



# PURSUING MARY IN LOS ANGELES

Wendy M. Wright

This is not my usual religious milieu. Here at Our Lady of the Valley in Canoga Park at mid-morning on Good Friday the Pabasang Pasyon (Tagalog chant reading of the Passion) has ended and a number of parish members have assembled to prepare the inaugurating prayer of the Divine Mercy Novena that begins today and will culminate on Saturday of the Easter Octave.

In the screened-in adoration area behind the main altar several women kneel in private prayer while two of the parish's men have taken responsibility for preparing the statue of the entombed Christ for the evening liturgical celebrations. That prone polychrome corpse had been, on my previous visit, ensconced in a glass coffin in the front vestibule under a mournful image of the Sorrowing Mother. Now, in this solemn time of the Triduum, it has been brought to a place of prominence, the tender ministrations of the two men washing the statue speak to me of the long ago vigilant women who swaddled for burial the body of their crucified friend.

Throughout the church slow reverential movements are observable as individuals make the circle around the Stations of the Cross or press a kiss or a fingertip upon one of the many saints' images whose toes are visible under their purple Lenten shrouds.

This is not my usual religious milieu not only because I generally do not attend a parish with a large Filipino population (in the last two

decades I have lived in the Midwest not the Los Angeles area) but also because my general Catholic associations outside the Omaha Cathedral parish or the university church, are among theologically educated, middle-class American church workers: parish administrators or pastors, women religious, hospital chaplains, secondary to graduate school educators, liturgists, DREs, spiritual guides, directors of retreat houses or volunteer service programs and so forth.

It is not that among that group there is not a wide range of perspectives. However most of them, whether "conservative" or "liberal" in their outlooks, have embraced the post Vatican II vision of an ecclesial community that is rooted in scripture and the sacraments and has the parish as its localized center. For most of them, the intense devotional atmosphere that characterized much of American Catholic life before the council, some of which was ethnically identified, is either utterly foreign, a discarded remnant of childhood or a longed-for idyll of some romanticized past.

I have come to the L.A. basin this Holy Week in anticipation of the Salubong that will be enacted on Easter dawn at Our Lady of the Valley during which, in Filipino fashion, processions of men and women carrying life-sized statues of the risen Christ and his long-suffering Mother will meet to the peals of Alleluia! sung by choirs of children costumed as angels. There the Virgin's black veil will be raised and replaced by a white one appropriate to the imagined joyous reunion with her resurrected Son.



My coming here is part of a larger project on Marian devotion that I have been pursuing in the archdiocese for some time. The city of Our Lady of the Angels (or *la ciudad de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles* or *Nuestra Señora Reina de los Angeles* or *Nuestra Señora de los Angeles de la Porciúncula* depending on which scholarly argument to which you want to adhere) is what social geographers call a "minority majority city." And, unlike any other city on the earth, its Catholic population is thus a microcosm of the global Catholic community. Here, in her city, Marian devotion in virtually all its forms is practiced.

---

## STUDY THAT IS NON-ACADEMIC

My study is not purely academic (how many theological projects really are?) although I am very interested in the origins and history of the thousands of images, titles, shrines and practices associated with Mary. For example, the fact that the unscriptural but touching reunion of Jesus and his mother that the Salubong celebrates as at the heart of the Easter event was introduced to the Philippines by Jesuit missionaries who were taking their cue from their founder Ignatius of Loyola whose early

---

WENDY M. WRIGHT is professor of theology and holds the John C. Kenefick Faculty Chair in the Humanities at Creighton University.

© Copyright Catholic Common Ground Initiative 2007



---

*I have been following  
my heart  
as well as  
my intellect.*

---

modern Catholic religiosity esteemed the Virgin as central to all things salvific. But in pursuing Mary in L.A. (as I have referred to the project) I have been following my heart as well as my intellect. And in the process I have found myself engaged in a process of prayerful personal theological rumination that is revealing.

**M**y husband and college aged son are with me this Easter extended weekend, neither of whom has been to the new downtown Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, so we attend the 3 p.m. Good Friday service there. In keeping with the aesthetic elegance of the building the liturgy is beautifully rendered, the homily thoughtful and well-crafted, the music sensitively performed, the mood appropriately solemn and reflective. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me"; we intone the words of Psalm 22 meant to direct our thoughts toward the mystery before us at this time of the church year.

This is a similar, if perhaps a more polished, version of the Catholic liturgy that I might attend in any one of thousands of parish churches throughout the country. Here, however, there is no blood-stained corpse, little of the random unscheduled devotional milling so

evident at Canoga Park in the morning, certainly no black veiled Madonna through whose eyes the momentous event of the resurrection is refracted to us.

