

“BLESSED IS SHE WHO BELIEVED”:  
MARY’S FAITH AND THE  
FORM OF CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE

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“Mary’s faith . . . [reveals] that faith is the unconditional assent given to the three-fold union of love that God wishes to establish with man: filial, nuptial, and fruitful.”



The mystery of the Virgin Mary, icon of faith, receives its light from that of Christ and guides us to him and to the Church, of whom Mary is also the archetype.<sup>1</sup> Only in and through the relation of love with her Son, the Incarnate Logos, can the contours of

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1. See *Lumen gentium* (=LG), AAS 57 (1965): 58–59. For a history of Mariology see, among others, René Laurentin, *A Short Treatise on the Virgin Mary*, trans. Charles Neumann (Washington, NJ: AMI Press, 1991); Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999); Luigi Gambero, *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

Mary’s person be seen.<sup>2</sup> By sheer grace, the Virgin Mary’s assent of faith was uniquely able to receive God’s love humanly and without any sort of resistance.<sup>3</sup> However, that the Virgin Mary, blessed among women because she believed (Lk 1:45), leads to and cannot be severed from Christ also means that, in a way possible only for the divine *agape* (1 Jn 4:8) that gives itself without losing itself, Christ himself cannot be separated from the Virgin Mary.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, man’s reception of and fulfillment in the divine life in Christ is a participation in the *agapic* relation of Jesus with his mother: we become children of God and members of the body of Christ when, through the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary becomes our mother and we become brothers of Christ, whose body was prepared in Mary’s womb. Man’s faith is a gift that comes from and roots him in the reciprocal relation between Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

This essay ponders Mary’s faith in its unique capacity to reveal that faith is the unconditional assent given to the threefold union of love that God wishes to establish with man: filial, nuptial, and fruitful. Mary’s faith shows us that God wants man to be fruitful, like he himself is, and to be nuptially and filially united to him as a son in his Son through the Holy Spirit (Gal 4:4–7).<sup>5</sup> The

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2. Love reveals the person because persons are defined by the relations that constitute them and love is the highest form of relation among persons. Love is the unconditional reception of the beloved in oneself; the affirmation of the longed-for beloved for his own sake; and the gratuitous reciprocation of the gift of his person with that of one’s own life. Thus, analogically to what happens in God, where the Father’s love is eternally received and reciprocated by the person of the Son, the divine love for man that the Logos is to personify in history must be recognized and welcomed by a human person. Concerning the way Christ’s passions express God’s love in history, see Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 5 (PG 91:1045D–1060D).

3. Mary is the daughter of Zion. As such she is virgin, mother, and spouse, and hence recapitulates in herself both the people of Israel with all of its history and man’s most authentic religiosity. It is in this sense that, as John Paul II said, the Virgin Mary “represents the paradigm of the authentic holiness that is achieved in union with Christ” (John Paul II, General Audience [3 September 199], no. 61 in John Paul II, *Théotokos: Woman, Mother, Disciple; A Catechesis on Mary, Mother of God* [Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2000], 227).

4. *LG* suggests, on the one hand, that Christology and Mariology need to be studied together and, on the other hand, that the study of the relation between ecclesiology and Mariology can enrich both theological disciplines.

5. Our reflection presupposes the threefold dimension of love indicated by Scripture: *agape*, *eros*, and communion. Faithfulness to Scripture, in fact, pre-

Virgin Mary's faith, however, is not simply an icon in which we see God's will embraced to the end. She is also the one through whom, in a mysterious way, God carries out his plan. The Virgin Mary, becoming the mother of all believers at the foot of the Cross (Jn 19:26–27), enables Christ to become the brother of all those who, as St. John did, welcome Christ and Mary in faith. As brothers, they enjoy the love the Father has for his eternal Son. Furthermore, precisely because the faith of her who is full of grace is the ongoing recognition of and total surrender to the true Word of God, she, the archetype of the Church and eschatological Bride of the Lamb (Rev 19:7, 21:9), introduces the communion of believers into that nuptial union with Christ (Eph 5:25–27; 2 Cor 11:2) which will be fulfilled when he is everything to everyone (Col 3:11).<sup>6</sup>

Our essay proceeds in five steps. It first examines the sense in which Mary's faith is both the fruit and the fulfillment of her own filiality. It then elucidates the nature of Mary's faith, by which, in assenting to God's promise and omnipotent faithfulness, she became the virginal mother of God and underwent at the foot of the Cross the most radical kenosis of faith (sections 2–3). Mary's virginal motherhood will then help us ponder the meaning of both the nuptial union with God that faith establishes (section 4) and the gift of divine sonship that Christ, together with Mary, bestows on the believer (section 5).

