

# Mary

MYSTERIES OF THE  
BLESSED VIRGIN MARY



By DR FRANCESCA MURPHY

-DEEPER CHRISTIANITY SERIES-

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# The Practice of Marian Devotion

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Devotion to the mother of Jesus Christ is a peculiar thing. An anthropologist of religion who wanted to study this phenomenon would encounter devout ladies chanting the rosary together before Mass on Saturday mornings. He would notice the whiff of corporate solidarity given off by a Catholic congregation when it sings a Marian hymn. Having detected that these are the only hymns which Catholics join in for, and loudly, he might feel as if he were watching someone else's football club celebrating a victory. Having fought his way through crowded streets to join the queue for the grotto in Lourdes, he would probably classify devotion to Mary as a type of corporate piety. He wouldn't be completely wrong, because Marian devotion does express the identity which all Catholics share. As the mother of the son of God, Mary is the mother of every person who becomes a son or daughter of God in baptism. Devotion to Mary does reflect our identity as members of the one Church. And yet, as the mother of

the Lord, Mary is unique, the most singular woman who ever lived. So the devotion of Christians to Mary is always a personal thing.

Newcomers need help in entering the practice and the spirit of Marian devotion. But it may not help to suggest what emotions one ought to feel about Mary: Marian devotion engages every human heart in its own way. Like the anthropologist, the baptised Catholic can observe these collective devotions and fear that if someone took our notebook away and invited us to join in, we would have the wrong sort of emotions, or none at all. Telling someone else how to feel about Mary is like telling them how to love their own mother. It doesn't work. What *can* be helpful is to describe the practices which Catholics have used over the centuries and to explain how our love for Mary can bring us closer to Christ, her Son. If your response to Mary is unique to you, join the club!

### **The Rosary**

The art of saying the rosary is to use the *words* of the prayers to concentrate one's mind on God, whilst *thinking* about the stages in the Gospel. These stages are the 'mysteries' of the Rosary. Each 'round' of five decades or 'mystery' is a portal into the life of Christ. When I was being received into the Church nearly 25

years ago, there were three acknowledged collections of meditations: the 'Glorious Mysteries,' the 'Joyful Mysteries,' and the 'Sorrowful Mysteries.' I followed a typical exchange in the letters column of a Catholic newspaper about whether it is OK to invent new mysteries, with the conservative rosary-sayers insisting that one must do as the Church has always done, and the progressivists insisting that their children enjoyed thinking up mysteries from the Biblical stories. Eventually, John Paul II outwitted both camps by defining on behalf of the Church a new spectrum for meditation: the 'Mysteries of Light.' Saying the rosary is travelling through the stages in the Incarnation, and remembering his life as a glorious event, as something joyful, as sorrowful, and as luminous.

### **The Mysteries**

The Resurrection, the first 'Glorious mystery,' is followed by (2) the Ascension, (3) Pentecost, (4) the Assumption of Mary, and the Coronation of Mary as queen of heaven (5). These mysteries reveal the *glory* of God. They show us something of heaven. The 'Joyful Mysteries' are the happy events of (1) the Annunciation to Mary by the Angel Gabriel, (2) the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, (3) the birth of Jesus, (4) the presentation of Jesus in the Temple (when the old priest, Simeon,

says, ‘Let thy servant depart in peace, for I have seen thy salvation,’ *Lk* 2.30), and (5) the ‘finding’ of Jesus, teaching the Scribes. I once said the Joyful Mysteries with a friend just before she went into hospital to have her second baby. My friend said that these mysteries correspond to the steps of having a baby: first you find out you are pregnant, you tell your friends the news, the baby is born, you have the baby baptised...and then the child grows up, and makes his way into the world. The ‘Sorrowful Mysteries’ recall that, on Good Friday, Christ became the man of sorrows. We pray and reflect on (1) Jesus’ agony in the Garden, (2) his scourging at the pillar, (3) his crowning with thorns, (4) his carrying the Cross to Golgotha, and (5) his crucifixion and death. Probably, some people now picture scenes from Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* when they meditate on these mysteries, recreating the movie in their mind’s eye.

