

THE SIGN OF THE WOMAN

An Introductory Essay on the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*

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A Marian encyclical and a Marian year generally meet with little enthusiasm in German-speaking Catholicism. People fear a strain in the ecumenical climate; they see the danger of an overemotional piety that cannot stand the test of serious theological criteria. However, the appearance of feminism has brought into play a new and unexpected element that threatens to confuse somewhat the lines of battle. On the one hand, feminism portrays the Church's representation of Mary as the canonization of women's dependence and the glorification of their oppression: The veneration of the Virgin and Mother, the obedient and humble servant, has been, so it is said, a means of fixing the woman's role for centuries. It has glorified her in order to suppress her. On the other hand, the figure of Mary furnishes the starting point for a new and revolutionary interpretation of the Bible: liberation theologians point out that the Magnificat proclaims the casting down of the mighty and the lifting up of the lowly. The Magnificat thus becomes the master text of a theology that sees its task as teaching how to subvert the powers that be.

The feminist reading of the Bible portrays Mary as the emancipated woman who freely and with self-assurance steps forward to challenge a male-dominated culture. The figure of Mary - together with other apparent evidence-becomes a hermeneutical key for uncovering an original and very different Christianity, whose liberating force the male power structure quickly concealed and stifled. It is easy to recognize that such interpretations are tendentious and forced. Nevertheless, they may well sharpen our capacity to hear what the Bible actually says about Mary. By the same token, this just might be the appropriate time to listen more attentively than usual to a Marian encyclical whose whole point, for its part, is to let the Bible have its say.

In order to make the Pope's² encyclical more accessible and to facilitate the reading of it, I would like to begin with a few remarks that bring to light some aspects of its characteristic methodology. In the second part, I will underline four main points around which the content of the text gravitates.

I. METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

1. *Reading the Bible as a Whole*

For whole passages at a time, the encyclical takes the form of a meditation on the Bible. It presupposes historical-critical exegesis of the Bible, but it then takes the next step-to a properly theological interpretation. What does this mean? How does it work? The fundamental rule of the theological interpretation of the Bible is found in the third chapter of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation:

Since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the same Spirit in whom it was written, the correct determination of the meaning of the sacred texts requires that no less scrupulous attention

¹ Translation used with permission.

² In 1997, when this book was written, the Holy Father was John Paul II-ED.

be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, account being taken at all times of the living tradition of the universal Church and of the analogy of faith. (no. 12)

The basic and primary presupposition of theological exegesis is therefore the conviction that Scripture—the multiplicity of its authors and its long historical genesis notwithstanding—is one book having a real, intrinsic unity in the midst of its various tensions. This presupposition rests in turn upon the firm belief that Scripture is ultimately the work of a single author, who has both a human and a divine aspect. That is, it comes out of one historical subject, the people of God, which, despite all the changes of its history, always retained its inner self-identity. When this people speaks, not casually and superficially, but from the center of its identity, it speaks in the stages of its own history, yet always as one and the same subject. This point brings us to the divine aspect of the whole: the inner identity of the people of God is based upon the guidance of the one Holy Spirit. When the core of this identity makes itself heard, it is not simply a man or a people that is speaking—it is God speaking in human words; it is the one Spirit speaking, the one Spirit who abides as the inner power guiding the people through its history.

It follows that to interpret Scripture theologically means not only to listen to the historical authors whom it juxtaposes, even opposes, but to seek the one voice of the whole, to seek the inner identity that sustains the whole and binds it together. A purely historical method attempts, so to speak, to distill the historical moment of genesis, thereby setting it apart from all others and fixing it. Theological exegesis, while not displacing such a historical approach from its proper terrain, nonetheless does transcend it. The moment does not exist in isolation, after all. It is part of a whole, and I do not really understand even this part until I understand it in terms of, and together with, the whole. In this sense, the methodological form that comes into play here is ultimately quite simple: Scripture is interpreted by Scripture. Scripture interprets itself. Attentive listening to Scripture's own internal self-interpretation is very characteristic of *Redemptoris Mater*. The encyclical does not endeavor to explain the individual moments of biblical texts by appealing to external voices, which can contribute a great deal of historical detail but cannot unlock the texts' inner core. Rather, it tries to attend entirely to their own polyphonic symphony and so to understand them in light of their own intrinsic correlations.

