

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
October 4, 2015
Spiritual Ponderings
Images of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Our Lady of the Hmong People

I recently came across an interesting story about Saint John Paul II in a book called *Everybody Needs To Forgive Somebody: Stories of Real People Who Discovered the Underrated Power of Grace*. It was written by Allen R. Hunt a former Protestant Minister who has converted to Catholicism. He explains that when Pope John Paul II met with the man who had tried to assassinate him, John Paul II discovered not a harden killer but rather a man who was deeply afraid of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It seems that John Paul II's would be assassin had heard about how John Paul II had attributed the saving of his life to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Agca (the assassin) reasoned that since Mary had saved the pope's life that it would only be a matter of time before Mary would seek to kill him. John Paul II spent more than two hours explaining to the man who had tried to kill him that Mary was not a goddess who chose to love some people and hate others but rather that Mary was the Mother of God and that Jesus gave her to all of us to be our mother also. John Paul II went onto tell Agca the amazing truth that the Mother of God was now his mother and that he and John Paul II were brothers through the power of Christ. Mary was not a goddess who did her own will but rather she was a conduit of God's grace.



With that story in mind, I was once again inspired to devote my spiritual ponderings for the month of October to the Blessed Virgin Mary and in a special way look at how the Blessed Virgin Mary has been displayed throughout of history and what religious lessons a particular image of the Blessed Virgin Mary teaches us. For help in our four week endeavor, I will be referring to a book by hagiographer (a person who writes biographies of saints) Ann Ball. The book is called: *The Other Faces of Mary: Stories, Devotions, and Pictures of the Holy Virgin Around The World*.

The first image, I would like to focus on is called Our Lady of the Hmong People. I first heard about the Hmong people watching Clint Eastwood's movie *Grand Torino*. Clint Eastwood's character's new neighbors are Hmong. Ann Ball has the following to say about the Hmong people: "America owes a great debt of gratitude to the Hmong people from Laos. While serving in special guerilla units during the Vietnam War, Hmong soldiers rescued many American pilots who were shot down over Laos. Most of the combat forces on the ground in Laos were Hmong, who cut off the supplies to the North Vietnamese as they traveled south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By the time America pulled out of Vietnam, thousands of Hmong men, women, and children, had been killed, and more than 100,000 fled to Thai refugee camps... A long genocidal campaign against the Hmong has been conducted by the Laotian and Vietnamese governments in vengeance for Hmong support of the United States during the war."

The Hmong people are also considered one of the youngest, if not the youngest culture to become Catholic. The first Hmong baptism on record took place in 1954 in Laos. Many of the Hmong have relocated to the United States with the help of the United States Government.

Monsignor Patrick McCormick found himself near the year 2,000 in charge of a multicultural parish in Fresno, California. With a desire to help the diverse culture come together he commissioned two parishioners to design an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary for the parish church. He chose sculptor and artist Manuel Rodriguez to create the statute and asked Tzer Lee Thao (a pious Hmong parishioner) to advise him. The created an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary dressed in traditional Hmong clothing. The statue stands only 12 inches high and Mary is clothed in a white robe and blue mantle designed to look like a special type of needlework called by the Hmong people *Pa Ntaub*. Mary's waist has a red and green sash and she wears a headpiece colored purple with black and white stripes. Finally the statue shows Mary wearing a silver necklace and earrings while carrying a rosary in one hand.

Some may object to this statue being considered an image of Mary because it was only recently created, I would have to disagree with them because while the image itself may be considered new, the symbols and message that make up the image are old and traditional. Mary's headpiece can easily be seen as Mary's being queen of heaven. Yet being Queen of Heaven, Mary has always identified herself with the poor as seen in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. There she was a poor Aztec and here she is a poor Hmong. The rosary reminds and invites us to have recourse to her and her Son in times of trouble. Finally it is an image that unites people together just as Mary's Son did through His death and resurrection.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

October 11, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Images of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Our Lady of Atocha



I have decided to once again devote my spiritual ponderings for the month of October to the Blessed Virgin Mary and in a special way look at how the Blessed Virgin Mary has been displayed throughout history and what religious lessons a particular image of the Blessed Virgin Mary teaches us. I will be referring to a book by hagiographer (a person who writes biographies of saints) Ann Ball. The book is called: *The Other Faces of Mary: Stories, Devotions, and Pictures of the Holy Virgin around The World.*

Have you ever thought what a unique creature human beings are? We are made up of matter (something that can be seen, taste, touched, smell, or heard) but yet there is something spiritual to us. It is because of this uniqueness that Catholicism never devalues matter or material things. In fact we use material things to help express our spiritual-ness. For example we use incense at Mass to symbolize our prayers rising up to God and to remind us that we understand divine things only vaguely as if looking through a pillar of smoke with watery eyes. We light candles to remind us that Christ is the light of the world and we have been charged with spreading His light to the world in need.