Pictures have a way of sticking in one’s mind, and visualisation can help us to reflect. When the rosary meditations were first set out in their modern form, in 1483, illustrated books, with wood-cuts of each of the mysteries, were printed for people to look at while they told their beads. John Paul II suggested that one can combine saying the rosary with various kinds of visual aids, like icons: “Announcing each mystery, and perhaps

even using a suitable icon to portray it, is as it were to *open up a scenario* on which to focus our attention. The words direct the imagination and the mind towards a particular episode or moment in the life of Christ. In the Church's traditional spirituality, the veneration of icons and the many devotions appealing to the senses, ...make use of visual and imaginative elements (the *compositio loci*), judged to be of great help in concentrating the mind on a particular mystery. This is a methodology...which *corresponds to the inner logic of the Incarnation*: in Jesus, God wanted to take on human features. It is through his bodily reality that we are led into contact with the mystery of his divinity.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Mysteries of Light**

Down to 2002, Rosary devotion centred on the joyful beginning of the Incarnation, its sorrowful climax, and its glorious conclusion. But if the rosary is, as Pius XII said, “the compendium of the entire Gospel”, what about the middle of the Gospel drama? In his ‘Apostolic Letter on the Most Holy Rosary,’ John Paul II proposed the ‘Mysteries of Light,’ in which Christ figures as the *teacher* of his disciples: (1) the Baptism by John in the Jordan, (2) the Wedding at Cana, (3) the Proclamation of the Kingdom of God, (4) Christ's Transfiguration and (5) his Institution of the Eucharist, at the last supper.

These mysteries are said on Thursdays. When the early Church Fathers talked about ‘illumination,’ they meant the reception of insight into God. ‘Illumination’ is a less prosaic way of saying ‘education.’ John Paul said that, in the luminous stages of his life, “Christ is the supreme Teacher, the revealer and the one revealed. ...Contemplating the scenes of the Rosary in union with Mary is a means of learning from her to ‘read’ Christ, to discover his secrets and to understand his message.”<sup>2</sup>

You can see that the Rosary’s four types of ‘mystery’ reflect certain kinds of human emotion, like joy and sorrow. But no one is obliged to *feel* depressed when they say the sorrowful mysteries, or illuminated on Thursdays and uplifted on Wednesdays and Sundays! The names for the mysteries reflect the character of the *events* on which we reflect when we pray the rosary. To say the rosary is to recall a sequence of real, historical events.

### **Repetitive Prayer**

Praying on beads is an ancient custom, and a useful one, because otherwise one is liable to lose count. But of course you can say the rosary without the beads: for instance, if you work in an office, you can say a decade or so when you are doing some photocopying, using the 1-9 buttons as an abacus – just remember to throw in

number 10! The ubiquity of cell phones has made it impossible for the casual observer to tell the difference between someone talking to a friend, someone silently whispering the rosary, and those eccentrics who talk to invisible friends. Praying the rosary is a bit of all three. It is a good habit, because it turns our thoughts away from ourselves, even at work, and toward the things that matter.

In the 11th century, lay Cistercian monks got the habit of combining humdrum work with repetitive prayer. Since they couldn't read, these monks were dispensed from going into Church to recite the psalms, and said 150 'Our Fathers' instead! 150 corresponded to the number of psalms in the psalter. Another prayer which became popular for repetitive use was the Angelic Salutation, the first half of our 'Hail Mary': *Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus* ('Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed art thou among women'). In the Christian Middle Ages, no one worried about offending people by using religious gear. So it was natural to carry quite large ropes of 150 beads, for chanting the 'Our Father' or, as was common by the 12th century, doing 150 Angelic Salutations, each followed by 'Jesus Christ. Amen.' Eventually, people looked for something more expansive than the Annunciation scene and the Holy

Name. So, in around 1409-1415, a Carthusian monk, Dominic of Prussia, set out no less than fifty key points of the life of Christ, on which to meditate whilst saying one's *Aves*. Two examples are #5: 'Jesus Christ whom thou didst wrap in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Amen' and #19: 'Jesus Christ whose feet Mary Magdalene washed with her tears and wiped with her hair, kissed and anointed. Amen.'<sup>3</sup>

