

MARY AND EVANGELIZATION TODAY

Model for the Missionary Church

In the Vatican II era, one can point to some important Church documents that provide fine theological-biblical-pastoral insights on the role of Mary in the Church and in Catholic devotion. The Council incorporated its teaching on Mary into its 1964 document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*; this decision firmly anchors Marian theology within mainstream Church teaching. The eighth chapter of *Lumen Gentium* (52-69) bears the title: “The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church.” In itself, this title presents a balanced and integrated Mariology, always linking Mary to Christ and the Church.

Saint Pope Paul VI was a Marian devotee. Following his famous predecessor, Saint Ambrose of Milan, Paul VI named Mary “Mother of the Church” at the close of third session of the Council in 1964. Among Paul VI’s pivotal documents is *Marialis Cultus* (*On Marian Devotion*, 1974). Paul VI dignified Mary with the title “Star of Evangelization” in his 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (*Evangelization in the Modern World*) [82].

Additional excellent Marian reflections are found in Saint John Paul II’s 1987 encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (*Mother of the Redeemer*). Recall that his coat of arms symbolizes Mary standing under the cross of Jesus. He also declared 1987 as a special Marian year. In addition, he credits Mary with saving his life during the assassination attempt on May 13, 1981, the feast of Our Lady of Fatima.

Mary and Mission. This presentation selects seven key moments in the life of Mary and illustrates how these events manifest that Mary is a fine exemplar of missionary dedication. Mary’s role is always to be seen as subordinate to and anchored within God’s loving plan of salvation for all people; she is always an active recipient of God’s action, yet, a true collaborator. Her entire life—from beginning to glorification—is a constant faith-response to God’s action; her life becomes a *series of fiats*. As recorded in the New Testament, her many “yes-responses” enable God’s merciful designs to become reality.

It would be inaccurate to somehow “semi-deify” Mary because she gave such a perfect faith-response to God’s action in her life. Likewise, this would minimize her true “pilgrimage of faith” if, because she was perceived as “super-human,” Mary’s faith-struggles (Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth, Calvary, etc.) were not those of a fully human person. John Paul II in *Redemptoris Mater* (5) speaks eloquently of “her personal journey of faith ... [within] the mystery of salvation.” Mary is a genuine, faith-full disciple. Through her words, actions, silence and contemplation, God’s loving design of salvation unfolds; through Mary there are many epiphanies of God’s action. Her relationship was one of an ever-increasing docility and surrender to God’s will. As John Paul II writes; “*At the center of this mystery* [of salvation], in the midst of this wonderment of faith, stands Mary” (RMa 51).

At the outset, it should be observed that as each “event” of Mary’s life is presented, its source in Scripture and Church teaching will be indicated; insights from popes, saints, and theologians will elucidate the “Mary-Mission” dynamic of the event; finally, appropriate themes for reflection are suggested. Our approach focuses on Scripture, while not denying the various Marian dogmas of the Catholic Church. Admittedly, this presentation intends to be a theological-spiritual reflection on mission; therefore, it does not claim to be a comprehensive, dogmatic Marian synthesis.

1. Annunciation to Mary. Saint Luke’s beautiful story of the Annunciation (Lk 1:26-38) is a very clear statement of the action of the Holy Spirit in Mary’s life: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow” (Lk 1:35). “For nothing is impossible to God” (Lk 1:36). “I am the handmaid of the Lord ... *fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*” (Lk 1:37-38).

All is grace: the angel Gabriel announces the unfolding of the mystery through the power of the Spirit. Mary’s response—free, prayerful, generous—is that she be worthy of the divine mysteries to unfold in her life. Mary’s “yes” to God was flaming with faith; it was an unqualified assent, without reserve. Mary became the perfect type of the servant of the Holy Spirit; indeed, all mission begins in a loving surrender to God.

