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Marian Mariology

CHAPTER 39



The veneration of Mary, when properly understood, permeates the entire life of the Church; it is a dimension of dogma and of piety, of Christology and of ecclesiology. This dimension needs to be made explicit today in connection with the problems of humanity. Mariology expresses something fundamental to the Christian life itself, to the Christian experience of the world.

Sound Mariology has always been understood in Christological terms. If the Gospel revealed nothing more than the fact that Jesus Christ, God and man, was born of Mary, this alone would be sufficient for the Church to love her and to draw theological conclusions from pondering this relationship of Mother and Son. We need no other revelations. Mary is a self-evident and essential *datum* and dimension of the Gospel.

Chapter one centers on Catechesis flowing from Byzantine Marian spirituality with commentary by Brother John M. Samaha, S.M. Chapter 2 discusses Mariology today with commentary by Rev. Professor Michael Lapierre, S.J. The remaining chapters are commentaries on various Marian topics by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J. (1914– 2000).

Chapter 39

Bellarmino and the Queen of Virgins

by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.

St. Robert Bellarmine is widely known in theological circles as the great champion of the Papacy. At the Vatican Council, his Controversies were the principal source from which the assembled fathers formulated the definition of papal infallibility. And in 1931, when the Holy See declared him a Doctor of the Church, he was described as “The Prince of Apologists and Strong Defender of the Catholic Faith, not only for his own time but for all future ages.”

But Bellarmine has another title to glory, seldom pointed out, which should endear him in a special way to priests and religious who are directors of souls. St. Robert was for years the spiritual counselor and confessor of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, to the day of the latter’s death in 1591. So attached was Bellarmine to his spiritual son that he was largely responsible for his early beatification, which he lived to see, and asked to be buried near the body of his “caro Luigi” as a perpetual remembrance of their mutual affection. Pope Benedict XV was sufficiently impressed by this circumstance that he proposed, “for the imitation of confessors, the prudence of that wisest of spiritual directors, Robert Bellarmine, who moderated even the penitential ardor of St. Aloysius Gonzaga.”

St. Aloysius is the heavenly patron of Catholic youth, and the chosen exemplar of heroic chastity. We should not be surprised, therefore, if his spiritual director was

personally so much devoted to the Immaculate Mother of Virgins that he drew from her life and example the inspiration which he transmitted to Aloysius. Bellarmine once wrote that, "Every great man in the Church has been most devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary: Ephrem, Bernard, Dominic, Francis of Assisi" – and we may now add, as the following sketch will show, Robert Bellarmine, the spiritual father of Aloysius Gonzaga.

Bellarmino's Personal Devotion to the Mother of God

St. Robert was devoted to the Blessed Virgin from his earliest years. According to his schoolmate, later Canon Vincent Patuichelli, as a young boy Bellarmine used to recite daily the Office of the Blessed Virgin, often in company with Vincent as the two of them walked slowly along the road. Bellarmine retained this custom of reciting the Office of Our Lady throughout life. In the same way he kept the custom to his old age of daily saying the Rosary. Alexander Jacobelli, who was the cardinal's almoner for twenty years, testified at the beatification process that, "He never omitted saying the Office and the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary, during which he was often found melted in tears."

However, Robert was not satisfied with only a single recitation of the Rosary. The beads were literally his constant companion. In the words of his chaplain, "when fatigued with study, Bellarmine would find recreation in reciting the beads with uncovered head." And again, "his relaxation was to say the Rosary of Our Lady." On his frequent journeys as Archbishop of Capua, attendants noticed that he always followed the same ritual: celebrate Mass, say the Itinerarium, and, rosary in hand, enter the carriage for the journey.

Juan de Serayz, a close friend of Robert, left some interesting details on how Bellarmine would say the Rosary. It was June 14, 1618, the feast of Corpus Christi, that Bellarmine and Juan were returning from a procession at St. Peter's Basilica. "As we got into the carriage," relates Juan, "he told me that he was able to say the third part of the Rosary exactly three times, from the time the procession left the Sistine Chapel to where it finally ended at the Altar of Exposition in St. Peter's. Which I asked him, out of curiosity, how he said the Rosary, he told me that he separated the decades of the Angelic Salutation with an Our Father, adding to each decade a short prayer corresponding to the different mysteries, and preceding with emphasis he said that he recited the Hail Mary's slowly, slowly. When I observed that this did not leave much time for keeping his partner company, he answered that during the whole procession he did not say a single word to his cardinal companion."