### **Dominican origins of the Rosary**

It was a Dominican friar who realised that, if the Ave was too little, fifty key stages in the Incarnation were too much for anyone to remember. In 1483, this practical friar published *Our Dear Lady's Psalter*, the illustrated rosary book mentioned above: it contains the three major stages (Glorious, Sorrowful and Joyful) with just 15 meditation points, all but one of which are the same as we say today. Apart from the accessible number of meditations, what may have fixed this particular set was the picture book. This combination of repetitive prayer with reflection on easily memorable scenes of the Incarnation caught on and entered the ordinary Catholic's prayer life. In 1520, Pope Leo X commended this practice. In the period of the English Reformation, owning sets of beads was a mark of one who adhered to the 'Old Faith.' By the time Pope Pius V

formally approved the rosary devotion, in 1569, and the Council of Trent included in its Breviary, in 1570, the Rosary had taken the form it has today, with the full ‘Hail Mary,’ including the second half, ‘pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death,’ and the ‘Our Father’ commencing the decades and the ‘Glory be’ concluding them. Dominicans were active in promoting the rosary – it was another Dominican friar, Alberto da Castello who invented the term ‘mystery’ to describe the stages for contemplation. Some theologians, and some lay visionaries, have done their best to make ‘Mariology’ something exotic. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council had a more everyday theology of Mary, defining the Mother of the Lord in terms of the key rosary meditations.<sup>4</sup>

Looked at from the outside in, the Rosary devotion sounds like a string of slurred prayers to ‘Holy Mary, Mother of God.’ Everyone who says it is on the ‘outside’ at some time, and not just anthropologists or casual onlookers, but, for instance, children who are compelled to do it by devout grown-ups, and adult converts who try to develop the practice without any parallel experience of saying one set of words whilst thinking about ‘something else.’ Learning to say the rosary is like learning any skill; it takes time to do it thoughtfully, and from the inside. The difficult part of the learning curve

can be *combining* the mechanics of it – the words – with the meditation. Why say the ‘Hail Mary’ whilst thinking about the Ascension or the Transfiguration? When he announced his Marian encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* (*The Mother of the Redeemer*) on the Feast of Mary, Mother of God, 1st January, 1987, Pope John Paul II described Mary as the “memory of the Church.” The Bible contains the written record of the historical life of Christ and of the primitive Church. Mary is the living record of these events, the woman who personally recollects them. It can help us climb the learning curve of combining ‘rote words’ with Incarnation meditations if we consider that Mary remembers the historical events alongside us, and with us, as we pray. One modern theologian comments that, “Again and again in recent Marian apparitions the Rosary has played a part: ...Mary has fingered the beads along with those praying the Rosary. Why should this be? ...so that it is from her point of view, from her memory that we should look at the mysteries of Jesus’ life... We are forgetful. Things we have already heard too often fade in our memory. But Mary’s memory is throughout all these thousands of years as fresh as on the first day.”<sup>5</sup>

# Apparitions, Hymns and Feasts

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## Some Modern Apparitions – and Shrines

What the Catholic Church calls “public revelation” from God came to an end with the death of the last Apostle. With the death of the ‘last Apostle,’ sacred Scripture was complete and could never be added to. The Church also acknowledges that some “private revelations” have occurred, which add nothing new to the faith deposited in Scripture, but which remind us of that same faith. Appearances of Mary which the Church recognizes are thus “private revelations,” not meant to displace the miracles in the Biblical salvation history, but to help us remember that miracles, or revelations from God, are at the heart of Christianity. Marian apparitions are part of the “private” rather than the public faith of the Church, a witness given to single individuals that God is with us.

A *Rolling Stone* journalist named Randall Sullivan wrote a book about a handful of recent Marian apparitions, from Medjugorje to a West Oregon trailer

park. Investigating what he came to believe were miracles brought this anthropologist to the verge of Catholic faith. But in fact, none of the apparitions described in his book, *The Miracle Detective*, has yet been formally accepted by the Church. Of the nearly 400 appearances of Mary which people have staked a claim for in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only eight have been officially recognized as “private revelation.” When the Church acknowledges an apparition of Mary, it is giving building permission! Formal acceptance of a ‘private revelation’ enables the locals to set up a shrine or some other token of devotion to Mary on the site of the apparition. The eight holy places, or shrines which emerged in the last century as the result of an acknowledged apparition are Fatima, in Portugal, two in Belgium, Beauraing and Banneux, one in Japan, Akita, Syracuse in Italy, one in Manila, in Zeitoun in Egypt, and one in South America, Betania, in Venezuela. Because every shrine has its own typical statue, icon, or picture (like the image of our Lady of Guadalupe), the most well known ‘face’ of Mary in every country reflects the statues made for the shrines. The three famous 19th century Marian apparitions happened in France: to Catherine Labouré, in 1830, which gave rise to the ‘Miraculous Medal’ image of Mary, to Melane Calvat at La Salette in 1846, and that to Bernadette Subirous, at Lourdes in 1858.

