

**THE VIRGIN MARY:  
A PARADOXICAL MODEL OF CHRISTIAN WOMANHOOD/FEMININE  
RELIGIOSITY FOR ROMAN CATHOLIC IMMIGRANT WOMEN OF THE  
NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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## ABSTRACT

This departmental honors project examines the incompatibility of Mary, Mother of Christ, as a model of feminine religiosity with the True Womanhood ideal of the nineteenth century. Roman Catholic immigrant women of this period traversed the boundaries between their native cultural heritage and their new American home with difficulty. The social/cultural standard of True Womanhood was the dominant mode through which they were able to be assimilated into the national culture. The four cardinal virtues of the True Woman (piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity) were much exemplified by Mary, and the immigrant women clung desperately to their Roman Catholic faith tradition that venerated Mary to buttress ethnic and religious solidarity. In this way, Mary as model and the True Woman as model merged to form an overarching and mutually demanding cultural and religious standard for women. These two paradigms may have seemed to benefit immigrant women seeking to retain their indigenous identity and to accommodate themselves to American cultural norms. However, they provided a deeply problematic and paradoxical set of standards for them to fulfill.

Thus, the project seeks to examine the problematic correlation of the Virgin Mary with the True Womanhood model of the nineteenth century as it affected Roman Catholic immigrant women of that time. The paper also explores the implications of Mary as an unattainable model of this cultural paradigm and as a paradoxical model of feminine religiosity in general, especially given that men and women respond differently to Mary.

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## INTRODUCTION

Though perhaps known as simple and straightforward to some, Mary, Mother of Christ, is a complex model of feminine religiosity. She is a figure whose life, significance, and even personal characteristics have been transmitted to modern audiences through sources that seldom parallel and often challenge or complicate each other. Furthermore, early in the history of Christianity, social and religious traditions emerged that expanded upon the scant canonical passages and the more detailed extracanonical accounts concerning Mary, filling in holes and more fully texturizing her as a biblical character. Such traditions have spread the world over and become transformed to accommodate different cultural settings. Taken together, the variations and discrepancies among the textual accounts of Mary and the differences between such texts and living traditions glorifying Mary construct a modern portrait of Mary fraught with paradoxes. Her paradoxical features have influenced conflicting theologies, particularly between Protestants and Catholics, and these theologies have informed and often dictated traditions of female religiosity.

This departmental honors paper identifies and discusses several examples of Marian paradoxes to better understand how constructions of Mary as the primary model of feminine religiosity affected Roman Catholic immigrant women. Such paradoxes include Mary's perpetual virginity juxtaposed with earthly women's commitment to family (and the sexual relationship implicit in marriage) and the classist elements inherent in the True Womanhood model related to Mary. The four cardinal virtues of the nineteenth-century American model of True Womanhood—

piety, purity, submission, and domesticity—parallel nicely those emphasized in the figure of Mary. For this paper, I shall focus on the virtue of purity particularly as related to Mary's virginity.

I contend that Mary as a model of feminine religiosity is ultimately incompatible with the True Womanhood paradigm. Because she contrasts so strongly with earthly women for whom she is alleged to be an ideal model, she over-fulfills the requirements of True Womanhood in ways that other women could never achieve, even if they are expected and strive to do so. For this reason, this project examines the problematic correlation of the Virgin Mary with the True Womanhood model of the nineteenth century as the two affected Roman Catholic immigrant women. Thus, the paper explores the implications of Mary as incompatible with the True Womanhood paradigm and of Mary as a paradoxical model of feminine religiosity in general, especially given that men and women respond differently to her.

The nineteenth century is an appropriate, even necessary context within which to examine Mary as a paradoxical model of feminine religiosity because the True Womanhood model emerged during the nineteenth century in the U.S., Mary was declared the patron saint of the U.S. in 1854, and Catholic immigration to North America was intense during this time. Immigrant Catholic women sought to conform to the cultural norms of their new setting. In doing so, many connected the True Womanhood model with Mary as model, but this equation was not without its challenges. Although discussing the twentieth century, the historian Jaroslav Pelikan sums up why it is necessary to consider the effects of the intersection between the

more secular, cultural model and the religious model of Mary: “Just when the twentieth century was beginning, it was traditionally held that ‘in Mary, we see in the little that is told of her what a true woman ought to be,’ the twentieth century’s dramatic upsurge of interest in the question of exactly ‘what a true woman ought to be’ has likewise been unable to ignore her.”<sup>1</sup>

To develop my contention that Mary is incompatible with the True Woman, I shall discuss particularly the purity/virginity element of the True Womanhood model of the nineteenth century as the appropriate and necessary window into Mary’s influence on American women of that period. Because the True Womanhood model of this century and in this cultural context is crucial to my argument, I will discuss briefly the evolution and implications of the paradigm. To establish constructions of Mary as a paradoxical figure, I will discuss the texts that mention Mary and the most significant similarities and differences found therein. I will also present examples of modern traditions that have expanded upon Scriptural accounts concerning Mary, focusing as much as possible on nineteenth-century American Roman Catholic immigrant communities. Then I shall discuss constructions of Mary’s personal characteristics that are paradoxical, particularly her virginal purity, and how they render her incompatible with the model of True Womanhood, itself a convoluted model. This process will lead to a nuanced understanding of the complex union of the True Womanhood model and the highest standards of feminine religiosity as both are subsumed in the figure of Mary. The implications of this union are intricate and

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<sup>1</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 3.

far-reaching, having affected Christian culture of the nineteenth century deeply, particularly female Roman Catholic participants, as well as present-day Marian devotees.

## TEXTUAL SOURCES ON MARY

The multitudinous social and religious traditions regarding Mary that have emerged throughout the history of Christianity are linked to what are actually very scant biblical mentionings of the Mother of Christ. Ironically, these brief treatments of Mary are often popularly assumed to be the historical and theological foundations for such traditions. The canonical tradition is clearly not the sole source informing living social and religious traditions extolling the Virgin. However, the biblical references to Mary and the living traditions revolving around Mary are by no means diametrically opposed. Furthermore, various extracanonical texts complicate the influence of the Marian texts by challenging or suggesting radically different narrative accounts compared to those of the canonical Gospels. Ultimately, it is important to recognize that Mary's legacy emerges from a tangled web of brief, limited insights gleaned from official church documents along with rather cursory Scriptural accounts, as well as from tradition. It derives from extended, Marian-centered accounts within unofficial texts and from living traditions that simultaneously reflect, selectively coalesce, and expand upon available written sources. Indeed, one contributor to *Mary in the New Testament*<sup>2</sup> suggests a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in the derived nature of her legacy:

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<sup>2</sup> This text is the result of a sustained Lutheran-Catholic dialogue that was compiled in this one-volume collaborative work. Aside from the editors themselves, many scholars contributed individual portions, often in the form of distinct chapters within the book as a whole. For this reason, I shall reference the work according to individual contributors and their individual contributions, followed by title and publication information for the collective volume itself. It is referenced on the "WORKS CITED" page according to the editors involved, while the footnote references throughout the paper will, again, refer only to specific contributors and their specific contributions.

In facing any issue in Christianity that has roots in the NT, one must take into account both the evidence supplied by the NT writings themselves, composed 1900 years ago, and the subsequent cultural and ecclesiastical traditions which have influenced Christian interpretations of those writings. The problem of intervening traditions is particularly acute in the instance of Mary, the mother of Jesus, for mariological attitudes in the post-Reformation West have been sharply divergent.<sup>3</sup>

Before exploring the emergence, formation, and implications of living Marian traditions, it is important to consider the early Christian texts that discuss Mary, both canonical and extracanonical, in order to understand the basis for constructions of the Virgin. Though scholars typically investigate thoroughly issues of authorship, chronology, gospel formation, and history alongside discussions of the extra/biblical texts' contents, I shall focus on the information about Mary that such early Christian sources provide internally, rather than on contextualizing these accounts with extrinsic information beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>4</sup> I shall also give particular attention to discussions of Mary in the canonical and extracanonical texts that deal with her uniquely female attributes—those of virgin, mother, and wife—in order to establish an understanding of Mary as a prime model of female religiosity.

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<sup>3</sup> P.J. Achtemeier, "Presuppositions of the Study," in *Mary in the New Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann, eds. (Mahwah, NJ: Fortress Press, 1978), 7.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that these issues are not worthy of more extensive discussion; on the contrary, they are and have been crucial as major influences of textual and living Marian traditions. However, these sorts of topics that refer to external elements of textual sources rather than the content of the sources themselves deserve and are afforded entire bodies of researchers and scholarship to investigate problems that have been acknowledged concerning authorship, chronology, canon formation, and history.

*The Canonical Texts*

Interestingly, Mary is discussed in all four Gospels, which collectively “constitute the major witness to Mary in the NT,” though Paul does not refer to Mary by name, despite the fact that his writings constitute the largest corpus of NT writings by a single author.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, I shall focus on references to Mary within the Gospels, relying heavily on the scholarly observations within *Mary in the New Testament*, as well as in Beverly Roberts Gaventa’s *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*.

Gaventa argues that “whatever the aims of Matthew’s teaching gospel, the curriculum devotes scant space to Mary.”<sup>6</sup> Matthew mentions Mary but a few times, including her in the genealogy of Jesus and in discussions of Jesus’ ministry. Ultimately, Gaventa argues that “Matthew’s characterization of Mary consists entirely of positioning her within the genealogy (in Matthew 1) and alongside the infant Jesus (in Matthew 2).”<sup>7</sup> She also notes that Mary’s only role in this particular Gospel is that of mother, that her ultimate function is to fulfill the prophecy of birthing Emmanuel, and that she is the first figure in Matthew to “receive the salvation inaugurated in Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup> It is also important to note that Mary’s virginal conception of Jesus is mentioned only in Matthew, although the subsequent maintenance of her virginity is not addressed. Furthermore, Mary is no longer referred to as a virgin once the birth narrative reaches Christ’s birth, but, rather, she is

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>6</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 47.

referred to as Jesus' mother, reinforcing Gaventa's claim concerning Mary's secondary, subordinate characterization. Nevertheless, the discontinuance of referring to Mary as virgin does not necessarily imply any absolute conclusions about the status, length, or ultimate theological implications of Mary's virginity.

This issue is potentially problematic because other textual sources, such as the Protoevangelium of James (which will be presented later in this section), discuss Mary as a perpetual virgin, one who sustains virginity through conception, birth, and beyond. In contrast, texts such as Matthew's Gospel refer to Mary's virginity as sustained only within the conception of Jesus and do not address the status of her virginity after this point. Furthermore, Mary is perhaps best known in various living religious traditions as the "Virgin Mary," so the sustained status of her virginity is naturally called into question when textual information either does not affirm the perpetual status of her virginity or does not directly confront the issue at all. This can become a real problem for earthly women, particularly Roman Catholic mothers, who obviously do not have the ability to sustain their virginity during conception, birth, or afterward. This fact entails a critical distinction between Mary and earthly women based on a destructive overvaluation of virginity within the realm of feminine religiosity. Mary's virginal purity is paramount to her role as ultimate model of feminine religiosity and as figurehead of the True Womanhood paradigm,<sup>9</sup> but earthly mothers are completely unable to maintain this virginal purity to the extent that

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<sup>9</sup> The emergence and impact of the Cult of True Womanhood shall be discussed in full in the fourth section of this paper. This section is entitled, "THE TRUE WOMANHOOD MODEL OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA," and it details the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which the True Womanhood paradigm developed.

extracanonical and canonical sources suggest that Mary does. Such textual sources have formed the historical and traditional basis for Marian standards of feminine religiosity and purity within Christian culture in a more secular sense. Mary's virginal purity thus stands as an original, yet unattainable symbol of complete and perfect Christian womanhood.

