

**“Mariology and the Sense of Mystery:  
The Virgin Mary, and the Spiritual Practice of Catholic Theology”**

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**Opening comments:**

“Call no man your master, for you have only one master, the Christ, and you are all brothers.” When Thomas Aquinas comments on this saying of Christ in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, he is, of course, aware that he obeys the Master of the Dominican Order and is himself called a Master of Theology in Paris, as are his colleagues who completed the commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard and who lecture in the university. Aquinas helpfully notes that Christ differs from other teachers in at least three ways. First, he is himself the plenitude of the Truth, as the Word of God, and so he does not refer to truths outside of himself but contains all truth within himself. Second, he does not receive the truth from another, but as the Word Incarnate is one who communicates saving truth to others, without receiving it from others. Third, the human teacher points others toward truths they themselves must aspire and eventually intuit for themselves. Christ however, by his divine light and his capital grace, can move us inwardly to see the truths that he himself teaches and embodies. He alone is the inward teacher. These observations suggest that a Master of Sacred Theology in the Dominican Order should be Christ-centered and live out his teaching mandate in relative reference to the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

However, here on the cusp of the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception I would like to pivot to turn toward the Mother of Jesus. Her mystery does indeed teach us something about him and about us, and it also teaches us, as I will suggest, something about the practice of theology.

For many years before I came to Rome I lived and taught at the Priory and Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC. So, I also thought it would be fitting to choose this day as an occasion to render thanks to members of my province for their fraternal friendship, trust, and for this honor that they have bestowed on me in collaboration with the Master of the Order and his Council.

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What I would like to explore in this presentation is the notion that what is true in general for Mariology and sanctification is also true in a specific way for the practice of theology as it relates to the spiritual life. Ontological and moral proximity to the Virgin Mary is of assistance to the practice of theological contemplation, teaching, and writing. Why is this the case, and how is it so? To treat these questions, I will proceed by considering three interrelated topics successively. First, what is the nature of the Virgin Mary's ontological exemplarism for the life of the Church? From whence does it arise, in terms of the mysteries of her own life? Second, what is the nature of the universal divine maternity of the Virgin in the order of grace and how does it relate to the efficacy of her communication of grace to the mystical body, *sub Christo* and *cum Christo*? Third, how are the efficient intercession and Christological term of the Virgin Mary's life important for the work of theologians, and for the spiritual life of theology? What is the role of the Virgin Mary in the spiritual life of the theologian, with respect to the pursuit of the science of *sacra doctrina*?

**I. Ontological Exemplarism: The Virgin as Model in the Order of Faith, Hope, and Love**

The ontological exemplarism of the Blessed Virgin arises in virtue of her perfection in the order of grace, instantiated in a series of mysteries we might designate as foundational, missionary-oriented, and terminative.

The quintessential foundational mystery of the life of the Blessed Virgin pertains to her Immaculate Conception, which indicates not only her primordial sinlessness, as one redeemed in anticipation of the merits of Christ from the first moment of conception, but also indicates her initial perfection of grace, by which she begins life as one in the highest order of creaturely grace, a grace that will flower developmentally, manifest itself and become more perfect in the course of her life. Here we can note at the start that there is something eschatologically terminative about her initial grace of sanctification: the Virgin is as one who is sinless and full of grace, the kind of person that Christians hope and aim to become eventually, by the grace of Christ. The mystery of the Immaculate Conception manifests itself first in a public way in the virginal consecration that the Virgin makes of herself to God in her youth, indicated in the Church's early popular piety in the *Protoevangelium of James* which recounts an idealized portrait of this ontological moment. The virginal consecration is foundational because it disposes her to the core mystery of her life, that of the Annunciation, in which she becomes the Mother of God and so enters into the inauguration of the apostolic and ministerial life of her Son.

