

The Virgin Mary (1) Mariolatry: The Great Divide

In our secular age, with its opposition to anything Christian, contemporary evangelicals and churches of the Reformation have much in common with the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). We often find ourselves on the same side of the debates that take place in broader North American culture. Some prominent American evangelical and RC leaders even undertook an independent theological initiative and developed a joint statement of commitment to public moral renewal entitled: "*Evangelicals and Catholics Together*."

Many greatly admired Pope John Paul II's rigorously pro-life stance. He fought against abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, and what he called the "culture of death." He stood up against the secular revolution, teaching the sinfulness of homosexuality, extra-marital sex, and pornography. We join the RCC in standing up for the dignity of all human life to maintaining the sanctity of marriage, from opposing the hedonistic, even vulgar substance of much American entertainment to championing the rights of Christians to be heard in the public square.

Indeed, we share so many core beliefs that we see ourselves more as allies than as enemies. We share with the RCC the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. Yet we must be vigilant and remind ourselves of the great divide that separates us from the RCC. What stands between us and the RCC is the solidifying by the RCC's officialdom of Mariology.

For most evangelicals and Reformed Mariology has become synonymous with Mariolatry. James R. White comments in *Mary - Another Redeemer?* "Giving 'veneration' to a saint, to an angel, or to Mary is idolatry, and if we are truly concerned about the glory of God and His truth, we will not hesitate to speak out."

The Development of Mariology

Since the beginning of the 19th century the veneration of Mary has increased rather than decreased. There have been many remarkable developments, bringing out ever more clearly the place of Mary in the system of RCC thought.

Many RC theologians now see the veneration of the Virgin Mary not as an isolated element chapter in dogma, but as a source of life. They see Mary involved in the mysteries of Christ, exalted by divine grace above all angels and men. The crucial pillar of the Catholic argument is--Mary was chosen by God to give birth to the Savior, inaugurating our redemption. Its Mariology hinges on it. Therefore, the RCC teaches that Mary was not only a virgin before Jesus' birth but that she remained a virgin afterwards. Mary is withdrawn from natural life.

The RCC denies that Jesus had brothers. It elevates her to a sort of supra- natural being. It teaches that Mary was conceived and born sinless and Jesus was born pure

from a pure one. As Vatican Council II (1962-65) declared: "Mary figured profoundly in the history of salvation and in a certain way unites and mirrors within herself the central truths of the faith. Hence when she is being preached and venerated, she summons the faithful to her Son and His sacrifice, and to love for the Father."

The devotion to the Virgin Mary is expressed in the oft-repeated prayer: "Ave Maria, mater dei, ora pro nobis..." "Hail Mary, Mother of God, pray for us..." The question here is the legitimacy and necessity of invoking Mary's or another saint's prayer. And why invoke Mary's prayer as the Mother of God? Is her prayer somehow different than the prayer of another saint? Mary has also been given many titles which are not found in Scripture. She is called "Coredemptrix" because she cooperated directly and immediately in the redemptive process itself. She is said to be the mother of the Church since she gave birth to Him who is the head of the Church.

Pope Leo XIII said: "Most truly is Mary the Church's mother, and guide, and the queen of the Apostles." Mary is called the mother of the redeemed. She is also called the Heavenly queen, spiritual mother, powerful intercessor, the ark of Noah, the burning bush, our Hope, and our Guardian.

Pope John Paul II said in an address in Washington, D.C., October 7, 1979, "As a great sign that appeared in the heavens, in the fullness of time, the woman dominates all history as the Virgin Mother of the Son and as the spouse of the Holy Spirit, as the handmaid of humanity."

The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (Lumen Gentium) Vatican II declares that the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, and Mediatrix. The RCC Catechism offers this glowing description: "The Mother of Jesus, in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven, is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise she shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, a sign of hope and comfort to the pilgrim People of God."

Mary in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition

Mariology is steeped in history. The idea of a Majestic Mary, her enthronement and coronation have deep roots in the Orthodox Eastern Churches. The hymns composed for the glorification of Mary belong to their official Church literature. In Orthodox services Mary is often mentioned, and on each occasion she is usually given her full title: "Our All-Holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorified Lady, Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary."

This belief in Mary as the ever-virgin was decreed in 553 AD by the Second Council of Constantinople. The Eastern Orthodox believe that if Jesus represents the ultimate descent of God into human life, Mary is the supreme moment in the ascent of humanity to meet God, the conception of Christ the fruit of her free decision in humble submission to God's will. The 7th century Syrian John of Damascus tells us that Mary "ascended to the very royal throne of the son of God."

