

An Unfathomable Marian Richness

By Michael O'Brien

In the storm of confusion and misinformation which has greeted the question of a papal definition of the dogma of Mary Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, and Advocate, St. Maximilian Kolbe's well known question regarding the Mother of God, "Who are you, O Immaculata?" takes on new poignancy and urgency.

Who is she? Who is she really, and what is God doing through this unique woman?

Mary is both Mary of Nazareth and "the Woman" of Revelation. But how can this be? Is she two persons? Alternatively, is she perhaps one person in two religious "costumes"? Is she only a model of fidelity, an exemplary disciple, a saint (albeit the greatest of saints)? Is she no more than a sign?

Yes, she is a sign. But much of the confusion about her in the modern mind derives from the peculiarly one-dimensional character of Western society, which has fractured the great harmony of the hierarchical cosmos so severely that the fault lines in our thinking and perceptions now run in all directions. In a word-saturated, image-bombarded culture, we have less and less time and capacity to see deeply, and as a result we increasingly have come to think of signs in simplistic terms. We assume that a sign is merely an object which tells us about, or points to, something else.

In the Christian understanding of the world, the fullest meaning of sacred signs is that they incarnate the things to which they point. In other words, a sacred sign participates intimately with the source of its life. Moreover, it reveals an aspect of that source which would not otherwise be intelligible to us. That is why, for example, the holy icons of the Eastern Catholic rites and the Orthodox churches are never considered to be merely catechetical instruments, religious art forms, or liturgical decoration. The theology of the icon holds that the icon is a "window" upon the infinite, a point of encounter with sacred presence, a place where grace can pour through. The physical aspect of the icon is never an end in itself, never worshiped; on the other hand, neither is it viewed as a neutral object, a "dead letter," a mere traffic sign on the highways and byways of the cosmos.

Consider the Holy Eucharist, the sacred encounter par excellence between God and man. There is in this sacrament a certain iconographic sign value; it "tells" us about many true things, such as the Last Supper, the Incarnation, the nature of communion and unity, etc. All of this is vitally important, but it is the first level of meaning. Going deeper, we see that Jesus is literally present in a continuation of the sacrifice of Calvary which involves the worshipper in the timelessness of God. Deeper still, the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ enters our own flesh and takes up residence there in the interior tabernacle of the heart. At this level, the "sign" of the sacrament is not just a transfer of religious information or a stirring of memories and insights. This sign is a person who is present to us, desiring a union that is referred to throughout Scripture in the terms of conjugal love. Most shocking of all, this person is God.

If God has deemed it right and good for us to live in a universe ordered along such lines, if He reveals himself as unspeakably generous, rich, and creative, if He is a

lover, then it is perfectly consistent that He would flood the world with a plenitude of life-giving signs of His love.

Several years ago I found myself in an informal discussion with some no-Catholic friends who, try as they might, simply could not understand the Catholic position on Mary. As a Catholic I had given total assent to the Church's doctrines and dogma regarding the Mother of God. Even so, I did not pretend to fully understand these teachings, and was hard-pressed to convince my listeners. They had particular difficulty with the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, and saw in it clear evidence that despite all our protests to the contrary, Catholics do indeed adore Mary. Nothing I said could dislodge them from this conviction.

At the time I had not yet come across Saint Augustine's famous dictum, "We do not first understand in order to believe; we must first believe in order to understand." I was still laboring under the impression that the human could not fail to be convinced if matters were properly explained. I had not yet come to the realization that human beings on the whole are largely subjective creatures and that we make our judgements about practically everything on the basis of impressions – on our fundamental perception of how creation works.

Feeling somewhat perplexed, I decided to go for a solitary jog along a sandy beach. Running barefoot, my mind still engaged in the debate, eyes staring at the horizon without seeing, I was oblivious to the passing scenery. After about 20 minutes of jogging I suddenly, for no apparent reason, stopped mid-stride and looked down at the sand beneath my feet. To my horror, I saw that my right foot was poised in the air above the jagged glass spears of a broken bottle. I stepped back quickly, breathing a prayer of thanks, for a split second later I would have been coping with spurting blood and cut tendons, miles from any help.

Feeling grateful, but realizing that the hour was growing late, I circled around the bottle and turned for home at a clip. A minute or so later it struck me full-force that I had left the dangerous object sitting there in the sand, and that the next barefoot jogger might not be as blessed as I had been. I stopped, returned, gingerly picked up the glass, and carried it home for disposal.

