

## **4. ANY STIGMA TO BEAT A DOGMA: A RESPONSE TO COMMON CRITIQUES OF THE PROPOSED DEFINITION**

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The recent flurry of articles in *L'Osservatore Romano* on the proposed dogmatic definition of Marian coredemption and mediation highlights on fact above all: that, as has historically been the case, definitions of Marian dogma tend to incite intense opposition both within and outside the Church.

Critics of the proposed definition will claim that they are simply trying to protect the Blessed Virgin from her friends since excessive honors are misleading and hence counter-productive for Marian devotion as a whole. Proponents of the definition will cite the substantive theological opus undergirding their campaign and may also point to the Magnificat as evidence that victory belongs to the lowly, the voice of the faithful (and not to the powerful and the sophisticated); some might even go so far as to claim that opposition to all things Marian is inevitable given Revelation 12 with its account of the Serpent in hot pursuit of the Woman through history.

On the second count, the freewill-determinism debate, it can be plausibly argued that a dogmatic definition of Marian coredemption would be a remarkable and utterly unexpected resolution of the debate that is both urgently needed and vitally relevant to everyday life. In defining Mary as Coredemptrix, we affirm, on the one hand, that human freedom is a reality even in the context of divine omnipotence and paradoxically, at another level, that submission to the divine will is the truest and most optimal expression of our freedom. To totally surrender our freedom to God is to be totally free. And Scripture unmistakably calls us not only to thus surrender ourselves but even adds that the suffering we offer up in this fashion is redemptive in nature thereby pointing to our vocations as “coredeemers”: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church” (Col. 1:24). “We are God’s co-workers” (L Cor. 3:9). The Christian Church has always seen in her who proclaimed “May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38) the paradigm of total submission to the divine will by a human person. From the Pauline frame of reference, she of whom it was prophesied “you yourself a sword will pierce” (Luke 2:35) is the coredeemer par excellence, the Coredemptrix. “As a witness to her Son’s passion by her presence, and as a sharer in it by her compassion, Mary offered a unique contribution to the Gospel of suffering, by embodying in anticipation the expression of St. Paul,” wrote John Paul II in *Salvific Doloris*, “She truly has a special title to be able to claim that ‘she completes in her flesh’ - as already in her heart - ‘what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.’”

At every instant of our lives we confront the mystery of freedom, the challenge of choosing to do right, the paradox of dying that we might live. In the icon and metaphor of Mary Coredeematrix we receive the hope, the courage, the serenity to accept freedom and to exercise it responsibly and thus ultimately to remain true to our vocations as coredeemers.

But before delving any further into the universal dimension of Marian coredeemption, we must consider some of the concerns evoked by the proposal for a definition in the context of the territory that lies between proposals and actual definitions.

### **Any Stigma to Beat a Dogma**

The definition of Marian dogmas has never been a smooth and easy process. Take Ephesus. The proclamation of the dogma of Mary's Divine Maternity - so critical for understanding the true divinity and humanity of her Son - came after decades of heated debate and resulted in a significant group of dissenters leaving the Church.

Again, the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception took place only after centuries of debate - and this despite the fact that some of the greatest minds of the Church, most notably St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bernard of Clairvaux, argued against its theological validity (admittedly these arguments were later overcome by the genius of Blessed John Duns Scotus).

Between 1627 and 1644, the Roman Inquisition, controlled by opponents of the doctrine, forbade usage of the phrase "Immaculate Conception." Although favorably inclined, Pope Gregory XVI (1831-46) could not define the dogma due to opposition from Catholics in Germany, France and England. When his successor Pius IX finally proclaimed the dogma, he did so in the face of opposition from the Archbishop of Paris (and other bishops) who stated that the dogma was neither definable nor opportune.

In response to the solemn definition of the Immaculate Conception, the Lutheran king of Prussia, Frederick William IV, sought to organize an international protest. Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed theologians and leaders immediately condemned the proclamation.

The dogmatic definition of the Assumption was also met with ecclesial testing and external opposition. A petition for defining the Assumption introduced at the First Vatican Council was rejected. When Pius XII defined the dogma in 1950, he was greeted with angry denunciations from Anglicans, Lutherans, various other Protestants and even the Eastern Orthodox who has always held to the doctrine.

In substance, however, these three dogmas (along with the dogma of Perpetual Virginity defined despite the influential objections of Helvidius, Tertullian, and others) are simply prolegomena preceding the actual story. They are pieces of a puzzle that make sense only in the context of a chain of events that call for a climax.

Prior to the definition of any of the dogmas, the Fathers had already established Mary as the New Eve and Christians everywhere had already begun to invoke her mediation on their behalf. Marian coredemption and mediation were presupposed, accepted and celebrated in the ancient Christianity of both East and West. The first four dogmas tell us that Christians think that Mary is a special person - a fifth dogma on Maternal Mediation, however, will show us why she is so special in the context of the salvific scheme and what difference this makes to us. The first four dogmas are premises that contain in themselves as conclusion this fifth dogma.

But it is one thing to point to the logical and theological coherence and cogency of another Marian dogma. The actual definition of this particular dogma is another matter altogether and is likely to be more daunting than any of its predecessors.

