Mary of Nazareth – The Incarnation and the Cosmic Christ.

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Sacred art, in its stillness, holds an energy that often opens our beings to cross a threshold into a new way of seeing the truths of our faith. I invite you on a virtual pilgrimage with me, to take time to pause, to contemplate the message wrapped in images preserved from early Christianity, some lost for many centuries.

Mary in Early Christian Iconography

Our early Christian sisters and brothers threatened by persecution, have left us precious images of Mary with Jesus, her Son, on the walls of the catacombs wherein they hid. They remain there today as a ‘silent’ witness of their faith.

The Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, Italy, dating from the 2nd century, preserves the oldest image of Mary and the Child Jesus. While somewhat obscure, we see Mary seated, holding her Child close to her breast. While Jesus’ position appears to be that of a child ready to nurse, his face turned outward seems to want to embrace what is before him. The figure standing next to them is said to be a prophet holding a scroll in his left hand, pointing to a star with his right. Commentators note that this figure refers to the prophecy of Balaam,

A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a scepter shall spring up from Israel” (Numbers 24: 15-17).

A prophetic message that indicates that the Child on his mother’s knee is the Messiah awaited for many ages. A silent assurance that they would not be alone in the midst of present suffering.
A century later, this image of a woman, hands raised in prayer, her child sitting securely on her lap, is on display in the Catacomb Maggiore (Coemeterium Maius), Rome, Italy, 3rd century CE. While her hands are raised in prayer, Jesus appears to be sitting securely on her lap.

Like the image in the catacomb of Priscilla, time has made this one somewhat obscure. Nevertheless, I was startled to see Mary in both drawings holding an infant portrayed with an adult face, clearly visible in the latter. There was a message here, for sure. Notice in the left upper corner a portion of the Greek symbol Π meaning ‘Christ’. The same symbol seems to be inverted on the upper right side. In the silence, Mary seems to say, see my hands raised in prayerful worship for the Child seated on my knee is the Holy One of God announced to me by the angel. What these early Christians were trying to convey about their faith in Jesus became clearer for me as my gaze shifted to other images.

Early images of Mary and Jesus are said to have influenced the emergence of icons that appeared from the 5th century on in public and private worship in the East especially.

This oldest Byzantine icon of Mary holding her Son, Jesus on her lap appeared in St. Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, Egypt in the 6th century. Around Mary and Jesus are St. Theodore of Amasea, St. George, and two angels. 

At first glance, the figures seem to be frozen in place. The more we contemplate them, the more their presence has a silent message. The saints stand tall, are grounded, yet a left heel slightly raised gives the impression they want to walk towards us. They have a message to convey. After all both were martyred for their Christian faith. Perhaps, their message is a reminder that following Jesus entails a cost, a letting go like Jesus, so well expressed by Paul in Philippians 2:6-11.
Mary is seated firmly on a raised dais, her two hands hold her Child firmly. Her right hand is on his right shoulder; her left hand grasps his left leg. Is this an indication that she doesn’t want him to get involved too quickly? Mary looks outward but her eyes look off to the left of her. Difficult to know who or what gets her attention. Her Child’s eyes seem to be closed.

Her Child has an adult face, like earlier images. Here we see his infant feet clearly for the first time. An adult face, infant feet a message to be explored.

The angels look upward to a hand at the top of the image said to be a symbol of God the Father. The light emanating from the hand that falls on Mary seems to be a symbol of the Spirit who overshadowed her, making the conception of Jesus possible. God the Father, Spirit, Son a first indication of the presence of the Trinity.

Dr. William Allan suggests that the icon portrays ‘zones of holiness which suggest a cosmos of the world, earth and real people, through the Virgin, heavenly angels and finally the hand of God. The viewer who stands before the scene makes the cosmos complete, from ‘our earth’ to heaven.’

Dr. Allan’s observation provides us with our first indication that an eternal, cosmic presence becomes reality in and through Mary, her Son.

