MARY AS COREDEMPTRIX AND MEDIATRIX
OF GRACE: CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS*

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After all that have been said and done related to the International Year of the Family, one may wish to highlight some fundamental insights regarding the family that should be retained thereafter to influence lives and guide our efforts. Apart from some pious platitudes inevitably dished out in such occasions, we have some solid thoughts to hold on and pass on.

IN THE POSTMODERN TIMES

The Church's task of evangelization takes place within the reality of the changes of culture and of consciousness accompanying the entrance of postmodernity. Christianity is viewed by some as already excluded from fundamental cultural influence in a secularized society, therefore irrelevant to the discourse of postmodernism and the future.

EVANGELIZATION: THE CHURCH’S MISSION TODAY

Precisely in such a surrounding, hostile to the self struggling to be human, the Church has her task cut out for her, in Paul VI's picture of it after Vatican II: as a Good Samaritan binding up the wounds of the beaten and robbed person left half dead

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by a culture increasingly de-Christianized.

As an aftermath of modernity, the individual finds his freedom unhinged too. Are the faithful already so catechized and informed that equivocations and misunderstandings are reasonably precluded? Have we been so permeated with the spirit of Vatican II that we can now go beyond it and define what the Council treated with extreme sensitivity and only in the complexity of Mariology’s dependence on more fundamental issues of the faith? Is our ecclesial situation today in this regard so different from that of Vatican II that we can afford to disregard the considerations, both theological and pastoral, that guided the Council Fathers’ deliberations? These are the basic questions that should accompany us in our reflections on the matter of defining a new Marian dogma.

It is interesting to note that the proponents of a papal definition of Mary’s co-redemptive role in salvation give as their first consideration regarding the timeliness and appropriateness for such a solemn declaration the profound outpouring of grace expected from a Marian definition. Does it mean that “a new springtime of graces for the Church through the intercession of Mary” is only to be expected when such a solemn recognition of her role is made? Mary continuously is interceding for us, and this truth about her love and assistance to us does not depend on any recognition and proclamation on our part. And precisely so that our teaching on and devotion to Mary may be founded upon the truth about her, we need to see Mary within the proper perspectives enunciated for us by the Second Vatican Council, the perspectives that present to us an integral, and not a fragmented and isolated, picture of our Blessed Mother.¹

A RETURN TO PRE-VATICAN MARIOLOGY?

Vatican II brought Marian theology to closer relationship with other areas of theology like Christology, ecclesiology, and liturgy. From a long isolation that originated from the fragmentation of theology predominantly influenced by the Council of Trent,

Mariology came into a healthy relationship with the rest of theology. With a new methodology leading to new emphases and new insights, Marian theology experienced a regeneration more dramatic perhaps than in most other areas of theology. Let us review some of these new emphases and insights in Mariology that may now appear threatened by a definition of a new dogma on Mary's co-redemptive and mediatory role in salvation.

a) It is in connection with the theology of Christ that a most significant theological shift took place in Mariology. In the earlier so-called Christology "from above" divinity was to the forefront. Within the context of such a Christology from above, in the unintended distancing and inaccessibility of the Savior from mankind Mary was seen eventually as the human face of God's relationship to us. She was next to Christ. And sometimes in contrast to Jesus, mercy would be even predicated of Mary, as if Jesus could not have mercy but justice only. This understanding is illustrated to us by a cute, little anecdote we all have heard. I personally first heard it at the Araneta Coliseum during a sermon by the famous Bishop Fulton Sheen. It was about Christ noticing individuals in heaven whom he could not recall having admitted into glory in the first place. Upon investigation, it turned out that Mary had been surreptitiously smuggling people into heaven through a backdoor.

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Mariology was also "from above," relating Mary by analogy to the role of Christ in redemption. Reflections on Mary were Christotypical in approach. It viewed her as joined with Christ facing the Church in the work of redemption. This view naturally tended to keep her distinct from the Church and from Christians. Emphasis was on how different and much better Mary was in comparison to the rest of humanity. Corollary to this view was the quest for unique privileges and prerogatives for her in the form of new titles or new roles in the history and work of salvation.

