

Mary, Mother of Jesus: Sketch of a Theology

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Systematic theology

Before God created, he knew what he would reveal and how he would save us. So, he included in creation all the realities he would use to make himself and his plan for us known, and to carry out that plan. Among those realities are sex and the interpersonal relationships that presuppose sex. Thus, God created fathers and sons so that he could reveal himself as Father and Son, and call us to be children in the divine family; he created marriage, so that he could faithfully love Israel as his unfaithful wife, make the Church the Lord Jesus' spotless bride, and promise an unending heavenly marriage feast. He made both motherhood and virginity possible, so that the incarnate Word could be both the Son of God and the son of Mary, whose virginity points to Jesus' divine origin and personhood, and whose motherhood manifests his humanity.

The Incarnation, considered as the coming to be of the created humanity assumed by the Word, neither began nor ended at the Annunciation. Part of any human individual's make up and identity is having ancestors, living within a tradition, belonging to a community, and sharing its culture. Thus, the whole history of Israel is necessary for Jesus to come to be as the man he is and to live the life he lives. Mary in particular contributes to Jesus' make up and very identity. To regard her as simply and absolutely other than the Lord Jesus is either to deny the Incarnation or to suppose that a real human individual can be only contingently related to his or her parents—to suppose that each of us could have had other parents while remaining the same individual.

All Christians are part of the Lord Jesus insofar as they are members of his body, the Church. Like us, Mary also is incorporated into the Lord Jesus in this way. As members of the one body, we have different gifts and functions; Mary also is a special part of the fullness of the Lord Jesus in this way.

At the Annunciation, Mary's *fiat* is both a yes to the truth of the new revelation and a performative utterance accepting her role in realizing God's revealed will. That *fiat* both arose from Israel's faith and added to its traditional faith. The new act of faith involved in Mary's *fiat* belongs to

the new covenant; it is specifically Christian. Indeed, it is the first act of Christian faith—which includes, as its intention, the first act of specifically Christian hope. Therefore, Mary is Jesus' first "disciple."

Even within the Trinity itself there is order, though without superiority and inferiority. In God's extended family, too, there must be order. Some of the kingdom's members are prior to others. This family is truly human; the risen Lord Jesus is the center of it, the head of the household. Some human person must be closer to the Lord Jesus than others. Since Mary still is both the Lord Jesus' mother and his first disciple, she is the person closest to him. So, in the heavenly kingdom she is prior to all other created persons.

It follows that we venerate Mary not insofar as she is a person separate and distinct from the Lord Jesus but insofar as she is *joined to him* in the two preceding ways. We do not adore Mary as we do the divine persons, for she is only a created person, as we are. But we venerate Mary in a special way by comparison with other saints, because she belongs to the Lord Jesus in a unique way. If we fail to acknowledge Mary's uniqueness, we miss something of the Lord Jesus' reality; if we cut off Mary, we mutilate the Lord Jesus.

God's revelation prior to Jesus was accomplished only insofar as it was received in Israel's faith. When the Word was made flesh, the past as past having ceased to be, Israel's faith survived only in the living faith of those who held and handed it on. In the Old Testament, there was no *magisterium*—that is, no permanent office, endowed with a "sure gift of truth" (Vatican II, *Dei verbum*, 8) despite its holders' personal sinfulness, for articulating the faith and rejecting falsifications of it—though from time to time God raised up prophets for this purpose.

For Jesus to gather up and complete revelation, he had to have access to it—that is, Jesus as man had to receive the whole of Israel's faith from someone who had all of it without any admixture of error. Mary was that bearer of Israel's faith, and, with Joseph's encouragement and support, she handed it on to Jesus. What prevents most people from receiving and handing on the whole of God's revelation intact and undistorted is sin. So, Mary needed to be sinless, and God by his grace prevented her from committing personal sins.

Like any commitment by which one of Jesus' disciples follows him, Mary's *fiat* at the Annunciation and her faithfulness in carrying it out during the rest of her life was cooperation with Jesus' redemptive act, which overarches his whole life. That redemptive act forms the new covenant—that is, it reconciles humankind as a community with God and thereby overcomes original sin. Thus, Mary's *fiat*, by cooperating in advance with Jesus' redemptive act, shared in his work of redeeming and

overcoming original sin just as Eve's disobedience, by cooperating in advance with Adam's disobedience, shared in committing original sin and rendering humankind incapable of being a community in friendship with God. Consequently, just as Eve contracted original sin before Adam committed it, Mary shared in the new covenant's new intimacy with God even before Jesus formed it. Predestined by God to receive the angel's message and to give her *fiat*, Mary came into being already able—due to Jesus' future redemptive act—to do what God wanted all human beings to do: to cooperate with the Lord Jesus and to begin living even now as members of God's family. Thus, the redemptive work of God in Jesus freed Mary from original sin in such a way that she was conceived without it.

