

## MARY AND CHRISTIAN MORAL PRINCIPLES

Since most of my work has been in ethics and moral theology rather than in Marian studies, the invitation to address this session of your distinguished Society came as a surprise. And since I am almost entirely ignorant of the vast body of theological scholarship concerning Mary, I obviously cannot take up and advance any of its familiar, important themes.

However, my recently published book on fundamental moral theology includes some fresh analyses of human action, and applications of these analyses to the human actions involved in central moments of salvation history—especially to original sin and Jesus' redemptive sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> In the first half of this paper, I shall extend these analyses to Mary's role. In the second half, I shall point out certain areas in which, it seems to me, Christian moral principles and life especially need help today from Marian studies and devotion.

Thus, while this essay itself will make no significant direct contribution to Marian studies, it will succeed if it helps you with and encourages you in your work in this field. It may do this by suggesting a somewhat different perspective on the familiar terrain. Starting with your existing store of scholarship and looking at Mariology from this different perspective, you may, I hope, gain some new insights to be developed in our discussion today and in your future work.

### I.

The three divine persons are naturally a family, a perfect communion of life and love. They created, not for any benefit to

<sup>1</sup> Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983).

themselves, but to enlarge their communion, so that others might share in their happiness. Human persons and the human family are made to be in the image of the divine persons and family.

Yet human persons do not at once share in the life and happiness naturally proper to God. Created with their own nature and potentialities, they are endowed with a certain real independence from God. Having the power of free choice, they do not become members of the divine family unless they consent. Rather, God proposes the plan he had in mind in creating, and created persons freely accept or reject God's plan and their role in it. In this way, the mutuality necessary for full friendship— as distinct from a relationship such as that between masters and slaves— is possible between divine and human persons. Men and women can accept or reject intimacy with a freedom similar to that with which God offers it.

Human free choices thus are a necessary factor in the heavenly communion God plans in creating. Of course, the whole created part of this communion, including these free choices themselves, exists only by God's grace. However, Jesus empowers those who accept him to become children of God (Jn. 1:12), and they exercise this power by free choices, beginning with their commitment of faith. Thus, those who accept the offer of divine intimacy determine themselves, by their own free choices, to be who they are in relation to the divine persons.

We know that in many specific ways our free choices also determine our selves and our relationships with other human beings. By one's choices one is a scholar or a businessman, a priest or a parent, a golfer or an amateur photographer. If these choices are upright, they help to shape persons and an earthly community which is material for the heavenly communion, as Vatican II teaches (*Gaudium et spes*, 35-39). Thus, free choices are a factor not only in adding created persons to the heavenly communion but also in shaping the specific personal and interpersonal fabric of the created part of that communion.

Even within the Holy Trinity there is an order of procession. Among created persons, too, relationships establish priorities. A personal relationship always involves giving and receiving, and the difference between giving and receiving establishes order

between those in the relationship. The giver has an initiative prior to the receiver's. Moreover, priority in such cases is by no means always voluntary: One does not choose one's parents. (Even Jesus has no *human* choice about this.) Furthermore, no single relationship wholly determines a created person or the interpersonal communion of such persons. For instance, a son who is a teacher or physician can have his own mother as a student or patient.

We know that the heavenly communion God planned and is bringing about centers upon one individual: the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ. Being both divine and human, he is the unifying principle of the entire divine-human communion, the unique mediator between God and humankind.

Some today advocate so-called inclusive christologies. But the uniqueness of Jesus' mediation becomes clear when we consider his place in heaven: God's plan is "to bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship" (Eph. 1:10). Socrates and the Buddha may help some people toward virtue, but there is no heaven of Ideas and no Nirvana. There is only one God and only one heavenly communion. Jesus alone is the center of this uniquely real heaven, the connecting link of the whole communion. He holds it together, for he has natural bonds both with the Father and Spirit, and with human persons and the remainder of creation.

Still, insofar as he is truly human, Jesus, like anyone else, must exercise his freedom to become who he is in relation to God and to human persons. The New Testament tells us of Jesus' obedience: his human commitment to live in accord with his special, filial knowledge of the Father and to carry out his unique human part in the Father's plan. Jesus' lordship requires and depends on this obedience.