The missiological dimension of the Virgin's life begins in the mystery of the Annunciation, wherein the hidden designs of God are revealed to her in a most epitomal way. The Angelic salutation reveals to her the mystery of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as well as the Incarnation, or human conception of the Lord, the Son of God made man. Her contemplative understanding of the mysteries is both deeply personal, or individual to her, and exemplary; that is to say, as an ideal model for others. St. Augustine claims that she conceived the Word in her mind and heart prior to conceiving the Word in her womb. To speak in anachronistically dogmatic terms, St. Luke's depiction of the event suggests that the truth of what Christians call the mysteries

of the Trinity and the Incarnation are unveiled to her first, in a profoundly intensive way, in this primeval of New Testament revelatory events.

It is in light of this initial revelation of the Savior, which the Virgin receives at the inception of her maternity, that her life is framed henceforth as she becomes a most privileged disciple of her Son. John's Gospel communicates this idea discreetly by underscoring the role of the Mother of the Lord in the "hour" of Jesus (in John 2:4). At the wedding of Cana, prior to the inauguration of his public ministry, the Mother of Jesus takes an initiative that leads to the first public miracle of Christ. Her invitation to him to resolve the problem of an absence of wine at the wedding has clear symbolic overtones. It is the bridegroom who is the Messiah who has come to initiate the wedding feast of Israel and of humanity with God. The new wine of life in the Son and in his Spirit is initiated in the public ministry of Jesus, and his mother stands at the head of this initiative by her unique act of intercession. What is more startling and significant is the anguish of the response her request provokes in Christ who notes to her in protest that his hour has not come. (John 2:4) "The hour" of Jesus is a central theme in the Gospel, alluding to his death and to the mystery of the atonement. Thus her intercession brings forth the question and possibility of her association in the mystery of his redemptive suffering, acute interior agony, and death. His address to her as "woman" has biblical overtones that recall the mystery of Eve, the first woman, and seem to suggest that the Mother of Jesus is the new Eve, alongside the new Adam, who is Christ. The "hour" of Jesus comes to its terminus, of course, in the mystery of the crucifixion, which marks the apex of the redemption, and is also the moment in which the missiological life of the Virgin turns towards its terminological resolution. At the Cross, the Virgin Mary stands in faith with her Son. (John 19:25-27) The Second Vatican Council notes that her active life of faith, hope, and charity in the hour of the redemption unites her spiritually and mystically with the offering that

Christ makes of himself to the Father on behalf of the human race. We will have more to say about this below. For our current purposes, it suffices to observe that the Virgin Mary exhibits a perfection of discipleship and of conformity to the mystery of her Son in this event of his crucifixion and death. The event is missiological because it brings to fulfillment the temporal mission and redemptive life of her Son, Jesus Christ, and it is terminative because, already in this event, the eschatological life of humanity has dawned.

In the terminative phase of her life, the Virgin Mary lives out her own conformity to this eschatological dimension of the mystery of Christ but in a gradual way. As the common tradition of the Church and of sound theological reflection suggests, she not only maintained faith in the redemption on the day of Holy Saturday, even while all others seemed to falter, but she must also have come to perfect faith in the resurrection of Christ on the night of Easter. Her prayer with the apostolic college in the upper room in Acts 1:13-14 signals her centrality to the eschatological life of the Church, sent from Jerusalem out to all the nations, preaching the Gospel in every tongue. Finally, her death and assumption into heaven are marked by a mystery of perfect conformity to Christ in his glory, wherein she accedes to perfection in the Christian life of heaven. In the beatification of her soul and her flesh, the Mother of Jesus is most perfectly conformed to the eschatological life of her Son. Her radiant holiness in the life of glory as the Mother of God, and as a universal intercessor and queen, makes her the most highly exalted of all creatures in the cosmos. In the exemplarity of her grace, she is an eschatological icon of the Church, she who is now and ever shall be the most living and dynamically perfected, after Christ, in the order of the grace.

## **II. Maternity and Communication (Marian “Instrumental” Efficiency)**

I turn now to our second topic: what is the nature of the universal divine maternity of the Virgin in the order of grace and how does it relate to the efficacy of her communication of grace to the mystical body? To address this question, let us consider the mystery of the Virgin Mary’s voluntary consent to the mystery of the Incarnation in her Annunciation, and her voluntary intercession with Christ in the mystery of the crucifixion. Third, we can ask, what is this efficacy of the Virgin? Should it be considered primarily instrumental or moral? In what sense might we affirm either or both of these ideas?

