

A CONVERSATION WITH JUDITH DUPRÉ

There has been so much written about the Virgin Mary. Thousands of artists, poets, and theologians have attempted to capture her essence over the centuries. What makes your book different?

Though Mary's life has had an enormous impact on two thousand years of history, theology, and the arts, we know shockingly little about her—there are no historical records—and she makes only thirteen brief appearances in the Bible. While it's true that literally thousands of books have been written about Mary, *Full of Grace* examines certain topics—fatherhood, the cost of war, the dignity of work, creativity, self-doubt, even subjects like divorce and autism—that are rarely discussed in a Marian context. It asks some daring, usually unspoken, questions: about the nature of faith, what makes one place sacred and not another, and does prayer really work?

I'd like to think of it as a book of hours, providing different glimpses of Mary that can be contemplated, savored, in light of a number of life circumstances that we often have little choice but to accept. Most of all, I wanted to make Mary real because that's how I've experienced her in my own life, not as a distant figure from the past but as a loving mother and a living example of empowered womanhood. In these times, which are difficult for so many, Mary models an ideal way to live—faithfully, with grace and radical acceptance of what is and what cannot be changed. She has responded with such wit to my many prayers that I can't help but think she also has a good sense of humor. So I think she'd appreciate *Full of Grace*—after all, what other book on Mary quotes Woody Allen, provides a recipe for Italian pepper biscuits, and tells you where to get your hair done in Palestine? Mary is real in every way!

Is this book written for Catholics?

Given Catholics' familial relationship with Mary, they will be especially interested in the history and genesis of key Marian beliefs, such as the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and that of the Assumption, and the controversies that attended their proclamation. But the book certainly isn't only for Catholics or even Christians, for that matter. The stories I tell in these pages cast a wide net, mirroring Mary's ability to cross boundaries—whether religious, political, geographic, or cultural. And, though Mary's life and her story speak directly to issues that all women face, this isn't a book just for women, either. Even President Obama carries a picture of Mary in his wallet.

I wrote the book for people like me—who embrace a religious tradition but don't hesitate to respectfully question it—and for those who aren't particularly religious but yearn to find meaning in their lives. Whether or not they go to church, those who want to cultivate their spiritual lives and moral, ethical, and social awareness, will find much to consider here. This is not a book about being perfect, it's a book about life. The book considers many of the “Monday through Saturday” issues that, taken with one's Sunday religious practice, make up the totality of a person's spiritual life.

The book covers many of the major pilgrimage sites where Mary appeared. The fifty-nine-bead format also suggests the theme of journeying.

Full of Grace is a journey undertaken, like the rosary, in the spirit of pilgrimage. Most major Marian pilgrimage sites— Lourdes, Fatima, Mexico City, Medjugorje, Loreto, and others—are explored in its pages. But it's also about engaging transformation along one's personal path, both spiritually and in our daily lives. By sharing my own doubts and missteps as I returned to my native Catholicism, I hoped to give people ways to understand their lives in a broader context and see them in a new light. I directly address and seek to comfort certain segments of the population, many of them pilgrims, who have cared for children with disabilities or those (like mine) who had difficult beginnings, who have suffered through divorce or endured the death of a loved one.

There is much that will never be known about Mary, yet we know the most important thing about her: When confronted by God, asked by the angel if she would become Jesus's mother, she answered in the affirmative. Although she didn't know where she was about to go, in that moment, full of grace, she said *yes* to the journey.

You write that “One of Mary’s most profound and persistent roles has been as a bridge builder.” Could you explain?

Mary joins together what had once been separate, whether traditions, cultures, or peoples, with perhaps no bridge more momentous than the one stretched tenuously between Christianity and Islam. I was intrigued to discover that Mary is the only female named in the Qur'an, Islam's central holy text. In fact, there is more written about Mary in the Qur'an than in the New Testament!

By making an empathetic, interpretative leap into Mary's historical past, I discovered parallels to contemporary concerns and to other faiths. One narrative, for instance, relates the beloved tradition of the Christmas crèche to an exhibition of refugee shelters I curated at Yale—an effort to open people's eyes to the reality that many on earth still suffer displacement and homelessness, just as Mary and Joseph did two thousand years ago. Another narrative about the medieval symbol of the Jesse Tree concludes with a story about Tu B'Shvat, the Jewish festival of trees, suggesting ways that Christians can take part in environmental stewardship. I also report on new church services, such as the Blue Christmas service for those who are grieving during the holiday season, to raise awareness about ways to meet the needs of the bereft and the lonely.

You've made your reputation writing about architecture. Why the shift to Mary?

It was time to more closely integrate my professional and spiritual lives. I have been devoted to Our Lady of Guadalupe for over two decades. My devotion increased when my youngest child was diagnosed with brain damage and it was thought he would never walk. Today, not only does he walk, but he's a talented athlete—and his middle name is Guadalupe.

About halfway through writing a book about the sacred feminine in architecture, I realized that every topic I was considering hinged, in some way, on the Virgin Mary. However, I haven't abandoned my usual themes: architecture and themes of "home" are threaded throughout this new book. I write extensively about the Chora (the Church of St. Saviour in Istanbul); Chartres Cathedral; Steinhausen, the great Bavarian Rococo masterpiece; the Basilica of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem; and the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles—extraordinary

examples of the many churches dedicated to Mary. I'm looking at buildings as metaphors in this one. *Full of Grace* reflects my ongoing study of the human condition and how it is sheltered by the structures we build.

Can you comment on the book's format?

The text is a three-part invention: narrative, visual narrative, and marginalia. The main text consists of short essays, sometimes personal, sometimes theological or historical, on Mary's place in our everyday lives. Additional insights from a diverse field of writers, from Bernard of Clairvaux to Simone de Beauvoir, are found in the margins, which are formatted after the *midrash* commentary on the text of the Hebrew Bible (which is used also but to a lesser extent in the New Testament and the Qur'an). One favorite *midrash* is a poem entitled "22-Foot Mother" by the poet Andrea Cohen, whom I met while in residence at the MacDowell Colony. She wrote it after I told her about my longing to crawl into a mother's lap for comfort. Because I tend toward the architectural and the analytic, I calculated that a mother big enough to hold me on her lap would have to be at least 19, but preferably 22, feet high. Andrea was so taken with this notion of a giant mother that she wrote a poem to commemorate our conversation.

In keeping with my interest in the venerable tradition and material presence of the printed book, *Full of Grace* includes a "book inside a book." This "inside book" runs through the narrative text, providing a mini-history of Mary's changing face in the history of art. The illustrations are provocative, combining masterworks of art with movie stills, photojournalism, and other images from popular culture. I wanted to break down the barriers between high and low art, just as I have attempted to connect high theology and Marian history to the experience of unexpected grace in ordinary life.