

# A New Marian Dogma: Fully Marian and Fully Ecumenical<sup>1</sup>

By Mr. Thomas Xavier

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Man can hardly be defined, after the fashion of Carlyle, as an animal who makes tools; ants and beavers and many other animals make tools, in the sense that they make an apparatus. Man can be defined as an animal that makes dogmas. As he piles doctrine on doctrine and conclusion on conclusion in the formation of some tremendous scheme of philosophy and religion, he is, in the only legitimate sense of which the expression is capable, becoming more and more human. When he drops one doctrine after another in a refined scepticism, when he declines to tie himself to a system, when he says that he has outgrown definitions, when he says that he disbelieves in finality, when, in his own imagination, he sits as God, holding no form of creed but contemplating all, then

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he is by that very process sinking slowly backwards into the vagueness of the vagrant animals and the unconsciousness of the grass. Trees have no dogmas. Turnips are singularly broad-minded.

— G.K. Chesterton, **Heretics**.

First there was the definition of Mary as Mother of God in 431. Then came the final proclamation of her Perpetual Virginity at the Third Council of Constantinople in 681. And then, over a thousand years later, the Church defined her Immaculate Conception followed nearly a hundred years later by the definition of her Assumption into Heaven. Now, as we head into the next millennium, we learn that close to 500 bishops, 40 cardinals and multiple millions of the faithful around the world – following in the footsteps of Cardinal Mercier, St. Maximilian Kolbe and countless others throughout this century – have petitioned the Holy Father to define as dogma the triad doctrine that Mary is Coredemptrix, Mediatrix of all Graces and Advocate for the People of God. The publication of *Mary: Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, Advocate: Theological Foundations II: Papal, Pneumatological, Ecumenical*, edited by Dr. Mark Miravalle, Professor of Mariology at the Franciscan University of Steubenville and President of *Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrix*, reminds us, like its predecessor volume, that distinguished theologians from different denominations find this doctrine to be deeply rooted in Scripture, patristics, soteriology, pneumatology, personalistic philosophy and magisterial teaching.

A major contribution of *Theological Foundations II* is its groundbreaking and comprehensive analysis of the dogma in the context of the development of doctrine and particularly with respect to the ecumenical effort. The cogently argued conclusion of the contributors is that a dogmatic definition of Marian mediation is not only demanded by the inherent dynamic of the development of doctrine but is ecumenically invaluable because it brings us to the typology of the earliest Church Fathers (see, for instance, the superb essay by Fr. Peter Damian Fehlner) who are revered by all Christians, thus giving us a new but common starting-point in the quest for unity.

At first glimpse the request for the definition of another Marian dogma may seem not just unecumenical but – worse still – anachronistic. In this century of Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Sigmund Freud, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, the mere idea of a new Marian dogma seems almost as fantastic as a debate on the relation between angelic activity and the movement of the spheres. But this century of brilliant freethinkers is also the century of Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Mao Tse-Tung and the

genocidal bloodbaths of Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda. And if there is one thing in common between the philosophies of the free-thinkers and the ideologies of the mass-murderers it is the dogma of determinism, the idea that the thoughts and words and acts of human beings are determined entirely by forces external to them. In other words, the free-thinkers do not believe in freedom.

Against this backdrop, the call for a definition of Mary's unique participation as a free agent in the divinely conducted symphony of salvation is an affirmation of the greatest relevance: it signifies that human beings have the capacity for free actions, that they are responsible for their actions, that the consequences of their actions have a bearing on both their own eternal destiny and the lives of others. In freedom and responsibility lies our dignity.

