

SEMINAR PAPER

MARIOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

MARY AND THE MEANING OF REDEEMED HUMANITY TODAY

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis cultus*, Pope Paul VI made a few observations about the anthropological guidelines for renewing Marian devotion:

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin must also pay close attention to certain findings of the human sciences. This will help to eliminate one of the causes of the difficulties experienced in devotion to the Mother of the Lord, namely, the discrepancy existing between some aspects of this devotion and modern anthropological discoveries and the profound changes which have occurred in the psycho-sociological field in which modern man lives and works. The picture of the Blessed Virgin presented in a certain type of devotional literature cannot easily be reconciled with today's life style. . . . In consequence of these phenomena some people are becoming disenchanted with devotion to the Blessed Virgin and are finding it difficult to take as an example Mary of Nazareth because the horizons of her life, so they say, seem rather restricted in comparison with the vast spheres of activity open to mankind today. In this regard we exhort theologians, those responsible for the local Christian communities and the faithful themselves to examine these difficulties with due care.¹

As a brief response to this papal exhortation, my presentation proposes to identify and address some of the difficulties which are apparently preventing our contemporaries from finding in Mary an example of what it means to be a redeemed human being today.²

First of all, I should like to examine what seem to be the main difficulties causing the apparent discrepancies between some aspects of Marian devotion and modern anthropological discoveries which particularly reflect the profound changes affecting human persons in our times. Although such changes are most obviously taking place in the liberation movement among women, we want to be aware of the wider horizons which pertain to the authentic humanization of both sexes. Then a brief biblical portrait of Mary will be sketched, principally based upon the New Testament revelation in Luke/Acts and in John's Gospel. Finally, our consideration will conclude with a few theological reflections in the light of this scriptural image of Mary which will respond to the initial difficulties about contemporary devotion to her.

¹Pope Paul VI, *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Washington, D.C.: USCC Publications Office, 1974), pp. 25-26, no. 34.

²Cf. R. Laurentin, "Mary and Womanhood in the Renewal of Christian Anthropology," *Marian Library Studies*, Vol. 1 (December 1969), pp. 77-95; W. Cole, "Mary—An Answer to Woman's Role in the Church?" *The University of Dayton Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring 1975), 85-105.

The Main Difficulties with Marian Devotion Today

There are several formidable obstacles to Mary's attracting the men and women of the 1970's and 1980's to behold in her a model of the contemporary Christian. Although the context of these difficulties is Mary's exemplarity, other aspects of devotion to her such as invocation, intercession and mediation are not unrelated. For we are often drawn to call upon those saints whose holy lives inspire us to follow Christ more faithfully. Nevertheless, let us bear in mind that we are concentrating upon those reasons that seem to make Mary remote from us as a model of Christian living today. And what we say in reference to her is more or less applicable to our devotion towards other saints.

The first problem is based upon the understanding of what it means to call Mary a *model*. According to the most popular interpretation, a person is proposed as a model because he/she is worthy of imitation. And so one becomes a material model to be imitated in concrete details. The difficulty in looking upon Mary as a model in such a sense is that her socio-cultural background was so different from ours. Our own historicity just would not allow us to lead her type of life even if we wanted to. On the other hand, to make Mary over into an idealized model is to turn her into a distorted image, an inaccessible abstraction. The opposite extreme from the material model, this sort of stereotype or blue-print representation also misses the heart of the matter, namely, that Mary is meant by God to be for us a living witness of the Christian life. Unless she is a personal sign, a flesh-and-blood icon, Mary cannot inspire us redeemed humans by her example.

The second set of difficulties revolves around the various pieces within the Marian mosaic. Over the centuries preachers have presented Mary in such a way that she has often been portrayed, especially to Christian women, as a model of passivity, silence and self-effacement. This portrait is particularly offensive and alienating not only to the contemporary liberated woman, but to all human beings today who are taking the active means of seeking their just rights in the world. And so what does she really have to say to the woman who, even though she may be a Christian wife and mother, is working to help support the family, is becoming active in politics or is pursuing a professional career in scientific research? By such women, Mary is often looked upon as one who was just a home-body, the mother of an only son and so not an example for the mothers of many children, as one whose virginity might be admired at a distance but certainly not to be imitated by a married woman, as one who is even a threat to equal rights for women today. To many, Mary has evidently become a model of repression and suppression since she would be imposed upon them as an example of how to be satisfied with one's lot in life as "the will of God." In the same way, what can Mary possibly say to all those who are involved in the various liberation movements today? Traditionally she comes across to them as the peacemaker at any price, as inspiring them to accept and carry the cross of their subjugated social status, and as warning them not to fight for justice.