God’s action overwhelms with its love. Life will spring forth from a peasant girl—filled with the Spirit. Mary rejoices to surrender herself—body, soul, and spirit. In the Annunciation she certainly moved to a new level of consciousness; she became more deeply aware of her role in God’s plan. What richness is included in that simple word: *fiat*. Saint Augustine poetically captures Mary’s profound faith when he writes: “*Maria concepit Christum in corde [mente] priusquam in carne [ventre]*.” Yes, Mary’s conception *in her faith* precedes the conception *in her flesh*. Faith is nothing less than a *living into mystery*. Readers can contemplate *Mary’s fiat and her free response of faith*. One can ask: How deep is my faith? Will I accept God’s will and mission in my life?

2. Visitation to Elizabeth. The Visitation story is chronicled in Luke 1:39-45. The scene presents Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit and impelled by love, rushing to the aid of her cousin Elizabeth who also is pregnant—even in her old age. In God’s loving plan, nothing is impossible. What a scene of great joy! Mary and Elizabeth, both faithful women of Israel, have been blessed by the Most High. When Mary enters Zechariah’s house, Elizabeth replies to Mary’s greeting and feels the child leap in her womb; she greets Mary enthusiastically: “Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Lk 1:42).

Note the clear sense of mission in this scene. Mary, prompted by the Spirit undertakes a difficult journey into the hill country; she went in haste; she was on a mission of service. She could have rationalized staying at home; she was pregnant and the journey was long. It seems that every word of Elizabeth’s greeting has a special meaning: “Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled” (Lk 1:45). Who is blessed? It is the one who, like Mary, *believes* in God’s promise and *acts* upon it.

Note that the evangelist says that Elizabeth was “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Lk 1:41) when she uttered these words. Indeed, those filled with the Spirit can recognize God’s plan, praise and thank God for it, and joyfully accept their role in the unfolding of this loving plan. These two generous, holy women shared their faith. Truly, faith-filled, Spirit-inspired women are central to the workings of God. In addition, we can reflect upon the fact that Mary clearly manifested *a lively sense of mission and service*. We also believe with Popes Paul VI and John Paul II that the Holy Spirit is indeed *the principal agent of mission and evangelization* (EN 75; RM 21).

3. Mary’s Spirit-inspired *Magnificat*. The prayerful, poetic genius of Saint Luke is manifested in Mary’s hymn of praise known as the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55); it is sung daily in the heart of the Church during Vesper prayer. Paul VI writes: “It was the Holy Spirit who filled her [Mary’s] soul with jubilant gratitude and moved her to sing the *Magnificat* to God her Savior.” When the Church celebrates Marian feasts, her liturgy notes that “it is our special joy to echo her song of thanksgiving [*Magnificat*]. What wonders you have worked throughout the world! All generations have shared the greatness of your love” (Second Preface of the Blessed Virgin Mary).

This beautiful song of gratitude, sung under the Spirit’s inspiration, is a brief, yet profound, synopsis of *how* God intends to unfold *what* his plan of salvation entails, and *what role* Mary will play within this unfolding design. The *Magnificat* asserts many profound truths: salvation comes from a loving God and is a cause for rejoicing; lowly servants like Mary play important roles in God’s design; God does great deeds for his faithful people; mercy, shown to Israel’s ancestors, will extend from age to age and the promises to Israel will be fulfilled; the world’s secular values will be subverted and inverted; God’s plan will be for all peoples and for all generations. The *Magnificat* is a sublime example of the great transformations the Holy Spirit brings about.

In his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater (Mother of the Redeemer)*, John Paul II reminded Christians: “The Church’s *love of preference for the poor* is wonderfully inscribed in Mary’s *Magnificat*.... Mary is deeply imbued with the spirit of the ‘poor of Yahweh’.” Thus, “drawing from Mary’s heart, from the depth of her faith expressed in the words of the *Magnificat*, the Church renews ever more effectively in herself the awareness that *the truth about God who saves, the truth about God who is the source of every gift, cannot be separated from the manifestation of his love of preference for the poor and humble.*” The entire Church looks to Mary “as Mother and Model ... in order to understand in its completeness the meaning of her own mission” (RMa 37). Meditating on Mary’s *Magnificat*, we readers become aware that *authentic prayer includes gratitude, praise, social awareness, and commitment to serve the needy.*