If Matthew's Gospel is as limited with regard to information about Mary as Gaventa claims, then Mark offers even less about her. The few times Mark even mentions Mary are only in relation to Jesus's family. Indeed, rather than illuminating the figure of Mary, Mark's passages serve only to raise implicit questions that complicate the biblical understanding of her. According to K. P. Donfried, the reference to Jesus' family in Mark 6:3 "gained Marian significance only in later centuries as Christians debated whether Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus."<sup>10</sup> The reason this issue arises is that the passages discussing Jesus' siblings do not definitively identify them as also born of Mary. The question of Mary's continuing status as virgin is not posed merely in an attempt to problematize such biblical passages out of sheer curiosity or opposition. As previously noted, this issue becomes very real when attempts fail to fully and seamlessly reconcile biblical passages that discuss Mary's virginity in equivocal terms and living religious traditions regarding Mary's virginity as a model for earthly women, whether or not the biblical texts acknowledge the continuation of her virginity as a theological or

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<sup>10</sup> "Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" Mark 6:3 (NKJV).  
K. P. Donfried, "Mary in the Gospel of Mark," in *Mary in the New Testament*, 65.

practical issue. In fact, Donfried notes that “the continued virginity of Mary after the birth of Jesus is not a question directly raised by the NT” and that “it cannot be said that the NT identifies them [Jesus’ siblings mentioned in Mark 6:3] as blood brothers and sisters and hence as children of Mary.”<sup>11</sup>

Though neither Mark’s text nor any other New Testament text may raise the issue of Mary’s virginity directly, the problems noted in the discussion of Matthew’s text are compounded by Mark’s mention of Jesus’ family. Matthew’s text does not directly address the continuing status of Mary’s virginity in relation to Jesus, nor does Mark’s in relation to Jesus’ siblings, all of whom were possibly and arguably born of Mary. The problem presented here is simple, but it has far-reaching implications for earthly women unlike Mary. If Mary was able to maintain her virginal purity, seemingly her most valued physical and spiritual trait, before, during, and after the birth of Jesus (or, indeed, at virtually any point during His term of gestation), then her virginal status trumps that (and even the physical and spiritual capacity for such status) of all earthly women. Moreover, if Mary was also able to maintain her virginal purity at any point before, during, and/or after the birth of any children following Jesus, whose personhood and conception/birth could be considered exceptional and not regulated by normal physiological constraints, then she and her unflinching virginity become all the more unattainable for earthly women seeking to fulfill the legacy and standards she left behind for them.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 72.

Luke's Gospel might be considered a more promising source for information on Mary, as it includes several passages that depict Mary both within Jesus's infancy narrative and, more importantly, within the narrative of Jesus's public ministry. As John Reumann notes, "The Lucan Marian material is more abundant than that of any other NT writer."<sup>12</sup> As he also mentions later in this text, one issue of scholarly contention and narrative significance is whether Mary was one of Luke's living, first-hand sources for much of chapters One and Two of his Gospel. Because "Mary is the only human being who could have had personal knowledge of what is narrated in 1:26-38," some suggest that she is at least one of the eyewitnesses to whom Luke makes reference just before he begins the infancy narrative.<sup>13</sup> Despite this understandable and wishful possibility, however, "the majority of scholars today would have serious questions about the overall historicity of the Lucan infancy narrative," so these scholars tend to assume that modern audiences encounter not the memoirs of Mary herself transmitted intact by Luke, but rather narrative constructed wholly by Luke without direct reference to Mary's own version of events.<sup>14</sup> Though this portion of the Lucan Gospel may not directly relate to issues involving Mary's virginal purity and how it affects earthly women, the scholarly debates raise important questions concerning the narrative representations of Mary and the absence of her own voice first-hand.

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<sup>12</sup> John Reumann, "Mary in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles," in *Mary in the New Testament*, 106.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

Christian audiences in all historical contexts must recognize that the Mary we encounter in the biblical texts was not transmitted by the Mother of Christ herself, but rather by limited contemporary secondary (perhaps tertiary) and later (notably male-authored) sources who more likely than not sought and received none of their information from Mary herself. If Mary is, indeed, intended to be the ultimate living model of feminine religiosity and to serve as the figurehead of the True Womanhood model of nineteenth-century America, it must be noted that, ironically, first-hand and direct accounts of her lived experiences are nowhere to be found in the biblical texts. Rather, women seeking to imitate Mary as model must rely upon narratives that depict her at best in a secondary fashion and through the perspective of a male scribe of the time. These facts raise many questions concerning the literary representation of Mary, but perhaps the most important problem to note is that an impossible and unattainable Marian model of virginal purity was ultimately constructed and transmitted by male authors and sanctioned first and foremost by church fathers. Furthermore, if the living presence of Mary's voice is entirely absent from biblical texts, then a hazy portrait of Christian womanhood is painted with no clear place for women's lived experiences and vocal/textual traditions. Nonetheless, the supreme image of the Virgin Mary stands sharply resolute and austere as an implicit reminder to Christian women of the standards they should, but ultimately cannot, fulfill.

Another central issue involving Mary within Luke's Gospel concerns the depiction of the annunciation. Some scholars have observed that the notion of Mary's

virginal conception of Jesus in Luke is not as explicit as that presented in the Matthean account. Indeed, as John Reumann notes:

it is not obvious to all that Luke did intend to describe a virginal conception [. . .] This future conception could be understood to take place “. . . in the usual human way, of a child endowed with God’s special favor, born at the intervention of the Spirit of God, and destined to be acknowledged as the heir to David’s throne as God’s Messiah and Son.”<sup>15</sup>

Though the scholars positing this possibility also state that the majority of their company does assume that Luke intended to describe Mary’s virginal conception of Jesus, they have acknowledged that this is a potentially problematic claim that cannot ultimately be demonstrated. Concerning Chapter Two of Luke, John Reumann also observes that “there is no reference to the virginal conception; and if we had just chap.2, there would be no way of knowing that Jesus had not been conceived by Joseph and Mary in the normal way.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the idea of the virginal conception of Jesus originated, as Reumann notes, in the Lucan Gospel. The problem that arises in tracing this tradition back to Luke concerns how it was transmitted to Luke in the first place. Some scholars connect the Lucan virginal conception with passages in Isaiah 7, though “overall the points of contact between [. . . the two] are not specific enough for us to posit Lucan dependence upon Isaiah.”<sup>17</sup> Because scholars cannot sufficiently argue for a localized, specific source of the tradition

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 124.

propagating Mary's virginal conception of Christ that influenced the Gospel narratives, they then turn to "the possibility and even probability of a pre-Gospel acceptance of the virginal conception."<sup>18</sup> This uncertainty regarding the origins and universal understanding of Mary's virginal conception of Jesus echoes previously noted problems involving the application of a ubiquitous standard of Mary's virginal purity imposed upon all Roman Catholic single women of the nineteenth century based solely on unclear accounts and far from unanimous notions of Mary's virginal conception.

Considering that Mary's first-hand, personal attitude toward her virginity and virginal conception of Jesus is not revealed in these texts, it becomes increasingly difficult to demonstrate a unified understanding of the virginal conception tradition that is so often taken for granted in modern, living traditions, both religious and textual. Once more, the issue of authentic voice and representation of Mary surfaces and problematizes the transmission of Marian traditions to modern communities of Roman Catholic women. Furthermore, it is confusing and frustrating, at least from a contemporary perspective, that such rigid and absolute standards of virginal purity were expected so forthrightly of earthly women, although the origins and intended practical applications of these standards were never addressed consistently, much less exhaustively, by the authors who serve as the best original sources of such Marian traditions. A more critical view of this cultural and religious phenomenon would suggest that early theologians and Christian practitioners unjustifiably seized upon an

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

enigmatic and appealing, though not fully or consistently substantiated, Marian tale and tradition of unwavering virginal purity. Additionally, modern Christian communities would come to interpret, recapitulate, and extend this Marian quality into an absolute and omnipresent standard dictating women's overall cultural participation and religious expression.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa's evaluation of the Lucan Gospel yields a more realistic portrayal of a Mary who performs three separate but interconnected roles of religious significance: "Mary appears as a disciple, perhaps even as the first disciple . . . In the power words of the Magnificat, she becomes not only a disciple but also a prophet . . . Mary's third role in Luke-Acts, that of mother, appears to be her most direct and obvious, but in fact it emerges as the most complex."<sup>19</sup> Though Gaventa does not focus critically on the concept, origin, and transmission of Mary's virginal conception, she recognizes that Mary's role as mother of Jesus is as integral to her biblical and theological importance as it is complex and problematic. The fact that Gaventa seeks to complicate previously simplified notions of Mary's maternal role(s) suggests the importance of a more critical understanding of the scant biblical passages, particularly those she discusses within the Lucan Gospel. This sort of understanding might help modern theologians and faith participants not to accept at face-value the daunting Marian benchmark of lasting and impeccable virginal purity. Furthermore, Gaventa's claim that Mary emerges in Luke as the first disciple holds within it the potential for Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, to dramatically re-

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<sup>19</sup> Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, 72-73.

envision Mary's typically secondary, supportive, and subordinate roles as depicted in the biblical texts. This might allow women to seek a more authentic understanding of Mary's own person and voice rather than to rely on received tradition that assigns Mary narrowly to a realm of austere sexual purity. Despite these positive possibilities for a Lucan Marian vision, the Gospel of John once more reduces Mary to a secondary role without voice or active agency.

In the Gospel of John, Mary does not even appear by name, but more as a peripheral figure only mentioned in her maternal role in relation to Jesus. As Gaventa notes, the absence of an infancy narrative within John as found in Luke and Matthew raises the question of whether or not we should "infer that the evangelist is unaware of the stories about Jesus' miraculous conception."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, she suggests that perhaps John even thought of the stories of Mary's virginal conception of Jesus as problematic or offensive. Ultimately, the depiction of Mary in John is limited and expressed only in exclusive relation to Jesus Christ, although Gaventa notes that many, if not all, other characters in the Gospel, including males, were presented only in relation to the Messiah as well, precisely because "John's is a story solely about Jesus."<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, Mary's full and individually-asserted personhood is inaccessible in this account. Her critical spiritual role as established only in relation to Jesus suggests that for other earthly women to emulate her properly, they must fulfill Mary's already unattainable model through men as inactive, secondary agents of spiritual rectitude. If Mary's religiosity is affirmed in relation to Jesus, the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

ultimate embodiment of man, then earthly women must affirm and express their religiosity in relation to earthly men (who obviously fall short of Jesus's personhood and spiritual standards), thereby limiting women's direct and active roles as Christians. Though Jesus and presumably other Christian (Roman Catholic) men may assert their religiosity individually, the very personhood and Christian identity of women is essentially overtaken and re-directed by Christian men. For women who define the more social/cultural aspects of their Christian religiosity only with regard to or against that of men, efforts to emulate an already problematic feminine model are complicated.

