

## THE RELEVANCE OF AN ANTHROPOLOGIC-BIBLICAL APPROACH IN CONTEMPORARY MARIOLOGY

It often happens that when we try to assess the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Salvific Mission of her Son, we omit Biblical sources and base our information mostly upon less reliable ones such as the numerous apocryphal writings that are fantastic in tenor and unknown in origin. Eventually, we misinterpret the real role of Mary in the Economy of Salvation and create a devotion that is rich in sentiment but very shallow from a theological viewpoint.

Undoubtedly, the image of the Blessed Virgin has suffered greatly from such an approach since Mary became less and less human and a stranger to our world. In this essay I intend to show that the contemporary renewed interest in an anthropologic-biblical image of Mary, which is indeed the image adopted by the Second Vatican Council, does not only help us to assess her authentic role in God's plan of Salvation, under the New Dispensation, but also to assert her solidarity with mankind-in-need-of-redemption, her unique place in the Mystery of Christ which is also the Mystery of Israel and of the Church. Furthermore, in this process there will eventually emerge her relations with Christians in their daily commitment.

### THE BLESSED VIRGIN AS DAUGHTER OF MAN, AND HER SOLIDARITY WITH MANKIND IN NEED OF REDEMPTION

First it is essential to insist that Mary is a daughter of man, as she is a child of human lineage and a branch of human stock, otherwise, by dehumanizing Mary, we will be also dehumanizing her child, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14). In the Gospels we find two genealogies (Mt 1:1-17; Lk 3:23-38) and although these are different and end up with Joseph, Jesus's legal father only, however, they are sufficient to indicate that Mary belongs to human lineage, since, according to ancient mentality, legal paternity (adoption, levirate etc.,) is sufficient by itself to confer hereditary rights<sup>1</sup>. Besides, as she was legally married to Joseph

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jerusalem Bible - London, Darton Longman & Todd 1966, exegetical notes on Mt. 1:1-17.

(Mt 1:16) and was a kin to Elizabeth (Lk 1:37) herself a descendant of Aaron (Lk 1:5), Mary is woven into the fabric of humanity and of her race – the people of God – by marriage, actual descent and relationship. And although the Gospels seem to cast on her a shade of anonymity, owing to the few referencies that we find about her, however, we can draw on the words of St. Paul:

'But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoptions as sons.' (Gal 4:4-5)\*

So it is clear that Mary, the woman who gave birth to the Son of God, is a daughter of man and a daughter of the Israel that was awaiting redemption.

Consequently, she too was in need of redemption<sup>2</sup>, which is quite in keeping with the doctrine of her Immaculate Conception. For the fact that she did not incur original sin was all due to the anticipated merits of her Son who deigned to preserve his mother from such a stain since her first moments of conception. Whence we speak of the need of a Preservative Redemption with Mary, as against our Liberative Redemption<sup>3</sup>.

#### THE GRACE OF MARY – A GRACE OF FAITH IN THE COVENANT

However, though the Blessed Virgin was free from original sin, yet we can be certain that she was fully aware of her possibility and even danger of sinning, as she too shared our human lot. That she, therefore, found herself in the state of a sinner, and yet never sinned, is the effect of grace. It follows that the element of the high degree of grace by which Mary was endowed shall be as well the object of our considerations. For her grace is primarily the grace of Faith, which from an Old Testament viewpoint is directed towards the God of the Covenant and the promises that accompany the Covenant. It is the Faith in the events that are to be fulfilled with the Incarnation. It is the same faith that at the Annunciation moves her to consent to the message of the angel Gabriel. And Mary as daughter of Israel was the daughter of Abraham not only because of human lineage but also because of her deep faith in the God of Abraham.

Consequently she is a true survivor of her race – 'the humble remnant of Israel' and the 'poor of Yahweh', since her faith in the promises of the Covenant is not marred by riches and worldly expectations. Neither

The Scriptural quotations in the essay are taken from the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, published by C.T.S. – London, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, artt. 52-53.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Ineffabilis Deus*, D – 2803.

is it motivated by political ones. But, though weak and oppressed due to her humble and lowly state, she constantly and continuously turns to God and seeks His will, as her aspirations are spiritual for they are in, and come from God.<sup>4</sup>

These aspirations are finally witnessed in faith by Mary at the Annunciation. Later on she will gradually witness them in deed, with the Incarnation and the fulfillment of the various stages of the Redemptive Mysteries. Consequently Mary's interior joy at such tidings of joy that had been awaited for so many centuries, knows no limits. So it is spontaneously and exuberantly outpoured in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), as she is very eager to show to and share with others 'the days of Yahweh'. In this sense, then, she represents also the 'daughter of Sion', the 'daughter of Jerusalem' after the manner of the prophecies of Joel (2:21, 23-27) and Zechariah (9:9ff.).

