

Newman about Mary, Mother of God and Co-redemptrix

By B. De Margerie, S.J.

We can contemplate with Cardinal Newman the Virgin Mary as earthly co-operator of our Redeemer, as our earthly mediatrix and as our Heavenly advocate. We can ask ourselves how would he react today to the petitions of millions of Catholics, including numerous Bishops, asking Pope John Paul to define as dogma the Mother of God, Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix and Advocate of mankind.

At first sight it would seem that Newman, avoiding the signature of any petition, would have rejected any affirmation contending that Mary was co-redemptrix if this word was understood as meaning purely and simply redemptrix: this is what he rejects in his Sermon Notes. In a more general way he would have desired, as in the case of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, a consultation of the Catholic world (Ker, 478). He would think today, as in 1854, that such a definition by the Pope would be valid and licit, but extraordinary. He would add that it would be later received by a Council, the normal mode of deciding points of faith and in that sense Newman was a prophet: Vatican II received and proclaimed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (LG 56). But Newman, today as indicated in a letter of his Pusey, would not promise us that there would be no further dogmatic definitions about Mary, because the Spirit blows as He wills and one cannot bind over the Holy Ghost to keep ecumenical peace (Ker, pp. 571, 610, 651).

Today, Newman might be more sensitive than he was at the time of his letter to the mention of the name of Mary in the Latin Mass. He would underline the fact that since the fifth century, no Mass is ever celebrated in the western or eastern Christian world without the mention of the name of Mary. This fact, indeed, corresponds to an affirmation of Mary as co-redemptrix, mediatrix, and advocate, doctrines which he clearly held and expressed in the same letter to Pusey, and which we will now look at more closely.

Co-operation in salvation

Newman receives the witness of the second century Fathers from Asia Minor, Africa, Rome and France: he listens to the voice of Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, telling us that Mary was not a mere instrument in the Incarnation, like David. On the contrary they declare that she co-operated in our salvation, not merely by the descent of the Holy Ghost on her body but by specific holy acts, the effect of the Holy Ghost within her soul. The Fathers tell us that as Eve was a cause of ruin to all, Mary was a cause of salvation to all; as Eve co-operated in effecting a great evil, Mary co-operated in effecting a much greater good.

Newman sums up his thought in the following beautiful affirmation: "She co-operated in the salvation of the world". He thinks that the book of Genesis, chapter 3 with its promise of a savior linked with a woman and chapter 12 of the book or Revelation reveal such a mission of the salvific co-operation of Mary.

True, Newman stresses the incommunicable greatness of Our Lord alone in his death and passion, alone in the garden, alone upon the cross, alone in the resurrection, and gives us to understand that we wound Mary if we deny this incommunicable greatness of Christ as God in relation to her, a pure creature. Newman admitted that he hated the perverse doctrine attributing to Mary the part that belonged to Christ only in the mystery of the Redemption. However, as Francis Davis explains, Newman deepens the meaning of the mysterious words of Christ to his Mother at Cana: “Woman, what have I to do with thee?” These words are interpreted by Newman, (Dif 1:II, 149) as an indication to his Mother at the beginning of his public ministry hinting that until its end (SD, 39-6) when he should have to do with His Mother again, until the consummation of the Paschal mystery, she could not participate directly in His works. Nevertheless, she could suffer and pray and offer these sufferings and prayers for His members. In other words, Davis believes that for Newman, Mary interiorly co-operated, through the offering of her sufferings and prayers, in the redemption of the world. This means that such an offering (so frequently mentioned by John Paul II) constituted a “specific holy act of co-operation with our salvation”. To express it in a different way, in Newman’s thought, Mary’s co-operation was secret and mysterious before being publicly and officially manifested in the Church. At Cana “He had seemed to turn from His Mother’s prayer, while he granted it” (SD, 37).

