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Discussion Questions for *FULL OF GRACE* by Judith Dupré

1. Although the author is often present in the book's stories, *Full of Grace* includes numerous insights on the Virgin Mary, and on womanhood in general, by theologians, historians, contemporary writers, and poets, adding up to a kind of chorus celebrating Mary. How do these other voices contribute to Dupré's narrative and to the overall meaning of the book? Would the book be the same if Dupré had not included these other voices?
2. As Dupré explains, there is startlingly little historical evidence—no eyewitness accounts, letters, birth records, or death notices—about Mary's actual life. She is mentioned only thirteen times in the Bible, yet she is one of the most recognizable figures in both the religious and secular spheres. Why do you think she has such a hold on our collective imagination?
3. When Gabriel asked Mary if she was willing to become Jesus's mother, she said yes. She knew it would be a difficult, heartbreaking journey, but she agreed to take it. What was your most difficult "yes"?
4. *Full of Grace* has an unusual, three-part structure, consisting of main text, illustrated narrative, and margin commentary. How do you think this structure affects your experience of the book and of the message that Dupré is expressing with her narrative?
5. The illustrations in *Full of Grace* provide a kind of mini-overview of the changing ways in which Mary has been depicted throughout the history of art. Talk about the different ways that she is represented by different cultures and at different periods in history. What do you think causes these shifts? If you were an artist commissioned to create an image of Mary, how would you show her? Would your vision of her change at different points in your own life?
6. In choosing the illustrations for the book, Dupré did not rely on conventional representations of Mary, although she includes many classic masterworks. Why do you think she did this? What images most surprised you? Were there any you disagreed with? Which was your favorite and why?
7. How would you describe Mary and Joseph's relationship? What drew them together? What qualities did Joseph bring to their marriage and to fatherhood?

8. The author reports on the MANTRA study at Duke University, which was the first time rigorous scientific protocols were used to quantify the intangible therapeutic benefits of prayer. What do you think of the results of that study? In your experience, does prayer really work?
9. Most major Marian pilgrimage sites—Lourdes, Fatima, Mexico City, Medjugorje, Loreto, and others—are explored in the pages of *Full of Grace*. How are these sites similar to one another, and how are they different? Have you been to any of them, or to other places of pilgrimage, and, if so, how did your experience fit with your expectations of the holy site?
10. Dupré explains that many women of all stripes, levels of education, and professional accomplishment, have said they “feel Mary’s presence most strongly in the kitchen, during those quiet hours, when they are cooking, cleaning up the Chinese takeout, or emptying the dishwasher.” What do you think they mean by this? Is there a room or a place in your home, or a moment in your day, that evokes a sense of the sacred for you? Why?
11. Do you relate to Mary most as the girl she was when she met the angel, as a proud young mother, as an older mother grieving the loss of her son, or as the queen of Heaven, as she was ultimately crowned?
12. Dupré writes about Blue Christmas services that help the grieving and the lonely come to terms with the suffering they feel around the holidays. Have you experienced a blue Christmas, or felt sadness during an occasion of joy? What rituals have helped you deal with loss?
13. Parents of autistic children often have a complex relationship to their children’s disability; their reactions can range from sorrow to frustration to acceptance to utter joy, sometimes all at once. Similarly, as shown in the “New Understanding” story, Mary and Joseph sensed that they could never fully understand Jesus. How do you think this sense of emotional and intellectual distance could complicate, frustrate, or enrich a parent’s love for a child?
14. Dupré opens the book with an anecdote about meeting a beautiful young woman covered in tattoos, and says, “I couldn’t shake the feeling I had been looking at an image of the Virgin Mary, who bore the wounds of the world as her own.” What do you think she means by this? Have there been seemingly casual encounters in your own life that, like the tattooed girl, have been “an awakening,” and left a mark on your perception of your world?

15. Discuss the commonalities between Mary and her elderly relative Elizabeth. How do they mirror each other? Do you have a specific friend or friends who have upheld you during difficult periods of your life?
16. Dupré suggests that there are strong parallels between Mary and the archetypal goddesses of the distant past, such as Artemis, the Egyptian mother goddess Isis, Demeter, and Cybele. Do you agree? What qualities does Mary share with the ancient goddesses? What is gained by thinking of Mary as a fusion of many earlier female deities?
17. Judith, the Old Testament heroine who slays Holofernes to save the Israelites, is widely celebrated, but nonetheless committed an act of cold-blooded murder. Was she justified in her actions? If so, what makes it so? When does the end justify the means?
18. Dupré makes the case that the role of the divine feminine has been marginalized and subject to patriarchal control for much of recorded history and has been a great loss—not only for women but for many men, who have also suffered from the historical, often spiritually disenfranchising privilege accorded them. What do you think she means by this? What privileges do women enjoy that are denied to most men? How might men benefit from a change?
19. The overwhelming numbers of pilgrims to the Holy Land for the past twenty centuries—to see churches and sites associated with Mary, Jesus and the Holy Family—suggest the ongoing appeal of “authenticated” places of biblical history, despite the lack of proof supporting such designations. Why do you think these places exert such a pull on our imaginations? Does it really make a difference if one is standing on the exact place where history transpired?
20. A holy relic, or any structure, has an emotional resonance and identity beyond its physical dimensions. Similarly, our personal internal maps last a lifetime. To test this idea, imagine the home of your childhood and the street you grew up on. What do you see, smell, hear, and taste?



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By Judith Dupré

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