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vents us from accounting for divine *agape* without love's erotic (Lk 22:15) and communal dimensions (1 Jn 1:4), properly understood. See, among others, Antonio Prieto, "Eros and Agape: The Unique Dynamics of Love," in *The Way of Love: Reflections on Pope Benedict XVI's Encyclical Deus Caritas Est*, ed. Livio Melina and Carl A. Anderson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 212–26. The theme of deification as the goal of Christ's sacrifice, still neglected today by most of Western theology, is, as is well known, admirably emphasized by the Fathers. See, among others, Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3.19.1 (PG 7/1: 939); Athanasius, *De incarnatione*, 54,3 (PG 25: 192B). Furthermore, when we consider that becoming like the triune God means becoming eternally gratuitous as well as virginally and immeasurably fruitful without thereby ceasing to be a creature, we understand more why God wishes to incorporate Mary into his bestowing of every grace—and to do so without undermining the sole mediation of Christ.

6. Regarding the nature of the meritorious act of Mary's faith, it is helpful to recall that she merited *de congruo* what Christ merited for us *de condigno*. *Ad diem illum laetissimum*, AAS 36 (1903): 449–62; DS, 3370–71.

1. “DAUGHTER OF YOUR SON”

The Annunciation is the first scriptural event that affords access to Mary’s faith, that is, to her unconditional assent to the Father’s omnipotence and bottomless faithfulness and to the promise of virginal motherhood (Lk 1:26–38).<sup>7</sup> To ponder the nature of Mary’s faith adequately, we must begin by carefully considering that, in receiving the good tidings, the Virgin Mary reintroduced into history the beauty of the mystery of childhood. Mary’s faith reveals that she is, first of all, the true child of God called to become the daughter of her Son.<sup>8</sup> Because she was immaculately conceived, Mary is the perfect child who uniquely attracts the Father’s love and welcomes the angel’s tidings. Indeed, the child is he who constantly looks up to his parents to receive everything from them, who joyfully radiates this truth of his being, and who lives his belonging to them as confident, creative, and audacious prayer. Such is Mary’s relation with God. She is the true daughter of God because—as child and as woman—she represents the quintessence of poverty, beauty, religiosity, and prayer. Her faith is both grounded in these four constitutive aspects of childhood and represents their unexpected and overabundant fulfillment.

The depth that these aspects of childhood acquire in Mary is better perceived when she is placed in relation with those Old Testament women whose history became emblematic in the later period of Israel: Judith, Susanna (Dan 13), and Esther. Through them, God was preparing Israel for Mary’s arrival, thus preparing his people to receive salvation through a woman.<sup>9</sup> What is common to these women is their weakness,

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7. Mariology helps us to perceive how rich the reflection on faith as a theological virtue becomes when it does not abstract the analysis of the act of faith from the personal context in which it takes place. Within this dramatic, personal context, Aquinas’s famous definition arrives at its adequate depth: “Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [=ST] II-II, q. 2, a. 9). See also Jean Mouroux, *I Believe: The Personal Structure of Faith*, trans. Michael Turner (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959); DS, 3008–14.

8. Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*, canto 33, vv. 1–2.

9. For the following see Divo Barsotti, *La donna e la salvezza d’Israele: Tra compimento e profezia; Meditazione su Giuditta, Ester, Susanna* (Milan: San Paolo, 2009).

that is, a poverty in which they do not have anyone on whom to rest or find support: Susanna is alone, Judith is a widow, Esther is an orphan. They lack any social, political, economic, or familial resources on which to rely. They can turn only to God. They are also women of great beauty (Dan 13:2; Jdt 10:14; Est 2:7). Their beauty, rather than contrasting their poverty, reflects both their poverty (as in Susanna) and their defenselessness (as in Esther). It is also a reflection of their valuing truth and fear of God more than anything else, and hence it is a radiation of God's wisdom, as we see in Judith (Jdt 8:28–30)—although in her case, beauty remains ambiguous (Jdt 10:1–23). Their beauty and poverty almost irresistibly draw the love of men: What in fact can attract the love of a king more than the poverty of his handmaid? What can elicit the love of a man more than a ray of the truth whose ultimate root is God's wisdom (Ws 8:2)?