Many icons similar to that found in St. Catherine’s monastery, Sinai, Egypt originated with Mary being proclaimed ‘Theotokos’, that is, ‘Mother of God’ at the Council of Ephesus (431 CE).

This modern rendition of the St. Catherine Monastery icon written by Brother Claude Lane, OSB, can be found in the refectory of Mount Angel Abbey, St. Benedict, Oregon, USA. Mary looks clearly at us, as does her Son. In this copy, Jesus raises his right hand in blessing. His left holds a scroll. Unlike the St. Catherine Monastery icon, Mary holds her Son lightly. She appears to say, ‘here he is, take him to yourself’.
Icons were particularly prominent in Churches until the eighth century. Church officials, feeling that the faithful were worshipping the images themselves not God to whom they referred, forbade their use. Consequently most were destroyed during the Iconoclasm period that followed in the 8th century (726-742 CE). Fortunately, the monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai, Egypt was untouched and never sacked. The monastery contains a wealth of icons from the early centuries.

By the ninth century an appreciation of their significance in liturgical worship and prayer was reawakened. Icons of Mary, Jesus, the saints were being written once again.

Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom)  
Early in the sixth century (537 CE), the first Greek Cathedral dedicated to the Wisdom of God, the Logos (Word of God), second person of the Trinity was built in Constantinople during the Roman Empire.

In the post-iconoclastic period, the Virgin and Child, situated in a high location of the half dome of the apse, was the first of mosaics recreated in the ninth century.

Like the images in the catacombs and the icon in St. Catherine’s monastery, Sinai, Egypt, Mary is sitting on a throne, holding the Child Jesus on her lap. Her feet rest on a pedestal. Jesus is portrayed with an adult face. His infant feet are in thongs. Mary’s right hand rests on his right shoulder, her left hand rests close to his left knee. A hankerchief appears to cover her thumb. Her Child’s hand is raised in blessing and in his left he holds a scroll which time has obscured.

A series of windows that circle the apse around the mosaic that symbolize light emanating from the divine do not appear in this picture. There are, however, faint glimpses of the golden heavenly light that surrounded the figures as well.
When the mosaic was first unveiled for all to see, the Patriarch said ‘here we see the Theotokos (Mother of God) who gave birth to the Christ who came to us in the flesh.’ These words are a clear announcement of Jesus, the Christ who existed from all eternity.

The more I contemplate these images, the more I find striking the continuous representation of Mary seated with Jesus sitting on her lap. In all, Mary looks out on us, on the world, not down at her Child. The power of her eyes draws us inwards to contemplate her Son, his adult face and his feet, when visible, like those of an infant. The significance of depicting Jesus this way became clearer to me in contemplating the icon of Our Lady of the Sign that arose in twelfth century Russia. What earlier images proclaimed in silence, we behold in Our Lady of the Sign that the Child Mary holds is the Cosmic Christ.

**Our Lady of the Sign**

The icon, Our Lady of the Sign, inspired by the ancient Christian image in the Catacomb Maggiore which we considered earlier, depicts Mary, Mother of God, with her hands raised in prayer.

The title, Our Lady of the Sign, harks back to the prophecy of Isaiah:
Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign;
Behold, a young woman shall conceive
and bear a son and shall call his name
Emmanuel, meaning God with us. (Is 7:14).