The reading of Scripture as a unity thus logically entails a second principle. It means reading it as something present, not only in order to learn about what was once the case or what people once thought, but to learn what is true. This, too, is an aim that a strictly historical exegesis cannot directly pursue. Such an exegesis focuses, after all, on the past moment of the genesis of the text and therefore necessarily reads it in relation to its prior history. One can, of course, learn from that prior history, as one can learn from history in general. But, in order to learn, one has to cross the distance of the past. The idea of posing the question of truth in its own right is alien to the very nature of modern scientific scholarship. The question of truth is a naive, unscientific question. And yet, it is the real question of the Bible as such. “What is truth?” – for the enlightened Pilate, this is a non-question. To ask it is, by that very fact, to shunt it aside. And so it is with us. The question is meaningful only if the Bible itself is something present, if a subject that is present speaks out of it, and if this subject stands apart from all other living historical subjects because it is bound up with the truth and, therefore, can convey knowledge of the truth in human speech.

Belief that this is the case constitutes the core of theological exegesis. The Pope converses with the Bible in this belief. He accepts its words, as they are revealed in the entirety of their meaning, as truth, as information about how things really are with God and with man. On this understanding, the Bible truly concerns us. Without any artificial updating, it needs only itself in order to be supremely “up-to-date”.

2. *The Feminine Line in the Bible*

The so-called Gospel of the Egyptians, which dates from the second century, ascribes to Jesus the

following saying: "I have come to destroy the works of the feminine."³ This sentence enunciates one of the fundamental motifs of the Gnostic interpretation of the Christian view. The same motif reappears, with a slightly different twist, in the so-called Gospel of Thomas: "When you make the two one ... and the upper as the lower, and when you make the masculine and the feminine one only, so that the masculine is not masculine and the feminine not feminine ... you will enter into the kingdom."⁴ By the same token, we find an explicit rejection of Galatians 4:4: "When you see him who was not born of a woman, fall down on your faces and worship him. He is your father."⁵ In this context, it is interesting that Romano Guardini interprets as a sign of the overcoming of the basic Gnostic pattern of thinking in the Johannine corpus the fact that

in the architecture of the Apocalypse as a whole, the feminine enjoys the equality of rank with the masculine that Christ bestowed on it. True, the whore of Babylon combines the dimensions of evil, of sensuality, and of the feminine. But this would be a Gnostic idea only if, on the other side, the good appeared solely in masculine form. In reality, the feminine finds radiant expression in the appearance of the woman crowned with stars. But if one were to assign any priority, one would have to award it to the feminine. After all, the figure in which the redeemed world is definitively embodied is ... "the bride."⁶

In these remarks, Guardini puts his finger on one of the fundamental questions concerning the proper interpretation of the Bible. Gnostic exegesis is characterized by its identification of the feminine with matter, negativity, and nullity which, according to the Gnostics, cannot be included in the salvation proclaimed in the Bible. Of course, such radical positions can turn into their opposite, into a revolt against such negative valuations, and into their complete reversal. Modernity witnessed the development of another exclusion of the feminine from the biblical message, which, while having different reasons from and being less radical than its Gnostic predecessor, was certainly no less influential. An exaggerated *solus Christus* compelled its adherents to reject any cooperation of the creature, any independent significance of its response, as a betrayal of the greatness of grace. Consequently, there could be nothing meaningful in the feminine line of the Bible stretching from Eve to Mary. Patristic and medieval reflections on that line were, with implacable logic, branded as a recrudescence of paganism, as treason against the uniqueness of the Redeemer. Today's radical feminisms have to be understood as the long-repressed explosion of indignation against this sort of one-sided reading of Scripture -an explosion, however, that has indeed taken the step to truly pagan or neo-Gnostic positions: the rejection of the Father and the Son that occurs in these theologies strikes at the very heart of the biblical witness.⁷

³ See E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen, vol. i. Evangelien* (Tübingen, 1959), 109-17; citation, 109. Interesting reflections on this point can be found in E. Kästner, *Die Stundentrammel vom heiligen Berg Athos* (Frankfurt, 1956), 267ff (pocketbook ed., 1991).

