

Protecting Mary

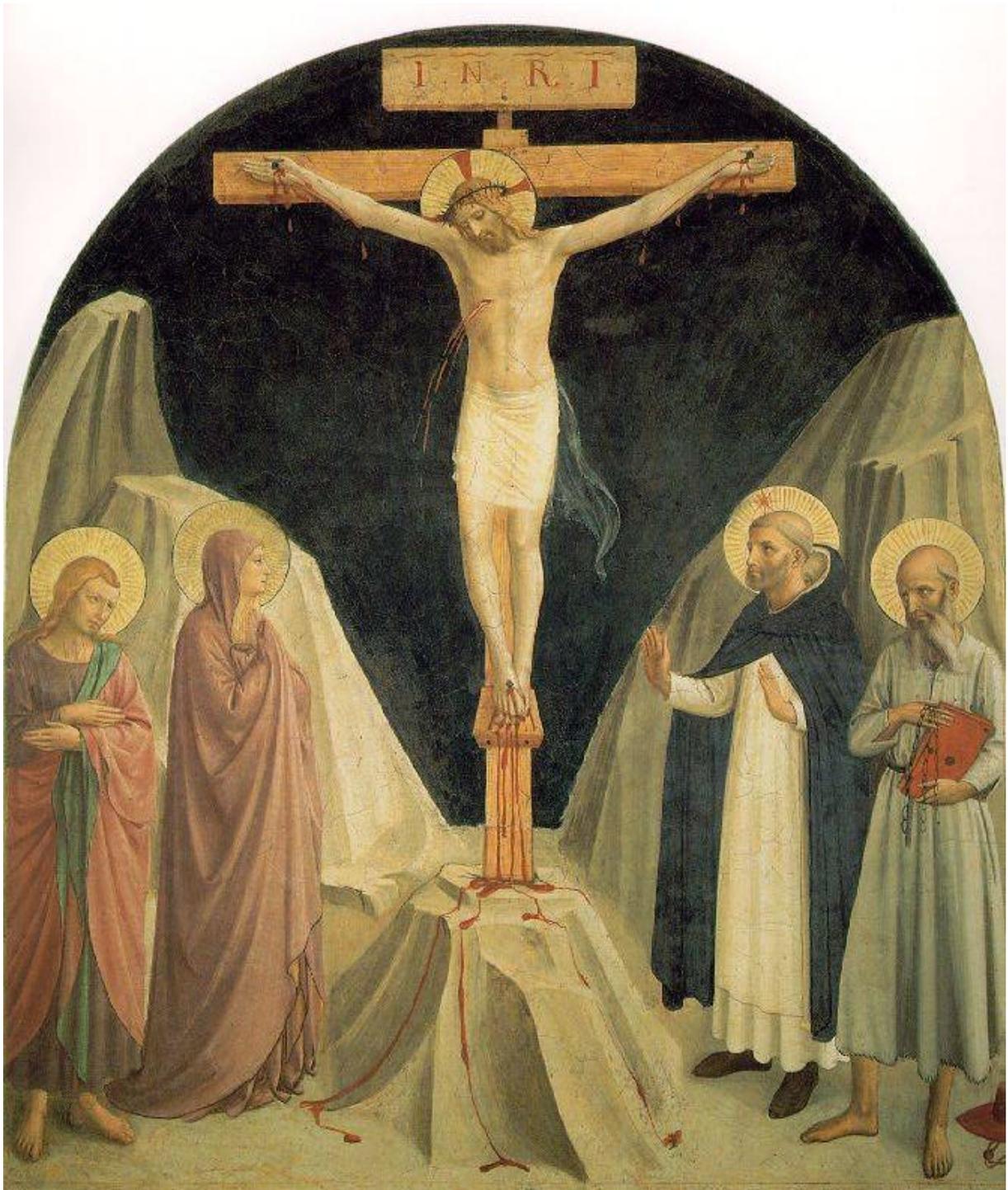
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To the Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Walsingham, March 2005

Ecumenical Marian Pilgrimage Trust



There is a powerful progression within the Gospels from Mary the mother of Our Lord, as the protector of her helpless infant child, to Mary the tragic figure beside the cross who is being protected by her Son and handed over into the care of a trusted and beloved disciple. But even this second tableau — the scene at the cross — carries within it the awareness of Mary standing there, still as a mother, a mother who may be helpless to change things but who is there, as only a mother can be there... helpless yet protective..



It is this subtle interchange in the whole business of *protecting* that I would like us to contemplate for a few minutes this morning. In many ways it parallels many purely human stories, as a mother begins by protecting her helpless child, learns that she must somehow 'let go', but yet remains always *a mother* as later in life she has to watch her child die, and as that child compassionately makes practical arrangements for the protection of his or her mother.