But his primacy in the heavenly communion also must be established by a suitable relationship with other human beings. We can imagine that God might have established the human primacy of the Word Incarnate by making him the first man, the natural father of humankind. However, we know that God chose instead to establish Jesus' primacy by having him head a human community formed by mutual free commitments: the new covenant.

Jesus accepted that role as his personal vocation and carried it

out, especially in celebrating the Last Supper. In choosing to do that, he freely accepted his passion and death, and so provided the material for his resurrection — not simply his corpse, but his corpse worthy of divine vindication, because it is the remains of his sacrifice worthy of acceptance. The vindication of Jesus' resurrection is the cornerstone of the heavenly communion — the eternal covenant.

Just as Jesus' human free choices in this world are necessary elements of his constitution as the center of the heavenly communion, so God plans and creates for Christians their lives of freely chosen good deeds (see Eph. 2:10). Without these they cannot be the persons they are called to be and they cannot enjoy the places they are called to fill in the heavenly communion.

Every Christian life of good deeds includes a choice similar to Jesus' obedience. This basic choice, the act of faith, is submission to God's plan. Since by that plan Jesus is head of the new covenant communion, faith makes one a follower of Jesus and a member of his communion. The follower of Jesus cooperates with him first by freely receiving and growing in the communion he offers and then by freely working with him to extend this communion to others.

At the same time, the many created persons called to this communion also must differ among themselves, and so must stand in diverse relationships to one another. As I already said, these relationships need not be of only one kind, and so we cannot be sure that there is one created person in all respects closest to Jesus and prior to all other created persons in heavenly communion, somewhat as he is prior to all created persons.

Sometimes popular piety suggests that Mary is prior in every human relationship. This suggestion is an exaggeration, for there are kinds of relationship in which Joseph, Peter, John, and others are closer to Jesus than Mary is.

Nevertheless, we know that God's plan and its carrying out has put Mary in one uniquely close human relationship with Jesus, and so in an especially central role in the heavenly communion. Her free choices which contribute to constituting her in this role involve a uniquely close cooperation with Jesus in receiving the communion he offers and in extending it to the rest

of humankind. Hence, as Vatican II teaches, because of the grace of her motherhood, Mary "far surpasses all other creatures, both in heaven and on earth" (*Lumen gentium*, 53).

Could God have redeemed humankind without Mary? Perhaps. But God is not bringing about redemption as if it were an end in itself, some sort of product apart from the persons involved and their communion with him and one another. God does not simply use Jesus, Mary, or anyone else to get a result beyond themselves. Rather, God redeems by bringing to be and shaping the being and relationships of those who will share in the heavenly communion.

God did not want an eternal covenant communion without Mary. A kingdom without her would have been poorer than the one God planned with her. So salvation history had to have a special role for Mary, because this history is the process which prepares the material of the heavenly communion.

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Mary is one of Jesus' first followers. About the details of her discipleship we know very little. She keeps her experiences of him in her heart, hears his word and ponders it, with a few other disciples accompanies him to Calvary, and with others prays and waits for his promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

In general, the redemption of each Christian is an orderly process, with two major stages. The first is initial conversion and justification by grace through faith. The second is the gradual process of growth in holiness. Holiness is not a reward, as if it were some sort of payment, for good works. Rather, as one made holy by God's gift of living faith puts mind, heart, soul, and strength to work in the service of love, the whole self is transformed according to the likeness of Jesus. Thus, St. Paul teaches: "Man believes in his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved" (Rom. 10:10), for those who sincerely confess their faith in word and deed gradually become perfectly at one with the grace by which they were justified, and so perfectly at one with Jesus.

Without faith, Mary would have no place in the communion of the new covenant. For although Mary, unlike us, is justified

by a grace which prevents her sharing in the heritage of sin, still she, like us, is saved by grace through faith in the sense that her personal faith in God implicitly includes acceptance of the grace of her own immaculate conception.

But justification by grace through faith, which Mary's relationship with Jesus has in common with that of other disciples, is not what specifies her personal place in the heavenly communion. Rather, Mary's motherhood is the relationship by which she is unique. It is her personal share in the grace of salvation, which is distinct from justification, as the fullness of grace is from its beginning, as the Assumption is from the Immaculate Conception.

Considered from the moral point of view, Mary's motherhood is a gift she freely accepts, an exemplary case of conscious and responsible parenthood. Mary's *fiat* is the human act by which she accepts her unique role in the heavenly communion.

