

'It doesn't matter if they give us a hard time'

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THE GOSPEL IN SOLENTINAME

By Ernesto Cardenal

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The phenomenon of Christianity arises out of the extent to which the scriptures are real, alive, and populated by flesh-and-blood people. Jesus is present, is vibrant, through his own words. His mother, Mary, is alive too, and yet, I suggest, she comes through to us most clearly not through the scriptures directly.

She lives more clearly, more boldly, most personally and -- dare one say it -- most usefully in our lives, through human creation and interpretation.

All that to introduce what follows as a companion to Marianist Fr. James Heft's review of Judith Dupré's *Full of Grace* ([see review](#) [1]). In Dupré, Mary is seen through artistic representation in various media, with grace notes and interpretation. This review travels to the Christians of the remote archipelago of Solentiname in Lake Nicaragua, the 38 islands, not all inhabited, whose voices are brought to us by a famous name in Christian service on behalf of the oppressed, that of Ernesto Cardenal.

It was the practice at Mass in Solentiname to have a dialogue on the Gospel readings in place of a homily. Many were written down or recorded. These discussions, writes Cardenal, were "often more profound than those of many theologians." That is not surprising, he continues, because the good news was written for the poor, such as these campesinos.

The Gospel in Solentiname is a treasure trove of simple wisdom and complex interpretation from which two jewels concerning Mary are extracted. It is these facets of Mary, in the voices of the people of the archipelago, that show how the more static Mary of the Dupré book's illustrations becomes transformed into a living Mary in the words of the listeners.

This, from commentary on the wedding feast at Cana.

Olivia: His hour, which hadn't come, was the hour of his death. He shouldn't be performing miracles yet, presenting himself as the Messiah who was coming to do good and to liberate the people, because the powerful would kill him. That's why he says to her, "Woman, stop bugging me, my hour hasn't yet come."

Marcelino: Following up on what Olivia said, I see Mary's attitude is a good example. Jesus may have been afraid. It's very natural for somebody to be afraid of death. Later he was afraid in the garden when his hour came. Or maybe it was just prudence. It's all the same. But anyway, Mary here doesn't seem to be afraid or pay any attention to prudence, but she urges him to perform a miracle. He didn't want to get into being a messiah yet and she pushes him into it. It seems like she's saying, "It doesn't matter if they give us a hard time."

When the Gospel reading was Mark 3:31-35, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" the dialogue opened:

Esperanza: He wants us to love everyone as we love our family. The ones that were inside with him were like his family. He doesn't want us to devote ourselves just to our own families but to treat everyone the same.

Tomas: His mother wasn't with him, see? So she came to look for him with all his brothers ? she'd stayed outside the church because they were gathered like us here.

There is a treasured place for valuable scholarship in Christianity. My two oldest books, bound in vellum and awkwardly printed in the early centuries of moveable type, are Gospel commentaries from the late 16th and early 17th centuries. They spoke to their time.

Four and five centuries later, the living commentaries of Solentiname can propel us forward in a different way. Equally, the scholarship and exploration around Mary speaks to these times. Her role as a woman and mother can fill us, as they filled her, with the promise that is Jesus, to push ahead, saying, "It doesn't matter if they give us a hard time."

[Arthur Jones is *NCR*'s books editor. His 14,000-word prose poem, *Mary, a Mother Waiting*, will be published in March by Paulist Press.]

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