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Crossing Borders with the Virgin Mary

Jamie Manson | Nov. 16, 2011 Grace on the Margins

In her book *American Madonna: Crossing Borders with the Virgin Mary* (Orbis Books, 2010), author Deirdre Cornell chronicles the three years that she, her husband and five children spent as Maryknoll Missioners in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Blending personal reflection, Marian scholarship and social justice advocacy, Cornell deepens our understanding of Mary by allowing us see her through the lens of Latin American people. As she journeys to various sites of pilgrimage in Mexico, we encounter the struggles, hopes and deep faith of those who inspire Cornell along the way. Mary Cornell discovers a universal Mother who invites us to cross the borders of cultural, economic and linguistic difference and to locate our common humanity and spiritual heritage.

Recently I had the opportunity to talk with Cornell about the ways in which the Latin American church opened her eyes to a new vision of Mary.

Jamie Manson: So much of your book is about pilgrimage. It's remarkable to look at how your own life's journey led you to explore the presence of Mary within Latin American culture. You credit your grandmother with starting you on the path.
Mary Cornell: Yes, my grandmother had a particular devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. It's very strange that she would have encountered Guadalupe because she was an Irish American living in a time before globalization and multiculturalism. It was so out of the ordinary for her to have this devotion.

How did she learn about Guadalupe?
She was very Marian, like most of the women of her time who shared her background. She loved the stories of Fatima and Lourdes. But the Guadalupe apparition had the strongest appeal to her. She did help to start a Catholic Worker House, and so she held the belief that Mary comes to the poor. So, I think the story of Guadalupe's appearance to Juan Diego really worked for her. It moved her so much that when she was in her 70s she went on a pilgrimage to the Basilica of St. Mary of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Throughout her life, she rarely traveled. She didn't even have a passport! Yet she had this uncharacteristic willingness to traverse linguistic and cultural boundaries for the sake of Guadalupe.

You write that this desire to meet the Mother of God across borders has become a recurring theme in your own life. Yet in college, you stopped going to Mass and hungered after a gender-affirming spirituality. Ironically, it was a lecture on Mary by a Jewish professor that opened your eyes to her power.
That lecture led me to see Mary as a form of female symbolic power. I see her as a powerful woman. In Latin America, the Virgin Mary holds a more public role. She is not just a self-sacrificing mother. She has this great influence. I think that's because in Latin American culture, the home and the family are more visible. I think that the gains in women's equality in the past decades are really important. One area, though, where we need a lot of work is the domestic sphere. I feel that, as a mother of five, the role of mother has been lost in the shuffle. It used to be the only role that was recognized. Now in the capitalist system, I feel like motherhood not valued. I think that Mary is a powerful model of how to hold together one's identity as a very strong disciple and one's identity as a mother.

Quoting the anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner, you write that Mary embodies *communitas* . That is, a state of collective mysticism experienced with others, the underlying interconnectedness of any society.
I've experienced this as I've talked to different parishes about the topics in my book. I've spoken to a parish in Beverly Hills [Calif.] and I've spoken to a parish in Camden, New Jersey. And I've found Mary resonates with everybody. Here we are in this polarized society, and yet parishioners in these two very different communities find something in Mary that somehow pulls them together. She is this great universal figure who unites us. She crosses boundaries and she appeals to us as Catholics, regardless of where we stand on the spectrum of economic justice or even the spectrum of our views about the church.

Does the image of Mary appearing to the poor challenge groups like those in Beverly Hills?
Yes, but the story of people's journeys with Mary allows you to enter into the conversation about the poor and about immigrants differently. If I came in and just declared that we need an amnesty for immigrants because we have a real crisis of immigration in our country, they might just tune me out or even get up and walk away. But if you approach the issue by telling the story about Latin Americans who walk under the veil of Mary before they are about to cross the border into this country, they sit through it. It may make them uncomfortable, but they realize that we have a common mother. And if we are to honor Mary as our spiritual mother, then we must be related to these other people who honor her as their spiritual mother, too. Whether we like it or not, we are linked in this faith.

So no matter how wealthy or powerful, ultimately we are all searching for answers and meaning. We all share in that common vulnerability.
And who takes care of you when you're vulnerable? Your mother. Some images of Mary are mysterious and enigmatic. But what is most important about her is the larger story of her presence, particularly as it is revealed in the gospels. We don't have to reach into the realm of superstition or magic to understand her importance because she is Mary of the Magnificat. We see this in the story of Juan Diego. Guadalupe appears to this poor man and she turns the power structure upside down.

In the Magnificat, Mary announces that God is throwing down the mighty and sending the rich away empty. How important is that image of Mary in Latin America?
We have a friend who wanted to come across the border. His mother, like most mothers, wasn't happy about it because it is so dangerous. When she realized that she couldn't change his mind, she made him make her two promises. First, that he would get into good physical shape by hiking the mountains daily. And second, that he would memorize the Magnificat. She told him that he must say it over and over throughout his journey. I've found in Latin America the Magnificat is used a lot, especially in dire circumstances. It is associated with risk-taking and invoked in situations where you need a lot of strength and courage. Mary offers solace, but she is also a crucial source of strength. She enables us to move forward into an uncertain future and helps us to always maintain our dignity along the way.

And who took a bigger risk than Mary in accepting God's call?
Working with the poor and with immigrants, you see the faith and devotion that people have and how much their experience resonates with Mary's experience in the Gospel. You read Matthew's account of the flight into Egypt, and you begin to see that Mary and Joseph are refugees. All of a sudden, she is not this plaster statue anymore. We even can say that Mary was a homeless immigrant living in exile, because, according to tradition, after the crucifixion she went to a foreign country with the disciple John. This is all in addition to the fact that she was an unwed pregnant teenager and, later, the mother of a convict. The richness of her portrait in scripture is incredible.

In your chapter about your journey to the site of the Virgin of Juquilia in Mexico, you write, "I have wondered if any number of years of catechesis can equal one night spent in the mountains under the stars on the road to Juquilia." What has your exploration taught you about the spiritual longings of young

adults?
Young people seek a direct, personal experience of God. Because pilgrimage is often such a physical hardship that wears down personal resistance, pilgrims often experience heightened sensory perception that makes them more receptive to communication with the holy. The young adults I met on pilgrimage were experiencing insights into our radical dependency on God, the beauty of creation, the realization of their place in the universe and wonder at the miracle of their own lives. Faith is so countercultural that it has become a challenge to pass it on to the next generation. Pilgrimage seems to be a medium through they can internalize a religious worldview.

Do you think there is a future for devotions for Catholics who are not necessarily highly traditional?
As Catholics, we have this great resource in belonging to a global church. We can approach scripture and doctrine from different perspectives, but in terms of devotions, it's very enriching to learn about the practices of others. Even if we didn't grow up with them, it is still part of our common tradition. This commonality offers an opportunity to re-enliven our own devotions. Most importantly, we should not be afraid to get to know images of Mary from other cultures and to let her touch us and teach us through those different images.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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