As an outward act, this *fiat* does not amount to much: a few words, which take only a few seconds. However, like any human act (and more obviously than most), like the act of sexual intercourse which normally initiates human life, the moral significance of Mary's *fiat* is in her heart—that is, in the volitional consent her outward act expresses.

This consent is not a temporal event or process, but a spiritual reality, which is lasting—until and unless nullified by a contrary choice. Like any free act of the will, it builds up a moral personality, self-determines the person's identity and relationships. In being carried out, the will act shapes thoughts, feelings, and outward performances, and so affects the whole person. Together with other acts of will on which it depends or which complement it, the consent of Mary's *fiat* is the core of her character.

As I have explained, the fullness of grace Mary enjoys by her motherhood presupposes but adds to the grace of her immaculate conception. Correspondingly, Mary's *fiat* to motherhood presupposes her faith in God but is not identical with it.<sup>2</sup> Mary

<sup>2</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Mary: Mother of the Redemption* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), chap. 3, fails to distinguish justification from sanctification and identifies Mary's act of faith with her *fiat*.

already believes before the angel appears to her, yet at first she perceives an obstacle to giving her consent. She consents only when it becomes clear to her how her motherhood pertains to her personal vocation.

Thus, Mary's faith is a necessary but not the only condition of her motherhood. So her *fiat* is not a consent in faith as if it were faith alone. Rather, Mary's faith is related to her *fiat* as readiness to do God's will, whatever that might be, is related to a specific implementing commitment: to do what she comes to recognize as his will with respect to her personal life.

In the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' temptations, we see him not only freely consenting to his personal vocation but also freely choosing it or, at least, confirming his commitment to it against appealing alternatives. By contrast, the account of the Annunciation does not show Mary rejecting an alternative to the motherhood she is asked to accept. Like many people with faith, her only problem is one of discernment. Once she is clear that this motherhood really does belong to her vocation, she consents to it as an unexpected implication of her commitment of faith: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord (the obedience of faith); be it done to me according to your word (the vocational commitment)."

In general, by commitments we enter into relationships with some other person or persons and assume definite responsibilities toward them with respect to certain human goods. Yet commitments leave much open, since they do not specify the ways and means by which one will serve others in respect to these goods, nor do they specify conditions and limits of service. Commitments join persons in a common life; they establish communion, at least within limits. Commitments can develop with respect to their clear demands and possibilities of fulfillment, yet keep their identity through this unfolding.

Mary's *fiat* to motherhood, like conscious and responsible parenthood in general, is a very broad and open-ended commitment. It is a commitment primarily to the child who is to be derived from herself, born as a distinct individual, and raised to human autonomy. Her commitment bears upon all the goods of this child, on everything which will contribute to his flourishing.

Like any good mother, Mary undertakes to promote her child's flourishing in every way open to her. And so Mary's commitment bears upon Jesus' moral acts—not least on his fulfillment of his personal vocation—and on all the relationships with others which he will establish by his own commitments. Thus, by her *fiat*, Mary implicitly undertakes to do whatever is appropriate and possible to further Jesus' work, and she accepts the role toward his friends which is appropriate for his mother. As Vatican II teaches, Mary devotes "herself totally as a handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son" (*Lumen gentium*, 56).

Like other parents, Mary does not know in advance what she is getting into. The price she has to pay only gradually becomes clear as it comes due. But to become the mother of the redemption and the mother of all Christians, she need only be faithful to her original *fiat* as the responsibilities it entails unfold. We know that she is faithful, and that her fidelity is not easy. As Jesus is God's suffering servant, so Mary is God's suffering handmaiden (cf. Jn. 16:21-22 and Rev. 12:1-5).

Jesus is the central moral principle of each Christian's life. Our faith in him is the fundamental option which shapes our lives; by it we accept communion in his new covenant. Our personal vocations are our diverse ways of helping Jesus complete his redemptive work, by building up the communion which centers upon him. Our personal vocational commitments determine most of our affirmative responsibilities from moment to moment.

