

Presentation of Mary: The meeting place of human and divine

by [Joyce Meyer](#)

Nov. 19, 2015 in

Thanksgiving is just around the corner, and the feast of Mary being presented in the Temple is celebrated November 21, within the same week. Of course the feast is special to the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but it is a feast that has iconic implications for all of us. It is a story of family and all the cultural implications and complications this involves; it is a story of a family's relationship to God; it is a story of a female figure important not only to Christians but Muslims and Jews as well; and it is also an icon of the cosmos.

Although not found in Scripture, the story of Mary's presentation is an apocryphal story appearing in other early Christian writings. Anna and Joaquim, Mary's parents, presented her in the Temple as a gesture of gratitude to God for the end of a painful time in their lives. This "miracle" child, according to the Protoevangelicum of James, was the answer to infertility of a couple who waited with longing and prayer for a child. According to the Islamic version, which I discovered in a 2003 edition of *The Economist*, Anna and Joaquim were finally "expecting a child who would perform unique services to God and were therefore surprised when the baby turned out to be a girl." In this rendition of the story, Anna and Joaquim's response to the prophecy and gift was a promise to give Mary over to Temple life until she was at least 14 years old and engaged to Joseph, a widower. The Christian story gives details of Joaquim making announcement that Mary, at 2 years of age, should be taken to the Temple as they had promised, but Anna

determined that they needed to wait. So, after dialogue, on her 3rd birthday Anna and Joaquim sadly took Mary to the Temple, accompanied by other young women. The Temple priest Zacharia, named in both the Christian and Muslim stories, received her. He lifted her up to the third temple step and as he set her down, she danced with joy for the Lord. The Islam story tells of Zacharia bringing the child food and finding that God had already sent nourishment, making it clear how receptive she was to God.

The tradition of Mary being accompanied by virgins on her way to the temple has both Christian and Jewish roots, because according to author Dr. Taylor Marshall, Temple virgins in Jerusalem were common. They "formed an altar guild that fulfilled the necessary tasks at the temples that included sewing and creating vestments, washing vestments of priests with would be stained regularly by animal blood, preparing liturgical linen, weaving the veil of the Temple and most importantly, liturgical prayer." Dr. Taylor cites a variety of Scriptural accounts to support this tradition: Exodus 38:8, 1 Samuel 2:22, Numbers 4:23 and 8:24, and others.

It is believed that this feast of Mary was first celebrated in Syria, one of the earliest birthplaces of Christianity. It was promoted through monasteries in Southern Italy in the ninth century and spread to other places including France under Pope Gregory XI. It became a universal church feast in 1472, taken away in 1568, and restored again in 1585 as a memorial feast in the Western church. Today, the feast is still celebrated in the eastern churches, but the country where it started is under threat. Centuries of Christian religious traditions are being lost, as ancient religious sites are destroyed and people are forced to either leave their countries or convert to a radical form of Islam.

I never paid much attention to early church history or eastern Christian churches until I visited Ethiopia and encountered Orthodox Christianity still being practiced in its ancient forms. Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity was brought from Egypt, but was later enculturated and became an independent form. Visiting an Orthodox monastery of nuns in 2006 was a close-up experience of ancient practice. I was welcomed by the sister in charge of the monastery, dressed in a long black habit with a long, black veil falling around her shoulders from a kind of pill-box-shaped hat. We went first to see the chapel, a place of worship very unlike our usual Catholic chapels. There was no Eucharistic tabernacle, but instead there were icons and large hand painted pictures of Jesus, Mary and the saints surrounding the few stools where the sisters sat for prayer.

I learned from the sister that the Eucharist was celebrated rarely, and later discovered that Eucharist and Communion are not common for any of the Orthodox communities. Instead, fasting and prayer are central to their prayer life. Usually, only elders and children receive Communion as they are usually the "most pure." Sexually active persons pray the liturgical prayers, but do not receive Communion.