I did not immediately analyze what had happened, and attached little significance to it. Curiously, the memory stayed in my mind, playing and replaying itself during the ensuing hours with a haunting sense of urgency, as if there was something about the experience that I was missing. Later that night I sat up in bed, suddenly wide awake, and realized that the incident with the bottle was kind of dramatic enactment of the Immaculate Conception. Something beyond my comprehension and senses had alerted me to a serious danger to life and limb, something so silent I had not given it a thought until the very moment when understanding broke through the mass of impressions which made up that ordinary day. Odorless, tasteless and soundless, it had saved me a great deal of agony. It had been one step ahead of me and preserved me. And something had also moved me to perform the same service for the joggers who would follow. I didn't have to do it, but I did it. What had moved me to do it? Was this not a pale reflection of the mercy of God who had gone ahead of history and preserved Mary from original sin? As a daughter of Adam and Eve, she too was in need of Christ's redemption. The Father, who is outside of time and Lord of History, chose to apply to her the merits of the Sacrifice of the Son. The Immaculate Conception prepared the way for her to be the

perfect cooperators with the Son in the Redemption: the Coredemptrix. He didn't have to do it, but He did it. Why did he do it?

Of course the analogy is imperfect, and I tell it not for the purposes of illustrating a doctrine. The point I would like to get at here is this: because we live in an incarnational universe, God speaks to the whole man, not just to his intellect or his spirit, but also through the very material of his mortality. Most often He teaches and forms us through the tangible events of life, through experiences that are latent with meaning. As we mature in the lifelong ingathering of images and words, a gradual picture of reality itself begins to emerge. The dialogue between reason and the subjectivity within our nature is more and more measured by the objective teachings of the Church, and thus our perception grows.

Only with the eyes of faith can we come to see the "whole truth about man." If the little stories written in our flesh and personal histories are informative, is it not probable that God would enact a very great and informative drama in the life of the Mother as well as her Son? Could it be that He is telling us something fundamental through her, not just as a signpost or icon, but as an epiphany of his Being?

By far the most dominant aspect of our experience as human beings is composed of our relations with others; the image of a mother, for instance, as she gazes into the face of her newborn child. The image of the child as he gazes back at her. Each is reading the face of reality, each is reading a word, a sign, a presence.

In the case of Mary and Christ Child, the mother is the first person in human history to gaze into the eyes of God, as she ponders the unfathomable mystery of His choice to be utterly dependent in her arms. Her face is the first image seen by the newborn incarnate God. The Son in his humanity drinks in the word of love and truth in her face. Each is pondering a mystery; each speaking and hearing the language of love in words that are soundless.

If God has chosen this woman to be conceived without sin, to bear the Word Incarnate in her own flesh, to nurture him in the hidden life of Nazareth, to be present with him at the Cross, to be present at Pentecost, to be assumed into Heaven, is it so unthinkable that He might give her a role that goes beyond, even very far beyond, the ability of human reason to grasp His purpose? Is not all of her life a sign of contradiction, a reversal of the ordinary categories of thought? What then are we to make of her? What is God's purpose in this woman? What is He telling us through her?

Because Christ is the new Adam, reversing the sin of Adam, it is very much in the nature of God to pour forth his scandalously lavish generosity in the choosing of a woman to represent a new Eve. It goes without saying that her role in the reversal of Eve's sin derives entirely from the sacrifice of the Son. By no merits of her own is she the first beneficiary in redemption; by suffering with the Son she is, though in a subsidiary sense, the Co-redemptrix. God could have chosen to reserve the victory over sin and death entirely to himself but He chose to share it with the woman and her children, the "offspring" of Revelation 12:17, where the promise made in Genesis 3:15 and incarnated in the Gospels comes to fruition at the definitive climax of human history.

John writes in Revelation: "And a great sign appeared in the heavens, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and she cried out in her birthpangs, in anguish for delivery... And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear the child, that he might

devour the child when she brought it forth. She brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days... Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.” (Rev. 12:1-17)

Modernist biblical critics have tended to limit this passage as a depiction of the Flight into Egypt or a symbolic portrait of the first-century Church undergoing persecution. In doing so, they attempt to reduce the multidimensionality of sacred scripture (and the mind of God) to a kind of spiritual flatland in which salvation is seen as a purely historical dynamic, a linear process, a chain of natural causality, which by inference is best understood (according to their thinking) in sociological, anthropological and psychological terms. Only the first level of the meaning of signs is accredited with significance, diminishing, where it does not reject altogether, the vital role of the “type,” and at the same time inhibiting the future unveiling of the fullest significance of Saint John’s vision.