⁴ Logion 22. 1 cite from the Coptic-German edition, A. Guillaumont, H. C. Peuch, G. Guispel, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1959). There is a whole series of parallel logia, for example, 37, 106, 46, and 31, etc. On the originality and dating of the *Gospel of Thomas*, see H. C. Peuch, in Hennecke and Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, 1:199-223. Much light is shed on the meaning of these texts by J. B. Bauer, "Echte Jesusworte?" in W. C. van Unnik, *Evangelien aus dem Nilsand* (Frankfurt, 1960), 10.50. Participants in today's debate surrounding feminism would do well to bear in mind the intellectual background against which Christianity took shape in the ancient world. This would make it clear how ecclesial Christianity and its selection of canonical writings maintained the uniqueness and novelty of Jesus Christ against currents of thought in which the zeitgeist sought to give itself the luster of a religiously sanctioned absoluteness.

⁵ Logion 15.

⁶ R. Guardini, *Das Christusbild der paulinischen und johanneischen Schriften*, 3rd ed. (Mainz, 1987), 208f. In this vastly underappreciated book, Guardini offers an abundance of important, hitherto neglected insights both into the fundamental issues of theological interpretation of the Bible and into the correct understanding of Pauline and Johannine Christology.

⁷ For an informative account of the feminist dissolution of the Christian image of God, see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority, vol. 5* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1983); for a representative feminist interpretation of the New

It thus becomes all the more important to read the Bible itself, and as a whole. Such a reading reveals that, alongside of and with the line running from Adam through the patriarchs to the Servant of God, there is in the Old Testament a line that runs from Eve through the matriarchs to figures such as Deborah, Esther, Ruth, and, at last, *Sophia*. We cannot ignore this trajectory as if it were theologically indifferent, even though it is as incomplete, hence, as open-ended in its basic meaning, and as unfinished as the whole Old Testament itself, which remains in expectation of the New and of the answer it brings. But just as the Adamic line gets its meaning from Christ, the significance of the feminine line, in its indivisible mutual immanence with respect to the mystery of Christ, becomes clear in light of the figure of Mary and of the role of the *ecclesia*. The disappearance of Mary and of the *ecclesia* in one of the main currents of modern theology is an index of the latter's incapacity to read the Bible in its integrity. The immediate effect of dissociation from the *ecclesia* is the disappearance of the place where this unity of the Bible becomes visible. All the rest follows naturally from this first move. Conversely, and for the same reason, perception of the architecture of Scripture as a whole presupposes acceptance of the fundamental ecclesial standpoint and corresponding rejection of a historical selection that declares the supposedly oldest strands of the New Testament to be the only valid ones and so devalues both Luke and John. Only in the whole do we find the whole.⁸

The contemporary relevance of the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* consists, as I see it, in the fact that it guides us to rediscover the feminine line in the Bible and its proper salvific content and to relearn that Christology does not exclude the feminine or repress and trivialize it and, conversely, that the recognition of the feminine does not diminish Christology, but that the truth about God and the truth about ourselves can appear only when the correlation of the two is correctly appreciated. The radicalisms that are tearing our times apart, that locate class warfare at the very root of man's being in the relationship of man and woman to each other—are "heresies" in the literal sense, in other words, a selection that refuses the whole. The drama of our day could thus foster a better understanding of the invitation to a Marian reading of the Bible than would have seemed possible just a short time ago. Conversely, we need this Marian reading in order to deal adequately with the anthropological challenge of our time.

3. *A Historical and Dynamic Mariology*

A linguistic observation may help us to understand the originality of the Mariology that we find in *Redemptoris Mater*. The Mariology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused primarily on explaining the privileges of the Mother of God, which were summed up in her major titles. After the title *Assumpta* had been secured by the promulgation of the dogma of Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven, the debate shifted to the titles *Mediatrix* and *Co-Redemptrix*. So far as I can see, the title *Co-Redemptrix* does not figure at all in the encyclical. *Mediatrix* appears very rarely, and then more on the margins and in citations. By contrast, all of the emphasis is placed on the word "mediation" (*mediazione*). The stress lies on action, on historical mission; being becomes visible only through mission, through historical action.⁹

This linguistic shift makes evident the new mariological approach that the Pope has chosen. The point of this approach is not to spread static mysteries before our astonished gaze, but to give an account of

Testament, see E. Schüßler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, 1983).

