

Mary, the Mother of the Lord, Coredemptrix and Christian Unity

By Rev. Francis P. Felice

The proposal that the Holy Father may declare Mary, Coredemptrix with Jesus has evoked many voices expressing concern. This is especially noticeable among those on both sides of the Tiber who are interested in furthering the Ecumenical impulse released by the Second Vatican Council.

The mildest, and most common, reaction is that such a declaration of Marian dogma would be “inopportune”: suggesting that damage would be done to the fragile ties that have been knitted with great effort during the last thirty years.

Far from being “inopportune”, such a declaration is precisely what the ecumenical movement needs at this time to bring it to completion.

To mute the voice of the Church on this issue is to buy into the idea, unconsciously, that the Church makes reality. This is a common error in the secular media who eagerly report petitions to declare such-and-such a “saint”; as if the status of sainthood is something that one achieves by a declaration of the Sovereign Pontiff in much the same way as one becomes a Knight of St. Gregory. It is also the error that feminists make in attacking the Pope for not allowing female priests; suggesting that another Pope may do so; this in spite of the fact that the Pope has declared that the Church does not have the power to ordain a woman.

This error is understandable since our culture believes that reality is subjective; that if I can wish hard enough I can make anything come true. Note how easily our leaders can pretend that there is no child in the womb of a pregnant women.

However the Church does not create reality, it is only the proclaimer of reality. The Church can only declare a person a “saint” if he is indeed among the blessed in heaven. Similarly, the proclamation of the Marian dogma of Coredemptrix would not make Mary Coredemptrix but only express a reality that already exists. Thus the question really is: is Mary of Nazareth indeed Coredemptrix with Jesus in the work of salvation?

To mute or equivocate on this point, if indeed she really has that status, would not only be wrong, but also be a disaster for the ecumenical movement since it would lead to an irenecism based on false premises.

Of course it is up to the Holy Father to interpret the Divine Realities for us, I would hold that she is indeed Coredemptrix with Christ, and that the theological reasons are so compelling that they would dispel the miasma that surrounds and impedes our efforts at union.

Mary’s sufferings at Calvary certainly were of a degree and level unmatched by any human. She has always been without sin and thus has none of the devices that we have developed to protect ourselves from serious pain. She was completely open in her love for Jesus and so she felt the pain of watching helplessly while her Son died a terrible death with an intensity we cannot equal. However, the intensity of her sufferings is not the fundamental reason why she can be called Coredemptrix.

The reason why is deeply imbedded in the reality of what the Church is. This foundational point is critical because a confusion of ecclesiologies is the major

intellectual impediment to the reunion of the fragments of Christianity. The definition of this dogma would give the Holy Father the occasion to explain to the world the Church's understanding of itself. This would remove the uncertainty in the hearts of our separated Brethren who are not sure exactly with what they are being asked to reunite!

The Holy Father would have the opportunity to explain the origin of the Church in the events that took place on Calvary (Jn 19) when in the mutual gift of his Mother and John to each other, Jesus constituted the Community that he had come to form. When he said "it is finished" immediately after that action (v. 24, and v. 28), he indicated that this was the completion of his mission: the formation of the community we call the Church.

Since Jesus is the reason for the creation itself, it becomes clear that the formation of the Church (to which he gave over his Spirit) is the purpose behind creation. Thus Paul spoke about the revelation of God's plan hidden throughout the ages now revealed: to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one, under Christ's headship (Eph 1).

Thus the Church, born from the side of the new Adam sleeping the sleep of death on the Cross and made up initially of the First Christian (Mary) and the first Minister to Christians (John), consists of those who share in the Holy Spirit released by the death of Jesus, and who partake of the sacramental gifts symbolized by the flow from his wounded side.

The Holy Spirit received in Baptism makes one a member of this Community which St. Paul conceives of as a spiritual unity analogous to that of a human body (e.g. Rom 12, 1 Cor 3, etc.). The events recorded in Acts 9 convinced him that Jesus really identifies himself with the Christian by reason of his gift of the Holy Spirit (Jn 20).

We, baptized, indeed share his Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16,17) but we also share his work in the salvation of souls ("As the Father has sent me, so I send you" – Jn 20:21-23). Thus Paul could say: "In my own flesh I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church" (Col 1:24).

What could be lacking in the sufferings of the God-man? Nothing except the application of the merits of Our Lord's Redemptive death the present existential moment. St. Paul applied the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross in union with his own minor sufferings to his time and place; and he knew he could do so because of the identification that Our Lord makes with the Baptized Christian.

Thus, in Jesus, Paul was called to be a co-redeemer. In fact, we, the baptized, are all called individually to be co-redeemers with Jesus. This is the essential meaning of the Church of Jesus Christ: those who share his Holy Spirit and his work as the Christ in the salvation of souls (Eph 1:17-23).

This is the truth "re-discovered" by St. Therese of Lisieux which won for her the title of Doctor in the Church. She realized and taught her very small sacrifices and weak prayers were efficacious for the salvation of others because they were united with the infinite merits of the Lord in the Church. She recognized the reality of the Mystical Body of Christ and what it means to be a member of that Body.

Mary is preeminently the Coredemptrix precisely because of her call to be the first Christian and thus the Mother of the Faithful. She should be proclaimed as such because it explains what it means to be a Christian; she is the model of the child of God we are called to be in our Baptism.

Protestants like to speak of Jesus as the "one mediator" and, of course, they are correct; but since the members of his Church are united in a profound way with him, we

make up the “fullness of Christ” (Eph 1) that works for the Redemption of all people at all time, not just for those who happened to be Calvary on Good Friday.

The time is ripe to bring the Christian desire for Unity to its fullness. The definition of Our Lady as Coredemptrix, explaining our common call to be co-redeemers, would provide the capstone of the bridge we need.

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