As theological shifts, propelled by the interpretation of biblical sources and the influence of Christian humanism, ushered in for Catholic theology a Christology "from below," fully appreciating the humanity of Christ, a new perception of Mary's role also ensued. Mary was no longer needed to be a substitute for the
humanity of Christ. And inasmuch as Christ was now seen as one who also suffered and struggled like us in all things except in sin, so now Mary’s humanity could also be seen to develop “from below.” As part of the Christian community and making her own journey of faith, she stands with the Church facing Jesus and receiving redemption. She is the first and the fully redeemed; she is the first and perfect disciple. She is our exemplar in the life of faith in imitation of Christ — in the imperative of “kenosis,” as Fr. Peña in his book on Mary points out. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) portrays Mary as our model of faith (144; 273) and the eschatological icon of the Church (972). “In her we contemplate what the Church already is in her mystery on her own ‘pilgrimage of faith’, and what she will be in the homeland at the end of her journey.”

This ecclesiotypical perspective characterizes Vatican II’s approach to Mary. Without rejecting the Christotypical approach, the Council diplomatically resorted to it in a toned down manner in nos. 55-59 of Lumen Gentium. But the text deliberately does not go into the nature of Mary’s cooperation with Jesus in redemption and avoids new titles and privileges, so as not to further distinguish her from the rest of humanity. In the rest of chapter 8 of Lumen Gentium, the Council approaches Mary so to say “from below,” linking her more intimately with Christians and the Church. It is Mary within the mystery of the Church in Christ’s redemptive work. Thus did we gain a mother who is a fellow-disciple!

b) Closely connected with the above consideration is another specific area of theology that has affected Mariology. It is the doctrine on grace. As this was influenced by anti-Protestant

polemic, when it came to fuller, balanced perspectives in Vatican II, it necessitated a corresponding readjustment in Mariology. To the Protestant Reformation's cry of "sola gratia" — "grace alone" — emphasizing that grace was a gift freely bestowed and totally unmerited by us, Trent countered by stressing humanity's need to respond to the gift of grace. This healthy theology however eventually came to be exaggerated to the extent that in the popular mind up to now the impression is that grace is very much like a quantifiable acquisition, rather than a personal quality created by God. The consequent verification of grace put the stress on meriting grace, rather than on responding to it as to a gift.

Tridentine Mariology built within this frame an elaborate description of Mary as some sort of a "treasurer" of the much needed merits, a dispensatrix even of graces. Such a theology necessarily expressed itself in a Marian devotion that stressed petition for the intercessory powers of Mary. She is an abundant conduit of grace. Not surprisingly Marian piety has been characterized for the most part up to now by novenas and prayers to obtain favors. This approach is not unorthodox, but it runs the risk of superstition that one has found a sure means of merit. One has only to pay attention to some of the claims being made around in connection with the Brown Scapular, for instance, which explain its startling popularity as a de facto talisman. Also, seeing Mary principally as a "grace dispenser" risks "using" her for that purpose rather than relating with her as a total person. This partly explains the actual local phenomenon of avid devotees to the "Ina ng Laging Saklolo," for example, so easily forgetting Mary when the favor sought has already been obtained or when it obviously would not be forthcoming. Another manifestation of this shallow and merely utilitarian relationship with her is evidenced by the at times shocking turn-around of Catholics becoming "born-again," who upon being convinced of Christ's sole mediatorship react by breaking Mary's images.

Contemporary theology's more balanced view of grace as both gift and inner quality which should grow through response has challenged Mariology to reconsider the intercessory role of Mary. Our Marian piety has been moving beyond simply asking her to obtain heavenly favors. We have started to appreciate her as
a disciple of Christ, attentive to the Word of God and living according to it. Her own journey of faith has become a focus of our attention and inspiration. Ecclesiotypical Mariology seems here to succeed in fully respecting God’s initiative and sovereignty by explaining Mary’s cooperation and mediation in terms of the redeemed community. Her mediation is the perfection, but is still like the mediation, of every member of the body of Christ. Such mediation detracts from Christ’s mediation no more than the priesthood of the faithful detracts from the one priesthood of Christ, or the goodness of the Christians detracts from God alone being good. This is an example of Mariology’s development which respects the legitimate concerns of the Reformation. In addition, we now realize that Mary herself in her authenticated apparitions in the modern times is fundamentally concerned with our own “metanoia” and inner transformation into Christ, which she can only repeatedly remind us about but which we ourselves must work on.