⁸ I have essayed a sketch of these interrelations in my small book *Daughter Zion*, trans. John M. McDermott (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

⁹ On the crisis of Mariology in relation to the conciliar deliberations, see R. Laurentin, *La Question mariale* (Paris, 1963); Laurentin, *La Vierge au Concile* (Paris, 1965). For a good summary of the current state of the question, see S. de Fiores and S. Meo, eds. *Nuovo dizionario di mariologia* (Milan: Edizioni Paoline, 1985); for example, the articles "Mariologia/Marialogia" (de Fiores), 891-920, and "Mediatrice" (S. Meo), 920-35.

the historical dynamism of salvation, which includes us and assigns us our place in history as both a gift and a task. 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, nor is it only above us. She goes before us, as the Pope repeatedly stresses. She interprets the historical moment for us, not through theories, but through action, through the action of showing us the way forward. To be sure, 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. We will have to deal at greater length in the second part of this essay with the way in which Mariology therefore becomes a theology of history and an imperative to action.

4. *Bimillennarism?*

The Pope's very first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), already resonated with a theme that resounded again more fully in *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986) and now occupies a central place in *Redemptoris Mater*: anticipation of the year 2000, of the great remembrance of Christ's birth "in the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4), which is to be preceded by an advent of history and of humanity. One could go so far as to say that the goal of the last two encyclicals has been to usher in this advent. In the Church's liturgy, Advent is a Marian season. It is the season in which Mary made room in her womb for the world's Redeemer and bore the expectation and hope of humanity. To celebrate Advent means: to become Marian, to enter into that communion [*Mitsein*] with Mary's Yes which, ever anew, is room for God's birth, for the "fullness of time".

The Pope's vigorous emphasis on the year 2000 and his interpretation of the present hour of history in light of it understandably provoke criticism. Is it not a form of neomillennarism, a number mysticism, that falls short of the true level of the event of Christ, which, historically speaking, happened once only and cannot be repeated, even as its saving power is contemporaneous with all times and opens them into the "always" of eternity? We have already touched on the answer to these objections. Yes, indeed, Christ, having risen from the dead, is contemporaneous with all time, and so every time is on an equal footing before him. But there is a privileged occasion of remembrance: the feast. Thus, just as, in spite of God's omnipresence and in spite of the sacramental presence of Christ in every tabernacle in the world, there is a "geography of faith", as the Pope suggests in a brief excursus on the major pilgrimage sites, so, too there are also junctures of time that invite us in a special way to reflect, to accompany God's human time, and so to experience his contemporaneity with us.

In this connection, Raniero Cantalamessa refers to a helpful idea that Augustine develops in his theology of the feast. Augustine says in one of his epistles that there are two ways of celebrating a feast. Some feasts, he explains, are no more than an annual recollection, the recurrence of a particular date. Others, however, are celebrated in the mode of mystery. In feasts of the first sort, what stands in the foreground is a particular date that awakens remembrance. In feasts of the second sort, what counts is, not the precise date, but entrance into, and union with, the interior reality of an exterior event.¹⁰

Drawing on this distinction, we can say a propos of the Jubilee of the year 2000 that it is not the particular date that occupies center stage, especially not in the sense that the Pope expects that date to produce certain effects automatically, like a wound-up clock. No, the decisive thing is the inner pointing that is implied in our chronology as a whole and of which the Pope invites us to become conscious once more on the occasion of the jubilee—the inner pointing, that is, to the One who holds time in his hands. He is the "mystery" that at once touches and transcends time. By the same token, he is the one who enables us to find solid ground in the disintegration and dissolution of time, to hold fast

¹⁰ R. Cantalamessa, "Maria e lo Spirito Santo", in H. U. von Balthasar et al., *Verso il terzo millennio sotto l'azione dello Spirito: Per una lettura della "Dominum et vivificantem"* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986), 49-55; citation, 55 (Augustine, Epistula 55, i, 2; CSEL, 34, 170)

to what endures in the midst of the transitory.

