

Mary: Mother ... and savior?

Jan Jarboe Russell / New York Times News Service

"The world of today is in desperate need of a mother," whispered Prof. Mark Miravalle as he sat behind his desk at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, carefully fingering a string of rosary beads. Half a world away, inside the Vatican, yet another enormous box arrived filled with petitions asking Pope John Paul II to exercise his absolute power to proclaim a new and highly debated dogma: that the Virgin Mary is a co-redeemer with Jesus and cooperates fully with her son in the redemption of mankind.

Miravalle, 41, began the petition drive four years ago from his obscure position as a professor of Mariology -- the study of Mary -- at one of the most conservative Catholic universities in the nation. Since then the pope has received more than 6 million signatures from 148 countries asking him to give the Virgin Mary the ultimate promotion. In addition to ordinary Catholics, Miravalle has received support from 550 bishops and 42 cardinals, as well as from Cardinal John O'Connor and Mother Teresa. Along the way, his movement has laid bare a deep-seated conflict between wildly popular devotion to the Virgin Mary and the efforts of the established church to keep that devotion in check.

If Miravalle's campaign succeeds and John Paul proclaims the Virgin Mary as a co-redeemer, she would be a vastly more powerful figure, something close to a fourth member of the Holy Trinity and the primary female face through which Christians experience the divine. Specifically, Roman Catholics would be required to accept three new spiritual truths: that Mary is co-redemptrix and participates in people's redemption, that Mary is mediatrix and has the power to grant all graces and that Mary is "the advocate for the people of God," in Miravalle's words, and has the authority to influence God's judgments.

For the millions of Virgin Mary devotees who have signed Miravalle's petitions, these are an accepted part of their daily spiritual lives. They represent what theologians call popular piety, practices that are widely accepted by ordinary religious people over the learned objections of the establishment. Indeed the idea has been present in Catholicism at least as far back as the 14th century. There is also historic precedent for petition campaigns like Miravalle's. Two other Marian dogmas -- the dogma of the Assumption in 1950, which declared that Mary was taken up, body and soul, to heaven after her death, and the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of 1854, which established that Mary was preserved from original sin -- were both preceded by floods of petitions. Yet within the Vatican, the dogma that Miravalle advocates has touched off a private holy war. Although it has the support of at least 12 cardinals in Rome, others fear that its acceptance would cause a major schism among Catholics and set back all efforts at ecumenism. Because the dogma would be an infallible proclamation by the pope, it would trigger a renewed debate over the role of the pope's power in modern society.

"It seems to put her on an equal footing with Christ," said the Rev. John Roten, director of the International Marian Library in Dayton, articulating the primary reason for opposition. "That just won't do." The Rev. Rene Laurentin, a French monk and a leading Mary scholar, agrees. In a fax, Laurentin said that the proposed dogma would be the equivalent of launching "bombs" at the Protestants and would deepen the breach between the Vatican and the Eastern Orthodox church. "Mary is the model of our faith, but she is not divine," he said. "There is no mediation or co-redemption except in Christ. He alone is God."

'Totus tuus' Pope John Paul has made no secret of his devotion to Mary. He has the phrase "totus tuus" (which in Latin means "totally hers") as his papal motto and credits the Virgin Mary with saving his life during a 1981 assassination attempt and for the fall of communism. He has used the phrase "co-redemptrix" six times in his papacy to describe Mary, which has led Miravalle and his petitioners to hope that during his lifetime the pope will proclaim her co-redeemer.

Miravalle has visited privately with the pope several times, but he would not say what happened during his meetings. "All I can tell you," Miravalle said fervently, "is that I am personally confident that the holy father will make this solemn definition of the mother of Jesus at the most appropriate time. It's not a question of if. It's only a question of when." Responding by e-mail in Italian, Joquain Navarro-Valls, spokesman for the Vatican, said "There is no proclamation of a new dogma on the Madonna under study either by the holy father or by the International Theological Commission," repeating a statement that the Vatican made in 1997.

Miravalle's argument is that the Virgin Mary literally gave Jesus the body that he in turn gave for humankind, that she was present at the important moments in his ministry and that she suffered with him during his death on the cross. "As a mother, she shared in the birth, suffering and death of her son," he said. "That makes her suffering not only valuable but redemptive." But does that make her equal to Jesus Christ? Miravalle insists that the answer is no.