c) Also interrelated with the above reflection is the matter of liturgy. The emphasis on novenas and petitions in the former Mariology flowed partly from another ramification of the polemics with Protestantism. What we have mentioned as the Reformers’ emphasis on salvation “sola gratia” — solely by grace accepted in faith — inevitably led them to the conclusion that sacraments are only efficacious if those celebrating have faith. Trent countered by stressing that sacraments are efficacious acts of Christ, effective “ex opere operato” and independent of the faith of the recipient. While both sides possessed a true but partial view of the full reality, these partial insights became increasingly polarized. Protestants went for liturgy that promoted the faith experience, i.e., liturgy in the vernacular with hymns and full participation by the people, while underplaying the theology of “real presence” and God’s effective action beyond man’s faith response. Catholics on the other hand stressed so much the efficacy of divine action in the celebration of the sacraments that they ended up with a liturgy where the faithful were mere spectators.

So Marian devotions among others came to replace the role that liturgy should have played in the life of faith of Catholics. With the official liturgy incomprehensible in Latin and dominated
by the clergy, with no room for active participation by the people, private devotions in the vernacular inevitably provided the outlet for faith expression to the faithful. Thus, Marian novenas and devotions became the needed places where the Catholics could sing their hymns, express their petitions, and feel themselves as active participants in a Christian community. Vatican II’s renewal of liturgy calls for the people’s full, active and meaningful participation in the Church’s celebrations.  

The Eucharist has become again the central expression of faith for all. Consequently, there is a lessening of the need for Marian devotions, and these are in fact to be subordinated to and brought in harmony with the liturgy, from where they must flow and to where they must lead. The resulting new conception of the role of Mary in the Church should be a graduation from the petitionary toward an empowerment of the faithful in their full participation in the life of the Church.

Is the desire for a new Marian dogma a return to pre-Vatican Mariology? Would the definition of Mary as coredemptrix and mediatrix of grace be in accord with the spirit and the achievements of the Second Vatican Council? Would it not be a reimposition of the more triumphant and static Christotypical approach to Mary and a devaluation of the more relevant and fruitful ecclesiotypical perspective in harmony with developments in Christology, eccesiology, the theology of grace and also liturgy? Are we risking the isolation once more of Marian theology from the rest of theology?

The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, opting for the ecclesiotypical approach, wants a Christ-oriented devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is presented to the Filipino faithful as a model of discipleship, the first to be evangelized and the first evangelizer. We shall “always continue to seek her intercession and learn from her way of life what we need to be as a community of disciples. She is truly what her oldest extant image in the Philippines calls her: Nuestra Señora de Guia, Our Lady

7. SC, 11.
8. SC, 13; Marialis Cultus, 31.
Guide of the Way.” Our Catholic Faith Catechism (1994) unmistakably pictures Mary as our model in faith in whom the destiny of the whole people of God is typified (36-140).

IN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE?

As vital for Mariology as its theological integrity is its ecumenical quality. The scandal of divided Christendom should never be glossed over. And we all bear the responsibility of striving for unity. Mariology and our Marian piety must be ecumenical, as Paul VI firmly set down in his Marialis Cultus (32). This is so if only because Marian theology in particular has been for so long a hotbed of controversies and typified the lack of understanding and openness among us Christians of various affiliations.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council were very aware of the apprehension by non-Roman Catholics that the declarations of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption as infallible truths confirm what they perceive as the centrality of Mary in Roman Catholicism, an excess slipping into distortion and paving the way for further dogmas on Mary’s co-redemption and mediation. With great sensitivity the Council explicitly avoided what may cause further misunderstanding. It cannot simply be assumed that if truth is one, then truth about Mary will automatically lead to Christian unity. Our grasp of truth is only partial and demands on-going clarification, and our manner of expression of truth and its consequences for action are in need of constant renewal. This task of clarification and more precise explanation as well as the purification of practice is not served by a solemn definition, but by the process of living catechesis and ecumenical discussion. Dogmatization follows clarification and deep conscientization. Proponents of the definition argue that it would be corrective of misunderstandings! That would be tantamount to knocking friendly at a door by shooting a cannonball at it. And no definitions have ever actually vanished all misunderstandings. Historically, dogmatic definitions spawned as

10. Ibid., Acts 153.
much controversies as they try to extinguish.

Mariology has become emblematic of the entire ecumenical movement, bringing to the fore the same major issues that are decisive in other areas of theology. Let us single out a couple of such issues in ecumenism to see if they would be resolved or clarified by a papal solemn definition of Mary as coredemptrix and mediatrix of grace.