Mary's perpetual virginity was necessary to carry out her *fiat*. Having committed herself to be the mother of the Lord, she knew she was accepting unique and unforeseeable responsibilities. Under the circumstances, it would have been irresponsible to risk having other children; whose care might interfere with fulfilling her responsibility. So, both she and Joseph had good reason to abstain from all marital intercourse so as to retain their freedom to serve the Most High by raising his Son.

Since dying is for human persons a punishment for original sin, it is not fitting that Mary, being free of original sin, should die. Of course, the grace she enjoyed was that of God's redeeming work in the Lord Jesus, not that of original justice. Still, to argue that Mary deserved death as a punishment for an original sin with which she never was stained is question begging if not absurd. Nor, given Paul's "We will not all die, but we will all be changed" (1 Cor 15:51), will it do to argue that, without sharing bodily in Jesus' death, Mary could not share in his resurrection life. Moreover, her death, unlike the death that Jesus in no way deserved yet freely accepted, neither is necessary to form the new covenant nor supportive of other Christians' faith and hope. So, to suppose that, despite Mary's complete innocence, she died, implies that God allows evils from which no good comes. But if Mary did not die, she had to be removed from the world and "changed"—directly enveloped in the Lord Jesus' resurrection life. Thus, I believe that Mary was assumed into heaven *without dying*.

(I am aware that in an address to a General Audience on 25 June 1997—see *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 2 July 1997, page 11—John Paul II argued for the contrary view. However, the first paragraph in section 2 of that address is: "Could Mary of Nazareth have experienced the drama of death in her own flesh? Reflecting on Mary's destiny and her relationship with her divine Son, it seems legitimate to

answer in the affirmative: since Christ died, it would be difficult to maintain the contrary for his Mother." By introducing his argument in this way, the Pope indicated, it seems to me, that he intended to contribute to debate on an open theological question, not to close the question by teaching with an authoritative judgment of the sort that calls for religious submission of will and of intellect.)

Concupiscence, which follows upon sin and death, is, I think, a consequence of anxiety about them. In any case, being hereditary, it must involve a set of morally disorienting dispositions transmitted genetically. But for Mary, who is preserved from sin and has no prospect of death, concupiscence is inappropriate. So, I think that—perhaps miraculously, but in any case providentially—Mary's genetic make up excluded the moral disorientation we inherit.

Moral theology

If one wishes to be the Lord Jesus' disciple, one must follow him—that is, both imitate and cooperate with him. He overcame original sin and formed the community of the new covenant, whose fullness will be the everlasting kingdom of God. Original sin and its consequences involved three elements: alienation from God resulting in human death, the disruption of human community (Adam and Eve blaming each other, Cain killing Abel, division at Babel), and disorder within individuals making life difficult (shame, unsatisfactory relationships, repugnant work). So, following Jesus should overcome, at least gradually, all these evils.

In baptism, the person wishing to follow Jesus seeks and accepts faith, rejects Satan and sin, and promises to follow Jesus, so as to live in the light and freedom of God's children—in other words, to abide in and increasingly appropriate the faith and love God gives in this sacrament. In confirmation, the Lord Jesus' disciples receive the Holy Spirit to enlighten and strengthen them to bear courageous and faithful witness to the Lord Jesus—in other words, to carry on his mission by making his kingdom more visible in the world and more available for others to enter and hope for. In the Eucharist, Christians gather to unite themselves with Jesus' redemptive act, his self-gift to the Father, and to consummate their fully personal, bodily unity with him and one another in the resurrection life that will last forever.

To participate rightly in baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist, and to enjoy the three sacraments' benefits for themselves and others, the Lord Jesus' disciples must live rightly. Each must discern the life of good deeds that God prepared beforehand for him or her to walk in. That life of good deeds is a Christian's personal vocation, his or her part in God's plan for completing his redemptive work in this world and preparing for the Lord

Jesus' second coming and the fullness of the kingdom.