We understand, therefore, how painful were the doctor's orders during Bellarmine's last illness, when he was forbidden not only to say the

Breviary but also the Rosary. For, as his brother explained, the doctor knew with what ardor and devotion he applied himself to these prayers. Finally, the doctor was moved by the dying man's pleas and mitigated the orders first given to the servant, allowing the sick man "a moderate use of the Rosary," although everyone knew that, "his intense application to this prayer would be a great strain upon him."

To the Office and the Rosary, Bellarmine added the Saturday fast in Mary's honor. He fasted three days a week with the same rigor that he kept the Lenten fast, that is, most strictly. According to a syllogism which he wrote on the subject, he argued in this way:

Our justice should be greater than that of the Pharisees. Matt. 5/20

But the Pharisees fasted two days a week. Luke 18/12

Therefore, I should fast at least three days a week!

So besides the fasts for the vigils and the Lenten fast, and besides the whole of Advent, he kept a sacred fast on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday of each week. That he kept the Saturday fast in honor of Our Lady is clear from the sermon which he gave on one occasion for the feast of the Immaculate Conception, when he said that among the practices most pleasing to the Blessed Virgin and her Divine Son, and most useful to grow in their love and friendship, is the daily recitation of the Rosary and the Saturday fast in Mary's honor. It was only under express orders from his confessor to fast only twice a week, that in his old age Bellarmine relinquished the Saturday fast.

Bellarmino and the Immaculate Conception

According to available evidence, Robert Bellarmine was the first bishop of the Catholic Church to have formally petitioned the Holy See for a definition of the Immaculate Conception. It was made while he was serving as cardinal member of the Congregation of the Inquisition. The petition is dated August 31, 1627, and carried two main questions: Is the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin a definable doctrine; and is it expedient at the present time to define this doctrine? Then follow three thousand words of careful theological exposition and answering of objections, calculated to break down the resistance of certain critics in the Roman Curia.

One of the reasons which Bellarmine gives in favor of the definition is especially revealing. "Is it possible," he says, "for a mere creature to be without any sin. Such, for example, are the good angels in heaven. Consequently, the same must be true of the Virgin Mother of God, who is more pure than the angels. Otherwise she would be less pure than the angels, at least by the presence of sin. For true purity consists of two qualities: absence of sin and nearness to God." The point is that if Our Lady is more pure than the angels in closeness to God, which all admit, then she is also as

Bellarmino's Hymn to Mary the Virgin

Among St. Robert's extant writing there is a short poem of twenty stanzas which he composed in the nature of a Litany to the Blessed Virgin. The text was first published in Italian some fifty years ago, and to the best of the writer's knowledge, has never been translated into English. Each verse-line begins with the name "Virgin," joined to a title and petition to Our Lady, starting with the letter "A" and going down the Italian alphabet to "V." Thus the first seven verses begin with the invocation: "Vergine adorna ... Vergine Bella ... Vergine casta ... Vergine degna ... Vergine eletta ... Vergine felice ... Vergine gradita ..."

A free translation to this tribute to the Virgin Mother reads as follows:

"Virgin adored and clothed with the sun, grant me thine aid.
Virgin most beautiful, mystical rose, take abode in my heart.
Virgin most chaste, all undefiled, grant me true peace.
Virgin deserving of all honor and praise, give me thy love.
Virgin elect and full of all grace, lead me to God.
Virgin most blessed, star of the sea, dispel the storms besetting me.
Virgin most virtuous, holy and sweet, show me the way.
Virgin illustrious, with thy burning light, enlighten thou my mind.
Virgin more precious than jewels or gold, make reparation for me.
Virgin most worthy of all praise, mother, daughter, and immaculate spouse.
Virgin and Mother, make me more pleasing to Jesus thy Son.
Virgin most innocent of any stain or fault, make me more worthy of God.
Virgin enriched with every gift and grace, obtain the remission of my sins.
Virgin most pure, grant me to enjoy the bliss of heavenly love.
Virgin, thou lily among thorns, I pray thee for the grace of a happy death.
Virgin more rare than the rarest dream, bring joy to my heart.
Virgin so great there is none like thee on earth, bring peace to my soul.
Virgin most true, loving Mother too, Virgin Mary."