Mary is a subordinate but real moral principle of our Christian lives. Without her consent to be Jesus' mother, the Word would have existed and might have been incarnate, but Jesus would not exist. Thus Mary's *fiat* is a necessary condition for the whole of Jesus' life and work. Since Mary mothers Jesus' entire work, our cooperation in that work is cooperation with her. Her motherly responsibility toward us is to further our Christian lives in whatever way she can. Our responsibility toward her is to honor her, chiefly by being the kind of children and living the kind of lives she can be proud of.

Thus the communion of the eternal covenant is built up. In it, Jesus as head has primacy over all his disciples, including

Mary. Yet she mediates every other Christian's communion with him and strengthens it without interfering in it. As Vatican II teaches, because Mary cooperates with Jesus in his redemptive work, "she is a mother to us in the order of grace" (*Lumen gentium*, 61).

In human relationships generally, closeness to someone close to a friend does not displace intimacy with that friend but intensifies it. This general rule holds true in our relationship with Jesus and Mary. For she does not stand in the communal relationship as a person between Jesus and us—humanly subordinate to Jesus and superior to us. Rather, as Jesus' disciple Mary stands alongside us, while as his mother she enjoys a real priority both to him and to us.

Mary's motherhood, as I have argued, does not follow from her faith alone; her *fiat* is necessary and it is distinct from her faith. Still, Mary's motherhood is not other than her discipleship, nor is it irrelevant to her place in heavenly communion, subordinate to Jesus but prior to us. Mary's single *fiat* at once brings her into a twofold relationship with Jesus. Being his mother also is Mary's personal vocation, her unique cooperation with his redemptive act. Thus, by her *fiat* she is both prior to Jesus as his mother and subordinate to him as a functioning member of his new covenant communion.

The situation is analogous to that in which a man's consent to marriage makes him at once the prince consort to a ruling queen and her subject. He is prior as husband to wife (assuming a Christian conception of marriage) but subordinate as subject to sovereign. Still, his conjugal role is his chief civic responsibility. Similarly, Mary's maternal role is her chief Christian apostolate. Thus, even in her subordination to Jesus, Mary stands behind our relationship with him and fosters our contribution to the completion of his work—that is, to the completion of God's plan of divine-human communion.

Mary's role in the episode at the wedding feast at Cana neatly exemplifies the way in which she is a principle of our Christian lives. Although she is only one guest among others at the wedding feast, as Jesus' mother she intervenes with him. She does not act as if she were his superior, but points to his sovereignty

by urging those who will serve to follow his directions. In doing that, she creates a situation in which action otherwise inappropriate for Jesus becomes suitable and timely. And the result of the sign Jesus performs is that his glory is revealed, and this strengthens his disciples' faith, their relationship with him as their master.

In a similar way, Mary's motherly concern for us helps to create a situation in which human actions which otherwise would be inappropriate for Jesus become appropriate and timely. In part, no doubt, she does this by her impact upon us. Although she is only one Christian among others, Mary stands behind and strengthens every other Christian's faith in her son. But it also is reasonable to think that Mary's concern for us affects Jesus' human attitude toward us. For our attitudes toward others are affected by our mothers' concern for them, and Jesus is like us in everything but sin.

I am aware, of course, that many exegetes will not allow John's account of the episode at Cana to be used as I am using it.<sup>3</sup> But their opinion is at odds with Vatican II, which teaches that at the beginning of Jesus' public life, Mary "was moved with pity at the marriage feast of Cana, and her intercession brought about the beginning of miracles by Jesus the Messiah" (*Lumen gentium*, 58).

Moreover, their exegesis of John 2:4 involves the assumption that "my hour" must have exactly the same reference every time it occurs in John's Gospel, namely, to the time of Jesus' passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. That assumption precludes reading Jesus' "My hour has not yet come" as a statement that his intervention to supply wine would be untimely, and so it precludes understanding Mary's appeal to Jesus as effective intercession on behalf of his embarrassed friends—immediately, those short of wine for an earthly wedding banquet, but ultimately those missing out on the wine of the heavenly wedding banquet.

<sup>3</sup> See Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, The Anchor Bible, 29 (2d ed.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), pp. 99-103.

But when does Jesus' passion begin? With his arrest, or in the Garden, or at the Last Supper, or when he heads toward Jerusalem for the last time? For John, the revelation of Jesus' glory (by his passion, death, and resurrection) and his glorification of the Father complete Jesus' work. His priestly prayer at the Last Supper begins: "Father, the hour has come! Give glory to your Son, that your Son may give glory to you" (Jn. 17:1). But Jesus' glory already is revealed at Cana (Jn. 2:11). Thus, it seems that for John, Jesus' passion begins when he first reveals his glory by performing his first sign. The beginning of Jesus' public life is the beginning of its end.