## Lourdes

I didn't intend to go to Lourdes. I missed the Dominican pilgrimage there because I was busy buying a house (*Lk 14:18-20*), and planned to make a trip to Tarascon instead, a few weeks later. For, earlier that summer, I'd read in *Le Monde* that a "grotte", or cave was opening up in Tarascon for just two months. The 'grotte' described by *Le Monde* shows the markings of human habitation from tens of thousands of years ago, with pictures on the walls of prehistoric animals. The most famous paleolithic cave paintings are those in Lascaux. Paleolithic art mostly depicts animals and fat ladies. Some archaeologists think the buxom paleolithic ladies are fertility symbols. The fact that our ancient ancestors didn't occupy all of their waking hours with making tools and hunting to eat is interesting. From the very beginning of human time, people have wanted to do more than just what it takes to survive. They have decorated their surroundings with beautiful artefacts. This human need to express itself in art is a sign that the human person is not just an evolutionary go-getter, but also a spirit, seeking to transcend its material conditions.

But, somehow, I ended up at Lourdes, watching those long queues of people feel the walls of a quite different 'grotte.' It's well known that hundreds of people have

claimed to recover from illnesses after a dip in the water from the Lourdes springs, and equally well known, to Catholic intellectuals, that the novelist Flannery O'Connor, suffering from the Lupus which eventually killed her, remarked on being compelled by her family to go to Lourdes, 'I'd rather die for my faith than take a bath for it.' Artistic people, who would love the caves at Tarascon and Lascaux, don't find Lourdes appealing. Some are depressed by the merchandising of Lourdes, the scores of shops selling cuckoo clocks, statuettes of the apparition, and plastic bottles for the holy water. But the main problem is that the heavy 19th century Church, and its grotto, are not really beautiful.

The difference between the lyrical images made by prehistoric artists and the images generated by the Marian apparitions is an important one. Although even the acknowledged apparitions are only deemed to be 'private revelations,' they give a key to the divine, public revelations recorded in Scripture which are the basis of Catholic faith. Paleolithic art expresses the spiritual side of early man, reaching out for the spiritual. The sites of the apparitions remind us of the divine reaching out for the human. If Mary really appeared at Lourdes, at Guadalupe, or at Manila in the Philippines, she was sent there by God. The Marian apparitions, and their shrines, are not about the human spirit stretching out

for the divine, but about God using his Handmaid to reach out to human kind. When he was just a Cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger put it like this: “Mary is not ensconced merely in the past or merely in heaven, God’s preserve. She is, and remains, present and active in this hour of history. She is an acting person here and today. Her life is not only behind us, and nor is it only above us. She goes before us... She interprets the historical moment for us, not through theories, but through action, through the action of showing us the way forward. ...in this texture of action it also comes to light who she is, who we *are*. But this happens only insofar as we become involved in the dynamic thrust of her figure.”<sup>6</sup> The quaint images of the Marian shrines may not be appealing, to artistic sorts, but they can be literally touching, in that Mary, and so God, can touch our minds and bodies through them.

### **Marian Hymns**

Catholics sing Marian anthems on the great Marian feast days, and at many other times. A new Catholic can feel quite awkward singing these emotional hymns, unless they are football fans and have got the hang of chorusing. The film *Educating Rita* has an old fashioned pub-singing scene - but that died out even before the smoking ban. People sing along at pop

concerts, but they're really there for the guitar heroes in the bands. Then there's the last night of the Proms – and that's about it, for modern people. Still, we enjoy singing, for the same reasons people liked painting their caves – it's a way of wearing one's heart on one's sleeve. It's just that we've become unaccustomed to showing our souls in public.