II. FOUR FOCAL PAINTS OF THE TEXT

1. *Mary-The Believer*

The central attitude in terms of which *Redemptoris Mater* unlocks the figure of Mary is faith. Jesus is the incarnate Word who speaks out of the depths of his oneness with the Father.¹¹ In the same way, Mary's being and the trajectory of her life are decisively shaped by the fact of her faith. "Blessed is she who believed" – this exclamation of Elizabeth to Mary (Lk 1:45) becomes the key word of Mariology. Mary thereby takes her place among those whom the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews praises as the great believers of history, thereby giving remembrance of faith's witnesses its theological citizenship. The encyclical never quits this fundamental biblical locus, and we cannot understand the document properly unless we, too, keep it constantly in view. For this reason, we can call *Redemptoris Mater* a catechesis on faith, on man's basic relationship to God. The Pope connects Mary's attitude with that of Abraham. Just as Abraham's faith was the beginning of the Old Covenant, Mary's faith, enacted in the scene of the Annunciation, is the inauguration of the New. For Mary, as for Abraham, faith is trust in, and obedience to, God, even when he leads her through darkness. It is a letting go, a releasing, a handing over of oneself to the truth, to God. Faith, in the luminous darkness of God's inscrutable ways, is thus a conformation to him (14).

The Pope sees Mary's Yes, her act of faith, implied in the psalm text that the Letter to the Hebrews interprets as expressing the Son's Yes to his Incarnation and Cross: "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me.... 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God'" (Heb 10:5-7; cf. Ps 40:6-8; *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 13). Mary, saying Yes to the birth of the Son of God from her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit, places her body, her entire self, at God's disposal as a place for his presence. In her Yes, then, Mary's will coincides with her Son's. The unison of these Yesses - "a body you have prepared for me"-makes the Incarnation possible, for, as Augustine says, Mary conceived in Spirit before she conceived in her body.¹²

The cruciformity of faith, which Abraham had to experience in such a radical way, becomes evident for Mary, first in her meeting with the aged Simeon, then, in a new way, in her losing, and finding again, the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple. The Pope vigorously underlines the Evangelist's affirmation that "they did not understand" what he meant (Lk 2:48-So; *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 17). Even in the midst of the closest intimacy, the mystery remains a mystery, and even Mary touches it only in faith. But precisely thus she remains truly in contact with this new self-revelation of God, that is, with the Incarnation. Precisely because she belongs to "the little ones" who accept the measure of faith, she is included in the promise: "Father.... you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to infants.... No one knows the Son except the Father" (Mt 11:25, 27; *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 17).

The Pope's meditation on Mary's faith reaches its apex and its summation in his interpretation of Mary's standing under the Cross. As she who believes, Mary faithfully keeps in her heart all the words she has received (Lk 1:29; 2:19, 51). But under the Cross, the word of promise that has been given to her- "The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David.... and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Lk 1:32-3S)-seems to be definitively proved wrong. Faith enters into its utmost kenosis. It is in total

¹¹ A great deal of light is shed on the knowledge and self-consciousness of Christ in the International Theological Commission's *De Jesu autoconscientia quam scilicet de se ipso et de sua mission habuit* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986; Latin and Italian). Also helpful is F. Dreyfus, *Jesus savait-il qu'il était Dieu?* (Paris, 1984).

¹² In no. 13 of the encyclical, the Pope cites a number of texts in which Augustine underscores the *prius mente quam ventre* [in her spirit before in her womb], for example, *De Sancta Virginitate* III, 3 (PL 40, 398); *Sermo* 115, 4 (PL 38, 1074).

darkness. But precisely in this way faith is perfect participation in Jesus' expropriation (Phil 2:5-8). The circle is complete: "A body you have prepared for me; behold, I have come" - this initial declaration of readiness is now being accepted, and precisely Mary's darkness is the fulfillment of the communion of wills that was our starting point. Faith - Abraham already makes this plain - is community at the Cross. It is at the Cross that faith achieves its integrity. Thus, and not otherwise, is faith room for the "blessing" that comes from God: "You have revealed them to infants."

2. *The Sign of the Woman*

The encyclical's catechesis on faith implies the idea of the way and, therefore, of history. Not surprisingly, then, it contains a second line of thought focusing on how Mary shows the way for history, how she is the sign of the times - once again in close connection with the biblical word. The twelfth chapter of the Book of Revelation speaks of the sign of the woman, a sign that is given in a particular moment of history, in order to define the communion between heaven and earth forever after. This text contains a reference-which is impossible to miss-to the Bible's depiction of the beginning of history, to the mysterious passage that tradition has called the Protoevangelium: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15).