a) Regarding the theology of grace we have already touched upon above, the concerns of "grace alone" and "faith alone" by the Reformation are related to a particular Christian anthropology that views human nature as totally corrupted by sin, and grace as the merciful disposition of God to forgive and treat the sinner as justified. This theology concentrates so heavily on contrasting fallen human nature with grace that there is room only for God's initiative and for faith as confident reception of this unmerited gift. To speak of human cooperation is to underestimate either the radical nature of human sin or the absolute gratuity of grace. In this Protestant perspective the use made of Mary's Fiat becomes a primary example of Catholic presumption of God's sovereignty, making God dependent on humanity or making a creature mutually effective with God in the work of redemption.

In contrast Catholicism tends to concentrate more on human nature as part of the good creation that came from God. The faculties of human nature are historically impaired and weakened by sin, but not totally vitiated. The goodness of human nature can be restored especially in view of the effects of God's sovereign action in the graced individual. In this perspective there is also room for human freedom. Freedom is a grace-given freedom, a radical change of fallen nature that comes from divine initiative alone, but it is human freedom. Grace thus enables a response to God's mercy and forgiveness. Faith entails not only a confident reception of God's gift, but also a free engagement in the new life of Christ that the gifts allow. Mary becomes the prime illustration of the workings of grace. Mary's life reflects the fullest effects of grace which enabled a faith-filled freedom that responds to and engages in the sovereign work of God in Christ.

In the spirit of ecumenical responsibility we have to ask: Has
Catholic theology and piety so stressed merit and good works that it has created misunderstanding about the divine initiative and the sovereignty of God’s grace? Has Christotypical Mariology been an example of this risky direction? Has Protestantism in turn so stressed divine sovereignty that it has forgotten the possibility of God’s perfecting human freedom? Is that neglect behind the rejection of Mariology?

It is the ecclesiotypical Mariology that best expresses both dimensions, Protestant and Catholic, of the theology of grace. In this perspective, Mary will be the exemplary sign that freedom does not substitute for grace, but neither does grace substitute for freedom. Mary would then illustrate the Reformation’s “God alone, grace alone,” showing their primacy over the human, but not their denial of the human.

The proponents of the definition of Mary as coredemptrix and mediatrix argue that it would be corrective of the Reformation theology of determinism, citing John Macquarrie’s *Mary for All Christians.*\(^\text{12}\) Let it be noted that the Protestant author is simply echoing and appropriating our Catholic understanding; he is not proposing a definition! A definition precisely would give rise to another issue.

b) It is remarkable that the proponents of the definition claim that “this new dogma would reaffirm the authority of the papal Magisterium and appreciation of Church authority at a time when complete unity of doctrine and appreciation of Church authority is lacking.” This is another one of their claims without any proof whatsoever. Anyway this brings us to yet another ecumenical point for discussion: the teaching authority of the Church.\(^\text{13}\) Current Catholic theology has come to see that papal authority, like Mariology, must not be placed outside or above the Church, but must be seen as expressive of the Church. The affirmation of papal infallibility is part of the affirmation held in common by all Christians that God will not allow his Church to err definitively. By the same token, papal infallibility does not arbitrarily invent new doctrine. It gives official expression and

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formulation to what is already at least implicit in the faith of the Church, our theologians suggest. Needing further discussion is how the Pope discerns the prior sense of the faithful, the *sensus fidelium* no less vital for the ecclesiality of the endeavor.

What has already been made clearer is that even the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption come out of a long tradition among the faithful, pre-dating even the Reformation, although that tradition is not unambiguous. Catholics suggest that the tradition had to reach greater and greater clarity over history, and that the papal declarations helped make explicit teachings that have genuine continuity with biblical faith. They also observe that the Popes gave their teachings only after elaborate consultations with many Christians throughout the world.

The proponents of a definition seem to imply that an exercise of papal authority would *eo ipso* result in a complete unity of doctrine and in an appreciation of Church authority. Not even within the Roman Catholic Church alone could such sanguine results be expected. But a more pressing question is the "how" of such an exercise of papal authority, the process of the coming about of a definition. Is there a tradition old enough for such a new dogma? Is it sufficiently part already of the faithful’s life and consciousness? Is it already somehow enshrined in our liturgy, our *prima theologia*, the primary expression and proclamation of our faith? Will the declaration, as expounded so far, be truly expressive of the Church’s faith? In particular, is the gathering of so many millions of signatures, as is being conducted today, sufficient ecclesiality?

