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Mary and Jesus as mother and son

by Thomas C. Fox



Arthur Jones

Paulist Press last month published NCR book editor Arthur Jones' newest book, Mary, a Mother Waiting: Raising the Messiah. Jones describes the book as an exploration of the mother-son relationship of Mary and Jesus during the "hidden years," until she eases him into his ministry at Cana. You can also learn more about the book and follow a discussion on The Marian Blog on the NCR Web site as well as on Facebook (tinyurl.com/Mary-A-Mother-Waiting) and Twitter (twitter.com/anotherwaiting). Earlier this month, NCR spoke with Jones about the book.

NCR: Where did this book come from? What prompted it?

Jones: Possibly it's generational. There's an unrecognized male cohort in the West around my generation. For four to six years, most males born in the 1930s were raised by women -- the men were all away, fighting a war. Britain was as misogynistic as they come, but my generation had an opportunity to see women, their mothers and aunts, differently, stronger, self-reliant -- I refer to it in the introduction in some detail. Blend this with the ever present Virgin Mary pictures in homes on the maternal side of my family, her presence in the churches, our May, month of Mary parades and it's scarcely surprising that as

the German bombs dropped on us we prayed to her.

Then, to bring it up to date, Robert Graham's Mary above the main portal of Los Angeles' new cathedral achieves what I in part aimed for: Mary, bare-armed, unveiled, a working mother in every way, involved in the life of her children.

Is there an acid test when writing fiction about a period in the life of Mary and Jesus about which we know nothing?

For me it was: Does Mary's simultaneous concern and encouragement for Jesus equate to most mothers responding to their growing children today? Paulist Press' editors felt it did, and went ahead.

Why the title?

Mothers wait. They wait with a gnawing apprehension -- when their kids are driving alone for the first time, when they're traveling alone, when they're job-hunting, falling in love. It's trying to project the love and concern and need to protect -- and personal experience -- on to them, to keep them safe. Waiting to see them again, waiting to learn the results of the interview. Silent, anxious, eager, oftentimes prayerful waiting.

What do you hope to achieve?

I believe Mary was instrumental in Jesus' education and readiness for ministry to a degree not actually thought about by a general readership. Equally, like children returning from college, on vacation, perhaps, Jesus was teaching Mary, educating his mother in everything he was learning and discovering. To see Mary in that light is to make her more like us and us more like her. As we understand her humanity we better understand Jesus' humanity.

So the crux point about Mary and all mothers is what?

Most mothers, one cannot say all, want their children to follow their dream. It can mean a mother encouraging her child to be a firefighter or an artist or activist or an organic farmer or a lay missionary or a soldier, even knowing it might mean death -- or failure. That mother in her heart of hearts may well wish the child would do/be something else. Something safe, something secure. But she recognizes the captivated heart, the will and need to serve or strive in this way -- and encourages the child despite the possible or likely danger. That, on a slightly different scale, is Mary with Jesus. The other part, again, is the mutual education process between mother and son. Mary never overshadows Jesus -- she releases him to overshadow her and everyone else. There is a point at which that happens, at which the balance forever tips from mother to son. It is in the book's final sentence.

Was your mother like this, encouraging despite possible danger?

Oh my goodness. No and yes. Alice, my Scots terrier of a mother, was about 4 [feet] 11 [inches] and probably 94 pounds soaking wet. She was a hoot. She knew we'd follow our own instincts -- my father wouldn't have had it any other way (nor would she), but what she set us loose with was stories, song and the example of her ability to preside over an antic, slightly unconventional -- by conventional British standards -- madhouse. That was hard for her; she was quite, no, extremely conventional, as was my father -- except he did not conform to conventions of class distinction so we grew up quite liberated in that regard. I was the least conventional of the three children. My parents probably thought I was a changeling.

Why blank verse? Why do it in poetic form?

Blank verse because it isn't meant to be read at one go. Blank verse slows the reader down, the words and phrases weigh a little more heavily. It's a reflection. The poetic form allows it to be what -- just a wee bit abstruse? -- so the reader wanders around inside the points being made to seek out the meaning. Poetic

form permits the entirety to be just slightly less anchored than a conventional fictional form.

This stops at Cana. Is there more -- will you take it through to Jesus? crucifixion and the aftermath?
I'd like to. It's sketched out, the first 4,000 words written. I'm dreading seeing the crucifixion through Mary's eyes. So we'll see. I began the NCR blog, "The Marian Blog," to keep the conversation going and quite honestly said to the readers that if it isn't going anywhere after a year, I'd end it. This may not be the moment for this Mary. But that doesn't mean one shouldn't push the concepts for all they're worth to test the waters.

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