



*ENCOUNTER  
MARY  
THE BLACK  
MADONNA*

*HER IMPORTANCE  
TODAY*

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**ENCOUNTER MARY, THE BLACK MADONNA  
HER IMPORTANCE TODAY**

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## HER IMPORTANCE TODAY

### Introduction

Jeremiah says “Ask for the ancient paths.” He does not mean that we should try to recreate a past but rather look at the symbolic meaning images of the Black Madonna and her Son hold for us at this time in history. For, “Imagining Mary in words and pictures has always been one of the most powerful ways of imagining the Church, and so imagining ourselves freshly.”<sup>i</sup>

Throughout the world, spanning centuries, we can find hundreds of shrines dedicated to Mary, a Black Madonna holding Jesus, her Son, the Christ, primarily on her lap. Most shrines of the Black Madonna in Europe are found in France, Italy and Spain. In France, most are found in the centre of the country. Our Lady of the Underground (Notre-Dame-Sous-Terre) and Our Lady of the Pillar in the cathedral of Chartres, Our Lady of Rocamadour, France; Our Lady of Tenderness, at Taizé, France and Our Lady of Montserrat, Spain remain popular pilgrimage sites.

### Why Black?

There have been efforts to explain their blackness and origin. Natural cause is the reason most often given. These images have become blackened by the aging of wood and paint, the soot of votive candles, and the number of years some were hidden in cellars or vaults for protection from invaders. Some, however, connect the Madonna’s blackness to the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). He identified Mary as the bride of the *Song of Songs* who declares “I am black but beautiful” (Song of Solomon 1:5). Another reason given is that originally these images were statues of the Black Goddess Isis and her son whose cult was worshipped in the East long before Christianity. Early images of Mary and her Son sitting on her lap do resemble those of Isis and her Son Horus. In fact, Isis bore such titles as ‘Queen of Heaven’, ‘Star of the Sea’, ‘Morning Star’. These titles form part of a series of short petitions and exhortations addressed to Mary in the prayer known as the Litany of Loreto.

The Black Madonna is never without her Son and this is surely important. Since the nineteenth century, with the apparition of Mary at Lourdes and the pronouncement of the dogma of Immaculate Conception, most statues of Mary in our churches in North America present her as a white woman, standing alone, eyes cast down, and the humble, virginal handmaiden of God. Her femininity and humanness are obscured. Even when Mary holds a child in her arms, he is an infant who needs his mother, a stark contrast to the Child with a manly, mature face sitting on the lap of his mother, his right hand raised in blessing.

Whatever the reason for their origin and their blackness, one fact holds true. Over the centuries images and icons of the Black Madonna have been carried in silent procession among the local people. Countless numbers have flocked to their shrines on pilgrimage. “For ordinary people in small towns, their local Madonna, portable representation of the Incarnation, summed up their hope of intimate contact with the divine.<sup>ii</sup> Today, they continue to exhibit an energy, a source of comfort, not to be ignored.

The purpose of this reflection, however, is not to provide an historical overview of this devotion to Mary that spans centuries. Rather, we will focus on images of the ‘Black Madonna’ of medieval origin, XII-XV centuries. In so doing, we wish to show how contemplation of these images can inspire Christians to be witnesses of Jesus, bearers of joy and hope in a fragmented world. We invite you then on a virtual pilgrimage to contemplate the rich symbolism that images of Mary, the Black Madonna have for us today.

Mary, the Black Madonna mirrors our call to be mystics, contemplatives in communion with God at the heart of our existence. She connects us profoundly to the Incarnation of Jesus. In her, we discover how feminine and masculine energies working together, call forth our full humanity. Mary, the Black Madonna underlines our connection to the earth and to darkness wherein lies new life. She is also ‘mirror of compassion’. Most often seated, holding her Son on her lap, Mary, the Black Madonna, named ‘Seat of Wisdom’, awakens us to the Kingdom of God present in each one of us. Immersed profoundly in the rich symbolism that Mary, the Black Madonna holds for us, we end with a reflection on Divine Cosmic Love.

**We wish you a “sacred journey!”**

**To connect with us: [cnd@cnd-m.org](mailto:cnd@cnd-m.org)**

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<sup>i</sup> Rowan Williams, Ponder These Things, Praying with Icons of the Virgin, Franklin, Wisconsin, and Chicago: Sheed and Ward, 2002, p. 74.

<sup>ii</sup> Sally Cunneen, In Search of Mary, Ballantine Books, New York, 1996, p. 175.

## The Black Madonna: Mirror of Mystical Life

The importance of mystical life has been documented as far back as the Fathers of the Church.<sup>i</sup> In recent times, Karl Rahner made the case that the “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all.” By mysticism, Rahner means “a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence.” Rahner adds that a deep experience of God, constantly renewed in prayer, supported by participation in the Christian community, is necessary for Christians to live their faith, to sustain hope and not succumb to fear in the face of an often hostile secular culture.<sup>ii</sup>

It might be helpful to remember that Scripture reminds us that Jesus would often leave the group early in the morning to go and pray. In those times of solitude, Jesus entered into communion with his God whom he called his ‘*Abba*’ (Lk. 1:35; 4:42; 6:12; 6:46). Mary’s attentive, listening heart to God’s word at the Annunciation also inspires us (Lk 1:26-38).

The Black Madonna then who carries the memory of the Annunciation in her being reflects our call to union with God. If we look at the image of the Black Madonna, Our Lady of the Underground, we see that her eyes do not gaze at her child, but outward to us. “In Chartres and elsewhere, the Black Madonna “glows with an inner fire that can be seen only by those who are convinced that ‘the door is on the inside’.”<sup>iii</sup>

As our eyes meet hers, she draws us inward. Images of the Black Madonna then are a strong invitation to be led inward to our inner centre where divinity and humanity meet, communion with God is born. And, there, like Elijah, the prophet perhaps we will hear the voice of God in the silence calling us, at times, challenging us beyond our human expectations (1 Kgs 19:12). Such was Mary’s experience in the Annunciation.



Daily, then we are called to create space in our lives where, in silence, we can pray to enter into communion with God. Drawn inward by God, we can make the journey to the centre of our being.