Please keep the above in mind as I introduce the next image of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This next image of the Blessed Virgin Mary is called Our Lady of Atocha. This image of Blessed Virgin Mary is peculiar in that it is the only image of the Blessed Virgin Mary where the Christ child can be separated from the main statue. Devotees to this particular image of Mary can symbolically receive the Christ child from Mary to take into their home. As part of the devotion, people ask the Blessed Virgin Mary to not only intercede with them for their petition but also to allow her son to visit their house in a special way. (I know of some parishes that have a statue of Our Lady of Fatima that travels from home to home, I am assuming the Christ child travels in much the same way). This devotion should make each of us pause and think about what things we would change if we knew Christ would be spending the week with us and then realize that Christ is always with us and so let us change those things

The image is also unique in that it portrays Mary as a fair-skinned medieval Spanish queen who is dressed with rich embroidered clothes and she wears a golden crown. Jesus on the other hand is dressed as a Spanish pilgrim and had Indian (I am assuming Native American and not someone from India) features.

There is some who believe that the statue or at least the image that the statue of Mary is based on dates all the way back to St. Luke himself. It is said by some devotees that St. Luke carved the image when he was living in Antioch and thus "Atocha" is a shortened form of Antioch.

Another unique legend that surrounds this image of Mary is that during the time that part of Spain was under Moorish (Islamic) rule, people who were thrown into prison for one reason or another were left there to starve and therefore it was up to family members to bring food to their loved ones in prison. A really evil Moorish leader came to power and declared that no one over the age of 12 would be allowed near the prison. It was the belief then that the older wiser

men would starve to death because they would not have children under the age of 12 to bring them food. According to the legend, the women of the town went and prayed at the Church and appealed to the Blessed Virgin Mary for help. Soon the children of the town began to tell story to the adults about an unknown boy who was visiting and feeding the prisoners. They said that he would always come at night, slipped pass the sleeping guard, and that his basket of bread and jug of water could feed all the prisoners without every running out. The women eventually returned to the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and thank her for the miracle and they noticed that the shoes on the infant statue of Jesus were worn out.

Ten years ago, I would have said that this was a nice story, because back then I thought that I had to know everything and I did not like the idea of being surprised by things that I did not know. I also think that there was a part of me that did not want to admit that stories like this might be true because I did not trust God that much. In this present moment, I don't necessarily believe the story to be true but I don't believe it to be false either. All I know is that I don't know everything and I have seen many things that I cannot explain. I also do not fear God as much because I can see how He has used the bad times of my life to bring about good things. I also cannot help but believe that my God is a God of miracles.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

October 18, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Images of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Our Lady of Africa

Once again I have devote my spiritual ponderings for the month of October to the Blessed Virgin Mary and in a special way look at how the Blessed Virgin Mary has been displayed throughout of history and what religious lessons a particular image of the Blessed Virgin Mary teaches us. I will be referring to a book by hagiographer (a person who writes biographies of saints) Ann Ball. The book is called: *The Other Faces of Mary: Stories, Devotions, and Pictures of the Holy Virgin Around The World*.

It seems that every holy man or woman had some sort of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Cardinal Charles Lavigerie who was Archbishop of Algiers in 1867 is yet another holy man that proves this point. Cardinal Lavigerie was sent to Africa to be one of its spiritual leaders during the time of Western Colonization and he spoke out vehemently against the slave trade and other evils of Western Colonization. His most famous quote according to Ann Ball was: "I am a man and nothing that is human is indifferent to me. I am a man; an injustice against another human being revolts my heart. I am a man and that which I would like done to me; I want to do for others."

In an effort to draw people to create a mutual respect of both the African people and European people and to fight against all the injustices that were being done, the Cardinal had a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary created that would have the facial features of a European and the skin color of an African. The image would have Mary standing on a globe and stomping on the head of snake with the inscription "Virgo Fidelis" (Faithful Virgin) written on it. While many of the injustices would carry on the Church in which the statue was place became a place of peace where people could come and pray. It even became a popular sight for Muslims to come and pray as well.

A unique tradition has developed at the Shrine of Our Lady of Africa. Pilgrims and others who come to visit the shrine have begun leaving engraved stones as offering to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Ann Ball does not say what people have engraved into these stones but the idea of stones invokes in me the image of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Maybe the shrine is a place of peace because people are symbolically dropping their stones of hate and accusations and instead admitting that they too are sinners. Maybe one day, I will build a shrine to our Blessed Mother and invite people to leave their stones behind. Until then, I invite you to prayerfully using your imagination doing this the next time you feel a desire to accuse another.