What I may wish to say perhaps needs a little introduction in the background on my own particular spiritual perspective, but this excursus I will keep as brief as possible. I come from a Christian tradition which — not to its particular credit — has tended to treat Our Lady more with deep respect than with any undying devotion. I am not entirely typical of that tradition (otherwise I might not be here with you) but, be that as it may — and speaking now very much for myself — I hold

that we must, at all times, keep a focus on *theology* as well as on *feeling*. And I find it easiest to do this when I can hold in my mind's eye *both* a sense of Our Lady as *Theotokos*, the bearer — albeit fully as mother — of God Incarnate, *and*, with this, the awareness of Mary as symbol, icon and '*type*' for the Church, in all its diversity and range of expression. This, I find, allows me to treat Mary with a reverence and love, while retaining that which is most critically important to my own personal faith and practice — an uncompromising and almost aggressive Christocentrism.

But to begin close to the start of the gospel narrative, with Christ, the child born in Bethlehem, incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. Jesus Christ the helpless infant dependent, like every infant, on his mother for continuing survival, and also dependent on his mother, with Joseph, for human protection from human danger. The first of the two paintings I am using in conjunction with this short devotional address is one that saw the first time 'in the flesh', so to speak, only a couple of months ago, in New York¹ – Giotto's painting of the Epiphany — tempera on wood, just under eighteen inches by eighteen inches, early fourteenth century, and now a long way from its native Florence. I am not going to weary you with much detail other than to say that of course here we are seeing the flowering of European art into expression, emotion and narrative content. The imagination (the artist's and ours) comes into play in a new way and what we immediately see is an anxiety for Christ.

It is an anxiety shown not only in Joseph's instinctive movement forward as one of the Magi picks up the infant Christ, but also the anxiety of a mother shown in the Blessed Virgin's face. These men are not enemies. This is no Herod. The king who has lifted Christ has placed his crown on the ground, and yet even in this posture of worship — even with earthly and heavenly celebration clearly well underway, symbolised by those cheerful Franciscans and the dancing angels — there is the anxiety of every parent for the safety of a child, one's care, one's deepest responsibility.

W H Auden captures this anxiety in Mary in his poem, *At the Manger Mary Sings*:

*O shut your bright eyes that mine must endanger
With their watchfulness; protected by its shade
Escape from my care: what can you discover
From my tender look but how to be afraid?
Love can but confirm the more it would deny.
Close your bright eye.*

*Sleep. What have you learned from the womb that bore you
But an anxiety your Father cannot feel?
Sleep. What will the flesh that I gave do for you,
Or my mother love, but tempt you from his will?
Why was I chosen to teach his Son to weep?
Little One, sleep.*

This moving emotional moment of maternal protective instinct should surely be part of our response to Our Lady. The care for this intensely vulnerable Christ, even among those who have come to worship him and, in every sense, to lay their crowns before him, speaks powerfully in a world of corruption, of abuse and of apostasy.

¹ Metropolitan Museum of Art. See illustration on the facing page.

In the recent encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistica*, Pope John Paul II suggests that the look of enraptured love on Mary's face as she gazes on the face of the newborn Christ should somehow be mirrored in the faithful as they receive eucharistic communion. We would say "Amen" to that but should we not also include in that look of love, the sense of concern which will always accompany true love?

In the first letter of John, we are reminded in that lapidary phrase, that "perfect love casts out fear". Yes indeed, but although a perfected love will certainly remove the self-centredness which becomes a selfish and obsessive fear for oneself, any love which will not grieve or care, or be concerned for others, is a very strange love indeed.

And so, in the midst of all our celebration and veneration here in Walsingham, let us hold in the eye of our mind and soul that look of care and concern on our Lady's face which is an essential component of what it is to love. Can we — as those who follow with her, on her path of joy and sorrow — feel this same instinct to care and protect, as we look on the face of Christ, as we receive eucharistic communion? I believe that we must, otherwise we have lost touch with what Mary is to be for us, and even what the Incarnation truly means. There must always be that strange, disturbing and ultimately mysterious tension between Christ Incarnate who is in his essential God-ness all-powerful, but yet who — in *kenosis* — strips himself of his power, in his love for us and all humankind. Our empathy with Mary, Theotokos and proto-type for the Church, means that we too are part of that scene of the Epiphany. Surrounded by devotion, surrounded by those who wish Christ no harm but only to worship him, Mary remains still the *protecting Mary*.

Luke, who is of course far more interested than are the other evangelists in exploring the relationship between Mary and Our Lord, goes on to tell us of one other incident before Christ begins his ministry. When Mary (perhaps not for the first time) realises what was meant when she was told by Simeon, "a sword will pierce your own soul too". The story of Jesus at the age of twelve remaining behind in Jerusalem after the Passover feast — and terrifying Mary and Joseph in the process — reveals to us more of the stresses in being the protective mother of God Incarnate. Luke concludes his story capturing to the full this tension and apprehension.

When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.

Luke 2: 48-51

The balance is shifting — the protection of a loving mother for her child can no longer be the core of the relationship. Indeed the exchange between Our Lady and Christ seems rather characteristic of the disputes in every household between parent and adolescent teenager or pre-teen. Our Lord has to draw away from a parent (even with the concomitant distress that this will cause to any loving and protective parent), if he is to reach the identity which is already his. There is danger and pain attached to this, the danger that accompanies freedom, and the pain which comes with a 'letting go' of any kind. That this danger and pain is part of the essential schema of Incarnation and of the earthly life of Mary *Theotokos* gives all of it — for me at least — a dignity and a purpose which sadly we are too ready to conceal from those who go through the reality of adolescent aggravation in every succeeding human generation.

