

The Sacred Feminine in Christianity

An Interview with

James Presta

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Fr. Presta: Thank you Fr. Baima, it is great to be with you.

Fr. Baima: I should also mention that Fr. Presta also is the host of another program on Catholic Community of Faith, the program: *From St. Joseph Seminary*.

Fr. Presta: That's correct. We sponsor the Catholic Community of Faith Radio Show every other First Friday of the month. Every other month there is also a show from Archbishop Quigley Preparatory Seminary: the high school seminary of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

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Fr. Baima: So it's always good to have another one of the Archdiocese's radio hosts on *Speaking of Theology*. So, what do we want to do today? We have been talking over the last few months about the religious issues that have surrounded or been raised up by Dan Brown's book *The DaVinci Code*. One of the issues I'm hearing a lot about in parishes is that the whole matter of the feminine dimension of religion, which Brown calls the sacred feminine. So, I thought it would be worth while to devote our time on *Speaking of Theology* today to explore the feminine dimension of Christianity. In a particular way, I want to focus on Mariology and explore with you the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Catholic history, art, piety and worship. For that reason I was so happy that you agreed to join us since this is your main area of study, when you're not administering the college seminary, is Mariology. Maybe we could just start out

and see how far we can get in the course of our time this morning. Let me start with a question: How early do we see Marian piety emerge in Christian history?

Fr. Presta: Well, certainly from the scriptures themselves. We can look a reference in St. Paul in Galatians 4:4 that refers to Mary, and certainly in the Gospels themselves, we already begin to see that Mary obviously takes a role in the story of salvation. She certainly had a place in the life of the early Church. I would say that immediately following the writing of the Gospels, you would see her in the next period, the Patristic period. The Church Father's certainly dwell on Mary, for example, in the idea of Mary as the new Eve. This would be a particular theme that some of the early Church Father's would use. After that, Mary is mentioned in the baptismal creeds. The Nicene Creed refers to Mary where it says that is Jesus born of the Virgin. Of course, all of the references are always Christological; they are obviously tied to Jesus Christ. That's where Mary obviously gains her importance as the God-bearer. She is the one who gives physical birth to the Savior, as well as playing a very prominent role in the birth of the early Church. So, I would say that from the very beginning, there is plenty of evidence that Mary has a prominent role. Devotion to Mary has already begun in the prayer of the early Church. I believe it is the Coptic (Egyptian) church from about the 3rd century the *Sub Tuum* prayer; "we fly to your protection O Virgin of Virgins." Obviously this is an example of deep supplication by the early Christians for the assistance of the Blessed Mother. So I would say there is plenty of evidence that she had a role in the early Church from the very beginning.

Fr. Baima: I had Sr. Agnes Cunningham one of our professors emeritus on the program. In her classes, she always would make the point that anything we say about Mariology is ultimately a statement about Christology. And as a consequence, when we talk about Mary, we are not just talking about an exalted woman, or a great saint, but about somebody who had a role in the history of salvation. Tell our listeners a little bit about that dimension of Mary's place in the Church.

Fr. Presta: That is so true and I would like to use the word, unique. She has the unique role of being the Mother of God. No other saint in the Church, even some of the greatest of the saints, can make that claim. Mary's role is unique and obviously privileged because she was chosen to be the mother of the Savior. That role has all kinds of implications in terms of salvation history and in terms of theology itself. We not only give Mary the title, Mother of the Lord but we eventually, centuries later, we give her the title of Mother of the Church. This was declared officially in 1964 by Pope Paul VI. Nonetheless, it gives our listeners an idea of the prominence that Mary plays in the Church throughout history.

Fr. Baima: The significance is that when we say that Mary had a role in salvation history, this is not just something constructed out of piety. This is actually related to the historic events that brought about our salvation. So the word, unique, is perfectly appropriate because no other saint has that exact place. The other thing that strikes me, when I hear criticisms of the Catholic Church such as we find in *The DaVinci Code*, of trying to somehow exclude the

feminine dimension from religion, is that here right in our doctrine, in the very moments of doctrinal development in the fourth century that Dan Brown criticizes in his book, is this truth that a woman had a unique roll in bringing about the very events of human salvation. Readers of *The DaVinci Code* have to see the whole picture, the real history, and not Brown's fictional construction. One of the other things that figures so prominently in the book and which give it the veneer of historical fiction is what Brown does with architecture. I know when I studied Rome, one of my great discoveries, was the age of buildings. Being an American and coming from a country where houses are younger than the people who live in them and then going to Rome and living in a house that was built in 1600 and referred to in the neighborhood as one of the new buildings, gave me a whole different approach to architecture. So, I want to ask you then; when were church buildings first dedicated to Mary?

