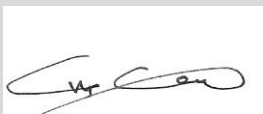




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MTh Dissertation

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January 2022

**Mary and knowing God in the work of John Henry Newman:
critique and redemption through a feminist lens**

For the students of The Oratory School

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Introduction

To approach a writer at whom accusations of misogyny have been levelled more than once through the lens of feminist theology may seem to open the door only to critique of his thought.¹ While, as will be discussed below, it is unfair and largely unfounded to brand St John Henry Newman a misogynist,² it would also be inaccurate to claim him in almost any way for the feminist cause. That acknowledged, however, it is worth noting the ongoing love, respect, and academic interest that continues to be poured out for the newest of England's saints, and, as such, his relevance to contemporary concerns deserves fresh attention. With the patriarchalism of the Roman Catholic Church and its teaching an entrenched sticking point for many contemporary thinkers, it is an interesting and important exercise to discern whether anything more than just criticism of Newman's thinking with respect to gender may be possible. This dissertation aims, therefore, to offer not only a critique of Newman's work in terms of its treatment of gender issues, but also hopes to redeem at least some elements from criticism and offer a positive reworking of aspects of his thought in such a way as to make them not only acceptable but even affirming to a feminist reader.

Such a project naturally has substantial limitations. For one thing, Newman was a prolific writer, and his works show considerable breadth of topic. In order to limit the scope of the project, the specific area on which this dissertation will focus is Newman's Mariology. This is a topic within his work that has received increased attention over recent years for its significance and relevance both within his own theology and in the wider field of Marian studies.

However, another challenge in the study of Newman is that his conversion from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism is reflected by different stages in his thinking, or, at least, in the limits of what he was willing to concede over certain doctrines at different points in his life and career. This is particularly relevant to his Mariology since, as an Anglican, he had described Marian devotion as his 'great *crux*' regarding Catholicism (*AP*, 244).

A further limitation for applying a feminist lens is the extent to which Newman's work is so firmly situated within a conservative 19th Century milieu. Careful consideration must be given to the impact of his historical circumstances: for example, even though his correspondence with women is abundant, not one of those women joined the emancipation movement nor

¹ For example, Paul Johnson in the Sunday Telegraph (26 September 1993) speaks of his 'rejection of half the human race'. Sugg 1996, 3.

² Sugg 1996, Preface by Meriol Trevor.

campaigns for their higher education (most likely because, as middle class ladies, they did not consider it a necessity for earning a living).³

For a feminist, especially one approaching the work of a 19th Century Roman Catholic theologian, Mary is both an obvious and challenging point of focus. On the one hand, she represents the most thoroughly studied female figure within all of Newman's thought, with other female figures from scripture and tradition receiving little to no attention in his writings. On the other, it is precisely her unique treatment within a patriarchal Church tradition that has made her so problematic for feminist critics, who see her presentation and place within Catholic devotion and doctrine as perpetuating rather than undermining the oppression of wo/men⁴ in the Church.

Such issues will be addressed within this dissertation, but with a specific claim for why Newman's Mary might offer some hope to readers struggling with the traditions of Mary in the Church more widely. While Newman undoubtedly does perpetuate and, indeed, exacerbate some tropes of Mariology that add to the oppression of wo/men in the Church, he also returns repeatedly to images of Mary as thinker and theologian, preacher, and ideal disciple, over and above her roles as mother and submissive instrument of a patriarchal God.

I will use the presentation of Mary as theologian (chapter 2) and Mary as preacher (chapter 3) to explore how she may offer a model of discipleship that goes beyond a patriarchal model of submission, humility, or wo/men's inferiority as passive co-operator. In my final chapter, I will explore Mary as wo/man, and how Newman's depiction of Mary might be freed from a dangerous and stereotyped gender binary.

To a lesser extent, Newman's Mariology will be contextualised within two further strands of his thinking: firstly, the rejection of a traditional masculinity for the Christian (male) disciple, and, secondly, the positive engagement he shows in his lifelong correspondence with women, however much this falls short of belief in wo/men's equality and emancipation. Within these frameworks, I hope to demonstrate that Mary becomes a significant model for the Christian, who can be extracted from the oppressive qualities of her treatment in much of the Church's tradition and scholarship.

³ Sugg 1996, 2.

⁴ I will adopt this term in all cases where I am not referring to 'woman' in historical terms, as Newman would have used it. I have taken it from Schüssler Fiorenza, who describes its use as follows: 'I have resorted to this way of writing wo/men in order to destabilize the essentialist notions of woman and indicate that from the perspective and positionality of wo/men who are multiply oppressed, the term is also inclusive of disenfranchised men.' Schüssler Fiorenza 1996, Introduction n.1.

Just as it would be unsound to suggest that there is a single coherent line in Newman's lifetime of work on Mary, albeit he does show great consistency in a developing process of thought, it would also be specious to suggest that there is one monodic feminism to which his theology can be subjected. Feminist Mariology has been undertaken within a plurality of approaches, some of which lend themselves more than others to a positive interpretation of Newman's work. Given the aim of this dissertation is ultimately to attempt to redeem for feminist readers something of his claims regarding Mary, one could argue that the methodology must be as appropriate as possible to achieve this. However, feminism and its interpretations extend well beyond the academy, and, indeed, the discipline of theology, and I believe profoundly in honouring the approaches I hold to beyond the scope of this particular exercise. Therefore, while I will draw on a range of feminist scholarship, I will aim to underpin my interpretation with intersectional non-biologicistic inclusive approaches to gender and identity, rooted in the Butler school of thought,⁵ within the limitations of its applicability to Newman's thought.

For this reason, the feminist lens proposed draws its stance principally from the world of liberal theology, predicated first and foremost on the aim of restoring all genders as equal in terms of reason and person. Critics of such an approach allege that it androgenizes women and removes gendered distinctiveness, while simultaneously excluding those whose gender leaves them on the margins of the oppressive world of the patriarchy from which individual intellectual emancipation will not free them. With this in mind, I will also attempt to argue for the liberationist aspects of personhood that Newman advocates, wherein Mary, in her situation as humble woman raised high, represents a restoration to oppression and a claim on a reformed masculinity, which more greatly reflects the female experience rather than the traditional aspirations of the patriarchy. While this is far from some traditions of a radical biologicistic feminism, and will garner criticism from certain schools of thought that I will not have the scope to address fully, I nevertheless believe it has scope to extend a feminist redemption of this aspect of Newman's thinking from the personal to the universal.

Finally, I wish to head off one obvious line of criticism for this project from the start, namely the impossibility of redeeming any aspect of the theology of a 19th Century Roman Catholic theologian, rooted not only deep in the conservatism of his time but also, and even more so, in the patriarchal traditions of Christianity, and Roman Catholicism in particular. It is undoubtedly true that a preferable way of redeeming Mariology from the misogyny that has traditionally plagued it is to begin again, as it were, from scratch, returning to Scripture and experience rather

⁵ Butler 1990 et al.

than attempting to salvage fragments from a non-feminist theological tradition. However, the lived reality of the enduring influence of Newman on popular thought, especially within the Oratory movement, pressures the need for, and upholds the validity of, a review of his work that makes it acceptable, even in a small way, to wo/men, and it is this small goal that this dissertation sets out to attempt to achieve.

Chapter 1: Newman's Mariology and Issues of Methodology

At the heart of Newman's Mariology lies the common Patristic concept of Mary as the second Eve. Before looking in detail at what he believes this to mean, and why it might be problematic, I propose that this offers a methodological foundation stone to a 21st Century reader, albeit one that may be based in assumptions that Newman would not have spelled out in the same terms, not least since the Fathers, on whom he draws as a bedrock, had not. The methodological crux to which I refer is this: by treating Mary in parallel with Eve, we are invited to approach her first and foremost from the mythological perspective. As Eve is a mythological construct to offer an explanation for human creation and original sin, so Mary, although a historical figure, is transferred to a higher plane, on which she signifies more than the limited facts offered us by Scripture.

Therefore, the recognition of the value of Mary in her typological function – the myth of Mary, as it were – not least in symbolic contrast with the mythological Eve, gives far greater utility and function to Mary in many ways. Strange expresses this aptly:

‘We need to remember that this contrast was never understood by Newman as something primarily historical. It was a contrast of type. Beyond a view of what might be thought actually to have happened, Eve was seen as a symbol of responsible co-operation in the fall of the human race and Mary symbolised responsible co-operation in its restoration. So it is not so much a question of accepting Eve as symbolic as coming to terms with the symbolic character of Mary's role. And in fact as scholars have come to realise how little they know about the historical Mary, so they have become more and more aware of her power as our pattern and example.’⁶

Treating Mary in these terms, that is to say as a symbol and signifier of a wider narrative as much as a real woman of history, is a contentious move in the eyes of many feminist critics. Given that Mary has been mythologized in such a way as to turn her into a figure that represents primarily the desires and agendas of a male patriarchal Church hierarchy, it can of course be argued that the best way to counter this is to strip away the constructed symbolic narrative and return Mary to her real/historical self. However, given the centrality of the Mary-myth to Newman's thought, I propose instead the critique of the narrative Newman creates for Mary, with the intention of redeeming those aspects of his myth that offer Mary as a positive signifier of Christian discipleship for feminist readers.