There, freed from the many voices and forces that relentlessly seek our attention, we can be silent, still, alone with our God. In the silence we can let God look at us, love us.

In the silence, we can listen to the “still small voice” rising from within: “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10), “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you...” (Jer.1:5; Ps 139), and “I have called you by name, you are mine” (Is 43:1). In these precious moments, God’s tenderness embraces and nurtures us like a mother does her child (Is 66:13). Our hearts fill with joy and awe. Sometimes we are “like a weaned child with its head on its mother’s breast” (Ps. 131:2). We can appreciate the words of Meister Eckhart, who said “Nothing in all creation is so like God as stillness.”<sup>iv</sup>

Thomas Merton, the prolific writer and explorer of spirituality, describes these moments of silent divine encounter as the *temps vierge*, the ‘still point’ where the world and time are engaged in the cosmic dance which pervades our very beings.<sup>v</sup>

Cynthia Bourgeault commenting on Thomas Merton’s reflections on the *pointe vierge* describes this moment as the time where we swim down into the depths of our being, discover the hidden ground of love and begin to swim in the infinite ocean of God’s mercy, the foundation of our hope.<sup>vi</sup> In this moment of union, only this breath, only this moment exist. All is now. Fear and anxieties melt away. We sense that the mystery of God embraces us. The more that we are in communion with God, the more we are in awe that we are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27).

Saint. Marguerite Bourgeoys (17<sup>th</sup> century) wrote that “we are God’s masterwork, a spark of the divinity.”<sup>vii</sup> We find the same description of humankind in the writings of Mechtilde of Madburg, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, 13<sup>th</sup> century mystics.

Teresa of Avila, that feisty woman reformer of Carmel, saint and Doctor of the Church, said that “making time to enter within ourselves to be with our God, we will not fail to drink from this fount that springs from God, the Source, and the very centre of our being.”<sup>viii</sup>

An Icon entitled Theotokos of the Fountain<sup>ix</sup> shows Mary sitting in a fountain. Jesus is depicted in a mandorla which describes the coming together of heaven and earth, the human and the divine. Here Mary can be said to be the source which makes possible Jesus' promise that he is the Source of living water. Drinking from the spring of water that rises from inner union with him, we will never be thirsty (Jn 4:14; 7:57). Jesus promised also that out of the believer's heart, shall flow rivers of living water (Jn 7:37-39). Not only must we be "born again" in the Spirit as Jesus told Nicodemus (Jn 3:35) but we must also become midwives, helping others in birthing new life.



## Reflection

1. In recent times, Karl Rahner made the case that the Christian of the future will be a mystic in communion with God from the very heart of their existence, supported by participation in the Christian community, or he or she will not exist at all.
  - a) What surprises you about this announcement?
  - b) How does this relate to your experience?
2. Ponder Meister Eckhart's word: "Nothing is so like God as stillness." How do his words speak of your relationship with God?
3. Identify an experience of your having helped others awaken to 'new life'.

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In Chartres Cathedral, a Black Madonna with her Child on her lap is enthroned in the crypt of the cathedral. Known as *Our Lady of the Underground* (Notre-Dame-Sous-Terre), this Black Madonna is a replica of the original which was dragged out of the crypt during the French Revolution and burned in a fire in front of the cathedral in 1793. History attests that this was an earlier shrine to a mother goddess, the protector of women in childbirth, of crops and of civilization. Photo, Marie Azzarello, © 2007.

<sup>i</sup> Olivier Clément, The Roots of Christian Mysticism, Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary, Translated from the original French edition 1982 by Theodore Berkley, O.C.S.O. and Jeremy Hummerstone. Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1993.

<sup>ii</sup> Karl Rahner, The Practice of Faith, New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983, pp. 22-26.

<sup>iii</sup> Jean Markle, Cathedral of the Black Madonna, The Druids and the Mysteries of Chartres, Rochester, Vermont, Inner Traditions, 2004, p. 198.

<sup>iv</sup> Meister Eckhart quoted in Mathew Fox, Original Blessing, New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Co. 1962, p. 133.

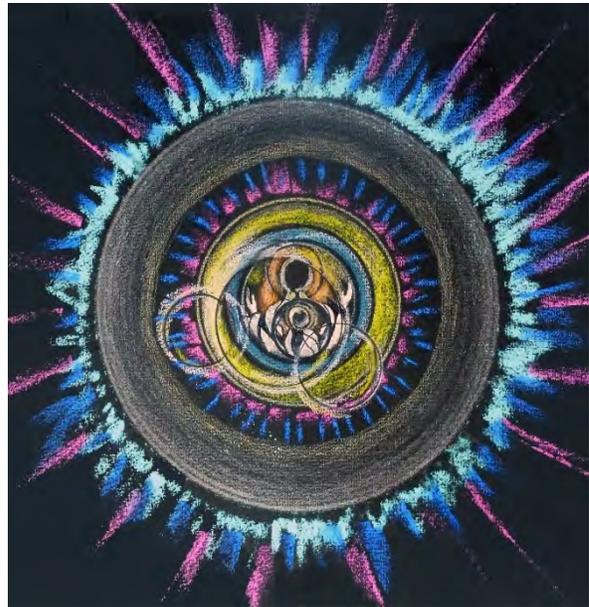
<sup>v</sup> Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation. New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1962. p. 297.

<sup>vi</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, Mystical Hope, Trusting in the Mercy of God, Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2001. pp. 34-40.

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- vii The Writings of Marguerite Bourgeoys, Translated from the French by Mary Virginia Cotter, CND, Congregation of Notre Dame, Montreal, Quebec, 1978, p. 62.
- viii Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle, Translated by E. A. Peers, Chicago: Sheed and Ward, 1972, p. 81.
- ix <https://www.google.ca/search?q=Theotokos+of+the+fountain+Free+image>, accessed November 29, 2017.

