

# MARY'S ROLE IN THE INCARNATION

• Jacques Servais •

“The new Adam wanted to associate  
the new Eve to himself from the beginning,  
raising her ‘yes’ to the rank of a co-constituent  
of the Incarnation.”

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In the methodological spiritual itinerary St. Ignatius of Loyola sets out in his *Spiritual Exercises*, the Virgin Mary holds a privileged place. In Ignatius' mind, the woman whom he loves to call “*Madre*” or “*Señora nuestra*” does more than contribute to the coming of the Redeemer by uttering an unreserved “yes” to the event of the Incarnation. Through her exterior and, in particular, her interior participation in the essential moments of her Son's mission, she plays a decisive role in the work of the Redemption. For this reason, her discreet presence can and must accompany the whole itinerary of the four “weeks” of the exercises. Thus the retreatant is invited to contemplate Our Lady in the various mysteries of the hidden life, the public ministry, and the Passion mentioned by the Gospels, and also, since “Scripture supposes that we possess intelligence,” in the mysteries of the Resurrection and the glory of heaven. In the name of this spiritual intelligence, Ignatius advises the retreatant to invoke the Virgin's intercession in the “colloquia” of the first week, whose goal is the initial conversion of the sinner. One might think that the incomparable personal purity of the Virgin makes her a stranger to the sinner's experience. But no, says Ignatius: her fullness of grace places her in such a relationship to her Son that she, more than anyone else, can share the most intimate of his intimate desires (cf. Lk 12:49). Flowing from his mission and completely united to it, Mary's mission is to correspond to her Son's saving

intention and to accompany its realization with prayer and abnegation. Certainly, her role is without compare, with regard to the other faithful. But her unique closeness to her Son does not hinder her—far from it!—from being at the same time the true “mother of the living” (Gn 3:20), the mother of believers. Her prototypical act of faith draws her near to them in their trials, in the night that she must continually (and ever more deeply) endure until the culmination of the contemplation of the Passion and Cross in the *Exercises*: the scene of the Pietà.

The faith and prayer of the saints solicits the understanding and stimulates the reflection of the theologian studying the Scriptures and the Tradition. Is not the image of Mary that St. Ignatius presents to us in the “mysteries of the life of Christ” inflated? Would it not be better to return to a more sober and limited vision of her role, at least of the role that she was called to play in the mysterious union of the Incarnation? On this point, isn’t St. Augustine right to have seen in the Mother of God only the “place” where the union of the Creator with his creature took place? He writes, “The womb of the Virgin was his nuptial chamber, since it is there that the Bridegroom was joined to the Bride, the Word to the flesh” (*In. Jo. Ep. Tr.* 1:2). The “flesh” here is humanity, inasmuch as this always already includes all the human beings called to salvation. One cannot qualify the physical union in the maternal womb as “spousal,” since there is no marriage between natures; the term refers rather to a wedding between “persons,” the marriage of Christ and the Church (here representing all of humanity), which, in the strict sense, will occur later. This solution overlooks the possibility that there might be an essential difference between Mary and the community of the saints. But is this the case? Doesn’t Vatican Council II affirm such a difference, for example when it calls Mary the “*typus et exemplar spectatissimum*” of the Church and, within the Church, “*plane mater membrorum (Christi)*,” “*auxiliatrix*,” “*mediatrix*” (*Lumen Gentium*, 53 and 62). In this essay, we propose to elaborate a solution which will take these doctrinal developments better into account.

### 1. *The saving meaning of God’s Incarnation*

In the first instance, it will be worthwhile to bring into relief the formula of the Nicene Creed: “*propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem, descendit de caelis.*” This affirmation is clarified by the following

formula: "*auxilifus etiam pro nobis*": the Incarnation already implies vicarious substitution. God made himself man for our salvation; by his life and sufferings, this incarnate God, Jesus Christ, delivered us from our sins and opened the way for us to life and eternal beatitude. From that moment on, it is right to call him "our Savior and Lord."

In giving this title to Christ in the *Tertia Pars* of his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas, whom we will follow here, immediately indicates the central perspective within which he will take up the question of the Incarnation. Refusing to speculate on the reasons God might have had to become incarnate if man had not sinned, he holds to what Scripture affirms: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim 1:15; cf. Mt 1:21; Lk 19:10; Jn 1:29, 3:16). Without a doubt—and Thomas does not fail to say this—God who is all-powerful could have restored our nature in some other way. But here, too, instead of pursuing the hypothesis further, he contents himself with setting forth the biblical assertion: the Incarnation was necessary to raise up a fallen human race. Thomas is talking here within the analogy of faith. In the light of this analogy, he discovers both the gratuity and the intrinsic fittingness of this Incarnation. In the infinite excellence of his bounty, God willed, by grace, to unite himself to our nature in order to save it. Christ is rightly called our Savior, because it was in order to save us that, "in the fullness of time," God sent him, his Son, "born of a woman" (Gal 4:4). In him, the eternal saving design of the Incarnation is revealed. Aquinas cites St. Cyril (q. 35, 2 ad 2), as if to refute any sort of dynamic-transcendental anthropology that seeks to reread the identity of the incarnate Word in terms of some self-transcendence of the open structure of the human being: "He who existed before all time and who was for all eternity with the Father . . . united himself, according to his person, to what is human and was born of woman." His very name, "Jesus," means nothing other than this mission of grace to save all men, which he received from God as a man like men. As Thomas clarifies later on, he is the universal and spiritual savior of all, charged with bringing salvation to all, whatever their condition (cf. Col 3:11), be they circumcised Jews or chosen pagans. The goal of his earthly mission is that human beings be reborn as children of God and thus fully participate in the divine nature, thus receiving its supreme degree of perfection that constitutes both our beatitude and the end of our entire existence (cf. 2 Pt 1:4). But in order to obtain for us this access to God, he must "deliver us from our sins" (Rom 5:2), take away our corruption. This is the other,