⁶ Strange 2009, 67.

It is this idea of discipleship upon which I believe it is possible to hang a feminist interpretation of Newman's Mary. Although much of his Mariological writing is focussed on justifying devotion to Mary and on explaining the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, one constant facet of the Mary-myth in his writing is the characterization of Mary as model disciple. Rather than treating Mary *Theotokos* as in tension with this prioritization of Mary disciple, Mary's acceptance of her role, and indeed the role itself, are treated in terms of perfect discipleship. This is not to say that Newman does not also venture into the presentation of Mary as Co-Redemptrix, but this is an extension of the narrative of her supreme discipleship.

The reason that I begin with this particular focus in my analysis of Newman is that it seems critical in any analysis of Mary's place as a signifier for wo/men to question whether she serves to open up or close down their potential within the Divine Economy, that is to say: does identification with Mary limit wo/men's ability both to identify with and enter into relationship with Christ? In some schools of thought undoubtedly, wo/men are encouraged to identify with Mary (and to relate to Christ through her only), whereas men are encouraged to identify directly with Christ. This becomes particularly pivotal in churches where women are not permitted to be ordained, and are therefore permanently excluded by gender from the ultimate identification with Christ at the altar.

I will argue, however, that in Newman Mary is symbolic in terms of her gender, and yet also extends well beyond a gendered type or gender-limited discipleship. However, this is not to say that there are not extremely challenging moments in the gendered idea of the disciple in Newman, not only in his masculine language, but also in some of his claims for the type of disciples the world needs, and particularly that the Oxford movement needed, stating, for example in LD III 43, 'The Church wants *expeditos milites*, not a whole camp of women at its heels, forbye brats.' To some extent, the distance between our own 21st Century cultural context and Newman's explains this restriction, the militaristic masculine language he exploits for discipleship comes up in stark contrast with some of the arguments I will identify for Mary as model disciple.⁷

If we treat Mary, as Newman often does, as the paradigm of discipleship, it must be without restriction of gender. Newman may well not have intended this to mean equality of discipleship between men and women, but it is hard to justify this from outside the patriarchal context of his own times, for all the same structures are perpetuated within the Roman Catholic church. However, in contrast with the *militem expeditum* above, we do see in Newman's writing that men are explicitly encouraged to reject negative aspects of their (secular) cultural masculinity in order

⁷ Sugg 1996, 40.

to achieve a model of discipleship based on the biblical and traditional characteristics Newman identifies in Mary.

One could, of course, encounter a problem with these characteristics when they might be seen to offer justification or romanticization of facets of wo/men's lived experience that feminism seeks to eliminate, such as the complex case of humility. On the one hand, it is right to claim humility as a virtue of discipleship before God, but on the other, feminists have found it problematic when God is depicted as the ultimate patriarch, Mary as a wo/man cowed into submission by a misogynistic power structure that requires humility from wo/men that it does not require from men. There is no avoiding the fact that Newman explicitly states that wo/men are below men as men are below Christ, his model of discipleship expressed in Mary is largely one that depicts her as a model both for men and wo/men in relation to God, simultaneously empowered and humble through her working with God in the Incarnation.

For Newman, Mary is also the paradigm of the Church, though this is closely entwined with his arguments about individual discipleship. The particular attribute of the Church as embodied by Mary that is of most significance to my arguments about her validity as a signifier for feminist discipleship narratives is that of doctrinal development. As Gregoris puts it, Newman assures all that 'Mary's life is indeed a paradigm for how the Church relates to the truths of the Faith that she professes and teaches'.⁸ This brings us to an aspect of Mary in Newman's work which is particularly distinctive to the feminist reader: Mary as thinker and theologian. This is an important area of Newman's Mariology to situate within his wider ideas about reason, theology, and knowing God. Importantly, Mary seems to serve as a model for a thinking development of an understanding of God, which she undertakes in spite of both her marginalized gender and her lack of formal education. This lays the ground for the argument that wo/men and men should partake in and are capable of theological education and knowing God through their own intellectual processes and development. Although this is not reflected in Newman's own educational theory and the all-male institutions he founded, nonetheless its seeds are strongly implied within his correspondence with and treatment of wo/men in this regard.

In the idea of Mary as theologian, we also have to start to look at the characterization of Mary as priest. Obviously Newman would not, given the exclusion of women from the priesthood, have seen her in these terms *per se*. However, it is interesting that Sophy Ryder attests that Newman encouraged her to choose as her religious order 'The Order of the Good Shepherd, saying,' 'The

⁸ Gregoris 2003, 51.

Order of the Good Shepherd is *nearest* to the *Priesthood*, the *dearest* to the Heart of Jesus'.⁹ In Mary's case, it is justifiable to say that he does depict her as a preacher and in some wider form a 'minister', perhaps something else 'nearest to the priesthood', which feminist thinkers could quite rightly view as priestly aspects to the myth of Mary in Newman's thought.

It seems critical that the feminist Marian scholar seek to avoid what Mary Daly calls 'the whole fallacious process of spinning a "theology of woman" out of Marian doctrine, in which process fantasy fills the void left by unknown historical fact and universalizes with naïve abandon.'¹⁰

What Daly concludes from the portrayal of Mary in some traditional treatments is that when the Christ-Mary relationship is analogized to the man-wo/man relationship in general, we end up with man as operator and wo/man as merely co-operator, that is to say only as receptive, with man having the mission to preach and wo/man to listen.¹¹ In Newman, however, we have a model of Mary as more than this, indeed as 'preacher' and as model disciple for all Christians, regardless of gender.

In order to understand fully the implications of treating Mary as theologian and preacher, it is profitable to start with what Walgrave identifies as 'the primary factor' in Newman's thought, that is to say: conscience.¹² It is upon conscience, first and foremost, that Newman believes apologetics must rest: in spite of his own intellectual prowess and admiration for intellectual talent, not to mention the presence of reason in his own methodology (in spite of its demands and the way in which he considered it a focus for criticism), all other methods are correlative to conscience.¹³ For Newman, the only valid way of thinking about the world starts from the inner experience of conscience, the 'kindly light' by which his own path to faith was initiated and guided; this is the first principle from which reflection on the experiences of life must commence, albeit then informed by reason, though never reason divorced from conscience.¹⁴

The role of conscience, as Newman presents it, is one that tells us about our conduct in our own lives. Because the rules revealed by conscience convey a sense of obligation, this implies, Newman argues, contact with a Person to whom we are bound and for whom we experience reverence. The movement from this point of vague sense to strong perception of the personal God comes only through education and personal fidelity.¹⁵ This role of conscience has two key

⁹ Sugg 1996, 171.

¹⁰ Daly 2002, 162.

¹¹ Daly 2002, 162.

¹² Walgrave 1960, 25.

¹³ Walgrave 1960, 25–26.

¹⁴ Walgrave 1960, 27, 34.

¹⁵ Walgrave 1960, 111–12.

factors for consideration within a feminist interpretation. Firstly, the validity of all conscience, regardless of the gender of the person who experiences it, makes universal the experience of God in this internal way. This acts to disavow a tradition in which men have dictated to wo/men what their experience of God should be, and also precludes any argument that relationship with God is different for men than for wo/men. Secondly, it raises a crucial point about obedience, to which we will return in Chapter 2. Obedience is a very challenging virtue for wo/men within the context of Christianity, since wo/men's experience of obedience throughout history has been one of their obedient submission to men. The language and characterization within the tradition of God as male has only added to this problem. However, Newman's theology of conscience suggests that there is one core form of obedience and one only that has vital ramifications in terms of our encounter with God, and that is obedience of every human being to God, and to God alone, beginning from obedience to conscience. The internal experience of this makes it personal to each individual, and not governed by external patriarchal structures. It also extends the concept of obedience to men, and does not differentiate between requirements of obedience for different genders. While elsewhere Newman explicitly confirms that he sees a hierarchy between God, men, and wo/men, in that order, this is not justifiable when we fix our understanding of individual encounter with God on what he claims to be a universal non-gendered experience of conscience.

The pathway from vague sense of God as the Person to whom conscience owes its obligations to the personal God with whom we can have true encounter is one Newman roots in education and personal fidelity. This may seem problematic when looked at in terms of the experience of wo/men in his own time and even now across the world, for whom theological education has not been accessible in the way it has been for men. Specifically for Newman's own context, we see even his most educated female correspondents limited to tuition by governesses rather than in schools, and excluded from university (even though boarding and day schools were being set up for women in the later 1800s, and by 1890 women were going up to Oxford and Cambridge).¹⁶ Although he encourages them in their faithful study, he is troubled by attempts to compare or even understand complex arguments or theological treatises. While on the one hand there is a practical issue here – these wo/men have not had the education to allow them to access such learning – we cannot but feel that Newman cares little about amending this (he shows no interest in admitting female students to his school or university, and in his limited

¹⁶ Sugg 1996, 158.

comments on women's education he retains some suspicions),¹⁷ though his willingness to engage at least in some dialogue over the issues may be more promising.