If Christians fulfill their personal vocations by discerning, freely choosing, and carrying out these good deeds, they simultaneously do three things. First, they live in the light and freedom of God's children, and in doing so gradually harmonize with their Christian faith and love all their thoughts, intentions, feelings, and habits of behaviour; only in this way can one gradually overcome the disorder within oneself and fulfill the commandment to love God with one's whole mind, heart, soul, and strength. Second, in fulfilling their personal vocations, Christians also bear witness to the Lord Jesus by letting his light, which they now share, shine before others; only in this way can they gradually overcome conflict with others by sharing with them the Gospel's truth and extending to them God's love in the human communion of the new covenant. Third, in carrying out their personal vocations Christians present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, together with the Lord Jesus' perfect self-offering in the Eucharist; only in this way can the Church, the gathering of his disciples, abide in God's love given through the Lord Jesus and share in his glorious and unending life.

Mary cherished and pondered God's word, and accurately discerned her personal vocation. She committed herself unreservedly to doing God's will as soon as it became clear to her. And she faithfully fulfilled that commitment. Therefore, she lived in the light and freedom of a child of God, holy and blameless in his sight. In doing so, she did not, as we must, overcome inner disorder, because she always was filled with grace. But in this regard she and we do not differ as significantly as might be supposed: she has no grace except due to God's redemptive work in Christ, and our struggles against sin and our good works flow from the same source.

Moreover, in carrying out her unique vocation, Mary, having received the Word of God spiritually into her mind and heart, and bodily into her womb, manifested what she had received by giving birth to Jesus, bringing him up, living as a model of faith, and encouraging others to do whatever the Lord Jesus tells them—in other words, to believe and hope in him—so that he can give them a share in the new covenant, which is the new (and the "best") wine of abiding together in God's love. In giving this witness, Mary helped overcome divisions among people by manifesting the kingdom and so making it available to them.

Finally, in walking in the life of good deeds prepared for her in advance, Mary followed Jesus to Calvary, where she surrendered him to the Father and offered herself completely with him as a living sacrifice.

Thus, Mary is a perfect example for all other Christians to follow. As Jesus' first and best disciple, she wishes his other disciples to be with him in sanctifying themselves, making his gospel and new covenant available

to others, offering the Eucharist, and sharing in everlasting life. Therefore, she will do whatever she can in a motherly way to help us in these respects, and she deserves, in response, our filial attention, respect, admiration, affection, gratitude, and imitation.

Of course, we cannot imitate Mary in all respects: in some ways, she cannot be imitated. And without imitating her in others, many of the Lord Jesus' disciples can follow him according to their own personal vocations. Still, insofar as Mary's gifts and her use of them concern her own holiness, her witness making the kingdom available to others, and the fullness of her self-giving with Jesus to the Father, those Christians who have the gift and call to imitate Mary more closely should commit themselves to doing so and fulfill that commitment faithfully.

Jesus remained single; he was detached from this-worldly goods; and being obedient to his Father—during a significant part of his life by obeying Joseph and Mary—was his sole concern. Similarly, Mary remained a virgin; her poverty left her dependent for care on the disciple Jesus loved; and she was the obedient handmaid of the Lord.

Insofar as the baptismal faith that is the starting point of every Christian's life is a religious commitment, all Christians live a consecrated life. For many, the next major commitment, under faith, that organizes their lives is marital consent and/or the undertaking of an occupation as service to others and lay apostolate. But some Christians' lives are consecrated, as Mary's was, by a second religious commitment: to follow Jesus, as Mary did, in virginity or celibacy for the kingdom's sake, detachment from all other goods and resources, and obedient cooperation in service to the kingdom.

Concupiscence manifests itself most clearly in the primary capital sins: gluttony, lust, greed, and pride. So, practicing chastity, poverty, and obedience is a radical way of overcoming concupiscence and growing in personal holiness. And *for those who enjoy the necessary gifts and calling*, this way, being uncomplicated and direct, is better and easier.

In heaven there is no marrying and being given in marriage, not because marital love is a bad thing, but because it is only a limited form of a better thing of which it is only a sacrament: the one-flesh communion of all the saints in the whole of the Lord Jesus' resurrection life. In heaven there is no property, not because having and sharing gifts and resources is bad, but because having and sharing them so abundantly that there never is scarcity is better. Likewise, in heaven there is no sphere for personal autonomy as distinct from the common good, not because freedom is bad but because all members of the kingdom will spontaneously cooperate in its glorious life. So, practicing chastity, poverty, and obedience bears witness to the Gospel by manifesting commitment to the kingdom,

approximating its goods already in this world, and by this concrete instantiation enhancing its appeal both to nonbelievers and fellow Christians.

Finally, in heaven one finds one's perfect self-fulfillment by giving oneself totally in the perfect communion of divine love. So, practicing the vows in a life centered in the Eucharist unites one with the Lord Jesus in special intimacy even now!