This prophetic announcement connects us to the mystery of the Annunciation, the poignant moment of Mary’s ‘Yes’, “Be it done to me according to your Word” (Lk. 1:38). Though her hands are raised in prayer, here too Mary looks out on us, on the world, not down at her Child imprinted close to her heart. Our gaze is drawn to Jesus the Child centered on his mother’s chest inside a mandorla that is said to symbolize his mother’s womb.
The mandorla is also described as an ancient symbol of two circles coming together, overlapping each other. Early Christians used this symbol to describe the coming together of heaven and earth, the divine and the human. It is said that images portraying Jesus with an adult face and infant feet symbolize that he is both human and divine. While his infant feet are not visible, the icon’s portrayal of Jesus with an adult face fleshes out what images considered earlier spoke silently. Jesus is ‘fully human and fully divine, the eternal Son, Word of God.’ More pointedly, the icon depicts Jesus as such from the moment of his conception.12

For nine months, the eternal Son, Word of God with God from all eternity, hidden in Mary’s womb, developed into the Child her body was preparing for birth. The Greek letters MP ØY to the upper left and right of Mary’s head proclaim her to be ‘Mother of God’. Mary birthed Jesus, the Christ (Mt 1:16) in whom a passionate God of love at the heart of all creation came to live among us. We can only contemplate this reality in wonder.

Like his mother, the Child looks out at the world. Vested in royal robes, like his mother, his right hand is raised in blessing. His left hand, which holds a scroll is said to be an indication of the new law, his teachings. Might the scroll symbolize also the text of the prophet Isaiah that Jesus read in the synagogue of Nazareth? “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”, he said, “because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Lk 4:16-19; Is 42:4-9). In proclaiming this scripture, Jesus announced that the power of divine love and mercy would be active as his ministry unfolded.

Inside the mandorla, the Greek letters IC XC are an abbreviation of the Greek words for ‘Jesus Christ’. His halo proclaims his divinity: “I am who I am.” This echoes God’s response to Moses who asked God ‘what should I say to my people when they asked me who sent me to them? God answered, “I am who I am.” “Say to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you” (Ex 3:14, 15). Jesus affirming his existence from all eternity in conversation with some of his people, said, “Before Abraham was I Am (John 8:58).

This icon, as the images, icons and mosaic above, portrays clearly how extraordinary the Child in Mary’s womb is. Mary conceives and births Jesus, the Word, Wisdom, Son of God. Through the wondrous mystery of the Incarnation, God, with Mary’s cooperation, has chosen to enter within the unfolding of human history by becoming man in Jesus. Herein lies the paradox of the Incarnation, through the wonderful union of the divine and human nature in Jesus, God enters into
the unfolding of human history. It is awesome that at every celebration of the Eucharist, we are reminded that in the mingling of water and wine that Jesus shared in our humanity so we could share in his divinity.

No wonder that the icon, Our Lady of the Sign is also called in ‘Greek, the ‘Platytéra’ which means literally ‘wider or more spacious, than the heavens. Mary, by conceiving the Creator of the Universe, carries within her womb, Him whom the heavens cannot contain. With this in mind, we can join with our Orthodox sisters and brothers who honor Mary in their Liturgy as “the virginal mother of God who accepted the unbearable and becomes the abode of the great Creator.15

**Mary and the Cosmic Christ**

Mary, overshadowed with the power of the Spirit (Lk 1:35) conceived and birthed the whole mystery of Christ. Scriptures announce in varied ways that Jesus, the risen Christ, is the eternal, the cosmic Christ. (We would be well to say ‘Jesus, the Christ’ so as not to confuse Christ as his last name.)

While not naming Mary, Saint Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, notes that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal 4:4). The Letter to the Colossians sums up this wondrous moment as follows:

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, … all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. … For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-17, 20).
In the gospel of John we read:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. … And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only Son, full of grace and of truth (Jn 1:1-5, 14).16

Wisdom who ‘fashions anew the whole creation’, originally perceived as an attribute of God, in Jesus, becomes God incarnate (Wis 7:22, 27; 18:14; 19:6; 1 Cor 1:24).

Last but not least the Letter to the Ephesians gives us a vision of the Cosmic Christ. ‘In him, God in the fullness of time will gather all things in heaven and things on earth’ (Eph 1:3-10)

Thus, the redeeming consequences of the Incarnation encompass the cosmos, all creation, every race and nation under the sun. A point made in the Book of Revelation which describes Jesus, the Word of God, as the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev 22:12).

