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The mystery and beauty of God's mother

James Heft | Nov. 10, 2010

FULL OF GRACE: ENCOUNTERING MARY IN FAITH, ART, AND LIFE
By Judith Dupré
Published by Random House, $40

Last fall I gave a university lecture titled ?Mary and the Intellectual Life.? I made use of both music and art to illustrate some of the points I wanted to make. It was the first time I ever did that in a university lecture.

Even though I can?t read a note of music and don?t have much of a background in art history, I realized that to speak about Mary required going beyond only a conceptual approach.

I wish now that before giving that presentation I?d read Judith Dupré?s most recent book, Full of Grace.

Dupré?s is not exactly a book with pages full of text. It does contain 59 meditations (the number of beads on a traditional rosary) on Mary by a superb writer. She possesses a poetic sensitivity for images that express what words alone can?t.

Full of Grace includes more than 150 full-color paintings, sculptures and photos, with Sr. Wendy Beckett-like explanations (or should I say, prayerful and illuminating meditations) on these extraordinary works of art, plus a host of quotations and poems carefully placed as marginalia -- to make moving through the book an experience of seeing, reading, reflecting and praying.

Some readers may already be familiar with Dupré?s previous best-selling illustrated books, Skyscrapers, Bridges and Churches. What one New York Times reviewer wrote of her book Bridges -- that ?Dupré captivates the eye, the mind and the imagination? -- is true also of this book, with the additional note that it nourishes a deeper love and understanding of Mary.

For the past five years, Dupré, a native of New York City and a graduate of Brown University with degrees in both English literature and studio art, has spent her time at the Yale Divinity School and Yale?s Institute of Sacred Music where, she tells us in her introduction, the friends she has made have deepened her ?thirst for God, knowledge and social justice.? Travel fellowships made it possible for her to visit the Balkans, Mexico,

Turkey and Israel, and translate those experiences into more vivid descriptions of the Marian traditions alive in those places.

Besides her commentary on art and Marian traditions, Dupré includes at different times striking descriptions of her own journey of faith, including the birth of one of her sons. Shortly after he was born, a doctor told her that he thought her son would never be able to walk.

Interweaving personal narratives in a work on a different topic is hard to do well, for it often seems to constrict the reader?s range of applications. Happily, this is not at all the case with Dupré. One has only to read her description of her late great-aunt Mary to come to a new appreciation of the power of prayer and the value of saying the rosary; or enjoy Dupré?s embrace of the sacredness of space -- the home and the kitchen -- to enter more deeply into the quotidian realities of Mary?s life at Nazareth.

The author devotes several of her meditations to Marian apparitions, including Fatima, Lourdes and Guadalupe. She explains that though officially approved by the Vatican, they remain technically private revelations -- that is, not required for Catholics to venerate.

At the same time, she captures the power of various Marian pilgrimage sites. She provides helpful historical commentary on the growth of Marian devotions from the fourth century on, the significance of the traditions surrounding Ephesus, the legends about Mary?s home now located in Italy, and, in general, demonstrates a sure feel for what, on the one hand, is rooted in doctrine (the divine maternity, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption), and what, on the other, is primarily popular piety (without denigrating it).

To weave together her own sense of the best ways to think about Mary today, she draws upon Christian feminist authors as diverse as Elizabeth Johnson and Rosemary Reuther, as well as the late post-Christian feminist Mary Daly.

She explains that the feminine dimension in Christian experience that ?has been marginalized and subject to patriarchal control for much of recorded history has been a great loss -- not only for women but for many men, who have also suffered from the historical, often spiritually disenfranchising privilege accorded them.?

Much more about this book should be mentioned: its graceful linkage between the symbolism of the tree and motherhood with today?s ecological concerns; the meditation on Mary?s visit with Elizabeth; the poignant description of the Pieta masterpiece sculpted by the 25-year-old Michelangelo; the chapter on beauty (with appropriate reference to Hans Urs von Balthasar); the cathedral of Chartres with its magnificent buttresses; the comparison of a uterus with the architecture of Baroque churches -- this list could be extended.

This is a wonderful book, rich in both visual and verbal expression. It is not only the focus on Mary that requires that the merely conceptual be transcended, but all that has to do with the mystery of both God and those who are made in God?s image. Dupré?s book makes clear that von Balthasar?s emphasis on the aesthetic would enrich the work of all theologians tempted to rely only on the conceptual approach. I will return to this book again and

again, both for my own meditation as well as for future lectures and sermons. Dupré has created a wonderful Marian experience for every reader.

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