## The Black Madonna: The Incarnation

Looking more closely at images of the Black Madonna with her Child, we see that he is not a baby but a small man-child. Often his right hand is raised in a sign of blessing. Sometimes his left hand holds a book or a globe of the world symbolizing that he is the eternal Word of God, who with God from the beginning of creation, is made flesh. His bare feet, evident in many images, indicate his humanity. This Child, who looks exactly like his mother, was fashioned in her womb. From his mother's womb where he knew warmth and nurture, he was birthed into the light of day. Flesh of her flesh, nurtured at her breast, raised from infancy to adulthood when he took his place, which was his mission in the world. He is the Christ in whom a passionate God of love has come to live among us.<sup>i</sup>



Images of the Black Madonna and her Child convey a sense of timelessness. They show us that the Incarnation was not a one-time event. Mary is the mother, always ready to bring forth her Child for the world to see, as she did with the Magi (Mt 2:11), the shepherds in Bethlehem (Lk 2:16), and in her words to the servants at the Marriage feast of Cana “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2: 5). In that sense, it is interesting that in none of these images does the Black Madonna ever look down with tenderness at her Child or display any pride at having given birth to God. Rather she appears as the mature woman, “the virgin always on the threshold of giving birth; the perpetual parturient of a world in becoming, of a God in becoming, of a humanity in becoming.”<sup>iii</sup> Her firm holding of the Child on her knees or supported against her body by her arms makes present the Incarnation as God's continuous presence in the heart of all creation.

St. Maximus the Confessor, commenting on the Incarnation, wrote that “the Annunciation is the model of what God wants to achieve in us. By the power of the Spirit, Christ is always born mysteriously and willingly in us, becoming incarnate in us.”<sup>iii</sup> St. Augustine wrote,

The members of Christ give birth in the Spirit, just as the Virgin Mary gave birth to Christ in her womb: in this way you will be mothers of Christ. This is not something that is out of your reach; it is not beyond you, it is not incompatible with you; you have become children, be mothers as well.<sup>iv</sup>

Meister Eckhart's words suddenly make sense. "We are all meant to be mothers of God," he said, "for God is always needing to be born."<sup>v</sup> In birthing Jesus, we are birthing God.

It is important then that our hearts become like Mary's, the good soil in which the seed, the word of God, Jesus, can be conceived, nurtured, given time to grow, to flourish (Lk 8:11-15). Then, Jesus, the Word of God, can be brought to birth, that is, actualized in our behaviour each day (Mk 3:31-35; Lk 8:21).

Like Mary, through our cooperation with God and trust in God's power at work in us, we become mothers of Christ as we give birth to the Word of God in our times and circumstances. Conscious of our interdependence with all creation, members of the sacred web of life, attentive to the culture and circumstances of our time, the Black Madonna and her Child remind us that our vocation to bear witness to the Incarnation is a lifelong commitment. In union with God, we will always be in labour and with all creation in one great act of giving birth.<sup>vi</sup> In so doing, make present a God who was, who is, and who will be, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Rev 12:13) as proclaimed from the heart of our Easter Vigil. Mindful, of course, that we are mere participants in the divine work of helping all creation to move forward to its final destination: communion with God for all eternity.

## Reflection

Take time to reflect on the messages of St. Maximus the Confessor, St. Augustine, and Meister Eckhart.

- How do their messages influence your journey as a Christian?

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<sup>i</sup> Our Lady of the Sign, © Rachel Gaudreau, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Jean Markle, Cathedral of the Black Madonna, The Druids and the Mysteries of Chartres, Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, English Translation, 2004, p. 288.

<sup>iii</sup> Saint Maximus the Confessor, "Mystical Conception, The Annunciation to the Theotokos," The Word Magazine, (March 25, 2005). [www.antiochian.org/wordarticles](http://www.antiochian.org/wordarticles). Accessed, June, 2010.

<sup>iv</sup> St. Augustine, Sermons 72A (Denis 25), 8 (Miscellanea Agostiniana, 1, p. 164). Quoted in Raniero Cantalamessa. Mary Mirror of the Church. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press: 1992, p. 72. Cf. Lk. 8:21; Mk. 3:31 ff.; Matt 12:49.

<sup>v</sup> Meister Eckhart, Original Blessing, p. 222.

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. Romans 8, 22.

## **The Black Madonna: Rediscovering the Feminine**

### **Part I: Facing the Challenges**

As Christians, disciples of Jesus, we are called like him to witness to God's love, compassion, justice for all humanity, all creation, and the universe. Desiring to be this presence, we are more and more conscious that we live in a divided, fragmented world. An inability to see another person as human like us, results in an inability to appreciate different cultures, values, customs, religions. We no longer see or ignore how we can be interrelated in this vast universe. This leads to confrontations in communities, families, societies, horrific wars, massive destruction among nations. Millions of persons are displaced. Simultaneously, materialism which privileges productivity, the economy and consumerism, threatens the life of our planet and all humanity. In a throw away culture, nothing lasts, has value or meaning. This furthers the exploitation of the earth, women and children. The rich get richer; the poor get poorer. In this climate, spirituality and religion have little or no value in the public domain. Today, there is a growing menace of violence where individuals kill and maim people at random.

How to live with these present realities is a serious question? We can become overwhelmed, discouraged by all that threatens us or search for a way to live with the present situation, work with others towards the transformation and integration necessary to bring about a new world order. One that will provide a just sharing of resources which allows all humankind and creation to live in peace and harmony. As Eric Neumann, underlines in his book *The Great Mother*, "the present day perils in which we find ourselves spring in large part from the one-sided patriarchal development of male consciousness. An integration of the masculine and feminine energies in every human being is essential, if we in the West are to face the dangers that threaten our existence from within and without."<sup>i</sup>

Chinese philosophy shows us that the energies of Yin (Feminine) and Yang (Masculine) are in constant movement in the universe. Complementing each other, they create harmony and equilibrium at the heart of the universe. These energies exist also in every human person and human action, calling every man and woman to their full humanity.



The tendency in some quarters to assign stereotypical ways of being to women and others to men overlooks the fact that men and women share similar human characteristics. Both can be intelligent

and rational, have the ability to be firm, to organize and to control outcomes, as well as be intuitive, gentle, tender and compassionate. How these characteristics are expressed depends on personality and ability. Growth to adulthood within every human being suggests that all human characteristics work in harmony where one is not superior to the other. One learns from experience when and how to be firm and when and how to be tender.