K. P. Donfried also discusses elements of John's Gospel that undercut Mary's role as an individual. As he discusses the significance and implications of Jesus' address to Mary as "Woman" in John 2:4, he notes that "for Jesus to address his mother in the same way as he addresses the Samaritan woman (4:21) and Mary Magdalene (20:13) may mean that he places no special emphasis on her physical motherhood."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, "the address 'Woman' has been seen as a symbolic evocation of the role of Eve in chap. 3 of Genesis," a correlation that would obviously extrapolate negative connotations of Eve's faults upon Mary.<sup>23</sup> As if this suggestion were not negative enough, Mary's character as related to Eve would be further tarnished especially when contrasted with her previously established features of obedience, piety, and purity she developed before, during, and shortly after Jesus' birth (depending on which textual account one consults). Not only is the Marian

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<sup>22</sup> K. P. Donfried, "The Mother of Jesus in the Gospel of John," in *Mary in the New Testament*, 189.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

paradigm of virginal purity unattainable in many ways for earthly women, but even this elusive, yet positive spiritual model becomes tenuous within these passages and threatened by those passages that seemingly parallel Eve and Mary. This suggestion places women problematically in between two extreme standards of feminine religiosity. Women should not aspire to the condition of Eve, who succumbed to her own pride and earthly desires over those of God. Perhaps Eve's sinless purity inherent in her before the fall is the quality though to be represented by Mary. If this is the case, then this quality seems to have been lost with Eve's fall. However, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception suggests that Mary shares Eve's original sinless-ness. Nonetheless, any vestige of this quality instilled in Mary is unattainable for other earthly women. Interestingly enough, other passages in John's Gospel depict Mary as a symbol of the church; clearly, the evocation both of Eve and the church present conflicting metaphorical constructions of Mary that modern theologians and faith participants would have to reconcile in aspiring to Mary as a model of feminine religiosity.

Overall, this brief discussion of Mary in the Gospel texts does not expose the nuanced complexities involved in assessing Mary's earthly and spiritual role(s) as intended for earthly women to emulate. The passages noted, however, should appropriately acknowledge the complications that arise within these biblical constructions of the Mother of Jesus. Such depictions influence, even if they do not cause directly, often paradoxical modern Marian traditions. The Gospels' collective, interdependent depictions of Mary certainly raise more questions than they answer for

modern faith participants. Mary's virginal purity has long been extolled as a ubiquitous standard of the utmost expressions of feminine religiosity, especially as co-opted by the True Womanhood model of nineteenth-century American Christian culture. However, the historical and (biblical) textual authorities specifically concerning Mary's virginal conception of Christ are far from uniform. Even if agreed upon within early Christian communities, the sustained status of Mary's virginal purity and the implications of this purity for earthly women are seldom entertained at all within the Gospel texts. Nonetheless, virginity has been upheld above all else of Mary's earthly and spiritual qualities as a litmus test of feminine religiosity. It is difficult to find a functional, realistic, and practical space in which Roman Catholic women may live and express themselves as earthly women who cannot traverse the fine line between virginity and maternity in quite the seamless and simultaneous fashion that Mary seemed to have mastered. Although early Christian authors portraying Mary would clearly like us to believe she navigated this challenge with apparent heavenly blessing, ease, and impeccable grace, physiological reality denies this achievement to all others.

Additionally, Mary's own voice is at best transmitted through traditions largely dictated by men. At worst, her voice is squelched to the extent that we might admit to have neither received nor retained any vestiges of the true, historical Mary or her living Christian spirit. In the latter, more dismal case, we must rely on male constructions of the most integral and best-known female biblical figure who inevitably became, for better or worse, the dominant religious model for Christian

womanhood. Needless to say, these inconsistencies have obviously affected the lived experiences of earthly Roman Catholic women for whom Mary is a problematic and incompatible model, even as the overqualified and quintessential “True Woman.”

*An Extracanonical Text*

The Protoevangelium of James is an early Christian text, an extracanonical source that speaks more of Mary than any of the canonical texts combined. Early scholars gave the text the title of “Protoevangelium” or “Proto-Gospel,” “reflecting the fact that the story takes place prior to the narrations of Matthew and Luke.”<sup>24</sup> As Beverly Roberts Gaventa notes, the text is not well-known outside of scholarly communities, which is unfortunate given the wealth of information it provides about Mary. Gaventa explains that the Protoevangelium demonstrates “the first evidence of Christian interest in Mary herself,” especially in contrast to the New Testament, which “exhibits no interest in Mary as such, but only in Mary as a character in the story of Jesus.”<sup>25</sup> Gaventa also cites other early Christian writings besides the New Testament texts that show little or no interest in Mary. Perhaps the most interesting and pertinent topics concerning Mary that the Protoevangelium discusses directly are those which, if addressed at all, are presented unclearly and inconsistently within the canonical texts. This extracanonical text suggests that Mary remained a virgin even as Jesus was born and seemingly affirms even her post-partum virginity.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the Protoevangelium maintains a refreshing focus on the Virgin Mary, tracing her life

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<sup>24</sup> Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, 106.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> “A virgin hath brought forth, which is a thing contrary to nature,” 4:16. “Protoevangelium of James,” 24-37, in *The Lost Books of the Bible* (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1979), 34.

from birth to her dedication in the temple to her courtship with Joseph to her giving birth to Jesus.

Nevertheless, the text's depiction of Mary's perpetual virginal purity is problematic for earthly women. The Protoevangelium was never officially codified by church authorities for inclusion with other canonical biblical texts, but its portrayal of Mary, though perhaps more sensitive to and interested in the Virgin than any other text of its kind and time, still creates an impossible standard of feminine religiosity for women to fulfill. Even if Roman Catholic immigrant women of nineteenth-century America were ever able to turn to this text as a source of information about Mary (and it is highly doubtful that they were able to or did ever access the text), they would have encountered a brand of sustained virginal purity they never could physically emulate. Thus, the author of the Protoevangelium spends the time and exerts the literary and theological energy deserved by a figure such as Mary while he also further removes her as a model for Christian womanhood from a practical, earthly context in which all other earthly women must exist and function. Unlike Mary, they are without the supernatural benefit and quality of (or even the capacity for this quality of) perpetual virginity and resultant spiritual purity.

Gaventa observes that questions of Mary's virginity prior to conception, during birth, and following Jesus' birth became quite controversial later in the development of Christianity. These controversies emerged both within the Christian community and between Christians and non-Christians. Apparently, points of contention that arose concerning Mary's virginal status (as discussed in Christian

sources) stemmed less from the Gospel texts than from arguments over the correct interpretation of Isaiah 7:14.<sup>27</sup> Discrepancies among interpretations surfaced as theologians differed over the variant renderings of this passage as presented in both the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament texts) and the Hebrew Bible (original rendering of the Old Testament texts). The Septuagint's translation of the original Hebrew passage clearly suggests that a virgin will conceive, whereas the Hebrew Bible's version of this passage suggests that she is merely a young maiden and not necessarily a virgin. Thus, the various constructions and interpretations of Mary's virginity in early Christian sources are confusing and problematic enough, and these controversies are exacerbated by tension between Christian and non-Christian interpretations. For these reasons, the same issue of unanimity concerning Mary's virginal purity emerges within discussions of the Protoevangelium just as within those of the canonical Gospel texts. This fact clearly demonstrates that early Christian writers and theologians were not in ready agreement with each other over Mary's virginal status, even if later textual and lived religious traditions suggest otherwise. Once more, absolute and unrelenting standards of virginal purity imposed on Roman Catholic women are called into question by the disputed status of Mary. Despite these conflicting textual accounts and interpretations of the texts, it is obvious within the True Womanhood model of the nineteenth century which view of Mary's virginal purity came to dominate Marian thought for a sustained period of time.

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<sup>27</sup> "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel." (NKJV).

During this time, Mary's supernatural quality would gain a pervasive influence over and set a high standard for expressions of feminine religiosity.

*Implications of Received Marian Textual Traditions*

Arguments over the status and theological significance of Mary's virginity still occur, and it seems that an overt connection between her virginity (whatever its status and significance) and earthly and spiritual purity has been sustained so as to link these two qualities inextricably for earthly women to emulate as one. Although current Roman Catholic Church doctrine may affirm at least Mary's virginal conception of Jesus, modern lay readers are likely to become confused by the various complex, inconsistent, and often challenging passages concerning Mary's virginity. Women especially might be unclear concerning the exact nature and course of such heavenly virginity that they are expected to emulate. Mary's virginity is connected with notions of purity, either in terms of moral behavior, conventions of ritual purity, or a general spiritual attitude and demeanor.

However, the inconsistencies and obscurity surrounding her virginal purity inevitably trickled down to the lived religious experiences of nineteenth-century Roman Catholic immigrant women. After all, these women lived in a country dominated by social conventions which co-opted the religious figure of Mary as the figurehead of America's mainstream cultural model of True Womanhood. The women had historically encountered the Virgin Mary within their native religious heritage, but they were forced in the nineteenth century to re-envision her as the ultimate paradigm for the various female cultural roles they were expected to fulfill as

well. These circumstances forced women to construct both religious and secular (social and cultural) self-perceptions based on Mary as she exemplified the True Womanhood model. In this process, the simple presence of virginity-purity models imposed on women, and especially the controversies involving textual discussions of these notions, at best complicated the modes and examples of feminine religiosity available for them.

Arguments over the interpretation of Mary's virginal purity within the various texts mentioning Mary might by themselves be dismissed as mere issues of literary transmission and authorship. In the context of lived religious experience, however, these problems affect real notions and standards of cultural/social and religious purity. For better or worse, this purity has been conveniently linked with notions of biblical, Mariological virginity that are often unclear and highly debated. Furthermore, notions of Mary's virginal purity are discussed largely in relation to men and have been historically transmitted only by male authors/scribes. Though the cultural model of True Womanhood separately categorizes purity and virginity, the two are inextricably linked in the figure of Mary, the ideal model of feminine religiosity and the exemplar of True Womanhood ideals. Just as Mary's virginal purity and spiritual submission allowed her to be blessed among women so she could carry the son of God, so such standards are imposed upon subsequent generations of Christian women, despite differences in historical, cultural, and even religious contexts. Thus, constructions of Mary as a paradoxical figure place women in a religious and cultural bind in which they are expected to emulate a model that was not

systematically and unilaterally expressed or interpreted and that was transmitted by and largely for the benefit of men. This imposition by authority blatantly ignores the personhood, lives, experiences, and voices of Roman Catholic women themselves. Instead, it would seem that Christian men would be the primary beneficiaries of a dual social/cultural and religious model that relegated women to the traditional domestic sphere and upheld constricting, oppressive standards concerning female sexuality.

Because Roman Catholic immigrant women of the nineteenth century had little choice between a religious model and a cultural/social model when it came to assimilating into American culture, these complex and paradoxical models complicated their efforts toward social and religious naturalization. Although allegedly natural and therefore expected, women's purity and virginity as stipulated by the True Womanhood model and by Mary herself resulted in an internal struggle for Roman Catholic immigrant women. The True Woman image exemplified by Mary posed a dichotomy between a religious ideal and the reality of the earthly domestic sphere in which women were expected to operate. With the canonical and extracanonical sources of Mary as a religious backdrop, it is necessary to assess the paradoxical nature and implications that arise from the inherent tension between Mary's model of religiosity and the True Womanhood model. Mary exemplifies, complicates, and overfulfills the requirements of the nineteenth-century True Woman, a situation which problematizes Roman Catholic immigrant women's earnest attempts to assimilate American religious and cultural/social conventions, both of

which refer back to (problematic) constructions of Mary. As is easily discernable already, this process produced a challenging mode of secular and religious being for these women who both could and could not fully emulate the cultural model while simultaneously emulating Mary.