The Fathers saw God's words of punishment to the serpent after the Fall as a first promise of the Redeemer - an allusion to the Descendant that bruises the serpent's head. There has never been a moment in history without a gospel. At the very moment of the Fall, the promise also begins. The Fathers also attached importance to the fact that Christology and Mariology are inseparably interwoven already in this primordial beginning. The first promise of Christ, which stands in a chiaroscuro and which only the light to come finally deciphers, is a promise to and through the woman.

Revelation is a way, and it does not speak its message until the whole is present. This fact becomes clear precisely in the analysis of the Genesis text. The theme of the history that is to come is played out in three actors: The woman, her descendant, and the serpent. The woman's descendant presages blessing and liberation: he bruises the serpent's head. And yet, curse and slavery do not lose their power: the serpent strikes at his heel. Blessing and curse seem equally matched, and the outcome of the whole story remains uncertain. The same three actors appear once more in the Book of Revelation. The drama of history has come to its hour of decision. But this decision has already been taken in the events of Nazareth: "Hail, full of grace", the angel had said there to Mary, who now takes her place-as the woman upon whom the definitive blessing rests.

Following the principle of the self-interpretation of Scripture, the Pope explains the significance of these words of blessing using the opening formula of the Letter to the Ephesians, which works with the same vocabulary and thus can unlock its meaning:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world.... He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ ... to the praise of his glorious grace. (Eph 1:3-6; *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 17)

The word "full of grace" refers to the conclusiveness of the blessing of which the Letter to the Ephesians speaks. It is also evident in the same Letter that the "Son" has decided the drama of history definitively in favor of blessing. This is why Mary, who has given him birth, is truly "full of grace" - she becomes a sign to history. The angel's greeting makes it clear that the blessing is more powerful than the curse. The sign of the woman has become the sign of hope; she is the signpost of hope. God's decision for man that becomes visible in her "is more powerful than any experience of evil and sin, than all the 'enmity' that marks the history of men" (no.11).

In this perspective, the Marian year signals the Pope's intention to present the “sign of the woman” in this hour of history as the essential “sign of the times”. It is on the path shown by this sign that we follow the trail of hope toward Christ, who guides the ways of history through this sign that points the way.

3. *Marian Mediation*

The next point I would like to mention is the teaching on Mary's mediation, which the Pope develops in detail in *Redemptoris Mater*. This is surely the point on which theological and ecumenical discussion will mostly focus. To be sure, the Second Vatican Council already uses the title "Mediatrix"¹³ and addresses the substance of Mary's mediation.¹⁴ Nevertheless, no magisterial document has expounded the theme so amply. The encyclical goes beyond the Council in terms of content, even while incorporating the Council's terminology. At the same time, it deepens the Council's own approach in a way that gives it new weight for theology and piety.

I would like to begin by briefly clarifying the terms in which the Pope defines the concept of mediation theologically and safeguards it from misunderstandings. Only in light of this clarification can we then understand the Pope's positive intention. The Holy Father forcefully underscores the mediation of Jesus Christ, but he sees its uniqueness, not as exclusive, but as inclusive. It enables various forms of participation in itself. In other words, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ does not extinguish the intercessory communion of human beings before God. All men can, in manifold ways, be mediators with God for one another in communion with Jesus Christ. This is a simple fact of our everyday experience, for no one believes alone; everyone's faith depends also on human mediations. No human being by himself could suffice to bridge the distance to God, because no human being can guarantee the existence and closeness of God by his own resources. But in communion with the One who is himself this closeness in person, men can be, and in fact are, mediators for one another.

So far, we have described very generally the possibility and limits of mediation in dependence upon Christ. Basing himself on this description, the Pope goes on to develop his terminology. Mary's mediation rests upon participation in Christ's mediatorial office, in comparison to which it is in a position of subordination and service (no. 38). The Pope borrows these terms from the Council. Also borrowed from the Council is the Pope's claim that Mary's task of mediation flows “from the superabundant merits of Christ, relies on his mediatorship, depends completely upon it, and draws from it its entire efficacy” (no. 22; *Lumen Gentium*, no. 60). Consequently, Mary performs her mediation in the mode of intercession (no. 21).