The opening verses of an 8th century hymn declare: "She who is higher than the heavens, more honorable than the Cherubim, and more glorious than all creation." In short, Mary is compared to the celestial powers and to all creation and has been given a higher, more glorious position.

The Greek Fathers in their bold treatment of the Annunciation of Christ's birth taught that, "as the first woman might have foiled the Tempter and did not, so had Mary been disobedient or unbelieving on Gabriel's message, the Divine Economy would have been frustrated." They argued that Mary's intentional act of obedience is in contrast to the willful disobedience we see in the story of Adam and Eve. The old Eve refused to cooperate with the will of God for her life. Because of the significance of Mary's free response, she was believed to be the "New Eve."

In The Orthodox Church Timothy Ware comments:

Among all God's creatures, she is the supreme example of synergy or cooperation between the purpose of the deity and the free will of man. God, who always respects human liberty, did not wish to become incarnate without the free consent of His Mother."

In popular Eastern Orthodox, devotion to Mary is expressed in icons. They express the feelings of the people toward the Mother of God and also the exceptional powers attributed to her.

In early icons, of which the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai has rendered some splendid examples, Mary is flanked by saints and/or angels. In such icons she occupies the center of the composition often seated on a throne, thus giving emphasis to her within the hierarchy of the saints and angels. She is viewed as consoling, helping, protecting, bringing joy, ending suffering and pain. This view of the role of the Virgin Mary in the history or redemption did not stay in the East. Prominent church historian Jaroslav Pelikan observes that much of the devotion to the Mother of God initially traveled from East to West.

Marian Devotion

In the West the early Christians in Rome continued the Roman tradition of decorating with religious images in catacombs and churches. The first image of the Virgin and Child has come to us from the third century. It was painted on one of the walls of the catacombs of St. Priscilla in Rome and shows a veiled mother holding a child on her knees. In the course of time, Mary became the subject of art and popular devotion. The second council of Nicea (787) approved the veneration of images of Mary. The middle ages saw an increase in belief in Mary's maternal influence and powers of intercession with her divine Son on behalf of sinners.

Both Mary as the nourisher and Mary as the life-giver to all humankind are alluded to in a hymn written by St. Anselm in the eleventh century:

Mother of our lover who carried him in her womb
And was willing to give him milk from her breast

Are you not able or are you unwilling
To grant your love to those who ask it?

Extra dogmatic pious beliefs and practices were tolerated and even promoted by the RCC such as Marian shrines, the rosary, statues, icons, processions, etc. The papacy became increasingly focused on the role of Mary in the history of redemption. For example, Pius IX's intention was to further traditional piety. In 1854 he proclaimed the dogma of the immaculate conception of Mary (Mary conceived in her mother's body without original sin). Pope Pius XII proceeded extremely forcefully along the lines Pius IX with the definition of a second infallible Marian dogma (the physical assumption of Mary into heaven).

No pope in recent memory has done more to promote Mariology than Pope John Paul II. When he became Pope, he said, "I was afraid to receive this nomination, but I did it in the spirit of obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ and in total confidence in his Mother, the most holy Madonna." He visited nearly every major Marian shrine in the world and credited Mary with saving him from an assassin's bullet early on in his pontificate.

His personal motto, inscribed on his blue-and-white coat of arms, *Totus Tuus sum Maria*, means "Mary, I am totally yours." He even claimed that we must follow after Mary as the model of pilgrimage in our search for the unity of the Church. He visited the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in 1982. He had gone there on pilgrimage on the first anniversary of Mehmet Ali Agca's assassination attempt, to give thanks to God and to Mary for his life being spared.

Mariology Interprets Scripture

Mariology influences the RCC's understanding of Scripture. On March 25, 1987, Pope John Paul II promulgated an encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* that focussed directly upon the Virgin Mary and the Marian dogmas of the RCC. In this encyclical John Paul II articulated the deep assumptions of what he called the long tradition of "Marian consciousness" in the church, the awareness as a singular presence within the mystery of salvation. He did so primarily by way of meditative expositions of the Bible.

Genesis 3: 15: The First Promise

According to the RCC, Genesis 3:15 foreshadows Mary's coredemptive mission. Eve and Mary are the two great opposites. The RCC claims that the full meaning of the prophecy is only realized when we see foreshadowed in Eve the other "Mother of all the life," who herself should actually give birth to the Savior. Whereas Mary was obedient, Eve was disobedient.