But it is when we stand at the cross of Christ that we come to the true reversal in protection. Fra Angelico's fresco of the crucifixion², the second of the paintings to I which am alluding in this address, shows how the protecting of Mary has now become the responsibility of her son Jesus. The fresco displays a symbolism characteristic of the period — what we might call, in technical terms, a *conceit* — in that we see not only those who were actually present at the crucifixion but two additional figures, Saint Dominic in his habit and Saint Jerome, holding a copy of the Scriptures.

There is a nice irony in that — centuries before Karl Barth — we are vividly reminded that the Word *revealed* became flesh and died on the cross for our salvation, that the Word is also *attested to* in the Scriptures (we see Jerome, the translator of the Scriptures witnessing the crucifixion), and the Word is essentially *proclaimed* in the Church's preaching (we see Dominic, the founder of the Order of Preachers standing at the foot of the cross). But the point of this convention in religious art of this period — of including later figures in biblical scenes — was crucially to remind us that we too are witnesses to that which the bible relates to us. We too are part of the picture, we too *were there*. And what we are witnessing — *what we are participants in* — in that scene captured by Fra Angelico is the concern of Christ for Our Lady, the concern not only of the Word become flesh, God become man, for human suffering, but also the instinctive care of a loving child for the loving mother whom he is shortly to leave behind.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

John 20: 26-27

And so John the beloved disciple is given the task of caring for Mary as a new son for a grieving mother. Von Balthasar, in one of his reflections of Our Lady, gives this theological perspective a further twist, and reverses the priority, when he writes of Mary being taken with Christ to the cross, in order, as Balthasar says, 'to share there his God-forsakenness, for as the Father abandons the Son, so the Son abandons his mother, and thrusts upon her, the church, another "son".' – "Mother, behold your son" thus takes on another dimension.

Yet before all else, I believe, we have to see that Mary was there at the cross in an anguished protection — *by her presence* — for a son whom she could no longer save from the dark forces of the world. If I may return for a moment to my own diocese and to one of the prayers in honour of Mary written by the seventh century abbot, Saint Lomman who founded a monastery near Lough Owel in what is now Westmeath. He writes of this scene at the cross:

*All men claim thee.
All peoples bless thy name.
Broken-hearted Mary at the Cross.
You saw the rabble mock thy Son.
You saw the lance open His side.
You saw them cast dice for His garments.
You who care for all, could not give him to drink, when He cried, I thirst.
He gave thee to us as our Mother. You saw Him die.
You knew He was God.*

² In the convent of San Marco in Florence. See illustration on p. 14.

But yet there is a protectiveness now directed towards the Blessed Virgin Mary by her Son. And this image is vitally important for us, not only theologically but also devotionally. Christ is the final protector, the protector from the cross, the protector in the midst of pain and suffering — his and ours. This interchange of protector and protected is fundamental to our understanding of the Incarnation, our understanding of the life of Our Lady, and indeed to our understanding of Christian discipleship both individual and in the corporate life of the Body of Christ, the Church.

We, like Mary, have the human responsibility for the dignity and even for the safeguarding of the Christ in the world in which we live. In this, we follow Mary in her path of obedience and discipleship. We are surrounded as individuals and as community by all that would trivialise and ultimately demean and undermine the life of Christ in the world. Following Christ, for many both inside and outside the Church, is now something of a spiritual buffet – take the things you like the look of and think might be tasty, don't worry about the things that you know you don't like, or think you mightn't like. Lift Christ up and put him down again or (if we return to the imagery of Giotto's Epiphany) lift him up if you like – you can always hand him back if he starts fretting. We are following in the steps of Mary — type of the Church, proto-disciple — when we protect that divine treasure with which we have been entrusted. As Mary protects Christ as mother, so he protects her as a loving Son. So we too are called to protect one another in love.

At the heart of the gospel — at the heart of all that we are and might become — stands the cross. We are protected by Jesus Christ. He hands us to the care of one another, to one another on earth, to the saints and angels, to the whole communion of saints and to his mother — Mary Theotokos, Our Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary — within the undying and everlasting love of the Father.

This paradox — of protecting and being protected, of weakness and strength, of humility and majesty, of *praying for* and of *being prayed for* — is at the heart of the entire Christian life. We see it most powerfully in the *Magnificat*, but why not conclude with another poem, translated by yet another poet — Longfellow's wonderful rendering of the opening of the final Canto (XXIII) of Dante's *Paradiso*:

*Thou Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son,
Humble and high beyond all other creature,
The limit fixed of the eternal counsel,*

*Thou art the one who such nobility
To human nature gave, that its Creator
Did not disdain to make himself its creature.*

It is surely here that the paradox of the divine relationship with God and Mary, and the relationship between Our Lady and us has, I believe, both its beginning and its final end.

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