One clear example of this type of correspondence is LD XV to Elizabeth Bowden:

As far as I know your course, you have almost grown of yourself into what you are – in the course of many months, first by the example of myself and others, next by your own judgement in the present state of things, further by the general impression made on you by history, and not least, by your knowledge of the general tendencies of dear John. Here is the legitimate way in which you are called to use your reason. God will bless you in such calm spontaneous use of it – But as to your being driven about hither and thither, by opposite disputants, I cannot bear to think of it. It is meant kindly, but for me, I am not capable of stunning you with arguments, or stifling you with folios, or subduing you by an urgent tone or a confident manner. (LD XV, 397)

While Newman's tone may seem patronizing to the modern reader, it is not without kindness. Sugg argues, with respect to the letter:

Newman was making a practical point here: how could women, even intelligent women like Elizabeth Bowden, without technical training at university level in evaluating evidence, be expected to wade through great volumes and in any case, was not her time properly spent in supervising her household and looking after her delicate children?¹⁸

On the one hand, this may be overgenerous, not least bearing in mind Newman's use of the word 'legitimate' to describe Bowden's reason. On the other, it is worth considering that we see here similar ideas to those we will see for Mary, a claim for the value of innate tendencies and the influence of factors other than education to encourage theological development in wo/men. While we may grow frustrated by the implication that 'arguments', 'folios', 'tone', or 'manner' would be unfair to inflict upon a wo/man, the aspects of knowing God that begin with reason are nonetheless there, and have been contributed to by example of others (perhaps mainly – though not stated to be exclusively – men, including Newman and her husband) and her personal judgement. Her 'growth' is also attributed to herself, again implying the development of rational faith apart from a requirement for active male control. The argument is similar to that developed fully in *The Grammar of Assent*, that 'we cannot prove religious truth as we would prove

¹⁷ Sugg 1996, 211 Newman wrote in 1884 to Catherine Bathurst, who had set up her girls' school at Harrow, 'I cannot but be anxious about the issues of this tip top education of girls. Of course, as you are used to say, that high education excludes a number of evils, which else abound, but we may find ourselves out of the frying pan into the fire.'

¹⁸ Sugg 1996, 58.

mathematical theory, but probabilities accumulate to make revealed religion worthy of our credence'.¹⁹

Newman undoubtedly has ambiguity about the intellectual development of wo/men in this regard. We see a similar set of issues in his response to Mrs Helbert, who also encounters difficulties with the books she had been reading, presumably for similar reasons to Mrs Bowden. He writes in LD XXIV, 337-38, 'You must recollect **you have chosen a man's part** – you have chosen to go by antiquity, by the Fathers, by history, and to ask answers to questions arising thence.' However, it is reassuring that Newman does not recommend she set aside her studies, even though she sees them as befitting a man.

However, when we turn our attention to Mary as model for discipleship and indeed to Mary as theologian, we are presented with a reassuring concept of what such education and personal fidelity might look like. Naturally, there is no case for a claim that Mary received any formal education any more than other poor wo/men in her own time. Therefore, what we may understand as education must be much more far-reaching than merely the study of academic theology within a traditional (and traditionally men-only or at least men-orientated) institutional context. While Newman's own particular interest in education, as demonstrated in his work on the University and on The Oratory School, clearly does manifest in part in the creation of educational institutions according to particular pedagogical agendas, there is a wider sense of what it means to be educated in order to encounter God that must take priority here. Indeed, given that so many aspects of his proposed educational reforms (at Oxford as a tutor and then in creating his own institutions) root good education in the development of the person, we can easily see how even the values from these formal venues for education might easily transfer in other forms to an education within the wider world, including one available to wo/men. Furthermore, and as something of an aside, given Newman's claims for implicit reasoning beginning in the mind of believers, in such a way as does not limit it to men, there is a good case to be made that his educational institutions should never have been able to justify their exclusion of women (a realization only just dawning on The Oratory School as it opened its doors to its first fully co-educational cohorts in 2020).

The roots of education may lie in the individual's capacity to develop from conscience via implicit reason, and it is to this that Newman attributes the right development of doctrine, again

¹⁹ Sugg 1996, 58.

questioning the claim that formal dogma can only be developed by male clerics. In *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, Newman writes:

‘Development is the fruit, neither of a wishing and resolving, nor of a forced enthusiasm, nor of any rational mechanism, nor of any subtlety of intellect; it proceeds from an innate power of expansion within the mind in its season, though making use, more or less according to circumstances, of reflection, argument and original thought, with a dependence on the ethical growth of the mind.’ (Dev. D, 73-74)

He goes on to claim that ‘the greatest men [*sic*] of learning owe their eminence to a special kind of instinctive judgement, in this case, theological judgement’; while he situates this in part in their being steeped profoundly in theology’s universe of ideas, there is little to justify the historical exclusion of wo/men from this ability or, indeed, this world.

Undoubtedly, the claim that wo/men, traditionally without access to this world, are nonetheless able to undertake the same pathways of education from conscience to personal knowledge of God on the same level as men steeped in formal theological learning does encounter hurdles in terms of Newman’s understanding of divine revelation as verbal revelation. As Walgrave would have it:

‘Nowhere...does Newman represent the intuition of faith as a contact with supernatural realities, independent of verbal revelation. It is arrived at by degrees through Revelation as manifested in Scripture, the Creeds and the liturgy.’²⁰

However, in Mary we might raise a contradiction to this claim, for her experience of Revelation comes directly from Jesus. While one might respond with the observation that Jesus is the Word incarnate, and therefore covered by the same umbrella as the ‘Scripture, ...Creeds, and ...liturgy’ to which Walgrave refers, much feminist theology would argue against the impossibility of knowing Jesus as the Word made flesh beyond these narrow confines of what we mean by verbal revelation. Furthermore, it seems strange to distinguish between Newman’s claims for the place of conscience as an encounter with God, even as the most vague experience of revelation, and his supposed exclusion of ‘contact with supernatural realities’. Indeed, it does not seem a particularly big step to reinterpret the concept of conscience as the inner working of the Holy Spirit within human beings. Boyce implies as much when he writes,

²⁰ Walgrave 1960, 135.

‘[Newman] invokes the Holy Spirit who is present in the souls of the just to be the consolation and strength of those who labour to mould their hearts after the pattern of holiness of the Heavenly Father.’²¹

For Newman, the negative influence of reason divorced from conscience within the development of religious thought was a key factor in his acceptance of the need for an infallible authority, that is to say, for a Roman Catholic, the Magisterium. Although in places he clearly puts considerable value on the faith of the masses and their instinct for divine discernments, elsewhere he mistrusts this as a source of superstition from which the faithful must be saved by the Church’s vigilance and intervention.²² Here we meet a stumbling block in feminist thought: the Magisterium, as an all-male priestly authority, is highly problematic as an ultimate authority for wo/men. However, to return to Mary as our supreme disciple and theologian, we recognize that her infallible authority can, of course, never have been the Magisterium, but must rather have been Jesus himself; her own theological development, as Newman himself describes, was undertaken through a life lived alongside and closely shared with God her son. Of course, one view of the Magisterium and the Roman Catholic male priestly caste might be that they are the closest the Christian disciple can come to an encounter with Christ, the ultimate form of earthly theological mediation, but it is not only Protestants but indeed many Catholics who would reject this view in favour of a personal encounter with Christ through the Holy Spirit. In this sense, it is possible to reject Newman’s requirement for the Magisterium in favour of a modelling of discipleship based on Mary, yet true not only to Newman’s account of her as theologian, but also to his claims for conscience, by which all people have the inner capacity to begin an encounter with God.

We might also here want to remind ourselves of the development of faith and understanding from the starting point of conscience through human experience, another element in which Mary models a mode of theology accessible to all, especially wo/men. As Walgrave summarizes, ‘To study and describe in close detail the general structure of human experience is, for [Newman], to lend an obedient ear to the creative word of God.’²³ Indeed, natural implicit reasoning is, for Newman the most noble form, resting upon what he refers to as ‘illative sense’.²⁴ The universality of this fits with Newman’s (at the time controversially-received) views of the capacity

²¹ Boyce 1979, 48.

²² Walgrave 1960, 191.

²³ Walgrave 1960, 91.

²⁴ Walgrave 1960, 99.

and task of the laity for the study of faith, as expressed in *On Consulting the Faithful*. Within the context of Roman Catholicism in particular, and the exclusion of women from the priesthood, this is naturally essential for the valuing of wo/men and their experience of God. Newman rejects the idea that the laity should be content with ‘that “implicit faith” which leads to indifference in the educated and to superstition in the simple’.²⁵ While Newman demonstrates the validity of personal spontaneous faith in the *Grammar of Assent*, he shows in *Mary* how such a faith might ideally be developed.

²⁵ Walgrave 1960, 58.

Chapter 2: Mary as Theologian

In his 15th Oxford University Sermon Newman sets out his interpretation of Mary as our model for doing theology, in a way that both authorizes the process for the laity and proposes Mary as model for the Doctors of the Church. The theme to which he returns is that of pondering; asking questions for understanding the will of God, and keeping and turning over the answers within her heart. He stresses that acquiescence is insufficient, even wonder is insufficient. It is this process of listening and pondering that provides the faith by which, according to Newman, Mary anticipates the first miracle at Cana.