## **EXPANSION OF TEXTUAL SOURCES: MODERN MARIAN TRADITIONS**

Most living and past Marian traditions have expanded greatly upon Scriptural accounts of Mary. Often communities focus on a particular aspect of Mary's character as the galvanizing virtue of their congregational purpose, iconic veneration, and/or their general living religious traditions. Marian traditions that arose in America during the nineteenth century help illuminate the paradoxical role Mary came to play within Roman Catholic immigrant communities.

Marian devotion experienced considerable growth during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America, a time marked by large-scale immigration. As Susan Hill Lindley notes, "Catholic faith was central to the identity of most immigrants, but it was a faith tied to the distinctive ethnic traditions they had left. Ethnic identity was symbolized and reinforced by devotion to a particular saint," such as the Blessed Mother Mary.<sup>28</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, however, American Catholicism experienced a decline in devotional practices, according to some scholars. The faith tradition also experienced a shift in ideology, resulting in the emergence of distinct forms of Mariology, according to other scholars. This section of my paper will examine selected ethnic expressions (Italian, Cuban, and American) of Marian devotion and will explore the alleged phases of popularity and subsequent decline and/or mutations of such expressions in each tradition, as well as proposed explanations for these phenomena. The selected ethnic expressions include: Italian Marian devotion displayed at the annual *festa* of the Madonna of Mount Carmel on

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<sup>28</sup> Susan Hill Lindley, "You have Stept out of your Place:" *A History of Women and Religion in America* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 201.

East 115<sup>th</sup> Street in New York; Cuban devotion toward Our Lady of Charity; and American devotion toward Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Pittsburgh. Particular attention is given to the role of women in American Marian devotion because of the diverse and often contested ways in which the figure of Mary presents a model of female religiosity, a phenomenon that may be linked to the rise and decline of devotional practice.

Timothy Kelly and Joseph Kelly, in their article “Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Gender Roles, and the Decline of Devotional Practice,” discuss devotional practices involving a painting of the Madonna and child. They document participation in devotion as having begun in the late nineteenth century, reaching a peak during the 1930s and 1940s, and going into a rapid decline in the 1950s. The authors speak specifically of the twenty years following 1930 when Catholic women particularly frequented St. Philomena Church in Pittsburgh’s East End in order to take part in the novena to the painting of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, who was “perhaps the most popular religious icon of the twentieth century.”<sup>29</sup> This is evidenced by the fact that forty-four parishes and convents in the Pittsburgh diocese were offering their own weekly novenas by 1939.<sup>30</sup> The Our Lady of Perpetual Help painting “was a great solace and support, a power of unequalled value to those in pain or suffering. A person resigned to suffering, or who aspired to resignation, could find no better refuge than Our Lady of Perpetual Help and no better access to her than through the

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<sup>29</sup> Timothy Kelly and Joseph Kelly, “Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Gender Roles, and the Decline of Devotional Practice,” in *Journal of Social History*, 32, no.1 (1998): 1. [Infotrac](#). Gale Group. 12 April 2005.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

weekly novena at St. Philomena parish.”<sup>31</sup> In 1950, however, participant numbers began to decline, and attendance was reduced to only ten percent of the 1950 average over the next two decades.<sup>32</sup>

The authors suggest linking the decline in American Catholic devotional practices to “a much broader transformation in American Catholic religious sensibility that began in the wake of World War II and continued throughout the 1950s.”<sup>33</sup> They propose that

changes in participation levels in the Our Lady of Perpetual Help devotion indicate that American women’s ideology of gender may have changed before the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s [ . . . ] Catholic women who once embraced a ritual that affirmed their roles as passive nurturers increasingly rejected that feminine ideal. That they did so in the years before the rebirth of feminist movement suggests that they had begun to redefine their lives earlier than we previously believed.<sup>34</sup>

So Kelly and Kelly seem to suggest that a significant, observable decline occurred in Marian devotional practices both with reference to the Our Lady of Perpetual Help painting and to pan-American Catholic devotional practices. Furthermore, they posit that this change resulted from a major ideological shift concerning women’s views of their own religious and secular roles. Despite these claims, they admit that explaining

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

the decline is complicated: “Catholics all across America appear to have abandoned devotional rituals by 1980, and the decline in this Pittsburgh parish likely fits this broader trend. But most studies identify the Second Vatican Council as the cause of the decline in American devotional behaviors, and thereby suggest that the decline only began after 1962.”<sup>35</sup> However, the authors identify causes that may have led to such a decline during the decade preceding the council.

Kelly and Kelly suggest that Our Lady of Perpetual Help emerged as a devotional icon following a century’s worth of intense devotional expression in America. They also noted that the “devotional climate” of the time was dependent upon support mainly from women. In this instance, women’s ideological shift during the fifties and sixties might have altered this climate to the extent that patterns of devotional practice at the very least changed and at most began to decline and even disappear. According to Kelly and Kelly, the image of the Virgin seemingly encouraged Catholic women to endure their diasporic cultural settings prior to the mid-twentieth century. Even so, they apparently began to “reject the novena’s representation of power” and sought “control in the temporal world,” a process that both in principle and practice eventually diverted women away from the Virgin and her influence as time progressed.<sup>36</sup> Kelly and Kelly claim that “only when that ‘feminine’ role [that Mary embodied and that her image promoted] began to change would this particular dimension of Our Lady of Perpetual Help devotion diminish in its appeal to women, and at that point it would likely begin the kind of slide from

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 9.

popularity that we know it experienced in the 1950s.”<sup>37</sup> A major impetus for the shift in women’s religious ideological consciousness was that “women’s increased participation in the labor force began to enable women to envision a route to mastery over their material lives, and to move them to reconsider, and even shed, those cultural experiences rooted in a less autonomous life.”<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, “the present trend toward greater equality and independence for women, implying as it does a weakening of the foundations upon which the prerogatives of male dominance in marriage were based, has led many wives to be less tolerant and long-suffering [as the image of Mary encouraged them to be] than they have been.”<sup>39</sup>

In his book, *Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, Robert Orsi tells the story of “a religious celebration, the annual *fiesta* of the Madonna of Mount Carmel on East 115<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City, and of the devotion to this Madonna which flourished among Italian immigrants and their American-born or –raised children who lived around her.”<sup>40</sup> Apparently, “the devotion to la Madonna del Carmine” has a venerable history in southern Italy, where the annual *fiesta* is celebrated in much the same way as it is in New York,” and Orsi emphasizes that “the immigrants sought to reproduce the devotion in their new home, introduced and integrated their children into it, and marched through the streets of New York behind their Madonna.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, “Southern Italy’s strong attachment to the Madonna is related by and large to

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), xxxix.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, xlv.

the matriarchal character of its peasant society.”<sup>42</sup> Because the Italians of Harlem have identified the *domus* as what “the people themselves claimed, implicitly, or explicitly, as the foundation of their understanding of the good and the basis of their moral judgment,” Orsi focuses on the dynamic relationship between home and family as the cultural and religious basis for their particular expressions of Marian devotion.<sup>43</sup> Because women have been so often relegated to the domestic sphere, especially within the nineteenth-century True Womanhood model, the connection between women and the home parallels conveniently the connection between the home and Mary. Therefore, correlative expectations are imposed upon earthly women that demand they fulfill the domestic standards set by Mary.

As Orsi previously noted, the Virgin’s statue on 115<sup>th</sup> Street “was a visible link between Italy and East Harlem.”<sup>44</sup> The procession in the *fiesta* was meant to foster a sensibility of remembrance of traditional religious processions in Italy, and the annual festa provided an entire week in which participants could honor this heritage and renew themselves as Catholic Italian-Americans.<sup>45</sup> Thus devotion to the Blessed Mother served as a mediator for religious and ethnic identity. The Madonna was approached by devotees seeking healing and help for all manner of family and household dilemmas, ranging from common, minor troubles to major life hardships. The poor sought her healing for colds and dental problems, and many families sought

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<sup>42</sup> Joseph A. Varacalli and Salvatore Primeggia, *The Saints in the Lives of Italian-Americans: An Interdisciplinary Investigation*, eds. (New York: Forum Italicum, 1999), 76.

<sup>43</sup> Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, 168.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-69.

her guidance over (often multigenerational) familial problems.<sup>46</sup> In this way, “One of the central meanings of the annual *fiesta*, then, was the power and authority of the *domus* over the lives of individuals and its resilience to their anger.”<sup>47</sup> As Joseph A. Varacalli notes, some scholars posit that displaying images such as the Madonna statue served “to emphasize the sacredness of the *domus*.”<sup>48</sup>

Extending beyond the *domus*, the celebration of the *fiesta* also helped to establish a bridge between the home/family and the larger Italian community in East Harlem. Establishing the Madonna’s image on 115<sup>th</sup> Street itself was an act that physically grounded the religious identity of Italian-American participants in their geographical setting. This resulted in a “sacralization of Italian Harlem” because Mary resided there and because the “devotion absorbed the geography into itself so that no distinction can be made between the religious event and the setting.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, as Orsi notes, “By celebrating the Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street, the Italians claimed the neighborhood for themselves.”<sup>50</sup>

The devotional role of women in honoring the Madonna seems to be anchored in an innate connection between devotee and the Virgin in a relationship that defined much of the Italian-American community’s perceptions of women. Orsi goes so far as to say that the devotion to the Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street “was a women’s devotion” in that it directly involved women participants and illustrated the role of women in

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 174-76.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>48</sup> Varacalli and Primeggia, *The Saints in the Lives of Italian-Americans: An Interdisciplinary Investigation*, 82.

<sup>49</sup> Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, 180.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 182.

larger Italian culture. Varacalli's text discusses Mary as appealing particularly to Italian peasant women because of her vast knowledge and experience in "ultimate spiritual glory and earthly tragedy" and because she "was seen as the one who could best understand a mortal mother's hopes, fears, and concerns for the family and surroundings."<sup>51</sup> Orsi acknowledges the mixed blessings that the connection between the Madonna and Italian women produced: "at the same time that the devotion offered women...consolation, it reaffirmed those aspects of the culture which oppressed them: the source of their comfort was also the source of their entrapment."<sup>52</sup> This troubling combination of liberation and limitation resulted from a number of factors, namely the ultimate male control of women's limited opportunity to assert their private power in the public sphere and the expectation of women to bear the responsibility of penitence for the community.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, the image of the Madonna and participation in devotional rituals served both to give women additional space in which to express themselves religiously, and to place on them additional burdens of expected action and attitude.

Susan Hill Lindley provides another perspective from which to view models of female religiosity and Catholic women:

The characteristics promoted by the church for the laity were those identified in the nineteenth century as natural for women:

emotionalism and sentimentalism, docility and obedience to authority,

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<sup>51</sup> Varacalli and Primeggia, *The Saints in the Lives of Italian-Americans: An Interdisciplinary Investigation*, 76.

