

MARY, QUEEN OF HEAVEN: *REGINA CAELI*

This is the last of three sermons focused on the Blessed Virgin Mary. The first sermon, “Mary, Mother of God,” dealt with Mary’s role in the Incarnation and Birth of Christ. The second, “Mary, Mother of Sorrows” dealt with Mary’s role in the Passion of Christ. This third, “Mary, Queen of Heaven” will consider Mary’s role in the Church. For many Christians the first two are obvious. No one can deny Mary her place in the Christmas story, and given the prophecy of Simeon and the fact that one of our Lord’s seven words from the cross was concerned specifically with his mother, Mary’s role there is also undeniable. Mary’s role in the Church may seem a less obvious matter—at least if one considers only what is said in Holy Scripture, which is very little. And yet if one reads carefully the story of the founding of the Church one can see that a very distinct role is intended for her there as well.

It is St. Luke, of course, in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles that traces the history of the Church’s founding, the very same writer who in the first volume of his work, the Gospel of Luke, told us of the Annunciation to Mary of the Angel Gabriel, of Mary’s visitation to Elizabeth, of Mary’s *Magnificat* and of the Presentation of Jesus by Joseph and Mary in the Temple where old Simeon spoke his dark prophecy. St. Luke was very conscious of Mary and of her unique role in the Church. It was he that recorded Elizabeth’s happier prophecy. “All generations shall call you blessed.” It was St. Luke that thought the early Church needed to know all those things and so was careful to include them in his Gospel.

Bear that in mind then when you turn then to the Book of Acts and see how this same Luke in the very first chapter paves the way for his description of the day of Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit, which is of course the formal beginning of the Church. Luke tells us first the story of the Ascension of our Lord, and of the disciples who were left gazing into heaven. Next he writes: “Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter

and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James Son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James.” The eleven disciples that remained are thus carefully named, and Luke continues, “all these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain woman, including Mary the Mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.” Thus apart from the Apostles, Mary alone is named. She, with them, aids the birthing of the Church through her prayers. Seen in the light of Luke’s other references to Mary, this brief reference is an important indicator of her role. The significance of this brief reference is enhanced further when one notices the clear parallel between Luke’s Gospel and its companion volume, the Acts. In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke Mary is told, “The *Holy Ghost* shall *come upon thee* and the *power* of the most high shall overshadow thee” and in Chapter 2 of the Gospel our Lord is born. In the first chapter of the Acts, Jesus tells the Apostles, “But you will receive *power* when the *Holy Spirit* has *come upon you*,” and in Chapter 2 of the Acts the Church is born. Luke was a very careful historian and writer, so we may assume that this striking parallel was quite intentional.

It would take some time for the Church to think through the significance of Mary even as it would take time for the Church to think through the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and of the dual nature of Jesus Christ. In time it would see that as Mary is the Mother of Christ so is she in a sense the mother of his spouse, the Church; or put another way, as Mary is the mother of Christ and the “total Christ,” as St. Augustine put it, is Christ the head of the Church and the Church the body of Christ, so is Mary the mother of Christ the mother also of the Church. She is its first model of faith, “Behold the handmaiden of the Lord,” its first model of submissive obedience, “Be it unto me according to thy word,” its first model of humility, “He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant,” its first model of true piety, “My soul doth magnify the Lord,” and its finest model of tender love and of perfect purity.

When the pages of the New Testament were closed the Church Fathers continued to reflect upon the role of Mary. In the second century Justin Martyr and Irenaeus contrasted the obedience of Mary to the disobedience of Eve. Mary’s perpetual virginity may have been taught by Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. It was certainly embraced by Athanasius, who called her “ever virgin,” which understanding was accepted by

orthodox Fathers of the East and West from the 5th century onwards. As we have seen, the 3rd Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 upheld the title ‘*Theotokos*,’, ‘mother of God.’ St. Ambrose held her to be a type of the Church, in that in giving birth to Christ she also brought forth Christians, who were formed in her womb with him, so to speak. Development continued apace during the Middle Ages, when the foundations for the contemporary Roman Catholic dogma were laid.

But even the Reformation, before the pendulum began to swing too far the other way, held fast to her honor. Martin Luther kept the feasts of Mary in his liturgy: the Annunciation, the Visitation, Mary’s own conception, nativity, and assumption. On the Festival of the Annunciation, March 25, in the year 1539, over twenty years after the Reformation began in 1517, Luther preached, “This is one of the most important festivals which we celebrate as Christians, for we have been called, as Saint Peter has said, to be a people who proclaim the marvelous acts of God.” Even in Zurich in the time of Ulrich Zwingli who reduced the Holy Eucharist to merely a memorial of the Last Supper, the feasts of the Apostles had been kept as well as those three festivals of Mary: the Purification (February 2) the Annunciation (March 25) and the Assumption (August 15). John Calvin, on the other hand, would have none of this and cleared the Church Calendar of all the feasts of Mary and of the Apostles and of the Saints, and indeed almost everything else except Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. (I have mentioned before that I had a Calvinist professor in Seminary, an old Scot, for whom I had the deepest respect, but who would ritually sweep out his apartment every year on Good Friday, to show his disdain for anything that suggested Catholicism to him.) But John Calvin, for all of that, in his preaching and in his commentaries on the opening chapter of the Gospel of Luke, would insist on the praise which we must render to God regarding Mary. “Today,” he said, “we cannot give praise for the blessing which Christ has given to us without remembering at the same time the glorious privilege which God bestowed on Mary by choosing her to be the mother of his only Son. . . . Now she is called Blessed, because, receiving by faith the blessing which is offered to her, she opened the way for God to accomplish his work.” Thus did even Calvin acknowledge that Mary played a critical role in our redemption.