But Mary's faith **did not end in a mere acquiescence** in Divine providences and revelations: as the text informs us, **she "pondered" them**. When the shepherds came, and told of the vision of Angels which they had seen at the time of the Nativity, and how one of them announced that the Infant in her arms was "the Saviour, which is Christ the Lord," while **others did but wonder**, "Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." Again, when her Son and Saviour had come to the age of twelve years, and had left her for awhile for His Father's service, and had been found, to her surprise, in the Temple, amid the doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions, and had, on her addressing Him, vouchsafed to justify His conduct, we are told, "His mother kept all these sayings in her heart." And accordingly, at the marriage-feast in Cana, **her faith anticipated His first miracle**, and she said to the servants, "Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it." (OUS 15.2)

This interpretation not only offers a foundation for the nature of faith that leads Mary to trust her son and to see him for who he is, before any other disciple, but also understands the central message of the Cana story not to rest in Mary's disobedience when Jesus appears to rebuke her, but rather interprets her working with him in the narrative of his mission: her role is one of trust but it is not passive; it is responsive but also initiates the actions that precipitate the first miracle. She works with Jesus, not against him.

Newman combines these roles of listening, pondering, and working with God in his interpretation:

“Thus St. Mary is our pattern of Faith, both in the reception and in the study of Divine Truth. **She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it; not enough to**

possess, she uses it; not enough to assent, she develops it; not enough to submit to Reason, she reasons upon it;’. (OUS 15.3)

Furthermore, Newman identifies this as a model for all disciples, lay and cleric alike. Indeed, in his contrast between Mary and Zechariah – Mary believing before she reasons, Zechariah struck dumb for doing the opposite – Gregoris proposes we should read a contrast between the ‘learned priests’ and the ‘common folk’.²⁶

‘not indeed reasoning first, and believing afterwards, **with Zacharias**, yet first believing without reasoning, next from love and reverence, reasoning after believing.’ (OUS 15.3)

By implicitly prioritizing Mary’s methods over Zechariah’s, we may read a justification for the methodology preferred in much feminist theology, in which experience is given an important place. Furthermore, in Newman’s own time with wo/men’s inferior education (and still wo/men’s experience worldwide today), wo/men’s ability to do theology is here not only ratified but even prioritized. Newman does not separate it from a preferable ‘masculine’ theology, either, but rather proposes that Mary’s way is the way in which not only all disciples should learn to know God but also that the doctors of the Church have done historically:

‘And thus **she symbolizes to us, not only the faith of the unlearned, but of the doctors of the Church also, who have to investigate, and weigh, and define, as well as to profess the Gospel**; to draw the line between truth and heresy; to anticipate or remedy the various aberrations of wrong reason; to combat pride and recklessness with their own arms; and thus to triumph over the sophist and the innovator.’ (OUS 15.3)

Such a claim calls into question the exclusivity of doctors of the Church against wo/men (no wo/men were proclaimed doctors of the Church until 1970 and they remain only four out of 36) and, furthermore, questions the validity of the authority residing in the Magisterium, embodied by male bishops. For further consideration is Newman’s implicit identification of Mary as the first exegete, enacting exegesis ‘of those mysteries which are later reflected upon and described by the inspired authors of the New Testament’.²⁷

However, in spite of this interpretation of Mary as theologian, we cannot avoid the wider context and one of the most problematic elements of Newman’s thinking about wo/men: his support for their subordination to men, as men are subordinate to God. Although a good deal of

²⁶ Gregoris 2003, 179.

²⁷ Gregoris 2003, 179.

emphasis has been placed on Newman's many women friends, and his lifetime of correspondence with them, it is questionable to what extent we see, in practice, the applicability of the Marian model to them or any sense that they are not lesser to men. Few of these wo/men are able to do many things with their lives beyond the domestic sphere, their education more limited than that of men (though many wrote religious novels and biographies, for example, or translated from French or Italian²⁸). Nevertheless, we can acknowledge that Newman puts considerable emphasis on their ability to develop in their faith and to educate themselves in this regard, especially in the face of growing rationalism denying the existence of God.²⁹ We might see this as a seed of growing acceptance of a future context in which wo/men may fulfil the discipleship role Mary offers, not least if we accept Sugg's argument that '[Newman] observed with satisfaction, in his old age, that the century had brought about one excellent thing, the greater use of women's talents by opening up the range of employments to them' (see LD XXX 316).³⁰

Newman's arguments concerning the hierarchy of men and wo/men hinge upon his interpretations of Galatians 4:4-5 and Genesis 3:15, related in turn to other passages of the New Testament such as 1 Peter 2:7 and 1 Timothy 2:15.³¹ A thorough account of his interpretations appears in PPS 2, drawing again on a gendered mythology typology of Eve, in parallel with Mary:

"But when Christ came as the seed of the woman, He vindicated the rights and honour of His mother. Not that the distinction of ranks is destroyed under the Gospel; **the woman is still made inferior to man, as he to Christ; but the slavery is done away with.** Saint Peter bids the husband "give honour unto the wife, *because* the weaker, in that both are heirs of the grace of life." And Saint Paul, while enjoining subjection upon her, speaks of the especial blessedness vouchsafed her in being the appointed entrance of the Saviour into the world. "Adam was first formed, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived but the woman being deceived was in the transgression." But "notwithstanding, she shall be saved through the child-bearing;" that is, through the birth of Christ from Mary, which was a blessing, as upon all mankind, so peculiarly upon the woman. Accordingly, from that time, marriage has not only been restored to its original dignity, but even gifted with a spiritual privilege, as the outward symbol of the heavenly union subsisting betwixt Christ and His Church. Thus has the Blessed Virgin, in bearing Our Lord, **taken off or**

²⁸ Sugg 2020.

²⁹ Sugg 1996 Preface by Meriol Trevor.

³⁰ Sugg 2020; Sugg 1996, 158.

³¹ Gregoris 2003, 116–17.

lightened the peculiar disgrace which the woman inherited for seducing Adam,
sanctifying the one part of it, repealing the other.” (PPS 2.130f)

Newman connects the incarnation with Jesus’ reversal of a situation for wo/men that Newman – perhaps bearing in mind particularly the social status of wo/men in the 1st Century – equates with slavery. Jesus’ birth from a wo/man vindicates wo/man’s ‘rights and honour’, with Newman specifically interpreting ‘saved through child-bearing’ (1 Tim 2:15) to refer to Mary’s bearing of the Christ-child, rather than the wider biological function of persons with wombs.³² This ‘blessing’ acts as a recapitulation of the curse Newman believes Eve to have brought upon wo/men, with Mary ‘taking off’ or, at least, ‘lightening’ the ‘peculiar disgrace which the woman inherited for seducing Adam’.

On a positive note, if one may be heard, Newman recognizes that this restoration of wo/men does protect them from negative consequences of their earlier status, for example of the treatment of wo/men in Jesus’ age and subsequently as a result of polygamy and divorce (both of which, he also notes, were negative for men). It may be worth noting that, overall, although he is respectful of it, Newman does not always hold a very positive view of marriage, at least among the clergy (specifically in the early days of the Oxford Movement, when he felt that the marriages of his colleagues reduced their ability to be true soldiers in the fight, just as later they would preclude some of them from becoming Roman Catholic priests):³³ he must, therefore, see it as exclusively – in its restored form – a state of being appropriate for those who would never be priests, perhaps increasing the likelihood that it was wo/men, in particular, whom he felt benefitted from the better forms of marriage he believed were precipitated by Mary. However, the passage overall is undoubtedly a blow for any feminist reader trying to salvage a positive view of wo/men from Newman’s work.

The issues are two-fold. Firstly, the legacy of the myth of Eve in perpetuating misogyny is unavoidable, and even Newman suggests that this ‘disgrace’ has only been ‘lightened’ by Mary’s actions. Secondly, the improved status which Newman claims the incarnation has won for wo/men is hardly one that many feminists would accept as tolerable. While Gregoris claims:

‘Newman admits of a true Christian feminism which, while respecting the order of creation wherein man and woman are equal but different, still he insists on the subordination of the female to the male insofar as authority is concerned’,³⁴

³² Boyce 2001, 71.

³³ Sugg 2020.

³⁴ Gregoris 2003, 118.

a world order in which the patriarchy holds sway, and marriage is held up as the ultimate space in which wo/men can now find their place, contributes to the patterns of control and the limiting of wo/men that have been complicit in oppressing wo/men throughout history. Indeed, the tone and content are reminiscent of the *Mulieris Dignitatem*, another document which claims to honour and recognize the equality of wo/men, while also circumscribing their place in the world to the domestic and confining them to the role of child-bearers and carers. While Boyce, examining Newman's claims for the restoration of the original dignity of marriage, maintains that:

‘If Newman were alive today he would surely enlarge on this passage of the inspired text in order to shed light on the contemporary discussion on women's rights which is being brought to extremes by certain feminist groups.’,

it seems unlikely that he is suggesting Newman would be on the side of their so-called ‘extreme’ views (and, indeed, those underlying this essay!).³⁵

Most concerning remains the emphasis on obedience. While elsewhere we might be able to limit our understanding of when obedience is called for only to the relationship between disciple and Christ, the hierarchy that Newman identifies, in which man is to wo/man as Christ is to man makes this harder to justify. Indeed, Gregoris goes on:

‘Obedience and love in the male-female relationship do not contradict one another, but are, in the Christian economy, virtues renewed and elevated by Our Lord's redeeming sacrifice – **integral to the bringing about of a new creation.**’³⁶

What we can perhaps most promisingly build upon in Gregoris' interpretation is the idea that restoration of wo/men is ‘integral to the bringing about of a new creation’: in this ‘new creation’ beginning from the incarnation we can see hope for the equality of genders, albeit Newman does not reach the ultimate point in this in his thinking.

