Ten years ago in this same column I asked the question, “What Ever Happened to Mary?” This reflected the curious reality that Mary had almost disappeared from theological reflection and popular devotion in the early post-Vatican II church, at least in the United States. The column examined a number of reasons for this lapse of interest and drew attention to some initial motifs in a renewed interest in this central figure of Catholic tradition. Ten years later, I think it is safe to say, “She’s back!”

Early retrievals of theology of Mary, following the council, drew on themes of the council that asserted the unique mediationship of Jesus, and Mary’s role in the Church as exemplary disciple. The council initiated a move away from the privilege-centered Mariology particularly characteristic of the nineteenth century to a theology of Mary that emphasizes continuity between Mary’s life and the lives of women today. Paul VI’s Marialis Cultus provided guidelines for a renewed popular devotion to Mary within the theological spirit of the council. Early theological explorations also drew on contemporary biblical scholarship and echoed the concerns of a developing feminist theology. Appropriately they reflected the entry into theology of significant numbers of women theologians from around the world. These theologians saw in Mary both a source of hope and a figure herself in need of liberation from past interpretations that saw her either as passive and docile, or as an idealized image of feminine virtue. Liberation theologians of the seventies and eighties both male and female saw in Mary, especially the Mary of the Magnificat, a powerful symbol of the liberating intent of God who stands on the side of the poor and powerless of society.

These initial explorations continue to form the basis for ongoing interest in Mary over the past ten years. The explosion of writing in this period not only indicates the deep awareness in the Christian churches that something is missing when we lose touch with Mary, but also that the figure of Mary is a complex and mysterious symbolic reality in Church life. Studies in the nineties both develop the theological direc-

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ations of the eighties and mine their insights for including Mary in a responsible ecclesial spirituality. Two major themes characterize recent works. The first focuses on the search for the “historical Mary” and the second emphasizes more her symbolic role in Church life and tradition. Probably the greatest danger in a theology of Mary is the loss of a creative tension between these two approaches that can lead either to unhealthy exaggeration or excessive diminution of her importance. Let me single out just a few representative works and authors.

Elizabeth Johnson continues to be an important voice in Catholic theology of Mary. Although she acknowledges the profound symbolic role that Mary has played in Catholic tradition and imagination, her focus is on getting in touch with the historical Mary, in spite of the difficulties posed by the paucity of information about her in the Christian sources. One avenue she suggests is new studies of life in first-century Palestine that open a window into the life of a poor, observant Jewish woman. Theologically, Johnson expands on feminist tendencies to stress continuities between Mary and other human beings by placing her firmly in the company of the saints, interpreted inclusively to include all human beings in a web of connections with the natural world. Mary is a friend of God and prophet in whom all those still on the journey can find hope and inspiration. Johnson’s book *Friends of God and Prophets* offers a feminist interpretation of the communion of saints that provides a context for rethinking Mary’s place in Christian tradition.

George Tavard’s work *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, while not neglecting the historical, focuses more on the symbolic dimensions of the Mary tradition as a way to overcome the barriers to exploring Mary’s significance beyond narrowly Catholic or even Christian discussions. Tavard draws on his wide experience and involvement in ecumenical theology and intra-Christian and interreligious dialogues to provide an introduction to the place of Mary in these traditions. Although there is a reawakening of interest in Mary within many Protestant traditions, theologically she remains a divisive figure. Agreements that have been reached on major church-dividing issues, such as justification, have not been able to be reached on Mary. Tavard attributes this to a narrow focus on Marian doctrines, particularly since the Reformation. His book contains a wide ranging discussion of the many images of Mary, starting with the young Jewish woman of the Scripture and moving to the symbolic importance of Mary as the female face of the divine which may make a connection with the religions of the east.

While Tavard’s work is driven by his ecumenical concerns, Sally Cunneen’s work *In Search of Mary* consciously attempts to bring together the many images of Mary in art, literature, and poetry in a very readable work that surveys the history of doctrine and devotion to Mary. She too notes that a search for Mary reveals many different versions and that each generation has found in her a way to touch the deepest truths we know about ourselves and about the divine. Cunneen suggests that today’s understanding of the symbol of Mary must be one that “is true to the Bible and church tradition, that fosters reverence rather than contempt for Jews, and that does not praise Mary by denigrating other women” (273). A good guideline!

The recovery and reclaiming of the symbol of Mary continues to be of particular importance for women theologians from many cultures and contexts. The image of the Mary of the Magnificat is a powerful emblem of the cry for liberation from all kinds of oppression voiced by
Latin American liberation theologians. “The image of the pregnant woman, able to give birth to the new, is the image of God who through the power of God's Spirit brings to birth men and women committed to justice, living out their relationship to God in a loving relationship with other human beings” (Gebara and Bingemer, 73).

Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung sees Mary as “both a model for full womanhood and of the fully liberated human being. As a virgin she is a self-defining woman; as mother she is giver of life to God and humanity; as sister she is a woman in solidarity with other women and with the oppressed” (King, 269). A paper on Mary that grew out of the Singapore Conference of Asian Women Theologians critiques the prevalent image of Mary as eternally young and will speak to many who experience their own aging.

The young woman who sings of revolution does age. The woman who stands, with other women, at the foot of the cross, and who is present with the community at Pentecost, is an older woman, a woman of wisdom and strength, who suffers, with God, the loss of her son. . . . It is time for us to claim and celebrate the presence of the Spirit in old women. We need them (King, 273).

Many of these theological themes are woven into a lovely book called *Meditations on Mary* by the poet and essayist, Kathleen Norris. Beautifully illustrated with classical works of art, her meditative essays offer another window into the many faces of Mary and the points of continuity between her life of faith and the lives of women today. “When I brood on the story of the Annunciation, I like to think about what it means to be ‘overshadowed’ by the Holy Spirit; I wonder if a kind of ‘overshadowing’ isn’t what every young woman pregnant for the first time might feel, caught up in something so much larger than herself” (Norris, 31).

*Mary: Art, Culture, and Religion through the Ages* also makes central the theme of the many faces of Mary and the reality that her complex symbolic meaning is not easily or appropriately reduced to any one defining picture or image. Its sumptuous presentation of pictorial images through the ages gives visual credence to the theological themes we have been exploring. Mary has indeed revealed different facets of the divine-human relationship through history and continues to do so today. Although this work confronts us with the reality that our images of Mary, whether in art, music, literature, or theology have been predominantly produced by men, it introduces new images that reflect the transformation of Mary’s role through the enormous societal conflicts and changes of the twentieth century.

A final theme of the last decade has been a continuing interest in the phenomenon of apparitions, perhaps not surprising in the apocalyptic atmosphere of the turn of the century. While religious bookstores once again have shelves of books on Mary, closer inspection reveals that many of them deal with apparitions. What does this mean? The official church takes a cautious attitude to apparitions (National Conference of Catholic Bishops), and there is obviously in these phenomena the possibility of exploitation, and the danger of retreat into a privatistic spirituality antithetical to the spirit of Vatican II. A provocative work on the topic is Sandra Zimdars-Swartz’s *Encountering Mary*. Zimdars-Swartz points out that the tradition of apparitions usually involves the most marginalized in both
Church and society; the poor, especially women and children. However one evaluates the apparition events themselves, the tradition of apparitions can challenge the institutional church to take seriously the experiences and concerns of the world’s poor and suffering.

This eclectic sampling of some recent approaches to Mary reveals that our generation too is fascinated by the figure of Mary and continues the quest for an understanding of Mary that will reflect and respond to the pressing questions and concerns of the twenty-first century.

References