The formal cooperation of the Virgin Mary in the work of Christ’s salvation has its origins in the mystery of the Annunciation. Her mission of personal cooperation with the mystery of redemption begins, formally as such, in her hour of consent to the angelic salutation, wherein the mystery of God’s Incarnation in our human nature is made known to her. In faith she freely consents to become “the Mother of the Lord” (cf. Luke 1:43). The reason that this form of free consent is already “co-meritorious” is that it allies her with that mystery which is most foundational to the redemption of the human race: the Incarnation. In his Incarnation, the Son of God takes on a complete individual human nature, of body informed by a spiritual soul, and in doing so unites human nature to himself personally, by a mystery that the Church’s tradition designates with the use of the term “hypostatic union”. The divine nature of the Son and his human nature are united without confusion within the Person of the Word, a substantial union of the Word made flesh. The humanity of Christ is the humanity of the Son of God.

Once the Incarnation has occurred, the principle of universal redemption is instantiated. This is the case first because the God-man is one of infinite dignity in his person, and his human actions and sufferings are of infinite dignity. Second, the human action, teaching, miracle working,

and suffering of Christ are animated by the plenitude of grace and charity that irradiates his human soul and body. In virtue of these two reasons, the infinite dignity of the hypostatic union and the plenitude of the grace of Christ, all that he does and suffers for the entirety of his life is meritorious of our salvation. Indeed, as Aquinas notes, any one act of Christ is of merit sufficient to redeem the human race, even if it is also fitting that he should redeem us in a particular way through his passion and death, as a particularly intensive expression of divine and human love. Therefore, to return to our central point at this juncture: once the Incarnation has occurred, the conditions of the redemption of the human race have been accomplished.

Because the Virgin Mary is associated meritoriously by faith, hope, and love in the acceptance of the Incarnation, she is associated directly with the conditions for the foundational mystery of redemption. Our point here is that if her consent is in any way holy and meritorious, which it is, then it is associated as an act *with all the effects that will ever come from the redemption*, just insofar as it is associated with that mystery that is the foundation and principle of all effects of the redemption. Her action in the Annunciation has an effect that is universal in extension simply because it is an action that is associated directly with the very instantiation of the universal principle of salvation. It is also inspired by this principle and dependent upon it, the person of Christ himself.

What do we mean, however, when we speak of the merits of the Blessed Virgin, or of any saints for that matter, in distinction to the merits of Christ? Here it is useful to recall the two-fold distinction of merit developed in classical medieval theology: *meritum condigni* and *meritum congrui*. In Aquinas' rendering of this distinction, condign merit refers to the merit proper to Christ in virtue of the infinite dignity of his perfect, his innocent, sinless human nature, and his unique plenitude of grace. All grace of justification, which renders human persons integral in spiritual

health as beings well-ordered toward God, derives from the merits of Christ in this sense. Congruent merit refers to a merit of one Christian for another, consisting not in strict obligation but acquired only in virtue of friendship with God. Defined in this way, congruent merits are merits of fittingness, wherein God first moves a person by grace, who is already his friend in charity, so that this person prays for another. God, in turn, answers the intercessory prayer or inspired meritorious deed of the person in question for the sake of friendship and charity. This vision of saintly merit preserves the primacy of the grace and justification of Christ in all things while extending the work of intercession and merit from Christ to the saints. Far from moving them dispassionately as marionettes in a divinely rigged game, this understanding underscores the freedom of the saints, who are so moved inwardly by the liberating power of grace that they freely undertake in charity to join themselves to the work of the atonement, not as something Christ needs or that accentuates his reign but as an expansion and expression outside of Christ of what is already present within him in an original and undiminishable plenitude. Far from competing with or contributing to Christ, the merits of the saints are an expression of the inner riches of Christ rendered manifest in the outward life of the Church.