While his claims that as a result of Mary wo/man's slavery and submission are done away with, and wo/man's honour is restored, may be seen as a positive step towards the restoration of wo/men, his overall perspective on wo/men's place is clearly intolerable, at least when treated in isolation from the rest of his arguments about the human relationship with and knowledge of God.

³⁵ Boyce 2001, 19–20.

³⁶ Gregoris 2003, 118.

To return to the specific presentation of Mary as theologian, and its redeeming qualities for wo/men, over and above the limitations Newman places on wo/men in general, the binary he sees regarding gender continues to play into the argument both ways. That is to say we are at risk of proposing that there is something unique about wo/men doing theology by stressing the role of Mary's gender in her mode of encountering and obeying God described here. Indeed, it is essential not to undermine the many strides made by wo/men to be taken seriously within the academic sphere. What is preferable is to stress that what Newman sees as the essential root of knowing God is faith. It is this, to which reason must submit and minister, that raised up 'fishermen' and 'peasants', to 'philosophers and divines' (OUS 15.6). However, from this starting point Newman does not eliminate reason and knowledge from Mary's process. Indeed, Mary's wisdom is a central interest to Newman. Once again, however, we encounter the potential problem that prevents Mary from being a model for other wo/men, for wo/men in the real world: the source of her wisdom may be, for Newman, unique, for it stems from her position as *Sedes Sapientiae*, her closeness to her Son and her opportunity to learn first-hand from the Divine *Sophia* Incarnate:

'For if such close and continued intimacy with her Son created in her a sanctity inconceivably great, must not also the knowledge which she gained during those many years from His conversation of present, past, and future, have been so large, and so profound, and so diversified, and so thorough, that, though she was a poor woman without human advantages, she must in her knowledge of creation, of the universe, and of history, have excelled the greatest of philosophers, and in her theological knowledge the greatest of theologians, and in her prophetic discernment the most favoured of prophets?' (MD 34)

If we take it as self-evident that we can preclude some form of secret *gnosis* being proposed here by Newman, we are left asking what he understands to have brought about this level of enlightenment. Indeed, the question seems crucial if we are to prove that such discipleship is not unique to Mary, or to transform her into yet another unachievable ideal, another myth with which to beat wo/men for falling short. Gregoris interprets Newman's account as identifying some sort of 'quasi-prevenient grace' in Mary. Indeed, such an excessive speculation comes across in Newman's own words, when he claims that:

'All that is obscure, all that is fragmentary in revelation, would, so far as the knowledge is possible to man, be brought out to her in clearness and simplicity by Him' (MD 34).

However, if we reject this hyperbole for what it is, we are left with a model of Mary as theologian that may yet be beneficial to the feminist reader. Indeed, what we are called to is ‘close and continued intimacy with her Son’ which allows access to an understanding of the divine, in terms of ‘creation...the universe, and...history.’ The boundary between lived experience of the faithful Christian and the academic study of the theologian is being broken down, and a call to intersectionality and liberationist thinking is propounded.

Nevertheless, we have still seen in these quotations from *MD* 34 a tendency towards Mary as receptive to reason rather than herself reasoning, unlike the above quoted *OUS* 15.3. There is a danger, therefore, of perpetuating the dualism of thinking/feeling or idea/intuition that comes into being when, as here, the feminine is only capable of passive receptivity in the face of masculine sovereignty.³⁷ This extends beyond gender specifically, wo/men below men, to the submission of laity to clergy and underprivileged to privileged.

³⁷ Ruether 1993, 139, 147.

Chapter 3: Mary as Preacher

Having demonstrated how Mary models thinking, theologizing, and use of reason, we can develop this argument into how she applies this, and more, in the act of preaching and ministry, and models these aspects of discipleship. Newman identifies this behaviour as preaching, and uses it to justify her exaltation in the high Marian tradition.

‘It would not have sufficed, in order to bring out and impress on us the idea that God is man, had His Mother been an ordinary person. A mother without a home in the Church, without dignity, without gifts, would have been, as far as the defence of the Incarnation goes, no mother at all. **She would not have remained in the memory, or the imagination of men. If she is to witness and remind the world that God became man, she must be on a high and eminent station for the purpose. She must be made to fill the mind, in order to suggest the lesson. When she once attracts our attention, then, and not till then, she begins to preach Jesus.** "Why should she have such prerogatives," we ask, "unless He be God? and what must He be by nature, when she is so high by grace?" This is why she has other prerogatives besides, namely, the gifts of personal purity and intercessory power, distinct from her maternity; **she is personally endowed that she may perform her office well; she is exalted in herself that she may minister to Christ.**’ (DMC 350)

The identification of Mary as preacher is an important one, but the nature of her status is not unproblematic. Newman makes the specific claim: ‘If she is to witness and remind the world that God became man, she must be on a high and eminent station for the purpose.’ That Mary is a the first preacher of Jesus as God is a valid and powerful observation, yet her exclusivity/uniqueness as a wo/man is only heightened by her singular elevation. It would be easy to read into what is implied here: Mary may be a wo/man but she has been raised to a status above that usually permitted to her gender in order to allow her to inhabit a role usually permitted only to men. Whereas men have the right, accorded them by their gender, to be ordained (and indeed to be apostles and to be doctors of the Church) and therefore to preach God incarnate, wo/men other than Mary cannot be permitted the status of preacher.

However, there is a second important message here: Mary preaches Jesus in spite of her gender, in spite of her status as a human wo/man, and it is because of this that she is elevated, in order that her preaching may be heard. If we understand her elevation to be as a result of her role as

preacher, and not in order to permit her to preach, we have a very different message: wo/men who witness to God in the manner of Mary are preaching and should be given the position to allow that preaching to be heard. Mary prototypically fulfils the call issued by Newman's contemporary Anna Julia Cooper in 1892: 'Women...daring to think and move and speak – to undertake to help shape, mold and direct the thought of her age, is merely completing the circle of the world's vision.'³⁸ Indeed, there is a prophetic ring to Newman's words: 'She would not have remained in the memory, or the imagination of men.' Truly, wo/men have not remained in the memory or imagination of the patriarchy, and furthermore only by the transformation of Mary by men into the myth we see in the Church today – the one 'made to fill the mind' – has she been allowed to access these spaces. The real Mary of history might well have not been allowed to inhabit them. However, by latching on to Mary as the embodiment of the ideal preacher we have a story that can have meaning to men and wo/men approaching discipleship.

And even if wo/men disciples are excluded from the structures of the Church and the strongholds of the academy, they are *still* preaching every time they, like Mary, live lives of holiness that give 'a resounding lesson...of the abiding presence of ... [the] Word [of God] in our midst'.³⁹ Not all wo/men may be able to bear God in a womb, nor may they all fit with the model of faithful female discipleship that Newman outlines, but they can share in the preaching that Mary undertook. We might add to this that wo/men do also share in the birthing of Christ in all traditions where they are allowed not only to preach but also to preside at the Eucharist, in which the body of Christ is again born to the people in the real presence in the bread and wine.

To understand Mary as not simply unique among wo/men, and therefore unattainable as a model of discipleship, it seems necessary to look not to Mary as mythological queen but as creature of God, as we all are.

It is well documented that the devotions paid to Mary and the Saints were a great sticking point for Newman in his conversion to Roman Catholicism. We see, therefore, an unsurprising shift from his views propounded as an Anglican to those as a Catholic, much as there are strong consistent traits across his lifetime, in spite of his later editing of Anglican works to fit with his altered views.⁴⁰

One that remains important, though its emphasis shifts, is Mary's creatureliness, and the importance of no devotion to her standing in the way of worship of God or the relationship of

³⁸ Cooper 1892.

³⁹ Gregoris 2003, 142.

⁴⁰ Dessain 1971, 96.

soul to Creator.⁴¹ Notwithstanding this, his tendency to elevate Mary increasingly above other creatures may be noted over his lifetime, in a way that has the potential to alienate Mary as a disciple with whom Christians can aspire to walk. We see this explicitly in some of the edits Newman made, for example to *PS* 4 247:

“His Blessed Mother, indeed, came closer still to Him; and we, if we be but true believers, still closer, who have him spiritually within us; but this is another, an inward sort of approach”

which he amended to

“His Blessed Mother, indeed, came closer still to Him; but this is another, an inward sort of approach”.

The omission of the possibility that other Christians might come as close as, or indeed closer, to Christ than Mary raises her to a pedestal which may have seemed only right to Newman, but which is certainly remote for many readers seeking to emulate her.

Nevertheless, we see Newman claim otherwise in his emphasis upon her creatureliness, which he felt her exaltation did not preclude; rather, he expresses that he finds evidence of the fervent devotion to her ‘not interfering with that incommunicable and awful relation which exists between the creature and the Creator’ (*Dev. D*, 434), affirming the idea that in Mary Christians may yet see the supreme example of that relation, not singled out for her alone.