The foregoing is true not only of Mary, but of any human cooperation in Christ's mediatorship. It thus does not yet tell us how her mediation might differ from that of other human beings. But the Pope does not stop here. Even though Mary's role of mediation is continuous with the nature of creaturely cooperation in the work of the Redeemer, it nonetheless has an "extraordinary" character. It uniquely transcends the mode of mediation that is in principle possible for every man. The encyclical also develops this train of thought under the tight control of the biblical text.

The Pope opens up an initial view of Mary's specific form of mediation in an in-depth meditation on the miracle of Cana, in which Mary's intercession moves Christ to perform a sign that already anticipates his coming hour-as continues to happen, again and again, in the Church's signs, that is, in her sacraments. The actual conceptual elaboration of the specificity of Marian mediation occurs mainly in the third part of the encyclical. Once again, the Pope offers there a sublime tapestry of different scriptural passages, which, seemingly disparate, nonetheless deploy a surprising illuminative power precisely when read together-the unity of the Bible! The Pope's fundamental claim is that the orig-

¹³ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, nos. 60, 62.

inality of Mary's role of mediation consists in its maternal character, which aligns it with Christ's being born ever anew in the world. It maintains the presence of the feminine dimension of the event of salvation, whose permanent center it is. By contrast, where the Church is understood only institutionally, only in the form of majority decisions and actions, there is no room for the feminine dimension. Standing against this superficial sociologization of the notion of Church, the Pope recalls a Pauline phrase that has been the object of much too little meditation: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4:19). Life originates, not by being made, but by being born, and it therefore requires birth pangs. The "maternal consciousness of the primitive Church" to which the Pope refers here is relevant for us precisely in today's context (no. 43)

Now, at this point one may well ask, "Why must we fix this feminine and maternal dimension of the Church once and for all in Mary?" The encyclical answers this question in the context of a scriptural passage that, at first sight, seems decisively antithetical to any veneration of Mary whatsoever. The woman who, enthused by Jesus' preaching, shouts her praise of the body that bore this man receives the following retort from Jesus: "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk 11:28). The Holy Father connects this saying of the Lord with another that goes in the same direction: "My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8:21).

These statements are only apparently anti-Marian. In reality, the texts proffer two extremely important insights. First, over and above Christ's once-only physical birth, there is another dimension of motherhood that can and must continue further. Second, this motherhood, which brings Christ to birth again and again, rests upon the hearing, keeping, and doing of Jesus' word. Now, it is the same Luke from whose Gospel the two above-mentioned sayings are cited who portrays Mary as the archetypal hearer of the Word, who bears the Word, keeps it, and brings it to maturity. This means that, in handing on these sayings of the Lord, Luke is not denying veneration of Mary; he is, rather, attempting to set it on its true foundation. He shows that Mary's maternity is not simply a uniquely occurring biological event; he shows, rather, that she was and, therefore, also remains a mother with her whole person. This becomes concrete on the day of Pentecost, at the moment of the Church's birth from the Holy Spirit: Mary is in the midst of the praying community that becomes the Church thanks to the coming of the Spirit. The correspondence between Jesus' Incarnation by the power of the Spirit in Nazareth and the birth of the Church at Pentecost is unmistakable. "The person who unites the two moments is Mary" (no. 24). The Pope sees the icon of our times, the icon of the Marian year, the sign of hope for our times, in this scene of Pentecost (no. 33)

What Luke displays in a web of allusions, the Holy Father finds fully explicit in John's Gospel-in the words of the crucified Christ to his Mother and his beloved disciple John. The words "behold, your mother!" and "woman, behold, your son" have always fruitfully enriched the pondering by interpreters of Mary's special task in and for the Church. They are rightly at the center of any mariological reflection. The Holy Father understands them as a testament of Christ from the Cross. In the inner core of the mystery of Easter, Mary is given to man as Mother. A new maternity of Mary comes into play, which is the fruit of the new love that has come to fruition at the foot of the Cross (no. 23). The "Marian dimension in the life of Christ's disciples... , not just of John, ... but of every disciple, every Christian", is thus brought into view. "The maternity of Mary, which becomes man's inheritance, is a gift that Christ makes to each man personally" (no. 45).