For Teilhard de Chardin, the Omega, the end point of this process, is the final point where the law of universal love will have reached its climax and its crown in Christ. A concept, Teilhard reminds us has no meaning except that it has its roots in the historical person of Jesus to whom Mary gave birth17 – his life, mission, death on the cross and resurrection. The hymn to the Ephesians speaks clearly of this “plan to be carried out in Christ in the fullness of time to unite all things in heaven and on earth in Christ” (Eph 1:10). In Christ, all is sacred.

In her own journey of faith, Mary must have been awakened through the birth, life, death and resurrection of her Son to the mystery of the Divine, the Christ that had grown within her.
This mandala, a modern rendition of the icon Our Lady of the Sign – Mary, bearing and giving birth to the Creator of the world, surrounded by the cosmos captures this well. The three interlocking circles surrounding Mary and Jesus represent the dynamic presence and energy of the Trinity in the cosmos, in them.18

Christian Iconography not only portrays Jesus, Creator of the world, the Cosmic Christ but also provides a vision of a Cosmic Mary. Mary’s creative ‘Yes’ at the Annunciation has been described recently as a “Cosmic Yes”19 Mary cooperated with the creative energy and power of God. Conceiving the Word, the Son of God, Creator of the world, Mary embraced the entire universe also.

Becoming aware of Mary’s cosmic self presents an image of her whole person. As mother and first disciple of Jesus, Mary remains an archetype, a model in living out my journey of faith as a Christian. The added awareness of the cosmic dimension to her person calls me to embrace the cosmic self in me.

Like Mary, I am called to discover my own capacity to carry the Cosmic Christ for the Incarnation is not a one-time event (Jn 14:17; 1 Cor 1:27). In St. Maximus the Confessor’s words: “the Annunciation is the model of what God wants to achieve in us. By the power of the Spirit, Christ is always born mysteriously and willingly, becoming incarnate in us.”20 Meister Eckhart reminds me that ‘We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born’.21 In faith, I am always steeped in the mystery of being pregnant with God, the Christ in me.

For many years, I have been conscious of my interrelatedness with all creation, with those near and far. Pregnant with God, in Christ, Mary, in conceiving the Creator of the World, embraced the universe and allowed it to flow through her. I must also.

Meister Eckhart captured this awareness centuries ago. He wrote, ‘God creates the entire universe fully and totally in the present now … There where time never penetrates, where no image shines
in us, in the innermost and deepest aspect of the soul God creates the whole cosmos in the innermost depths of every soul now’.

Pope Francis in Laudato Si, ‘On Care of Our Common Home’, underlines that “the universe as a whole shows forth in all its manifold relationships the inexhaustible riches of God” mysteriously present in all creation. The destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ from the beginning (Col 1:16-20; Rom 8:22, 23). Christ through his life, death on the cross and resurrection has reconciled all things to himself. The salvific Cosmic Christ embraces all.

Pope Francis notes also, “For the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice.” A Prophetic voice indeed rising from Mother Nature crying out to us through the extreme weather patterns surfacing in our planet through human negligence affecting mostly our poorest nations. “Human beings”, he adds: “endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to God”.

The more I become conscious of my interrelatedness with the universe, creation, all humankind, the more I realize that I am engaged in a cosmic dance where Love unfolds relationally. Immersed in God’s love, like Mary, the life of the Cosmic Christ must flow through me in my being and action. An awesome responsibility!

That said, I wonder what else is hidden in those images contemplated above that give me some indication as to how this awesome responsibility can find concrete expression in my daily life. As I turned my attention back to those images, I was surprised that invocations rose within my being from the Litany of Loreto, which I haven’t prayed in many years: Mary, Ark of the Covenant, Seat of Wisdom. And I would add her title, Mary, Seat of Mercy. In exploring these I sensed Mary shows the way.