---

**THEOLOGY BACK HOME**

In my university theology department back home Catholic identity is strong. Our curriculum reflects both the traditional range of theological disciplines (scripture, ethics, systematic theology and church history) and a spectrum of approaches conjoined by a shared centrist perspective. Mariology is not among our course offerings.

**M**arian themes have surfaced occasionally: a dozen years ago a cross-disciplinary conference held on campus explored the figure of Mary in the social context of the Mediterranean culture of her time; December 12th sees a collaboration by the small Latino/a campus population and Campus Ministry on an early morning mass for the feast of Guadalupe; some of us have used the work of contemporary theologian Elizabeth Johnson whose work on Mary as faithful, and most importantly imitable, disciple refrains from treating the Virgin symbolically as she has so

often been—as the feminine face of God, the eternal feminine, the idealized church, the queen of heaven, the co-redemptrix—and treats her rather as an historical woman, a companion for those who journey on the road of faith.

Johnson's narrative brings critical theory to bear on the figure of the biblical woman who, she asserts, has been too often used to validate the patriarchal idea that the difference between the sexes assigns women and men to predetermined characteristics and social roles thus restricting women to positions of inferiority or subordination and granting them little part in determining how the world might be run.

**J**ohnson's more egalitarian theological anthropology envisions not a dualistic but a redeemed humanity with relationships between men and women marked by mutual partnership. She also reflects efforts of the Second Vatican Council to redirect attention to the central, rather than the peripheral, truths of faith, efforts which privilege the study of scripture and Christology over areas of study like Mariology.

While not everyone on our faculty would assign Johnson's writing or shares all of her perspectives, it is safe to say that all on the faculty would applaud what underlies her writing, i.e. the effort to put Christ at the center of the religious universe and to encourage an informed, conscious and active faith in all Catholics. Together we are convinced that our students should be conversant with scripture, Christology, the Creed, the writings of major figures such as Augustine, and Aquinas, Catholic ethical teaching and so on, and many of us would have no way of appropriating the Salubong into our religious worlds except perhaps to give a curious nod to "cultural difference" or to be concerned that "popular religion" be appropriately channeled to con-



form to magisterial teaching.

I do understand this impulse to gather the faithful into an ecclesial community that is nurtured by the Word and sound theology rather than “superstition.”

Certainly this has been the pastoral effort at Our Lady of the Valley: while the Salubong is performed, it is done not as a stand-alone festival but as a prelude to the parish dawn Easter celebration, the angelic children’s choir folding seamlessly into the Eucharistic musical ensemble. And I must admit that it is disconcerting to speak with a devotee who treats a scapular or holy medal much as a magic amulet or to find that a parishioner of the Omaha Cathedral routinely lights votive candles on Nebraska Football’s game days.

I am also in agreement with Fr. Johann Roten, S.M. of the University of Dayton, an institution which offers pontifical degrees with in emphasis in Mariology, when he reminds us that for a Catholic all Marian images, however miraculous, archetypal, autonomous and regal they might appear, must be related to the simple biblical Miriam of Nazareth. And yet, and yet....None of these caveats, as much as I ascribe to them, explain the Marian “thing” away.

---

## A BLESSED TATOO

I am reminded of an interview I recently conducted with an older Franciscan in residence at Saint Francis of Assisi parish in the Silverlake district of L.A.. He was very well read and, as we chatted over mugs of hot coffee in the small latticed patio behind the rectory, he expressed impatience with some of the devotions that his ethnically diverse congregation persisted in practicing. These were, in his eyes, often not grounded in scripture and doctrine and he referred me to the 8th Chapter of the Constitution on the Church in which Mary is described as the

instrument of incarnation through her openness to God and thus model for the church. (This was, I was informed, an idea grounded in Franciscan/Scotist teaching).

But at Saint Francis, he continued, the Marian stuff was “cultural,” too “possessive,” too much emphasis was put on national or ethnic Marys. Even though the church had tried to make Guadalupe universal, she was not. Instead she was identified in people’s minds with Mexico. And, my conversation partner said as he rolled his eyes, devotions were often so sentimental, and sometimes gruesome. “Goodness, the things I have been asked to bless!” he exclaimed.

**B**ut then his demeanor slowly changed as he began to recount the story of a young Latino man who came to him during the First Gulf War and asked to have the tattoo on his chest blessed. When the fellow opened his shirt a full sized image of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe was revealed. “Why do you have Guadalupe on your chest?” the Franciscan queried. “Because I am being deployed to Desert Storm and I want her always to be close to me,” came the response. My priest companion paused and stared into his coffee cup, lost in the remembered moment. “I

blessed the tattoo,” he said quietly.