Moreover, the exegesis inconsistent with Vatican II's teaching turns Jesus' "My hour has not yet come" into an irrelevant remark and renders the whole passage incoherent. It seems to me unreasonable to accept a method of interpretation which prefers an incoherent text (something unusual in carefully written works) to one in which an expression is used with different, though related, references (something usual in almost every work of any length).

Hence, despite the contrary opinion, I think it more reasonable exegesis, not mere pious eisegesis, to interpret "my hour" in John's Gospel as an expression having a somewhat elastic reference. It always refers to the time for Jesus' glorification, but the revelation of his glory comes by stages and with gradually increasing fullness—beginning with his first sign, and ending with his resurrection.

Or does the manifestation of glory end even with Jesus' resurrection? The Johannine literature points to a still fuller glorification, that of the second coming. In Revelation 12:1-5, the spiritual motherhood of Mary seems to play a part in the final hour.<sup>4</sup> For the Church—the bride whose reality is mysteriously intertwined with the person of Mary—together with the Spirit says:

<sup>4</sup> See André Feuillet, *Jesus and His Mother According to the Lukan Infancy Narratives, and According to St. John: The Role of the Virgin Mary in Salvation History and the Place of Woman in the Church*, trans. by Leonard Maluf (Still River, Mass.: St. Bede's Publications, 1984), pp. 8-10, 14, and 120-24 (on Cana); pp. 23-33 (on Mary's motherhood in Revelation 12:1-5).

“Come!” (Rev. 22:17), and so invokes the final revelation of that glory whose first revelation Mary invoked at Cana.

## II.

Since Mary is especially close to Jesus and is our spiritual mother, sound piety often proposes her character as a model of Christian virtue. In my book, there is a detailed treatment of the Christian virtues, structured according to the eight Beatitudes of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount.

The first Beatitude, concerning the poor in spirit, often has been thought to refer to humility, and I accept this view. Humility, as we all know, is vulgarly confused with self-denigration. Actually, humility is practical acceptance of one’s total dependence upon God, not only as creator but as redeemer. I use Mary’s *Magnificat* to illustrate the difference between self-denigration and Christian humility. Nothing could be further from self-denigration than “From this day all generations will call me blessed” (Lk. 1:48). Yet humility is clearly expressed by one who says, not “My soul proclaims my greatness,” but “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord” (Lk. 1:46); not “I have done great things for God,” but “the Almighty has done great things for me” (Lk. 1:49).

It would be interesting to go on to consider the extent to which all the specifically Christian virtues can be verified in Mary. However, I have not done that, and some of you, as Marian scholars, are far better equipped for that task.

Instead, I will deal with only one respect in which Mary often is taken as an example: discernment and acceptance of personal vocation. Here Christian moral principles desperately need help from Marian studies. For Mary surely is exemplary in respect to personal vocation, yet one runs a serious risk if one takes her as a model.

Vatican II emphatically recalls attention to the universal and common vocation of Christians to holiness. The Council’s teaching absolutely excludes any lingering notion that Christians who are neither priests nor religious are second class members of Jesus’ Body.

But more than this, Vatican II makes it clear beyond doubt that every Christian has a unique personal vocation, which must be discerned, fostered, accepted, and faithfully fulfilled. Parents should encourage every one of their children in the vocation proper to each of them (*Lumen gentium*, 11). As teachers of the faith, priests are to see to it “that the faithful are led individually in the Holy Spirit to a development of their own vocation as required by the gospel, to a sincere and active charity, and to that freedom with which Christ has made us free” (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, 6). “Bishops should be diligent in fostering holiness among their clerics, religious, and laity according to the special vocation of each” (*Christus Dominus*, 15).

