

From Marian Doctrine to Marian Dogma

By Patrick Coffin

Next to the Eucharist and the role of Peter, Marian devotion is surely the most distinctly Catholic enterprise. To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, it's not that Marian doctrines have not been investigated and proven false; it's that they've yet to be investigated. This axiom sheds light on a proposal being put before the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith by an international lay group based in the United States.

Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici ("The Voice of the People for Mary Mediatrix") is currently organizing a worldwide effort to encourage Pope John Paul II to define as Catholic Dogma that the Blessed Virgin Mary is Co-redemptrix, Mediatrix of all graces and Advocate for the People of God.

The four-year-old group is headed by its founder, Dr. Mark Miravalle, a Professor of Theology and Mariology at Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio, U.S.A. And since its inception in May 1993, Vox Populi has swiftly become a global movement of ordinary faithful, lay scholars, priests, nearly 500 bishops, and 55 cardinals from over 150 countries.

The group has overseen the sending of hand-signed petitions to the Holy See at a rate of 100,000 letters per month. In the 95 years following the definition of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, about 8 million petitions were sent to Rome to have the dogma of the Assumption defined through a similar petition movement; in only four years, Vox Populi has sent almost five million.

When the dogma of the Assumption was defined in 1950 (Pius XII's *Munificentissimus Deus*), it was the fourth Marian dogma of the Church – following Mary's title of Theotokos, the God-bearer (defined in 431 AD); her perpetual virginity (649 AD); and her Immaculate Conception (1854 AD). Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici submits that now is the time for a fifth and final Marian dogma.

Two scholarly anthologies edited by Dr. Miravalle argue that the Church is now living in a "climax of the Age of Mary." As evidence, the books point to the increased appearance of Marian centers around the world, the renewed popularity of personal consecrations to the Immaculate Heart, and the virtual explosion of Church-approved Marian apparitions. But Miravalle insists that even the most established Marian apparitions in no way form the basis for the proposed definitions.

Rather, their essence is already taught by the magisterium, and each element of the proposed dogma has a broad range of biblical anchors. Moreover, the titles are taught with the kind of authority that meets the criteria for ordinary infallible teaching as set forth in *Lumen Gentium*. Therefore, defining a dogma would articulate something ancient, not add something new.

The movement's purpose is to manifest the *Sensus fidelium* according to the traditional process described by Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman. Here the movement distinguishes itself from other petition-oriented movements claiming the adjective Catholic. For the authentic "sense of the faithful" presumes an a priori communion with Rome – at least on matters of faith and morals. When Popes Pius IX and Pius XII promulgated, respectively, the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and of the Assumption, they noted how the timing and content of their promulgations was influenced by the lay petition movement of the day.

The term *sensus fidelium* begs the question: Are the faithful manifesting their sense, or the so-called sensible their “faith”? *Vox Populi* is not a lobby group that somehow equates truth with a nose-count; the process they have initiated is more of a doctrinal thermometer. In this case, what is “sensed” is precisely what the faithful already hold as true about the singular role played by the Mother of God in the work of her Son.

As the news of the proposed dogma spreads across the universal Church, the two vital questions are whether we find these Marian roles already present in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, and whether believing Catholics already honor Mary according to these titles, at least implicitly. There is also the question of the impact that a Marian dogma would have on ecumenism. While many of the faithful support the idea with what may be called guarded sympathy, one hears a well-meaning concern that such a formal pronouncement would damage the delicate ecumenical gains made since the Second Vatican Council. But the most foreboding challenge for *Vox Populi* may lie not in external factors but in the titles themselves. To Protestant believers, uninstructed Catholics, and the otherwise uninitiated, ascribing the titles “Coredemptrix,” “Mediatrix,” and “Advocate” to the humble handmaid from Nazareth may seem a little out of proportion. To these groups, the terms, especially *Mediatrix*, have a suspicious ring to them, appearing as they do to dilute if not supplant the sole mediatorship of Christ, the “one mediator between God and man” (1 Tim 2:5).

The third aspect of the proposed dogma, however, Mary as Advocate, seems the most familiar to Catholics since the whole tradition of Marian devotion – from the Rosary to consecrations to the Immaculate Heart – rests on the premise that Mary somehow intercedes for the faithful as an “advocate.” This advocacy is also latent in ancient prayers such as the *Sub Tuum Praesidium* (c. 250 AD): “We fly to your patronage, O holy Mother of God, despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us from all dangers, O ever glorious and blessed Virgin.” Catholic iconography has also enthroned this idea through, for instance, the serene and somber bearing of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and other Marian icons.

What about Mary as “Coredemptrix” and “Mediatrix”? Does Catholic teaching bear a sufficient level of doctrinal certainty for the rarified air of a dogmatic definition?