If we start therefore on the affinity of all disciples to Mary through their shared creatureliness, we see a more positive version of Mary as a human wo/man who had a unique place in the economy of salvation because ‘she actively and personally corresponded with God’s grace’.⁴² While Newman’s promotion of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (even before it was confirmed as the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church) does imply that Mary was pre-ordained as the chosen instrument of God from her conception, he nevertheless also places emphasis on the importance of her active role in the Incarnation. As Boyce summarizes,

‘At the moment of her own conception she was passive in God’s creative hands, but at the moment of the Annunciation, when she became the Mother of God and of divine mercy, she was not simply a passive and physical instrument, but a living, responsible and

⁴¹ Dessain 1971, 79.

⁴² Boyce 2001, 66.

intelligent cause of God taking flesh within her. Had she not willingly made the act of obedience and faith, she would not have become the Mother of God.⁴³

Newman's language when he compares Mary to Eve stresses this active participation, when he calls Mary 'a cause of salvation to all', argues that she 'made room for our Lord's reparation [of Adam's fall]', and stresses that she 'cooperated in effecting a much greater good [than the great evil in which Eve cooperated]' (Diff II, 36).

While it may be hard to isolate this from the repeated emphasis on the Immaculate Conception, Newman seems to want to walk a dual path, in which Mary is chosen before birth and yet must willingly participate for the birth of Jesus to be possible. In its most negative interpretations, the Immaculate Conception is a doctrine that annihilates Mary, as Mary Daly argues, with power taken away from her life from before her birth, by divine decree.⁴⁴

Daly, and other feminist theologians subsequently, see accepting the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as evidential of Jesus' conception as an act of divine rape. If she has been stripped of free-will by means of an pre-natal stripping of her capacity to sin, then her *fiat* becomes not her own, but God's, and is such no consent at all. In Daly's (somewhat extreme) rendering: 'as a consequence of her initial rape ("grace"), Mary has been totaled, made totally unable to resist divine aggression/lust/rape'.⁴⁵ While the Catholic Catechism and supporters of the doctrine of immaculate conception argue that God's grace is necessary for Mary's full assent, predicated on an understanding of the angel's address to her as 'full of grace' (κεχαριτωμένη, Luke 1:28), as a perfect participle and therefore referring to a past action, at least some such justifications seem to be founded within a concept of the spousal relationship between God and Mary, by means of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶ While one might argue for a divine marriage as unfettered by the sinful limitations of a mortal marriage, that is to say marriage in its perfected state, the analogy is still uncomfortable when contextualized within full knowledge of spousal coercion and rape within marriage, not to mention the underlying gendered assumptions, in which marriage remains confined by the supposed complementarity of God *qua* male and Mary *qua* female, for reproductive purposes.⁴⁷

How Newman resolves the tension between Mary's inability to refuse God and her personal ability to consent is unclear. Perhaps it is enough to recognize that Mary's consent is a willing act

⁴³ Boyce 2001, 66.

⁴⁴ Daly 1995, 85.

⁴⁵ Daly 1984, 104.

⁴⁶ Mulder Jr. 2018.

⁴⁷ See further Higton 2016, 20–23.

on her part, in Newman's eyes, and that he wholly rejects her depiction as a passive instrument. Such a free act of faith is essential not only to Mary's own place in the divine economy, but for all human responsiveness to God. Without it, there is no concept of co-creatorship between God and humanity, but rather an underlying coerciveness. Only through Mary's free act of faith does faith 'cease to be a heteronomous submission to external authorities and become a free act.'⁴⁸

One striking point, within Mary's relationship to Eve, is that Newman describes Mary as 'a child of Adam and Eve as if they had never fallen' (*Meditations on the Litany of Loreto*, May 3). This might potentially present a logical inconsistency in the concept of Original Sin that is beneficial to interpreting Mary's own capacity for sin. If to be born by immaculate conception, without inherited sinfulness (setting aside for now the problem of that doctrine in and of itself), is to be as Adam and Eve were before the eating of the apple, then it doesn't strictly eliminate the capacity to disobey God. How else could Eve have acted as she purportedly did? If Mary is indeed a second Eve, then she is faced with the same choice in the moment of the Annunciation: her state of Grace has not, it seems, eliminated her free will at all, but rather filled her with the capacity to offer a full assent to God.

While Mary's empowered reply to God at the Annunciation is undoubtedly a positive reading for feminists, there remains the criticism of Mary as cooperator, not operator. Daly, unsurprisingly picks up on this in particular, in her critique of the 'fallacious process of spinning a "theology of woman" out of Marian doctrine'.⁴⁹ As mentioned, the issue arises when the gendered analogy of wo/men to Mary and men to Christ is perpetuated. If Christ is the operator, Mary is merely the cooperator, and so it must be with men and wo/men, with cooperation in this instance closely aligned with receptivity.⁵⁰ Although this dissertation is arguing for an interpretation of Mary as model disciple, and proposing that to see a wo/man in this role not only promotes the dignity of wo/men but also offers a wo/man who acts as role model to both men and wo/men alike, the issues raised by the Annunciation – and to what extent Mary did indeed even cooperate – and the Immaculate Conception provide no small hurdle, not least since, although the former is positively treated by Newman, the latter largely is not.

Newman identifies Mary as preacher, but in his treatment of her, we might go one step further than he would have allowed, and recognize within her a priestly function. If we understand the

⁴⁸ Ruether 1993, 153.

⁴⁹ Daly 2002, 162.

⁵⁰ Daly 2002, 162.

role of the priest as, in part, to mediate between heaven and earth, then Mary does this beyond any other, in the Annunciation and beyond. As *Mediatrix*, identified by Newman, for example in the power of her intercession at Cana (*The Power of Our Lady's Prayer*, see Boyce 2001, 266) and perpetually in heaven (ibid. 267), she fulfils the role to the greatest possible extent, yet as *theotokos* she also enacts the same incarnation that the priest effects in the Eucharist, when bread becomes Body (understanding the Eucharist as both an Incarnation and Crucifixion event). Given that we are dealing with typologies in how we approach Mary, there is scope for exploring this claim.⁵¹ The importance of Mary as intercessor, *theotokos*, and wo/man become fully realized in our understanding of her embodied discipleship.

⁵¹ O'Donnell 2019, 94–108.

Chapter 4: Mary as Wo/man

One of the potential limitations of the argument in this dissertation has undoubtedly been the binary nature of gender within Newman's thinking, however much he may recognize 'feminine' aspects to male discipleship, and vice versa. There is a risk that this drags us back to an anachronistic feminism,⁵² embedded in the second wave desire to theorize sexual difference, in which a narrow stereotype of 'woman', along strictly binary lines, is maintained. This line of thinking risks obfuscating the differences between wo/men and predicates gender on a biologicistic concept of 'sex', in order to separate male from female, masculine from feminine, and in order not to see the elevation of the wo/man as achievable only by means of her adopting traits that were, in Newman's thinking, 'masculine'.

In this final chapter, therefore, I shall endeavour to demonstrate that a critique of Newman's narrow definition of gender is essential for the validity of a feminist interpretation of his Marian theology. If we recognize the character traits of discipleship not in terms of 'masculine' or 'feminine', but as gender-fluid in nature, we may uncover a Mary who is open to all. In doing so, I shall endeavour to challenge the dangerous binary that has occurred across catholic traditions, in which Mary is elevated to idealized queen and mother for male disciples, while modelling idealized virginity and motherhood for wo/men. This moves hand in hand with a masculine-centred Christology, and the two have effects on the lived experience of Christians world-wide, by means of 'a complex of social relations specifically defining femininity [and masculinity] and organizing, in and across actual local sites of people's lives, the homogeny of gender difference.'⁵³

Newman is working within the 'pre-constructed frame of meaning' identified by Schüssler Fiorenza, wherein 'the assumption of "natural" sex/gender differences informs...everyday experience and turns it into "common-sense" knowledge that makes gender difference appear to be "commonplace" and "G*d-given.'⁵⁴ This frame of meaning obscures the fact that such a dualism is a sociocultural construct for maintaining what Schüssler Fiorenza refers to as 'kyriarchal domination'. It resides neither in biology nor an innate essence, both of which are assumed by Newman in his essentialist understanding of gender.

Whether Newman's Mary conforms to or 'surpasses' his essentialist idea of woman, that essentialism is fundamentally problematic. It becomes most evident when Mary – and woman-as-type – is reduced to her child-bearing function, and her identity is superseded by a single

⁵² Cf. Keller 1997, Loc 774.

⁵³ Smith 1993, 160.

⁵⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 35.

interpretation of her body. While embodiment is important, and it is in an embodied state, first and foremost, that Mary fulfils the roles of theologian and preacher, predicated an understanding of gender upon binary concepts of women's bodies is both fallacious and potentially damaging.⁵⁵

That said, however, Newman understands Mary first to conceive in faith, and then in body, and by this understanding there is more to her *fiat* than mere confirmation of either a child in her uterus or her acceptance of the birthing and nursing of a baby. We have already observed that, in spite of the issues posed by the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, on this point, Newman does believe Mary to have free-will to consent, and indeed sees her as a cooperator on whom God depends for the accomplishment of the Incarnation.⁵⁶ Her ministry is not only in physical motherhood, the provision of a womb, but in a life of virtue lived out as *theotokos*, a reminder that the generativity of the embodied disciple is not confined to physical reproduction.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, of course, the association between the feminine and motherhood does not stop at biological motherhood, but defines wider aspects of how wo/men are supposed to behave. The very fact of Mary being a co-operator in the face of a traditionally masculinized divine operator reflects this. It is this which leads to wo/men being presumed care-givers, being held up to standards of altruism and self-sacrifice beyond those of men, and becoming self-effacing.⁵⁸

However, in the preceding chapters we have seen at least some aspects of a Mary who is more than these things, and indeed adopts so-called 'masculine' characteristics of power, independent action, and voice. With a Jesus who demonstrates 'feminine' self-sacrifice, care for others, and selfless love, we see gender stereotypes challenged and new models offered for discipleship.