#### THE FAITH OF MARY VIS-A-VIE THE NEW COVENANT

Having examined the place of Mary in the midst of her people, Israel of the Old Covenant, now that the promises of this same Covenant are fulfilled, we move to examine her unique place in the Church, under the New Dispensation. We have already emphasised the importance of her faith vis-à-vis the Old Covenant. Nevertheless we shall see that it is on this same faith that we base her relations with the New Covenant.

To begin with, it is very relevant to note that now Mary's faith is no longer in the promises of the Old Law but in the fulfilment of such promises, the Redeemer who is to be born from her. We may rightly add that she is then, the first to believe in Jesus Christ as *the* Redeemer when at the Annunciation she consents to God's plan of Redemption in choosing her to be the Mother of the Messiah. I am not entering into the controversy among theologians, whether at this moment Mary believed in Christ as the Son of God. The Gospel draws our attention mainly to her faith as born from her high favour with God, (Lk 1:28ff.), which is later affirmed at the Visitation by Elizabeth, her cousin:

'And blessed is she (Mary) who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.' (Lk. 1:45)

The Second Vatican Council echoes these same words:

<sup>4</sup>For a better understanding of the theological and biblical concept of 'the remnant of Israel' and 'the poor of Yahweh', see Jerusalem Bible — opus citatum, exegetical notes that accompany Zeph. 2:3, 3:11 ff; Is. 4:3; and Rom. c. 11.

'By her belief and obedience she gave birth on earth to the very Son of the Father, and this with no knowledge of man, under the shadow of the Holy Spirit. She was like a new Eve presenting a faith unadulterated by doubt, not to the serpent of old but to God's messenger.'<sup>5</sup>

#### MARY IN THE HUMAN AND CHRISTIAN SITUATION

However, we cannot drive the element of faith in Mary to such an extent as to exclude her from the human situation with all the difficulties that it entails. The Christian who is 'in via' has to struggle in his faith. And there are moments in his life which are clouded as God makes an allowance for an increase in faith through trials and temptations. He may also permit a decrease of faith.

Mary found herself in a similar situation, even because the Gospels speak of moments in which she seems to have lacked full comprehension of the Mysteries of the Faith, which she was living. (cfr. Lk. 2:18-19, 33,50) Furthermore, we must never forget that the grace of Mary was a created grace and consequently left room for a change. Besides, it is a basic principle of Revelation that in the developing of his plan of Salvation, God does not hurry, but works gradually and the more one experiences life, the more one experiences Revelation.<sup>6</sup>

We expect then that Mary did not fathom the whole Mysteries of Faith at once and that the Divinity of Christ was only gradually revealed side by side with his full Humanity, otherwise, unless we accept the moments of trial, obscurity and incomprehension in Mary's life of Faith, we cannot explain the purpose of the aged Simeon's prophetic words:

'And a sword will pierce through your own soul also,' (Lk. 2:35)

for the sword signifies precisely that salvation would be accomplished in a manner that could have neither been foreseen by man, nor expected by Mary.<sup>7</sup> And this becomes more evident when she 'stood' at the foot

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, art. 63, C.T.S. Ed., London, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, artt. 2-4.

<sup>7</sup> We cannot actually speak with certainty about the exegetical meaning of the sword transfixing Mary's soul in Simeon's prophecy (Lk. 2:35). We can say only that the N.T. use of the term *psyche* is heavily dependent on the O.T. use of the term *nepes*, and shows little or no effect of Gk philosophical concepts, even because prophecy is contained in the second chapter of Luke, which together with the first and third chapters and unlike the rest of the third Gospel, is of high Semitic tone and colouring. Consequently it is relevant to add that *nepes* can be signified by no single word in modern languages; it can neither be con-

of the Cross (Jn. 19:25-27) which implies that even here in the hour of darkness and desolation she kept firm in her faith. Whence Christ gave rather John to her, — for the giving of Mary to him comes second — to help him in his faith and serve as a model and example of the faith that is to be expected of those who are to be committed Christians in the mission of the Church through the obscurities of time, although we must not exclude her dying Son's solicitude for His Mother's future in giving her besides, to the disciple who, 'from that hour . . . took her to his own home.' (Jn. 19:27)<sup>8</sup>

Thus Mary becomes the type of the wayfaring Christian, who sees her as the one who has experienced the faith that is required of him in his earthly sojourn, in an unwavering and heroic manner.