negative aspect of his mission: to repair human nature, freeing man from slavery by offering satisfaction for humanity, for all its sins, and principally for original sin—that is to say, by “taking onto himself alone, responsibility for the guilt of all” (q. 1, 4, ad 3)—in order to offer all, justified, to God his Father.

In the *Compendium Theologiae*, Aquinas details the reasons why the Incarnation was necessary. The restoration of human nature, he explains, could not have been accomplished by any merely human being, not even by Adam, because no single man ever occupied a position of preeminence over the whole of human nature; nor could he, a simple creature, be a cause of grace. Thus it was necessary—a “necessity” of fittingness—for God himself to accomplish this restoration. Now, this act would have to be an act of justice as much as mercy. “If God had decided to restore man by a sole act of his will and power, the order of divine justice would not have been observed. Justice requires satisfaction for sin. Now, God can no more give satisfaction than he can merit. Such a service befits someone who is subject to another. Thus God was not able to give satisfaction for the sin of human nature in its entirety; and a mere man was just as incapable.” Hence the providential solution of the Incarnation: “Thus divine Wisdom judged it proper that God should become man, such that one and the same person might be capable of both restoring mankind and giving satisfaction” (cap. 200).

In this way, the Incarnation is the presupposition of the “marvelous exchange” between the sin that is taken away and the grace that is bestowed. In order to overcome the limits of Anselm’s overly juridical theory, in which the “superabundance” of Christ’s merits remains in some way extrinsic to the reality of the sin that was to be destroyed, St. Thomas introduces the notion of “*gratia capitis*,” the sanctifying grace of Christ the Head (the new Adam) that flows in plenitude over the elect. This does not mean, however, that Aquinas maintains that the “mystical Body of Christ” is constituted exclusively through the Incarnation, the viewpoint sometimes attributed, without sufficient nuance, to the Greek Fathers. Humanity’s, and in particular the Church’s, inclusion in Christ is not based solely on the organic relation that joins the Head to the Body, so to speak in a purely physical way. Rather, it also flows from the free action of Him who takes upon himself and expiates the sins of the world (“*gratia capitis*” is efficacious only for the Passion: St. Thomas, III q. 48, 1 c and ad 2). Here we find the teaching of the Fathers, who intimately joined the

Incarnation and the Redemption: “*Christus mori missus, nasci quoque necessario habuit, ut mori posset*” [Christ, being sent to die, also had to be born, so that he might be able to die], declares Tertullian (*De carne Christi* 6). Leo the Great expounds this idea: “*In nostra descendit, ut non solum substantiam, sed conditionem naturae peccatricis assumeret; nec alia fuit Dei Filio causa nascendi quam ut cruci posset affigi*” [He descended into what was ours, to assume, not only the substance, but also the condition of sinful nature; nor was there any cause for the Son of God to be born but that he might be able to be nailed to the cross] (*Sermo* 71:2).

The nature assumed by the Son of God is not simply complete, with a body and a sensible and rational soul; it belongs to Adam's race, like our own nature. Since the human nature that needed purification was the nature corrupted in Adam, “it was necessary for Christ to receive a flesh whose matter had its source in Adam, so that he might, in assuming it, heal human nature itself” (q. 31, 1; cf. 31, 7). God willed to draw therefrom what was needed to give satisfaction for the whole of our nature; in this way, he guaranteed the justice, which demands that the one who sins give satisfaction. Thus Christ was subject, like ourselves, to the penalties of this earth: to the bodily deficiencies man bears as a result of original sin, to the passions of the soul (without these dominating his reason), and especially to the necessity of death. All of these are causes of involuntary suffering and are part of our nature as infected by its Adamic origin. Nevertheless, Christ willed to bear all these trials in his human nature, thereby foreshadowing the Cross. Coming into the world to take upon himself the punishment due to the sin of man, he wanted “to assume a flesh subject to human infirmities, so as to be able, in these infirmities, to suffer and be tempted, and in this way to bring us aid” (q. 14, 1 *sed d*). In the punishments man suffers in his flesh as a result of sin, Christ found the material for a satisfaction for the sake of all. The deficiencies of the “flesh of sin” (Rom 8:3) that he took upon himself are a real anticipation of his passion and saving death. Joined to the latter, such infirmities take on an expiatory value. Though being of our race, Christ himself is pure from all sin and for this reason is able to give satisfaction for the guilt of all (cf. q. 15, 1 and ad 3; already q. 4, 6 ad 1 and 2). In becoming one of Adam's race, the Word made his humanity a Host that might justly give satisfaction for sinful man: Adam and the whole human race (cf. Hos 4:8 and Is 53:6).