In spite of the beauty of this philosophy, the present conflicts in the East underline that these energies are not always in harmony. As in the West, expediency and a desire for domination without compassion rule many civil government and religious decisions. Were men and women to recognize the value of feminine energies such as intuition and compassion in decision-making, they could offset the trend toward the more technological (seen as masculine) approach, where production and the economy have become gods.

Pope Francis underlines that the harm done to nature and the environment is the most striking sign of a disregard for the message contained in the structure of nature itself and the human person. (Laudato Si, 117) “There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature,” he says, “without a renewal of humanity itself”. (Laudato Si, 118) Here, the rich symbolism hidden in Mary, the Black Madonna can help us.

## **Reflection**

How can we respond to the challenges arising in our society and the world at-large while maintaining a desire to work with others towards the transformation and integration necessary to bring about a new world order?

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<sup>i</sup> Eric Neumann, The Great Mother, Translated from the German by Ralph Manheim, Bollingen Series XLVII, Princeton University Press, Second Printing, 1970, p. xlii.

## The Black Madonna: Rediscovering the Feminine

### Part 11: Liberating Feminine Energy

The Black Madonna, Our Lady of the Underground and Our Lady of Rocamadour, holds Jesus, the Christ, portrayed with a mature face and infant feet, on her left knee. In some images, her left hand is dominant in the way she holds him. In others she holds her Child on her left knee with her arms holding him against her left side.<sup>i</sup> Sometimes, she points to her Child with her left arm.



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The fact that *Our Lady of the Pillar* in Chartres is in the left chapel of the cathedral is not an accident. Here, as in all images, our attention is drawn to the left side of the Madonna. Jean Markle commenting on *Our Lady of the Pillar*, notes, “All paths lead to the left, the sinister side where the supreme feminine is exalted, in this instance the Virgin Mary, the incontestable mistress of this millennium old sanctuary.”<sup>iii</sup>

To speak of feminine energy as noted above is not to be equated with female gender. What is spoken of here is allowing feminine consciousness, which patriarchal structures have uppressed for centuries, to return to life in men and women. In an effort to retrieve the feminine, images of the Black Madonna and her Son can shed some light. Mary’s firm holding of her Son, with the face of a man-child, on her left side, shows that the feminine, sustaining and nourishing love, justice, mercy and compassion - serves as a guide.

holding of her Son, with the face of a man-child, on her left side, shows that the feminine, sustaining and nourishing love, justice, mercy and compassion - serves as a guide.

Without the feminine, law and commandments can become sterile, devoid of heart and restrictive, disconnected from the complexities of life. This is not to say that law, commandments, and morality are not important. Rather, consciousness of feminine energy calls us to be mindful that human growth to maturity is difficult and fraught with all kinds of distractions.

The Black Madonna enthroned with her Child carries a different message. To be enthroned is to be empowered to rule. But this form of power does not mean bullying, oppressing or lording it over others. It is the power which rises from within, that empowers others, recognizes their gifts and the different ways people can work together to nurture communion and solidarity in and beyond the Church community to build a world of equality for all humankind. In so doing, we recognize our place in the web of life, the right to life of all God's creation and thereby, work together to rescue the planet from imminent death.

The Black Madonna and her Son with the face of a man-child depict feminine and masculine consciousness in women and men working in harmony so that all actions emanating from within might be guided by the Wisdom of God which resides in every person, in all that God has created. Thus, feminine energy, considered for centuries to be a feminine attribute, is present in men and women. This enables them to be receptive beings, to work together as partners. Receptivity also enables them to receive God's love and to love God in return.

As women and men, then, being attentive to listen to their hearts for inspiration (feminine) and then know how to act (masculine). When such equilibrium exists, ego or fear do not direct their choices. They move away from dualistic tendencies, cease to pit opposites against each other: life/ death, immobility/movement, noise/silence, we/them, us/creation. They will also set aside the dualistic biases that swirl around gender, skin color, language, religion and so on. As the life of Jesus shows us, unity is the reconciliation of differences, not the denial of them, overcome by the power of love.

The challenge is to hold the tension between the joys and pain, the light and dark side of reality. Only then, it seems, can energy emerge to receive life before us with open hands and “allow cosmic compassion to work in our being.”<sup>iv</sup> This, we believe, is the revolution of consciousness which Eric Neumann pointed to in his book, *The Great Mother* cited above. Rediscovering the feminine leads us to consider the connection between the Black Madonna, the earth and darkness.

## Reflection

Receptivity, long considered a feminine characteristic, is the ground of being in women and men that enables us to receive God’s love and to love in return calling us into mutuality in our relationship with God and with others.

1. How do I perceive that my capacity for receptivity is a prerequisite for listening to and being transformed by the Word of God?
2. How do you perceive that ‘receptivity’ is active in you and in those around you?
3. What gives me hope that I and others can be instruments of change; that together we can help bridge the differences which erupt in global violence and warfare?

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<sup>i</sup> Our Lady of Rocamadour: Photo Marie Azzarello, © 2007.

In the mediaeval village of Rocamadour, France, the pilgrimage site of the Black Madonna may be as old as the ninth century. Our Lady of Rocamadour is considered “a challenge to the law of commercial usefulness and the winner takes all mentality. The twisting of her hips gives her a more feminine stance.”

<sup>ii</sup> Jean Markle, Cathedral of the Black Madonna, The Druids and the Mysteries of Chartres, Trans. By Jon Graham, 2004, Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1988/2004, p. 52.

<sup>iii</sup> Our Lady of the Pillar: Photo Marie Azzarello, © 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> Ruben L.F Habito, Healing Breath, Zen for Christians and Buddhists in a Wounded World, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2006, p. 134.