Sadly, determinism is not restricted to philosophies and ideologies but has established itself in influential systems of theology – most clearly in the theology of Calvinism. A renowned Anglican contributor to *Theological Foundations II*, the philosopher-theologian John Macquarrie, gives a remarkable analysis of the relevance of the doctrine of Mary's coredemption in “correcting” the dangers of determinism in theology:

[Calvinist patterns of thought as embodied not just in Calvin but in Luther and Karl Barth treat] human beings like sheep or cattle or even marionettes, not as the unique beings that they are, spiritual beings made in the image of God and entrusted with a measure of freedom and responsibility. ... Human beings, on such a view, have no freedom and no responsibility ... [The] hopeful view of the human race is personified and enshrined in Mary... In the glimpses of Mary that we have in the gospels, her standing at the cross beside her Son, and her prayers and intercessions with the apostles, are particularly striking ways in which Mary shared and supported the work of Christ – and even these are ways in which the Church as a whole can have a share in coredemption. But it is Mary who has come to symbolize that perfect harmony between the divine will and the human response, so that it is she who gives meaning to the expression Coredemptrix.

We are coredeemers and mediators all! To deny this is to implicitly assume we are puppets or worse still “part of God” (since we are

incapable of independent action). Not all Protestants are Calvinists, of course, and the Methodists and Pentecostal groups in particular have rejected the deterministic impulse. Here we see how a definition of Marian mediation can make a positive contribution to an inescapable ecumenical dilemma.

### ***Development of Doctrine in the Teaching of Paul VI and John Paul II***

Strictly speaking, ecumenism and development of doctrine are two entirely distinct realms of thought and action. Whereas ecumenism seeks to bring about unity of doctrine and fellowship among “separated” Christian communities, development of doctrine concerns the ongoing process of understanding and articulating further implications of the Christian revelation. At its zenith, development of doctrine culminates in definitions of dogma either by popes or papally “certified” councils.

Fortunately, in John Paul II, the Catholic Church has a leader who is as concerned with the ecumenical vision as he is with explicating the traditional faith in the context of new knowledge.

On the latter we have only to review the Catechism of the Catholic Church and his vast treasury of encyclicals. On the former, we are touched to note how in *Ut Unum Sint*, he talks of exercising his teaching office as a ministry of love to all Christian peoples.

It is not often realized that the three longest-reigning popes of the last fifty years, Pius XII, Paul VI, John Paul II, have made pioneering contributions to the development of doctrine. Everyone knows that Pius XII’s definition of the Assumption represented a major new milestone. We forget, however, that Paul VI’s proclamation of Mary as Mother of the Church was a breakthrough which he brought about in his capacity as Pope.

We read in *Mary and the Churches*, an anthology of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, that in bestowing the title *Mater Ecclesiae* “the Pope took an affirmation of tradition a step further, with the help of a vocabulary that had come into use only in recent times.” Although the title had only been implicitly included in Lumen Gentium VIII, “because so many fathers from various parts of the Catholic world had pressed him for an explicit declaration of ‘the motherly role of the Virgin among the Christian people’, and because it seemed so fitting, the Pope decided to proclaim Mary *Mater Ecclesiae* ‘for the glory of the Virgin and for our own consolation.’ ”

The actual proclamation took place on the last day of the third session of the Council in 1964:

The day had begun in dark humor, as the Pope came into St. Peter's to concelebrate a last solemn Mass with twenty-four fathers from sees with national shrines in honor of the Blessed Virgin. The mood had changed; Pope Paul was interrupted seven times during his last address, applause increasing throughout. A standing ovation greeted the announcement of the title *Mater Ecclesiae*, signaling the assent of the Council fathers – but not all of them, for some voiced their criticism of the Pope's independent action later when they had returned home. Cardinal Bea of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, pointing out that the issue had never been put to a plenary vote, asked: "By what right then can one pretend to know something about the presumed majority opinion of the Council?"

Paul VI was perfectly correct, and in no way overriding, in the sequence of his actions – a twofold exercise of his own supreme authority, and that of the Church. He first conformed himself to his College of Bishops by promulgating the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which included the new Marian title in an "equivalent" manner. Afterwards, the first action completed, the Pope then invoked his own personal authority to state explicitly what he and the College had just stated implicitly or "equivalently." Thus it is that a Pope may guide a Council, rather than surrender to it.