## 2. The plan of trinitarian love

The Bible does not consider the hypothesis of a non-sinful humanity, which would have had no need of redemption. St. Thomas himself, after having considered the famous thesis that Duns Scotus would later defend, categorically rules it out in the name of the teaching of Scripture and the Tradition (III q. 1, 3). To challenge Scotus' thesis does not, however, lead to the strict linking of the redemptive Incarnation to original sin. Drawing inspiration from St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, Hans Urs von Balthasar enlarges the perspective in an upward direction: he brings the drama of the relationship between finite and infinite freedom all the way back to God's primordial saving plan. In the Son become incarnate for our salvation, we are given to understand that "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8); we are shown that this is the reason for God's "need" to love a world that is not himself, as well as to let himself be affected by this world to the point of behaving, as Ignatius says in the last contemplation of the Exercises, in the manner of "someone accomplishing a laborious task" (n. 236). Human sin did not surprise God as if it were an unexpected event in the face of which he must take new and unforeseen measures. The act of creation, and all of the drama that follows, are founded solidly in intratrinitarian love. This drama has eternally begun with its central figure, Jesus Christ. In him, the God-Man "crushed" by the "trials, anguish, and sorrows he endured from the moment he was born to the mystery of the Passion" (n. 206), this trinitarian love is what at the same time hides itself and is revealed to the eyes of faith. "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (Jn 1:3). The "Lamb of God" is contained in advance in the original plan of creation; he is the "lamb predestined before the foundation of the world" to be "precious blood" (1 Pt 1:19ff), a life given up out of love, the "Beloved by whose blood we are saved" and predestined to be "adopted children" for God the Father (Eph 1:4-7). In Christ is made manifest, alongside the depths of this divine love, the freedom that lies at the heart of the divine mystery, a freedom that is real event, decree, and execution: "God (and this applies to the Incarnate One also) can only be 'passive,' subject to *passio*, if this accords with some prior, 'active,' free deci-

sion.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we must logically “posit an incomprehensible freedom in God that allows him to do more, and to be other, than the creature would suppose of him on the ground of its concepts of ‘God’”<sup>2</sup>: the freedom to make the incomprehensible decision that represents the “stripping” of the “divine condition” (Phil 2:6-7).

Again and again, Balthasar draws his readers’ attention to this primordial decision. Among many texts illustrating this, we may cite the following passage from *The Threefold Garland*:

Everything proceeds from the Father’s salvific will—even within God, insofar as the Son and the Spirit proceed eternally from his unfathomable and fruitful goodness. Son and Spirit, however, are not subordinate servants but equal in essence with the Father, and as such they participate in the very origin of the Father’s gracious plan for the world, in equal agreement with the Father’s thought, which in the end can be nothing other than ever greater goodness. This goodness has already given itself eternally to the Son and to the common Spirit of both; and therefore it can express itself to the world only in a triune manner: through the consent, indeed the offering of himself, of the Son, to make this goodness of the Father known effectively—even unto death on the cross; through the consent and self-offering of the Spirit ready to be engaged wholly in the service of this prodigal love of the Father in the self-surrender of the Son.<sup>3</sup>

The Son’s coming into the world to save us from sin and death is, on his part, a free act and a supreme testimony of love for his Father. All three of the divine Persons decide on the Incarnation—the whole of it, all the way to its ultimate consequences. The Holy Spirit, the irrevocable witness of this common deliberation, in a way guarantees its execution (cf. Mt 1:20; Lk 1:35). As for the Son, he offers himself to the Spirit’s action, receiving his body from the Father, as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews suggests in his reading of the Greek version

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<sup>1</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 222.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics VII: Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 213.

<sup>3</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Threefold Garland*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 28.

of Psalm 40:7–9 as an allusion to the Incarnation: “When Christ came into the world, he said,” by the power of the Holy Spirit, “you have prepared a body for me. . . . ‘Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God’” (Heb 10:5ff). He does not incarnate himself; he does not on his own initiative seize the human nature that he will put on. Rather, through a free decision of love, he “let himself be implanted in the Virgin’s womb by the Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> The path that leads him from the bosom of the Father to the womb of his temporal Mother is a path of obedience, explains Balthasar. The Son wanted, in the manner of men, “*to be* conceived by the Holy Spirit”—who has the active role—leaving, in the same movement, the task of conceiving to the Virgin.