Sister and I then walked out to the farm where the nuns raise cows for milk, chickens for eggs and meat, and till gardens for vegetables. This group of 10 nuns was very poor. To earn a little income, they provide a small, poorly furnished kindergarten for about a dozen children and weave fabrics that they sew into table cloths. The nuns doing the weaving had not been trained, and so the results were not well executed. Sister explained that they were hoping to get help from another monastery to increase their sales. Our last stop was the monastery dining room where we were invited to drink tea. To my

amazement, one of the nuns in the room spoke American English. She was an African American woman who had come to learn how to be a Coptic Orthodox nun. Her plan was to return to the United States and start her own monastery. I never did learn if her dream became reality, but there are a number of Orthodox congregations in the United States who still practice the ancient rites of various rites of Orthodoxy

The iconic story of Anna, Joaquim and Mary also sparked memories of the recent Synod on the Family and Pope Francis' call to all of us to be merciful to the complicated lives of families worldwide. I was thinking about Anna and Joaquim, wanting a child and yet being unsuccessful to conceive. Most of us know such families and the pain they endure as they try to decide what to do. Now days with all the gynecological technologies available, it is still not simple to discern God's will in such circumstances. Anna and Joaquim's struggle to be faithful to their promise to give up their child for a time to the Temple was not an easy one either. Again, how many stories have we heard, even in our day, of parents in many places of the world who want to provide a future for their children but at times cannot even afford to feed them and so give them up to the care of others? Seeking the right husband for their daughter, Anna and Joaquim were confronted with finding Mary unexpectedly pregnant, most certainly another complication. None of these situations that Anna and Joaquim experienced is foreign to families in the world today, either because of custom, poverty or unforeseen circumstances. Pope Francis reminds all of us that harsh judgements have no place when people are struggling to raise their children in the best way possible with all the pressures of society and culture they endure.

Mary's generous self-giving of her life to God is not only an icon of

generosity and self-giving for women consecrated in religious life, but for mothers as well as they remember Mary only stayed in the Temple for about three years before she was engaged to Joseph and became a mother herself. This story of Mary's presentation in the Temple is an icon for all of us, female and male, consecrated in Baptism to give our lives completely over to God and to live in dance of joy, gratitude and fruitfulness in the midst of all life's complexities.

Lastly, this story of Mary's presentation in the Temple even has cosmic implications found in Jewish cosmic mythology. According to Sr. Mary Coloe, PBVM, a Scripture scholar, Genesis 2:8 presents us with a creation event describing the place of the Temple in Jewish belief. She notes that "all the waters of the earth have their origins in the heavens and flow down to touch the earth at the place where the temple stands. The temple rests upon the fissure above the great abyss, which is the source of the creative waters." For the Jews, the Temple represented God's act of creation. Exodus 40 describes the tabernacle of the Temple being built in seven stages replicating the seven days of creation. "The tabernacle is equal to the creation of the world," is a quote from Midrash Tanhuman 11.2 according to Margaret Barker, a Scripture scholar. Mary's presentation places her in this temple of creation — she becoming the beginning of a new creation.

Somehow this simple image of Mary's presentation in the Temple is archetypal. It touches something deep in us humans that reaches across the diversity of three major religious traditions. Its layers of meaning connect us to creation of the cosmos; reveal human vulnerability experienced in family bonds and unite us as one family in belief that human life is holy from the earliest moments of our existence. And in these moments of awareness we experience the Joy

of Mary who not only entered the Temple, but became the Temple, the meeting place of human and divine, a transformation that is our call as well.

- Acknowledgements and gratitude to Mary Coloe, PBVM: *Presented in the Temple of God's Glory*; Dr. Taylor Marshall: *Did Jewish Temple Virgins Exist and was Mary a Temple Virgin?*; *The Economist*, Dec. 18, 2003 (no author given): "A Mary for All."

[Joyce Meyer, PBVM, is international liaison to women religious outside of the United States for *Global Sisters Report*.]