He claims the use of the Latin prefix "co" in co-redeemer means "with," not "equal to." "We do not want to place Mary on a level of equality with her son," he said. "He alone paid the price of our sins, but what we are saying is that Mary offered something that no one else could offer -- the bone of her bone, the flesh of her flesh -- and that cooperation was so great it amounted to a collaboration of our redemption."

In 1997, 23 of the world's leading Mary scholars, Catholic and Protestant, met in Poland and voted unanimously against the proposed dogma. The concern that the dogma would be construed as making Mary equal to Jesus was an underlying reason for the opposition. "The titles are ambiguous and could be understood in very different ways," said the panel of experts in a brief report that added that the idea would worsen "ecumenical difficulties." Leaders of other denominations oppose it for other reasons as well. It gives the Virgin Mary a lot more power than most religious authorities are willing to give, and it is a reminder that to Catholics the pope is all-powerful.

Heretical view. The Rev. Paige Patterson, president of the conservative Southern Baptist Convention, the largest denomination of Protestants in the United States, is horrified at the mere suggestion that Mary might be a co-redeemer. "Such a view is clearly heretical," he said. "In order to be a redeemer, it would require a person to be perfect. It would require a person to be God. We certainly don't believe she was God." Some liberal Protestants have long argued that the Catholic Church has used the symbol of the Virgin Mary to restrict women's possibilities by keeping women obedient to the teachings of the church. Retired Bishop John Spong, one of the most controversial figures in the Episcopal Church, says that Christians need a feminine symbol for God, but said such a symbol needed to be created by women, not "a bunch of men sitting around in Rome in their frocks."

Miravalle said he was unfazed by the objections from both ends of the spectrum. In some ways, the idea of the mother as hero and savior has been the defining theme of his life. He was born in San Francisco in 1959 to parents who were lifelong Catholics, but who later divorced because his father was a gambler and alcoholic. His mother, Nora, worked as a secretary to support him and his two siblings. The year that his father left, his elder sister died of leukemia. "There was never enough money, and yet mother just affirmed us so much," Miravalle said. "If we needed shoes, she always found a way to cough up the money."

He was a pietistic boy. When his sister died, he reasoned that she was "taken by God" and that it was somehow for the best. He attended Catholic schools, made good grades and took pleasure in studying the lives of the saints. He remembers times when his mother's migraine headaches were so debilitating that she would have to pull off the side of freeways so that she could vomit and then sleep for a while until she felt well enough to drive. Despite her infirmity, he said: "I always felt very protected by my mother's love. She was my first hero." He, in turn, became a man worthy of his mother's sacrifices. In high school, he was one of the few boys in his class who always went to weekly mass. He went to a Jesuit-run college and majored in theology. He agonized over whether he was meant for life as a priest.

One day in 1980 he went to church to pray for guidance about a career. As he was leaving, he literally ran into a pretty, dark-haired woman named Beth, who was on her way into church. They stopped to talk, and before they parted, Miravalle asked her for a date. "I took that as a clear, extraordinary sign that I was not meant to be a priest," he said. The two married in 1981, and Miravalle continued his theological studies in Rome. In 1984, shortly after the birth of their first son, they went on a pilgrimage to Medjugorje, a small mountain village in Bosnia, which has been revered by Catholics since 1981 as the site where the Virgin Mary appears each evening at 6:40 to a small group of visionaries. To date, an estimated 25 million people, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, have visited the village.

Messages from Mary. Miravalle's visit was the beginning of his emergence as a leader in the popular Marian movement. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the messages that the Virgin Mary gave the Bosnian children who first saw her. She reportedly told the children that she opposes abortion, birth control, female priests and communism. To Miravalle, the three cornerstones of her messages are prayer, penance and fasting.

Since 1984 Miravalle has published five books on Mary. At the back of each, he placed postcards that readers could cut out and send along to the pope, supporting the proposed dogma. Now the postcards and petitions average about 10,000 a month. He also puts out an international monthly news bulletin, sponsors conferences on the subject and regularly appears on Mother Angelica's television program, which reaches more than 55 million homes. Whether or not his campaign is successful and the pope decides to declare Mary a co-redemptrix, the popular devotion to Mary as a healer, comforter and female symbol for the divine will undoubtedly continue. The world, it seems, will always need its mother.