Thirdly, a series of problems has arisen from the attempt to make Mary the model of women and Jesus the model of men. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss in any detail the theories of theological anthropology about the distinction between the sexes.³ Suffice it to say here that a simplistic categorizing of masculine and feminine characteristics, e.g., the aggressive and discursive male, the passive and intuitive female, is dismissed as deceptive today. It fails to take into account the obvious fact that masculinity and femininity do not concretely exist in an unalloyed state. In the average man are found some feminine qualities as some masculine traits are embodied in the typical woman. But, more importantly for our purposes, such an approach about the exemplarity of Jesus and Mary obscures the truth that each, in his or her own order, is called to be a universal model for all human persons. This truth will be explained in the final section of the paper.

Brief Biblical Portrait of Mary

The scriptural image of the Lord's mother provides us with the basis of her true exemplarity for redeemed humanity. In keeping with our objective of beholding Mary as a model for the contemporary Christian, we shall focus our attention upon her special relationship with the Holy Spirit as communicated to us in Luke/Acts and the Fourth Gospel. For only the gifts and charisms of our risen Lord's Spirit can enlighten and inspire one to exemplify Christianity.

According to St. Luke's account of the Annunciation, the heavenly messenger reveals to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (1: 35). The evangelist's expression of the Spirit "coming upon" and "overshadowing" Mary is reminiscent of Isaiah (32: 15) and of Ezechiel (36: 25-26; 37: 5-7) when the *Ruah Yahweh* (breath of God) comes upon the barren land and overshadows the dry bones to bring new life into the world. Only the loving power of God's Holy Spirit can recreate. Mary is the masterpiece of his new creation. It is his grace, and his alone, operative in her as the most highly favored one of Israel that initiates the Incarnation and Redemption. At the same time, Luke emphasizes Mary's free and intelligent response by narrating her inquiry, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" (1: 34). Far from indicating a lack of faith, this discreet question manifested her cooperation with grace. The same Spirit who inspired her complete openness and docility to God's word also enlightened Mary to exercise the gift of her sinless freedom. Out of this religious experience of operative and cooperative grace, she was able to respond most generously to her unique calling from God in salvation history: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1: 38).

In meditating upon other aspects of Mary's special relationship with the Holy Spirit as revealed in the infancy narratives, we behold her as

³Cf. S. Butler, ed., *Women in Church and Society*, Research Report, The Catholic Theological Society of America (1978), pp. 36-40.

the completely charismatic Christian who both receives and mediates the love of God in person. Immediately following his account of the Annunciation, Luke leads our contemplative gaze into the joyful mystery of the Visitation when Elizabeth, "filled with the Holy Spirit," (1: 41) greets Mary as "blessed among women" (1: 42) and witnesses that the child in her own womb leapt with joy at the sound of Mary's voice. Because of the presence of Jesus in her own virginal womb which had been made fruitful by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, Mary mediated to Elizabeth's unborn child the fruit of the Holy Spirit that is messianic joy. She responds to the occasion with the magnificent canticle, the *Magnificat*, her beautiful song of liberation which the evangelist is inspired to place upon Mary's lips. For it is such an apt expression of his image of her. She proclaims in her prayer of praise that all which causes her to rejoice is the gift of the Spirit. Mary is ever the contemplative apostle living in intimate communion with the indwelling Spirit while engaged in the activity of mediation. She prophetically sings about a revolution in human hearts that will be rooted in the redeeming love of God and bring justice to the oppressed (Lk 1: 46-55). Herself one of the *anawim*, the "poor of Yahweh," she is most grateful in her praise: "for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden . . . for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Lk 1: 48, 49).