The proposed new dogma of maternal mediation is simply a logical culmination of Paul VI's authoritative development of doctrine. As we see in *Theological Foundations II*, the doctrine of Mary's spiritual maternity theologically presupposes her roles of coredeemption and mediation. And, as the anthology notes, the usage of the term "Coredeptrix" is especially distinctive in the teachings of John Paul II (although it is present in those of other popes as well). Fr. Arthur Calkins paper on "Pope John Paul II's Teaching on Marian Coredeemption" is a prolific evaluation of the pontiff's thought in this area.

### *Misconceptions*

The charge that "Coredeptrix" is not present in the tradition fails on two counts. First, the doctrine of "Coredeptrix" is found in the first Church Fathers with their doctrine of the New Eve. And by using

this term in a dogmatic definition, the Holy Father would only (as with Paul VI above) be taking “an affirmation of tradition a step further, with the help of a vocabulary that had come into use only in recent times.” Moreover, the terms “Theotokos” and “Trinity” are both instances of new “vocabulary” enlisted in the service of articulating ancient concepts.

The objection that the granting of dogmatic status to the term “Coredemptrix” would cause irreparable ecumenical harm is again misplaced. “Coredemptrix” is nowhere near as potentially misleading as the phrase “Mother of God.” And, despite its potential for misinterpretation, this latter term is an indispensable vehicle in understanding the Incarnation – and was judged worthy of dogmatic definition by an Ecumenical Council.

The term “Coredemptrix” may be shocking to some – but the shock value should serve to bring them back to the teachings of the Fathers. Of course, as Miravalle (and Anglicans like Macquarrie and E.L. Mascall) have said, “In addressing Mary as ‘Coredemptrix’ we must be clear that the prefix ‘co’ does not mean equal, but comes from the Latin word, ‘cum’, which means ‘with.’ The title of Coredemptrix applied to the Mother of Jesus never places Mary on a level of equality with Jesus Christ, the divine Lord of all, in the saving process of humanity’s redemption.” It is the idea of “Jesus alone” in point of fact that is relatively recent and novel – and that often ends up in the eclipse of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus (take for example the Jehovah’s Witnesses). In Scripture we have the recurrent theme of Virgin and Son and in the Fathers the theme of the New Adam and the New Eve. The need to return to these ancient truths to preserve the ancient Faith is argument enough for a definition.

It is often said that the title “Coredemptrix” would somehow diminish our awareness of the all-sufficiency of Christ’s redemptive act. The contributions of both Miravalle and Fr. Fehlner show with great clarity that a dogma of Marian coredemption will “clearly distinguish the secondary and subordinate coredemptive role of Mary from the unique redemptive triumph of the Savior.” Besides, it is not often realized that there is no defined dogma of the Atonement. While the Church teaches that the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ offer infinite satisfaction to God for human sin, there is no defined teaching on the exact mechanism of atonement. Is it penal or substitutionary or is it simply an act of love and obedience? Today, many Christian syncretists have even lost all sense of a universal redemptive value in the Passion and Death of Our Lord. A dogma of Marian Coredemption would certainly bring back to the forefront the non-negotiable reality of “the unique redemptive triumph of the Savior”

just as the definition of Mary's divine maternity was a clear affirmation of her Son's divinity.

As for the terms "Mediatrix" and "Advocate," these simply express truths presupposed by every Christian who has prayed the Rosary and by every act of Marian devotion. From the third century prayer *Sub Tuum Praesidium* ("We fly to thy patronage...") to the ancient Marian hymns of Eastern and Western Christianity, the fact of Marian mediation has been assumed by Christians from the earliest times. Misconceptions about Marian mediation (and there are many) are rigorously analyzed by Miravalle who shows that this whole concept is validly rooted in a "unique sharing in the one mediation of Jesus Christ."