The terms of the definition can best be understood under the overarching category of maternal manifestations in the order of grace: Mary is *Coredemptrix* because of her unique participation in the acquisition of the saving grace of her Son; she is *Mediatrix* because she gave humanity its one Redeemer. By God’s providence, the Redeemer’s very appearance in history hinged upon her active acceptance of the Angel Gabriel’s proposal.

An unfortunate limitation of the English language poses something of a challenge to any easy acceptance of Mary as “Coredemptrix.” The word literally means “woman with the Redeemer,” and its Latin prefix (*cum*) has no connotation of equality, but rather suggests accompaniment, “presence with” – even “adorned with.” A co-founder is an equal, as is a co-pilot. In this second sense, the given individual fulfills a critical but secondary role.

Sensitive to this critique, the Fathers of Vatican II emphasized that “no creature could ever be counted along with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer, but just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by his ministers and the faithful, and

as the one goodness of God is radiated in different ways among his creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is a sharing in his one source" (*Lumen Gentium*, No. 62).

The title Coredemptrix points to Mary's unique participation in the salvific work of Jesus Christ, a participation seen most starkly at the foot of the cross, and prophesied at the dawn of creation. In Genesis 3:15, the serpent is assured God will "put enmity between you and the Woman, and between her seed and your seed: he shall crush your head and you shall strike his heel." The Woman and her seed are united in victory. Pope John Paul II says Mary "puts herself 'in the middle,' that is to say, she acts as a mediatrix not as an outsider, but in her position as mother" (*Redemptoris Mater*, No.21).

Mary's suffering "along with" Jesus lifts that Pauline maxim. "I make up in my flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (Col 1:24) to an entirely new level, for two reasons: Her sufferings (unlike St. Paul's) contributed to objective Redemption; and they were not set against her own sins, since she had none. Hence, her "offering up" was done entirely for the rest of us, John Paul II calls this the "deepest kenosis of faith in human history" (*Redemptoris Mater*, No. 18). She consented to her Son's sacrifice, "associating herself with his sacrifice in her mother's heart" (*Lumen Gentium*, No. 58).

At the Presentation (Lk 2:38), Mary's very hearing of strange prophecy that a sword would pierce her heart was a foretaste of the length of its shaft. Simeon's words orient the scene toward Calvary, to the biblical climax of Marian coredemption. There at Calvary, in the shadow of her dying Son, the Mother of God relinquished "her maternal rights," at Calvary "she suffered and almost died with her suffering and dying Son" (Benedict XV, *Inter Sodalicia*, 1918). This is active participation, not passive resignation.

The first recorded use of "Coredemptrix" dates back to a liturgical book from 14th-century Salzburg, Austria, but the concept was present, in seed, in the devotional life of the Church centuries before. St. Augustine gave Mary the title "Co-operator in the Redemption" (*De Sancta Virginitate*, 6; PL 40). The corpus of the Church Fathers finds a recurrent theme of Mary as the "New Eve" in which Mary's obedience is contrasted with Eve's disobedience. St. Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 202 AD) said that "the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by Mary's obedience. For what the virgin Eve bound fast by her refusal to believe, this Virgin Mary unbound by her belief" (*adversus Haereses*. Bk.3).

The first Marian encyclical, *Gloriosae Dominae*, written by Pope Benedict XIV in 1748, emphasized Mary's unity with Christ, especially as she was entrusted to the Church at the foot of the cross. This late 18th-century document gave way to a steady momentum of the Church's modern mariological project. In 1806, Pope Pius VII called her the "Dispensatrix of all graces." In 1854, Pope Pius IX referred to her as the "Raparatrix" or secondary restorer of our first parents.

The great Marian Pope St. Leo XIII (who wrote 11 encyclicals on the Rosary alone) laid a firm Mariological foundation for the twentieth century Church. In *Jucunda Semper* (1894), Pope Leo taught that "insofar as her Son was concerned, she offered him to the justice of God. In her heart, she died with him (*commoriens corde*), her heart transfixed with a sword of suffering" (ASS 27).

Every Pope of the 20th century has developed these themes, with each succeeding pontiff advancing and deepening what has been perennial Catholic teaching on Mary.

The Fathers of Vatican II devoted the final chapter of the “Dogmatic Constitution of the Church” (*Lumen Gentium*) to role of the Blessed Virgin both in the life of the Church and in relation to her Son.

But arguably the greatest development in Mariology in modern times has flowed from the pen of Pope John Paul II.