### **The Salve Regina**

One may feel out of place singing hymns to *Mary* because one has the ingrained belief that Church hymns ought to celebrate *God* or Christ, not any human being. This opinion became widespread in the 1970s, and many of the popular Marian anthems dropped out. Instead of singing to Mary after communion, we often sang hymns about what we mean to do for God, like *All that I am*. The result was not what it was intended to be, since these hymns often celebrate the *human communion* of the Church – instead of God! Professor Eamon Duffy described the attitude in some 1970s time-warp Catholic churches after the distribution of the Eucharist as “a comfortable sense of the simple continuum between human and divine community. The painful and contradictory sense of our unity in Christ despite our class and racial antagonisms..., the sheer brokenness

of human society, is buried under a cosier sense of the niceness of all being together.”<sup>7</sup> The Dominican chaplain in our Catholic Chaplaincy at Aberdeen University has enabled us to recover the right atmosphere for the post-communion moments of Mass by making the service conclude with the ancient Marian hymn, *Salve Regina*:

Salve Regina, Mater  
misericordiae,  
Vita dulcedo et spes  
nostra salve.  
Ad te clamamus exsules  
filii Hevae.  
Ad te suspiramus  
gementes et flentes,  
in hac lacrimarum valle.

Eja ergo advocata nostra,  
illos tuos misericordes  
oculos ad nos converte.  
Et Jesum benedictum  
fructum ventris tui  
nobis post hoc exsilium  
ostende.  
O clemens, o pia, o dulcis  
Virgo Maria.

Hail holy queen, mother  
of mercy,  
Hail our life, our  
sweetness and our hope.  
To you do we cry poor  
banished children of Eve,  
To you do we send up our  
sighs, mourning and  
weeping in this vale  
of tears.

Turn then, most gracious  
advocate your eyes of  
mercy toward us.  
And after this, our exile,  
Show us the fruit  
of your womb,  
Jesus.  
O clement, O loving, O  
sweet Virgin Mary.

We sing it in Latin, and can veritably be said to belt it out. It works for three reasons. Like the ‘cosy’ 1970s folk hymns, the *Salve Regina* is also about the Church; but it is about the immaculate and perfect Church above and beyond our ordinary ‘broken’ lives. As the Queen of heaven, Mary represents the Church perfected by Christ: she already is what the Church as a whole will become at the end of history. In looking to her, we look to the authentic Church. It is into the hands of this perfect, feminine Church that Christ gave the power to make the Eucharist. Secondly, and I am no traditionalist or Tridentine rite advocate, it works because of the Latin: ‘dulcis’ is sweeter to sing than ‘sweet’, ‘fructum ventris tui’ tighter than ‘fruit of thy womb.’ The *Salve Regina* is good for corporate singing because it is slightly lugubrious, sad without tipping over into sentimentality. Like many great songs, it speaks of a profound yearning for that place which is over the rainbow. This ancient Marian anthem reminds us that ‘over the rainbow’ is not a sweet, hopeless hope, but a physical reality, a mother with her child. Like the ‘Hail Mary,’ the *Salve Regina* nails the meaning of the Incarnation of God in human form in four little words: ‘benedictum fructum ventris tui,’ ‘the blessed fruit of your womb.’ “A Catholic,” Christopher Derrick once remarked, “cannot say the Hail Mary without mentioning the female generative tract.”<sup>8</sup>

## The Hail Holy Queen

I once spent a day working as a temp in a hospice. Or rather, half a day, and since temporary secretaries get paid by the hour, no notice was given of the brevity of the employment, and the text I typed smacked more of Christian Science than Incarnational Christianity, I had little cause to regard the place as a Christian hospital. After lunch, I went to the hospice Mass. A dozen or so haggard persons had collected there, some in their wheelchairs, and most barely able to stand. We concluded the Mass by singing the anthem which begins 'Hail, Queen of Heaven':

... the ocean star,  
Guide of the wanderer here below;  
Thrown on life's surge we claim thy care.  
Save us from peril and from woe.  
Mother of Christ, star of the sea,  
Pray for the wanderer, pray for me.

And while to him who reigns above,  
In godhead one, in persons three,  
The source of life, of grace, of love,  
Homage we pay on bended knee.  
Virgin most pure, star of the sea,  
Pray for the sinner, pray for me.

The only meaning and purpose of that hospice was in that Mass and in this hymn. Real Catholics don't shy away from vulnerability and mental and *physical* pain. Those who learn this hymn know instinctively that the Mother of Christ is the most real of Catholics, and feel they can confide the pain they feel in their bodies, as well as their souls, to her. Bad and lapsed Catholics may know this especially well: Bruce Springsteen makes his 9/11 fireman "see Mary in the garden" at the moment of his heroic death.<sup>9</sup>

The Church is an 'ark of salvation,' like Noah's ark. Following the Church Fathers, the Dominican mystic, Johann Tauler (1300-1361) understood Proverbs 31:10-31, which likens the "valiant woman" to a "merchant's ship", to refer to the Mother of all Christians. Tauler considered Mary as the 'ship' in whom all Christians sail. He based a devotional poem on this conceit:

A little ship is sailing  
The silent waves between,  
The richest gift she brings us,  
Of all the world the Queen.

