
Mary and the Good Girls

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In this article, I will explore a particular question, although from a sharper perspective than first imagined. In recent years I have been exploring perceptions of Mary, Mother of God, in Roman Catholic teaching and theology, on the threshold of Catholic sexual theology and females. Here, I will explore Mary in Catholic consciousness, but will more narrowly consider ways in which some Marian theologies and a Christian theological anthropology of sex and gender complementarity have propped up the diminishment of women's hard-earned gains toward well-being in Northern America.¹ Has this connection been consciously articulated or, rather more likely, has a long-running stream of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy simply watered and nurtured harmful perceptions enough to keep women in their place? I cannot say. But here, I make a case for correlation, if not causation.

Mary

I love Mary. Her person and her prayer were my solace as a child and remain so today. As the mother of Jesus, we know little about her but, as the Mother of God, her image has flourished in the Catholic imagination since early Christianity. Still today, creative expressions of Mary thrive in literature.² Multitudes of images aiming to capture her complex Christian persona show up in churches and holy sites around the world³ and in the street art of Texas,⁴ New Mexico, California, and Arizona.⁵ Sanctuaries offer devotional spaces in France,⁶ Portugal,⁷ and Canada.⁸ Celebrations of her place in the lives of Catholics continue to thrive in the Philippines⁹ and in pilgrimage sites across the Canadian prairies, in Alberta¹⁰ and Saskatchewan.¹¹ She is doubtless a captivating figure.

What is vexing about Mary is not actually Mary herself and her beloved place in Catholic tradition and devotion. Rather, it is how malleable she becomes in the hands of those whose Marian perceptions are such that they limit females, submit us to male hierarchy, relegate us to pious feminine obedience, and lock us out of positions of ecclesial (and other) power. In this construct, women have little to no authority in the decision-making realm of the Church precisely because of the lack of such ecclesial power. I have previously explored a theological anthropology of complementarity in relation to sex and gender¹² and in relation

to Mary and ecclesiology.¹³ By way of an abbreviated summary, the mid- to late 20th century saw the growth of a theological anthropology and ecclesiology based on the notion of complementarity, which holds to a female/feminine (Marian) aspect of persons and the Church, and a male/masculine (Petrine) aspect. These anthropological categories, deemed necessary and fixed in human persons, were forwarded by key influential thinkers such as Dietrich von Hildebrand,¹⁴ Louis Bouyer,¹⁵ and Hans Urs von Balthasar¹⁶ and taken up by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI),¹⁷ Pope John Paul II,¹⁸ and Pope Francis,¹⁹ and made their way into perceptions of the Church and the division of labour and privilege therein. This anthropology necessarily limits the actual expression of humanity to masculine for males (i.e., assertive, leading, hierarchical) and feminine for females (i.e., passive, receptive, deferential), regardless of individual character, interest, or vocation. In this light, while women might be emancipated and free to choose in some areas of our lives, as was Mary at the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38), still we are made for obedience to the men who reflect the physical embodiment of Christ and thereby have consonant authority.

In laying this anthropology atop ecclesiology, some thinkers, such as von Balthasar, claim that there is more power in the feminine, Marian, serving facet of the Church than in the masculine, Petrine, ordained ministry and hierarchical facet of the Church²⁰ and are happy to point to that circumscribed power while denying more substantial authority to females. Women are not suited for ministry *in persona Christi* because we do not physically look like Christ and bear his essential maleness. In this perception, also iterated in *Inter Insigniores* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith²¹ and later reflected authoritatively, although with more cautious limitation, by Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*,²² the theological vision of the male Christ as God leans heavily toward positing that males, who do look like Christ, must therefore more perfectly image God.

In this light, these influential male theologians have posited the following about women, Mary, and roles in the Church in the last century. Von Balthasar suggests that any demand for ecclesiastical office for women betrays the necessary roles of males (Petrine) and

females (Marian) in the Church.²³ Mary herself would know this and would decidedly not be a feminist, he argues.²⁴ He further supposes that Mary need not have given birth to Christ by any typical means, effectively erasing her incarnate body and the reality of childbirth among all mothers.²⁵ And finally, he notes, in concert with the likes of Pope Francis, that women seeking ministerial office in the Church would be “exchanging more for less.”²⁶ Bouyer warns that masculinizing women in the Church via equal access to ordained ministry would annihilate their feminine originality and identity and ultimately deny their existence.²⁷ Pope John Paul II identifies sexual difference in the Genesis 2 creation story, whereby Adam and Eve are essentially masculine and feminine humanity, and embeds complementarity into the creation of humanity.²⁸ In these particular expressions, females and males are bound to a construction of gender not necessarily their own.