### **The Commission**

In the context of both the history of the other dogmas and the thought-climate of the present day, the June 4, 1997 negative verdict on the definition of Marian coredemption by a theological commission of the Pontifical International Marian Academy could almost have been predicted. Theological commissions as such, of course, do not have any magisterial or canonical authority in determining the desirability of a definition: for instance, the verdict of the theological commission appointed by the Holy See to study the question of artificial birth control was overruled by Paul VI when he issued *Humanae Vitae*; more recently, the Holy See rejected the recommendation on family limitation of a committee of the Pontifical Academy of Science. The conclusions of the theological commission, then, have to be judged entirely on their own merits as arguments.

The commission recommended that Marian coredemption and mediation not be defined for six main reasons:

1. The titles are ambiguous as they can be understood in different ways.
2. The Church should not change the theological direction chosen by the Second Vatican Council which has decided against defining these titles.
3. Since the time of Pius XII the term “Coredemptrix” has not been used by the papal magisterium in its significant documents.
4. Prior requests for the formal definition of Marian mediation were rejected after studies by the Holy See.
5. Moreover, the proposed titles lack theological clarity and the doctrines inherent in them require further study in a renewed Trinitarian, ecclesiological and anthropological perspective.
6. Finally, ecumenical difficulties would be involved in such a definition.

Two commentaries on the statement in *L'Osservatore Romano*, published in the July issue of *Inside the Vatican*, produced three more reasons for rejecting a definition:

7. “In the case of the mediation of Mary, with respect to many of its aspects one finds oneself before a *questio disputata*, far from that substantial theological unanimity

which, in relation to every doctrinal question, is the necessary prelude for proceeding to a dogmatic definition.”

8. The term “Coredemptrix” is only found “in papal writings which are marginal and therefore devoid of doctrinal weight.”

9. “The conciliar option was essentially determined by the correct decision ‘to place at the centre’ of the treatment, without any shadow of equivocation, the axiological and soteriological primacy of that *unus Mediator* attested to in explicit terms by 1 Tim 2:5.”

Two things can be said at the outset about these opening objections in the renewed opposition to the definition. First, none of the other Marian dogmas could have been defined if the presuppositions of these nine critiques were valid and, second, the best arguments for a definition are contained in the two critical commentaries themselves.

Turning to the critiques, we note that an “ambiguity” objection was (and still is) used as an argument against the title Mother of God - despite the ambiguity, however, the title was chosen because the truth it contained was both vital and urgent. In addition, distinguished theologians like Jean Galot, who has himself written in favor of the title “Coredemptrix” in *L'Osservatore Romano*, have denied the charge that the proposed titles are ambiguous: whereas the title “redemptrix” (used in the sense of “mother of the Redeemer”) might have been ambiguous, “coredemptrix” is not so because it is expressive of subordinate cooperation. Moreover, all Christians are coredeemers but the term has an added significance in Mary’s case because of her unique role in giving as Mother a Saviour to the world and then associating herself in His sacrifice. The author of one of the commentaries prefers the title “Cooperatrix in redemption” but this is conceptually no different from “Coredemptrix”: the only difference is linguistic. It might be said in addition that the only way to avoid ambiguity is in fact to use the title “Coredemptrix”: no other term contains both the essential truths of our vocation as coredeemers and the unique role of the Mother of God. The Christian mind is familiar enough with the devotional distinctions of *dulia*, *hyperdulia* and *latria* to recognize a parallel order of redemptive distinctions embodied in Redeemer, Coredemptrix, and coredeemer. As for Mediatrix and Advocate, both titles are used in *Lumen Gentium* with appropriate qualifications to dispel possible ambiguities.

Regarding objection n. 2, whether the proposed definition would change the theological direction of the Second Vatican Council is a matter of interpretation, but the argument that the particular direction of a Council places a blanket ban on future development of doctrine is historically inaccurate. The Council of Trent chose not to define the disputed doctrine of Mary’s Immaculate Conception (although it left the theological door open to a later proclamation) and the First Vatican Council expressly refused to define the Assumption. But these actions of the Councils did not deter popes of later years from proclaiming the two dogmas. In the case of the proposed definition, it could well be argued that Paul VI’s unprecedented proclamation of Mary as *Mater Ecclesia* actually set the theological direction for future development of doctrine and the dogmatic definition of Mary’s maternal mediation is therefore the ultimate destination of this train of thought. Moreover, the Council expressly stated that “This sacred...does not, however, intend to present a ‘complete doctrine on Mary’” (*Lumen Gentium*, n.54).