Vatican II advances a most comprehensive conception of apostolate. It embraces the whole mission of the Church: To spread God’s redemptive work in Jesus to all humankind and to restore all things to God in Christ. Each member of the Mystical Body receives special gifts and makes a unique contribution to this all-embracing salvific work:

For the exercise of this apostolate, the Holy Spirit who sanctifies the People of God through the ministry and the sacraments gives to the faithful special gifts as well (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7), “allotting to everyone according as he will” (1 Cor. 12:11). Thus may individuals, “according to the gift that each has received, administer it to one another” and become “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:10), and build up thereby the whole body in charity (cf. Eph. 4:16). From the reception of these charisms or gifts, including those which are less dramatic, there arise for each believer the right and duty to use them in the Church and in the world for the good of mankind and for the upbuilding of the Church (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, 3).

The words “personal vocation” do not appear in this passage, but the concept is articulated with precision: From the reception of gifts there arises in the believer the duty to use them.

Now, Mary is exemplary in that she receives her unique gifts, discerns her corresponding role, meekly accepts it with her *fiat*, and faithfully fulfills its responsibilities. However, using Mary as a model involves a risk: that people will want something like an angelic visit before discerning and accepting their vocations. Christians generally should expect to receive their personal voca-

tions in a quite different way. To clarify this point, let us look at the scriptural roots of the concept of personal vocation.

Vocation presupposes a personal God who reveals himself, for only such a God can call men and women to cooperate with him by entering and building up a divine-human covenant community. Hence, pagans both ancient and modern have no concept of vocation. Unlike pagans, God's people of the old covenant and the new believe in his wise and loving providence. Hence, they will expect help from God in shaping their lives according to his plan, and so can be aware of his call.

Still, the principle of personal vocation did not fully emerge in the Old Testament. A whole people was called to enter into covenant with God, and certain men—Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Jeremiah—were called to roles of leadership. But members of the rank and file did not receive personal vocations. The detailed precepts of the old law shaped their daily lives into a standardized response to the common vocation to follow God and live within his covenant.

The New Testament maintains and deepens the conception of the covenant community. All men and women are called to enter it by a personal act of faith and to share by the Spirit's gift in the divine life and dignity of Jesus. Not only the great but *every* disciple of Jesus is called to a special role of service. Each Christian has his or her own cross to bear—a unique way of sharing in Jesus' redemptive work.

In Jesus' new covenant, all are to be priests, spokespersons for God, and sharers in responsibility for his people. Each member of the Body of Jesus, endowed by the Spirit with unique gifts and opportunities, has a vital function: The diverse gifts must be used whenever opportune to build up the one Body.

Undoubtedly, the emergence of personal vocation in the New Testament was partly a result of the economic and cultural diversity among Christians and their greater scope for choices among social roles. But more important is the freedom of God's children characteristic of the new covenant, in which the interior gift of the Spirit provides a law of freedom which renders a detailed code of precepts no longer necessary. A still more profound factor is the enhancement of the dignity of the individual person which comes

with the Christian understanding of God's kingdom, in which created persons enter into communion with the Trinity.

God's people of the old covenant were called to receive his revelation, to accept and trust in his promises, and to prepare a culture and family in which the Word would take flesh. Their task was a great but limited one—for example, to give rise to the Jewish language and nation, to hand on the Law and the Prophets, and to give birth to Mary, Joseph, the apostles, and holy women. In carrying out their task, the people of the old covenant served God without comprehending what they were doing. For the plan revealed in Jesus was still hidden from them. Very often in the Old Testament, individuals were called to accept roles against their upright inclinations, and even asked to do things which seemed utterly pointless to them.

But, as Jesus tells us, we know what our Master is doing. We are called, not to serve him without knowing what he is about, but to cooperate responsibly with him in completing his work of proclaiming the kingdom and building it up. It follows that each disciple of Jesus can discern his or her personal vocation by reading the signs God provides in the contemporary needs of the Church, his or her unique gifts, and the indication of personal inclinations, which, under certain conditions, can be accepted as the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

If the preceding argument is sound, Christians must be cautious in using as models for the discernment of their personal vocations the great vocation narratives of the New Testament—the Annunciation, Jesus' choice of his apostles, including Paul, and so on. All these examples still have important features in common with the style of vocation proper to the old covenant, for none of those called had yet received the explanation Jesus' teaching gives of God's plan.

For us, however, the New Testament and the life of the Church bear witness to this fullness of revelation. We can proceed as Jesus' friends in finding our vocations. We must not expect an angelic visitation, and should not suppose that our very vocations, even at the time we first discern them, will be against our Christian inclinations or seem meaningless to us even in the light of faith.