This idea may be applied to the Virgin Mary in a unique way in the mystery of the crucifixion. As noted above, her cooperation in the mystery of the Cross is active, exemplified by her faith, hope, and charity. She lives in union with her Son even in his moment of extraordinary suffering, torment, and eventual death, as well as in his burial and descent into hell. Because she lives in all of this with faith and hope, the Virgin Mary believes, however obliquely, that the action undertaken by her Son is redemptive, that is to say, that the redemption of the universe is taking place in and through his life, ministry and now his suffering and death, in a very intentional way. She understands however obscurely in faith that what is transpiring is happening in view of the



salvation and transformation of the world. Insofar as she bears the sorrow and unspeakable maternal suffering of being subject to this event herself in genuine and profound love for her Son, his mission and his self-offering to the Father, so too she associates herself willingly in his offering and in his living act of atonement.

Understood in light of the previous distinction of merit, we may say that Christ alone atones for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2) in the hour of his passion, in the merit of plenary dignity or condign merit. However, the Virgin Mary, uniquely among all the saints, takes part in this event as a living participant, as one who is full of grace and without sin, and who offers her immaculate heart to the Father in faith, hope, and love in union with her crucified Son. She is conscious in some way of his plenitude of grace as the messianic Lord and Savior, and she intentionally wills, prays and acts meritoriously in union with him in the supernatural order of grace. This congruent merit, or merit of friendship and fittingness, is wholly dependent upon and derived from that of Christ crucified, but it is also a first fruit of the Cross, the life of Christ made manifest and expressed in ecclesial fashion in the life of the Virgin Mary. Her merit and intercession at the Cross are of a maximal extension and intensivity because they take place in the hour of the redemption of all human beings, in the most perfect unity with Christ in the order of faith, hope, and love, in a human person in a perfection of created grace (“full of grace” Luke 1:28), and in a person without sin (characterized symbolically by the notion of the immaculate heart of Mary).

This brings us to the topic of the universal scope and horizon of the intercession of the Blessed Virgin. The intercession of the Mother of Jesus at the Cross is united to his intercession on behalf of sinners, and her merits are coordinated with his and dependent upon them. Thus, her intercession and merit in the crucifixion are universal in scope, as are his, and the universality here

mirrors the universality of the effect of the Annunciation or Incarnation. Just as the Virgin's consent to the Incarnation links her indissolubly to the redemption of all, so her consent to the crucifixion does so as well.

During the time of her earthly life after the crucifixion of Christ, this universal intercession of the Virgin is hidden or discreet, and is only manifest publicly primarily in virtue of her connection to the apostolic college as the Mother of Jesus. However, after her glorification in the Assumption, there is a change. In the mystery of the Assumption, the Blessed Virgin is glorified in both body and soul, and lives forever in glory in communion with her risen Son. In her beatific vision, she has, in virtue of the perfection of her holiness, the most extensive and intensive beatific vision of any spiritual creature, angelic or human, and so she is the closest of all to Christ in his human knowledge and grace, in virtue of which he is head of the Church. Therefore, just as he knows humanly in his beatific vision the whole mystery of the Church, in heaven and on earth, in time from Adam to the apocalypse, so too she knows the whole Church with him, in the light of her beatific vision. Just as he wills humanly to communicate the fruits of the redemption and his own personal grace to all persons throughout time and in the eschaton, so too she wills with him that this grace might be communicated to all, to those who are potential members of Christ's mystical body, to actual members in the cosmos and time, and to those fully redeemed in the life of the blessed. She is associated then in the universal communication of grace to all, and in particular to all members of the Church, by her intercession and prayer. This suggests that there is an ecclesiological horizon to the Virgin Mary's life for all of human history, and one that has consequences for the state of our relationship with Christ in the world to come. She will always be the most proximate to Christ, and she will also always be associated with him in the life of grace, by which he communicates grace to us as the God-man, and she is associated morally and

somehow instrumentally or effectively in the communication of this grace, in virtue of her living role in the Church as the Mother of God.