Another objection: “Coredemptrix” is not found in the official documents of the magisterium, only in peripheral papal writings. If this objection is a valid argument then *Mater Ecclesia* could not have been given normative status. The Vatican II Fathers did not use this title in *Lumen Gentium* because “it lacked attestation in Tradition.” But Paul VI went ahead with his proclamation of *Mater Ecclesia* because, as Fr. Gerard Philips (one of the drafters of the Marian chapter of *Lumen Gentium*) put it, “the Pope took [the] affirmation [of *Lumen Gentium*] a step further, with the help of a vocabulary that had come into use only in recent times.” The concept of coredemption is embodied in the ancient doctrine of the New Eve and is especially prominent in the papal writings of the last 100 years. Terms such as Trinity and Theotokos were novel when they were defined but expressed beliefs that were ancient. The present pontiff has in fact expressly used the term “coredemptrix” at least six times. The contention that these “papal writings are marginal and therefore devoid of doctrinal weight” is at best an arbitrary (if not audacious) interpretation. Making distinctions in levels of papal authoritative teachings, yes; weekly general audiences and official papal addresses categorically dismissed as “marginal” and “devoid of doctrinal weight,” no!

The objection “prior requests being rejected” is true enough, but true initially also of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Unlike older petitions on Marian mediation, however, the new proposal for a definition carries with it the authoritative corpus of 20th century papal teaching on Mary’s maternal mediation, also highlighted by the Paul VI title, “*Mater Ecclesia*” (Mother of the Church), the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 58-62, and raised to a new level of clarity in the magisterium of John Paul II. One cannot ignore either the petitions for a definition from 500 bishops (including 40 cardinals) and over four million of the faithful, as well as the substantial body of theological development found in *Mary, Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, advocate, Theological Foundations I and II*, as edited by Franciscan University of Steubenville Professor and *Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici* International President, Dr. Mark Miravalle.

The further charge that Marian mediation lacks the “substantial theological unanimity which, in relation to every doctrinal question, is the necessary prelude for proceeding to a dogmatic definition” is most surprising as this criterion would have eliminated both the Immaculate Conception (denied even by St. Thomas, the Prince of Theologians) and the Assumption - not to speak of *Mater Ecclesia*. The so-called contemporary crisis of faith springs from a lack of “substantial theological unanimity” about ancient dogmas of the Faith ranging from Original Sin to the divinity of Christ. If the papal magisterium were dependent for its exercise on “substantial theological unanimity” then it would have to eliminate the Creed - beyond concerning itself with a new definition.

Archbishop Christoph Schöborn, overseer of the Universal Catechism of the Catholic Church, has not only affirmed his support for the proposed dogmatic definition by signing a petition, but holds too that the proposed titles and associated doctrines are in fact taught by the Catechism, and that the doctrine of coredemption is profoundly present in the spiritual doctrine of the Little Flower.

As to the ecumenical question, it cannot be denied that definition of dogma has ecumenical implications. In previous instances of definitions, at least some sections of the faithful opposed dogmatic definition because they feared the potential negative impact on inter-Christian relations. It would seem, then, that some degree of tension between ecumenism and the development of doctrine is inevitable. The plight of the ecumenically minded is plain to view: the definition of any dogma changes the ground-rules and frameworks of discussion that had been worked out with such difficulty. Equally challenging is the task faced by those who work on the development of doctrine: an ecumenism focused on the lowest-common-denominators of doctrine by its very nature constrains any new authoritative expression of doctrine.

Clearly the popes and councils that defined dogmas were convinced that the importance of declaring an authoritative milestone in the development of doctrine in particular cases over-rode considerations of lowest-common-denominator ecumenism. But it will no doubt be said that previous definitions of dogma took place in eras when the ecumenical imperative was not as pronounced as it is today, and that it is ecumenism and not development of doctrine that is in the driver's seat today.

But this line of thought raises more fundamental questions: Is it then to be concluded that an ecumenical ceasefire should be imposed on defining even doctrines worthy of dogmatic status? Was it a mistake to define dogmas in the past because of the intrinsic divisiveness of dogmas? Is it even possible for Christians to attain the level of doctrinal certainty embodied in the very idea of a dogma?

Here both our Orthodox and protestant brethren cannot but give an affirmative answer to the last two questions. In accepting Nicea and Chalcedon, for instance, they acknowledge that (a) there is a place for the definition of dogma (b) that such definitions implicitly represent "progress" in our understanding of the Christian mysteries.

A further consideration is relevant here. Development of doctrine necessarily requires authoritative expressions of doctrine. The theologies of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Karl Rahner, no matter how influential, do not have a normative status. The idea of an authoritative expression of doctrine that has a normative status is what we mean by the definition of dogma. And there is nothing comparable to the teaching office of the head of the Catholic Church in any sister church or separated ecclesial community. The problem is illustrated by the predicament of the World Council of Churches which has been unable to issue a statement acceptable to its member churches affirming even the divinity of Christ.

Of particular interest concerning the 1996 Commission meeting is the recent statement to the press by Fr. Johann Roten, S.M., a signing member of the commission, who was surprised to see the *L'Osservatore Romano* Introduction to the Declaration refer to the commission as "being appointed by the Holy See," as this was never officially announced to the commission members. Roten refers to a vocal group at the congress who wanted more discussion on the possibility of a definition of Maternal Mediation as the principal

cause leading to the commission, and not the Holy See. In any case, it is of serious concern and consequence that the members of the commission were not themselves officially notified that they would be proceeding under the auspices of a Holy See appointed commission, if indeed that was the original intent.