<sup>52</sup> Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, 205.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-16.

represented by the church's hierarchy and clergy. Yet we should not conclude that certain religious values and activities were simply imposed on immigrant women by the church's hierarchy or by American culture. Particular familial and religious roles for women were part of the ethnic heritage of many immigrants and were embraced and endorsed by women themselves. Religious devotion to God and especially to Mary.....helped Catholic women preserve their identity and provided a source of comfort, strength, and meaning in a world that was often harsh and bewildering.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, Lindley warns against viewing all religious values and activities as imposed on women and recommends understanding the traditions also as preserved by women themselves within their ethnic heritage. She views ethnically grounded roles for women more positively than the dichotomous terms in which Orsi speaks of Italian-American women's roles in relation to the Madonna; if nothing else, these two views suggest the complex implicit and explicit, and public and private, effects the Virgin had on Italian American women's roles. Depending on the perspective one assumes, Mary may be seen as liberating, limiting, or as representing a paradoxical mixture of both possibilities. These paradoxes attest to the understanding that Mary, even as a simple and integral piece of Roman Catholic religious culture, complicated arguments for women's traditional cultural roles. Though women could perhaps look to Mary

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<sup>54</sup> Lindley, "You have Stept out of your Place:" *A History of Women and Religion in America*, 203.

for hope and endurance, it seems apparent that the male-dominated culture looked to Mary for reinforcement of women's roles that arguably benefited men most.

The Madonna also served as an image of stability for a people experiencing inner and outer turbulence as a diasporic people. Simply knowing that her statue would remain on 115<sup>th</sup> Street provided Italian-Americans from Harlem with a reference point for their religious and cultural heritage and identity, even though the community composition fluctuated over time. During the 1950s and 1960s, *cara Harlem*, referring to the religious solidarity of Italian-Americans within Harlem, began to disappear, but “what continued to exist of it, in reality and in memory, existed in relation to the Madonna.”<sup>55</sup> Orsi notes that “continued participation in the devotion, even from a distance, offered the people who moved away some continuity and social mobility,” and he suggests that “what is left of Italian Harlem seems to be clustered around the Madonna.”<sup>56</sup>

In support of Orsi's claim, a pastor of an Italian Harlem parish is recorded as having written the following in 1953: “Many people who were once living in the neighborhood but now are far away will remember the Church which is associated with the earliest memories of their life, will remember the Statue of the Blessed Mother at whose feet they poured their hearts at the time of their first joys, their first sorrows.”<sup>57</sup> As Orsi again notes the apparent decline during the 1950s of “the Madonna's power,” he asserts that her devotees will remember her statue. As

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<sup>55</sup> Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, 185.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 185-86.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

evidence of the decrease in devotional practice, he notes fewer reports concerning divine graces in bulletins of local parishes, and he states that “many of those which are printed have a crude quality of bartering about them. In 1947, for example, a woman wrote into the church from Brooklyn asking the priests to light one candle in gratitude for a grace received and another ‘because I am expecting another favor.’ The fear and trembling before the holy in its place is gone, replaced by a wager.”<sup>58</sup> These examples echo notions suggested by Kelly and Kelly of women envisioning “a route to mastery over their material lives” as they gradually discard notions of passive acceptance and endurance in favor of active pursuit of material wellbeing. In other words, women during the 1950s shifted their focus from seeking from Mary the strength to endure to seeking for themselves material benefits that would aid them in their everyday lives by actively petitioning Mary.

Orsi notes that the Italian-Americans who still came to the *festa* during the 1950s and 1960s participated in a very different sort of procession. Apparently, the annual feasts of this time saw “A greater emphasis on order and decorum [. . .] as the clergy attempted to control what they saw as the less acceptable features of this devotion; and there was at last a chance of their succeeding in this. . . . The meaning of the festa is interior, controlled, a matter of the heart and not the street. The people have come not to march and eat and cry in the hot streets, but to go to church.”<sup>59</sup> He notes again that the Madonna of East Harlem had lost her “power of the past. . . . The Madonna had been relegated to a subordinate position, the handmaid of the priest

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

who founded the order in charge of the church on 115<sup>th</sup> Street.”<sup>60</sup> Again, this situation seems to support Kelly and Kelly’s argument for a shift in religious ideology that effected a decline in Marian devotional practices across the United States during the nineteenth century.

Salvatore Primeggia, though observant of a definite change in Italian-American Marian devotion during the mid-twentieth century, claims that “a distinct Mariology arose” that flourishes “as strong as ever among the third and fourth generations” of Italian-Americans.<sup>61</sup> Primeggia suggests that “throughout Italian-American parishes today, formal and cult adoration of the Madonna continues to flourish.”<sup>62</sup> Robert Orsi explains this preservation of religious expression: “the women in the community believed that Mary had suffered the pains of childbirth, that she had menstruated, and that she worried constantly about her child. They felt that she could understand them because she had shared their most private experiences...”<sup>63</sup> Orsi posits a statement extending Primeggia’s claim:

As they insisted on a personal God who could know the hidden sorrows of their lives, the Italians of East Harlem revealed a sense of the insufficiency of a male God. Women seemed to doubt that a male God could understand their needs and hopes and so they turned to another, complementary divine figure whose life was one of suffering

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>61</sup> Varacalli and Primeggia, *The Saints in the Lives of Italian-Americans: An Interdisciplinary Investigation*, 89.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*, 227.

for her child, a story that resonated deeply with the economy of Italian-American family life.<sup>64</sup>

So, though Primeggia does not identify a decline in devotional practices of Italian-Americans as Orsi and Kelly and Kelly do, his suggestion of “a distinct Mariology” that arose during the time that many other scholars note as a time of significant decrease in devotion seems to support Kelly and Kelly’s argument of a change in “religious sensibility, a shift in ideology,” though this shift certainly differs from that which they reveal in relation to the Pittsburgh Catholic community. In other words, perhaps what Primeggia defines less as a decline in devotional practice and more as the development of “a distinct Mariology” demonstrates, if not a decline in devotional practice and the support of Mary’s more traditional model of female religiosity, then a shift in the religious ideology and identity of Italian-Americans that resulted in different, rather than diminished, devotional practices. Orsi’s observation of the changed form and content of the annual Italian feasts also supports this conjecture.

Thomas Tweed’s account of the Our Lady of Charity image presents a view of twentieth-century Marian devotion that complements the previous two studies because the Cuban Madonna’s image was not brought to the States until September of 1961: “The statue of Our Lady of Charity that journeyed from Havana to Miami had sacred power for her dispersed devotees, even though it was not the original image.”<sup>65</sup> Apparently, the “Golden Age” of Cuban Catholic history in general occurred from

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.

about 1750 until 1850, earlier than the swell of Catholic devotional practices for the Italian-American and Pittsburgh communities. Also, since “most observers, native and foreign, still found the [Cuban] institution extraordinarily weak” and because of the mere time frame in which the Madonna’s image was brought to the States, this Cuban expression of devotional fervor experienced a surge of popularity right about the time when the other traditions’ practices seem to have been declining, as mentioned earlier.<sup>66</sup> However, it is important to note that “Cuban exiles in Key West and New York had appealed to Our Lady of Charity during the tumultuous 1890s.”<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, with Fidel Castro’s assuming control of Cuba in 1959, a slew of exiles and migrants fled Cuba and came to the U.S. “That almost unprecedented migration transformed the cultural landscape of Miami.”<sup>68</sup>

The devotees of Our Lady of Charity in Miami connected her “with the collective identity of the Cuban diaspora and the fate of the island nation.”<sup>69</sup> Tweed notes that though “informal domestic piety” toward the Virgin continued before and after the mass migration to Miami, “organized public devotions to Our Lady of Charity....began shortly after the first waves of migrants arrived from Castro’s Cuba.”<sup>70</sup> Especially following the time when a permanent building was erected in place of the provisional chapel housing the Shrine of Our Lady of Charity, “more and more Cubans came to homage and petition the national patroness.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 38.

Devotional patterns of the Our Lady of Charity Shrine as compared to the Pittsburgh and Italian Harlem shrines differed concerning the participation of women in terms of attendance and frequency of devotion. Though Tweed still documents the Cuban traditions of predominately female participation in religious practice, he claims that “the patterns have altered somewhat in exile...*men* attend and participate more, especially at the shrine.”<sup>72</sup> Tweed suggests that this pattern was established because of the Virgin’s connections with national identity. Males shared a natural devotional connection to the Madonna because they most often served as Cuban independence fighters. Tweed still notes, however, that “women are more likely to express other personal concerns and visit when no public ritual is scheduled.”<sup>73</sup>

All three cultural expressions of Marian devotion—Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Pittsburgh, the Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street in Italian Harlem, and Our Lady of Charity in Miami—illustrate distinctive ethnic practices. To the devotees of all of Mary’s various manifestations, her image seems to impart a particular sense of identity, both religious and ethnic. The shrines in Italian Harlem and Pittsburgh suggest evidence of a larger shift in American Catholic ideology, particularly for women. Though Roman Catholic immigrant women could certainly turn to Mary for ethnic solidarity and religious and cultural preservation, it is also the case that Mary was a common source of oppressive American cultural norms for women. These standards were succinctly embodied in the nineteenth-century True Woman, the dual cultural and religious model that often relegated and limited women’s experiences to

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 63.

the domestic sphere. The variant manifestations of the shift in ideology enrich the complex heritage of American and immigrant expressions of Marian devotion. Though the shrine from Cuba and its growing popularity seem to be more circumstantial and more related to ethnic matters of politics and society, one cannot help but identify the decades of the 1950s and 1960s as a time of change for American and immigrant devotional practice, if not religious ideology. The empirical data concerning the Italian Harlem and Pittsburgh shrines, however, do point to some major, wide-sweeping transformation in devotion that seems to result from a common change in ideology. Overall, these three instances of ethnic Marian devotional expression provide small pieces of the overall puzzle of American Catholic devotional practices regarding the Blessed Mother. If nothing else, they complicate previously simplified notions of Mary's role as an entirely positive exemplar for female religiosity, of the general role Mary played in American Catholicism of the nineteenth century, of devotional practice patterns in the U.S., and especially of ethnic expressions of devotion.

## THE TRUE WOMANHOOD MODEL OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

As Susan Hill Lindley suggests in *“You Have Stept Out of your Place:” A History of Women and Religion in America*, three models dominated feminine religiosity in America in the nineteenth century. The images of the good wife, the Republican mother, and the “true woman” described and prescribed the socially and religiously acceptable roles for women.

The image of the good wife arose during the seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries from within the Puritan community. Portraits of the good wife come from ministerial literature of the period; these emerged during a time when women tended to exceed men in terms of church membership and activities. For this reason, the good wife model was largely concerned with women’s religious behavior as it manifested in all areas of their lives under the guidance of their husbands.<sup>74</sup> The image and role of the Puritan good wife gradually evolved into that of the Republican mother during the time of the American Revolution. As citizens of a budding America, women needed and desired to contribute to their growing nation. According to Lindley, “Republican Motherhood represented both continuity with and change from the colonial ideal of the ‘Good Wife.’ ”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, women were expected to fulfill their social and religious roles primarily within the home by influencing the religious and moral character of their families. However, her knowledge and insight

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<sup>74</sup> Lindley, *“You have Stept out of your Place:” A History of Women and Religion in America*, 24-25.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

could also extend to some degree into the public and political sector within the Republican period.