Simultaneously, however, Newman poses further challenges to how Mary's *fiat* may truly be seen as retaining the rights and dignity of wo/men. He sees in the *fiat* a vow that Mary will 'know not a man', her question to the angel not one of biology but of whether she will be breaking her vow of chastity by accepting this pregnancy. Furthermore, this virtue of 'purity', so often held up as a rod to shame wo/men's sexuality, recurs for Newman as one of Mary's most praiseworthy characteristics, and indeed a prerequisite of divine maternity.

In FP 89, Newman writes, 'so that if she had not had faith, and humility, and purity, and obedience, she would not have merited to be God's mother'. On the one hand, humility and

⁵⁵ Cornwell 2016, 110.

⁵⁶ Gregoris 2003, 93.

⁵⁷ Cornwell 2016, 115.

⁵⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 38.

obedience are both problematic in the question of consent: in the case of disempowerment by the patriarchy, requiring wo/men's humility and obedience, can we truly understand Mary to have the option of refusal (noting that the possibility of marital rape wasn't acknowledged until decades after Newman's time), without which consent is impossible? On the other, however, we might equally acknowledge these values as essential to Newman's concept of priesthood, which he believed should be celibate, as his own was, and therefore not necessarily gendered, but rather as a marker of a higher discipleship, at least within the framework of Newman's thinking.

Nevertheless, the emphasis Newman places on the Virgin Birth and Mary's Perpetual Virginity makes for a challenge to feminists seeking to accept his teachings about Mary. Coupled with the emphasis on Mary's motherhood, these provide a conflicting and unattainable image of wo/manhood to which the Church expects wo/men to aspire. To require virginity in wo/men turned Mary into an 'effective instrument of female subjection',⁵⁹ to promote motherhood above all other female qualities has bound wo/men in many countries to a lifetime of dangerous and poverty-inducing pregnancy, with the life of the child valued above the life of the mother, and abortion forbidden even in cases of rape.⁶⁰

I would go further and emphasize that an obsession with chastity in any other than heteronormative and nuclear-family-orientated settings has damaged any person who does not fit certain patriarchally-defined parameters within which sex is considered acceptable. The two alternatives of chastity and biological parenthood ostracize countless individuals in terms that get justified by the Church as signs of 'obedience' and, therefore, virtue.

Such thinking links neatly with the challenge Newman poses with his theology of suffering. Newman often repeated in letters of sympathy that suffering is sign of God's special love, a necessity for Christ-like-ness.⁶¹ However, he also argued that punishment for sin takes place in this life, and that 'even if one cannot associate a definite punishment with a definite sin, still a Christian should be able to accept all suffering in his life as a punishment inflicted by the hand of God Himself'.⁶²

With wo/men and others marginalized by gender, race, disability, sexuality, and poverty all liable to experience greater suffering than wealthy white cis heterosexual men, this connection between suffering and individual sin, not to mention the positive perspective Newman places on

⁵⁹ Warner 1976, 67.

⁶⁰ Isherwood and MacEwan 2001, 68.

⁶¹ Blehl 1994, 27.

⁶² Blehl 1994, 53.

suffering, is more than uncomfortable. At its worst, it negates the call to ameliorate suffering in the world, to strive for equality, and to minister to the outcast, not least when considered hand-in-hand with Newman's focus on the eternal Kingdom, rejecting this world as 'mere shadow' (Diff I 239)

In *Difficulties of Anglicans I*, Newman expands on this understanding with his description of a poor wo/man in such a way that both stands in contention with his definition of suffering and its relationship with sin, and yet in no way assists an acceptable feminist interpretation of his theology.

'Take a mere beggar-woman, lazy, ragged and filthy...if she is chaste and sober, and cheerful, and goes about her religious duties...she will, in the eyes of the church, have a prospect of heaven, which is quite closed to the state's pattern-man, the just, the honourable, the conscientious, if he be all this not from a supernatural power but from mere natural virtue. Polished, delicate-minded ladies, with little of temptation around them, and no self-denial to practise, in spite of their refinement and taste, if they been nothing more, are objects of less interest to [the Church] than many a poor outcast who sins, repents, and is with difficulty kept just within the realm of grace.' (Diff I 249-50)

Here, virtue is understood as duty and cheerfulness in the face of suffering, and repentance in the face of sin (which is, by implication, committed more by the 'poor outcast' than by the 'polished...ladies'), and is said to count for more in the eyes of the Church than the 'natural virtue' understood to reside in the 'state's pattern man'. Class and sinfulness seem to be connected, yet there is also again the sense that to face one's suffering with good humour and the recognition it comes from God is commendable. No sin is ascribed to the class who allow the existence of ragged and filthy beggar-women in spite of their own 'refinement and taste', nor indeed their apparent 'honour... and conscientious[ness]'.

At the same time, however, Newman does, in principle, reject worldliness and the pursuit of earthly gains. However, the call to individual experience and intersectionality that is so paramount for a just contemporary feminist critique asks us to question what this means within his cultural milieu, and whether we consider it sufficient or even relevant to a modern understanding of suffering. Who is Newman, as an educated man of means, or indeed who am I, to speak to the rejection of the worldly as an aspiration among those who have little or nothing? In the sermons 'Temporal Advantages' and 'The Dangers of Riches', Newman explains why wealth, gain, influence, and power are dangerous to the Christian and withdraw one from God; they are specifically contrary to what he views as Christ's detachment from the world. Newman

defines the Christian as ‘one who looks for Christ, not who looks for gain, or distinction, or power, or pleasure, or comfort’ (SSD, 19, 284-85), yet the suffering of the world rests in those who are disempowered and un comforted, and feminism would strive to give power to the powerless.

To link this with the above passage, it is not the virtue in one who sins and repents that is at issue, of course, but the failure in Newman to acknowledge the existence of corporate sin. It is only in the introduction of such a concept to our reading of Newman that it becomes possible to accept his belief that suffering is punishment for sin. If the suffering of certain groups on account of gender, or any other ostracizing factors, is understood as the suffering of the world, that is to say a world broken by inequality, then it may clearly be linked to the sinfulness of patriarchal structures that govern societal order.

To return to Mary, we may now consider her place within this difficult narrative of sinfulness. For Newman, as discussed, Mary is understood to be free from sin (and hence, in principle, sorrow deriving from sin) as a consequence of the Immaculate Conception. This is, of course, one of the final developments in his understanding of Mary, prior to his conversion to Roman Catholicism. While he readily accepts Mary’s title as ‘Mother of God’ while still an evangelical, and uses imagery traditional to the Immaculate Conception, ‘the second Eve’ and ‘undefiled’ (PPS II:12), he still denies the possibility of her being conceived without sin:

‘No one is born into the world without sin; or can rid himself of the sin of his birth except by a second birth through the Spirit.’ (PPS V:7, 90)

and

‘Mary, His mother, was a sinner as others, and born of sinners, but she was set apart’ (PS 2).

He also makes a distinction between Mary’s sorrow and the sorrow of the sinner:

‘And when sorrow came upon her afterwards, it was but the blessed participation of her Son’s sacred sorrows, not the sorrow of those who suffer for their sins.’ (PS 2)

Later, however, as he adopts fully the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, we lose the identity of Mary as capable of sin but sinless, and, more specifically for this discussion, a victim of sorrow.

To focus first on Mary’s embodied assent to the Incarnation, it would be misguided to overlook the potential and real suffering brought about by her *fiat*. Those with ‘female’ bodies have been

excluded from the priesthood, and, more poignantly historically, from the Eucharist in times of menstruation and birthing, a reminder of the marginalization of their biology. However, there is also a physical suffering in pregnancy and childbirth to which Mary acquiesces when she says yes to God. To overlook these is to minimize the sacrifice that Mary makes, and, indeed, the impact of childbirth upon wo/men. Newman might well associate birth-pain with the Fall, and have some concept of Mary delivering Jesus without this, but such a thing is a biological impossibility. She endangers her own life and health, physical and psychological, to play her part in the Incarnation.⁶³

To return to our connection with the Eucharist,⁶⁴ in which brokenness is intrinsic to this Incarnation-Crucifixion event, we might remember the trauma done to Mary's body in the former, as much as to Christ's in the latter. As Mary suffers the trauma of her unplanned, incomprehensible pregnancy, so too does the recipient of Christ's body experience a rupture in identity through the Real Presence of Christ entering their own body.⁶⁵ In this, too, Mary offers a perfect model of discipleship, including priestly discipleship, not only in her suffering, but also in her reclamation of bodily identity in the Magnificat.⁶⁶ Christ in Mary's womb will become the renewal of all people, foreshadowing the effect of the Eucharist on its recipients.⁶⁷

Mary's sorrow also stems from her suffering as a parent, in particular, and is an obvious point of identification for many Christians, and particularly the marginalized. Her powerlessness as she experiences her son's suffering and death, even if we accept her understanding of the divine plan, makes her an important model. Much of Newman's theology, perhaps because he didn't experience the trauma of the World Wars that changed so much thinking over God's place in suffering, binds suffering with individual or personal sin. However, Mary suffers in the face of corporate sin, and sorrows in its manifestation. This is the sword that pierces her heart.