The Holy Father offers in this context a very subtle exegesis of the words with which the Gospel concludes this scene: "From that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (Jn 19:27) - that is the usual translation. But the depth of the event, the Pope stresses, comes to light only when we translate the passage literally. In that case, we would actually have to say: "He took her into his own." For the Holy Father, this implies a quite personal relation between the disciple-every disciple-and Mary; a letting of Mary into the inmost core of one's own mental and spiritual life; a handing oneself over into her feminine and maternal existence; a reciprocal self-commitment that becomes the ever-new way to Christ's birth and brings about Christ's taking form in man. In this way, however, Mary's task sheds

light on the figure of woman in general, on the feminine dimension and the specific mission of women in the Church (no. 46).

At this point, all the scriptural texts that the encyclical weaves into a single tapestry come together. For both in the Cana narrative and in the account of the Crucifixion, John mentions Mary, not by name, or even as Mother, but under the title "woman". The text itself thus sets up the connection with Genesis 3 and Revelation 12, with the sign of the "woman", and there is no doubt that John uses this name with the unspoken intention of raising Mary as "the woman" in general to the level of a universal sign.¹⁵ The Crucifixion narrative is thus simultaneously an interpretation of history, a reference to the sign of the woman who participates maternally in the battle against the forces of negation and who is thus a sign of hope (no. 24 and no. 47). The Credo of Paul VI sums up all that follows from these texts: "We believe that the most holy Mother of God, the New Eve, the Mother of the Church, continues in heaven her motherly task for Christ's members through her cooperation in the birth and formation of divine life in the souls of the redeemed" (no. 47)

3. *Interpretation of the Marian Year*

Out of all the foregoing building blocks, the Pope now fits together his interpretation of the new Marian year. While the Marian year proclaimed by Plus XII was correlated with Mary's Immaculate Conception and bodily Assumption into heaven, this Marian year focuses on the special presence of the Mother of God in the mystery of Christ and his Church (no. 48). It aims, not just to remember, but to prepare (no. 49). It has a dynamic, forward-pointing character. The Pope recalls the celebration of the millennium of the baptism of Saint Vladimir, which may be regarded as the celebration of the millennium of the conversion of Russia to the Christian faith, and he connects it with the birth of Christ. Such dates call, not only for remembrance, but, even more, for a turning back to our true historical and human identity, which comes to expression in them. This sort of redirection of our history to its foundation is the deepest meaning of the Jubilee, and who could dispute that we urgently need such an orientation of our existence in the present moment of history, with its tumultuous progress of knowledge and, at the same time, its crisis of all spiritual values?

The framework that the Pope has given the Marian year very pointedly underscores its intrinsic meaning. It begins with Pentecost. The icon of Pentecost is, as was said above, to become the icon of our identity and, therein, of our true hope. The Church must relearn her ecclesial being from Mary. Only a conversion to the sign of the woman, to the feminine dimension of the Church, rightly understood, will bring about the new opening to the creative power of the Spirit, and so to Christ's taking form in us, whose presence alone can give history a center and a hope. The Marian year closes with the bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven and thus points to the great sign of hope-to the humanity already ransomed in Mary, which, at the same time, appears as the locus of ransom, of the ransom of all.

In the encyclical's closing words, the Pope makes dramatically concrete his intention to give the present an orientation and, hence, his aim in declaring the Marian year. In accord with his understanding of our time in Advent terms, he interprets the ancient Advent hymn "Alma Redemptoris Mater", laying special emphasis on the words "come, help your people, which struggles to rise from its fall." The Marian year is located at, so to speak, the neuralgic point between falling and rising, in the twilight between the crushing of the serpent's head and the striking of man's vulnerable heel. It is here that we continue, and always will continue, to find ourselves.

¹⁵ On the modern exegetical debate surrounding John 19:26-27, see R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, vol. 3, 6th ed. (Freiburg, 1992), 321-28; R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, J. A. Fitzmeycr, and J. Reumann, *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia and New York, 1978), 206-18; N. M. Flanagan, "Mary in the Theology of John's Gospel", *Marianum* 40 (x978): 110-20.

The Marian year aims to challenge every conscience to follow the path that leads away from falling-to learn from Mary what this path is. It intends to be something like a single loud cry: “Help, help your people that falls” (no. 52). The Marian year, as the encyclical interprets it, is far removed from mere sentimental devotion. It is an appeal to our generation, urging it to recognize the task of this hour of history and, in the midst of all perils, to embark upon the way of not falling.