The sweetest gift she brings us  
In silence sailing past,  
Her mainsail is a love-song,  
The Holy Ghost her mast.<sup>10</sup>

All the Marian hymns are love songs. This is why they look sappy to casual observers. Our love for our mother is not based in an emotion, but in a fact: she gave birth to us and nurtured us. No Christian faith is motherless, like Frankenstein. Mary, the mother of believers, helps our faith to come to life.

### **Marian Feasts**

The liturgical calendar is marked with Marian feast days. Immediately after Christmas, on 1 January, comes the Solemnity of Mary. February has two, the Presentation of the Lord (in the temple, same as the fifth Joyful mystery) on the 2nd, and Our Lady of Lourdes, on the 11th. March sees the Feast of the Annunciation, on the 25th. May is dedicated to Mary, reflecting her youthful and springlike character. Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote a beautiful poem, “May Magnificat,” about May as the month of Mary which you might want to look up, if you like poetry. June has Our Mother of Perpetual Help, on the 27th. The central Marian feast day in modern times is the Assumption. Celebrated on the 15th of August, this feast is a liturgical expression of the ancient dogma of the assumption of Mary into heaven. Belief that Mary was bodily assumed into heaven goes back to the 3rd or 4th century: it was sufficiently common place to form part

of the 'Glorious Mysteries,' which, as we saw, were developed in the 15th century. There are Baroque paintings of Mary floating into heaven, encircled by ecstatic angels. The Assumption was defined by Pius XII in 1950. September has three Marian feasts, the 'Birth of Mary' on the 8th, 'Our Lady of Sorrows' on the 15th and a reminder of the mediaeval apparition of Mary in the Norfolk village of Walsingham, 'Our Lady of Walsingham,' on the 24th. Since the Church defines it as Rosary month, October has 'Our Lady of the Rosary,' on the 7th. The 'Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary,' is on 21st November. Building up through Advent to Christmas, December is given two important Marian feasts, the Immaculate Conception, on the 8th, and Our Lady of Guadalupe on the 12th.

### **Why so many feasts?**

Why are so many days in the liturgical calendar devoted to Mary? It is to keep our minds on the end of time, which often seems too far off to be at all exciting. In Jesus' own time, many people were wanting to know when God would return in glory to set up his Paradise, the kingdom of God. In his answers to their questions, Jesus often makes the End of time sound very near indeed. He was not mistaken about this, for the End of ordinary history, or the 'Eschaton' happened with his

Resurrection from the dead. 'Time' was never the same again: a new world had begun to be born. The eternal world of God's new Paradise has already entered history. One human being already lives amongst us as one who has regained the innocence of the paradise lost by Adam and Eve. That person is Mary. The liturgical Calendar is marked with her feast days to remind us that ordinary time is not just going on, and on, after Christ, but that the Eschaton has peeped into our history. As Hugo Rahner suggests, the "last day and final judgement have begun already." For the "final glory" into which Mary has entered "is a recognition of the final glory of the Church. This indeed sometimes seems very far away in a remotely future time, but then we are often too shortsighted, and need to look close at hand, where we can find the heavenly reality hidden in our everyday lives."<sup>11</sup>

# The Theology of Marian Devotion

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## The Two Sides of Mariology

The theology of Mary has two sides to it. One side connects up with Christ, with the Incarnation, and the other side is linked to the Church. The first formal doctrines taught by the Church about Mary were related to Christ (or 'Christological'). In the fifth century, disputes arose amongst theologians about the bond between Christ's human nature and his deity. Surely his divine nature could not be so closely bound up with his humanity that it went through the physical process of birth, and crawled around the floor in nappies? In order to keep Christ's divinity out of physical processes which revolt intellectuals, theologians were dreaming up clever ways of keeping it separate from his humanity. Others realised that the salvific effect of the Incarnation depends precisely on the divine nature of the Son becoming wholly and entirely bound up with the humanity of Jesus. To

compartmentalise the divinity and humanity of Jesus in such a way that Mary is only the mother of the *man*, not of the Son of God, is to deny that the Word *really* became flesh (*Jn* 1:14). In order to safeguard the full reality of the Incarnation of God in the man Jesus Christ, the Ecumenical Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) named Mary as '*Theo-tokos*,' the God-bearer, meaning that she bore God within her womb.