Fears of Eastern Orthodox resistance to a papal proclamation of Marian mediation must be tempered by an awareness that the Seven Ecumenical Councils accepted by the Eastern Orthodox all presupposed Marian mediation. As Miravalle has shown, the greatest Marian sermon of antiquity was a paean to Marian mediation delivered by St. Cyril of Alexandria at the ecumenical Council of Ephesus: "Hail Mary Theotokos, venerable treasure of the whole world ... it is you through whom the Holy Trinity is glorified and adored." So there is indeed a conciliar basis to the new Marian dogma. A great Orthodox theologian of this century, Evdokimov, pointed out that "The Holy Spirit has no place of incarnation but he possesses in Mary the unique and altogether distinctive temple of his presence." Another modern Orthodox thinker (quoted in the anthology), Sergius Bulgakov, even said, "A faith in Christ which does not include his virgin birth and the veneration of his Mother is another faith, another Christianity from that of the Orthodox Church." By acknowledging the great Eastern tradition of Marian mediation (to which the West owes a great debt), a dogmatic definition could well be a major step toward the union of East and West. And, as he reiterates, in *Ut Unum Sint*, John Paul II's desire remains that "the Church must breathe with her two lungs!"

Unlike all previous dogmas in Christian history, a dogma on Marian mediation is not just a truth for contemplation but a principle of action. In defining Mary's coredemptive and mediatory role, we are reminded, in the face of popular philosophies and theologies of determinism and fatalism, of St. Paul's teaching of our responsibility to be coredeemers and mediators. This is a dogma that calls forth direct and immediate pastoral application. Moreover, notes Miravalle, "The example of Mary Coredemptrix tells the Church and the world that 'suffering is redemptive.'"

## *Fully Marian and Fully Ecumenical*

If he defines Mary as Coredemptrix, Mediatrix and Advocate, the most ecumenical pope in history, who is also one of the greatest teachers of Christian doctrine the world has ever seen, will bring about an intersection of ecumenism and development of doctrine that will set the theological agenda for the next millennium.

A dogmatic definition would bring to completion the doctrinal development begun by both Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council. In its Mariological declarations, the Council made a significant contribution in two areas: with their emphasis on Scripture, these declarations have provided a sound scriptural basis for Marian doctrine; secondly, with their concern for allaying Protestant misconceptions, these declarations have successfully explained Marian doctrine in terms that are theologically acceptable for most non-Fundamentalist Protestants. It is safe to say that today, thanks to Vatican II, there has been a greater acceptance of Mary's role in Scripture and the theological necessity of Marian doctrine among Protestant scholars and laity. Now that we have substantially achieved the Vatican II objective of making Marian doctrine accessible to our "separated brethren" it is possible to concentrate on the other major Marian objective of Vatican II: to foster Marian doctrinal development (*Lumen Gentium*, n.54). It is in the context of this second objective that the proclamation of the new Marian dogma is of such importance. Clearly doctrinal development in the area of Mary's person (Immaculate Conception, Perpetual Virginity, Divine Maternity, Assumption) is now complete. The one remaining area requiring development (as *Lumen Gentium* notes) is Marian mediation. This is the area addressed by the proposed dogma. In sum, the proclamation of this dogma brings to a climax the great ecumenical and Marian vision of Vatican II. And who is better suited to make such a proclamation than the great prophet and theologian of Mary's maternal mediation, John Paul II?

Miravalle explains in moving terms that the enduring significance of the teaching and ministry of John Paul II is especially apparent as we approach this rendezvous of ecumenism and the development of doctrine:

What better pontiff [to make this definition] than the present Pope who has opened the doors of the Church to all peoples and religions, who has spearheaded the ecumenical mission for the last eighteen years? Who better to oversee and determine the final formulation of the whole truth about Mary, a formulation both

fully Marian and fully ecumenical? As the *Totus Tuus* Pope and the most accepted ecclesial figure worldwide, John Paul possesses the ecumenical sensitivity to guide and direct the theological process which would grant the Church the most articulate, biblically based, personalist, ecumenically sensitive dogmatic proclamation with the greatest possible palatability for all Christians concerning the Woman of the Redemptive Incarnation, who is also (cf. *Redemptoris Mater*) “our common Mother.”