End

The Blessed Virgin in the Apostolate

Bellarmino instinctively appealed to the virtues of the Mother of God, whenever he urged consecrated religious to the more faithful practice of their profession. While he was Archbishop of Capua, for example, a convent of nuns which he had reformed was accused of receiving only applicants of noble birth. When investigation showed that the charge was true, St. Robert addressed to the Sisters of San Giovanni one of the longest letters which he ever wrote.

Following the lead of St. Augustine, Bellarmine praised the Sisters for consecrating their virginity to Almighty God. He implied that in doing so they were admirably imitating the chastity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, becoming “the affianced of the Lord.” But he also suggested that chastity is not enough, unless it is coupled with true humility. “Religious life,” he told them, “cannot co-exist with the spirit of the world, nor can it be ruled by it, but by the Spirit of God alone. The spirit of the world makes account of nobility and wealth, but the Spirit of God esteems virtue and holiness of life above everything else.” Taking this for granted, he continues, “I thought that the nuns of San Giovanni would have really laid aside the spirit of the world, and have gone out from it not less in body than in soul.” Now the pointed shaft: “If the Blessed Virgin were on earth and wanted to become a nun, she would never be able to get into your convent, being a carpenter’s wife ... This will show you in what favor you will be with the Queen of Heaven and her Divine Son, if you persist in such a spirit of worldly vanity.” And he concludes that, “We must not try to impose our ideas on the Holy Ghost, debarring Him from calling to His service those whom He pleases,” seeing that He chose the humble Virgin Mary to become the Mother of God.

Also when exhorting his own religious brethren in Rome to the practice of perfect chastity, he counseled them to “be vigilant over the first movements of the senses, which is easy, because then the passions are still weak and a man is strong and able to resist.” Undoubtedly this means a constant war on our concupiscence, literally “bearing the cross in our bodies.” But in this, religious have the example of the saints to imitate, notably St. Luke, “whose friendship and familiarity with the Blessed Virgin Mary made him an ardent lover of Christ,” for whose sake, and with the help of whose Mother he was able to carry the cross faithfully until death.

Also outside the cloister, on at least one occasion, Bellarmine appealed to the purity of the Mother of God in asking for a favor from the Pope himself. In the city of Rome, near the Cardinal’s titular church of Our Lady of the Way, was a public house of ill repute, which Bellarmine considered an insult to the Church. First he tried to do something privately, and when that failed, he wrote a letter to the Sovereign Pontiff, in which he begged, “by the love which Your Holiness has for the most pure Virgin Mary,” to see that this instance was removed. Needless to say, his request was promptly granted.

pure as they (angels) in the absence of sin, since purity comprehends both qualities without discrimination.

St. Robert’s devotion to the Immaculate Conception is also attested by the number of sermons which he preached on this prerogative of the Mother of God. Besides other testimony, there are two extant letters which Bellarmine wrote on the subject: one in 1617 to an English priest, and another in 1618 to Philip III of Spain, in both of which he promised to do everything in his power to promote the defense of the Immaculate Conception.

Juan de Serayz, previously quoted, testified at the Beatification Process that Bellarmine had a singular devotion to the Immaculate Conception. After this general statement, he added that, “his devotion was manifested in all the Roman Congregations on which the Cardinal served. And relative to this question, he often told me that he would not rest until the doctrine was defined. ‘There is no need of convoking a General Council in this matter,’ he said, ‘since the Pontiff can easily pronounce the definition by means of a papal bull.’ ” It is significant that when Pius IX defined the dogma in 1854, he did so without convoking a General Council and by means of a papal bull, exactly as Bellarmine had suggested.

It was Bellarmine’s mind that the definition of the Immaculate Conception in his own day was not only opportune but even necessary, as he wrote to King Philip, “to remove the terrible scandals which are daily committed against the honor of God and with such danger to the souls of the faithful.” Only two months before his death, Bellarmine was still urging the cherished definition. On August 1, 1621, says the chronicle, St. Robert engaged the Holy Father in a long conversation, and frankly told him that if he were Pope he would not hesitate immediately to define the Immaculate Conception, seeing no obstacle whatever standing in the way.

St. John Berchmans died on August 13, 1621. Shortly after his death, Bellarmine heard of the vow which John had made, signed with his own blood, and declaring, “I, John Berchmans, unworthy son of the Society of Jesus, promise thee and thy Son ... that until death I will ever declare and defend thy Immaculate Conception.” When the aged cardinal was informed of this fact, he exclaimed, “What a marvelous act of devotion! What an ingenious expression of love, written in his own blood! What he says is most certainly true. I am sure he was inspired to this action by Our Lady herself. For just now in Flanders, while others are attacking Mary’s honor, this young man from Flanders has been chosen by the Mother of God to defend her.” Bellarmine was referring to the forerunners of Jansenism at Louvain, who were teaching that, “No one except Christ is without original sin. Consequently the Blessed Virgin died because of the sin which she had contracted from Adam.”