The symbolic value of these women—who represent both their own nation and woman as such—is an anticipation, within a greater dissimilarity, of what we see in the Virgin Mary. As revealed by her *fiat*—that gesture which radiates the truth of the Virgin Mary—her beauty is her utter poverty. It is hard for us to fathom Mary's poverty: confronted with temptation as no other human being has been, she, unlike any other, never sinned. Her graced awareness of God's ever-greatness and faithful love, as well as of her own littleness, of her being a child, is so unspeakably profound, and her love for God, for her people, and for mankind so unconditional, that it is given to her to see through Satan's lie and so not mistake for God what is merely an idol. Her poverty is radical surrender to God; it is true childlikeness. Her beauty is her letting God be God in herself and in history. She relies only on God's word. If, as Gertrud von le Fort writes, "surrender to God is the only power the creature possesses," would the God of love be able to let the immaculate beauty and pure prayer of his most perfect creature pass unheeded?<sup>10</sup> In light of this attractive power, would it be too far-fetched to say that, *mutatis mutandis*, what was written in the Song of Songs is true first and foremost of the Virgin Mary? "You have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes" (Sg

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10. Gertrud von le Fort, *The Eternal Woman: The Timeless Meaning of the Feminine*, trans. Marie Cecilia Buehrle (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 18.

4:9); “Turn your eyes away from me, their gaze disturbs me” (Sg 6:5).<sup>11</sup>

Along with surrendering to God and lovingly letting God be God, poverty and beauty have another active dimension: thirst. As the humblest of creatures, Mary is the thirsty ground ready to receive the rain when it comes (Ps 63:1). This thirst is what constitutes Mary’s (and hence man’s) religiosity par excellence. Religiosity is reverence for the divine *within* the very texture of life. Because it is the joyful acknowledgment that God is everything and that one depends completely on him, religiosity, as we see in Mary’s faith, is the apex of human reason. Religious existence expresses reason’s true nature, a nature that will be fulfilled by faith, that is, by the recognition of Christ’s divinity and universal mission and by the entrustment of oneself, enabled by Christ’s very presence, that this recognition entails. It is not a coincidence that, as a woman, the Virgin Mary expresses religiosity perfectly. Although it defines the creature who is made for God and hence always on a path toward him, religiosity belongs most properly to woman because it is she who, as woman, symbolically represents the creaturely dependence on, surrender to, and acceptance of God.<sup>12</sup>

Mary’s joyful, lived awareness of her own littleness, conscious of not being anything before God yet grateful for having been created and chosen, blossoms in prayer.<sup>13</sup> The child is the one who prays for everything without fear of not being heeded. Such prayer is best expressed in the Virgin Mary’s words welcoming the angel’s announcement, “Let it be done,” or in those we hear at Cana—her last recorded words in Scripture: “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5). Mary’s prayer gestates, so to speak, within the silence that her beauty creates. In this silence

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11. The only Marian commentary on the Song of Songs is that of Rupert of Deutz. See Ruperti Tuitiensis, *Commentaria in Canticum canticorum*, ed. H. Haacke (Turnhout: Brepols, 1974) (CCCM 26; PL 168:837–962).

12. Religiosity understood in this way explains why Eve was tempted before Adam. As woman, Eve symbolically represents the religiosity proper to human nature: loving surrender to God, who wants nothing but that his creature be and be for him. See Louis Bouyer, *Mystère et ministères de la femme* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1976), 9–68.

13. Mary’s prayer also echoes the prayers of women in the Old Testament: Dn 13:42–43; Est 14; Jdt 9.

following the angel's departure, the Virgin Mary waited for the unfolding of God's promise, and in it she grew in faith. Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, grew ever more human, ever more childlike: "daughter of your Son." She grew more radiant with beauty as she entered ever more deeply into the prayerful silence of faith in which everything is carried and embraced.

