

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

I. Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Mariology is based upon the intimate bond that links Jesus with Mary: she is his mother. The NT testifies to this fact. She is first mentioned in the Bible not by name, but as the mother who gives Jesus his earthly life. Through her he becomes our brother, shares our life, and makes us share in the sonship of God. "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law that we might receive the full rights as sons."

-Mary's life is hidden in the humility of Nazareth. The exalted language of our liturgical celebrations should not estrange her from our human world. We encounter her first as the maid of Nazareth who is called to a task totally beyond her understanding: to share in God's design for the renewal of our human family. Her greatness lies in the silent faith with which she surrenders herself to a vocation which was hidden in God's love: "Blessed is she who believed!"

-According to modern biology, Mary is more closely related to Jesus than in the older view. Through her, and through her alone, Jesus becomes heir of the lineage of inheritance which leads back to the origin of the human family, to "Adam, who is from God" (Lk 3:38). This is the significance of Luke's genealogy.

-The psychological dependence of the child on the mother leads to the psychological bond, the intimate communion between mother and child. The mother bears the child nine months during pregnancy, gives birth to him, nourishes his body with her breasts and protects him during the years of utter dependence. Each of these relationships affects the child deeply—it affects also the life of the mother most intimately. Psychology reveals the deep impact this earliest relationship has on the entire personality of the child. As recounted by the Gospels, the human personality of Jesus developed in Nazareth under the care of his mother. We may think of Jesus as a happy child, accepted and loved by his mother, closely linked to her in the daily life in the rural setting of a village.

II. Mary's Personal Motherhood

The natural link between mother and child develops into a personal relationship in tune with the natural growth of the child, beginning with the total dependence of the child on the mother and leading to the mature independence of the young person. The personal relationship passes through the constant tension between continued dependence and growing, self-asserting freedom. Every mother has to face the painful task of allowing her children to grow and find their own destiny. A possessive mother who links the child to herself may ruin his life. To allow freedom is the test of real love.

Theologically Mariology begins only with Mary's personal relationship to Jesus. By God's design she is drawn into his life not only through her physical motherhood but also by sharing his life and saving mission. She has to follow his path in the darkness of faith. In the angelical message he is described as Messiah and Savior; she must accept him with his mission which seems to take him away from her, but which links her in reality inseparably with his saving work.

-Through her obedience to the divine message, Mary shares in Jesus' work of salvation. Already Irenaeus develops the parallel-contrast of Eve's disobedience and Mary's obedience: "As the human race fell into the bondage of death through the virgin (Eve), so it was rescued by a virgin. The disobedience of a virgin was balanced on the other side of the scale by virginal obedience."

-The theme is later taken up by Tertullian: "Eve had believed the serpent, Mary believed Gabriel"

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-According to Augustine, Mary is linked with the mission of Jesus through her obedience of faith. "It is more important that Mary is Christ's disciple than that she is his mother...Mary is blessed because she listened to God's word and kept it. More important is that she conceived his truth in her mind than his flesh in her womb. Christ is truth, Christ is flesh: Christ the truth is in Mary's mind, Christ the flesh is in Mary's womb."

-Vatican II articulates the biblical account and the patristic tradition of Mary's personal motherhood in a sober and concise manner. Mary is related to Jesus not only through her physical motherhood but through her free, personal response to the divine invitation. (LG 56)

III. Mary's Divine Motherhood

It is significant that the controversies about the person of Jesus in the early Christian centuries were inseparably linked with the person of Mary.

-The question whether she could legitimately be called "Theotokos", mother of God, became crucial in the early centuries.

-In the context of Mariology we limit ourselves to a brief outline of the problems involved, and to the specific Marian aspects of the discussions.

a) The Beginnings of Christology.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the only person in the Bible about whom this question is asked. Mark's entire narration reports Jesus' ongoing attempt to make the disciples understand his person, culminating in the question: "Who do you say I am?" (Mk 8:27-29). The first to give the full answer to this question is the centurion at the foot of the cross: "Surely, this man was the Son of God". (Mk 15:39)

-It is a process of growing in depth and precision which finally leads to the vision of John, the Gospel of the divine Logos who is incarnate in Jesus Christ: "In the beginning was the Word...and the Word became flesh and made its dwelling among us". (Jn 1:1.14) John's Gospel became the main inspiration of later Christology.

-Jesus' earthly life and work on earth are God's revelation to us. This understanding of Jesus' person underlying the accounts of all the Gospels" though he is fully human, he is never described as a man who reaches out to God. Also in his mission he is not first a man who, like the prophets, receives a mandate. His person is identical with his mission: "God sent his Son, Born of a woman" to make us share in his sonship. (Gal 4:4).

b) Two Approaches to Christology.

In the early Christian centuries, two basic trends of Christology developed and came into conflict; they remain significant also in today's approach to the person of Christ.

