemently opposed her exaltation; papal pronouncements concerning her status have driven a wedge between the Vatican and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Conflict surrounds the notions that she remained ever a virgin, that she as well as Jesus was born without sin and that her sufferings at the Crucifixion were so great that she participated with her son in the redemption of humanity.

Yet even though the Madonna's presence has permeated the West for hundreds of years, there is still room for wonder—now perhaps more than ever. In an era when scientists debate the causes of the birth of the universe, both the adoration and the conflict attending Mary have risen to extraordinary levels. A grass-roots revival of faith in the Virgin is taking place worldwide. Millions of worshippers are flocking to her shrines, many of them young people. Even more remarkable are the number of claimed sightings of the Virgin, from Yugoslavia to Colorado, in the past few years.

These apparitions frequently embarrass clerics who have downplayed her role

since the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65. "It's all the fashion," sniffs Father Jacques Fournier of Paris, reflecting skepticism about the populist wave of sightings. The hierarchy is wary about most of the recent claims of miraculous appearances; only seven Marian sightings in this century have received official church blessing.

Church concern has served to highlight

"The world will recognize in due time that the defeat of communism came at the intercession of the mother of Jesus."

the most interesting aspect of the growing popular veneration: the theological tug-of-war taking place over Mary's image. Feminists, liberals and activists have stepped forward with new interpretations of the Virgin's life and works that challenge the notion of her as a passive handmaid of God's will and exemplar of some contested traditional family values. "Mary wants to get off the pedestal," says Kathy Denison, a former nun and current drug-and-alcohol counselor in San Francisco. "She wants to be a vital human being."

Whether they hold to those views or not, people the world over are traveling enormous distances to demonstrate in person their veneration of the Madonna. The late 20th century has become the age of the Marian pilgrimage. Examples:

**At Lourdes**, the biggest of France's 937 pilgrimage shrines, annual attendance in the past two years has jumped 10%, to 5.5 million. Many new visitors are East Europeans, now free to express their beliefs and to travel. Despite the inevitable attraction of Lourdes for the ill and aged, one-tenth of the faithful these days are 25 or younger. "We also have new kinds of pilgrimages," reports Loic Bondu, a spokesman at the site. "They dance, they sing, they praise out loud. They're more exuberant."

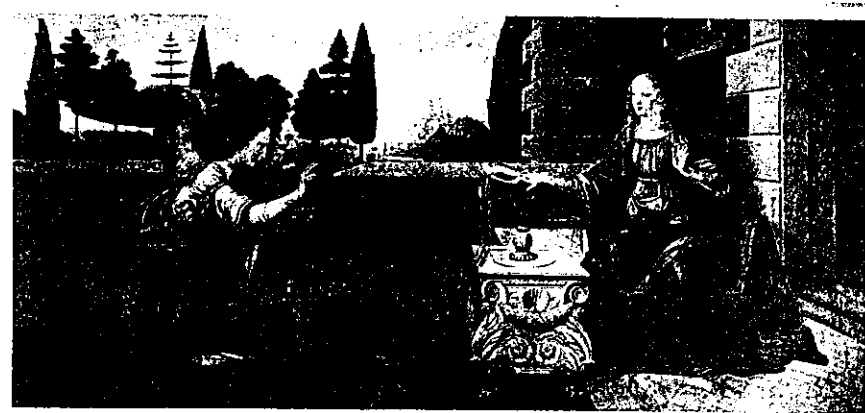
**In Knock, Ireland**, where 15 people saw the Virgin a century ago, the lines of the faithful lengthened dramatically after Pope John Paul II paid a visit to the shrine in 1979. Since then, attendance has doubled, to 1.5 million people each year. To handle the influx, a new international airport was opened at Knock in 1986.

**At Fátima, Portugal**, the shrine marking the appearance of Mary before three children in 1917 draws a steady 4.5 million pilgrims a year from an ever widening array of countries. One million devotees turned out last May when John Paul made his second visit.

**In Czestochowa, Poland**, attendance at the shrine of the Black Madonna has increased to 5 million a year, rivaling Fátima and Lourdes, since John Paul's visit in 1979. Last August the Pope spoke there to 1 million Catholic youths.

**In Emmitsburg, Maryland**, attendance has doubled in the past year, to 500,000, at one of the oldest of 43 major Marian sites in the U.S., the National Shrine Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes.