Fr. Presta: Well, at least in the Western Church, the one we are most aware of and obviously has a great prominence not only in the City of Rome but also for the Church universal is St. Mary Major. That Church was built probably about fifth century, sometime after the Council of Ephesus when Mary was declared to be *Theotokos* (the God-Bearer) or as we say in English, *the Mother of God*. In a sense, to elevate and remember and venerate that sacred moment and the declaration of such an important event, the Church of Saint Mary Major was erected to give honor and praise to Mary, always glorifying God ultimately, but in veneration of his Mother.

Fr. Baima: I'd like to ask you to explain to our listeners about Mary being declared to be *Theotokos*; God-Bearer. Some people have the notion that when a council declares something a doctrine, that the council invented a new teaching. In my reading of Church history, what councils do is make judgments between different formulations and choose the one that is the most authentic to the ancient tradition. Could you say a little bit about how that happened in the case of the title, *Theotokos*?

Fr. Presta: Certainly what you say is true. A council meets to clarify for the faithful exactly what the Church teaches. So the wording is obviously of utmost importance in making those definitions. In terms of the Council of Ephesus, the primary argument was whether Mary could be called the God-Bearer or whether she could only be called the Christ-Bearer? You see there was certainly no argument that Mary was the Mother of the physical Jesus, but, could we also say that a woman could bear God? I think that's where the argument began. You might say that the Council of Ephesus made the judgment to call Mary the *Theotokos* rather than the *Christotokos*. Obviously, as the Church Father's debated these questions, faith was working in them. They authentically declared what was the lived reality in the beliefs of people. I think that with the help of the Holy Spirit the expression of our doctrine comes to fruition. We begin to see the Church able to define these important doctrines and teachings. That's what happened at the Council of Ephesus.

Fr. Baima: I want to take us back to something Fr. Bob Barron said on an earlier show. I can imagine some of our listeners driving in their car and saying to

themselves, “Theotokus, Christotokus, who cares”? What is the consequence of this in my life? Fr. Barron made the important point that it really all goes back to who is Jesus? If Jesus is not God and man, if the divine-human union hasn't taken place in him, then everything we say about salvation is meaningless. Because if that were so, if Jesus did not have the ability to heal the separation between God and humanity, then he would have just been a great teacher or philosopher, but not the incarnate Son of God. These statements about Mary immediately reflect back to statements about Jesus. Dan Brown, in *The DaVinci Code*, casts it as though Constantine invented the divinity of Jesus sometime in the fourth century. But Fr. Barron asked the question rather pointedly. If that is true, who in the world would care who Jesus married? If he was just a prophet, just a first century teacher, who cares? So while these very technical terms of Greek theology make our head spin, they're terribly important. Mistakes in doctrine are felt at the level of people's piety. The simple people knew that it made a difference if you didn't allow Mary the title of Mother of God. If she was not the Mother of God, it demoted Jesus and that put the whole enterprise at risk.

Fr. Presta: We have a saying in this field, “the study of the sacred scriptures is the soul of Mariology.” We have to look first at what is said of her in the scriptures. That becomes of utmost importance. Right along side the scriptures is the tradition, the lived reality as you said of who Mary is and who she has become for the Christian people. Again, this is not invented but aligned and in relationship to who Jesus is. There is no such thing as Mariology without Christology. In other words we cannot understand Mary without Christ, we can’t understand Mary without a sense of what the church is. All these different areas of theology impinge on understanding Mary and Mary is impinging on our understanding of those other areas of theology. It cannot operate separately. It must work together. Mariology, in a sense, assists our understanding of who Christ is or what the Church is.