Mary: Ark of the Covenant

Many parallels can be drawn between the Ark of the Covenant carried by the Israelites through the desert, later housed in the Temple of Jerusalem and Luke’s Gospel narratives of the Annunciation-Visitation. As the cloud, sign of the divine Mystery present to the Israelites hovered over the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 40:35), the shadow of the Most High overshadowed Mary and she conceived Jesus the Word, the Wisdom of God. Mary’s womb becomes the tabernacle of the New Covenant (Lk 1:35). She carries in her being and births the hope of the world, Jesus, the Christ, creator and
sustainer of the whole universe (Col 1:15-20). Throughout her life journey, Mary must have become more and more conscious of the divine life within her.

Mary, Ark of the Covenant, models for me the importance of being attentive, open and receptive to a God of love, mindful that I am a dwelling place for God in whom God’s Spirit dwells (1 Cor. 3: 16; Eph. 2:22). Only taking time daily to be in communion with God, can I listen to the Word of God spoken to me. With my whole being, in faith, like Mary, say ‘Yes” (Lk 1:38). For the life of Christ must flow out of me, as I open myself to receive life, flowing out of those whom I encounter.

Mary’s encounter with her cousin Elizabeth, the Visitation (Lk 39-35) models this call for me beautifully. Their encounter reminds me that Mary’s unconditional ‘Yes’ to what she perceived was God’s will would entail consequences for her beyond her control. That could be said for Elizabeth and any parent. Life experience shows me: this is grace.

Mary’s life in the Spirit didn’t cease with the birth of Jesus. Her cosmic self continues to be Wisdom’s dwelling place.

**Mary: Seat of Wisdom**

As far back as the fourth century Mary was named Seat of Wisdom. In conceiving and birthing Jesus, the Word, Wisdom of God, Creator of the World, Mary became God’s temple. When we see her seated holding her Child on her lap or in the mandala in the Icon, Our Lady of the Sign, we understand why she was given this title. Jesus, the Wisdom of God, first nestled in her womb now sits on her lap for all the world to see. In so doing, Mary becomes literally Wisdom’s seat.

Mary, Seat of Wisdom ‘honors her royal dignity as the mother who has given birth to the Messiah whose kingdom will never end (Lk 1:32-33). It also refers to her maternal role as mother of the Creator, the Word, the Wisdom of God made flesh who existed from all eternity, through whom all things came into being (Jn 1:1-14; 1 Cor 1:24). Holding Jesus, imaged with an adult face and infant feet, securely on her lap, Mary witnesses
to her Child’s entire life from his conception to his death on the cross, his resurrection, his ongoing presence in the Eucharist and in the evolution of the universe.’

As God’s dwelling place, I too am Wisdom’s seat - gift of Baptism, strengthened in Confirmation, so easily forgotten. Even though I pray each morning the late Cardinal Cushing’s prayer, ‘Lord in the quiet of this morning hour, I come to you for wisdom, peace, power, to be patient understanding, gentle, wise, to view the world today with love-filled eyes’…. Why? So I can “see with God’s eyes, feel with God’s heart, speak with God’s words, pray as Solomon did for “an understanding mind able to discern good from evil” (1 Kings 3:9). I am called, then, like Mary to turn all things over in my heart, seeking understanding, attentive to the call of wisdom wherever I am (Lk 2:19, 51; Proverbs 8). So necessary in seeking solutions for our planet in peril, in personal relationships, my encounters with others in my society and world fragmented by fear, hate and mistrust of those who are different.

Walking in Mary’s footsteps is my challenge. I sense that Mary, Seat of Mercy can flesh this out for me. For mercy is the companion of wisdom.