Bellarmino and the Annunciation

Cardinal Orsini recalled that one year he happened to stop at the Jesuit Novitiate in Rome on March 25th, where Bellarmine was making the Spiritual Exercises. That morning, the latter's meditation had been on the Annunciation of Our Lady, and when Orsini called on his friend, Bellarmine immediately began to talk about the sublime mystery with such fervor and clarity that his visitor was convinced "he had received a special illumination from God that very morning." It may be noted also that all his life Bellarmine delighted to mention that he was ordained to the priesthood on Holy Saturday, March 25, 1570, and therefore had the privilege of celebrating his first Mass in honor of Our Lady's Annunciation.

Since one of the main points of opposition by the Protestants was clerical celibacy and religious chastity, Bellarmine took every occasion to defend this traditional practice of the Catholic Church. There are three complete sets of sermons which Bellarmine preached for the feast of the Annunciation, and in several of them he took as his theme the Virginity of the Mother of God, stressing the sublimity of this privilege and the example it affords for our imitation.

Thus on one occasion he is commenting on the words, "And Mary said to the angel: 'How shall this be done, because I know not man?' " and explains:

"The obvious implication of these words is that Mary had not only chosen to be a virgin but that she had confirmed her choice by vow. According to St. Augustine, the Blessed Virgin would never have spoken this way to the angel unless she had already vowed herself as a virgin to God.

"Can we imagine a greater courage than Mary's, when she made this choice of a virginal life? Even in our day, it is no small thing to preserve oneself in untainted virginity after we have been taught the dignity of this state of life by Christ Himself, after St. Paul had clearly recommended it to us, after the Fathers of the Church have given it unstinted praise, and after so many thousands of people of both sexes have embraced the life of celibacy and kept it inviolate until death. How remarkable it is, therefore, that the Virgin Mary should have aspired to the palm of this virtue although she had been given no precept to that effect by God, had received no counsel, and the only example she had to follow was the disrepute in which virginity was held by everyone around her."

Bellarmino and the Assumption

Among the longest sermons that Bellarmine preached are three for the feast of the Assumption, which he gave at Louvain in St. Michael's Church; In Rome at the titular Church of Our Lady of the Way; and in the Cathedral Church of Capua, as Archbishop, in 1604. It is worth noting that the fifteenth of August was one of the six feast days each year when all the servants and attendants of Cardinal Bellarmine were obliged to go to Communion and receive the Holy Eucharist. St. Robert would himself distribute Holy Communion to his cardinalatial family, at the Mass which he said for their intention. Two other of these six days "of precept" were March twenty-fifth and December the eighth.

In the first of his sermons on the Assumption, Bellarmine returns to his favorite theme in relation to the Mother of God: her spotless purity. Contemporary witnesses record that many of his listeners at Louvain were English Protestants, who crossed the Channel to Belgium just to hear him speak.

"The Mother of Jesus," they were told, "was the first woman in history to have consecrated her virginity to God. She was the first to have pointed out the path of chastity which leads to the highest sanctity. It is common doctrine that no one, either man or woman, had ever taken a vow of virginity before the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"Add to this the fact that Mary, alone of all to her before or after, united the state of virginity with the holy state of matrimony, in the truest and fullest sense of the word. For other virgins may be said to contract marriage only in a restricted sense, in that they become spiritually espoused to the Person of Christ.

"But most remarkable of all, she alone joined virginity of body and soul with true progeny, and such progeny as would make her the Mother of God. Other virgins, it is true, are also not without children, when, by their example, prayers and exhortations, they bring sinners back to God and thus increase the number of the elect. And it not infrequently happens that the unmarried in God's Church are more fruitful in this regard than those who are married, as witness St. Catherine of Siena, St. Clare, and others. However, with the sole exception of the Blessed Virgin, none of them could at the same time remain virgins and also give birth to a natural offspring. All of which must finally be attributed to a special grace of God, and also, let us not forget, to the free choice of Mary, who chose to take a vow of virginity, to take a human spouse, and who chose to become the Mother of God".