Fr. Baima: Historically, as we’ve already said, devotion to Mary and this feminine dimension in the Catholic tradition has been present from very early days. But there were some points in Church history where there were movements against that feminine dimension. I am thinking of the Iconoclast movement, where images of the Blessed Virgin and all the saints were destroyed. But I am also thinking of the opposition to Mariology that emerged in the Protestant Reformation. Could you speak a little bit about that opposition to this dimension of Catholic life?

Fr. Presta: Well as you mentioned, I think that was about 8th century when the Second Council of Nicea declared that the use of icons was perfectly valid form of devotion. It held that icons were art forms that could be used in churches and

should be venerated. I think one of the important things to remember is that the depiction of Mary in iconography, especially in the Eastern rite, Mary is usually shown with the Child Jesus. It's rare to see Mary pictured by herself. So, it's very important to keep that feminine dimension alive. It's also important as we look at the Counter Reformation, where Mary had become, perhaps, somewhat elevated. Perhaps people really could not identify as strongly with her and so some of the Protestant reformers said we need to have a more real Mary or perhaps that Mary is not as important to us as perhaps what we had imagined. So there's a break with the study of Mary and the prominence of Mary after the Reformation with the Protestants.

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Fr. Presta: Well as you mentioned, I think that was about 8th century when the Second Council of Nicea declared that the use of icons was perfectly valid form of devotion. It held that icons were art forms that could be used in churches and should be venerated. I think one of the important things to remember is that the depiction of Mary in iconography, especially in the Eastern rite, Mary is usually shown with the Child Jesus. It's rare to see Mary pictured by herself. So, it's very important to keep that feminine dimension alive. It's also important as we look at the Counter Reformation, where Mary had become, perhaps, somewhat elevated. Perhaps people really could not identify as strongly with her and so some of the Protestant reformers said we need to have a more real Mary or perhaps that Mary is not as important to us as perhaps what we had imagined. So there's a break there with the study of Mary and the prominence of Mary in the Counter Reformation with the Protestants.

Fr. Baima: I think we are at a time today where we're also finding some more of this opposition. In Dan Brown's book, *The DaVinci Code*, there's a lot of reference to feminism and the opposition that it has voiced against the portrayal of Mary in the Catholic Church. I wonder if you could talk a little bit for our listeners about feminism's critique of Mariology. As a Mariologist, how would you respond?

Fr. Presta: I think the main contention of many feminists theologians today would be this; there is certainly a patriarchal feeling as you read different doctrines and different manuscripts. Really, Christianity itself has kind of a patriarchal feeling to it. I think feminists would like to go back to the first century, at least when we talk about Mary and

the New Testament. Who is the real, historical Mary? Who was this woman? What times did she live in? So, they say we need to get in touch with first century Palestine and the Mediterranean woman that she was. When feminist theologians talk in that way, obviously it is important to balance and understand the different things that would touch upon, the writings of the early Church Fathers, the scriptures themselves, any of the doctrines, the emphasis will always be from the feminist point of view. The feminists want to liberate Mary so to speak, from models that have been used on her that somehow help men to understand their own role but diminish women. Obviously, as a Marian theologian, I wouldn't totally agree with that assessment, but that is what feminist theologians would put forward.

Fr. Baima: Certainly going back to the historical roots is a legitimate methodology. Essentially, that is what we do in theology. We try to find the literal sense again going back to the scriptures first and then move forward. In our previous show with Sr. Agnes Cunningham, we explored one of the problems with the feminist approach, which could be called the leveling of sources. There are some sources that are authentic to the Christian faith and others that are outside it. One thing I've seen happening in the feminist critique is that these sources are all treated as equal, even though some are Christian and some are, in effect, non-Christian or have been created by heretical groups. So, one issue when one does historical theology is making certain that one has authentic sources. What would we say would be an approach to a healthy Mariology? If there are critiques about unhealthy Mariology, what's the formula for a healthy Mariological view?

