



Mary, Mother of the Church

Reflections by Sr. Regina Bechtle, S.C.

“Listen to your mother”

“Listen to your mother” – good advice whether we’re 8 or 80. Good advice for the gathered community of disciples that we call “church.”

It is said that there are two times in a community’s life when it reveals its truest self: when it gathers to celebrate and when it meets to discern. Let us look at two such moments from Scripture: the Cana community in the midst of a joyous wedding celebration, and the community after the Resurrection, when it gathers to pray and discern in the deepest unity of mind and heart.



Mary of the church of Cana



What does *Mary of the church of Cana* have to say to us and to our church?

- Cana: a scene of festivity & community, of intimacy & scarcity.
- Like a wise mother (and a good spiritual director), Mary clearly assesses the need. She brings to light what is going on, she describes the situation, and she points toward the next step to be taken. “Do whatever he tells you.”



What does Mary of the church of Cana have to say to us and to our church?

- Mary of Cana keeps us focused on the One to whom we all need to listen.
- She firmly directs the stewards and ministers *not to get in His way*.
- She shows us that we first have to acknowledge our need, our limits, our poverty, so that the Spirit can show us the abundance that is hidden within it.



What does *Mary* of the church of Cana have to say to us and to our church?

- And she reminds us to keep believing that the Spirit of God can take what is old and finished and ordinary and stale and not enough – and transform the dregs into something special and unique and precisely what is needed.



What does *Mary of the church of Acts* have to say to us and to our church?

- Think about the post-Easter community, still rocking and reeling from the impact of the Spirit of the risen Jesus.
- One in mind and heart and possessions, they live in a communion that overflows into mission – an ideal picture, to be sure, that probably lasted all of five minutes!



What does *Mary of the church of Acts* have to say to us and to our church?

- An alternate image of the early church that I especially like to pray with is one from a 14th century illuminated manuscript. The disciples are gathered in a circle with Mary in the center. She is obviously the wisdom figure to whom they turn.



Editor's Note: This is an image from the 14th C. that seems to fit the description, however it may not be the exact image to which Sister is referring.

What does *Mary of the church of Acts* have to say to us and to our church?