### *3. The theo-dramatic person of Mary*

The revelation of the decree of the Incarnation takes place in the annunciation to Mary (Lk 1:26–38), which, in its limpid simplicity, immediately shows its trinitarian character. “The Lord is with you”: that is, the God of Israel whom Mary knows, whom Jesus will call “Father” in an altogether unique way, the eternally good Father, from whom everything proceeds—not only this decree but, as the Virgin will herself experience, the Son and the Holy Spirit as well. She is troubled by this completely incomprehensible greeting, left wordless and astonished. The angel Gabriel responds to her anxiety by saying, “You will bear a child . . . the Son of the Most High,” the Son designated by the classical kingly epithet, “Son of David,” and at the same time more than David, the Son who “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his being” (Heb 1:3). Stunned by this completely unexpected announcement, Mary does not know what to say, and asks what she must do. Then comes the decisive instruction, “The Holy Spirit will overshadow you,” followed immediately by the justification of this unthinkable event: “therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.” This Spirit is the divine Spirit, shared by the Father who is the origin of the Son’s mission and the Son who obeys this mission freely and in love. Never before had the Spirit been joined so intimately to a creature. Between him and Mary a mysterious relation is established that explains the privileged role she plays in the Incarnation.

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.



Balthasar<sup>5</sup> rules out certain formulas present in the abundant literature of popular Mariology. Mary, whom the Council of Ephesus, presided over by St. Cyril of Alexandria, calls *theotokos*, the “Mother of God,” must not be seen either as the spouse of the Father or of the Holy Spirit, or of the Trinity, all of which contradict Scripture. Scripture applies the term “nuptial” only to the Christ-Church relation, and does so especially where the Church is presented as “immaculate, without stain” (Eph 5:27). On the other hand, one must hold, against every form of Gnosticism, that the conception that takes place in Mary is an authentically bodily process involving all three Persons of the Holy Trinity, particularly the Father, who buries the “seed” of the Son in the virginal womb. He does not do this directly, however, but through the mediation of the Holy Spirit, who accomplishes it as the executer of the divine decree.

The Spirit is not, however, merely the obedient bearer of the divine seed; he actualizes its conception in the virginal womb, first by conforming Mary's attitude to the objective demands of the Son's mission. The “yes” of the annunciation had to be, from the first instant of the Incarnation of the Word, a universal one. Balthasar explains that Mary must be fully in accord with her destiny, which is, in a sense, limitless: she will have to accompany the Son along his path from beginning to end, whatever that end might be. In her, the Daughter Zion, it is all Israel who is called to “personify,” go beyond, itself in a synthetic word that expresses perfect consent to the will of God. Even more, it is necessary to postulate that “somewhere, in the name of all mankind, a *fiat* with no internal boundaries must exist in response to the final word of God that continually transcends all understanding, a *fiat* that goes all the way to the end with God's Word in unreserved agreement, in the meditative attempt to understand (Lk 2:19, 51) and to keep company with God's Word: and this sets into motion an endless historical process.”<sup>6</sup>

In these words, Balthasar attempts to formulate the conditions required for the “wondrous exchange” discussed above. The solution he proposes goes beyond Augustine's, according to which a prevenient grace works to draw us away from sin and applies itself directly to provoke our free acts. According to Balthasar, man's active participa-

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<sup>5</sup>Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Skizzen zur Theologie V: Homo Creatus Est* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1986), 143.

<sup>6</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord VII*, 94.

tion in his own redemption is essential. The human partner for whom the God-Man suffers must not only fully accept this exchange, uttering a “yes” that, on his own, he would never have been able to pronounce; he must somehow cooperate in the work of his own redemption. If God pardoned man because the latter is incapable of paying his debt, the human being would remain a destitute and thus unhappy creature for all eternity. The act of substitution cannot consist in imputing the merits of Christ to the guilty in a juridical or exterior manner. This would remain not only unilateral, but extrinsic. Rather, Christ must in some way allow the human being who is the source of the guilt to pay out of his own funds. The “yes” that, under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Virgin utters at the Annunciation, fulfills these conditions. A presentation of the nature and essential dimensions of this “yes” will help us to discern Mary’s role in the Incarnation. This entails a number of intimately related though distinct issues: the quality of Mary’s personal “yes,” its meaning for the whole human race, and, even before this, her belonging to the race of the first, sinful Adam. Before tackling these questions, we will say a brief word about the privilege of her immaculate conception.

It is well known that the Eastern Tradition, while celebrating Mary as All Pure and All Holy, at the same time attributes to her faults from which she had to be purified during her life (in her mother’s womb, at her birth, or at the Annunciation, according to the interpretations), or at least, according to the explanation of Sergei Bulgakov (cf. *Le Buisson Ardent*), a potentiality for sin that had no real influence on her will. Rather than seeing in original sin primarily a chastisement due to Adam’s sin, the Eastern Tradition follows Augustine, interpreting it as a sin analogous to personal sin: a state of privation of grace whose effects remain even in the baptized. The Fall caused not only exile from the earthly Paradise, but, in a necessary second step, a proximity, and even an intertwining, between the original sin and the sins of fallen individuals. Consequently, says Balthasar, it is impossible to establish an exact demarcation between the non-sinful and the sinful consequences of original sin. Under these circumstances, it makes more sense to set aside the restrictive interpretation of the Eastern Tradition and affirm, as the Second Vatican Council did, that Mary was “adorned from the first instant of her conception with the radiance of an entirely unique holiness” and was “free from all stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature” (*Lumen Gentium*, 56). This privilege, however, takes nothing away

from her solidarity with the community of sinners who need salvation. On the contrary, we might say that it makes her all the more sensitive to the sufferings of Adam's descendents. How are we to understand this paradox? Duns Scotus grasped this point well (*Ordinatio*, III, dist. 3, q. 1): Mary was not exempt from original guilt in the sense that this guilt would not have been transmitted to her by her parents, had the grace of God not intervened, but rather in the sense that, from the first moment of her conception, the grace of Christ sanctified her in such a way that she was preserved from ever having existed in an unregenerate state.