Here is a few quotes about the Blessed Virgin Mary to end this week's ponderings.

- 1.) A Catholic boy from a parochial school was telling a university professor who lived next door about the Blessed Mother. The professor scoffed at the boy, saying: "But there is no difference between her and my mother." The boy answered: "That's what you say, but there's a heck of a lot of difference between the sons." - Fulton Sheen
- 2.) "We never give more honor to Jesus than when we honor his Mother, and we honor her simply and solely to honor him all the more perfectly. We go to her only as a way leading to the goal we seek - Jesus, her Son." --Saint Louis Marie de Montfort
- 3.) "Men do not fear a powerful hostile army as the powers of hell fear the name and protection of Mary." --St. Bonaventure
- 4.) "Never be afraid of loving the Blessed Virgin too much. You can never love her more than Jesus did." --Saint Maximilian Kolbe
- 5.) "Mary, give me your Heart: so beautiful, so pure, so immaculate; your Heart so full of love and humility that I may be able to receive Jesus in the Bread of Life and love Him as you love Him and serve Him in the distressing guise of the poor." --Blessed Mother Teresa
- 6.) "To serve the Queen of Heaven is already to reign there, and to live under her commands is more than to govern." --St. John Vianney

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

October 25, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Images of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Our Lady of Penrhys

I have devote my spiritual ponderings for the month of October to the Blessed Virgin Mary and in a special way we have looked at how the Blessed Virgin Mary has been displayed throughout of history and what religious lessons a particular image of the Blessed Virgin Mary teaches us. For this last week, I will one again be referring to a book by hagiographer (a person who writes biographies of saints) Ann Ball. The book is called: *The Other Faces of Mary: Stories, Devotions, and Pictures of the Holy Virgin Around The World.*



"Before the Protestant Reformation, the Welsh country side was blanketed with shrines and holy wells dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The principal medieval shrine was at Penrhys. The shrine there was a major place for pilgrims. Pilgrimage was an important part of the Church's life during the Middle Ages because they were often assigned as penances for serious sins. Pilgrimages were considered good penances for sins because they removed you at least temporarily from the near occasion of sin. You were also given a lot of time to ponder Scripture stories and what was really important in your life.

During the Reformation many of the images of the Blessed Virgin Mary including this one was destroyed in a hope to stomp out the Catholic faith. During this time of persecution, Catholics would still come and pray at the Church where the statue had been demonstrating that the image was not the important thing but rather what was important was their relationship with God and His Mother. Four hundred years later in 1939 a new statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary was erected in the Church; proving once again that the Catholic faith continues to survive thanks to the Holy Spirit and the faith of the people.

“The history of the shrine of Penrhys is one of glory and defeat, of prayers and of final triumph over adversity. Today in the heart of South Wales, the beauty of devotion to the Mother of God still burns brightly.” –Ann Ball.

The following are some more quotes about the Blessed Virgin Mary from Scott Hahn’s book: *Hail Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God*.

1. All Mariology, all Marian devotion, must begin with solid theology and firm credal faith. For all that Mary does, and all that she is, flows from her relationship with God and her correspondence to His divine plan. She is His mother. She is His spouse. She is His daughter. She is His handmaid. We cannot begin to know her if we do not, first have clear notions about Him—about God, His providence, and His dealings with His people.

2. As the Mother of God and His children, Mary shows us how to glorify the Father, not by groveling but by receiving the gift of His Son in fullness of the Spirit. So if you want to judge how well people grasp the gospel in its essence, find out how much they make of having God as their Father—and Mary as their mother.

3. Mary is the test of how well a Christian has accepted the gospel. It’s not that she’s central figure of salvation history. She’s not: Jesus is. But our understanding of Mary reveals everything about how we understand Jesus and His saving work.

We live our sonship best by listening to Mary and loving as she loves. Listening means responding when she says, “Do whatever He tells you.” Loving means standing by Christ, even to the cross. Loving means choosing, Him in every instance, over sin.

4. First the rosary is anything but mindless. Indeed, its meditative technique has been refined by centuries of practice in order to engage the mind most completely. The rosary ordinarily engages at least three of our senses—with the sound of voices, the feeling of the beads, and the sight of devotional images—so that those senses are made prayerful. Thus committed, body and soul to prayer, we are less prone to distraction.

5. Further, the formulas themselves are rich in scriptural doctrine and devotion. The Our Father we learn from the lips of Jesus Himself. The Hail Mary comes from the words of Gabriel and Elizabeth in Luke’s gospel. And who could argue with the words of the Glory Be, which merely give praise to the eternal and Blessed Trinity?