

## Mary Now - Part 3 of 6 - The Swirling Current of Mariology

### A Twentieth Century Issue

In 1997 *Newsweek* had as its cover, *The Meaning of Mary: A Struggle Over her Role Grows Within the Church*. At the heart of it was the question as to whether John Paul II would proclaim Mary as Co-Redeemer. A large box of signatures arrived at the Vatican, 49,383 from nearly every continent, asking the pope to exercise the power of infallibility to proclaim a new dogma, that Mary is “Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of All Graces and Advocate for the People of God.” Over the previous four years an average 100,000 requests a month supported the proposed dogma, Catholics petitioning the pope to make an infallible pronouncement.

If the move had succeeded we would have seen three extraordinary doctrines: 1) that Mary participates in the redemption achieved by her Son, 2) that all graces that flow from the suffering and death of Jesus Christ are granted only through Mary’s intercession with her Son, and 3) that all prayers and petitions of the faithful on earth must also flow through Mary who brings them to the attention of Jesus. It all seems to contradict the basic New Testament line in 1 Timothy 2:5 – There is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, Christ Jesus.

### Resulting Reactions

“A Marian de-emphasis of Jesus and re-emphasis of the dogmatic authority of the pope. A further nail in the coffin of ecumenism”; these were issues raised from outside Catholicism, yet were the very concerns expressed in Paul VI’s great document, *Marialis Cultus* (1974). From within the Catholic Church a commission of 23 Mariologists, specialists in the theology of Mary and the scholars most likely to support the initiative, voted by 23-0 against promulgating the new dogma. Their grounds were: it was contrary to the teaching of Vatican II, unclear in its wording, and insensitive to the ecumenical difficulties it would cause.

### And Yet...

Mary continues to be no ordinary religious figure. Over two millennia the most beautiful churches in the world have been named for her: Chartres and Notre Dame in France, St. Mary Major in Rome. Poets such as Dante, Hopkins, Eliot and Auden have found inspiration in her. Musicians such as Schubert gave us his Ave Maria. And the Annunciation, the angel announcing to a startled teenage virgin that she would be with child, is probably the most painted scene in Western art. The twentieth century was the century of Mary with visions on every continent, 400 reports of visionaries, more than the three previous centuries. There was more interest in Mary than there ever was before, not all driven by apparitions.

Feminism played its part, too, as the Mary who had previously been seen as the oppressive figure of clerical patriarchy was now celebrated as a ‘free woman’ who chose to say yes to God at the Annunciation where Eve said no in Eden, and Mary thus made salvation possible. Liberation theology found in the humble figure of Mary an apt symbol of God’s ‘preferential option for the poor’.

### The Journey to Now

The secret of Mary’s mysterious power may be just this: having no history of her own, she entices every new generation to draw her portrait. In a past article we saw how the gospels

offer scraps to build on, yet from these Mary grew in stature, from the Madonna who gives life to the Pieta who receives the dead. With the rise of early hermits and monasteries she follows the privileged road to Christian holiness as the perpetual virgin and model of chastity and self-denial. In 431 the Council of Ephesus issued the first dogmatic statement that Mary was to be honoured as *Theotokos*, God bearer or Mother of God. The mystery of the meaning of Mary, her relationship to the Bible from Genesis to the Apocalypse was well caught by the author of *Mary through the Centuries*, Jaroslav Pelikan, "Concerning no other human being, none of the prophets or apostles or saints, has there been even a small fraction of the profound theological reverence that has been called forth by the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary."

In the Middle Ages the influence of Mary broke loose. To the poor, hers was the merciful face of a maternal God. Aquinas argued against Mary being born without original sin, but in the nineteenth century Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The heavenly patroness became the worried mother warning of war, rightly as it turned out, if humanity did not repent and reform. Religious orders that bore her name rose and flourished. Shrines such as Guadalupe, Montserrat, Czestochowa became centres of national and religious identity. Came the middle of the twentieth century, the Assumption was proclaimed.

### **A Mirror to the Age**

At the Vatican Council in the 60's the bishops fought fiercely over what to teach about Mary. A minority wanted yet another declaration of her exceptional role in salvation with terms such as Co-Redemptrix and Mediatrix being used. Others saw such a path as a dangerous deviation towards Mariolatry. A religious artist, Sr. Corita Kent put it all rather well when she said, "The nice thing about Mary is that her son turned out so well." Clearly, the face that Mary wears is that of a mirror to the age. We saw that towards the end of the millennium she was an apocalyptic figure prophesying doom. Mother Angelica of the Eternal Word TV Network maintained: "If the Holy Father would define this dogma it would save the world from great catastrophes and loosen God's mercy upon this world."

Against this stance we have the internationally respected French theologian, Rene Laurentin, who opposed the proposed dogma as un-Scriptural and an affront to the uniqueness of Christ's redemptive death. John Paul II had as his motto, *Totus tuus*, 'all yours' – a reference to Mary. He believed that Mary saved him from a bullet in 1981, on the feast of Our Lady of Fatima. Yet from our perspective today we know he never went to the extreme and made a dogma out of terms he regularly used himself such as Mediatrix, Advocate, and on rare occasions, Co-Redemptrix. He did go so far as to assert that Mary was the first to experience the Risen Christ at Easter, something that was not in Scripture but it was, he said, 'only fitting.'

Emerging from the Assumption, a rich vein to be explored in an age when the culture of death is far too present, Mary already has what any Christian can hope for, a reunion with her Son in the Glory of the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. What more could any mother want?

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