Mediation

This co-operation of Mary in the salvation of the world implies her mediation of prayer. Newman quotes Basil of Seleucia as saying that “Mary mediates between God and man”; much more than the other saints, much more than the martyrs, “she shines out above as the sun above the stars”. From the Greek Fathers and liturgies he has received a high idea of Mary: “Morning star, mother of all living, mother of life itself”. This is the reason, linked with her divine maternity, why her prayer is so powerful for the redemption of the world. Her office in the Church is one of “perpetual intercession for the faithful”. While the serpent’s weapon lies in being the tempter, this weapon of the second Eve and mother of God is prayer. For Newman, the mediation of her intercessory power is symbolized in those representations of her with uplifted hands, still extant in Rome.

So Cardinal Newman follows the thought of Irenaeus about Mary, as being our earthly mediatrix and our heavenly advocate, advocate of Eve, advocate of the Church, advocate of each one of us. He remains impressed by the fact that through Eastern liturgies seventy million Christians offer petitions in the name of the Theotokos. He is also impressed by other doctrinal facts coming from the West: the mother of Our Lord intercedes for those Christians who do not know her. He quotes St. Alphonsus Liguori with approval: “God gives no grace except through Mary”, that is, “through her intercession”. He even quotes Suarez saying that the intercession of Mary is not only useful but necessary; but it is the question of her intercession, not of our invocation of her, nor of our devotion to her.

Such is the doctrine of Cardinal Newman about the mother of God’s co-operation with our salvation, about her mediation of the graces we receive, about her intercession as advocate in our favour. Like her Immaculate Conception and Assumption, this doctrine is implied in the second century affirmation of Mary as the new Eve.

We can sum him up by quoting the fourth-century archbishop, St. Proclus of Constantinople: Mary is:

“the golden altar of holocaust, God’s only bridge to man: run through all creation in your thoughts and see if there be equal or greater than the Holy Virgin, Mother of the God (Essay on Development, ch.IV, sect. II, 11).

Is this doctrine considered by Newman as having undergone a growth? His negative answer has to be understood and explained. It has been in substance one and the same from the beginning (Di ang, II, 79). This means that when the Gospels and the ante-Nicene Fathers call her the “Mother of Jesus” everything is said implicitly. However in the Essay on Development, Newman admits that “in the first ages there was no ecclesiastical recognition of the place which Mary holds in the economy of grace; this was reserved for the fifth-century (Ephesus)”.

Growth in expression

So we admit with Newman that the doctrine about Mary’s salvific co-operation, mediation and intercession, though remaining one and the same in substance, in its roots, has undergone a growth in its expression: the Greek Fathers of the fifth-century are more explicit about this mediation than the Gospels and Irenaeus. The objective growth corresponds to the subjective increase of St. Mary in the reception and in the study of truth, beautifully described in the fifteenth Oxford University Sermon: the Church, as Mary:

pondering in her heart does not think it enough to accept the truth, she dwells upon it; not enough to submit to reason, she reasons upon it. Not indeed reasoning first, and believing afterwards, with Zacharias, yet first believing without reasoning, next from love and reverence reasoning after believing...

Thus she symbolizes to us not only the faith of the unlearned, but of the Doctors of the Church also: “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:51).

If the Church defines dogmatically the Mother of God’s privileged co-operation with the only Redeemer, in the work of atonement, as well as her mediation of intercession, Newman would help us with his writings and examples, still more by his own prayer, to perceive the foundations, the exact meaning, limits and finalities of such definitions without maximization but with a legitimate minimization, and we would find in his works materials to defend and promote these doctrines. Newman would tell us about these eventual Mariological definitions in the same way that he wrote about Papal infallibility before it was defined:

if the Church says anything about it, it will be so strictly worded, with such safeguards, conditions, limitations, as will add as little as possible to what is now held (Sep. 28, 1869).

In his 1849 discourses to mixed congregations, Newman concludes with these words:

In thee, O Mary, is fulfilled an original purpose of the Most High. He once had meant to come on earth in heavenly glory. But we sinned. And then He could not safely visit us, except with a shrouded

radiance and a bedimmed majesty, for He is God. So He came Himself in weakness, not in power. And He sent this creature in His stead, with a creature's comeliness and luster to suit our state.