In other words, many a biblical exegete will admit the historical event (the Flight into Egypt or the persecution of the Church), but ignore the dimension of the living symbol, the “type” or arch-icon (Mary as the New Eve, Mary as Mother of the Church), thereby operating on the presumption that the scripture passage can mean either one thing or the other but not both, and surely not a third dimension! Yet it is precisely this third level of spiritual consciousness to which the other levels of the sign are leading. It is this understanding of sacred scripture which imbued the thinking of the Church Fathers. The Fathers, to put it simply, had depth perception.

Whatever the meaning of divine interaction with the human is compacted into, and neutralized by, one-dimensional templates, the identity and the evangelical mission of the Church is gravely weakened. When this happens, as it has in many particular churches in the West, so dominated by materialism and pragmatism, vital resources are in danger of being choked off, and even come perilously close to being banished from the life of the Church. In a “democratic” cosmos, befogged with an atmosphere of conflict resolution and negotiation, grown insensible to the mystery and majesty of the hierarchical cosmos, the Church’s prophetic voice will be relegated to just one opinion among many, at best a philosophy of man or an interesting mythology. If this tragically stunted reading of creation should ever work out its logical politics – the politics of manipulation and manipulation of politics – and most ominously, “ecclesial politics.” Its first targets will be those doctrines which stand as signs of contradiction to the natural mind.

John Paul II writes in *Sign of Contradiction*: “And so in the vast panorama of the times in which we live, in the age to which we belong. Simeon’s prophecy of Jesus Christ as a ‘sign of contradiction’ seems to ring resoundingly true. We know that immediately after speaking those words Simeon turned to Mary, in a way linking the prophecy about the Son with the one about the Mother: ‘And a sword will pierce your soul, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be laid bare.’ With the old man’s words in mind we too turn our gaze from the Son to the Mother, from Jesus to Mary. The mystery of this bond which unites her with Christ, the Christ who is ‘a sign of contradiction,’ is truly amazing.” (Karol Wojtyla, *Sign of Contradiction*, p.201. Seabury Press, 1979).

United to the Son in the work of redemption, Mary participates uniquely and simultaneously as the daughter of the Father and the daughter of man. In her, He shows us what we were intended to be “from the beginning,” and what we are to become in Christ.

John Paul II points out that “Mary is part of salvation history from the beginning, and she will remain part of it until the end... The ‘woman’ in Revelation represents both Mary and the Church – as is agreed by biblical scholars, theologians, and above all Christian tradition and the Church’s magisterium.” Furthermore, “within the dimensions of the universe the Son of God, the eternal Word, the Lord of all the ages to come is her Son and she his mother. Therefore all that goes to make up what he bequeathed – the work of salvation, the Mystical Body of Christ, the People of God, the Church – is taken care of, and always will be taken care of, by her.” (*Sign of Contradiction*, p. 205).

When Satan makes war upon the woman of Revelation, the Son is taken up into Heaven and the woman remains to face the serpent in the desert of the world, accompanied by her spiritual children, strengthened by all the graces poured out by Heaven (Rev 12:11). It is in this context that the question of the solemn papal definition of the dogma of Mary Coredemptrix, Mediatrix and Advocate becomes more understandable. In the definitive struggle between the Church and the anti-Church, between the Gospel and the anti-Gospel, the Church needs unique graces. Yet God will never force these graces upon us. In the great dialogue between God and Man, Mary pleads before the throne of God for these graces, and at the same time she pleads with us to accept them. Everything waits upon the freedom of man’s choice. The release of particular graces depends upon our assent. By proclaiming the dogma formally, the Pope would go with Mary before the throne of God and give that assent in the name of mankind, asking Him to release to us, through her, the singular graces which the Father desires to give. In this dialogue we see the most intimate communion of the heart of the creature speaking to the heart of the Father —*cor ad cor*.

Michael O’Brian is a Canadian author, artist, and international lecturer on Christian art and culture. He is author of the best-selling novel, Father Elijah: An Apocalypse.