## The Black Madonna: Connection with the Earth

The Black Madonna restores Mary's humanity as a woman. Being a woman of this earth, flesh and blood, body and spirit, as we too are flesh and blood, body and spirit, gives her universal appeal. As "St. Augustine noted, the Virgin Mary represents the earth and Jesus is of the earth born."<sup>i</sup>

The vast majority of early Syrian Christians was pagan and lived in an agricultural society. Records dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries show that the Syrian Church developed the earliest Marian theology, focusing on creation and the Incarnation. For them, Mary, who gave birth to God, was Queen of Heaven as well as Queen of the Earth. The balance was obvious. Heaven and earth were one. It was only at Vatican II that the Church acclaimed Mary 'Queen of the Universe' that she might be more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of Lords.<sup>ii</sup>

The Syrian Church celebrates feasts of Mary, such as, Our Lady of the Seeds, Our Lady of the



Harvest, and Our Lady of the Grapes.<sup>iii</sup> This has much to say to us with respect to our responsibility to reconnect to and care for the earth and the harvest. This responsibility is another important message of the Black Madonna. For black not only designates darkness but also the rich, fertile dark soil of the earth, the womb from which nourishment so essential to life bursts forth. Our prayer might well be that of St. Basil (329-379), who many years before ours understood the sacred balance of creation:

O God, enlarge within us a sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers and sisters the animals, to whom you gave the earth as their home in common with us. We remember that in the past we have exercised high dominion with ruthless cruelty, so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to you in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that they live not for us but for you, and that they love the sweetness of life.<sup>iv</sup>

In these times when the devastation of our earth is imminent because of our carelessness and treatment of her body as an object to be exploited, the urgency of listening to the voice of the earth is all around us. This is not to speak glibly of the earth as the angry voice of Mother Nature when natural disasters befall us. It is to listen to the voice of this mother crying from within her being on behalf of all her children. A poignant example can be found in the tenth chapter of the second book of Esdras in the First Testament. Here, the prophet Esdras, speaking to a mother, who has gone out in the dark of night to grieve for her only child who has died, offers these words to her:

Ask the earth and she will tell that it is she who ought to mourn over so many who have come into being upon her. From the beginning all have been born of her, and others will come; and lo, almost all go to perdition, and a multitude of them will come to doom. Who then ought to mourn the more, she who lost so great a multitude or you who are grieving for one alone (2 Esd 10:9-11)?<sup>v</sup>

We must lament with Mother Earth for what has been and for what is being lost by our greed. The challenge for each of us is to address the connections between the rape of the earth, the pollution of the water table, and the trafficking and abuse of women and children. In raping the feminine, however difficult it might be for us to admit, we are raping the feminine side of God, the source of all that is feminine and masculine.

In order for balance to be restored, is not the cry of the earth still calling us to listen? Listen to the voice of nature's beauty in her flowing streams and lakes and oceans. Listen to that voice in her windswept majestic mountains. Listen to that voice in the songs of her birds. Listen to that voice in the wonder of our bodies and the infinite variety of creatures of every race and culture. Listen to that voice in all her animals. Listen to that voice in the ever-changing light of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Hear the voice of the entire universe in evolution, and in so doing celebrate the feminine of God. In that listening and hearing, accept that we come from the earth and will return to the earth and engage the mystery of death and transformation.

## Reflection

1. Created in God's image, we are called to share actively in God's dream for the world, to imagine new possibilities that will further an unfinished universe in which all life is respected.

Share ways this can be real for you and your community.

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<sup>i</sup> St. Augustine, Sermons, 188, I, 5, p. 890 quoted in Michael P. Duricy, "Black Madonnas." The Mary Page. [www.udayton.edu/mary/meditations/blackmdn.html](http://www.udayton.edu/mary/meditations/blackmdn.html) (Accessed 22/05/2005.

<sup>ii</sup> Lumen Gentium, Constitution on the Church, 1964, # 59.

<sup>iii</sup> Our Lady of the Harvest, Rachel Gaudreau, © 2018/

<sup>iv</sup> Mark Hathaway, "Renewing the Sacred Balance." p. 6.

<sup>v</sup> Belden C. Lane "MOTHER EARTH AS METAPHOR: A HEALING PATTERN OF GRIEVING AND GIVING BIRTH." Horizons 21/1 (1994): 7-21.

## **The Black Madonna: The Value of Darkness**

In the Gospel of Luke at the Annunciation Mary is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will be overshadowed by the power of God. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God (Lk 1:35). “It was God’s shadow that made the child holy, God’s darkness. The Black Madonna shows us what it looks like to be covered by God.”<sup>i</sup>

To be covered by God must be similar to the disciples’ experience at the Transfiguration of Jesus. As frightened as they were, it was only when they were overshadowed by a cloud signalling God’s presence that they were able to hear God’s revelation, “This is my Son, My Chosen, listen to Him” (Lk 9:34-35). Only when Mary, and the women and men who were disciples entered into the darkness of the Cross were they able to receive the light of Jesus’ resurrection. Only in the interior darkness of their lives as they gathered together in prayer in the Upper Room were they able to receive the Spirit of the Risen Jesus and set out on a new venture. They did not know where the journey would lead them but they trusted in that inner power, the gift of the Spirit given to them.



We know light because we know darkness. Guidance from the feminine, our intuition, helps us to trust in the darkness and to be open to life as a process not a series of problems to be solved rationally, one after the other.<sup>ii</sup>

The dark times that spiritual writers like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila call “dark nights” help us to recognize that our emotions, love and hate, joy and sadness as with all other emotions are merely single threads in the dense fibre of our lives. Integrating our emotions is part of our growth to maturity, an ongoing challenge in the evolution of our faith journeys—our transformation into the image and likeness of God.

The prophet Malachi wrote “God sits as a refiner and purifier of silver” (Mal 3:3). Now a refiner and purifier of silver sits and holds the silver, keeping his eyes on it the entire time it is in the fire. He knows the silver is fully refined when he can see his image in it.<sup>iii</sup> We trust that God holds us in the fire of the longings in our dark nights, and in the process, God’s image and likeness emerge in us as more visible.

Establishing a space to face the Good Fridays and Holy Saturdays of our lives leads us to find positive meaning in loneliness, silence, inner emptiness, suffering, poverty, and ‘the knowledge that does not know.’ For the mystics this meant, in their paradoxical formulation, learning to live in the absence of God who is present, or in the presence of God who is absent, and enduring the ‘dark night of the soul.’<sup>iv</sup>

Our dark night experiences then are a summons to befriend the darkness, to be in the Mystery of God “alone in the silence, with no expectations, waiting quietly in hope” (Lam 3:24-28).