**Mary: Seat of Mercy**

Early on, Christians, contemplating early images of Mary and her Son, claimed the seat (throne) on which she sat, holding Jesus Christ firmly on her lap for all to see, as the new mercy seat. Parallels were drawn between this image of Mary and the mercy seat found in the Ark of the Covenant. Carried by the Israelites on their desert journey, it was later place in the sanctuary of the Temple built in Jerusalem. Flanked by cherubim, God’s glory was manifest first to the Israelites, then yearly to the High Priests in the Temple ((Exodus 25-27); Hebrews 9:3-5).

Mary, in whom the glory of God is manifest through the Incarnation becomes the new ‘Mercy Seat’. Unlike the Mercy Seat hidden in the sanctuary of the Temple, the images contemplated above show that the Mother of God and her Son are visible for all to see. God is manifest to all in the person of Jesus, the Christ.

‘Here we encounter the mystery of the Incarnation anew. God, the Child on his mother’s lap is not distant but passionate about being in relationship with all. In God’s closeness, we touch God’s compassion and mercy embodied in space and time, earthy and real. God is connected to life. God embraces life. All life is sacred.’
Michelangelo’s “Pieta” just inside the Vatican, captures this well. It can be described also as God’s Mercy Seat for here we see ‘God’s maternal affliction open to view in Mary, a human being who has let herself be drawn wholly into God’s mystery. Indeed, we can say the Cross of Christ is God’s compassionate suffering with the world.’

Noting this is important, for the death of Jesus on the Cross has led to Atonement Theology; namely, that God demanded Jesus’ bloody sacrifice of himself on the cross to atone for the sins of humanity. Jesus never aligned himself with the Jewish high Priests, a comparison made in Hebrews, but with his loving, merciful and compassionate Abba. His mission days were spent in a compassionate, loving embrace of the poor, the lame, the weak and afflicted, the tax collectors, the disenfranchised whom the Jewish High priests claimed were sinners and outcasts. In going to his death, Jesus showed us the power of love and the inherent danger when you speak truth to power.

Seeking mercy then is not about seeking God’s pity. As Thomas Merton reminds us in his essay on the Good Samaritan, mercy in the original Semitic language describes God’s unconditional love that binds us to God, which never fails and expects nothing in return. It is an invitation to hope, to trust that no matter what happens I cannot fall out of the mercy of God. So I approach the mercy seat, the throne of grace not to receive mercy and find grace in time of need as Hebrews suggests (Heb 4:16) but rather to learn from Jesus how to live, to grow beyond whatever pettiness surfaces in me, affecting my relationships with others.

Being embraced in God’s unconditional love, mercy, and compassion urges me to seek Wisdom’s guidance in order to live in right relationship with God, self, neighbour, creation. A summons to be mindful that as for Mary, all of creation is here and now in my person in an ever expanding universe.

A poem by Kabir, a fifteenth century Indian mystic and poet, captures this well.

Within this earthen vessel are bowers and groves, and within it is the Creator: Within the vessel are the seven oceans and the unnumbered stars. The touchstone and the jewel-appraiser are within;
And within this vessel the Eternal soundeth, and the spring wells up.

Kabir says; “Listen to me, my friend! My beloved Lord is within.”

In Mary’s Footsteps

My reflection has awakened in me an awareness of Mary’s relationship to Jesus, her Son as the Cosmic Christ. Reflecting on Mary as Ark of the Covenant, Seat of Wisdom, Seat of Mercy concretize her relationship to the Cosmic Christ that remained with her throughout her life on earth, a relationship that spills over into my whole being.

This picture of a sculpture of Mary, Seat of Wisdom, a mature, older woman, sums up all for me. With a smile on her face, arms reaching out, hands wide open, feet planted firmly on the dais, Mary embraces the world. Her very posture echoes for me her ongoing ‘Yes’ to the call of God in her life in her time, in her circumstances. A beautiful reminder that I am at all times and places God’s mission on this earth, even as age advances.

The expansiveness of Mary’s lap reminds me also that her lap was a place of security for her Child. As any parent’s should be, though unfortunately a child might be deprived of such tenderness.