Still, Mary's example remains relevant because of the care she takes in discerning her vocation, the meekness with which she accepts it once she discerns it, and the faithfulness with which she fulfills it. Like Mary, every Christian will be tested by some of the unexpected implications of his or her vocational commitments, and will have to sacrifice personal inclinations and immediate self-fulfillment for the sake of fidelity to the role in salvation history which God has assigned. Moreover, like Mary, every Christian must expect to be perplexed at times, in the face of frustrations and sufferings whose specific point remains hidden throughout this life.

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Because Christian doctrines are organically united with one another and with the practice of Christian life, sound Catholic doctrine concerning Mary and devotion to her often has played an important role in limiting and rectifying unsound currents of opinion and action in the Church. In this final section, I will suggest two closely related places in Christian moral principles and life where especially, as it seems to me, the Marian factor can make its salutary contribution today. One of these is the importance of the Christian's good works; the other is the correct orientation of the whole of Christian life toward the kingdom which is not of this world.

Before Vatican II, popular Catholic spirituality perhaps over-emphasized good works. Trent's correction of Luther's errors sometimes may have contributed to an excessive attention to human merit at the expense of adequate recognition of the primacy of God's grace. Today, it seems to me, there is a tendency toward the opposite extreme: Some seem to wish to minimize the importance of a morally good Christian life, while they focus almost exclusively on God's grace and mercy. And the latter sometimes is conceived in a more Lutheran than Catholic way: as a covering over of ineradicable sin rather than a real transforming of the sinner to new life in Christ.

This misconception of God's mercy is pernicious, for it helps to rationalize widespread and increasing moral laxity among Catholics. If one rejects the rationalization and insists on the im-

portance and possibility of keeping the commandments, one is likely to be called unrealistic, legalistic, and even pharisaical.

The Church, it is said, should avoid harsh moral pronouncements and should stick to her primary task of bearing witness to God's gracious forgiveness, his unending mercy. Hard sayings, we are told, will only make more of the children of the Church pack up and leave home. So anything too demanding must be censored out of the gospel, as a culturally conditioned element no longer useful in our time. Does the Bible talk about hell? Ancient Near-Eastern threat discourse, hardly appropriate in our more civilized age.

Those who urge the Church to be a permissive mother, who want her to adopt an indulgent pastoral practice, do not understand what morality and sin are. They are the real legalists, for they think morality is just a set of rules, only loosely connected with anything of great importance for human life, and that sin is merely the breaking of a rule. They think that a pastor should be like a friendly neighborhood patrolman, who prudently softens the requirements of the law and overlooks most violations.

With this misunderstanding of morality, sin, and pastoral work has come a remodeling of God. No more a Father who passionately wants what is truly good for his children, he no longer hates evil or becomes angry with sinners.

Wanting us to enjoy ourselves and feel no pain, this remodeled God does not demand repentance, but instead ignores sin, tolerates it, covers it over cosmetically, and makes sure that sinners do not suffer the consequences of their irresponsibility. In place of the almighty God and Father revealed throughout the Bible, we now are presented with something more like a weak male character in a TV situation comedy. God is becoming the great wimp in the sky.

In reality, the norms of morality are no mere set of rules. Rather, they are inescapably necessary requirements for living in accord with our dignity as persons made in God's image and likeness, for reverencing the persons of others, and for working together toward a flourishing life of personal fulfillment and communion in social solidarity. Sins are self-mutilating acts, which impede or damage or destroy some part of the full being

of ourselves and other persons; sins block the way toward integral human fulfillment.

Corresponding to the real significance of sin is the real importance of a good Christian life. Such a life is not outside God's grace but part of it. God's goodness is so great that he wants his gifts also to be our merits, as Trent teaches.<sup>5</sup> By preparing a life of good deeds for each of us to live, God gives us more than he would if he saved us without our willing cooperation.

Moreover, since our Christian lives actually build up our selves and relationships, they prepare the material of the heavenly communion. Christian life in this world is not merely an extrinsic means for reaching heaven, like a rocket which drops away in flames once it has served its purpose. No, Christian life in this world is an indispensable part of eternal life. Without living our life of good deeds we cannot become the persons God wishes or enter into the relationships God plans for us in the eternal covenant.

