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Marian Mariology

Chapter 21



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 21

The Mariology of Pope Pius XII

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

It is easy to write on Pope Pius XII and the Blessed Virgin Mary because there is so much to say. We might recall how as a young boy in Rome he would stop every day to visit the shrine of Madonna della Strada at the Church of the Gesu where, as he told his mother, “I pray and tell Mary everything.” Or we might reflect on his life-long devotion to the rosary, his frequent sermons on our Lady, his constant reference to her in his writings or, in summary, his own testimony shortly after election to the papacy, that “our priestly life began with Mary and has always been directed under her motherly eye.”

In all this profusion of Marian piety, one aspect may be overlooked. Pius XII made a substantial contribution to the science of Mariology, a contribution concerning which, no doubt, volumes will be written in the years to come. We shall examine only the highlights of a large subject, whose implications have an important bearing on the whole body of Christian asceticism.

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

On November 1, 1950, Pius XII answered the requests of the Catholic hierarchy with a solemn definition that, “by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by Our own authority, We pronounce, declare and

define as a divinely revealed dogma: The Immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever Virgin, after her life on earth, was assumed body and soul to the glory of heaven." The spontaneous reaction of the faithful was gratitude for the exalted honor paid to the Mother of God. The Pope's own sentiments were expressed to the bishops gathered in Rome for the occasion, when he told them the joy he felt over the proclamation and the assurance it gave him that Mary would obtain the graces of which mankind stood in such dire need. On the level of piety and devotion, therefore, Mary's Assumption was only the climax in a series of definitions to honor the Blessed Virgin, beginning with the divine maternity at Ephesus and terminating in the past century with her Immaculate Conception. But dogmatically the constitution **Munificentissimus Deus** has a much deeper significance that deserves to be recognized.

Shortly before the actual definition but after its public announcement, the Anglican bishops of England lodged a formal protest against the "new" dogma. "We profoundly regret," they said, "that the Roman Catholic Church has chosen by this action to increase dogmatic differences in Christendom and has thereby gravely injured the growth of understanding between Christians based on a common possession of the fundamental truths of the Gospel." The Anglican complaint was not a wild gesture. It exposed their radical opposition to the church's authority over Christian doctrine, which I believe many Catholics do not fully appreciate.

Pope Pius defined Mary's Assumption as a truth divinely revealed. Of the two sources of revelation, theologians commonly say the Assumption was implicit in tradition, in spite of the practical absence of documentary evidence before 300 A.D. Some years before the definition, a scholarly work was published under Vatican auspices on *The Silence of the Early Centuries on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. The author frankly admitted that except for apocryphal sources we have no explicit witness in the early patristic age. Yet the Pope finally declared the doctrine was in revelation. How do we know? On the answer to this question rests a new insight into Christian tradition which had been gaining momentum since the eighteenth century. Briefly stated, tradition is coming to be identified more and more with the Church's magisterium or teaching office and less exclusively as the genetic source, along with Scripture, of the truths of salvation. Behind this new emphasis is a development of dogma since the Council of Trent which reveals hidden depths of the power in the Mystical Body of Christ. The Church is being seen more clearly as not only the guardian of a faith once and for all given to the Apostles, but as perpetual expositor of that faith in every age to the end of time.

In August of the same year that he defined the Assumption, the Pope laid down the principles which guided the Marian definition. The Church's teaching authority, he said in *Humani generis*, is not confined to reflecting

or consolidating the past. It is also, and especially, the vital, present-day function of an organism animated by the Spirit of God. "Together with the sources of revelation (Scripture and tradition) God has given to His Church a living magisterium to elucidate and explain what is contained in the deposit of faith only obscurely and, as it were, by implication." The degree of obscurity, we may add, is irrelevant. Given this faculty by her Founder, whose Spirit of truth abides with her at all times, the Church can infallibly discern what belongs to revelation no matter how cryptic the contents may be. Consequently when Pius XII defined the Assumption, he did more than propose the doctrine for acceptance by the faithful or give them a new motive for devotion to the Blessed Mother. He vindicated as never before the Church's power to authorize a legitimate development in doctrine and piety that scandalizes those outside the true faith and may even surprise believing Catholics. The Assumption thus becomes part of a larger process, along with Catholic Action, the liturgical movement and even such practical matters as the mitigated Eucharistic fast, in which the current problems of the Church and the present needs of souls are being met by the Holy Spirit. It was no coincidence that on the day following the Assumption definition the Pope expressed the hope that this new honor to Mary would introduce "a spirit of penance to replace the prevalent love of pleasure, and a renewal of family life, stabilized where divorce was common and made fruitful where birth control was practiced." If there is one feature that characterizes the modern world it is the cult of the body. Science and ingenuity exhaust themselves in providing for bodily comforts, avoidance of pain, and the pampering of every sensual desire. Divorce and birth control, lurid reading and entertainment are only symptoms of a deeper malady for which revelation provides at least one certain remedy: faith in the resurrection of the body, for us on the last day as for Mary on the day of her departure from this life. Since the body is made to be immortal, it is infinitely important to provide for its eternal happiness by discipline and self-control - because the alternative is also bodily immortality, but in hell, as the price of earthly pleasure against the will of God.