### **Mary and the Incarnation**

It may seem odd to us that Mary should have to be formally and dogmatically *defined* as the Mother of God. But historically, nearly every attempt to diminish the complete interpenetration of humanity *and* divinity in Christ has wanted to wriggle out of thinking of God himself as subject to the indignity of being carried about in the womb of a woman, and physically born. Marian devotion reinforces our sense of the concrete reality of the Incarnation of God. That was the purpose of the first formal, theological Mariology, as laid out in the title '*Theotokos*,' given to Mary at Ephesus and Chalcedon. Putting Mary in the foreground backs up our belief that Jesus is not simply a highly inspired man, a spiritual genius, or someone to whom the spirit of God was always quite close, but, rather, God Himself in human *flesh*. It has wisely been said that, for the Word to be

made flesh, it wasn't possible for Jesus to have a human father but no human *mother*: the basic presupposition of the incarnation is that a woman and mother should give birth to the Word. The way in to Mariology taken by most people, perhaps, and certainly the way in taken by the first dogmatic definitions, is Christological. The Incarnational side of Mariology highlights her *sacramental* significance, the way in which her *body* became the temple and dwelling place of God. In order to "dwell amongst us" (*Jn* 1:14), God had first to indwell the 'temple' of Mary's womb. All religions have sacred spaces and places, and, in her role as the bearer of the Lord, Mary is the supreme 'sacred place.'

### **Mary and the Church**

When Christians think of sacred spaces, they are likely to think of church buildings. Many particular churches are connected by name or by dedication to Our Lady (the Cathedral in my hometown is dedicated to 'Our Lady of Aberdeen,' for instance). This helps to concretise her link to ecclesiology, the science of the Church. Even before the title of "God-bearer" was formally given to Mary, theologians had had much to say about her. The claims which the early Church and Patristic theologians made about her were tied to their idea of the Church. They spoke of Mary as the *mother*

of all believers, generating, giving birth to and nourishing Christians, just as the Church does. As the 'archetype' of the Church, Mary is someone different from Christ, just as every human member of the Church is someone different from Christ. The second side of Mariology, which is ecclesiological, highlights the reality of Mary, and thus of all Christians, as persons who co-operate with Christ. In terms of Church dogma, this side of Mariology has been emphasized since the Protestant Reformation, and it is probably the main reason why some Protestants think that Mariolatry (or inappropriate devotion to Mary) and Mariology are one and the same thing. Because the 16th century Protestant Reformers seemed to think of God's grace and human action as a zero-sum game, in which the human is entirely out numbered by the divine, the Catholics, in turn, emphasised that human beings co-operate with God's grace. The word 'co-operation' is important here: it takes *two*, God and a created person, to *co-operate*. Mary has always been in the frontline of this debate, as the most outstanding example of the co-operation of divine and human action which Catholic doctrine attests. For Catholics, Mary is the living token of the fact that divine grace acts through created persons, not replacing them or making them God's ventriloquists or puppets on a

divine string. “Mariology,” Ratzinger says, “demonstrates that the doctrine of grace does not revoke creation, but is the definitive Yes to creation.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Free co-operation with God**

Divinity and humanity come together in Christ’s incarnation, and grace and nature interpenetrate in every baptised person, working together, not against each other, because nature is God’s creation. *Lumen Gentium* summed up the Catholic teaching when it stated that “the holy Fathers,” the Patristic and mediaeval doctors of the Church “see her as used by God not merely in a passive way, but as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience. For, as St. Irenaeus says, she ‘being obedient, became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race.’”<sup>13</sup> Mary and indeed all graced believers are real *actors* or agents within God’s plan. Catholics think of Mary or the Church, and Christ, as having a symbiotic unity, like husband and wife do, but also as being different from one another, as husband and wife are. Two of the most famous Marian dogmas of the past two centuries, the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950) are directed to Mary as someone who is a person in her own right.