Alexandrine Christology is based on John 1:14: The Word became flesh. It is characterized as *logos – sarx* (Word – Flesh) Christology. It was developed by Athanasius in his struggle against Arius who denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. Rooted in John's prologue, he saw the Logos as the determining center of Jesus' being and personality and work. The significance of Athanasian Christology lies "in the clear presentation of the unity of subject in Christ. The Logos is the all-dominating and sole principle of the existence and therefore the subject of all statements about Christ...The Athanasian picture of Christ is clearly centered on the Logos and in its inner structure, sprier to any symmetrical Christological formula which puts Logos and man on the same level. (A. Grillmeier).

-The weakness of the Athanasian formula is the disregard for the human soul of Jesus. It has no place in his Christology:

Jesus is the divine Logos assuming a human body but not living a truly human life.

-Cyril of Alexandria, the outstanding representative of Alexandrian Christology, was in his early years totally dependent on the Athanasian position. Though he admits that the humanity of Jesus included a human soul, the human knowledge and freedom of Jesus have no theological significance. The question of the true humanity of Jesus in his person and work remains the crucial problem of the Alexandrian theologians.

-**Antiochian Christology** approached the mystery of Christ from the opposite side, namely, the true humanity of Jesus. Their Christology is characterized as *Logos – Anthropos* (Word – Man) Christology. The incarnation implies not only the assumption of a human body, but the Logos unites himself to the fullness of human life and so affects our destiny, makes us share in his immortality. Jesus himself, truly and fully human, is filled with the divine life through the Logos with whom he is united in most intimate union (*synnaphaia*).

-The most important representative of this trend is Theodore of Mopsuestia. His main concern (against Arius and Appollinaris) is the genuine understanding of the union of God and man, both in Christ and in us, without diminishing the full divinity of the Logos, and the preservation of the integrity of Christ's manhood. His picture of Christ is different from the Alexandrian school: "The human nature of Christ regains its real physical-human inner life and its capacity for action".

-This understanding of Christ, however, creates another problem which becomes crucial in subsequent controversies. "The interpretation of the unity (in Christ) becomes all the more burning. IN fact, everywhere in the interpretation of Christ, built up by Theodore, we have the impression of a loosening of the union in Christ...The Word-man framework seems to put it at a disadvantage. (Grillmeier)

-Without entering into further details of the momentous discussions preceding the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, a general note of orientation may be useful; it also affects the mariological implications. The Christologies of both schools were developed on the basis of ancient traditions. Their representatives were fully convinced that they taught the Christian doctrine based on the Council of Nicea, but in their extreme conclusions they fell into error: the Antiochene position ended in Nestorianism; the Alexandrine trends resulted in Monophysitism. The analysis of the sources leads to the conclusion: "In reality Nestorius and Cyril, Chalcedonians and Monophysites, are much nearer together than they themselves know". (Grillmeier).

-The difference lies in the approach: Nestorius must be credited with the modern, searching approach; he is conscious of the full and distinct reality of the Logos and the humanity of Jesus; both must be safeguarded. His formula of unity, however, is as yet, tentative and remains inadequate; the classical formula emerges only in Chalcedon. Cyril, on the other hand, is fascinated by the vision of unity in Jesus Christ which has the Logos as its only center. But to him the deep significance of the humanity and freedom of Jesus remains elusive.

c) Mariological Implications

Both Christologies have implications for Mariology: Can Mary be called *Theotokos*, mother of God? The title Theotokos was probably first used by Hippolytus in the third century. It occurs frequently in the writings of the fourth century authors: Athanasius, Basil and others.

-The title is easily understood in the context of the Alexandrian Logos-Sarx theology: the Logos is the only determining principle (hegemon) in the personality and life of Jesus. Thus Mary as the mother of Jesus is the mother of the Logos-in-flesh, mother of God. However, the title had misleading connotations: at first sight it seemed to link Mary with the mother-goddesses of pagan mythologies. Hence it had to be avoided. Furthermore, in the Christological context it had become suspect.

-Apollinaris cherished the title: For him the Logos was truly divine, but in his Christology the psyche—the principle of human life—was replaced by the Logos. Jesus was the heavenly man. As in ordinary people the body is humanized by the psyche, so in Christ it is divinized by the Logos. Thus in Apollinaris' theology Mary gives birth to Jesus' divinized body and so is truly Theotokos, mother of God. It is understandable that the title was not accepted in the Antiochene tradition.

-The controversy becomes acute when Nestorius, coming from Antioch, a disciple of Theodore of Mopsuestia, is elected as the patriarch of Constantinople (428). A discussion took place with a priest Anastasius who denied Mary the title Theotokos and called her merely *anthropotokos*, mother of the man Jesus. Nestorius wanted to make peace. Mary was the mother of the Savior—he called her *christotokos*, mother of Christ. However, he could not accept Theotokos because it was associated with a Christology which denied the full humanity of Jesus. But to be arbiter in the discussion, he lacked the subtle tools which were found only in the formula of Chalcedon. In his controversy he also attacked Cyril of Alexandria, the heir of Alexandrian Christology, who, in his earlier writings, still remained vague about the true humanity of Jesus and spoke of a natural union (henosis physike) of Logos and humanity; this was later rejected in Chalcedon. It was his mistake that in the controversy he put Arius, Apollinaris and Cyril together.