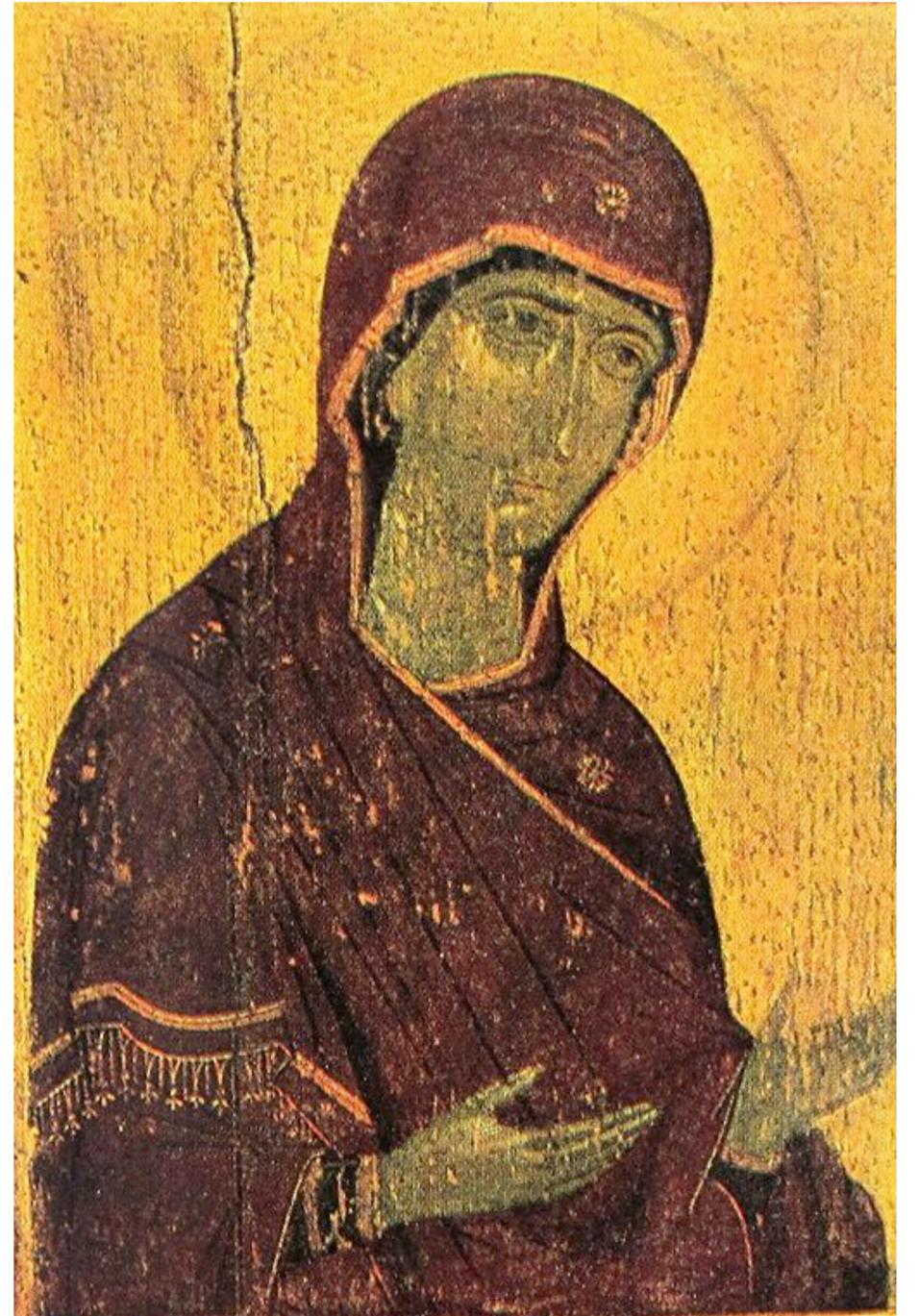
- As the early church faced questions like “Who can belong? Can the Gentiles belong to Christ if they don’t follow Jewish laws and customs?”, I imagine that they were grateful for *Mary’s* motherly guidance.

Resurrection Appearances (detail). Meister des Schöppinger, c. 1449, Pfarrkirche, Westfalen.



What does *Mary of the church of Acts* have to say to us and to our church?