Mary's life of intimacy with the Spirit made of it a "pilgrimage of faith."⁴ She kept pondering over and over again in her heart the mystery unfolding in her life (Lk 2: 19, 51). She patiently awaited the divine moment of enlightening her husband Joseph concerning the mysterious circumstances of her being with child (Mt 1: 20, 21). She is portrayed by the evangelists as inspired to share her Son and God's with others, to the Jewish shepherds (Lk 2: 15-20), and to all of us through the Gentile Magi (Mt 2: 11). And Mary was ever most receptive to those who were called to mediate the Spirit to her. From the prophecy of Simeon she learned more about the divine designs for our salvation and what she would be asked to bear as the mother of the suffering Servant of Yahweh (Lk 2: 29). Another opportunity for her to grow in faith was the loss of the child and finding him in the Temple (Lk 2: 41-50). The experience reflected there must have influenced the remainder of the hidden life when "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (Lk 2: 52). The mother matured along with the son in her spiritual odyssey of receiving and responding, of observing and interpreting, and of contemplating and acting. In fact, we might say that Mary was doing an inspired theology of prophetically interpreting the events of salvation history which she witnessed and in which she participated. For she was accepting the mediation of the Spirit as she in turn mediated the Spirit in the Holy Family.

In the Gospel of John, the "mother of Jesus" appears in two scenes, at the wedding feast of Cana and on Calvary at the foot of the cross (2:

⁴"Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," in A. Flannery, ed., trans. from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Pub. Co., 1975), p. 417, no. 58.

1-11 and 19: 25-27). In each scene the fourth evangelist has Christ address his mother as "woman." Whether or not John, the great symbol-lover, intended that Mary thereby be interpreted as the "New Eve," or mother of the new living in Christ, is open to question among Scripture scholars.⁵ Tradition, however, would support such an interpretation. For at Cana Christ anticipated the "hour" of his glorification upon the cross at the request of his mother by working the first sign, the changing of water into wine, which led his disciples to believe in him. Her role as the mother of new life in Christ is foreshadowed at Cana since there through her intercession he allowed an anticipatory glance at his glory. Only on Calvary, however, according to John's theology of the cross, could Christ be fully constituted in the glory of the paschal mystery and so send the Spirit. Only then also could Cana be fulfilled by making his mother our spiritual mother and archetype of redeemed humanity. In a recent book we read:

St. John's description of the death of Jesus is, "When Jesus took the wine, he said, 'Now it is finished.' Then he bowed his head, and delivered over his spirit" (19: 30). The crucifixion and death of Jesus is also his hour of triumph. In New Testament thought, particularly in St. John, only when Jesus has been glorified, in his victorious return to the Father (7: 39) can he send his Spirit. The reference to the Savior's death is much more than that he "expired," "breathed his last," "gave up his spirit." The translation of the New American Bible, "delivered over his spirit," expresses the sending of the Holy Spirit.

The presence of the "woman," Mary, mother of Jesus, at her Son's cross, and the Savior's words, "Woman, there is your son," and "to the disciple whom he loved," "There is your mother," are part of the victory of Calvary. Like Matthew and Luke, St. John is concerned with messianic maternity, with the Church as new "mother of the living" (the meaning of the name "Eve" in Genesis 3: 20); the motherhood of Mary prepares and makes possible the motherhood of the Church.⁶

The Lucan tradition, unlike the Johannine, portrays the sending of the Spirit on the first Pentecost Sunday, fifty days after the Lord's resurrection, the tradition followed by our liturgical year. In the Acts of the Apostles we find a certain completion of Luke's Gospel. Particularly concerning the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary, there is a remarkable parallel between the birth of Christ (Lk 1-2) and the birth of the Church (Acts 1-2).⁷ In each account the Spirit "comes upon" Mary, upon her alone in the Gospel and upon her along with her son's first members in Acts; in both the Spirit sets persons into motion, Mary on the Visitation and the Apostles on their mission; the two records narrate a witnessing in the form of praise, Mary's *Magnificat* and the disciples' outburst of glorifying God before the people. And so St. Luke completes his image of Mary in her intimate association with her son's Spirit. He

⁵R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, J. A. Fitzmyer, and J. Reumann, eds., *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press and New York: Ramsey, and Toronto: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 188-90.

⁶E. R. Carroll, *Understanding the Mother of Jesus* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1979), p. 68.

