

## **What Would Mary Do?**

**By Jo Rotunno**

On August 15, 2008, the day my Mother died, I whispered her favorite prayer into her ear, hoping that she might hear it. It was the Memorare, the devotional prayer to Mary that she had prayed each night since childhood. My mother was sometimes an unconventional but always faithful Catholic who returned to many of the Marian devotions of her childhood in her last years. For her, Mary symbolized all the struggles of her own life as a mother and a woman to live a faithful life in a not always helpful world. She saw Mary as one who understood her and who showed her how to be strong and fearless no matter what came her way. How fitting that my Mother entered eternal life on the Feast of the Assumption.

With her image of Mary in mind, I read a recent Newsweek article on Mary by their religion editor with some dismay. The cover posed the question, “What Would Mary Do?” However, the conclusion from Lisa Miller’s article seemed to portray the Mary of the Gospels as a weak and passive woman who stood submissively if sorrowfully at the foot of the cross. She implied that Mary’s influence on Catholics helped explain the Church’s long silence in the face of mounting evidence of clergy misconduct toward children.

Nothing could be further from my own understanding of Mary—and, I feel safe to say, the understanding of the Church. The month of May, one of the months in the Church calendar when we honor Mary in a special way, is a wonderful time to reflect on a positive theology of this strong and courageous model of faith.

Fr. Bert Buby, a Marianist father and professor of Marianist theology at the University of Dayton, provided an excellent interview several years ago on Mary for *Echoes of Faith Plus*. As part of that interview, he recounted all of the Scriptural references to Mary, noting, for example, the courageous young girl willing to face the censure of her contemporaries by bearing a child whose origins could not be explained; the mother who could foresee the needs of others and asked her son to intervene, as she did at the marriage at Cana; and the mother courageous enough to stand silently at her son’s side as he died, while many of his followers hid themselves in fear.

As you prepare to celebrate Mary in your parish this May, here are a few suggestions to guide you:

1. Examine your own image of Mary and test it for accuracy against the Gospels’ and the Church’s teaching. Was your Marian image shaped by the sexless and submissive classroom statues of many of our childhoods? Or was it perhaps the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe which, properly understood, challenges us to stand in solidarity with the poor and to work courageously for justice? Consider what images or ideas of Mary you are passing on to others, as parent or catechist.

2. Invite students to re-read with you the stories of Mary in the Gospels. Ask older students to identify the images of Mary they find there and to discuss them with one another and with their families.
3. Use the index of your basal religion program and look up all the references to Mary in your student text. Gather them together and compare what you find with your own image of Mary. Remember that your textbook series conforms to the Church's understanding of Mary.
4. Have students draw their own pictures of Mary acting as they are asked to act today as followers of her Son.
5. If you have a talent for technology, make a Marian slide show. Invite older students to collect images of Mary that express their understanding of her. Suggest that they include mother and child (or grandmother and child) photos from their own family or from a variety of cultures. This strategy shows the universality and contemporary character of Mary for the Church today. Scan their photos and art images and create a slide show in PowerPoint. Adding a favorite Marian hymn, use the creation as the basis of a classroom prayer experience.
6. Yes, do have a May procession, either with the whole catechetical community, or in your own classroom. Honor Mary with flowers, and hymns, and prayers, and crown her statue as many of us did when we were children. Your celebration, if it concludes a month of reflection on Mary and what her life accomplished, will have deeper meaning, rather than being just a relic of the past.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* concludes its creedal treatment of Mary by reminding us that she is the “eschatological icon of the Church.” Big words, but they remind us that Mary lived her entire life assisting her son in ushering in the reign of God, and now dwells with the Holy Trinity for all eternity. Meditating on her role in the story of salvation does indeed reveal powerful answers to what we are to do as we follow our own path to God, and affirms our hope in the life that is to come.