This brings us to the final and most substantive question of this second section of our study. How ought we to understand the role that the Virgin Mary plays by her intercession in the communication of grace to the Church? Does she not only intercede for grace but also actively instrumentally communicate grace? Twentieth century Thomistic Mariologists have debated this question in detail, with some such as Garrigou-Lagrange considering the likely position that the Virgin communicates grace by “physical instrumentally,” so that when she wills to give grace, this comes to the recipient in a kind of directly channeled way. Other authors like Charles Journet have held that her intercession is principally moral, like that of the other saints, as she intercedes for other human beings, but that this intercession is of greater scope and intensity than that of others in virtue of her privileges.

Part of the confusion in this matter stems from the use of terms. I would posit that the notion of instrument in Aquinas is a very flexible, analogical notion. In some passages of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, he notes that every reality in creation is an instrument of God in some attenuated sense because God’s providence works through all things, no matter how remote their agency is to the final end of human beings and the spiritual ends of the cosmos. Seen in this very broad sense, we might first note that the second sense of Marian efficiency noted above, that pertaining uniquely to moral intercession, is still in real sense instrumental, even if the instrumentality in kind is not sacramental. The best construction of a treatment of this topic seems to come from the comparison and contrast of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, in regard to the communication of grace.

All grace derives from the Holy Trinity, principally. Grace also derives from the humanity of Christ, not principally but instrumentally, as a channel. Christ wills as Lord and God to communicate grace to the world with his Father and with the Holy Spirit. He also wills this as man, in his human heart and in accord with his human wisdom. The perfect conformity of the two wills of Christ is rooted principally in his person as the Word made man. Likewise, the habitual grace of Christ is the exemplary cause and original font of the grace received by all other human beings. When he wills that others receive grace, he wills that they receive *his* grace and their grace is patterned in limited ways after his perfection and unequalled original plenitude.

The Virgin Mary can be contrasted with Christ on these points. Evidently, her willing does not occur within the unity of the hypostasis of the Son made man. In her we encounter instead the perfect conformity of the will of a creature with the will of God. Thus, we can note that the Virgin Mary is not the cause of grace, even instrumentally. Nor is her willing efficient in the distinctive way that Christ's human willing alone is intrinsically efficient, as the human will of one who is God. All that she wills in virtue of her proximity to Christ she wills in virtue of the more primary initiative of God acting in her by grace and in dependence upon the more primary activity of her Son in his divine and human agency and his communication of grace, upon which she is dependent and which she is conformed to inwardly as are all the saints.

Regarding the second comparison, we can note that, while all human beings receive grace from the capital headship of Christ and his habitual grace, so too the Virgin Mary receives all her grace from him. However, it is also true that all human beings receive the grace of Christ *accompanied by the intercession of the Virgin Mary*, which itself is inspired and initiated by the inward life in her of the grace of Christ. What she receives from Christ 'first' in the order of grace, so in turn all others receive from Christ directly, not mediated from him through her, but received

from him directly. However, this grace is always received with the association of her prayer and intercession as well as her volitional desire. What she wills from and with Christ, she wills in such a way that it transpires, by his efficacy and by her perfect conformity to his designs. Here we should make a crucial observation. The Virgin Mary does intercede for others in Christ and with Christ, in strict ontological dependence upon his primacy in the order of grace. But she also intercedes as a reflective, free, volitional person. Her habitual action of reflection and desire, even in the beatific vision and in her assumption into glory, are respected, much as nature is respected by grace. Therefore, even when she is moved inwardly by perfect conformity to the Holy Spirit and by perfect union with the heart of her Son, to will with him as he wills, and so to communicate something of the Marian form of Christian life to others, she also wills this of her own volition as a genuine created cause, taken in the general sense. She is an autonomous personal agent, according to her nature. If this is the case, we can say, for example, that *whatsoever* the Virgin Mary wills in the order of grace will indeed happen effectively and that she can *by personal initiative or impulse* design or will to communicate grace in a specific way to a specific soul. However, when we do affirm this, there are necessary caveats that are implicit. She only ever does this as one who is always already in beatitude, illumined from within, and her heart is inspired to desire in accord with the designs of God, without any diminishment of her freedom, but on the contrary, in the most perfect and highest of all freedoms present in any creature who ever has been or ever will be. Her intercession is not intrinsically effective of itself independently of Christ and the Spirit, but it is formally effective as such, always only from and with Christ and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, all that is received from Christ is received by her maternal intercession, which is always associated with the work of Christ.