⁷R. Laurentin, *Catholic Pentecostalism* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978), p. 222.

carefully draws the lines of her spiritual portrait from the virginal conception of Christ by the power of the overshadowing Spirit, through Jesus' beatitude on his mother as a true disciple who hears the word of God and keeps it (Lk 11: 27-28) during his public ministry, to the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost when Mary is again at the center of the picture, this time surrounded by the holy men and women who form the infant Church. A number of Christian scholars of the New Testament have asserted, concerning this Lucan picture of Mary: "Mary's first response to the good news was: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.' The real import of Acts 1: 14 is to remind the reader that she had not changed her mind."⁸ Vatican II sums up the biblical portrait of the mother of Jesus very clearly and succinctly:

But since it had pleased God not to manifest solemnly the mystery of the salvation of the human race before he would pour forth the Spirit promised by Christ, we see the Apostles before the day of Pentecost "persevering with one mind in prayer with the women and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his brethren" (Acts 1: 14), and we also see Mary by her prayers imploring the gift of the Spirit, who had already overshadowed her in the Annunciation.⁹

Some Theological Reflections on Mary as Model of Contemporary Christians

A theological portrait of Mary that is faithful to the Bible ought to focus our attention upon the characteristics of her special relationship with her son's Spirit. In fact it should reveal to us what is actually unique about that relationship in order to identify more clearly just what might constitute her an archetypal model for redeemed humanity in every age of salvation history. Indeed she is the most highly favored temple of the Holy Spirit on account of her preeminent holiness among us redeemed members of her son's Body, the Church. For Mary's Immaculate Conception makes her more perfectly redeemed than the rest of us, in that Christ has redeemed her by preservation from all sin. What is truly unique about her relationship with the Spirit, however, is her calling to be the virginal *Theotokos*. Her concrete motherhood of the Word Incarnate with all the graces preceding the Annunciation and subsequent to it in her "pilgrimage of faith" is that which reveals to us most clearly the Spirit of God at work within her.¹⁰ For what the Spirit brings about from all eternity in the bosom of the Trinity as the Love of God in Person sealing the unity of the Father and the Son, he accomplishes in time within the womb of Mary at the virginal conception of Christ in whom our human unity is sealed. As one outstanding theologian explains the mystery:

The divine life of the Son in eternity implies the inherence in him of the Spirit of the Father, and the recapitulation of the Son in the Father by the Spirit.

⁸R. E. Brown et al., *op. cit.*, p. 177.

⁹A. Flannery edition, p. 417.

¹⁰Cf. F. M. Jelly, "Mary and Listening to the Voice of Christ's Spirit in the Church," *CTSA Proceedings* 33 (1978), 119-20.

Likewise, the inclusion of the Son in the humanity of his mother, and our final inclusion in the humanity of the Son received from Mary, imply a participation in this inherence of the Spirit and in that recapitulation in the Father of the whole Trinity which the Spirit effects by the very fact of his procession. . . . Consequently, the divine motherhood of Mary as regards her Son, her motherhood of grace in regard to us, and the motherhood of the Church which is a fulfillment of both these, are, one and all, the seal *par excellence* of the Spirit on the world of man. Nowhere else is so clearly affirmed the conjunction of the creature, precisely as creature, with the Spirit.¹¹

In light of such theological reflections upon the biblical revelation in the Church's tradition, we ought to be better prepared to address the first set of difficulties about the meaning of Mary as a model. Certainly the nature of her exemplarity for us is not to be confused with a concrete material model or an abstract idealized model. As Pope Paul VI put it: "She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and the most perfect of Christ's disciples. All of this has a permanent and universal exemplary value."¹²

As we look upon Mary for the enlightenment and inspiration of the Spirit's accomplishments in her Christian existence, we also can respond to the second group of problems about her apparent passivity. Once again let us listen to Paul VI:

... we wish to point out that our own time, no less than former times, is called upon to verify its knowledge of reality with the word of God, and, keeping to the matter at present under consideration, to compare its anthropological ideas and the problems springing therefrom with the figure of the Virgin Mary as presented by the Gospel. The reading of the divine Scriptures, carried out under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with the discoveries of the human sciences and the different situations in the world today being taken into account, will help us to see how Mary can be considered a mirror of the expectations of the men and women of our time. . . . These are but examples, but examples which show clearly that the figure of the Blessed Virgin does not disillusion any of the profound expectations of the men and women of our time but offers them the perfect model of the disciple of the Lord; the disciple who builds up the earthly and temporal city while being a diligent pilgrim towards the heavenly and eternal city, the disciple who works for that justice which sets free the oppressed and for that charity which assists the needy; but above all, the disciple who is the active witness of that love which builds up Christ in people's hearts.¹³