Given this Christian underpinning and construction of masculine and feminine gender and sex, it is no great leap to assume the social, political, economic, and cultural power of males in relation to females. In such a scenario, women emulating Mary are framed as good girls and women, meeting the patriarchal expectation of their circumscribed roles: delicate, deferential, silent, and serving. This construction meets the theory of ambivalent sexism, whereby “benevolent” sexist persons admire and maintain a generally positive attitude toward females as long as they remain within traditional roles set out in patriarchal perceptions of sex and gender. When females do not remain within such roles, benevolent sexism turns “hostile” and maintains a generally negative antipathy toward females, whereby they are devalued and treated with antagonism.²⁹ Given the influence of the Church in Western social development in the past two millennia, the influence of such Marian perceptions on females’ place in the world could not help but reach beyond the Church. The power of stratified, ordained ministry denied us trickles into the boardrooms, national Parliaments and Senates, and homes of our communities. Again, I make a case merely for correlation, not causation; this phenomenon might be a reciprocal relationship whereby each element of society bolsters and boosts the others.

If good girls and women are characterized as less able to manage the affairs of the world, it might seem natural to keep them subordinate to males in relation to power and authority, in the same way that Mary is subordinate to Christ in the order of grace. Mary is female/feminine and Christ is male/masculine, and this necessary aspect of human living makes its way into all orders of society. In the broader social context, females then become available to males for the fulfilment of their wants, needs, and desires, rather than individual human persons in their own right; they

are interchangeable, expendable, marketable, and consumable.³⁰ Their bodies become less their own to understand and experience and more for social regulation and control via the manipulation of access to reproductive care and persistent surveillance,³¹ exclusion from medical research,³² and maintenance of beauty standards as social capital,³³ for example.

Beyond Mary

As a testament to gendered perceptions of power in the world, I reflect briefly on the question casually posed to women in a TikTok video from 2024 about who they would rather meet when alone in a forest, a man or a bear. Beyond the lack of rigorous statistical data and scrutiny of the making of the video, the responses are that seven out of eight women chose the bear.³⁴ A robust discussion ensued across social media platforms, wherein some men were affronted by women’s fear of being alone and isolated with a man, and many pointed out the ignorance of women about the dangers of encountering a bear.³⁵ But women do not choose the bear because they are foolish enough to believe that a bear is not dangerous; this perception misses the point. Rather, they choose the bear because they know that a man can be just as dangerous as, if not more so than, a bear.³⁶ Global statistics regarding violence against women (including harassment, assault, stalking, rape, or death) are staggering. The World Health Organization indicates that approximately 30% of “women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Most of this violence is intimate partner violence.”³⁷ Knowing this information from experience, women could be forgiven for preferring to take a chance at being mauled by a bear, who is just being a bear, rather than taking a statistically significant chance at being harmed by a man, who is just being a man.

Ultimately, the point is that men can be dangerous to women, and women have little by way of satisfactory recourse available to them should they be attacked by a man.³⁸ Studies demonstrate that perpetrators of violence against women, of any sort, are rarely held accountable before the law and are protected by social and judicial systems that afford them this luxury.³⁹ I am not blaming Mary for these realities. Rather, I merely point to the millennia of interpretation and manipulation of the most prominent female figure in Christian thought that will keep her relegated to the receptive, obedient, and serving role of the Mother of God and its possible correlation with contemporary questions facing females in 2026. When we look to Mary and women today, we frequently see the sexual vulnerabilities and dangers they face rather than the expression of autonomy in Mary’s choice to bear Christ. Despite first-, second-, and third-wave feminism (with a fourth

wave swelling) each making gains for women in their cultural contexts in the past century,⁴⁰ we remain subject to violence, humiliation, discrimination, and scrutiny regarding our bodies, our spirits, and our dignity in the world.⁴¹

Some recent global and local data regarding female general health and wellness in the world suggest that females generally fare better today than in any time in history, by most measurements.⁴² In the Northern America region, however, economic gender equity and parity for females is somewhat stagnant, which, according to the World Economic Forum, has gained only 0.6 percentage points since the inception of their index in 2006, that is, in 20 years.⁴³ Despite making gains in educational and political empowerment parity, economic gains for females continue to lag in Canada and the United States. In the current, relatively unfettered capitalist structure, economic gains represent gains in emancipation, choice, and independence for females.