Fr. Presta: Let me refer to Elizabeth Johnson, a Sister of St. Joseph who has written on Mary and while she takes a feminist approach, I think it is also very good balanced approach. One of the things she talks about is that Pope Paul VI wanted to say that good Mariology must have five characteristics; it must be biblical, liturgical, ecumenical, and anthropological as well as theological. Using all those sophisticated words is another way to say that we have to center Mary in the times that she lived. We have to look at the person she was. We have to look at the scriptures. We have to look at the liturgy itself and even the theology and how it's connected to some of these different areas in order to have good Marian theology. In other words, we have to center our Mariology. We have to figure out exactly what surrounds it and, as you said, some of the things that are written certainly from the early church are the more credible sources. And then some we can't put everything on the same level. So when we talk about good Marian Theology it has to be biblically based in the scriptures. It has to be in the tradition of the Church in terms of liturgy. It certainly has to be sensitive to the different religious points of view within Christianity and sensitive to the different religious groups, as well as being aware of the changing roles of women in their society and in society today. Again, theologically Mary is always placed in relationship to Christ and to the Church. So once, you've used those five characteristics, you get a much more balanced approach about who Mary is. I think it answers a lot of questions even from a feminist point of view. At least it can answer some of the questions and critiques that are sometimes leveled at Mariology.

Fr. Baima: So how would a Catholic today or any Christian for that matter, who wanted to either recover or enter into an authentic Marian piety, proceed to deepen their appreciation for the feminine in Christianity? What would you offer as a recommendation to them?

Fr. Presta: I think quickly of two things, Fr. Baima. The first would be the scriptures themselves. My focus would be on the Gospels, in particular Luke and John. I also think of what Pope John Paul II has done for us with this year of the Rosary that just recently ended by presenting the five new mysteries. We call them the luminous mysteries, mysteries of light. They're more focused on Christ and so now with a total of 20 mysteries which are all scripturally based, we have a better sense of who Christ is in company with Mary. As you pray the beads and pray the prayers you can also take the scriptures along with it and really journey with Christ throughout his birth and his ministry, death and resurrection. We pray in company with Mary. We are disciples in company with Mary. I really think that praying of the rosary and keeping it biblically based is a wonderful way to renew your own Marian piety and I can't think of a better way to renew it than looking at the scriptures themselves.

Fr. Baima: Well, that's about all the time we have today. My thanks to Fr. James Presta, the Rector President of St. Joseph College Seminary for sharing his insights with us today on *Speaking of Theology*.

Fr. Baima: I think we are at a time today where we're also finding some more of this opposition. In Dan Brown's book, *The DaVinci Code*, there's a lot of reference to feminism and the opposition that it has voiced against the portrayal of Mary in the Catholic Church. I wonder if you could talk a little bit for our listeners about feminism's critique of Mariology. As a Mariologist, how would you respond?

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sensitive to the different religious points of view within Christianity and sensitive to the different religious groups, as well as being aware of the changing roles of women in their society and in society today. Again, theologically Mary is always placed in relationship to Christ and to the Church. So once, you've used those five characteristics, you get a much more balanced approach about who Mary is. I think it answers a lot of questions even from a feminist point of view. At least it can answer some of the questions and critiques that are sometimes leveled at Mariology.

Fr. Baima: So how would a Catholic today or any Christian for that matter, who wanted to either recover or enter into an authentic Marian piety, proceed to deepen their appreciation for the feminine in Christianity? What would you offer as a recommendation to them?

Fr. Presta: I think quickly of two things, Fr. Baima. The first would be the scriptures themselves. My focus would be on the Gospels, in particular Luke and John. I also think of what Pope John Paul II has done for us with this year of the Rosary that just recently ended by presenting the five new mysteries. We call them the luminous mysteries, mysteries of light. They're more focused on Christ and so now with a total of 20 mysteries which are all scripturally based, we have a better sense of who Christ is in company with Mary. As you pray the beads and pray the prayers you can also take the scriptures along with it and really journey with Christ throughout his birth and his ministry, death and resurrection. We pray in company with Mary. We are disciples in company with Mary. I really think that praying of the rosary and keeping it biblically

based is a wonderful way to renew your own Marian piety and I can't think of a better way to renew it than looking at the scriptures themselves.

Fr. Baima: Well, that's about all the time we have today. My thanks to Fr. James Presta, the Rector / President of St. Joseph College Seminary for sharing his insights with us today on *Speaking of Theology*.