Lindley suggests that the Republican Mother model of the later eighteenth century, though integral as a social and political model for women, was a transitional model for women. In this way, the Republican Mother model immediately followed the colonial good wife model and immediately preceded the “incredibly pervasive” cult of “true womanhood,” the latter two being chiefly concerned with feminine religiosity as expressed in a larger cultural setting.<sup>76</sup> This image was the primary ideal Americans espoused during the nineteenth century, when “the Cult of True Womanhood” emerged and prescribed four “cardinal virtues” for women, relegating them to, and exalting them highly when they fulfilled their roles within, the domestic sphere. The “cardinal virtues” suggest that a “true woman” aims to be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. These virtues were to be cultivated by all Christian women in America. However, the virtues were crucial for Roman Catholic immigrant women of the early to mid-nineteenth century who sought assimilation into their new American and largely Protestant environment(s). The True Womanhood model provided strict guidelines for women in the nineteenth century, both Catholic and Protestant, nuns and laity. The model was grounded in religious principles, but its application also concerned all-encompassing elements of secular, earthly, and domestic life for women as well.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-58. Lindley’s volume dwells primarily upon Protestant women in nineteenth-century America. For this reason, I thought it unnecessary to re-articulate how the Cult of True Womanhood

Immigrant Catholics coming to the States between 1820 and 1850 were largely responsible for establishing Roman Catholicism as the largest Christian group in America, a fact that holds true at the present. Among some groups, Roman Catholicism has maintained traditional and cultural ties to Mary that reach back to early Christian thought concerning the Virgin. These ties have also accommodated uniquely American manifestations, particularly among immigrant communities. For this reason, Roman Catholic immigrant women claim an important role in demonstrating the connection between the True Womanhood model, largely a social and cultural paradigm, and Mary, a paradigm of feminine religiosity. In their efforts to acculturate themselves to/within the dominant social model of the time, Roman Catholic women eventually combined Mary's model of feminine religiosity with the True Womanhood model as it seemed the greater American culture wished for them to do. This blending of spiritual expectations concerning Mary with social and cultural expectations concerning the somewhat more secular True Womanhood model produced what I call a sort of dual cultural-religiosity paradigm.

Within this paradigm, cultural and religious roles for women are inextricably linked so that women are expected to consolidate their interests and efforts by channeling all their energy toward a directive they cannot even call wholly their own, even if this directive claims to combine their native heritage and traditions with American cultural standards in a mutually beneficial manner. This cultural-religiosity paradigm manipulated Roman Catholic immigrant women's traditional reliance upon

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functioned within Protestant communities. Thus, I will focus on how the True Womanhood model affected Roman Catholic women.

Mary as a source of religious identity that could be used to draw these women further and further into the cultural roles that a largely prejudicial Protestant America felt were appropriate and necessary for them. This dual model seemed to have functioned well because it seemed on the surface that these women would benefit both religiously and culturally from submitting to both models simultaneously within their new American cultural/religious setting. In this way, the paradigm touted misleadingly its ability to enable Roman Catholic women to both assimilate into American culture and to preserve their religious heritage, particularly pertaining to Mary, who was conveniently co-opted as figurehead of the American True Woman model. In a more positive understanding, Lindley notes (as previously cited) that “Religious devotion to God and especially to Mary and the saints [...] helped Catholic women preserve their identity and provided a source of comfort, strength, and meaning in a world that was often harsh and bewildering.”<sup>78</sup> As will be discussed, this dual cultural/religious model for women thwarted their ability to effectively and thoroughly emulate the virtues of the models separately, though perhaps they seem similar enough so as to blend seamlessly.

Despite some degree of pervasive Protestant hostility toward immigrant Roman Catholic women, Susan Hill Lindley asserts that the latter “had a unique position among American Christians, for their tradition provided not one but two respectable roles for women: wife and mother; and the honored single life of a

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

religious sister.”<sup>79</sup> These roles, exemplified by Mary, easily parallel the cardinal virtues prescribed by the True Woman model of the nineteenth century. Lindley also later discusses Roman Catholic women’s interaction with this model: “middle-class Catholic women, like their Protestant sisters, found ways to use or reinterpret the image to expand their concerns and activities, even as they insisted they agreed with the ideal.”<sup>80</sup> Thus Roman Catholic women, particularly immigrants, utilized both the model they knew in Mary and that which they were introduced to in True Womanhood in order to navigate the social, cultural, and religious relations with “native” American neighbors. The progression from the Puritan good wife to the True Woman of the nineteenth century culminated in a manner that necessitated the co-opting of the Virgin Mary as a model of female piety in order for Roman Catholic women to thrive in America if they were to successfully assimilate dominant cultural value systems of the time.

This dual cultural/religious model also raised issues of male spirituality versus female spirituality, sparking debates over innate and cultivated religiosity that continue today. Over the course of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, popular cultural and religious views of women’s spirituality changed drastically. As Lindley discusses, the view of women as the spiritually weaker sex as descended from the sinful Eve fully evolved into the view of women as innately more spiritual and moral. Although some Puritan leaders went so far as to assert only that women’s gender-specific experiences (of sexuality and reproduction) made them

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 198.

naturally more likely to participate in and respond to religious devotion, it was not until the advent of the “true woman” image that women *as women* became more religiously devout.

The notions of submissiveness and domesticity, as Lindley notes, were not new standards for the nineteenth-century woman. But the notions of piety and purity ascribed to her are newer and more far-reaching in their implications for women. Immigrant Roman Catholic women assimilated to American culture and the national True Woman ideal, which automatically entailed notions of natural piety and purity that would have immediately and understandably evoked the image of Mary. Furthermore, to aspire to emulate the Virgin Mary as an example of these cardinal virtues also would have allowed these women to distinguish themselves from Eve’s model of feminine religiosity—that of disobedience, moral impurity, and impiety. In this way, immigrant Catholic women could conform to dominant religious standards in a manner that preserved their religious heritage, particularly elements of Marian devotion, while also satisfying the social and cultural standards of nineteenth-century America. This process entailed both benefits and risks for these immigrant women. Though Marian traditions were preserved for these women, the figure of Mary herself was manipulated as a sort of convenient pawn within American culture’s move to put women in their place via the True Womanhood model.

The notion of purity was especially important for these women, not only because it was one of four cardinal virtues of True Womanhood, but also because it was the motivation for and result of Mary’s virginity. Barbara Welter, in her seminal

article on “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” discusses the importance of purity for American women of the time: “Purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine. Without it she was in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order.”<sup>81</sup> Just as the religious virtues of women may be tested by earthly immorality, temptations, and satanic influences, so women’s purity may be threatened, even assaulted, by men’s innate and voracious sexual drive and desires. In this way, the piety modeled by Mary and the purity extolled in the True Woman combined to women’s seeming advantage; together these virtues and the models that best illustrated them could help Roman Catholic women defend these qualities against the outside world. This empowered women to affirm their religious identity and to seek a distinctive American identity that seemingly combined the best of both their native traditions and new American cultural standards.

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<sup>81</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1800-1860,” in *Dimity Convictions* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 23. This essay was originally published in *American Quarterly* in 1966.

## **MARY AS PARADOXICAL AND INCOMPATIBLE WITH MODEL OF THE “TRUE WOMAN”**

To view Mary as paradoxical and incompatible with the model of the “True Woman” is exploratory in nature, including criticism written in the twenty-first century. This understanding results from rhetorical examination, relying on historical and ethnographic insight when available. Because primary sources from Roman Catholic immigrant women have been nearly impossible to locate and consult at this point, it might seem as if this paper leaves as little room for their voices as some of the texts previously noted leave for Mary’s own voice. The lack of such primary sources stems in part from the fact that women religious (nuns) were the only Roman Catholic women of the nineteenth century who would have had the time, energy, and justification for recording personal testimonies and memoirs. This fact attests all the more to the challenging situations in which lay immigrant women found themselves. They had families to care for and domestic responsibilities to fulfill, while women religious were privileged to have more individual and collective spiritual matters as their primary concern in life. Nonetheless, I do not wish to squelch these women’s voices that are already limited in number and difficult to transmit effectively. My analysis may appear to force upon these women a personal, cultural, social, and religious consciousness they may very well not have had the ability or inclination to cultivate. I have not found any sustained examination of how the religious paradigm and the social/cultural paradigm came together for women, despite the several ethnographic sources discussing briefly Mary and the True Womanhood model in relation to one another. My sources often acknowledge the paradoxical application of

both models for women, but tend to treat the issue as a small part of a larger struggle for Roman Catholic immigrant women of the nineteenth century.

For this reason, much of the section to follow will extend more limited conversations about Marian paradoxes that appear in cited source materials. This section is intended only to conjecture about a more complete picture of the myriad challenges faced by these immigrant women. Much more work could and should be conducted on this topic, using primary sources from nineteenth-century Roman Catholic immigrant women themselves. This study is but the first step into an adequate analysis of two fundamental issues that are more concrete and tangible concerning the real-life situations of these women and the models they were expected to fulfill.

First, as already discussed in the extra/canonical source section, it is critical to understand that the biblical portraits of Mary that have dominated many Marian traditions scantily and inconsistently portray a Mary whose virginity seems crucial to her heavenly and earthly status, but which is ambiguously denoted, defined and extrapolated as a model for all other women. The very fact that Mary is “a simple heroine who left no diaries or personal testimonies”<sup>82</sup> strongly suggests a basic problem of voice: Mary is to be the ultimate religious (and social/cultural) model for earthly women, yet she herself in no way communicates the origin and significance of the qualities that earned her all her various titles and praise. This issue of voice is reflected to some degree in one study conducted by Colleen McDannell. Discussing

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<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Celibacy* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000), 60.

Catholic women's literary writings and publications within a nineteenth-century context, McDannell notes that "Catholic women, although they produced devotional poetry, analytical articles, and domestic fiction, rarely presented their own religious attitudes."<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the equivocal depictions of Mary's biblical virginity beg critical questions for earthly women. They leave them with no clear answers as to the exact content and duration of Mary's virginal purity. Simply stated, the principle of Mary's virginity is widely accepted and known, though it seems to be easier for earthly women to articulate than to emulate.

Second, the True Womanhood model of the nineteenth century presented a dilemma for women, whether viewed in conjunction with the Marian paradigm or not. Mixing virginal purity with expectations of fertility within marriage further complicates an already circumstantially problematic situation. Marriage and sexual submission within that sacrament were in stark contrast with the virtue of sustained purity within the True Womanhood model. Virginal purity was expected of women prior to marriage, and they were expected to eventually marry and produce children. This tension created a fundamental dilemma for women for which no segue or solid bridge was provided in transition from one to the other. Virginal purity was necessary and expected, just as was marriage, but the two logistically cannot coincide. This conflict creates a problem for women: virginity and marriage are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, this reality wholly pits earthly women against Mary, who is extolled for apparently maintaining her virginity and maternity.

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<sup>83</sup> Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 137.

Ultimately, Roman Catholic immigrant women of the nineteenth century may very well never have expressly acknowledged, understood, and dealt with these issues of Marian paradox as someone from a contemporary context might do. However, this matter seems secondary; from a rhetorical view, these paradoxes are indeed inherently fixed in the biblical passages portraying Mary, in discourses theologizing Mary, and in other sources that have no clear connection to Mary herself. On a basic level, there are problems concerning both the True Womanhood model and constructions of Mary. For this reason, it is understandable that the mutual union of the two for the interests of Roman Catholic immigrant women seeking to assimilate to American culture, society, and religious norms would create only further problems for these women of the nineteenth century.