More detailed numbers regarding disparity between males and females are ubiquitous. Regarding recent social and health policy and legal action in the United States, we know that 412 women have been arrested for pregnancy-related crimes since the *Roe v. Wade* decision giving women access to abortion was overturned in June 2022.⁴⁴ By contrast, the number of American men arrested as a result of their connection to and involvement with the notorious trafficker of underage females Jeffrey Epstein, as named in the files connected to his criminal case, is exactly zero. At the same time, numerous males and females outside of the United States have been arrested, been publicly admonished, and lost their careers over the same issue,⁴⁵ while one female closely aligned with Epstein, Ghislaine Maxwell, is currently incarcerated in the United States.⁴⁶ While reproductive rights and bodily autonomy are compromised for females in the United States, the appalling behaviour of males in relation to the sexual exploitation of underaged females goes unchecked in that same country. Even if prosecution in relation to the Epstein files were not possible given legal requirements for legitimate prosecution, the fact that many of these men seem to remain in positions of power means, in the public eye, that their abhorrent actions are not quite abhorrent enough to cause outrage and reap consequences among their peers. It is unclear what level of abhorrent behaviour would be required for there to be legitimate recoil among their social, business, and familial relations, if this is not sufficient. Returning north to Canada, we see the intersectional violences committed against Indigenous women and girls. The many years it took for various levels of government to pull together inquiries and investigations into murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) and the meagre progress we have made in executing the Calls for Justice from

the Final Report of the MMIWG Inquiry speaks volumes on the ways in which violence against females is minimized, and even more so for Indigenous females.⁴⁷

That violence against and diminishment of women exist is not solely attributable to a Marian theology closely aligned with a theological anthropology of complementarity. The concurrent patriarchal economic and social structures that prop up sexist and misogynist attitudes continue to deprecate the concerns of all females in Northern America. However, the Christian and Catholic imagination operative around the globe does little to support the concerns of women.

Conclusion

I am writing something slightly different than I had anticipated because I am frustrated, disappointed, and angry. I have walked for and with women, I have written for and with women, I have taught for and with women, and I have advocated for and with women most of my adult life. And still, here we are. Males who continue to believe it is safe to ignore or revile contemporary feminist sentiments are part of the problem. Those who believe they advocate for women but would not dare call themselves feminist: who say, “Yes, but not all men.” Those males who do not speak up when their female family members, colleagues, friends, and neighbours are diminished by one of their own. Those who would rather teach their daughters self-defence than teach their sons respect for girls, women, and all marginalized people. Those males are the problem. Their micro-aggressions and silence allow for this state of affairs. In the same light, those who point to how highly respected Mary is without hierarchical power or how motherhood is the glory of being a woman without concomitant respect for actual mothers are the problem. Because they are abandoning the ones who birthed, raised, nurtured, taught, accompanied, dated, and married them. The fact that they have never harassed or assaulted a woman does not mean no woman has ever been harassed or assaulted and does not exonerate those who have quietly capitulated to patriarchal norms.

As a counselling therapist for over 25 years, of all the many and diverse females I have seen, I would estimate that only 5% of them have never experienced sexual abuse, harassment, or assault over the course of their lives. Many of these females have normalized and explained away male harassment and assault as part of the social contract to which girls and women are party. Many of these females do not identify these experiences as their presenting issue, although it frequently is predominant. Let us not think that telling girls to dress modestly, stay quiet, and emulate Mary does not contribute to the epidemic of male violence against females. Because males know that females

often will not speak up and that the females will fare worse than the males should they report. Men know that, despite abhorrent criminal behaviour and felony convictions, they could still end up as the president of the United States of America.⁴⁸