Later in the evening of Good Friday my two men and I venture down to Dolores Mission, the Jesuit run parish in the barrio of East L.A. It has been difficult to determine if a Pesame service is going to take place tonight or not. Dolores Mission has no efficient staff person assigned to keeping up an informative webpage or to updating the parish voice mail. What happens there is mainly disseminated by word of mouth.

Luckily, a college friend of my son’s and his girlfriend have been in the barrio recently and she remembers overhearing someone mention that such a service would indeed occur, perhaps at 7 or 7:30. So we make the trek and park in the narrow darkened side street down the block from the tiny church. Indeed, a community is gathered and already packed closely in the dimly lit interior—women, children, teens, men young and old, none exhibiting any signs of affluence or authority, only a few Anglos like ourselves. I mark once more the utter simplicity and functionality of the place.

**T**onight a large cardboard poster clearly designed for a recent immigrant’s rights rally is temporarily propped up and hides my favorite painting—a

---

*None of these caveats,  
as much as I ascribe  
to them, explain  
the Marian “thing” away.*

---



---

## *It is only one in a long history of personal offerings to Mary. . .*

---

Latina Madonna carrying her serape-wrapped child through the mean streets of Los Angeles, the sky-scrapers of the downtown business district looming in the distance. In the sanctuary, the altar has been removed and a life-sized statue of Dolores herself, the doleful Sorrowing Mother, stands in a pool of light, a large empty wooden cross and a presider's chair at her left.

We are a few minutes late and the event has begun: a recitation of the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary each in turn led by a different female member of the congregation and interspersed with Spanish language songs which tell of the unimaginable suffering of the Mother as her heart is pierced by the death of her Son .

**T**hen it is time for the young Jesuit pastor to seat himself in the presider's chair and begin his meditation on the weight of sorrow that Mary carries. The lights in the room are low, the air close, the mood of the crowd heavy. The priest draws us into the Virgin's grief with a first person narrative crafted in the Ignatian imaginative meditation mode. "*Mi hijo, mi hijo*, [my son, my son]," he repeats soulfully. A large antiquated screen furls down from the ceiling above the mournful scene and

we view a brief emotive clip from what seems to be an old black and white European film on the Passion featuring a wordless Madonna wild-eyed and weeping as she clings to the foot of the cross under a stormy sky.

The meditation completed, sheets of paper and pencil stubs are passed out and we are invited to reflect on the burdens that weigh upon us. We will inscribe them on our papers and present them to the compassionate Mother whose pondering heart alone can carry such grief. To the soft strumming of guitars we make our way up the center aisle, picking up flowers from baskets offered to us which we then lay tenderly at the feet of Dolores along with our intimate sufferings. No, this not my usual religious milieu but it is a place my heart finds itself at home.

---

### **PERSONAL GESTURES**

Mainstream parishes in Omaha don't have such celebrations but the gesture, at least as a private one, is familiar. It is only one in a long history of personal offerings to Mary, a history not mine by family inheritance nor by association with traditionalist Catholics. Many of these I remember well: pregnant for the first time and kneeling before the side altar of Our Lady of

the Mountains in Estes Park, Colorado; years later, during a tumultuous period with a teenaged daughter, burying a small photo of her at the base of an outdoor statue of Our Lady at a coastal retreat center; votive offerings on behalf of our children at innumerable shrines and grottos at far flung locations.

The language of this service at Dolores Mission is not my native tongue, the cultural inflection foreign. The religious world of constant veneration, intense intercession, expressive bodily gesture, emotionality and intimately hovering divine presences is not one my colleagues as a rule inhabit, although motherhood has led me there in my own idiosyncratic way. I can still concur with the feminist theologian and the Marianist scholar that Catholic devotional life should, for a variety of reasons, be guided by the wisdom of a reflected theology. And yet, and yet...

**A**s the pesame service concludes the young Jesuit invites members of the community to share with the assembly what they have laid before the Sorrowing Virgin. My Spanish is rusty and my own son has periodically had to lean over and provide a clue to the drift of the evening but the deep affect in the voices and faces of the women who now rise needs no translation: "My boy has fallen in with bad men." "My daughter is very sick and dying." "I go to the prison to visit my son and I don't know if he will come home." "The drugs find our children even on the playground."

Here there is no pain that is isolated, no sorrow that breaks the heart held alone, mine included. There is no grief so stinging that it is not already known and borne here in this humble shelter in the barrio of East Los Angeles, borne in the wisdom of those present and, most generously, by the Sorrowing Mother herself. ●