

## The Beatles and the Blessed Mother



The Beatles, USA Today reminds us, began their fantastically successful recording career (best selling band ever, seven Grammy awards, thirty-nine platinum albums, etc., etc.) fifty years ago this month. What does their achievement have to do with the Catholic Faith? Not much, apparently.

Still, it is hard not to think of the Faith in connection with one great Beatles song: Paul McCartney's "Let it Be," from the album of the same name. That song features a "Mother Mary" who comes to us in "times of trouble" with her comforting "words of wisdom": "Let it be."

McCartney, it must be said, seems to have intended no such thing. He was, according to Wikipedia, baptized as a Roman Catholic but not raised as one. His family was not religious. And the song arose from a dream he had of his own mother, who was in fact named Mary and who had died when McCartney was fourteen.

Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore the biblical resonances of the song's lyrics. There is reference, more or less, to a light shining in the darkness. But most striking is the placing of the words "let it be" in the mouth of a Mother Mary. To the person familiar with the New Testament this cannot but summon to mind Mary's answer to the Archangel Gabriel, when he told her she was to be the mother of the Savior: "Let it be unto me according to your word." The song was written by Paul McCartney but credited to Lennon and McCartney. Maybe it should have been credited to Paul McCartney and the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps McCartney himself would not reject such an idea out of hand. He has experience of inspiration, at least in the musical realm. The Beatles's great hit "Yesterday" came to him in a dream,

and he went to the piano immediately upon waking up so that he could play it and not forget it. Furthermore, McCartney has openly acknowledged the role of inspiration in composition. For example, in this interview he admits that he can't explain how he writes a song, that it seems to be something magically given to him, and that it is hard to separate this experience from faith in the spiritual.

All this calls to mind the similar experience of a great Catholic artist, J.R.R. Tolkien, who was, like McCartney, more reflective about his work than most creators. Tolkien reported that he awoke from sleep with his wonderful short story, "Leaf, by Niggle" fully formed in his mind. Moreover, he spoke in his letters of The Lord of the Rings as something somehow given to him much more than as something he invented.

We certainly cannot prove that "Let it Be" was inspired by the Holy Spirit, despite my playful suggestion. Let McCartney have the royalties — the Holy Spirit doesn't need the money. But maybe we can at least suggest that art points to a more than human force at work in us, simply by virtue of its mysterious origins — as well as its gratuitousness, its status as something that we don't need to live but that makes life worth living.

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