4. Mary Reflects on Jesus’ Birth and Childhood. This section presents a composite picture of the role of Mary in the events of the birth and childhood of Jesus. It incorporates several passages from the infancy narratives of Luke and Matthew: *birth* (Lk 2:1-7); *visit of shepherds* (Lk 2:8-20); *visit of magi* (Mt 2:1-12); *sojourn in Egypt* (Mt 2:13-15); *life at Nazareth* (Lk 2:39-52; Mt 2:19-23); *presentation in the temple* (Lk 2:22-

38). We ask ourselves: How did Mary follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit during those many years of her “hidden life” with Jesus and Joseph?

It is valid to assert that the Spirit inspired Mary to be a “giver” of Jesus to people. In the mystery of Jesus’ birth, she gave him to the world; she presented him to the shepherds and the magi; she presented him to the joyful, old man Simeon. Mary struggled with giving Jesus to the temple teachers, fearing that he had been lost. Many works of Christian art consistently show Mary in a “presenting-mode”; she presents Jesus to all peoples of the world—represented by the various Scripture scenes already noted.

Luke also portrays Mary as a woman of constant reflection. In three instances, he focuses on Mary’s “response of the heart.” As the shepherds depart, Luke writes: “As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). Simeon in the temple predicts that “the secret thoughts of many hearts [including Mary’s] will be laid bare” (Lk 2:34-35). When the Holy Family returned to Nazareth after Jesus was found in the temple, “his mother stored up all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51). Reflective faith is characteristic of Mary—and all who engage in mission.

As the whole panorama of events mentioned in this section serves to illustrate, Mary’s participation in God’s designs demands constant reflection and meditation. Learning from Mary’s experience and practice, Christians realize that *meditation (prayer of the heart) is essential for integrating mission into daily life.*

5. The Mother of Jesus at Cana. The text of John 2:1-11 records the wedding at Cana. Paul VI asserts that this important event manifests Mary’s responsive openness to the Spirit: “It was the Holy Spirit who urged the compassionate Mary to ask her Son for that miraculous change of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, which marked the beginning of Jesus’ activity as a wonderworker and led his disciples to believe in him.”

The encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* devotes a lengthy section to the Cana scene and Mary’s Spirit-inspired actions on that occasion. “Mary is present at Cana in Galilee as the *Mother of Jesus*, and in a significant way she *contributes* to that ‘beginning of the signs’ which reveal the messianic power of her Son” (RMa 21). The Cana event also “outlines what is actually manifested as a new kind of motherhood according to the spirit and not just according to the flesh, that is to say, *Mary’s solicitude for human beings*; ... this coming to the aid of human needs means, at the same time, bringing those needs within the radius of Christ’s messianic mission; ... the episode at Cana in Galilee offers us a *sort of first announcement of Mary’s mediation*, wholly oriented toward Christ and tending to the revelation of his salvific power” (RMa 21-22).

The liturgical preface for Our Lady of Cana proclaims: “With loving care for the bridegroom and his bride, she turns to her Son for help and tells the servants to do what he commands. Water is changed into wine [and] the wedding guests rejoice.... In this great sign, the presence of the Messiah is proclaimed, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is foretold, and the hour of salvation is foreshadowed.” Here one finds a clear mission

theme for our reflection: *sensitivity and compassion for human need result in outpourings of the Holy Spirit and concrete action on behalf of the needy.*

6. Mary at the Foot of the Cross. Vatican II beautifully describes Mary's faith-filled presence on Calvary: "the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and loyally persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross. There she stood, in keeping with the divine plan (cf. John 19:25). There she united herself with a maternal heart to his sacrifice, and lovingly consented to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth" (LG 58).

Paul VI notes: "It was the Holy Spirit who strengthened the soul of the Mother of Jesus as she stood beneath the cross, and inspired her once again, as he had at the Annunciation, to consent to the will of the heavenly Father who wanted her to be associated as a mother with the sacrifice that her Son was offering for humanity's redemption."