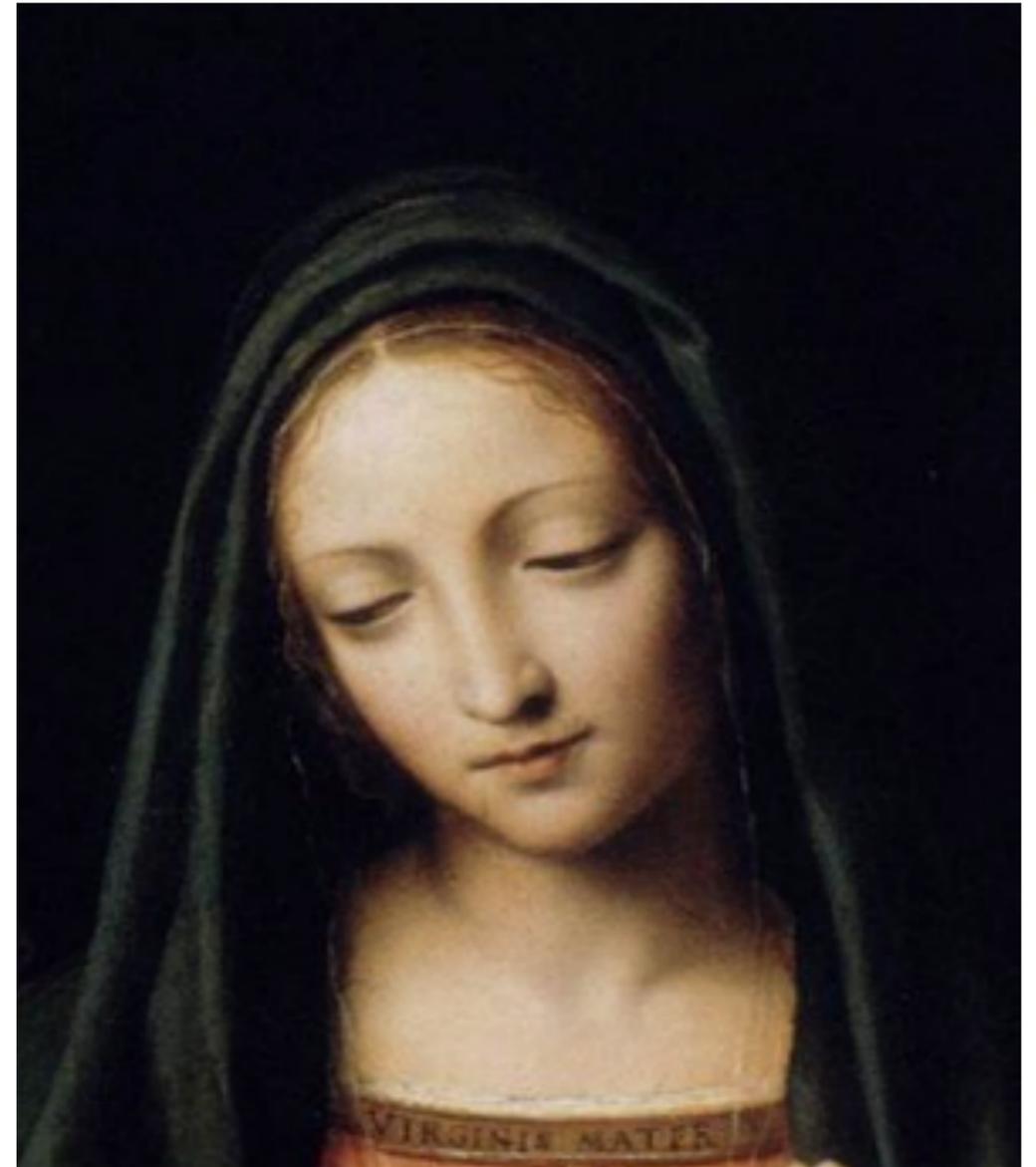
- Because a mother knows how to build up her family, not to tear it down.
- A mother knows how to make room for all around the table; how to encourage more than chastise.
- A mother knows how to set limits that help her family to grow in responsible freedom, how to lead them beyond self-absorbed concerns into a discerning awareness of what is best for all.



"Virgin Mary (Ubisi icon)" by Unknown

What does *Mary of the church of Acts* have to say to us and to our church?

- A mother doesn't muzzle her children, but knows how to encourage them to speak lovingly with freedom and boldness.
- A mother knows that the diverse gifts of her children are meant to enrich the whole family, meant to be welcomed and called forth and held in common.



Detail of painting by Bernardino Luini

Kindred Spirits

- “Listen to your mother.” Elizabeth Ann Seton, herself a mother and a widow, struggling over the decision to become a Catholic, found in Mary a kindred spirit. She was convinced that Christ “would refuse nothing to his mother — she couldn’t help loving and pitying the poor souls he died for.”



Seed of Vincentian Charity in the U.S.

- Over 200 years ago, Elizabeth founded a community of Sisters of Charity, the first apostolic religious community for women begun in the United States. With her choice to use an adapted version of the rule of the Daughters of Charity, she was the first to plant the seed of Vincentian Charity in this land.