The ‘Incarnational’ and ‘Ecclesial’ sides of Mariology are different without, of course, being absolutely distinct. The Vatican II Constitution *Lumen Gentium* describes Mary’s ‘cooperation’ with Christ’s grace as being a consequence of her physical “conception” of Christ and maternal companionship with him in his earthly ministry. *Lumen Gentium* says that Mary “is hailed as a pre-eminent and singular member of the Church, and as its type and excellent exemplar in faith and charity. The Catholic Church, taught by the Holy Spirit, honors her with filial affection and piety as a most beloved mother...the Blessed Virgin was in this earth the virgin Mother of the Redeemer... She conceived, brought forth and nourished Christ. She presented Him to the Father in the temple, and was united with Him by compassion as He died on the Cross. In this singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Saviour in giving back supernatural life to souls. Wherefore she is our mother in the order of grace.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Mary ‘type’ of the Church**

But how can Mary be an individual – the historical, Jewish woman about whom historians writes – *and* the whole Church – thousands and thousands of persons, throughout history? Isn’t it just a sort of metaphor? Yes

and no. It is certainly intended to be taken symbolically, or allegorically, rather than literally. Because they believed that God is the ultimate author of Scripture, the Fathers of the Church thought of everyone, and everything in Scripture as having some allegorical meaning. For instance, Augustine, and Irenaeus before him, thought of Noah's Ark as an allegorical preview of the Church. In the 7th century, Isidore of Seville (560-636) wrote in an encyclopedia of Biblical symbols that "Mary stands for the Church. For the Church is espoused to Christ, and as a virgin conceives us, and brings us to birth as a virgin" (*The Allegories*).

To understand this allegorical way of looking at Scripture properly, it is helpful to focus on the word *preview*. The word the Fathers use is 'type,' as in archetype. A 'type' is like a preview. For the Fathers, in their Biblical interpretation, every Old Testament 'type' has its fulfilment in a New Testament counterpart, and likewise, much in the New Testament is also replayed symbolically in Christian history. The commonest modern experience of such 'typological,' previewing readings of Scripture happens on Easter night, when we hear the reading about the Crossing of the Red Sea (from the book of Exodus), which is fulfilled in the *Resurrection* of Christ from the dead, and symbolised in our contemporary lives by the baptism of believers: the

Exodus is a 'type' of the Resurrection, and baptism is a sacramental or symbolic sharing in the Resurrection. Exodus is the forerunner or preview of the Resurrection, and baptism is its living recreation. So every 'type' has three lives, in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and in the life of the Church. When the Fathers, like Irenaeus and Augustine, claimed that Eve was the 'type' of Mary, the allegorical preview of Mary, they meant that Eve's meaning for humanity was completed or realised in Mary. Thus, they call *Mary* the "Mother of the living," because Eve is like a trailer for Mary, and Eve's allegorical significance is completely viewed, and lived, in Mary. Mary, in her turn, is, as Isidore says, summing up five centuries of earlier theology, the allegory of the Church.

### **Mary without sin**

Mary epitomises the Church. This is at the heart of the meaning of the 'Immaculate Conception' of Mary, the teaching that, from the moment of her conception, Mary was without sin. When we speak of the allegorical or symbolic significance of a Biblical character or event, we are thinking of the meaning which God gives it and which is actualised in human history. Eve, the first human woman, was intended by God to live in Paradise, eternally sinless and at one with God. It is in

this that she previews the sinlessness of Mary. The allegories or symbols in the Old Testament are not just buried deep inside the *words*, so that a very clever person could dig them out. The historical events of the New Covenant make those of the Old Testament symbolical: That is why we can only understand the Old Testament in the light of the New. In a sense, Eve only *becomes* a type or preview of Mary when paradisaical innocence is regained, by Mary. Augustine wrote that, ‘But already then, Mary was included in Eve; yet it was only when Mary came, that we knew who Eve was.’ [*Sermon 102*].

The statement in Genesis 3, that a woman will crush the serpent’s head, comes to life in the sinlessness of Mary, the defeat of the original sin of Adam and Eve in her. But not only in her, as an historical individual. In her immaculate conception, Mary is the archetype of the Church. She is what God intended for all humanity, for all “the living” of whom she is the “mother.” This is why the Church teaches that Mary is the fulfilment of Eve: God’s plan for humanity, begun in Eve, is completed in Mary – and therefore, in the Church. Saint Paul in his letters taught the first Christians that God intended them to be ‘holy and unspotted’ (*immaculati*) before Him (*Ep 1:4*; cf. *Col 1:22*). The Church of all Christians is to be *immaculate*. God has already made it so in Mary, and

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