#### MARY AS A SURE SIGN OF CHRISTIAN HOPE AND FUTURE GLORY

However, the Christian's life is to be lived also in the hope of future glory, when he is to reach the perfect redemption that is promised to be received abstractly and essentially but concretely and existentially, and refers basically to a person, as the conscious subject of action and passion; as distinct from other selves. Perhaps the Ego of modern psychology comes closer to a parallel with *nepes* than any other word, and *nepes* is the Nb word which comes nearest to a person in the psychological sense, i.e., a conscious subject. (Cf. J.L. McKenzie S.J., *Dictionary of the Bible* — Soul, Geoffrey Chapman, London — Dublin, 1966, pp. 836-839). Therefore, it is more likely that in Lk. 2:35, the sword was to transfix her 'mind', in which case it would add more weight to the argument that the Blessed Virgin, notwithstanding her high degree of grace, was to undergo various temptations against her faith during her lifetime and especially at the foot of the Cross. Moreover, it would add further weight to the subsequent argument that John was given to Mary at Golgotha, since she, who had undergone and overcome great temptations against her faith could in turn confirm him in his faith (cf. Jn. 19:25-27 and the following footnote, n. 8). This would later lead to the confirmation of the other disciples of Jesus, who for a reason or other were missing from Golgotha, and who were shocked by the reverse fortunes of Jesus in meeting such an ignominious end.

<sup>8</sup> Theologians also vary in their interpretations of Jn. 19:27. Many see in it only a gesture of human love on Christ's part in giving his mother to John to be cared for. Others do not quite agree for they think that, as Mary did not accompany her Son in his public ministry, by the time of the Passion, she was already cared for (cf. J. Galot, *Maria nel Vangelo*, Ancora, p. 220 ff.). Consequently, the new maternity of Mary is to be taken spiritually i.e., in the order of grace and in faith. Hilda Graef in *Mary: a History of Doctrine and Devotion*, Sheed and Ward, London and New York, 1963, vol. 1, p. 24 ff., also refers to such Ecclesial and Messianic implications of Jn. 19:27. Besides, she mentions a number of scholars who share the same opinion.

him with the Parousia for having remained faithful to God's redemptive call. And here again he finds a pledge of such a promise in Mary, that, having been the Lord's uniquely generous associate and humble handmaid on earth, in faith and obedience to his will, 'finally the immaculate Virgin, who had been kept free of all stain of original sin, completed the course of her life on earth and was raised, body and soul to the glory of heaven.'<sup>9</sup>

Mary then, is the first among the fully redeemed, not so much in the temporal order, since even before the advent of Christ, the just of the Old Dispensation who awaited in ardent expectation his coming are also saved, but in dignity and in the intended order of God. Moreover, her perfect redemption marks her as the beginning of the 'Heavenly Jerusalem', the 'new Heaven' and the 'new Earth' — the Church in Eschatology (cf. Revel. c.21). She represents besides redeemed creation and is consequently a sure sign of the cosmos in its recapitulation and return to God (Rom. 8:19 ff.).<sup>10</sup>

#### MARY AND THE CHURCH

Verily then, Mary is the Church in miniature for she is at once the type of the Church whether 'in via' or triumphant in heaven, and at the same time her most eminent member in that, due to her divine motherhood, God deigned to show her unsurpassing love and endowed her with gifts of outstanding graces thus making her outstrip by far all other creatures in excellence, whether they are in heaven or on earth.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, she is still a faithful member of the Church since the faith of Mary is the faith of the Church in Jesus Christ, and the grace of Mary is the grace of Christ, for Mary owes all to Christ. Hence her high claim among all who are saved throughout time does not come from any merit of her own, but it streams from the overflow of Christ's merits. And her function in the Church in leading others to Christ is in line with that of the Church and subordinate to that of Christ who is sole redeemer and mediator.<sup>12</sup> We can therefore speak of a correlation between Mary and the Church, which does not imply a mere parallelism as of two completely separate or independent realities, but a dependence and a kind of in-

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, art. 59.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 68. Cf. also Jerusalem Bible, opus citatum, exegetical note on Rom. 8:19.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, art. 53.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, artt. 60 & 62.

clusion in each other's work of bringing others to Christ and to their final fulfilment.<sup>13</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The above considerations on the Blessed Virgin Mary may help us better, I believe, to understand her place and role in the human and Christian situation. And they may further serve us to realize the implications of Marian studies in the various theological fields such as Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology and Eschatology – whence the relevance of an anthropologic-biblical approach in contemporary Mariology.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. René Laurentin, *Mary's place in the Church*, London, Burns & Oates pp. 85-86.