Through his countless Angelus addresses, general audiences, talks to pilgrims, and especially through his encyclicals *Redemptoris Mater* and *Salvifici Doloris*, John Paul II has articulated what has always been the rich ordinary Catholic teaching on Mary’s special role and mission to the pilgrim Church. Over the past 18 months, the Holy Father has mounted – with particular urgency – an ongoing catechesis on Marian Coredeemption:

- Mary was able to be “associated with her Son’s saving work,” and was “fully involved in the fight against the spirit of evil.” Thus, “the titles ‘Immaculate Conception’ and ‘Co-operator of the Redeemer,’ attributed by the Church’s faith in Mary, in order to proclaim...her intimate participation in the wonderful work of Redemption” (January 25, 1996).
- “By emphasizing Mary’s initiative in the first miracle and then recalling her presence on Calvary at the foot of the cross, the Evangelist helps us to understand how Mary’s co-operation is extended to the whole of Christ’s work” (March 5, 1997).
- “Mary shares the journey of her Son ‘to Jerusalem’ (Lk 9:51) and, more and more closely united with him...she co-operates in salvation” (March 12, 1997).
- “By becoming the mother of the Messiah at the Annunciation, Mary was implicated in the sacrifice of her Son...At the foot of the cross, the Mother of God while suffering the natural anguish of losing her child – associated herself with Jesus’ mission in ‘an authentic act of love.’” (April 2, 1997).
- “Even if God’s call to collaborate in the work of salvation is addressed to all human beings, the participation of the Mother of the Savior in the Redemption of humanity represents a unique and unrepeatable fact...in union with Christ and yielding to him, she (Mary) collaborated to obtain the grace of salvation for all humanity” (April 9, 1997).

What is continually emphasized throughout these teachings is Mary’s utter dependence upon Jesus. They are not “equal partners.” Christ is the sound, Mary the echo.

God’s employment of mere creatures –a presentiment of the incarnational principle – displays the divine *modus operandi*. For throughout the Old Testament, God engaged the holy angels, Abraham, Moses, and the prophets to effect his will. And now, “in the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4), through the action of the Holy Spirit, Christians are called to be God’s “co-workers” (1 Cor 3:9). Being the woman who “mediated” the Word by giving him flesh and consenting to his sacrifice, the Virgin is simply the perfect co-worker.

Several scriptural bases, often expounded by the magisterium, also bear out Mary as Mediatrix of all graces. Her unconditional *fiat* (Lk 1:38) gave the world the One who redeemed it. Her active cooperation with God’s plan provided the Savior with his body, the instrument of salvation (Heb 10:10). Her free choice initiated the mystery of the

Incarnation – with all its inscrutable implications and demands. (The personalist meaning of this choice may be found in the last one-third of Pope John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Mater*.)

At the wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2), Mary prompts Jesus to perform his first public miracle, and orients them both toward Calvary, the place of the true nuptials between heaven and earth – and the reason Jesus came into the world. His use of the title “Woman” is a cryptic allusion both to the way in which he would address her from the cross, and to the title’s rich scriptural resonance (esp. Gen 3:15; Jn 19:26; Gal 4:4; Rev 12:1).

St. Luke’s account of the Visitation (Lk 1:41) presents Mary, now a living Tabernacle, physically “mediating” the sanctifying grace of her Son to Elizabeth, and especially the unborn John the Baptist. Catholic dogmas propose what is to be held and expose what is not. There is an inner coherence to their development; they are organically united to previous teachings. They are not spontaneous “add-ons.” Many a canard about the Church inventing this or that dogma start with this false premise that the Church “makes up” teachings ex nihilo. We can affirm, on the one hand, that the bodily Assumption of Mary did not become “more true” after it was defined, and that our Lord was no “less present” in the Blessed Sacrament before it was defined. But, on the other hand, when Pope Pius IX defined the Immaculate Conception, he pointed to the many blessings that invariably result from dogmatic definitions: “The Church labors hard to polish her teachings,” he wrote, “to bring to perfection their formulation in such a way that these older dogmas of the heavenly doctrine receive proof, light, distinction, while keeping their fullness, their integrity, their own character, in a word, in such a way that they develop within the same object contents and that they remain always in the same truth, the same denotation, the same thought” (*Ineffabilis Deus*, December 8, 1854).

The Catholic Church may be poised to invoke her highest authority and pronounce that the redemption of the human race was dependent – conditionally but actually – upon the free consent of a woman, and that this consent contributed to the objective character of that Redemption. Vox Populi simply asks: Could there be a more appropriate Pope to make that pronouncement? The Totus Tuus Pope was an intimate collaborator in the drafting of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*. He has guided the Church along the authentic trajectories of the Council, directed the revision of the Code of Canon Law, supervised the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and given the world *Mulieris Dignitatum*, *Redemptoris Mater*, and the “Letter to Women.”

Forty years ago, Father Karol Wojtyla chose an image of Mary as Coredemptrix as his episcopal coat-of-arms upon becoming auxiliary bishop of Cracow, Poland, in 1958. For Pope John Paul II to make explicit the whole truth about Mary on the eve of the third millennium would be a remarkable climax to a remarkable pontificate. It is a universally-known fact that mothers are meant to be a sign of unity as they gather their children unto themselves. This may be the most practical reason why the nearly five million supporters of Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici agree that a papal definition would bring much Advent light to the children of our common mother.

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