The boom at such long-established sites is almost overshadowed by the cult of the Virgin that has developed through new reports of her personal appearances, most



spectacularly at Medjugorje, Yugoslavia. Before Yugoslavia's civil war erupted and travel became much more difficult last September, more than 10 million pilgrims had flocked to the mountain village since the apparitions began in 1981. Six young peasants there claim that the Virgin has been imparting messages each evening for 10 years. Hundreds of ailments have been reported cured during visits to the region where the visitations take place. None of them have been verified, however, by the meticulous rules applied at Lourdes.

Paradoxically enough, the Medjugorje apparitions are a headache for the local Roman Catholic bishop, Pavao Zanic. He flatly asserts that "the Madonna has never said anything at Medjugorje." Our Lady, he snaps, has been turned into "a tourist attraction" and "a bank teller." The Vatican has intervened to determine whether Medjugorje is a fraud. Rome is officially noncommittal while the case remains open but advises bishops not to sponsor pilgrimages to the site.

Less spectacular appearances by the Virgin have attracted streams of the faithful in locales from Central America to the Slavic steppes. In Nicaragua, President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro is a strong believer in a series of visitations by the Madonna in the small town of Cuapa, where Mary was witnessed by a church caretaker several times from May through October of 1980. During a 1981 Mass celebrated at the spot by the Archbishop of Managua, with some 30,000 people in attendance, believers say the sun changed colors. In Hrushevsk, Ukraine, tens of thousands of people gathered in 1987 after a 12-year-old claimed to see the Madonna hovering over a church that had been shut down by the ruling communists.

## HANDMAID OF THE LORD

When the angel Gabriel brought the news of God's plan for the birth of the Messiah, says the Gospel of Luke, the young Nazareth girl said, "Let it be." Her response thus provides believers with the perfect model of humility and submissiveness.

More recently, the Madonna has been seen in the U.S. Devotees by the thousands have been flocking to the Mother Cabrini shrine near Denver, where Theresa Lopez, 30, says the Virgin has appeared to her four times in the past seven weeks. Marian apparitions were reported by parish coordinator Ed Molloy at St. Dominic's Church in Colfax, California, for 13 weeks in a row last year, and there was a surprise reappearance six weeks ago. In Our Lady of the Pillar Church of Santa Ana, California, Mary's image has been seen by Mexican immigrant Irma Villegas on the mosaics each morning since October, boosting attendance at 7 a.m. Mass enormously. Says Villegas: "Mary told me to talk to people about it so I did."

This being the late 20th century, Americans participating in these epiphanies are doing something about it: networking. Says Mimi Kelly of Louisiana's Mir [Peace] Group: "People come back with a burning desire to do something good for mankind." Some 300 groups of Medjugorje believers exist across the U.S., publishing at least 30 newsletters and holding a dozen conferences a year. There are 70 telephone hot lines that feature the Virgin's messages from Yugoslavia: In Alabama dial MOM-MARY. Over the past 16 months a Texas foundation has put up 6,500 billboards inspired by Medjugorje. The huge signs say the Virgin appeared "to tell you God loves you."

No one can take more satisfaction in

Mary's submission to God alone, not to Joseph or other male authority figures, feminists argue. Contemporary women can be inspired because Mary was a strong person who acted independently when she affirmed the course of her life.

the growth of faith in the Virgin—or feel more uneasy at some of the pathways it has taken—than John Paul II. Devotion to Mary was ingrained in the Pope in his Polish homeland, where over the centuries the Madonna has been hailed for turning back troops of the Muslim Turks, Swedish Lutherans and, in 1920, Soviet Bolsheviks. The precious Black Madonna icon was a mobilizing symbol for the country's efforts to throw off communism, and is still a unifying image for the entire nation.

When he was made a bishop in 1958, John Paul emblazoned a golden *M* on his coat of arms and chose as his Latin motto "Totus Tuus" (All Yours)—referring to Mary, not Christ. Once he put on St. Peter's ring, John Paul made Mary's unifying power a centerpiece of his papal arsenal. He has visited countless Marian shrines during his globe trotting, and invokes the Madonna's aid in nearly every discourse and prayer that he delivers. He firmly believes that her personal intercession spared his life when he was shot at St. Peter's Square in Rome in 1981; the assassination attempt occurred on May 13, the exact anniversary of the first Fátima apparition.