John of the Cross said “The Dark Night” is our soul’s being “fired with love’s urgent longings— ah, the sheer grace that enables us to swim in this darkness, this apparent absence of God.”<sup>v</sup>

The challenge is to trust that out of our dark nights which can pervade our lives personally and collectively, some light will emerge.

To embrace darkness is a frightening challenge, one that many of us do not handle well. We see the same kinds of challenges and darkness in Church leadership. When conflicts arise, threatened by the tension, Church leaders, unwilling to enter into dialogue will often respond legalistically. This kind of response stifles the possibility that the Spirit might show us that other responses are possible. And the Church is not alone. The same kinds of tensions exist all around us, in our communities and in our political systems.

Reflecting on the Black Madonna with her Child on her lap presents us with an alternate picture. The Mother who holds the Incarnation of God on her lap knows how to hold tension in her life. Her ability to treasure all events that being the mother of Jesus brought into her life, signals her ability to turn things over and over again in her heart seeking meaning (Lk 2:19, 51). Mary did not

run away from the tension even when leadership of the synagogue in collusion with Roman authorities had her son murdered. Mary faced and held the tension in her heart and found God in the darkness. As at the Annunciation Mary allows herself to be overshadowed by God.

To allow oneself to be overshadowed by God, to enter into communion with God is a call to:

mystical love, a sun that is shining in our darkness, expands the heart in such a way that the heart can love the sinner and the saint, both within itself and in others, and possess inwardly and outwardly the passion of Christ. This generates a divine universal energy that is like steam rising from the compost heaps of the world towards its ultimate transformation.<sup>vi</sup>

Here we enter into the sacred mystery of God for whom “the darkness is not dark; the night is as bright as day, and darkness is as light (Ps 139:12).” Accepting that there is light in darkness enables us to see that there is light in matter, that matter is sacred.<sup>vii</sup> This is a summons to sacred balance, to heal the split that for generations has equated light with good and darkness with evil. Unfortunately this has caused suffering to so many people of color.

The Black Madonna holding her Son on her lap shows for all to see that “the Incarnation of Christ is an affirmation of the body. God becomes human, becomes flesh and blood. Spirit and body are not in opposition.”<sup>viii</sup> The life-giving Spirit which brought the universe into being sustains all life.

Sacred balance enables us then to embrace the sacredness of our bodies, the light and shadow of our personalities, our Church, our social, political and economic structures. Not as an end in itself but so that the steps can be taken, not once but many times, making possible God’s kingdom of peace, justice and equality for all in an ever evolving universe. Only by embracing darkness can the light shine.

Mary is always presented as our mother, the Queen of Heaven, therefore of light, disconnected from the earth. This image of her overlooks the fact that mother in Latin comes from the word *mater* which equals matter, the earth. Mater is also the root word of materialism. Its offspring consumerism keeps the wheels of capitalism in motion creating ever greater needs in humankind. For Marion Woodman,

that is one reason we don't take seriously the impoverishment that is taking place in other parts of the world, brought about by global Capitalism. We receive the Feeding, and workers in the "undeveloped" countries receive the Eating.<sup>ix</sup>

The Black Madonna with her blackness then challenges us to look hard at how consumerism plays out in our lives. This image also encourages us to reflect on our connection with the earth.

## Reflection

1. Name the times of Good Fridays and Holy Saturdays in your life.
  - a) What helped you then or continues to help you now as you walk with the darkness, the uncertainty, the ambiguity that such moments bring?
  - b) How do these moments—and with moments of consolation they sometimes bring—form an integral part of your call to holiness?
2. The above text describes feelings that often rise within us for a variety of reasons. No matter how hard we try, we are unable to ignore them. How does this speak to my personal life experience?
3. Knowing that there is also gold in the shadow side of my personality, how do I integrate my shadow side?

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<sup>i</sup> China Galland, "Black Madonna and the Womb of God." *Journal of Women in Religion*, 16 (1998): 146.

<sup>ii</sup> Light in Darkness, Rachel Gaudreau, © 2018.

<sup>iii</sup> Bible Study led by Bertrand Buby, SM in Dayton, Ohio.

<sup>iv</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, "Theology of Mystical Experience." *Scotland Journal of Theology*, Vol. 32, No. 6 (1979): 505, 506.

<sup>v</sup> John of the Cross, Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. trans., Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979, 295

<sup>vi</sup> Vilma Sealau, "Crisis and Transformation, Turning Over the Compost Heap." *The Way*/ 43/1 (January, 2004): 80-96.

<sup>vii</sup> Marion Woodman, "In Focus: I have faith that the feminine will come into consciousness—the manifestation of light in matter, that matter is sacred." [www.banyen.com/INFOCUS/WOODMAN.HTM](http://www.banyen.com/INFOCUS/WOODMAN.HTM) (Accessed 25/11/2007).

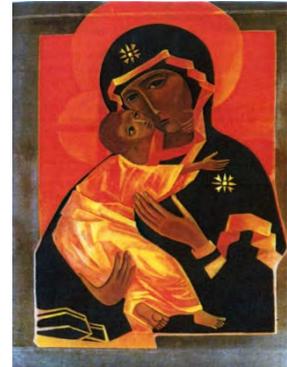
<sup>viii</sup> Mark Hathaway, "Renewing the Sacred Balance... A challenge and an opportunity." *Scarboro Missions* (April 2004): 6.

<sup>ix</sup> Robert Bly and Marion Woodman, The Maiden King, pp. 69-70.

## The Black Madonna: Mirror of Compassion

Although images of the Black Madonna may at first sight appear austere, there is gentleness in her deep black eyes. They convey an expression of maternal goodness and tenderness, a deep sense of compassion which would serve us well in a world embroiled in turmoil.