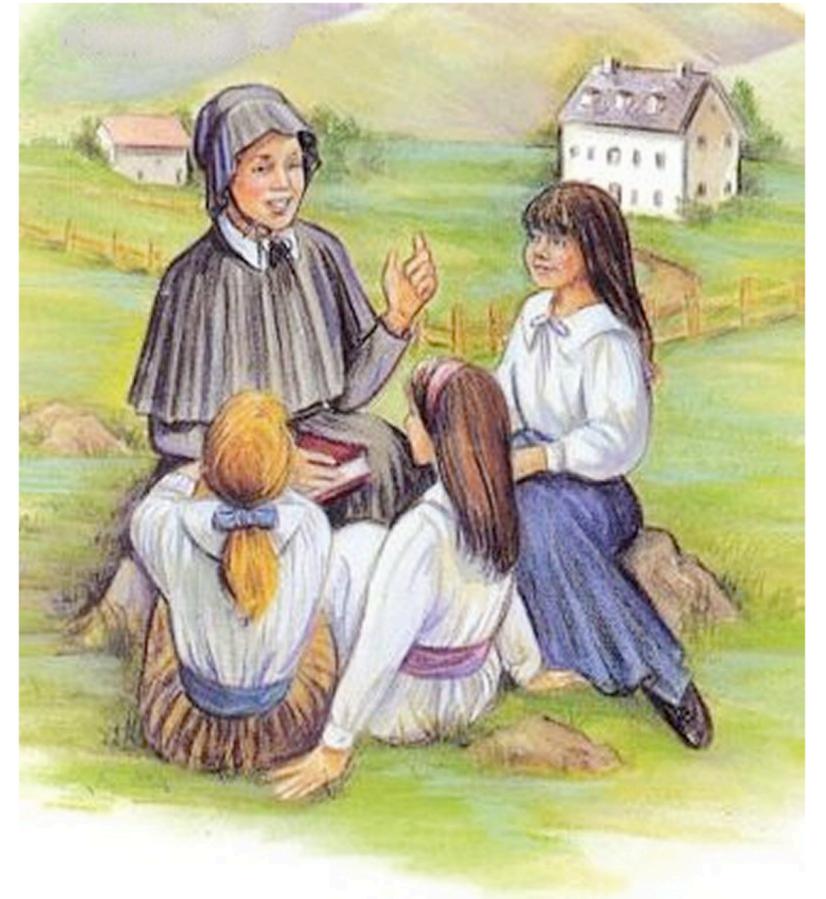
“Children of the Church”

- Her dying advice was, “Be children of the Church.” But let us not too quickly use her words to reinforce a childish subservience that doesn’t benefit adult members of Christ’s body.