#### 4. A "yes" necessary for Creation and Redemption

In his poem, "The Eternal Feminine," written in 1918, Teilhard de Chardin attributes to the Virgin Mary the expressly feminine role of attracting the Savior by her beauty. Later on in the same hymn, significantly addressed "to Beatrice" (an allusion to Dante's Beatrice) the sensual tones that might surprise the hearer evaporate completely before the Platonic image of the Virgin-Mother, with which Teilhard associates the Church, which, with Mary, is the unsurpassable fulfillment of the feminine principle:

Placed between God and the Earth . . . I make them draw  
near to one another . . .  
Until they meet in me, in what is the consummation  
throughout the ages of the generation and the plenitude of  
Christ.  
I am the Church, His Bride.  
I am the Virgin Mary, Mother of all mankind.

*Generation and plenitude*: as de Lubac explains,<sup>7</sup> these words were not chosen heedlessly. "The first refers to the fleshly body animated by the Word and born of the Virgin Mary; the second, to his mystical Body, born of the Church. Both Mary and the Church are virgin and mother; since there is only one Christ, both are in some way identified with one another in their maternal function." This idea is entirely traditional, and can already be found in the Fathers. As St.

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<sup>7</sup>Henri de Lubac, *L'Éternel Féminin* (Paris, 1983), 48.

Irenaeus says, Jesus' virginal birth, "which God granted against all hope as a sign of salvation," is prolonged in the "regeneration [of believers] through faith," in the "new birth . . . which took place from the womb of the Virgin."<sup>8</sup> This intuition of the profound unity between the immaculate womb that brought forth the Head and the womb that brings forth the Church's members is at the center of Catholic dogma; de Lubac notes with pleasure its blessing by the Second Vatican Council in the constitution *Lumen Gentium*.<sup>9</sup>

To grasp the full breadth of this idea, it may be useful to return to the theme, so dear to Louis Bouyer, of the "Wisdom of God."<sup>10</sup> Bouyer sees "wisdom" as the hermeneutical principle of the economy of creation and divine adoption. This intuition, which the author claims to find in St. Thomas' *De Veritate*, and which he admits is inspired by the well-known work of Bulgakov on the same theme, can be summarized briefly:

It is in eternally begetting his only Son that the Father at the same time conceives of the whole of creation and its becoming, as destined to espouse the Son in his filiation and, therefore, to participate fully in the "Gift" par excellence that is the Spirit of the Father, as a Spirit of filiation. In this way, the effective predestination of Mary to divine motherhood with regard to the eternal Son of the invisible Father, making the Virgin Mother the Seat of Wisdom, is like a sketch; the "wedding feast of the Lamb," which concerns the Church of the redeemed and the whole cosmos with it, appears as the final revelation and consummation of all the holy Wisdom of God.<sup>11</sup>

Mary appears at the pinnacle of history as created Wisdom, the Virgin who becomes Mother by taking the Son of the eternal Father as her own. In this way she prepares the birth of the Church of the predestined for filial adoption; she prepares the Bride, who is both virgin and mother. If we keep in mind what was said above regarding the freedom of the divine decree of the Incarnation, we can avoid giving this "sophiological" vision a Gnostic interpretation. God created with

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<sup>8</sup>Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* IV 33:4.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. *Paradoxe et mystère de l'Église* (Paris, 1967), 103–108 and 112–119.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Louis Bouyer, *Sophie ou le Monde en Dieu* (Paris, 1994).

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

a view to Christ, and, concretely, with a view to his Incarnation; in the eternal availability with which the Son is ready from eternity to redeem the world from every pernicious consequence of finite freedom, creation includes, from the beginning, the guarantee of final victory. The womb that receives the whole reality of the world, and, indeed the Incarnation of the Son himself, is included within the mission of the Son, who makes it possible; he has always already reached under and so mastered every "no" of finite freedom. (Though without this compromising the dramatic event-character of the Son's earthly life, passion, and death.) In Balthasarian terms, "Deep down, man's attempt to banish God from finitude in order to avoid receiving (and conceiving) from him, his endeavor to bring forth fruit on his own, is undergirded and sustained by the 'wisdom of the poor' ['created' or 'begotten' wisdom: Prov 8:22], that wisdom which was 'the first of God's acts' and which, in creation, has always said Yes to being made fruitful by God and his Word."<sup>12</sup> The "yes" of the Virgin at the annunciation thus appears as an echo of the Son's eternal offering to the Father in creation; it is this faithful echo because it is the work of God and not first of the creature. In this sense, one must say with Teilhard de Chardin and Bouyer that it preexists the plan of creation.