Already in the second century Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, asserted that Eve by her disobedience was the "cause of death for herself and the whole human race," while Mary through her obedience was the cause of salvation, again both for herself and for the whole human race."

Justin Martyr in his Apology completed the Pauline parallel of Adam and Christ by indicating Mary to be Second Eve. In other words, not only Christ but also Mary is in enmity with the devil. Mary with Christ was victorious over the serpent. The *Lumen Gentium* states: "She was the new Eve, who put her absolute trust not in the ancient serpent but in God's messenger." As the new Eve, Mary continues to fulfil a role on behalf of believers. The RCC Catechism confesses: "We believe that the Holy Mother of God, the new Eve, Mother of the Church, continues in heaven to exercise her maternal role on behalf of the members of Christ."

Luke 1 : 38: The Acceptance of the Annunciation

In the RCC there is no room for the teaching of Scripture alone, faith alone, and grace alone. Man has to cooperate in the work of salvation through faith and obedience. In RC theology this elevated view of man's ability to cooperate with God for salvation is clearly demonstrated in the Virgin Mary's free decision to accept the task of becoming the Mother of the Son of God. Mary could have refused; she was not merely passive, but an active participant in the mystery. God waited for her voluntary response. The RCC Catechism states: "By pronouncing her "fiat" at the Annunciation and given her consent to the Incarnation, Mary was already collaborating with the whole work her Son was to accomplish."

Pope John Paul II elevated Mary to the level of a co-mediator. He wrote that she is to be found "at the center of [the salvific] event" which is God's self-revelation to the world. Mary's "yes" brought a human being, into "a union with God that exceeds all the expectations of the human spirit."

John 2: The Wedding of Cana.

In his encyclical, *Redemptrix Mater*, Pope John Paul II argued that Mary as Mediatrix is brought out plainly in the incident at the wedding scene at Cana of Galilee. He wrote: "There is a mediation: Mary places herself between her Son and mankind in the reality of their wants, needs and sufferings. She puts herself 'in the middle,' that is to say she acts as a mediatrix, not as an outsider, but in her position as mother. She knows that as such she can point out to her son the needs of mankind, and in fact, she 'has the right' to do so."

John 19: Mary at the Foot of the Cross

RCC theology stresses the role of Mary at the foot of the cross, by which she participated directly with Christ in the act of Redemption through which the divine grace was won for all men. It is viewed as a logical consequence of her union with Christ from the moment of the Incarnation. On our account, Mary suffered as no mother on earth has suffered. "She cried out in pain of her innermost heart, when she came to her martyrdom at the Passion of her son." On the cross we see the fulfillment of what was announced at the gates of paradise lost: that the seed of the woman should crush the serpent's head. "Beneath the victorious cross of the dying God stands the woman who

has won all God's battles, the holy Ecclesia, the fulfillment of Mary." In other words, Mary, the woman at the foot of the cross, is the woman of the promise (Genesis 3: 15) who would overcome Satan.

Vatican II stated: "Thus 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), suffering grievously with her only-begotten Son. There she unified herself with a maternal heart to His sacrifice, and lovingly consented to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth." Pope John Paul II taught that Mary's ascent of Calvary and her standing at the foot of the cross together with the beloved disciple were a special sort of sharing in the redeeming death of her Son.

Acts 1: 14: Mary at Pentecost

After Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, Mary waits with our Lord's disciples for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Although only her presence is mentioned in Acts 1:14, the RCC puts her at the center of the Pentecost event. According to the second Vatican council, we see Mary prayerfully imploring the gift of the Spirit, who had already overshadowed her in the Annunciation. RC theologians even claim that Pentecost has its origin in the innermost heart of Mary; it was there the Church was born. At Pentecost Mary reaches the very heart of her share in the work of Redemption. In her are all prophecies fulfilled, in her begins the life of heavenly glory, in her the Spirit already breathes, which shall change the world in the last days.

Revelation 12: The Woman and the Dragon

Some RC theologians are inclined to see that the woman of Revelation 12:1 is not Mary, but the church. The Dutch RC New Testament scholar Jos Keulers, states that Revelation 12: 2 cannot be applied to Mary as she gave birth to her Son without pain. Most RC theologians, however, believe that the woman represents the Virgin Mary, who has a powerful influence on earthly affairs. Pope Pius X even made the bold claim that "everyone knows that the great woman of Revelation represents the Virgin Mary, who without blemish gave birth to our Head."

Concluding article: "The Biblical Mary".

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