### III. The Christological Term: Theology and the Spiritual Life in a Marian Key

In the third and final part of this essay, we can consider ways that the Marian character of our grace can affect the *habitus* of theology as such, both (a) intrinsically and (b) by proximate conditions of exercise through a life of Marian virtues. Here we should first recall that theology is an intellectual virtue or a form of habitual learning that is exerted from within a prior supernatural *habitus* of faith. One can only pursue the activity of Christian theology because one already has the infused habit of faith that accords an intellectual connaturality with the supernatural mystery of God as such. At the same time, the gift of faith itself does not suffice for the cultivation of the habit of theology, since the latter is instantiated in an intellectual practice in accord with our human natural mode of discursive learning and reasoning. The human mind in any given science makes use of discovery of first principles to pass to deductive conclusions about causes and effects in a given domain of knowledge. This is true also for theology even though the principles and conclusions are concerned with the formal object of mysteries made known supernaturally in the faith. Theologians must have faith, hope, and love but they also must have those intellectual practices that are customary for any person of acute study, right judgment, sound reasoning, and reasonable consideration of diverse viewpoints. Those who seek theological learning must cultivate intellectual and moral virtues proper to their field, like the right speculative consideration of sources, habitual fidelity to first principles, just consideration of a range of opinions, fairness in dialectic, the illustration of points from evidence, and transparent and clear reasoning. Moral virtues associated with these practices include studiousness, charity, fairness to persons, chastity, zeal, fortitude, perseverance, and of course humility, to say nothing of virtues of religion, such as habitual prayer and devotion, penance and sacrifice, exerted toward God as Creator and Savior.

How does the Virgin Mary enter into all of this? We have noted above that the Virgin Mary can inspire and will for her spiritual children an intensification of the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. She can also will by a special providence an augmentation or intensification of those intellectual and moral virtues specifically oriented to the study of theology. Some affect the practice of the *habitus* of theology intrinsically, such as the virtues of knowledge (*scientia*) allied with the moral virtue of studiousness, so that the work of the theologian is more intellectually insightful or profound, just or rigorous in measure, insofar as that work is considered as an intellectual and scientific practice of the mind. Some affect the practice by ambient conditions of its exercise, as in the case of virtues such as chastity or the virtues of religion (adoration, prayer) so that the intellectual gaze of a theologian upon God is protected or empowered in some way by these virtues, rather like turrets of a fortress that surround an observation tower wherein one may peer upward serenely into the heavens. Of course, we know in reality the serenity of contemplation and the practice of spiritual warfare often co-exist in mutual support of one another. But the point of such imagery is to suggest an order of priorities. The infused moral virtues can aid in the stable pursuit of higher forms of virtue, namely those allied most directly with the deepening knowledge of God in faith, hope and love. Theology that is conducted within this context profits from the supernatural life of faith from above, and from the protections and dispositions of the infused moral virtues, from below as it were, while having its own integrity in the center as a practice of intellectual speculation, characterized by its own integrity of scientific truthfulness, rigor, and organic history of progressive discovery and expansion. In all of this, the Virgin Mary can intercede actively in the life of the Church to call forth individuals, from doctors of the Church to professors of seminary and indeed whole societies, such as religious orders, for the purpose of theological speculation, in the service of the common good of the people of God. The Church is

protected and aided by those groups of persons, and those schools and traditions of sound theological reasoning, in which contemplation and science of doctrine are cultivated actively, not only for the sanctification of theologians themselves, but also in order to communicate from one generation to the next in the Church a life of holiness of mind, through the habitual study of the mystery of God. In all this the Virgin Mary is an intercessor and effective agent of inspiration, who communicates to members of Christ's mystical body a Marian sense of the faith, and a Marian practice of the contemplative and rational practice of theology as a science of revealed truth.