## 2. MARY'S FAITH

Pondering the nature of Mary's faith as it is manifested at the Annunciation will help us unfold how this faith—that is, her self-entrustment to God's omnipotent and faithful love, as well as to his promise that she would be mother of the Logos—represents a fruitful union with God. This union witnesses to the redemption of our forebears' original sin by restoring the link between man's loving recognition of God and the promise of divine-like fruitfulness. Being part of both the old and new covenants (Heb 8:6–13), Mary's faith fulfills and in a sense transcends that of the Old Testament. She is therefore in continuity and discontinuity with the main figures of the old covenant (Heb 11:39–40), the first and foremost of these being Abraham. Let us look first at one aspect of the content of the faith itself and then at the existential disposition of both Mary and Abraham.<sup>14</sup>

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14. It is helpful to recall the following similarities between Mary and Abraham: Mary is favored by God (Lk 1:28) and, in a different way, so is Abraham (Gn 18:3). The angel invites both of them not to be afraid (Gn 15:1; Lk 1:30) and to trust in God completely: God is almighty. The angel's last words to Mary, "For with God nothing will be impossible," echo those spoken to Abraham: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gn 18:14). Because of their faith they will both be blessed (Gn 15:6; Lk 1:45). In Abraham all the families of the earth shall bless themselves (Gn 12:3), and Mary is blessed among all women (Lk 1:42, 48). Besides the Magnificat (Lk 1:46–56), the parallel between their faiths resides in the fact that both represent the figure of the Daughter of Zion. For Abraham see Ps 45:11; Gn 12:1; Ez 16:2, 45. Luke's account of the Annunciation echoes three prophesies (Ws 3:14–17; Jl 2:21–27; and Zec 9:9–10; and we may also include Is 12:6) addressed to the Daughter of Zion, who is characterized predominantly as spouse, holy, virgin, mother, and God's dwelling place. See René Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Luc I-II* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1957). See also Ignace de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, trans. Bertrand Buby (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1992), xxiii–xl; Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann, eds., *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment*

Abraham and Mary’s faith requires trusting God’s promise of fruitfulness. God would make Abraham father of many nations and would give him and his descendants many possessions and a new land in which to dwell. “God,” says Pope Francis, “ties his promise to that aspect of human life which has always appeared most ‘full of promise,’ namely, fatherhood, the begetting of new life.”<sup>15</sup> In this way, God reveals himself to be good, almighty, and the giver of all life. Mary was also promised that she would become a mother. Yet, unlike Abraham’s, Mary’s Son unforeseeably fulfills the promise made to the people of God and repeated throughout the history of the people of Israel. She was asked to embrace the promise of conceiving a Son who will “reign over the house of Jacob for ever” (Lk 1:33). Thus, already at the Annunciation—without seeing how it would take place—Mary knew that the “Son of the Most High” (Lk 1:32) would be born to live eternally. This Son of hers therefore would fulfill the original promise made to our forefathers (Gn 3:15) and free mankind from disunion and death, the most toilsome consequence of Adam and Eve’s sin. This child, finally, would be conceived and born without causing her to lose her virginity (Lk 1:34). Preserving her virginity not only entailed conceiving a child without knowing a man and remaining a virgin during and after childbirth. Even more deeply, it also meant that God, while making her the mother of his Son, had to fulfill her desire to remain a virgin and to be fully dedicated to God.<sup>16</sup> Given the nature of the promise, the sacrifice already contained in Mary’s faith was unparalleled by that of Abraham’s. This brings us to the second aspect of faith, the personal entrusting that faith in God signifies.

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by *Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 61–79.

15. *Lumen fidei*, 11.

16. See John Paul II, *Théotokos*, 112–19, 130–32; de la Potterie, *Mary*, 30–37, 123–54; Laurentin, *Short Treatise*, 316–34. Because virginity has both bodily and spiritual connotations, we can perhaps describe it as that way of loving that, coming from God’s mercy, affirms the other for what it is and in its relation to God without absorbing it into oneself. Virginity’s love lets the other be and hence gratuitously owns the other in utter poverty. See my “Mary: Certainty of Our Hope,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 35 (Summer 2008): 174–99.