What do we make of this paradoxical affirmation? Before delving further into the nature of the Marian "yes," we will indicate briefly the solution Balthasar proposes to this difficult question.<sup>13</sup> In the same way that, in the second account of creation, the "man" already contained the "woman," who was drawn from his side (Gn 2:21–23), the Word, the Savior of the World, lives in an eternal "receptivity" we can qualify as "feminine," even as the Son also lives out a "masculine" "activity" that expresses his entire equality with the Father. (Note the circumincession of these terms: the Son's "receptivity" is "active" and his "activity" is "receptive." We do not *simply* align one or the other with masculine or feminine, much less speak of masculinity or femininity in God without the discipline of analogy. Nevertheless, analogy also bespeaks an intrinsic relation. Somehow, the trinitarian life may be seen as the analogical foundation of the sexual difference, especially in its role within the Christ-Church relation.) In the first and

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<sup>12</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama IV: The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius 1994), 361.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. for example *A Theological Anthropology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 308–310.

fundamental kenosis of the Incarnation (Phil 2:7), the Son does not, for all that, appear as a primordial Adam who contains both sexes, and in this sense all of mankind. Rather, he comes as a son of man (the *eis* of Gal 3:28 is masculine!) of the male sex, wishing to be “born of a woman” (Gal 4:4). In this way, he founds his own need—which he wills as such—for a feminine response. Since he is not active in the Incarnation, he is not yet the Bridegroom, but he already experiences a free dependence on what only a woman can give him. If he includes all of humanity, he does so inasmuch as Mary’s “yes” is itself included in his own eternal “yes” to the Father, such that the Marian receptivity is the image of receptivity in God.

#### 5. The “yes” of the “first” Eve

Among contemporary authors, it is perhaps Adrienne von Speyr who has best grasped the meaning of this state of Marian openness, which belongs to creation from eternity—a state Balthasar will later conceptualize using the abstract term “Marian principle.”<sup>14</sup> Von Speyr’s reflection begins with the prologue of John’s Gospel, where Creation, Incarnation, and Redemption are joined in a single plan. “In the beginning was the Word . . . all things were made through him . . . He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who did receive him . . .” (Jn 1:1–12; cf. Col 1:15–18). Somewhere upon the earth, there had to be an exact response to the Word, and not just anywhere, but precisely where the Word himself appeared. For his part, “the Son wants to redeem the world for the Father. This redemption is accomplished through the Passion, in which he bears all our sins as if they were his own, and the Father recognizes all sinners in him.”<sup>15</sup> The Son must be received, otherwise he would not come to us. “And thus it is fitting that from the first instant, the Father and the Spirit show the Son the efficacy of the Cross. In Mary is thus from the beginning a gift that the Father and the Spirit make to the Son, so that her instrumentality in the Redemption makes her a sort of pre-Gift or advanced deposit. The Father and the

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama III: Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 292–300.

<sup>15</sup>Adrienne von Speyr, *Maria in der Erlösung* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1979), 8.

Spirit show the Son the value of the path he has chosen to tread by pre-redeeming Mary in view of the Cross—which is to say, from the Cross.”<sup>16</sup> Comparing her to Eve, St. Irenaeus sees Mary as the one who untied, in faith, the knot Eve had tied through her lack of faith: “The knot tied by Eve’s disobedience was untied by Mary’s obedience.”<sup>17</sup> In this sense, Irenaeus could celebrate Mary as “the cause of salvation.” Adrienne von Speyr boldly reverses the perspective, seeing in Mary the true first Eve. This step enables her to ground radically all salvation within the trinitarian plan. “Mary, the pre-redeemed, is already active in the plan of God . . . . When God the Father begins with Mary and her pre-redemption, the realization of his plan is already there, with her . . . . In Mary, we find the idea of the perfect human being, which God had in mind from the creation of the first man, so much so that Mary is not the second, but the first Eve, the Eve who did not fall and who sees how the second Eve does fall.”<sup>18</sup>

As Wisdom, Christ is the “image of God” (Wis 7:26); preexisting all creatures, he takes an active part in creation and leads men to God (Pr 8:22; 36). Thanks to the Son’s Incarnation and Redemption, creation acquires a new vitality in him. He is the “first-born of all creation” (Col 1:15). Those creatures born after him receive a new plenitude from him, the “first-born of many brethren” (Rom 8:29). Similarly to Bouyer, von Speyr sees this universal role of Christ (cf. also Heb 1:1-4), the “new Adam” (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:45ff), as being closely related to that of Mary, the new Eve, the first and perfect product of the redemption, who represents the original idea of man. In this way, the Pre-redeemed is herself intimately associated with the Redeemer and, given the fundamentality of Christ, to the incarnate Redeemer, to the work of creation, can even be said to cooperate in that work itself:

Since the Redemption is the edification of the true creature, Mary’s being co-redeemed cannot be separated from some participation in the creation. To be sure, Mary was not present on the day of creation. But it is given to her to cooperate in the correction of creation, in the raising up of Eve. In order to be capable of this, she was conceived

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>*Adv. haer.* III, 22:4.

