

Mary – Our Lady of Social Justice

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Reflections

Devotion to Our Lady is deeply instinctual in Catholic cultures, yet until recent decades she has rarely been revered under the title of Our Lady of Social Justice. This is curious, given how insistent the Scriptures and Jesus are on justice and social concern.

Moreover, the Gospels present Mary

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not as a symbol of passivity in the face of human suffering and injustice, but

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as the valiant woman sharing the liberating mission of Jesus. Mary sings in her great Magnificat prayer: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1: 51-53).

For complex historical reasons, the social action of many Catholics for centuries was sharply constrained and only in recent decades is it expanding to its proper dimensions. Even so, devotion to Our Lady remained an important corrective in the Church, allowing the expression of warm religious feeling at a time when liturgy was generally cold and distant.

Moreover, following the ages of absolute monarchy when God seemed stern, fearsome and punitive, Our Lady reflected the tenderness and compassion of God.

No matter what their problems, people could approach Mary confident and without fear that she would plead their cause with God.

The icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour is probably the best known picture of Our Lady in Australia and is in most churches.

Just watch how many people, especially those in some need or trouble, approach the picture.

The eyes of the Madonna draw you into the drama as she holds the Christ-child, both trying to comfort her boy but also somehow offering him to us. The child is trembling in fear at the sight of the angels holding the instruments of his crucifixion. Indeed one of his shoes is falling off, presumably because he is shaking.

Why does Christ subject himself to this terrible ordeal? To show us how extravagant is God's love for us, and that in our astonishment we might be moved to love him in return. In Christ, God as it were lays down his life for us in an unmistakable gesture of what is deepest in his heart. The message is very clear: God is not indifferent to human suffering, but deeply distressed at the plight of all in pain, whatever form it takes.

The eyes of the Madonna tell us that this unexpected generosity of God is for each of us, very personally. The promise is not necessarily to take away suffering, but to be with us in it, and help us bear it as we are mysteriously transformed by it. God offers hope, healing and a sharing in his own life.

Without a word being said, the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour intimately depicts God's incomprehensible act of solidarity with all the 'poor', those who hunger for God and his justice.

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