



## Mater Admirabilis: Model of Contemplative Leadership

*Did the Bishop dub novice Pauline Perdrau's fresco of Mary at the Trinita dei Monti 'most admirable' simply because he found it attractive, or was there something else that he found admirable? That this image is so deeply loved by so many people across different times and cultures points to something deeper. And depth might just be the key.*

For me, it is an image of deep calling to deep. It is an image of Mary's attentive listening and active response to God's call, not just in the crucial moment of her courageous *fiat*, but continuously in the midst of the everyday activities of her life. It challenges me to ask myself: Do I ponder in my heart the word of God to me as I 'spin' a livelihood and 'read' the book of the world seeking wisdom? When there is a lot of 'spinning' and 'reading' to be done, do I pause to give priority to the interior life, taking the time for stillness and silence that this demands? Otherwise, how could I hear the deep calling to the deep within me, how else could my heart ever be in union with the Heart of God?

For Zen monks, painting the circular enso symbol is a contemplative practice that is repeated many times. Pauline Perdrau painted Mater many times too. The Society's Director of General Archives, Margaret Phelan, has documented a number of these paintings and they can be viewed at <http://rscjinternational.org/news/mater-through-years-pauline-perdrau> No two enso are exactly the same. Each enso is a unique expression of the spirit at a moment in time. Each of Pauline's paintings is also unique - but recognizably Mater. The presence of the distaff and spindle, the open book, the lily of purity, and the serenity of Mater's face are



constants. Mater's surroundings, the colour of the thread, and of the book and of the vase vary. It suggests to me that Mater, the contemplative in action, is to be found everywhere, in every culture and creed. In some depictions there are skeins of thread already spun and a ball of thread. In one, a cheeky bird pulls at the thread between the ball and the skein under Mater's unperturbed gaze.



Do you think of Mary as a contemplative leader? It is perhaps more common to think of her as a follower – the first disciple. The passive and sentimental depictions of Mary to which we are so often exposed, and a pedestalized Mariology that robs Mary of both her humanity and her agency, are of little help to us in this regard. Mater Admirabilis by contrast shows a very human Mary doing an everyday task and actively choosing to incline the ear of her heart to the Heart of God. To choose to follow, not our own superficial desires or the expectations of others around us, but rather the deep, God-planted desires of our hearts, is indeed an act of contemplative leadership.

In the final painting, Mater is depicted in the house of St John. She is no longer a young girl spinning, but an older woman about to cut the final thread from a completed bolt of woven fabric. The work of attending, of noticing, and of responding endures through all of the seasons of our lives.

In the midst of very active ministries, Mater reminds us that contemplation is not at odds with, but rather grounds, our action. When we exercise contemplative leadership, we are not troubled or dragged off mission by cheeky birds! It is the serenity of Mater's face that touches our hearts, not the amount of thread spun.