In the Spirit we come to penetrate the spirit of what Mary means to us as a model of Christian life today, as one who can always manifest the authentic meaning of redeemed humanity. And so we are not put off by the differences between her situation and ours. For we are not contemplating her as a blue-print but as a living embodiment of the spirit behind Christian discipleship. Paradoxically even her uniqueness as a virgin mother, wherein she differs from everyone of us, can inspire us to more courageous consecration of ourselves in being Christ-bearers to our world.

¹¹L. Bouyer, *The Seat of Wisdom* (Chicago: Regnery, 1965), pp. 183-84, 187.

¹²Pope Paul VI, *op. cit.*, p. 26, no. 35.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 26-28, no. 37.

Regarding the third series of difficulties arising from attempts in the past to make Jesus the model of men and Mary the model of women in the Christian life, we should at this point be ready to consider the proper distinctions. First of all, the exemplarity of the humanity of God who is Jesus Christ is uniquely universal and reveals most fully the meaning of our being created in the image and likeness of the triune God. And so Christ is uniquely the Way of becoming fully human for every man and woman including his mother Mary. It is precisely because she followed her son so faithfully and embodied his Spirit so fully that Mary is such a perfect model for us to follow. (In fact, we might note that *follow* seems to be a better word than *imitate* in this context. It does not have the misleading connotations of mechanical repetition.) Secondly, the exemplarity of Mary's Christian existence enjoys a certain universality in the order of received redemption. She is the Archetype of the Church principally as a community of redeemed men and redeemed women. Thirdly, the fact that recent anthropological studies have called into question the natural differences between the male and female personalities should not obscure the historicity of Christ's masculinity and Mary's femininity. Although it is of paramount importance that in Christ God assumed a human nature and redeemed all humanity, and that in Mary we find a model for the Christian lives of us all, this "doesn't militate against the fact that both Christ and Mary can be special models for the feminine and masculine sexes respectively."¹⁴ To deny this would be tantamount to rejecting a basic historical realism to the Incarnation and Redemption. Christ and Mary would then cease to be living models of what it means to be truly human.

As an eminent Orthodox theologian has pointed out: "Properly understood, Mariology is thus the '*locus theologicus*' par excellence of Christian anthropology."¹⁵ The beautiful balance of absolute dependence on God and complete cooperation in freedom exemplified by Mary's Christian discipleship helps us strike a happy medium between the extreme secularistic anthropologies of our times: one which interprets the human as total dependence upon deterministic forces in contradiction to the other which looks upon the human as totally undetermined freedom. In complete contrast to such polarization, the Christian anthropology based upon the personal experience of Mary views redeemed humanity as graced freedom, in which "'freedom' becomes the very content of 'dependence,' the one eternally fulfilling itself in the other as life, joy, knowledge, communion and fullness."¹⁶

A recent article entitled "Attempts to Develop New Types of Human Being," confronts us with the challenge to our Christian convictions that emerges from the prospects of genetic control and biotechnology. Careful to avoid a completely negative reaction, but also realistically assessing the possibilities, the author clearly points out:

¹⁴W. Cole, *op. cit.* p. 97.

¹⁵A. Schmemmann, "Mary: The Archetype of Mankind," *The University of Dayton Review*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 84.

The direct and immediate application of technology to our selves, without the intervention of an external environment, does not in itself seem contrary to the Lordship of Christ over us and over all creation. We can and should be open to what this technology can offer us. But we must develop a more profound understanding of the human as well as an acute critical (in the best sense of the word) appraisal of society, its goals and priorities. It is essential to develop a profound sense of the worthy, the free, the good, the timely and the mysterious.¹⁷

Again let us be reminded that we do not look to the experience of Mary or any model given us in the Christian tradition for simplistic answers about the meaning of the human which would save us from degenerating into "some kind of biological collectivist society."¹⁸ Her exemplarity, however, will help us preserve and develop the personal dignity, freedom, responsibility and physical integrity worthy of God's children in any society.

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¹⁷R. A. Brungs in *The Month* (June, 1979), 198.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 196.