**RECENT CONCERNS**

Apart from the more traditional issues of theology we have reflected upon apropos the possible definition of Mary as coredemptrix and mediatrix, we also have a couple of more recent concerns that test the appropriateness of a new Marian dogma.

a) Biblical studies and the Catholic charismatic movement have of late fostered theological developments pertaining to the
relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit. The new consciousness of the role of the Spirit and its relationship to Mary in the Bible takes Mariology in a new direction. Mary is seen as the first realization of and the most eminent member of the Church formed by the Spirit. She is the finished work of the Spirit, manifesting the gifts of the Spirit and its abundant fruit. She prays in the Spirit, magnifying God with tongues, as did all on Pentecost, but praising God even more with interpretation that recounts the “mirabilia Dei.” Her gift of the Spirit does not leave her passive, but moves her to action.

This theology of the Spirit avoids any sense of competition between Mary and the Spirit. They are complementary actors in the work of redemption, and both center on Christ as the focal point of their very being. This complementarity does not make them equal, but rather it emphasizes the very human and totally subordinate role of Mary. It is only by the Spirit and through the Spirit that Mary does what she does. Instead of being two juxtaposed roles in redemption, we see in Mary and the Holy Spirit one participation. The Spirit enables Mary’s role in redemption. The Spirit works from within Mary in such a way that all she brings of redemption comes from what she has first received.

As the relationship of Mary and the Spirit is more fully elaborated, it may be the way of confirming the ecclesiotypical approach to Mariology, removing any final traces of Marian triumphalism, and centering on Christ as unique Mediator and showing the possibilities of glory for a Church fully redeemed. Laurentin has often said that Mariology developed during the time between Trent and Vatican II in which little explicit attention was given to theology of the Spirit. And Roman Catholics have tended to assign to Mary roles that could also be assigned to the Spirit. To such effect are the titles: “Advocate,” “Mother of Good Counsel,” the “Source of Grace,” the “Consoler.” This rediscovery in Pneumatology does not sit well with a revival of Christotypical Mariology. In this connection, it is interesting that the proponents of the definition see the approaching year 2000

as best prepared for by a final jewel in the crown of Mary in the form of a solemn declaration of her coredempptive role in salvation. Have we forgotten John Paul II’s encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (51), wherein it is precisely in the power of the Spirit that we are proposed to cross the threshold into the third millennium? Or does this simply illustrate the problem of a Christotypical Mariology needing “new conquests” and prerogatives for Mary?

b) The word for Spirit in Hebrew (*ruach*) is in the feminine gender and gives us a glimpse into the fact that God can be seen as female as well as male. The Spirit is also perceived as source of communion and the principle of unity within the Church, so that there is neither male nor female but a unity in Christ Jesus. This brings us to the consideration of feminist theology.

Very briefly and without getting bogged down in hotly controverted details, let us note that feminist theologians seek to make Christians aware of what feminists consider sexist presuppositions which influence the way in which even doctrines are stressed.\(^\text{15}\) They maintain that one must begin to see sex as good, that sexual differentiation is significant, but the significance is for complementarity and not for domination. All should be defined as possessing human qualities, and not only by their sexuality or rationality. Sexuality simply means a different distribution of human qualities shared by every person. Feminists believe that the symbol of Mary can be reappropriated if it is accompanied by raised consciousness and by structural changes in the Church and society.\(^\text{16}\)

Under the tantalizing shroud of confidentiality, the proponents of the definition consider the solemn declaration of Mary as coredemptrix and mediatrix as a critical corrective also to the errors of radical feminism, which like a cancer is said to be seeking to infect the Church throughout the world. How a definition would stop the onslaught of such feminism is not explained. Would it take away the wind from the sails of women

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aspiring for the priesthood? Would it disarm them of their demands for equality, since Mary herself is already coredemptrix and mediatrix of grace? Would it satisfy the imperative of a new consciousness, even regarding Mary? Or will a definition be likely to boomerang as verifying exactly the concern of feminist theologians?

We have been hearing what the Marian definition would do, as if it would be some mighty wind that sweeps everything on its path. Pictures of another world come to mind. A world of sheer power and of triumphalism. A world that is strangely alien to Mary, the woman blessed among all, whose self-identity is that of a doer of God’s word, a servant of the Lord.