<sup>18</sup>Speyr, *Maria in der Erlösung*, 9–10.

without original sin, in the grace that Adam and Eve possessed before their Fall, in a grace that the Son possesses as the Redeemer and in which he lets his Mother participate. In order to allow her to be truly co-redemptrix, however, her Son must scatter her being throughout the Old Covenant. He does not wish only to be able to raise up Adam in himself, but also Eve in Mary. It is not enough for the man to be redeemer and redeemed; the woman, too, must be redeemed from the beginning and, in this way, be co-redemptrix.<sup>19</sup>

In Eve's lineage, God predestined Mary to be the Mother of his Son. If the angel Gabriel greets her as "favored by God" (Lk 1:28), it is because she is "the most excellent fruit of the Redemption" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 103). We must, then, affirm that Mary in no way differs from other Christians except in the intensity with which she is given the gift of redemption. Though her Son did not have to expiate for her as for us because she herself committed no sin, he nevertheless merited for her in the Passion, just as he did for us. In her case, the work of redemption consisted in preservation from all original sin; it sheltered her from the state that results, for the whole human race, from the act of our first parents, and by reason of which she could have committed actual sins, as we do. The privilege conferred on her by the Holy Spirit in prevision of the merits of Christ, her immaculate conception, must not be understood as a simple result of the redemption, but rather as the effectual power of fruitfulness. As in us after her, grace is the source of all her merits, because it unites her to Christ in an active love; from the beginning, grace assures the supernatural character of all her actions, and thus guarantees their worth before God and men. Rather than estranging her from sinners, this privilege brings her more deeply into communion with all who belong to her Son. As Balthasar remarks,

[S]in brings about isolation and thwarts effective solidarity (there was no solidarity among those who shared '*in eadem damnatione*' in Lk 23:40), whereas innocence makes it possible to be open to suffering with others and to be ready, in love, to embrace such suffering.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Speyr, *Maria in der Erlösung*, 33.

<sup>20</sup>Balthasar, *Theo-Drama III*, 324.



And,

Her solidarity with the human race must in the last instance . . . be founded on the pro-existence of the Son, the pro-existence that, in the wake of his liberating deed, all Christians are invited to live . . . . An offspring of human parents in Adam's lineage, Mary possessed a co-existence that the grace of God intensified from the beginning into a pro-existence. Thus the natural participation in the sufferings and infirmities inherent in human nature is not abolished, but immediately clothed in the index of a fruitfulness that comes from Christ.<sup>21</sup>

#### 6. *The Virgin's maternal fruitfulness in the Incarnation*

We have already remarked more than once that the Virgin Mother must be seen as the quintessence of the nascent Church. We can recall, in this regard, the formula of Isaac of Stella, which de Lubac rediscovered for contemporary theology: "*quod de virgine matre Ecclesia universaliter; hoc de virgine Maria singulariter; et quod de virgine matre Maria specialiter, id de virgine matre Ecclesia generaliter*" [What applies to the Virgin Mother Church universally, applies singularly to the Virgin Mary; and what applies specially to the Virgin Mother Mary, applies generally to the Virgin Mother Church] (*Sermo* 51). The "first" and new Eve, Mary is the prototype of the Church, of the People of God that generates the Messiah and those who believe in him (cf. Rv 12:2). Since we are focusing on Mary's role in the Incarnation, we will not develop this point further. But in closing, we nevertheless would like to highlight a decisive point. All men are included without exception in the redemptive Incarnation of Christ. The grace it gains for them is efficacious even before they recognize it as such by an act of faith. This universal inclusion results from the work of Christ alone. Nevertheless, the new Adam wanted to associate the new Eve to himself from the beginning, raising her "yes" to the rank of a co-constituent of the Incarnation. When Mary pronounces this "yes" at the annunciation, she acts in the name of all humanity, in the name of those who cannot

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<sup>21</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Heilig öffentlich Geheimnis," *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 7 (1978): 7.

yet utter this “yes”: “*Per annuntiationem expectabatur consensus Virginis loco totius humanae naturae*” (“the annunciation solicited the consent of the Virgin, who stood in the place of the whole human race”).<sup>22</sup> But in doing this she plays an eminently personal role, performing an act of spiritual faith that confers on her a unique place in the economy of salvation. The recent Magisterium, in the footsteps of the Second Vatican Council, has repeatedly stressed the active role Mary plays in the Incarnation, highlighting her free “acceptance” (*Lumen Gentium*, 56) and her “singular” cooperation by “her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity” (LG 61).

But how exactly can we affirm this active role without compromising the christological uniqueness of the “*pro nobis*”? To pose the question in classical terms: does Mary’s causal cooperation extend to the production of the hypostatic union, according to the opinion resolutely dismissed by John of St. Thomas (*In IIIam S. Thomae*, q. II, disp V, a. 3) and other seventeenth-century theologians (e.g. the *Salmaticenses*)? The argument against this opinion is well-known; it draws inspiration from the Augustinian idea mentioned above that the womb of the Virgin is merely the “place” of the union. According to this view, it is the hypostasis of the Word alone, to the exclusion of all created co-causes, that gives the humanity of Jesus its subsistence. We have already sketched a response to this objection, particularly with respect to the identity of the new Adam. We will discuss these elements together in light of additional observations of Adrienne von Speyr. This will help us the better to discern Mary’s central role in the Incarnation.