At the Ecumenical Centre at Taizé, the Black Madonna entitled *Our Lady of Tenderness*, holds her Child cheek to cheek. His right foot and right hand seem to form a circle, as if they were holding the world. His left hand touches her neck and chin gently. “The Child seems to be pushing himself up against his mother’s body with great energy,”<sup>i</sup> drawing on the compassion in his mother’s eyes. She, on the other hand, points to him with her left hand, even as her eyes look out toward us.<sup>ii</sup>



There is so much human kindness in this image. As in all these images of the Black Madonna, the Child is not a baby but a man-child. His bare infant feet remind us of his humanity. The Child is nestled in the arms of his mother who gave him life. Here we encounter anew the mystery of the Incarnation. God is the Child held in his mother’s arms, not distant but passionate about being in relationship with us. In God’s closeness to us, we touch God’s compassion and mercy embodied in space and time, earthy and real. God is connected to life. God embraces life. The message? All life is sacred. The mutuality in the embrace between Mother and Child expresses God’s “longing to embrace and be embraced. ... The image of God’s action we are presented with here is of a hungry love.”<sup>iii</sup>

Pondering the depths of such love connects us to the Hebrew word for womb, *rehamin*, used to describe the compassion and mercy of God in the First Testament. God’s compassion, synonymous with womb-love, signals the feminine nature of God, the Motherhood of God—God’s compassionate love for all creation rooted in and emanating from the womb of God making sacred the world and all its inhabitants. This is a love that comes from the heart and is gratuitous, not merited.<sup>iv</sup>

The Black Madonna, *Our Lady of Tenderness*, signals that compassion is central in the lives of those Christian women and men who desire to be witnesses of the unconditional love and mercy of God for all. Compassion, rooted in the love, mercy and compassion of God, has no agenda, is not outlined in any plan. Rather, it is the expression of heartfelt emotion released in the moment and according to the need to which it is a response. Here, Mary shows the way.

Perhaps the strongest indications of Mary's compassionate presence can be found in the narratives of the marriage feast at Cana and her presence as she stood before her Son, Jesus on the Cross.

The marriage feast of Cana is rich with theological symbolism. The presence of wine and a marriage feast are said to symbolize the Church as the bride of Christ. The servants' immediate positive response to Mary's words "Do whatever he tells you" is seen as a metaphor for the attitude required of Jesus' followers. But before this, Mary looked with compassion on the impending distress and embarrassment of the young couple for whom the wine of their marriage feast had run out and sought a solution by asking her son to help (Jn 2:1-11). Jesus was never reported as having performed a miracle before this moment. It's unlikely that she expected one.

At Calvary, before the suffering of her Son, Mary shows us how to be a compassionate presence in the face of suffering and death and darkness (Jn 19:25). Images of Mary holding her dead son on her lap as tenderly as she held him as an infant at her breast are engraved in our minds. None is more precious than Michelangelo's *Pieta*, just inside the entrance to St. Peter's in Rome. In this artistic image of Mary, we can see "God's maternal affliction open to view, ... the compassion of God, displayed in a human being who has let herself be drawn wholly into God's mystery"<sup>v</sup> — the mystery of God who in the end will wipe every tear from our eyes (Rev 21:4). Indeed "we could say the Cross of Christ is God's compassionate suffering with the world."<sup>vi</sup>

Compassion which rises from the inside-out is about right relationship with one's self, with God, and with creation. Right relationship is justice, implying that compassion cannot be separated from the way we live and the decisions we make on a day-to-day basis. This is also known as biblical justice. It is never easy, always a challenge. In the words of Matthew Fox:

Compassion knows when enough is enough; compassion does not overindulge;  
compassion does not hoard and does not run its life on addictions of insecurity and

pyramid-building to overcome these addictions. Compassion trusts life and the universe ultimately to provide what is necessary for our being. But compassion works hard as a co-creator with the universe to see that a balance and basic fairness is achieved among beings.<sup>vii</sup>

As Paul urged the Philippians, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit; ... Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2: 1-5). A timely message for this time. Corporate greed has led to financial losses and economic insecurity for many people around the world. Money designated to alleviate poverty in developing counties often doesn’t reach the people it was meant to serve. As we point the finger at others, let us never forget our own struggles to be fair at all times, and to always be kind. Without love and compassion which finds its source in the feminine energy of God, neither can we aspire to be midwives of reconciliation and hope within and beyond the Christian community.

As Ronald Rolheiser points out, some want Christians to challenge the world and speak sound teaching with regards to issues of family, marriage and private morality. Based on the comments of the life experience of an aging brother priest, Rolheiser writes:

What the world needs first of all from us, the churches, is comfort, help in lifting and understanding its complexity, its wounds, its anxieties, its raging restlessness, its temptations, its infidelities, its sins. Like the prodigal son, the world needs first of all to be surprised by unconditional love. Sometime later and there will be time for that it will want hard challenge. The comfort we offer must be the product of what we ourselves feel when we come to know for ourselves the ineffable, all-empathic, all-embracing, all forgiving heart of God. ... that God understands our complexity, our weaknesses, our anger, our lusts, our jealousies and our despair, ... stands inside of our muddled, wounded and guilty hearts and breathes out peace.<sup>viii</sup>

## Reflection

Compassion, rooted in the love, mercy and compassion of God, has no agenda, is not outlined in any plan. Rather, it is the expression of heartfelt emotion released in the moment and according to the need to which it is a response.

1. What can I do to help compassion be the heart of all decisions and actions in which I am involved?
2. Where do I see compassion expressed in actions within family, community, Church, government?

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<sup>i</sup> Rowan Williams, Ponder These Things, p. 21.

<sup>ii</sup> Our Lady of Tenderness, Copy of the XII Century Icon of the 'Mother of God' of Vladimir, Church of Reconciliation, Taizé, France. Used by permission of Presses de Taizé.

<sup>iii</sup> Rowan Williams, p. 25.

<sup>iv</sup> Cf. Chapter 3, Mary and the Maternal Face of God.

<sup>v</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, Mary the Church at the Source, p. 77.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>vii</sup> Matthew Fox, "The Return of the Black Madonna." In *The Moonlit Path*, Berwick, ME: Nicolas-Hays, 2003, p. 91.

<sup>viii</sup> Ron Rolheiser, "Church Must Offer Comfort." *The Catholic Register*, Week of August 31, 2008, p. 23. Used with permission.