To welcome this promise, Mary, like Abraham, had to listen (*ob-audire*) to the word of God and adhere to it with such a total, complete purity that, unlike Abraham, it was necessary for her to be already holy, full of grace (Lk 1:28), that is, uniquely preserved from original sin and from every consequence of it. Mary's immaculate conception, however, neither places her outside the human race nor makes her faith in God's word and her gift of self events that could be taken for granted. On the contrary, being full of grace (*keharitomene*), she was given to say "yes" freely, untethered by any lie, particularly the archetypal lie of wanting to be God without God.<sup>17</sup> She was thus given to be herself, to be a person, since one becomes oneself when one says "yes" to the One for whom one most truly thirsts. Because she was immaculately conceived, she possessed herself in the total gift of self to God. "Grace as dispossession," writes Ratzinger of this most unique grace that Mary received, "becomes response as appropriation."<sup>18</sup> Mary embodies faith perfectly because she recognized all of God and obeyed with all of herself, body and spirit, without any shadow of doubt.<sup>19</sup> Mary's perfect faith in God and his promise (Lk 1:30–33) is both, as John Paul II says, total self-surrender to "the truth of the word of the living God," and an entrusting of herself to God that is always able to persevere when faced with the impossible.<sup>20</sup>

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17. See Stanislas Lyonnet, "χαῖρε κεχαριτωμένη," in *Biblica* 20 (1939): 131–41; Ignace de la Potterie, "κεχαριτωμένη en Lc 1, 28: Étude philologique," in *Biblica* 68 (1987): 357–82; Ignace de la Potterie, "κεχαριτωμένη en Lc 1, 28: Étude exégétique et théologique," in *Biblica* 68 (1987): 480–508; Ernesto della Corte, "κεχαριτωμένη (Lc 1, 28) Crux interpretum," in *Marianum* 52 (1990): 101–48. St. Bernard described Mary's grace as the "grace of virginity" (Bernard of Clairvaux, *De laudibus Virginis Matris* 3.3 [PL 183: 72D]).

18. Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church's Marian Belief*, trans. John M. McDermott (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 70. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception, whose history we cannot enter into here, moved from the Church to Mary. This dogma has its most solid scriptural grounds in Lk 1:28. See *Ineffabilis Deus*.

19. *LG*, 63, AAS 57 (1965): 64.

20. *Redemptoris Mater*, 14, AAS (1987): 377; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 148. Virginity, while being first the blossoming of the reception of God's ever-preceding love, also reveals the active dimension of Marian faith: the positive belief that, without one's own knowing how it will take place, God can and will carry out the impossible. In this sense, virginity is another fun-

Mary’s faith, expressed in her *fiat*, is neither a simple acceptance nor a resignation before God’s will. Rather, “let it be done unto me” expresses a joyful desire to collaborate (*généito*) with whatever God has determined, even without fully understanding what this will means.<sup>21</sup> She, unlike any other creature, lets God be God. She, in other terms, does not impose any measure—neither an idea nor a method—on him and so remains fully a human person. It is true that, similarly to her Son who learned obedience through suffering (Heb 5:8; Lk 2:52), Mary had to grow in faith. Yet, from the very beginning, we find in the Virgin Mary the simple, joyful, and radical decision to embrace all of God’s word of truth and love, and thus to become the mother of the beloved Son of the Father (Lk 3:22; Mt 3:17) while remaining the virginal, lowly servant. That Mary, through her faith, becomes the mother of God shows forth the intrinsic tie between faith and fruitfulness. To elucidate this bond we need to see in what sense Mary’s assent to God’s promise is an overcoming of original sin.<sup>22</sup>

Because of the opposition between the evil one and the “woman”—who is both the Church and Mary (Rev 12)—it is important to remember the connection between Satan’s fall and man’s. The devil, “liar and father of lies” (Jn 8:44), he who “has sinned from the beginning” (1 Jn 3:8), was envious and occa-

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damental dimension of child-likeness that Christ reveals and bestows on Mary from the beginning so that she can give herself completely to God.

21. De la Potterie, *Mary*, 14–17; Raniero Cantalamessa, *Mary: Mirror of the Church*, trans. Frances Lonergan Villa (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 43–46.