It is this sorrowing at the world's suffering, and co-suffering with the marginalized and powerless, that many feminists embrace as a force of change. It is what moves us to action. Indeed, we might see the transformative power in the status of Mary, whom Newman specifically points out is largely absent in the Gospels, though present throughout Christ's life and elevated in the Church after his resurrection. In Lakey Hess's analysis of this form of sorrow, she adopts and adapts Kierkegaard to explain how Christian faith entails suffering:

⁶³ O'Donnell 2019, 168–69.

⁶⁴ O'Donnell 2019, 165–66.

⁶⁵ O'Donnell 2019, 171.

⁶⁶ Jones 2009, 117–18.

⁶⁷ O'Donnell 2019, 178–79.

‘but it is a suffering that results because one chooses to stand firm in a faith that doesn’t pander to convention and to the powerful. This is to be contrasted with imposed suffering or passive submission to an oppressive status quo. When one chooses to marginalize oneself and assertively suffer with the powerless, one is taking a firm stand against injustice. The purpose of this stance is to oppose, denounce, and vigorously resist suffering – not to passively accept suffering or, God forbid, glorify it as virtue-producing.’⁶⁸

When Mary demonstrates virtuous humility, we are left to ask what sort of humility this is. Is it ‘passive submission’, subjected to or, worse, cooperating with oppressive structures, or is it a marginal space that offers a site of resistance? That is to say, is Mary’s privileged position as preacher and teacher obtained because she chooses prophetic humility. In the face of sinful power structures, she offers a possibility for all marginalized people to encounter, know, and preach Jesus Christ, without needing to adopt those power structures or seek the self-aggrandizement that lies within them.

What we should not see in this, however, is self-negation, the humility that intensifies suppression. In Soelle’s critique of an authoritarian religious life she argues that ‘obedience that is blind to objective concerns and to the world, that merely listens to what it is told, has *divested itself of all responsibility* for what is commanded.’⁶⁹ We are therefore brought back to Newman’s contention that ‘Mary’s faith did not end in a mere acquiescence’: when she places God at the centre of her identity, her humility renders her assertive on behalf of justice, as indicated in the Magnificat.

What is critical here, if there is to be value to this model in Mary, is that it is understood as one of discipleship, not one of gendered behaviour. If only the masculine is active, the feminine receptive, there is no true relationship beyond the sadomasochistic, the one domineering, the other servile.⁷⁰ This leads, when gendered by a biological binary, to the suppression of wo/men. However, if discipleship entails an active prophetic humility that is receptive and responsive to God, some value to the dichotomy might be redeemed.

In this, Mary cannot be reduced to mother in biological terms alone. The over-promotion of motherhood as a status has been responsible for the dangers posed to wo/men, not least in Roman Catholic communities, by high-risk pregnancy, the trauma of birthing children conceived

⁶⁸ Hess 1997, 49–50.

⁶⁹ Soelle 1995, xxi.

⁷⁰ Ruether 1979, 79.

by rape, the elimination of the concept of consent in marriage, and the suffering imposed by overpopulation, particularly in areas of poverty.

However, the Mary who births Jesus over and over in her role as preacher and disciple, reliving her *fiat* over and over, even in the face of suffering, even – and indeed most especially – from her place among the marginalized, offers a model of discipleship and cooperation with God that has immense value not only for the disciple, but for overthrowing a dangerous model of the ideal disciple bound up in the patriarchy, not least an all-male priesthood.

One obvious problem with this is that it risks inadvertently supporting the highly problematic associations made by the high Mariological claims of Newman and his contemporaries between Mary's unique exaltation and her manifest 'weakness'. Ullathorne, for example, argued that Mary's glorification does not threaten male supremacy, but rather confirms it: 'God made so much of her because she was so little: her youth, her femaleness, and her submission to God were emblematic of her lowliness.'⁷¹ There may be admirable qualities to embracing the Marian position, but ultimately to take her as a model reinforces the subjugation of wo/men as natural or God-given. God the patriarch, unthreatened by this little wo/man, raises her up to a queenly status only to promote wo/men's submission and to reinforce masculine authority.

This position stems from a still-prevalent fear among powerful men that threats to the patriarchy must be met by perpetuating misogyny. However, I would turn this on its head, and say that Mary and her model of discipleship are indeed a threat to the patriarchy, and this is ultimately the greatest importance of a renewed Mariology. In whatever way we understand Mary to be without sin (noting all the caveats listed above with respect to the Immaculate Conception) she could certainly be understood, even in Newman's account of her, as not only refusing to cooperate with the corporate sin of patriarchalism, but indeed speaking out against it, in the very message of the Magnificat and beyond.

If we reject the essentialism of Mary, or of wo/man, as womb, and understand the bearing and birthing of Christ as the ultimate myth of acceptance of and cooperation with God, just as Eve's story serves as a metaphor for disobedience to God through the sin of seeking to become divine, Mary – and all people – are freed from a gender binary that subordinates non-(cis heterosexual)men, and indeed from all power structures that diminish the marginalized on account of their non-privileged characteristics. To bear, to birth, to mother become terms that should not be reductively understood as a biological receptivity. Rather, they offer a model of

⁷¹ Alvarez 2016, 76.

discipleship that gives of self to do the work of God. They understand the primacy of the divine will, and consent to work with God to bring about his divine plan.

Ultimately, there are feminist readers who will reject this conclusion for stripping away gendered differences, asserting this collaborates in the elimination of wo/men from the narrative in a different but just as dangerous way as patriarchal history has done. However, with an understanding of the performative nature of gender that is not inextricably linked with biological essentialism, I believe that we can identify discipleship characteristics in Mary that not only can manifest within any gender, but which specifically react against the toxic gendered stereotypes perpetuated by patriarchal power.

Mary is identified as a wo/man in the narrative, but is exalted because she is *theotokos*. As the owner of a working uterus, she is able to manifest her participation in the divine plan through the biological route of having a baby who is God incarnate. Without undermining the significance of the incarnation, or of childbirth, we can also read into her mythology far more than that single biological act. It is her *fiat* to the entire will of God, ongoing in her life, that matters more.

Conclusion

Newman himself famously argued that ‘to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often’. To argue for any sort of redemption of the theological arguments of a renowned Roman Catholic writer for a feminist reader has to rest on the fundamental premise that such a thing is possible: that a set of teachings deeply set within a patriarchal hierarchy and indeed the patriarchal foundations of the Church and Catholic theology can ever be reconciled to any degree with a feminist worldview. I don’t claim it as an ideal approach, tainted as it is by the limitations of the so-called malestream framework of theology. However, given the primacy of patriarchal academic theology in history, the masculine power structures of the Roman Catholic Church, and the popularity of Newman as England’s newest saint, to avoid such efforts on principle is to make no difference to this predominant kyriarchal set of teachings for the future.

I am not proposing that Newman was anything other than an advocate of a patriarchal theological perspective, nor that he would accept the mining of his teachings that I am suggesting, but rather that it is possible to redeem and rework aspects of his theology to a valuable extent by the application of a feminist lens and modifications by means of this lens.

This is more than merely an academic exercise. I believe that there is continuing value to the perspectives of this important Catholic theologian and liberal educator, and that these can still have usefulness and relevance to 21st Century readers. However, they are limited in their scope as long as they are undermined by the trappings of the intrinsically patriarchal 19th Century Roman Catholic setting. For their value to be appreciated beyond those who adhere to this wider worldview in the modern day, they must be revisited in new contexts. In practical terms, the fact that Newman’s only school, The Oratory, has been fully coeducational since 2020 demands this reinterpretation of his teachings in such a way that makes them not only tolerable but arguably even relevant in this new era.

Ultimately, there is insufficient scope within this dissertation to undertake the work that may yet be needed if Mary is to be reclaimed for feminism in any way that retains aspects of a high Mariology such as Newman’s. However, any such work would do worse than to begin from the premises outlined here, that is to say recognizing Mary’s qualities beyond historical motherhood or the tradition of queenliness. To draw on the discipleship Newman observes in Mary, as thinker and theologian, as preacher and priestly minister, and yet as creature and wo/man, provides a firm starting point for redeeming her in a way that does not continue to promote a patriarchal structure nor non-masculine/non-male discipleship as passive, humble, or innately obedient.

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Dev. D *An Essay in the Development of Doctrine*

Diff I/II *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teach* (2 vol.)

DMC *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*

FP *Faith and Prejudice*

LD *Letters and Diaries*

MD *Meditations and Devotions*

OCF *On Consulting the Faithful*

OUS *Oxford University Sermons*

PPS *Parochial and Plain Sermons*

SSD *Sermons on Subjects of the Day*

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