As noted earlier, constructions of Mary's virginity provide the most complex set of paradoxical religious and cultural norms for Roman Catholic immigrant women of the nineteenth century and even for such women today. Theologies and doctrines that emphasize Mary's virginity filtered through the True Womanhood model codify her virginity in terms of both institutionalized religious requirements and American socio-cultural requirements for women. Despite the unclear and inconsistent nature of biblical texts regarding Mary's virginity, this sexual characteristic is often claimed as a sort of prerequisite for women's ultimate spiritual development and immigrant women's efforts to exemplify the American True Woman. Hence, it is imperative to examine the implications of Mary's paradoxical virginity for Roman Catholic

immigrant women of the nineteenth century. My purpose is to better understand how the figure of Mary influenced them and fit in both their secular and religious lives.

*Virginity Juxtaposed with Maternity: Pope Pius IX's Encyclical Letter*

Documents produced and approved by the Church provide the most authoritative and perhaps most widely disseminated source for Roman Catholic teachings of the Virgin Mary. For this reason, the papal encyclicals, particularly those disseminated during the nineteenth century, offer insight into how views of Mary as an exalted religious figure combined with notions of more general cultural purity and sexuality to instill standards of religiosity in ordinary Catholic women. As Kenneth E. Untener, Bishop of Saginaw, wrote in the 1981 foreword to Claudia Carlen's collection of the papal encyclicals, "You cannot do theology, you cannot preach, you cannot teach, without taking these into account. You can miss a lot of other articles and statements by theologians and bishops around the world, but these you cannot miss. They are essential."<sup>84</sup> Considering the pivotal role the encyclicals play in Catholic teachings, they form a basis upon which to assess institutional attitudes toward Mary and interpretations of her that affected Roman Catholic immigrant women of the nineteenth century.

Pope Pius IX promulgated an encyclical letter in February of 1849 concerning the Immaculate Conception that is illustrative of Catholic church teachings on Mary. Early in this letter, Pius IX notes that

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<sup>84</sup> Kenneth E. Untener, "Foreword," *The Papal Encyclicals: 1740-1878*, ed., Claudia Ihm Carlen, (Raleigh, NC: McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), x.

there was in the entire Catholic world a most ardent and wondrous revival of the desire that the most holy Mother of God—the beloved Mother of us all, the immaculate Virgin Mary—be finally declared by a solemn definition of the Church to have been conceived without the stain of original sin.<sup>85</sup>

Mary is denoted here in two rather limiting ways. First, she is named only in relational terms as the Mother of God, an approach (or perhaps intentional tactic) that constructs Mary merely as an adjunct to Jesus and not as an individual in her own right. Second, the title of “the immaculate Virgin Mary” serves as a synecdochical label that constructs Mary’s personhood only in relation to her sexual purity, thereby limiting, if not wholly excluding and even denying, her individual identity and human earthliness. This type of reductionism is problematic for women who do not seek to define their humanity only by the state of their genitalia and the resultant spiritual purity they can cultivate and garner as compensation. This statement also implicitly connects holiness, a quality that helped Mary earn her status as “the most holy Mother of God” and “the immaculate Virgin Mary,” with sexual purity, thereby reinforcing a rigid standard of feminine religiosity which inappropriately pivots on a very human and earthly sexual characteristic for women.

More crucial to this discussion of Roman Catholic immigrant women is the way the Church deals with the link between original sin and reproduction. The declaration that Mary is affirmed by “the Church to have been conceived without the

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<sup>85</sup> “Ubi Primum,” in *The Papal Encyclicals: 1740-1878*, 291.

stain of original sin” further distances Mary from earthly women and completely negates her humanity that should serve as a bridge for women to fulfill the ultimate paradigm of feminine religiosity. Furthermore, the mention of original sin automatically evokes the image of Eve. It thereby suggests Mary as the redemptive solution to Eve and, indeed, to all women’s sins *as women*. As this rhetorical evaluation of the Pope’s few lines presented here suggests, encyclical portrayals and discussions of Mary are problematic at best in constructing a realistic, human model of feminine religiosity for Roman Catholic women.

Toward the end of this encyclical, Pius IX states:

Great indeed is Our trust in Mary. The resplendent glory of her merits, far exceeding all the choirs of angels, elevates her to the very steps of the throne of God. Her foot has crushed the head of Satan. Set up between Christ and His Church, Mary, ever lovable and full of grace, always has delivered the Christian people from their greatest calamities and from the snares and assaults of all their enemies, ever rescuing them from ruin.<sup>86</sup>

Here, again, it seems that individual personhood and humanity are alienated from the figure of Mary. This passage suggests a trust in and reverence of Mary based on her merits, more on the idea and ideal of Mary than on the actual person of Mary herself. Mary has so far transcended the bane of her earthly, albeit exalted and “Blessed,” existence that she resides upon the “steps of the throne of God.” Thus, not only is

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

Mary completely removed from an earthly context in which real Catholic women might relate to her, but she is elevated for her meritorious sexual purity, which is presented as a rather disembodied entity, even as an object of veneration in its own right, as previously mentioned. Once more occurs a reference to Eve,<sup>87</sup> the wayward first female and sinful proto-Marian figure, and this dichotomous relationship between the two constructs Mary as Eve's antithesis and redeeming replacement.

Mary would thus seem to be an important locus of feminine religiosity serving dutifully as an intermediary between Christ and His church. But she may well be only a conduit between the two and as such a sort of necessary evil. Even as the redemptive antithesis of Eve, Mary as an earthly, human woman still in theory possesses the ability to sin. High standards of personal and especially sexual purity are expected and nearly demanded of her as the mother of God and the ultimate paradigm of feminine religiosity. For this reason, and also to ensure the absolute purity of the virginal conception of Jesus, Pius IX constructs Mary in a disembodied and heavenly manner. In so doing, church teaching distances her (and the Christological heritage she ushers into the world) from a world of sin. Although this may well preserve the purity and holiness of Mary so that her son would not be tainted by sin, the Mary presented in these passages becomes a paradoxical model of feminine religiosity embodied (and yet disembodied) in Mary. On the one hand, she is very close to the divine status of her son and God the Father. Nonetheless, as an

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<sup>87</sup> "Her foot has crushed the head of Satan." "Ubi Primum," in *The Papal Encyclicals: 1740-1878*, 292. This passage is reminiscent of God's command given in the Garden of Eden in which he asserts perpetual enmity between Eve's children and the serpent's offspring (Genesis 3: 14-15, NKJV).

individual and originally earthly woman she seems never to fully achieve this status. On the other hand, her austere human and earthly characteristics are far removed from real women's experiences of virginity and maternity. The overcompensation of her extraordinarily holy and pure virginity defines a model of religiosity for women both inherently based in, yet far removed from, Catholic women's sexual experience.

This paradox is problematic for earthly Catholic women seeking to define their religiosity vicariously through constructions of Mary's virginity. Furthermore, these constructions have been historically and traditionally moderated and disseminated by a male-dominated church hierarchy primarily to advance interests of men more than of women. This sort of religious process for forming identity calls for women to be wholly responsible for their individual holiness mostly through, ironically enough, adopting a stance of passivity in refraining from sexual activity. However, the ultimate model for this purity is presented as intangible and disembodied. Thus women cannot wholly claim this model, as it is both human and triumphantly semi-divine. In this way, it seems that Mary can be either one or the other and not both simultaneously, though it is clear which persona the church prefers. Moreover, this standard defines for women a Christian identity dependent more upon what they should not or cannot do with their bodies than upon their spiritual development. It does not address what they should or could do, nor does it recognize women even as having spiritual selves. This strips Roman Catholic women of human agency and vilifies women's sexuality. Sexuality is considered appropriate or necessary only in certain limiting contexts of procreative sexual acts (as can be

seen particularly in other encyclical letters). The model embodied in Mary created more problems for women's religious, national, and ethnic identities than it solved, making it difficult for Roman Catholic immigrant women of the nineteenth century to claim a balanced and meaningful model in her name at all. Indeed, as Elizabeth Abbott writes in *A History of Celibacy*:

the most warped and humorless debates [concerning “Christianity’s obsession with chastity”] focus on Mary, Christ’s mother, culminating in a series of dogmas that, over the centuries, have relentlessly cleansed Mary of the earthiness and humanity she exudes in the Bible. She has metamorphosed from a virgin impregnated by the Holy Ghost to a still-virgin even after delivery, to an ever-virgin throughout her marriage, to an unearthly virgin immaculately conceived in her own mother’s womb. The theological stranglehold on Mary’s virginity, of course, has ensured that virginity in general never loses its fascination as a topic for Christian thinkers.<sup>88</sup>

*Virginity Juxtaposed with Maternity: Ethnography, History, and Religiosity*

In order to connect constructions of Mary’s virginity in papal encyclicals with the virginal purity characteristic of the True Womanhood model, we must turn to ethnographic, historical, and religious studies of scholars who specialize in nineteenth-century Roman Catholic beliefs and practices in America. As Ann Taves notes, “Marian devotions [of the mid-nineteenth century] focused on Mary as

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<sup>88</sup> Abbott, *A History of Celibacy*, 56.

simultaneously symbol of purity (virgin, immaculately conceived) and fertility (mother-hood) and as grace-filled mediator.”<sup>89</sup> In support of this notion, Robert Orsi’s research concerning the Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street and other ethnographic studies previously cited demonstrate that a complicated Marian paradigm was indeed constructed for women within nineteenth-century Roman Catholic devotional practices. These more localized examples illustrate the problematic constructions found within the rhetoric of the papal encyclicals. Mary was presented within multiple contexts as a mixed metaphor of sexual purity and of fertility. An unquestionable responsibility to family was also thrown into the mix of rigid expectations for Catholic women.

Taves also notes a further complication for Roman Catholic immigrant women of the mid-nineteenth century. Because these women seemed more inclined to Marian devotional practices than men, they were all the more susceptible to and even readily accepting of the multiple, conflicting models of feminine religiosity presented therein. Taves discusses this complex, nuanced situation:

At a time when women spent most of their lives enmeshed in family relationships, such devotions may have provided a source of solace and a means of repressing resentments about their familial relationships and responsibilities. The relational character of the devotions, their emphasis on obedience and devotion to idealized supernatural patrons, and their tendency to evoke feelings of

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<sup>89</sup> Ann Taves, *The Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 39.

dependence corresponds closely to the stereotypically “feminine” role which nineteenth-century women were expected to assume in marriage.<sup>90</sup>

Taves’s exploration of the patterns of women’s Marian devotion alludes to the True Womanhood model of the nineteenth century, which dictated this “stereotypically ‘feminine’ role [. . .] women were expected to assume in marriage.” In this way, Roman Catholic doctrine combined with American cultural standards to construct an ideal represented by the figure of Mary that was then imposed upon these immigrant women and manifested in their lived religious traditions. In other words, the emphasis of nineteenth-century Marian devotions went hand-in-hand with the more social/cultural standards of the time, both of which focused on purity and virginity as dominant modes of women’s religiosity and general personhood. This melding may have benefited some men and women as they sought cultural and religious conformity and status. It is understandable that immigrant women attempted to satisfy a multitude of religious and cultural standards by aspiring to Mary in order to assimilate to American conventions. However, her pure virginity leaves essentially no room for the physical and sexual identities Roman Catholic immigrant women assumed as earthly women conforming both to social/cultural standards of that time and to traditional religious roles as pious, dedicated mothers and wives. This combination of roles implicitly challenged and negated the status of virginity.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 87.