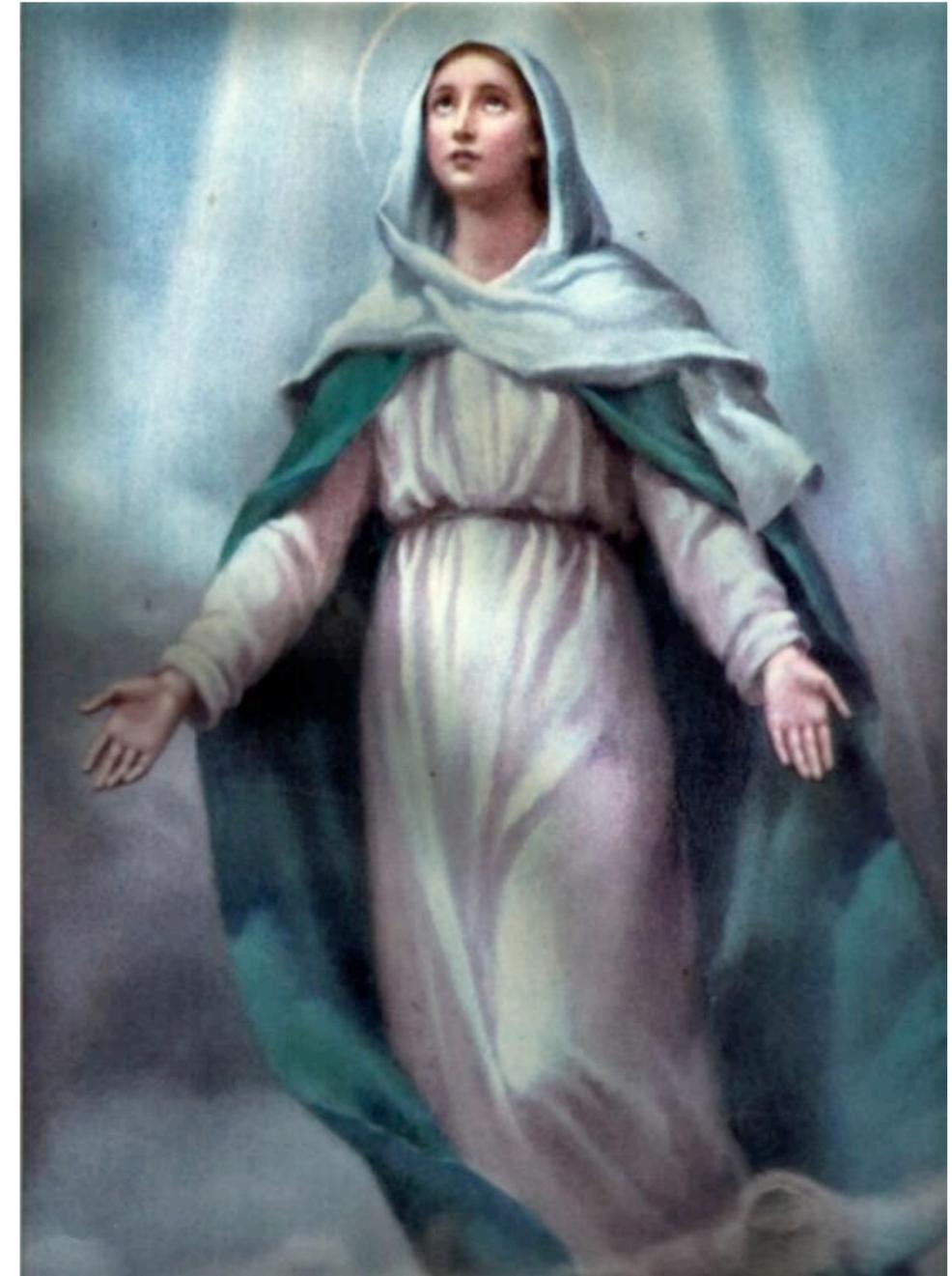
Church As a Welcoming Home

- Remember that Church for Elizabeth meant “home”, the place where she felt welcome to enter a rich sacramental life. Sacraments were for Elizabeth Ann Seton an invitation to experience and enjoy God’s own fullness – not a litmus test to separate sheep from goats. All were equally unworthy, and so equally worthy, called and gifted by God.
- Yes, Elizabeth’s church had rules and expectations, but it also had plenty of room.



Mary's Message

- How would Mary, our Mother, mother of our Church, respond?
- “Do whatever he tells you. Let yourself be rocked and shaken and broken open. Let the Spirit transform you into people of one heart and mind. And speak the Good News of Christ’s boundless love, with boldness and joy.”



Mary's Message

- “When you are tempted to widen the divisions in your midst,” our Mother Mary would say, “find the WE beyond the us and them. Deepen instead your desire to see as God sees.”



Beg Mary to Bring Our Needs Before Her Son

The end of Vatican II's Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, offers a fitting way to close this reflection. It calls on the "entire body of the faithful" to beg Mary, "who aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers," to continue, from her heavenly place of glory, to bring our needs before her Son. "May she do so until all the peoples of the human family...are happily gathered together in peace and harmony into the one People of God." (LG, 69)



Our Prayer

Or in Vincentian language, we might pray, “Mary, mother of the Church, show us how to expand the circle of solidarity. Help us to welcome the challenges of a world church, and to find the abundance in what seems like scarcity. Inspire us — like the familiar image of Vincent at Table — to find room for all.”



Artist: Br. Robert Lentz, OFM

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