We are beginning to see a way beyond the Roman Catholic/Protestant impasse regarding Mary. Recent dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, and also between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, have made real headway in this regard. Protestants have sometimes misunderstood what Roman Catholics teach. The eminent Roman Catholic theologian at Tübingen in the early part of the last century, Karl Adam, wrote in his book, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, after alluding to the Litany of the Saints with its long list of “All holy martyrs—All holy bishops and confessors—All holy doctors—All holy priests and Levites—All holy monks and hermits—All holy virgins and widows—All saints of God,” that “great multitude which no man can number” which is pictured in heaven in Revelation chapter 7 as “standing before the throne and in sight of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands,”—after citing all of that Karl Adam wrote,

But however wondrously glorious all these holy figures are, each in his own way, yet all are outshone by one, by the Queen of all angels and saints, Mary, the Mother of God. [But he goes on to state carefully:] Like every creature in heaven and earth, she too was called into existence out of nothingness. An infinite distance separates her from the infinite, from Father, Son and Holy Ghost. And she has no grace, no virtue, no privilege, which she does not owe to the divine Mediator. Both in her natural and in her supernatural being, she is wholly the gift of God, “full of grace” (κεχαριτωμένη, Lk. i, 28). There is nothing, therefore, so misguided and so preposterous as to decry the Mother of God as some “mother goddess,” and to talk of Catholicism having a polytheistic character. There is but one God, the Triune God, and every created thing lives in awe of His mystery.¹

Mary, the Mother of our Lord, who prayed earnestly with the apostles for the Church at the beginning, ought not to divide us. The late Max Thurian, while still a theologian in the ecumenical Protestant Community of Taizé, wrote, “Instead of being a cause of division amongst us, Christian reflection on the rôle of the Virgin Mary should be a cause for rejoicing and a source of prayer.”² Pope John Paul II, in an encyclical on Mary, focused on the prayer of our Lord for the unity of his Church, saw a key role for Mary therein, and wrote,

¹ Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, revised edn., tr. by Dom Justin McCann (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), pp. 122-123.

² Max Thurian, *Mary, Mother of All Christians* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), p. 7.

The ecumenical movement, on the basis of a clearer and more widespread awareness of the urgent need to achieve the unity of all Christians, has found on the part of the Catholic Church its culminating expression in the work of the second Vatican Council: Christian must deepen in themselves and each of their communities that ‘obedience of faith’ of which Mary is the first and brightest example.³

As we saw, Mary prayed with and for the Church at the beginning and St. Luke tells us that they were all of one accord, so I am sure that she continues to pray for us today that that unity willed by our Lord might come to be. A number of years ago, in introducing that dialogue on the Blessed Virgin Mary, of which I spoke last week, between the Most Reverend Thomas Grady, Bishop of Orlando, and the Reverend Dr. J.A. Ross Mackenzie, then Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Gainesville, I cited those words of Max Thurian and of Pope John Paul which I just read to you, and then concluded my remarks by saying,

In this connection let it be noted that the ecumenical road is long, the journey arduous, the issues thorny. Recent years have seen even seasoned ecumenists throw up their hands and exclaim that the ecumenical ship is dead in the water. But, so what if the progress is slow, the barriers virtually impregnable, the task seemingly impossible. We have no doubt that God in Christ wills our unity and know that nothing is impossible with him. Perhaps it is from Mary at the Annunciation we need to learn to say in the face of possible impossibility, “Be it unto me according to thy word.” It is in that spirit that we are gathered here this evening.⁴

Mary, Mother of God, *Theotokos*, had a glorious and vital role to play in the incarnation and birth of our Lord. Mary, Mother of Sorrows, *Mater Dolorosa*, had a blessed and vital role to play at the death of our Lord. Even so does Mary, Queen of Heaven, *Regina Caeli*, have a vital and indispensable role to play in the Church today. Let us ever seek to implore her, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, Florida, on The Sunday Next Before Advent, November 20, 2011. Copyright © 2011.

³ John Paul II, *The Mother of the Redeemer; Encyclical Letter: Redemptoris Mater: On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Church*, March 25, 1987 (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1987), p. 65.

⁴ *Mary, Full of Grace: A Protestant-Catholic Dialog*, Sponsored by the Florida Council of Churches and the Diocese of Orlando, St. Mary Magdalene Roman Catholic Church, Altamont Springs, Florida, May 9, 1988, p. 2.