Mary F. Foskett notes in her article “Virginity as Purity” that

Whereas a married Jewish woman can be expected to engage in sexual intercourse with her husband without compromising her sexual purity, Mary clearly cannot. Her virginity is absolute – the liminality of her sexual status is removed. An end in itself, Mary’s virginity appears to signal a particular kind of purity.<sup>91</sup>

Furthermore, Foskett notes another major departure of Mary’s “brand” of virginity from that available to earthly women. She argues that “Mary emerges less as a moral agent who must actively resist threats to her virginity and more as a sacred object that is dedicated to the Lord, celebrated by the people and protected (mostly) by men. She resembles more a cult object than a priestess in whose care the sacred things are placed.”<sup>92</sup> Foskett’s observations, though profound and seducing, need some unpacking. Foskett’s comparison of Mary to a married Jewish woman shows Mary to be a sort of one-of-a-kind, unattainable model of virginal purity. The Jewish woman (or, indeed, any married woman), is expected to engage in sexual intercourse as both a wife and potentially procreative being; this action and identity are expected and socially/religiously sanctioned, though it is still in conflict with a sustained notion of purity as defined solely by virginity. Furthermore, “Mary’s virginity signals a particular kind of purity” because her sexual limits are removed. In essence, Mary ceases to reside upon the ambivalent line between virginal purity and expected,

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<sup>91</sup> Mary F. Foskett, “Virginity as Purity in the *Protoevangelium of James*,” in *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, 67-76, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 71.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

natural sexual engagement because her sexual status itself is removed, thereby also removing any limits associated with this status. Even if earthly women remain virginally pure, they, unlike Mary, do not have a physical choice to remove from themselves at least a sexual potential.

Foskett's second observation is particularly problematic because none of its nuanced implications bode well for women. Even Roman Catholic women who may have had more "moral" agency than Mary must endure and sustain themselves through threats to their virginity, the sacred object placed in their care. If this agency is interpreted as a positive, even empowering notion, then the real reason for respect afforded to these women is disembodied from them and commodified in the object of sexual purity. This disembodiment serves both to confuse the real, physical sexual expectations placed upon women and, paradoxically, to hold them responsible for an object that will eventually be sacrificed in the course of nature. Furthermore, even if this agency is to be celebrated among earthly women, their inescapable carnality still inevitably separates them from their ultimate paradigmatic figure. Foskett's notation of Mary as a sacred object also reduces any vestiges of Mary's humanity, to which earthly women might relate, to an objectified sexual quality that is disembodied even from her. Even Mary's prized virginity and personhood are protected mostly by men, thereby further reducing female agency and female religious identity. This formula distances Mary, her virginity, and also the problematic relationship between earthly virginity and fertility from Roman Catholic women on many levels, serving to disempower them and provide overly-complex and unattainable models of feminine

religiosity. Furthermore, this formula objectifies women's sexuality and then places it in the protection of the very men who also might threaten and assault the virginal purity of women. According to Mary's example, Roman Catholic women are expected both to trust and distrust men, who subsume within themselves the agency denied women and then mount allegedly natural, impulsive attacks on women's defenseless, yet crucial, sexual purity. Each complex and convoluted layer of this scenario disenfranchises women. Although they are touted as privileged and blessed by their virginal purity, these women's prized quality will ultimately be either stolen by ravenous men<sup>93</sup> or destroyed by their husbands in marriages that replace virginity with maternity without hesitation.

In reconnecting Mary's problematic virginity with the True Womanhood model of the nineteenth century, it is important to return to Barbara Welter's argument concerning the paradox of virginity and fertility: "Purity, considered as a moral imperative, set up a dilemma which was hard to resolve. Woman must preserve her virtue until marriage and marriage was necessary for her happiness. Yet marriage was, literally, an end to innocence. She was told not to question this dilemma, but simply to accept it."<sup>94</sup> Here one can see a direct correlation between the inherent paradoxes of the True Womanhood model and the inherent paradoxes of the virtues extolled in Mary noted by Taves. The cultural/social model and religious model in and of themselves are in conflict. Roman Catholic immigrant women

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<sup>93</sup> As Barbara Welter notes in her argument concerning women who submit to the True Womanhood model.

<sup>94</sup> Welter, *Dimity Convictions*, 27.

sought to merge their normative religious tradition (Mary included) with new American cultural standards in order to more easily assimilate to the dominant societal norms. However, the dominant paradigms these models offered were complicated. Roman Catholic women could turn to Mary for solace in troubling times, but they could never fully exemplify the extreme, heavenly, and disembodied virginal purity for which she is extolled. Nonetheless, the True Womanhood model, combining both social/cultural and religious norms, highlights Mary as an ultimate exemplar. The True Woman herself must deal with conflicting, simultaneous pulls of virginity and fertility, and Mary's rather de-humanized example of virginity leaves little to no room for women to be human. These institutionalized standards of virginal purity seem to have kept women of the time in an endless cycle in which they never could quite succeed, for Mary is both Queen of Heaven and an unattainable model that eludes earthly women.

*Classist Nature of True Womanhood Model Exemplified by Mary*

One might expect that the Marian paradox of virginal purity and simultaneous fertility would have caused nineteenth-century Roman Catholic immigrant women to increase family sizes. After all, this would be a natural result of adhering to such a model that they could fulfill only in this manner (as opposed to fulfilling it by emulating Mary's brand of virginal purity). The immigrant status of these women, however, strongly affected their socio-economic standing within an increasingly industrialized nation shaped by a middle-class standard of living. According to Colleen McDannell,

The nineteenth century also saw the decline of the large American family. In 1800 the average number of children born to a woman before she reached menopause was 7.04. By mid-century, this number dropped by 23 percent to 5.42, and by the end of the century, to 3.56.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, the fact that family sizes decreased during the nineteenth century is not necessarily evidence that the Marian paradoxical model did not negatively impact women's earthly roles and self-conceptions of religiosity. In fact, several scholars argue the opposite. Not only did the Marian paradox provide a problematic base for Roman Catholic immigrant women's earthly and spiritual roles, but the classism they encountered also disabled many of them in their efforts to assimilate to American society/culture and even to attempt to pursue and fulfill the already problematic Marian paradigm. If anything, this notable decrease in the number of children born to women in the nineteenth-century serves as evidence that earthly women could not fulfill all the various, conflicting standards imposed upon them by religious figures extolling Mary and social/cultural figures extolling the True Woman. Immigrant women particularly were disadvantaged socially and economically and therefore did not have the time, energy, desire, or ability to cultivate and manifest the contradictory elements of this dual cultural-religious paradigm. Though privileged, upper-class women certainly could not fulfill simultaneous standards of virginity and maternity as Mary did, at least some of them benefited from economic resources that allowed them more time for personal spiritual development and the pursuit of such lofty ideals. For

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<sup>95</sup> McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900*, 8.

lower-class immigrant women, however, the socio-economic realities of American life during the nineteenth century did little to accommodate a pursuit of divine standards for women.

As Susan Hill Lindley notes:

In its typical and most limiting form, the cult of True Womanhood was inherently class-biased. Immigrant women surely valued home and family and their roles therein, but few had the luxury of full-time domesticity, and their own ethnic traditions about female roles within the family did not necessarily fit an American cultural ideal.

Furthermore, middle-class Catholic women, like their Protestant sisters, found ways to use or reinterpret the image to expand their concerns and activities, even as they insisted they agreed with the ideal.<sup>96</sup>

Thus, the inherently classist elements of the True Womanhood model, especially in combination with the paradoxes of the Marian paradigm, can be understood as profoundly problematic for Roman Catholic immigrant women of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>96</sup> Lindley, *"You have Stept out of your Place:" A History of Women and Religion in America*, 198.

**CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS OF MARY AS INCOMPATIBLE WITH MODEL OF THE “TRUE WOMAN”**

“Women found the Madonna’s azure cloak, so ceremoniously draped over their shoulders, a heavy one.” --Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> Street*

Ultimately, Mary is a highly overqualified model of the nineteenth-century True Woman. In this way, she is also incompatible with the True Womanhood model. Mary represents the culmination of complementary religious and cultural ideals, but these ideals are wholly contradictory in practice for all other women. As figurehead of the dual paradigm of religiosity and True Womanhood, Mary offers a model for nineteenth-century Roman Catholic immigrant women that they could pursue but never fulfill. It is most important to note simply and straightforwardly that women cannot emulate Mary’s simultaneous virginity and maternity. Because Mary’s virginal purity seems to be the singular quality that allows her to carry Jesus, this same quality has been expected of other women in order for them to fulfill both their ultimate earthly and spiritual roles. However, because earthly women can in no way be both virgin and mother at the same time, a situation unfolds for them in which they cannot achieve on earth what they are allegedly expected to aspire to in heaven. Even if the social/cultural model of the True Woman is understood as more practical and immediately achievable for women, this model is still problematic and is represented, especially in its religious elements, by Mary herself. Thus, Mary is incompatible with the model of the True Woman.

Many scholars discuss the tendency for men to perform devotions to the Virgin Mary more often than women during the late nineteenth century and into the

twentieth century. Though they document this phenomenon as a casual observation, it seems to me that this tendency was probably linked directly to Mary's serving as an overqualified model of Christian womanhood. Though Mary was important to women devotees, the paradoxical model she provided for them complicated many aspects of their material/physical and spiritual lives. However, because the figure of Mary is constructed in the biblical texts and in Christian sources such as the papal encyclical letters only in relation to Jesus, it is understandable that men even more than women might look to her for guidance and nurturing. After all, she is a pillar of support for men, but she serves as a daunting model for women, overshadowing their inability to fill the mold she left behind for them. It is also possible that Mary was more appealing to men than women because she provided justification for men's assertion of their authority over women in both secular and religious realms. As previously noted, this suggests that Mary was constructed in a literary and faith tradition by men and for men. This not only excludes the perspectives and experiences of women, but it engenders men's manipulation of women's consciousness-shaping and personally formative life activities. The thought is cruelly ironic that men might be more attracted than women to the embodiment of the figure who is supposed to offer the ultimate representation of feminine religiosity as well as social/cultural virtue. This scenario does not make sense for women on a fundamental level, and it reminds one of the complicit role Christian men played in sustaining Mary as the preeminent model for women throughout the centuries.

It is difficult to offer a provisional resolution to the difficult dilemma in which Roman Catholic immigrant women of the nineteenth century seem to have found themselves. Their particular historical and cultural context gave way to new and different challenges from their Christian faith, especially concerning Mary's role in their tradition. Events such as the confirmation of Mary as patron saint of the United States in 1854 would seem to have advanced Mary's status as an exemplar of feminine religiosity. However, the institutionalization of Mary, whether as espoused by proponents of the True Womanhood model or as patron saint of the U.S., has certainly reinforced traditional and often oppressive roles for Roman Catholic women. At best, Roman Catholic immigrant women of the nineteenth century were given a complex and often contradictory model of social/cultural and religious being. Thus, the ubiquitous and often romantically simplified image of Mary appears to have actually complicated life and modes of religiosity for these women. The paradoxes they encountered in Mary might help contemporary Christian audiences gain understanding of how Mary is constructed for both men and women today. Though the solution does not seem to lie in disposing of Mary entirely, Marian paradoxes do necessitate re-envisioning of how the Mother of Christ speaks to modern women.

As written accounts of Mary are still dominated by male interpreters, it seems crucial that women's voices concerning her should be excavated from the past and amplified in the present so Catholic women of the future can claim a Mary—she who speaks to their own earthly and religious experience rather than to those of the men dictating the transmission and application of her tradition.

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