## The Black Madonna: Seat of Wisdom

In the twelfth century, the image of the Black Madonna seated on a throne holding her Child firmly on her lap, led to Mary being named “Seat of Wisdom,” which became a prominent title for her in the prayer of the Church. The title celebrates Mary’s royal dignity as the mother who has given birth to the Messiah whose kingdom will never end (Lk 1:32-33). It also refers to her maternal role



as mother of the Child, the Wisdom of God made flesh, whom she holds on her lap for all the world to see.<sup>i</sup> Her teaching role as the remembering mother is also honoured. Holding the man-child on her knee the Madonna witnesses to his entire life from his conception to his death, and his teachings which scripture tells us she treasured and pondered in her heart (Lk 2:19, 51).<sup>ii</sup> In this way, the Madonna holding her Son is not only a symbol of her holding the Church in the person of Christ on her lap but also the Church taking on the role of being like Mary, the ‘remembering mother’ who keeps the life of Jesus before us, his passion, death, resurrection and presence in the Eucharist. Is there a message for us beyond the theology?

A mother or a father holding their child on their lap is usually an expression of love and security for the child. In particular, a mother’s lap has been for most children the secure place from which they received nourishment from their mother’s breast. A memory lies somewhere deep in our psyches of being held on our mother’s lap and nourished at her breast; unless, for some unfortunate reason, a child was deprived of such comfort. Yet, we know how essential being held by a mother is to the development of every child.

Images of the Black Madonna with her Child seated firmly on her lap then are a strong feminine, mother image. These images suggest that “a woman’s motherliness resides not only in her womb but also in the seated woman’s broad expanse of thigh on which the newborn child sits

enthroned.”<sup>iii</sup> They also resemble an ancient image of the goddess Isis whose very name means “Throne of Compassion, the divine Lap.”<sup>iv</sup>

In the middle ages, these images provided comfort and security for people in the midst of life’s struggles, the deadly devastation wrought by plagues, and the countless wars and lawlessness.<sup>v</sup> “As in the ancient world, these people continued to relate maternal concerns to those of divinity.”<sup>vi</sup> Today, an emerging universe awakens us to the “vast web of relationships that bond us not only to those people who impact our lives within and beyond the Church but also to the whole of creation.”<sup>vii</sup>

In spite of the advantages of modern life brought on by the explosion of technology and advances in medicine, we no longer feel protected. Increasingly powerful weapons at our disposal maim, kill, and make the earth toxic. Our daily pollution of the water table, the environment and the food chain puts all life at risk. For the first time in the history of humankind we have the power to destroy our planet and bring an end to human life as we know it. We hold the power of life and death in our hands. We also live in a world where violence rises around us perpetrated by people ascribing to a variety of ideologies. Corporate greed places many in our world in economic insecurity. In this climate, Mary, The Black Madonna, Seat of Wisdom mirrors for us that we must hold and provide security for others and embrace the suffering of our world, not out of fear but love for others and, for our Earth, who first loves us and nourishes us. Love, rooted in Wisdom, will also manifest itself through right relationships, for all is interdependent (Jn 15:5). This is compassion, mercy, forgiveness, justice at its core.

## Reflection

How are you aware that giving yourself sacred time in the presence of God carries the potential for:

- Inner wisdom to rise in me advising me how to live in hope in the midst of the ambiguities and uncertainties that emanate from the darkness engulfing our world?
- The new to happen in me – new ways of being, new ways of doing?

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<sup>i</sup> Photo of a statue of Our Lady of Montserrat, Rachel Gaudreau, © 2017. The Virgin of Montserrat. A Black Madonna, is patron of Catalonia, Spain. A Roman style statue, made in poplar wood, dates from the twelfth century.

<sup>ii</sup> “The Blessed Virgin Mary, Seat of Wisdom.” Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, p. 224.

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew Fox, quoting Erich Neumann, The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype, pp. 98-99 in “The Return of the Black Madonna” p. 93.

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- iv Ibid, p. 93.
- v For ways in which the Black Madonna has offered security through the centuries, see Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum's The Black Madonna, feminism and politics in Italy.
- vi Sally Cunneen, Mother Church, What the experience of women is teaching her, New York: Paulist Press, 1991, pp. 58-59.
- vii Cletus Wessels, Jesus in the New Universe Story, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003, p. 220.

## Reflection on Divine Cosmic Love

The painting below called “Abbraccio Cosmico” by Camilian Demetrescu, (2014) hangs in the Vatican. Recently Pope Francis sat in front of this painting while speaking with the astronauts on the Space Station, October 26, 2017.



The translation means “Cosmic Embrace.” In the center of this painting is a man and woman in a tender embrace. This represents the Sacred Union of the Divine Feminine and Divine Masculine. Uniting the Heart and the Mind through Divine Cosmic Love – Christ Love!

Facing the picture, the Blue Angel on the left represents the Feminine/Universe/ Spirit. The Brown Angel on the right represents Masculine/Earth/Physicality. The Angels wings are pointing up and down. They are each holding a handle. One up – one down. As Above – So Below. The handles are connected to a shaft of Light that runs through the heart center of the Divine Cosmic Embrace. The Enlightened Ones are guiding the transition.

Earth/Humanity goes through the Cosmic Portal to connect to the heart of Divine Source/Divine Unconditional Love – the Cosmic Embrace. The Cosmic Alignment funnels Light through Divine Source/Divine Unconditional Love to elevate Earth. The Cosmic Portal envelopes the planets and humanity in a Divine embrace of Christ Consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Queen Elizabeth of England, accompanied by Prince Philip, was photographed with Pope Francis in front of the painting. If

former and current presidents, heads of State throughout the world, are questioning themselves before this image – then it is, without a doubt, a monumental event!

## **Reflection**

1. When I look at this work of art and ponder its meaning, what feelings arise in me?
2. Were this revelation to illuminate the world, what transformation would happen in our relationship with one another, with the Cosmos?

**“The journey is the destination.” Thank you for making this journey with us.**

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<sup>i</sup> [keys.to/ascension.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Abbraccio-Cosmico-2.png](https://keys.to/ascension.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Abbraccio-Cosmico-2.png), accessed October, 2017.