Moreover, John Paul is firmly convinced, as are many others, that Mary brought an end to communism throughout Europe. His faith is rooted in the famed prophecies of Mary at Fátima in 1917. According to Sister Lucia, one of the children who claimed to see her, the Virgin predicted the rise of Soviet totalitarianism before

it happened. In a subsequent vision, she directed the Pope and his bishops to consecrate Russia to her Immaculate Heart in order to bring communism to an end.

According to Lucia, papal attempts to carry out that consecration failed in 1942, '52 and '82. John Paul finally carried out Mary's directive correctly in 1984—and the very next year Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power inaugurated the Soviet collapse. Says Father Robert Fox of the Fatima Family Shrine in Alexandria, South Dakota: "The world will recognize in due time that the defeat of communism came at the intercession of the mother of Jesus."

With such a powerful institutional presence behind the effort to revive Mary's influence, it was to be expected, at least to some degree, that her popularity would grow. What was far less predictable was the outpouring of new interpretations of the Virgin's message for believers. In his writings, the Pope has given a conservative tilt to the meaning of Mary's life. The Pontiff's 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), citing positions taken at Vatican II, declared that "the Blessed Virgin came first as an eminent and singular exemplar of both virginity and motherhood." He extolled both states as ways women could find their dignity.

John Paul's traditionalist leanings find their most pointed expression in the Pope's continued refusal to consider the ordination of women as priests. The Vatican's argument is that if Christ had wanted women priests or bishops, Mary above all would have become one. On the other hand, John Paul does not argue that women must shun careers just because Mary was a homemaker. Although the Pope lauds Mary for her submissiveness, it is in relation to God, not to male-dominated society.

But a much more aggressive view of Mary is emerging from feminist circles within the church, emphasizing her autonomy, independence and earthiness. Old-fashioned views of the Virgin, complains Sister Elizabeth Johnson, a theology professor at New York City's Fordham University, "make her appear above the earth, remote and passive," with "no sex and no sass." She adds, "There's still a strong element of that in the present hierarchy."

The revisionist views of the Madonna claim her as an active heroine who was variously an earth mother and a crusader for social justice. Mary, says Sister Lavinia Byrne, who works with non-Catholic groups in Britain, stood by loyally during her son's crucifixion while all but one of his male disciples ran away. Her agreement to bear the Son of God, argues Ivone Leal of Portugal's Commission on the Status of Women, was the act of "a strong woman. She followed her son's adventurous life, which was known to be doomed to failure, and always sustained him." Says French writer Nicole Echivard:



## MOTHER OF BELIEVERS

The traditional view is that Mary led a perfect life on earth and now reigns as Queen of Heaven. There she continues to pray to help believers. Mary is the most powerful of the saints in interceding with God and dispensing gifts to supplicants.

Modernists argue that the notion of the woman who was free of original sin and rules as a heavenly monarch detaches Mary too much from the rest of humanity. She should be taken off her pedestal and understood as a flesh-and-blood woman.

"The Mother of God is the one from whom women are created in their preference for love and for people, rather than for power or machinery. Mary is the most liberated, the most determined, the most responsible of all mothers."

Others emphasize the political dimension. "Mary stood up for the poor and oppressed," says Sister Mary O'Driscoll, a professor at the Dominican order's Angelicum university in Rome. She and others point out that in the Magnificat (Luke 1), the pregnant Mary declared that God "has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away."

The activist interpretations do not necessarily run counter to Vatican teaching.

Back in 1974 Pope Paul VI portrayed Mary as a "woman of strength who experienced poverty and suffering, flight and exile." John Paul II has said much the same thing, referring to Mary's "self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work."

But some other views strike dangerously close to fundamental Catholic truths. Among them:

**Virginal Conception.** The Gospels of Matthew and Luke state that Mary was a virgin and that Jesus was conceived miraculously without a human father. This belief is also included in the ancient creeds, and traditional Christians insist upon it. Some liberal Catholic scholars, however, increas-



Picci by Giovanni Bellini

olic and Lutheran negotiators issue an accord, years in the making, on Mary's role.

The shift in the debate over Mary represents a delayed backlash against the influence of the Second Vatican Council, which made Mary emphatically subordinate to her son in church teachings. Prior to Vatican II, Popes had proclaimed Mary the Co-Redeemer with Jesus. During the council, bishops were under pressure from the faithful to ratify the Co-Redeemer doctrine; instead they issued no decree on Mary at all. Rather she was incorporated into the *Constitution on the Church*, a move that placed the Virgin among the community of believers in Christ rather than in anything resembling a co-equal position.

