



R E F L E C T I O N S

IN HER ARMS

Somewhere back in the labyrinth of grammar school religious instruction, one of our patient nuns spent considerable time explaining the role of Mary as intercessor, illustrating her point with the story of Cana and the miracle of water changed to wine.

I wasn't quite sure at the time what to make of the concept. Was I to take my prayers up the side aisle first? Put in a word with the Mother before tackling the Son? But as a son myself, I knew mothers had the say. The analogy would have worked more easily for me if Mary were interceding with Joseph, who seemed to my boyish mind to be and not to be like my father. I kept that confusion to myself; it didn't matter. Then and now my perceptions of Mary have never been dogmatic. Instead a whole complex of emotions has grown from stories of her, and the picture and statues in my home and church have been the illustrations of those stories.

As a child (and even now) setting up the Christmas manger kindled deep feelings in me, especially reverence for the power and beauty of the maternal and feminine that held my child's world together. I remember placing the blue-robed figurine of Mary into the straw, and it was large in my small hand. This past year I joined the parish work party that sets up our crèche in front of the side altar. It involved removing the near-life-size statue of Mary from the altar and assembling a rather large stable of fir

boughs. When I carried Mary back up from the cellar closet where the figurines wait each year in darkness before Advent, I needed two hands. And I noticed that a finger and palm of Mary's hand were damaged. Silver wires of the armature protruded from a ragged gap in the plaster; it struck me as a kind of wound. It broke the spell of its artistic illusion, and echoed a story I read in my teens.

In that story by Giovanni Guareschi, the good-hearted but wily pastor of an impoverished parish loathes the century-old ugly terracotta statue of the Madonna venerated by his faithful little flock. When he finds a crack in it, against the advice of his conscience, which speaks to him from the altar crucifix, he changes the annual procession route so that the statue will be driven on a truck bed over the town's roughest roads.

Like Guareschi's Don Camillo, I loathe ugly statues. My artist father, a devout Catholic with a gift for restoration, passed on to me a distrust of statues poorly created or poorly used. I have come to see the worst of sentimentality and superstition as good stories told badly. These statues I would gladly fling on the Italian pastor's flat-bed truck, though I could not expect the same result: In the story the statue splits apart to reveal a silver Madonna hidden centuries ago under the covering of ugly clay.

A treasure, however, lies within many statues — not silver treasure, but the glimpse of something real and profound held even in terracotta or painted plaster. As in a painting or a story, the illusion of reality is necessary to catch the truth of reality. There are times when the poor light and humble statues of side aisles conspire to give body to the woman



growing from the young mother of the nativity to the sorrowful mother at the foot of the cross. In her arms Mary holds life and death.

There are, of course, the beautiful statues also: Michaelangelo's *Pieta*, or Mestrovic's *Virgin and Child*, or the haunting *Madonna and Child* of the Jewish sculptor Jacob Epstein. Humble or magnificent, statues grow in beauty and power from what viewers bring and to take from them.

The summer during the renovation of my church, the statues were taken from the altars to the church basement, Mary with the broken hand among them. I did not inherit my father's artistic skill, but I have his tools, and I sat by his side often enough as a boy to try to repair this broken hand.

I felt like Don Camillo, though our means were opposite. He unveiled the treasure of his statue by destroying its shell. I protected our treasure, giving it back its shell of illusion, so that Mary reaches out again, as she has for generations, to those who come to her in the shadows of the side aisle. □

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Why God Gave Me Children

Enough that it was afternoon and I was home from work
And tired and rutted in routine hoping for sleep and the quick passage of time
When out on my back porch to take some air I saw my children running
In the grass chasing one another laughing giddily and hanging from the volleyball
Net that I had set up some time ago but had yet to use and they haven't
Noticed me so I watch quietly these two best friends who never chose one
Another yet who love each other and hold hands and collide laughing falling
To the ground and one stays down on his back chest heaving with deep breaths
And his hand cupped over his eyes blocking the harsh sun as he stares in
Wonder at the grace of clouds and points upward telling his little sister
Who lies down beside him in perfect flattering imitation mimicking his
Gestures and repeating his sighs

— Patrick Madden