-In his search for a proper formula Nestorius wrote: "Mary has not borne the divinity...but a man, the instrument of the divinity; the Holy Spirit has not created the God-Logos from the Virgin...but made for him a temple". Extracts from his sermons were sent to Alexandria. Cyril demanded of Nestorius the acceptance of the title Theotokos. Both parties appealed to Pope Celestine who sided with Cyril. To restore peace the emperor Theodosius convoked the General Council of Ephesus.

e) Council of Ephesus (431)

The theological procedure of the Council was correct but incomplete. The 318 bishops who had assembled were not asked to prepare a statement of their own, but only to decide about the orthodoxy of the contrasting presentations of Christology. The text of the Nicene Creed was read out: it contained the understanding of Jesus Christ universally accepted in the Church. Then the Second Letter of Cyril, addressed to Nestorius, was read. Each bishop was asked whether he considered Cyril's letter in consonance with the formula of Nicea. One by one they agreed. Then Nestorius was asked to give his reply to Cyril. Again the bishops had to give their vote whether they considered it in agreement with Nicea. Their vote was negative. Nestorius was condemned.

-Serious objections, however, can be raised against the actual procedure of the Council. On his arrival, Cyril demanded the immediate beginning of the proceedings, though the delegation of Antioch—which would have supported Nestorius—had not yet arrived. Even the Roman delegation had not yet come. A few days after Nestorius had been condemned and deposed. John, the patriarch of Antioch, arrived with his bishops and, in his turn, excommunicated Cyril.

Gradually attempts at reconciliation were made which finally led to the compromise formula of reconciliation. A final formula was worked out only in the Council of Chalcedon (450).

-The basis of the definition of Ephesus was the Nicene Creed to which both parties appealed. Both series of statements are made about one and the same person who is Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, who in time is born of Mary. The identity of the one person, the eternal Son and the man Jesus, is an inalienable part of the Christian faith. Thus Cyril rightly justified the title Theotokos: "Not an ordinary man was born first of the holy Virgin on whom afterwards the Word descended. What we say is that, being united with the flesh from the womb, the Word has undergone birth in the flesh making the birth in the flesh his own...Thus the holy Fathers have unhesitatingly called the holy Virgin "Mother of God".

-Most important among these texts is the prologue of John's Gospel: the eternal Word of the Father became flesh (Jn 1:14). The theme continues throughout the Gospel: the eternal Son of the Father fulfills his saving mission in his earthly life, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...those who believe in him have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). Though Mary is not mentioned, her divine motherhood is implicitly affirmed. She is chosen as his mother to give him the earthly life in which he fulfills his divine mission. This is implied also in Paul's text to the Galatians: "God sent his Son, born of a woman" (Gal 4:4). About the one person Jesus, two origins are asserted: the origin

from God, he is Son of God, and his origin on earth through Mary for our salvation. She is the mother of the Son of God, Theotokos, in his earthly life.

-The title "Mother of God" is of significance for Christian life: Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. He is not merely God's messenger, or ruler in God's name—this was the role of prophets and kings. The mission of Jesus is not exhausted in teaching and working; it consists in his presence, in communion; through Jesus God is in a living and life-giving communion with us. This is God's gift to us through Mary. Through her the Son of God became member of our human family.

-This communion with God which we contemplate in the encounter of the angel with Mary continues and unfolds in the life of the Church.

IV. Mary and the Church in God's Plan of Salvation

Mary encounters God in freedom. Mary's free obedience becomes a constituent part of God's saving work. From the beginning, salvation is presented as a covenant, not of equal partners, to be sure, but including human freedom and responsibility. God cannot eliminate human freedom without destroying his own work, the dignity of man created after his image and likeness.

-Mary's free response to God's invitation is the pattern of God's ongoing saving action through the Church for the world.

-**Hippolytus** already sees the mission of the Church as the continuation of Mary's motherhood: "The church never ceases to give birth to the Logos. WE read that (Mary) brought forth a man child who was to rule the nations, the perfect man that is Christ, the child of God, both God and man. And the Church brings forth the Christ when she teaches the nations."

-**Origen** develops the theme of the Logos-birth in the Church in his Christmas sermons: "Hear this, shepherds of the churches, shepherds of God: All through time the angel comes down and announces to you that today, and every day, the redeemer is born, Christ the Lord.

-**Augustine**, the birth of Christ in the Church, in analogy to his birth from Mary, is a frequent theme.