The effects of that downplaying have rippled through the observances of the church to the point that Mary's statues have been removed from some sanctuaries and Catholic parishes have gradually reduced the traditional novena devotions to the Virgin. John Paul clearly thinks the reconsideration went too far, and his fellow veneration of Mary agree. In Eastern Europe, says Warsaw priest Roman Indrzejczyk, enthusiasm for Mary is no less than a "reaction to the matter-of-fact religiousness of the West."

Behind Vatican II's reconsideration of the Virgin and some of the uneasiness expressed over her populist revival, says feminists, is a concern over making Mary into a competitive divinity, a tradition common to many of the pagan religions that Christianity superseded. Remarks Warner: "The great terror is that she will be worshipped above her son."

Even for feminists who have no desire to go that far, the idea of a return, however marginal, to that notion of supernatural feminine power is alluring. Says Sandra Schneiders, a professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California: "There has been a stupendous upsurge in goddess research and the feminine divinity as an antecedent to the male god. It's not unrelated that the Virgin Mary's popularity has also increased. Judeo-Christianity has been exclusively male, leaving a gap that cries out for feminine divinity."

It seems clear, though, that the world is crying out for many things from Mary, and in some fashion is receiving them. Devoted mother or militant, independent female or suffering parent, she remains one of the most compelling and evocative icons of Western civilization. Renewed expressions of her vitality and relevance are signs that millions of people are still moved by her mystery and comforted by the notion of her caring. Whatever aspect of Mary they choose to emphasize and embrace, those who seek her out surely find something only a holy mother can provide. —With reporting by Hannah Bloch/New York, Greg Burke/Medjugorje, Robert T. Zilli/Rome, and other bureaus

## LADY OF SORROWS

In the past, Popes have deemed Mary's maternal sufferings at the Crucifixion to be so profound that she took part with Jesus in the mystery of salvation and that therefore she should be recognized as the Co-Redeemer of humanity.

Catholicism now avoids the term Co-Redeemer, which offends other churches. Feminists note that Mary stayed by Jesus' side at the Crucifixion while male disciples fled. Liberationists see her sufferings in terms of political injustice.

ingly follow liberal Protestant thinkers and doubt that this was literally true. Father Raymond Brown, the leading U.S. Catholic authority on the Bible, has declared the issue "unresolved." Jane Schaberg, who chairs the religion department at the University of Detroit, goes further. She contends, to traditionalist scorn, that the unwed Mary was impregnated by a man other than her fiancé Joseph and that she was a liberated woman who was "not identified or destroyed by her relationship with men."

original sin. The concept was popular for centuries but was not defined as Catholic dogma by the papacy until 1854, partly in response to popular pressure stirred up by Marian apparitions. Unofficial belief adds that Mary lived a perfect life. Protestants insist the Bible portrays Jesus as the only sinless person. Marina Warner, author of *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, contends that Rome's dogma artificially sets Mary apart from the rest of the human race.

**Perpetual Virginity.** A Catholic and Orthodox tradition 15 centuries old holds that Mary was ever virgin, meaning that she and Joseph never had sex and that the "brothers" of Jesus mentioned in the Bible were cousins. This idea consolidated the tradition of celibacy for priests and nuns. Protestants reject the belief as antisexual and lacking in biblical support. Liberal Catholic theologian Uta Ranke-Heinemann of Germany contends that the notion of a celibate clergy demeaned women by robbing Mary of sexuality and normal motherhood. This is, Ranke-Heinemann declares, "a monstrous product of neurotic sexual fantasy." Responds a Vatican official: "The church doesn't have problems with sex. The world does."

**Immaculate Conception.** This tenet holds that Mary was conceived without

There is yet another kind of rethinking of Mary going on. Protestants see no biblical basis for praying to her for favors, and they believe veneration of her can slide into worship that is due to God alone. They also reject the idea that human beings, Mary included, can contribute to humanity's salvation. Nonetheless, some Protestants are softening aspects of their hostility. Church of England theologian John Macquarrie has proposed revisions of such dogmas as the Assumption of Mary into heaven, which could then be seen as a symbol of the redemption that awaits all believers. Theologian Donald Bloesch of the University of Duquesne in Iowa says fellow conservative Protestants "need to see Mary as the pre-eminent saint" and "the mother of the church."

Similar convergences will receive a thorough airing in February, when U.S. Cath-