22. Jesus Christ, revealing the novelty that he himself brings, constantly indicates that God wishes man to be fruitful, and to be so overabundantly (Jn 6:1–15; Lk 5:4–9). Jesus’ parables that speak of the seed, of fruit, of growth, of the tenants, etc., make this point crystal clear. Fruitfulness is a crucial principle in Balthasar’s theology. See, e.g., *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 415–31; *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 2, *Truth of God* (=TL 2), trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 59–62; *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 3, *The Spirit of Truth*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 157–64; *Epilogue*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 109–23; “Spirit and Institution,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4, *Spirit and Institution*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 209–43.

sioned man's death (Ws 2:24).<sup>23</sup> Without presuming to resolve in a few brief strokes a mystery whose depth remains always beyond comprehension, we could say that Satan was envious of man and his vocation to exercise priestly dominion over the cosmos. This envy moved Satan and a multitude of angels to rebel against God and, rather than adore him (Heb 1:6), to persist in the fight against him.<sup>24</sup> Satan's disordered love of self gave rise to pride, which in turn blossomed into the envy that led him to radically oppose God and, with equal hate, Mary, who, unlike Satan, is pure and utterly humble.<sup>25</sup> Satan seduced Eve (Gn 3:1–5) and persuaded her that God was jealous and deceitful. He interpreted the prohibition against eating from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gn 2:17) as God's reluctance to share his life. They “will not die” if they eat of the forbidden fruit, Satan claimed, and they will know good and evil, like him (Gn 3:5). Would this fake promise mean that evil is something withheld, a part of the good they have begun to be familiar with? God, so the lie would have it, is jealous of his own life and does not want man to share it fully. Could it be because God, after all, does not think man worthy of that dignity? Satan led our forefathers to believe that, given the prohibition, God is not completely good to his children. Satan portrayed God, who was not perceived by either of them as triune, as *the* liar by implying that he, the creator, would not be faithful to his promise. Thus, Satan convinced Eve and Adam that it was more fitting to grasp at the divine dignity *on their own*, that is, as if they were fatherless. God knows the good because he is its source, and to be the absolute source of the good, to be like God, requires having no father. To be fatherless is to be like God; God, after all, has no father.<sup>26</sup>

When Mary, the new Eve, wholeheartedly embraces the angel's message with unprecedented humility, she is given to see past Satan's lie and to reaffirm the truth about God and about

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23. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 391–93.

24. Francesco Bamonte, *Gli angeli ribelli: Il mistero del male nell'esperienza di un esorcista* (Milan: Paoline, 2008).

25. *Redemptoris Mater*, 11, AAS 79 (1987): 373.

26. See my *Gift and the Unity of Being* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 135–47; Carlo Lorenzo Rossetti di Valdalbero, *Novissimus Adam: Saggi di antropologia ed escatologia biblica* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 2010), 13–31.

herself.<sup>27</sup> God is a good father, “for with God nothing will be impossible” (Lk 1:37). He, as Mary told Elizabeth, helps “his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever” (Lk 1:54–55). Mary’s faith allows man’s salvation to take place because it recognizes that she is the daughter of the Father who is rich in mercies. She is the one who knows more deeply than anyone else that nothing is owed to the creature and that the Father wants only to give his creatures what is best for them. We can now perceive with greater clarity why Mary’s *fiat* reintroduces into history the beauty of the mystery of childhood. Even more, we see that the recognition of God’s fatherhood is coincident with her gift of divine motherhood. Mary becomes mother in her unconditional acceptance of her filial dependence on God.<sup>28</sup>

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27. *LG*, 56, AAS 57 (1965): 60–61.

28. It is obvious that in Mary’s case the relation between faith and motherhood is due to the fact that she is asked to become the mother of the Son of the Most High. For all other human beings, the coincidence of fruitfulness and faith unfolds in time and never as the unity of virginity and motherhood that we see in Mary. Besides the fruitfulness given with faith itself and the God-given capacity of peoples and communities to give birth to Christ, every believer becomes fruitful because, thanks to the mediation of Mary, the birth of Christ takes place also in him. We shall return later to this matter.