If holding up motherhood as the pinnacle of womanhood is true and necessary, then so ought to be supporting women and mothers in their lives—women who disproportionately (still) bear the burden of work in the home,⁴⁹ the mental and emotional load of childcare and maintaining a household⁵⁰ while holding full-time jobs outside the home—by advocating for affordable childcare, safe streets at night, hefty prosecution of child and adult sexual offences, equitable distribution of domestic work, support for females in roles of power, and equal pay for equal work. What we find in today's news, however, leans more in the opposite direction, such as males raping their sedated wives and monetizing their actions online or inviting other males to participate.⁵¹ In her prophetic article, Karen Lebacqz identifies exactly this reality: women enter potentially dangerous relationships knowing the possibility of intimate partner violence.⁵² The nature of gendered and sexed relationships is such that females have learned practical vigilance toward violence and abuse in their own partnerships. Whatever progress society in Northern America has made in respecting and supporting women in the last century, it is ever eroded by the lack of accountability for crimes against females among men, prominent and otherwise.

In the light of correlation, we might consider emphasizing a more robust vision of Mary, the Mother of God; less an essentially obedient, feminine, and receptive self and more an autonomous, active, and choosing self. As the bearer of Truth, Mary's choice to carry Jesus in what was likely a difficult circumstance was also an act of fortitude; she knew the social realities of her time. She was an embodied female who bore God's son in her womb—not only because she was obedient, but also because she was strong, faithful, resilient, and female. We might talk about Mary as a woman who persisted in her commitment to God, knowing full well that she was choosing a difficult road, with no promise of a life free from violence or diminishment. We might consider that Mary's suffering was not confined to her watching her son die a brutal death; it might also be located in the daily realities of being a woman in an historical context that was only marginally concerned with the women who fed, followed, and cared for Jesus; the handmaids; the good girls. Given the circumstances in which Mary birthed, raised, and let go of her son, we might conclude not that she was merely serving, obedient, and quiet. Rather, we might conclude that she was resolute, wise, and magnificent; that she was sexual, esteemed, and mighty. In taking that Mary as a model, we could be empowered toward

a womanhood that need not be silent in the face of our own oppression; that need not fear the hostility of males who fear us; and that does not assume violence or degradation but rather authority and respect. This is the Mary, full of grace, whose model lifts us more fully into the embrace of the Divine.

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1 "Northern America" refers specifically to Canada and the United States as a designated "region" of the World Economic Forum; see *Global Gender Gap Report*, June 2025: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2025/in-full/benchmarking-gender-gaps-2025/#performance-by-region>. I also note the simultaneous undoing of the rights of other marginalized persons and groups (e.g., racialized, LGBTQ2S+, disabled) by reduced funding and support. For example, recent legislation in the province of Alberta substantially reduces monthly income for persons with disabilities and requires proof of their inability to earn an income: Inclusion Alberta, "Alberta Disability Assistance Program (ADAP) Would Cut AISH by \$220/Month: The Facts and How to Take Action," December 2025, <https://inclusionalberta.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/ADAP-The-Facts-and-How-to-Take-Action-Dec25.pdf>. This conflation of discrimination across marginalized groups is of a piece. However, a broad consideration of these intersections is beyond the scope of this short paper.

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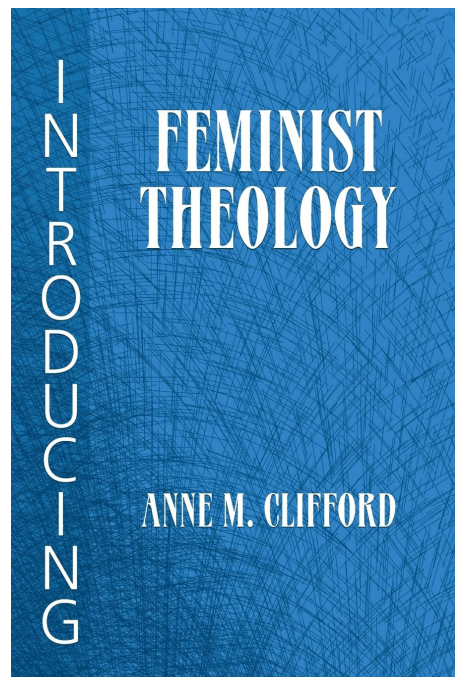
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