The Immaculate Conception

Three years after defining the dogma of the Assumption, Pius XII called on the Catholic world to join in the observance of a Marian Year from December, 1953, to December, 1954, to commemorate the centenary of Pius IX's definition of the Immaculate Conception. He introduced the Marian Year with the encyclical *Fulgens corona*, whose doctrinal content went far beyond the immediate purpose of proclaiming a season of special prayers to the Mother of God.

According to the late Pontiff, the Assumption was a consequence of the Immaculate Conception, not merely in the superficial sense of something suitable, but in the strict logic of supernatural merit and providence. "These two singular privileges bestowed upon the Mother of God stand out in most splendid light as the beginning and the end of her earthly journey. For the greatest possible glorification of her virgin body is the complement, at once appropriate and marvelous, of the absolute innocence of her soul which was free from all stain. Just as she took part in the struggle of her

baptism there is pouring of water; in confirmation and extreme unction, anointing with oil; in orders, the imposition of hands; in matrimony, the expressed acceptance by the two spouses; and in penance, the vocal and visible absolution by the priest. All these actions are external and their agents are all human, but conditioned on their performance in the spirit of faith, such transcendent changes occur in the spiritual world as the removal of a lifetime of sin by a sign of the cross and the conversion of a piece of bread into the Body of Christ.

The more clearly we see how the Blessed Virgin shares in this type of sacramental efficiency, the less scandalized we shall be to say that “as God is the Father and Lord of the universe, preparing all by His power, so the Blessed Mary, repairing all things by her merits, is the ruler and mother of all.” While remaining subordinate to her Son as a creature to her Creator, she was instituted by Him on the cross as the great sacrament of His mercy and the visible sign of internal grace which He promised to those who, like Pius XII, “approach with confidence to the throne of our Queen and Mother to beg help in difficulty, light in darkness, and solace in trouble and sorrow.”

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only-begotten Son with the serpent of hell, so also she shared in His glorious triumph over sin and its sad consequences.”

This correlation between the two mysteries has a long and respected theological history, which other statements of Pius XII indicate that he knew very well. Addressing the National Eucharistic Congress of Cuba in 1947, he acknowledged the petition which the Cubans had sent to the Holy See relative to Mary’s Assumption. “This mystery must certainly be true, according to the mind of him who has rightly been called the *Doctor Eximius*, who teaches that this privilege is most eminently congruent with the innocence and purity of the Virgin Mary.” The *Doctor Eximius* was Francis Suarez, the sixteenth-century theologian whose Disputations on the Blessed Mother are the most exhaustive in classic Mariology. Again in the actual document of definition, the Pope referred to Suarez’s conclusion that “the mystery of the Assumption was to be believed with the same firmness of assent as that given to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin. Thus he already held that such truths could be defined.”

How are the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption related in Suarez, and by implication in Pius XII? Their relation arises from the subtle but necessary connection between sin and its consequences in the after-life. The souls of the just in heaven, says Suarez, still desire and seek the glorification of their bodies. To the extent to which this is lacking to them, they are deprived of the perfection of beatitude, even though only in accidentals. When the soul of Mary, therefore, was separated from her body, this hunger and desire for “the perfect perfection” were not absent. Being always full of grace, she had a title to perfect glory on leaving this world. And what Mary desired, she must immediately have obtained, in virtue of her exalted position and “by a mother’s right.” Therefore just as during her stay on earth she had never contracted the least stain of sin, so after this life she was freed from every corruption and sequel that are the wages of sin. Her body was not to decay, nor was she to wait until the last day, as others who are sinners, to rise with her body from the grave.

In the same document, *Fulgens corona*, the Pope made another association, this time a historical one, and not between the first and final mysteries in the life of the Blessed Virgin, but, rather between the first and final mysteries in the life of the Blessed Virgin in the Immaculate Conception and the supernatural phenomena at Lourdes. In his judgment, “the Virgin Mary herself wished to confirm by some special sign the definition which the Vicar of Christ her divine Son on earth had pronounced amid the applause of the whole Church. Four years had not yet elapsed when, in the French town at the foot of the Pyrenees, the Virgin Mother showed herself to a simple and innocent girl at the grotto of Messabielle. And to this same girl, earnestly inquiring the name of her with whose vision she was favored, with eyes raised to heaven and sweetly smiling, she

replied, 'I am the Immaculate Conception' " Following the original visions, thousands of people from every country in the world have made pilgrimages to Lourdes, where "miraculous favors were granted them, which excited the admiration of all and confirmed the Catholic religion as the only one given approval by God."