Inasmuch as he is the bearer of his divine nature, the eternal Son is certainly not subject to any change; there is no question of saying, then, that the only-begotten Son who is “in the bosom of the Father” (Jn 1:18) is born of Mary according to his divine nature. But according to the formula of the Second Council of Constantinople, the Son “descended from heaven and became incarnate in the holy and glorious Mary, the Mother of God and Ever-virgin”; he was “born of her,”<sup>23</sup> and not only *in* her. Balthasar remarks, “The Word was, in fact, carried into the womb, in order to become flesh”; it thus required the existential response of her whole person, body and spirit. Balthasar adds, “One cannot divide this response into two parts: one spiritual,

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<sup>22</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, III q. 30, 1; cf. St. Bernard, S. 4 *Super missus est* 8.

<sup>23</sup>DS 422.

her active acceptance of faith; the other bodily, her passive utilization as womb for God becoming man."<sup>24</sup> This is why, according to Balthasar, the Handmaid of the Lord actively participates in the constitution of the hypostatic union, by reason of the gift of her perpetual virginity, which is intimately linked to her spiritual faith. We repeat: Christ did not wish to accomplish the work of salvation alone. He did not wish to be alone in his unique state vis-à-vis the Father; he wanted to associate to himself the Woman who was his first cooperator.

Mary is thus enabled to do what, outside of this grace, no human creature ever could: mother into being the very person of the Incarnate Son. This mothering presupposes what was said above about the Son's entrustment of the work of incarnating him to the Spirit, who allows the creature to do infinitely more than it otherwise could. Between Christ's state and Mary's, however, there remains a fundamental distinction. The Son's "yes" precedes and determines the beginning of his earthly life, such that we must say that Jesus was born, from the beginning, in mission and for mission, being in person the eternal mission of the Father. Mary, on the other hand, was born as a daughter of the earth and, though pre-redeemed (as the Immaculate Conception), she had to mature until the moment she receives her mission and can utter the full consent she gives to it. The "yes" Mary utters at the annunciation is the key to the mystery of her life; in it is revealed the paradox of her divine motherhood.

The startling passage that opens Adrienne von Speyr's first book, *Handmaid of the Lord*, brings to light the simultaneously historical and ontological character of this "yes." It thus serves as a fitting conclusion to our reflection. Mary's "yes," suggests von Speyr, not only marks her future life, but sheds its light on the whole of her past. It expresses the foundation of her existence before God, an existence that resembles a chess piece that God can move as he desires—but without the exteriority that such an image suggests:

As a sheaf of grain is tied together in the middle and spreads out at either end, so Mary's life is bound together by her assent. From this assent her life receives its meaning and form and unfolds toward past and future. . . . All freedom

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<sup>24</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 162.

develops through surrender and through renunciation of liberty. And from this freedom within commitment there arises every sort of fruitfulness. . . . Above all, Mary's assent is a grace. It is not simply her human answer to God's offer. It is so great a grace that it is also the divine answer to her entire life. Her assent is the answer of the grace in her spirit to the grace which from the beginning has been the foundation of her life. But the answer Mary gives is just as much the answer expected by grace, in that she . . . [places] herself at the service of the call in complete surrender . . . in the strength of one who is ready for every disposition of God and in the weakness of one whose life has already been placed at his disposal. . . . As a word of grace, her assent is in a special way an act of the Holy Spirit. . . . At the time of her overshadowing, the Spirit flooding through her will meet the Spirit already dwelling within her, and Mary's Yes will be as though enclosed within a Yes of the Spirit. . . . At first it will be a word of her own spirit, without her yet suspecting how firm God's intention is to become a Word of her body as well.<sup>25</sup>

The boundless gift of the Incarnation had to be the response to a boundless expectation on the part of the creature. It required the limitless availability that St. Ignatius calls "indifference" (*Spiritual Exercises*, n. 23). Mary's indifference is fundamentally the same as, and yet entirely different from, that of Christians, even the most perfect among them. Our indifference always involves a limit and an exclusion (e.g., I must choose marriage over consecrated virginity, or vice versa). The indifference of the Virgin-Mother is, on the other hand, inclusive. She doesn't need to sacrifice anything, because she has already offered everything. In her, everything is already decided, and yet her personal act of freedom is actively engaged to the full. Mary is outside and beyond what is normally meant by "choice." She is able to receive everything from the hands of God. The "everything" here does not therefore mean anything at all; rather, it means everything at once, an everything she accepts with the same naturalness with which it is offered to her. Her indifference is the most perfect love. The gift of this indifference, communicated and personally received, is matched by the divine motherhood that expresses the fullness of Mary's unique

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<sup>25</sup>Adrienne von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, trans. E. A. Nelson (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985), 7–8.

role in the Incarnation. — *Translated by Michelle Borrás.*

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