We live in a world where violence rises around us perpetrated by people ascribing to a variety of ideologies. Corporate greed places many in our world in economic insecurity. Nations hold weapons capable of obliterating humankind, all creation. In this climate, Mary, Seat of Wisdom mirrors for me that I must hold and provide security for others and embrace the suffering of our world, not out of fear but love for others and for our Earth, who first loves us and nourishes us. Love, rooted in Wisdom, will also manifest itself through right relationships, for all is interdependent (Jn 15:5). This is compassion, mercy, forgiveness, justice at its core. Thus, in spite of any weaknesses I have, love will enable me to walk daily in Mary’s footsteps, to echo her ‘Yes’
to God, and, in faith, embrace the Mystery of the Incarnation, the Cosmic Christ working in and through me.

**A word of explanation:**

Mary of Nazareth has always been an important person in my life. In recent years, I have written extensively and given retreats on the scriptural memory of Mary, in particular her experience with Elizabeth, in the Visitation (Lk 1:38-55); her presence in the Upper Room and at Pentecost (Acts 1:12-14; 2:1-4), and ways in which her life influenced the first Christian community. As mother and first disciple of Jesus, her journey of faith models for us how to be in relationship with Jesus, his disciples and mother church in a fragmented world.36

Today, along with many members of my Congregation, family and friends, I am also very conscious of my interdependence with all humankind, creation - the cosmos. Reading and personal reflection on evangelization today in light of our new understanding of the unfolding of the universe and the Incarnation have brought to light Jesus, the Christ, the Cosmic Christ in whom all things in heaven and earth were created; in whom all things hold together until the end of time (Eph 1:3-10; Col 1:15-17).

Since Mary continues to be a guiding presence in my life, not surprising that I found myself wondering, what more this new awareness has to say about Mary? How does naming Jesus as the Cosmic Christ impact on the Incarnation, Mary’s ‘Yes’ and on her personally?

I know that I am not the first to reflect on Mary in relation to the Cosmic Christ. Hildegard of Bingen, for one, did so many centuries ago. My desire to reflect on Mary in her relationship to Jesus, the Cosmic Christ, comes from within my being. A call really to explore the depths of this mystery; its importance in my life as I try to live in union with Jesus, be his presence in a multi-cultural society of diverse religious backgrounds and persuasions, professed agnostics, atheists and secularists.

Pondering where to begin, to my surprise, I was drawn not to the printed word but to explore sacred art in early years of Christianity that portray Mary with Jesus, her Son.

It is said that the journey is the destination. Thank you for taking this journey with me.

Montreal, Quebec, June, 2018
In the catacombs other events in Mary's life with Jesus, such as the Adoration of the Magi, are also represented. Similar portrayals of Mary and Jesus can be seen in statues of the Black Madonna found all over the Mediterranean, in Europe, in particular, in churches in Italy and France. 

The origin or Our Lady of the Sign can be traced to the assault on Novgorod, Russia, November 17, 1165. When the citizens brought the Icon to the city wall, arrows are said to have pierced the Icon and the Mother of God turned her face to the city and shed tears. For them it was a sign that Mary was entreating her Son to have the city spared. Inspired by this sign, the people of Novgorod repelled the attack on their city. 

Our Lady of the Sign bearing the Creator of the World, surrounded by the cosmos. Created by Rachel Gaudreau Copyright © 2018. A triptych named Mary, Cosmic Mother giving birth to the Trinity c 1390 can be seen in the Louvre, Paris, France.


The Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a Marian litany originally approved in 1587 by Pope Sixtus V. It is also known as the Litany of Loreto. It is said to have risen as early as the 11th century.

Photo of a statue of Our Lady of Montserrat taken by Rachel Gaudreau, CND © 2017.


Pope Francis, Gaudete et Exultate, On The Call To Holiness In Today’s world, #46.


Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, Mary The Church At The Source, Translated from the German by Adrian Walker. San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2005, p. 77.


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