Note carefully that Calvary was a significant moment in Mary's *fiat*. Her surrender did not remain on the level of her initial response in Nazareth; it grew through the darkness of the Cross. John Paul II writes in his encyclical on Divine Mercy (*Dives in Misericordia*): "No one has experienced, to the same degree as the Mother of the Crucified One, the mystery of the Cross" (DM 9). In our mission commitment, we Christians join Mary in her *fidelity in trial, suffering, and even death*; mission demands radical commitment to transform the numerous "calvaries" of this world. We thank God for giving us Mary, a loving, compassionate mother. Through frequent reflection, *Christians can truly experience intimacy with Mary their mother.*

7. Mary with the Church at Prayer and Pentecost. Building upon the Lukan narration of the Church at prayer (*ecclesia orans*) and the Pentecost event (Acts 1:14-2:13), Paul VI writes in his characteristically poetic manner: "It was the Holy Spirit who raised Mary on the burning wings of love so that she might be a model intercessor during those hours in the Upper Room when the disciples of Jesus 'together ... devoted themselves to constant prayer' along with 'some women ... and Mary the Mother of Jesus' and waited for the promised Paraclete."

Several spiritual authors have written on the role of the Spirit and on the presence of Mary at Pentecost, when the Church is fully born and sent into the world in the power of the Spirit. Hans Urs von Balthasar asserts: "Mary's living faith is the perfect prototype of what is expected in the life of the Church." A. Schmemmann writes: "Mary is truly the icon and the epiphany of the Church—of the Church as life in Christ and of the Church as Christ's life in us." Y. Congar notes: "Mary has a pre-eminent place in the Christian mystery as the model of the Church and of universal intercession. This is the work of the Spirit in her."

Other writers highlight the clear parallelism between the Incarnation and Pentecost. They see that the birth of the Church on the day of Pentecost is, in fact, the continuation of the mystery of the Incarnation that took place in Mary by the operation of

the Holy Spirit. K. McNamara observes: “At the Annunciation Mary co-operated with the Spirit in the Incarnation of the messiah, destined to be the Savior and ruler of his people; at Pentecost she co-operates with the Spirit in the emergence of that people on to the stage of human history. She who had first become the Mother of Christ is now revealed as Mother of the Church, and central to her motherhood on each occasion are the humility, obedience and loving trust in God which unite her profoundly to the Holy Spirit.” Would that space permitted an extended commentary on these and many other profound insights!

The entire Church rejoices over a newly established feast of Mary. On February 11, 2018 (Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes), Pope Francis decreed that the ancient devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, under the title of Mother of the Church, is now inserted into the Roman liturgical calendar. The Pope wishes to promote this devotion in order to “encourage the growth of the maternal sense of the Church in the pastors, religious and faithful, as well as a growth of genuine Marian piety.” Pope Francis’ action flows from his appreciation of the “divine motherhood of Mary and from her intimate union in the work of the Redeemer.” Most appropriately, the feast is fixed on the Monday following Pentecost Sunday.

Contemplating Mary at prayer with the disciples in the Upper Room can deepen our awareness that *prayer begets radical openness to an outpouring of the Holy Spirit*. Mary’s example provides a model that we must seek to integrate into our thoughts, prayers, lives, and dedication to mission.

Conclusion. *Totus Tuus* (Totally Yours), seen in John Paul II’s coat-of-arms, proclaimed his total dedication to Jesus through Mary. He frequently implored Mary to show a mother’s love, care, and protection for the Church. To Mary he committed every aspect of the Church’s life; to her he entrusted his own Papal ministry. Even in times of great difficulty and suffering (e.g. the 1981 assassination attempt), John Paul II, quoting Saint Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort, proclaimed: “*Totus tuus sum, O Maria, et omnia mea tua sunt*” (I am totally yours, O Mary, and all I have is yours). As Christians, we rejoice to have Mary as our maternal intercessor; in faith we also proclaim: *Totus tuus sum!*

[J. Kroeger]