Here we come back to the considerations of the first part of this paper. What is true of the importance of every Christian's life is eminently true of Mary's life. And what may be hard to believe about oneself is clearer in doctrine and can become clearer to us in meditation about Mary. Her *fiat* is entirely an effect of God's grace. But it also truly is her free commitment. That commitment is necessary for her motherhood, indeed is its moral core, and her motherhood lasts forever, determining her relationship both with Jesus and us.

The teaching of this truth and the practice of devotion in accord with it will help to balance present tendencies toward an overemphasis on grace against good works, and the accompanying misconception of grace. If the fullness of God's grace in Mary includes her free response and if her holy life is intrinsic to her role in the eternal covenant, so with us.

The other, closely related area where, I believe, the Marian corrective is most needed today is in respect to the orientation of Christian life as a whole. Forty years ago, every Catholic knew and bore in mind that the main reason why God made us is so that we might be happy with him forever in heaven. Today, this

<sup>5</sup> D-Sch, 1548/810.

truth seems to be forgotten. There are at least four reasons why this has happened.

First, during the depression of the 1930s and World War II, the hardness and fragility of life in this world were obvious, and it was comparatively easy to bear in mind that Christian life here is a way to a better, a heavenly homeland. The period of reconstruction and prosperity after World War II naturally drew people's attention to this world and made it easier to feel as if we were permanent settlers here.

Second, Vatican II, especially in *Gaudium et spes*, corrects a false other-worldliness and stresses the responsibilities of Christians to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of this world. At the same time, the Council develops a richer and more balanced eschatology, a sounder other-worldliness, than that of classical piety.

But, as often happened with the work of the Council, publicity distorted this element of its teaching. Media of communication, influenced by secular humanism, emphasized what is more obvious and more appealing in that perspective. So the Council's this-worldly concern was much more publicized than its renewed eschatology. The result was that the Council's correction of false other-worldliness sent the Church on a dangerous skid toward false this-worldliness.

Third, in the optimistic atmosphere around the time of the Council, thoughts of hell seemed out of place. Attention to heaven, unfortunately, inevitably carries with it thoughts of hell. So attention to heaven began to seem an occasion of bad thoughts, and as such to be avoided.

Fourth, liberalized Christianity compromises with secular humanism and denies the transcendent. Faithful Catholics do not go so far, yet they are influenced by liberalized Christianity. Many tend to emphasize the elements of truth in its call for relevance—for example, involvement in the causes of human rights, social justice, and peace—and to ignore, pass over quietly, and so almost accept by default its erroneous narrowing of Christian concern to this world.

The New Testament and the liturgy remain predominantly concerned with heaven—the hidden kingdom. No faithful Catholic will deny that we must seek it first and that it is not of this

world. Yet the other-worldly significance of what the New Testament and the liturgy say about the kingdom is generally ignored. The words are still repeated, but for many people they seem to have become just as insignificant as most of the "good news" one receives in each day's pile of junk mail.

So in practice even many faithful bishops, priests, religious, and layfolk seem to attend almost exclusively to our human concerns in this world (which they nevertheless say is passing away), to the practical implications of our experience of this world (which they nevertheless say should be subordinated to the more real world of faith), and to the standards of this world (to which they nevertheless say we should not conform).

If we really believed in heaven, if our treasure were there and our hearts were there, with a real, live Jesus and Mary, a Jesus and Mary so familiar that just as we expect from moment to moment to see, hear, smell, and embrace those with whom we live, so we expected to meet Jesus and Mary at any moment, to talk with them, to work and play with them, to eat with them—if heaven were like that for us, the orientation of our Christian lives as a whole would be much sounder than it now is.

Thus, along with the doctrine of Jesus' bodily resurrection, it seems to me there is no more timely doctrine than that of Mary's bodily assumption into heavenly glory. Linked to a sound understanding of the relationship between grace and Christian life, and experienced through sound devotion, Mary's Assumption can help liberate today's Catholics from the deadening sense that the world of immediate experience is the only real one.

Then they will be able to experience the Eucharist as a celebration of heavenly communion already realized and still to be realized. And with the Eucharist as the center of their lives, they will be able to work passionately for integral human fulfillment in this world inasmuch as their work toward it—even when imperfect and unsuccessful—prepares material for the fulfillment of everything in our Lord Jesus.

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