This judgment is highly significant. In the last analysis, if a Catholic wants to prove that no other religion than his own is from God, he must invoke some principle by which any religious system can be tested and its divine authorization verified. Such a principle is the norm of miracles, which even the unlettered primitive can understand. It says simply that when God communicates a revelation (as claimed in some form by every organized religion), He will confirm the mysteries He reveals and make them rationally acceptable by working miracles in favor of the truths that He wants believed: Or put negatively, He will not work miracles in support of a pretended revelation because, as master of the miraculous, He would be actively cooperating in a lie.

In the context of the Lourdes apparitions and the constant stream of preternatural wonders there granted by God, this means that what Lourdes stands for is perennially attested as true. The Immaculate Conception is a strict mystery, not even conceivable apart from revelation. Miracles are visible signs of divine intervention that lead the well-disposed to believe (or strengthen their belief) in what cannot be seen, on the argument that the same agency which produces the phenomena also revealed the doctrine in whose atmosphere the phenomena take place.

Mediatrice of Graces

The last element in the triad of Marian privileges to which Pius XII made a lasting theological contribution is Mary's role as universal mediatrix of graces. On the fourth anniversary of the Assumption dogma and in closing the Marian Year, the Pope instituted a new feast of the Queenship of Mary, for May 31, and in the encyclical *Ad caeli Reginam* elaborated on the basic principles that underlay Mary's royalty, namely, her unique position as liaison between Christ and the human race.

An examination of the teaching of the fathers of the Church since the time of Origen, Ephrem, and St. Jerome shows a practical unanimity in regarding the mother of Jesus as sharing with Him, albeit subordinately, a truly royal dignity. Ephrem called her "Empress and Ruler"; Origen, "Mistress and Queen"; the seventh ecumenical council spoke of her as "the Lady ruler of all Christians"; and in modern times, Benedict XIV gave her the title "Queen of heaven and earth." The ancient tradition is reflected in the liturgy of the East which poetically addresses Mary as "carried into heaven on the chariots of the cherubim, the seraphim wait upon thee and the ranks of the heavenly host bow before thee." Familiar hymns like the *Salve Regina* and prayers like the Litany of Loreto confirm the sentiments of Christian art since the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) which "portrays Mary as Queen and Empress seated upon a royal throne, adorned with the royal insignia, crowned with the royal diadem and surrounded by

the host of angels and saints in heaven and ruling not only nature and its powers but also over the machinations of Satan."

However, more important than the evidence of its traditional character is the dogmatic basis for Mary's queenship which the late Pontiff traced to her divine maternity and her association with Christ in the redemption of the world. The Pope synthesized in bold analogy the Catholic doctrine which some theologians consider definable.

The Blessed Virgin has not only received the grade of excellence and perfection which is supreme after that of Christ Himself but has also received some sharing of that efficacy by which her Son and our Redeemer is rightly and properly said to reign over the minds and wills of men. For if the word of God performs miracles and gives graces through the humanity He has assumed, if He employs the sacraments and His saints as instruments for the salvation of souls, why should He not use His mother's office and efforts to bring us the fruits of the Redemption?

We may transmit the comparison between Mary's intercessory power and that of other saints. Certainly if they can pray in our behalf and obtain favors we should not otherwise receive, how much more the Queen of Saints and the Mother of the Author of grace. The remarkable thing is to associate the Blessed Virgin's share in our Redemption with the humanity of her divine Son and to compare its efficacy with the function of the sacramental system. Both analogies are penetrating concepts.

By relating Mary's role of mediatrix to the human nature of Christ, the Pope wished to emphasize what even Catholics are liable to forget, that while God can perform by His own power all that is effected by created natures, yet in the counsels of His providence He has preferred to help men by the instrumentality of other men - whose efficacy for sanctifying others depends on their proximity to the human nature assumed by the Son of God. Viewed in this light, the potentiality of the Blessed Virgin as an instrument of grace takes on staggering proportion. As the woman whose consent made the Incarnation possible, who carried in her womb and brought into the world the word made flesh, and whose association with Christ during His life and sympathy in death were the most intimate conceivable - her efficacy at the throne of God must be, without fear of exaggeration, "almost immeasurable in power."

If we compare Mary's mediation with the sacraments of the New Law, we gain a further insight into her place in the economy of salvation. We know that on the level of sanctification nothing is more internal than heavenly grace which begets holiness; and yet the ordinary and chief means of obtaining grace are external, in the form of sacraments administered by men specially chosen for that purpose and by means of external rites. In