It is important here to remember that God takes flesh in Mary because it is the woman who carries within herself the principle of fecundity. It is because an isolated man has never existed (Gn 2:18) that the Logos needs Mary’s *fiat* to enter history. Yet, it is also crucial for us to distinguish between God’s fatherhood and man’s. In God, the ineffable mystery of begetting is the communication of all of the divine life without any prior beginning. Neither human fatherhood nor human motherhood adequately represents this. Human fatherhood represents the giving of life that originates in God, and hence it is always secondary to God’s fatherhood. Human fatherhood is responsible for representing an origin that the male is not. The memory of the gift-character of human fatherhood is what alone can prevent it from being reduced to possessive reproduction. At the level of the creature, motherhood represents God’s begetting more adequately than fatherhood precisely because, symbolically speaking, motherhood makes it evident that the human communication of life is a giving of life that is *received*. In this sense, motherhood is a communication of life that is informed by the creaturely difference. Of course, at the human level, neither fatherhood alone nor motherhood alone represents God’s generation. They do so only together. Each one needs the other to be itself. The father discovers his fatherhood with and through the mother, and she her motherhood with and through her husband. As a dual act, the human generation of life is a silent witness to the fact that communion lies at the root of the very nature of being. See my “Homosexual Marriage and the Rever-

Why does faith in God's promise represent a participation in God's fruitfulness? A first and easily neglected aspect is that the Virgin Mary is given to recognize and embrace, in an inchoate fashion, that fruitfulness belongs to God himself.<sup>29</sup> This deeper knowledge of God's fruitfulness makes of Mary a person who is herself in the contemplation of and dialogue with God. Mary's *fiat* and the Incarnation of the Word, in fact, coincide with the beginning of the explicit disclosure of the mystery of the Trinity. "The Lord is with you" refers to the Lord whom Mary knows to be the God of Israel. The "Son of the Most High" who will take flesh in Mary is the messianic heir: "The Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David," and he will live forever. Finally, this is to happen because the Holy Spirit "will overshadow" Mary. Of course, Mary will have to walk the path of faith marked out for her in order more fully to understand these first rays of the ungraspable light of God's triune mystery. Yet, she is already given a glimpse at the unthinkable depth of God's goodness: there is otherness in God. He is not a jealous God because he is a unique type of source; he is fruitful in himself. Fruitfulness regards first and foremost the bringing forth of another person who can never be absorbed back by the source.<sup>30</sup> God can be the Father of those who believe in the Son of Mary,

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sal of Birth," in *Anthropotes: Rivista di studio sulla persona e la famiglia* 29, no. 1 (2013); Louis Bouyer, *Mystère et ministères de la femme*; Georgette Blaquièrre, *La grâce d'être femme* (Paris: Editions Saint-Paul, 1981); *Mulieris dignitatem*, AAS 80 (1988): 1653–1729.

29. Answering the question of whether there are more than two processions in God, Thomas says that "God understands all things by one simple act; and by one act also He wills all things. Hence there cannot exist in Him a procession of Word from Word, nor of Love from Love: for there is in Him only one perfect Word, and one perfect Love; thereby being manifested His perfect fecundity" (ST I, q. 27, a. 5, ad 3). See also his affirmation that God does not know solitude because in him there are three persons who share in the divine nature (ST I, q. 27, a. 3, ad 1).

30. Regarding God, therefore, the term "fruit" refers to the divine subsisting relations that constitute the three hypostases looked at from two points of view. The first is their eternal coming from the Father (eternal begetting of the Son) and proceeding through and with the Son (eternal procession of the Holy Spirit). The second point of view is that of the always already existing divine persons who are eternally in relation and never happen to come to existence at a given (eternal) point. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia Dei*, 10.3; Balthasar, *TL 2*, 128–49.

and can share with them his divine life without absorbing them into himself, because he is the one whose omnipotence eternally begets a Son equal to him.

Mary’s recognition that God is fruitful implies that she begins to be made like him, since the vision of God gradually transforms the beholder into what he is given to see and love (1 Jn 3:2–3). In Mary’s case, this entails that her fruitfulness must be virginal, analogically to that of the Father. Anthropologically speaking, we could say that the Father’s generation of the Son is virginal because he begets without needing a feminine principle. The womb in God is the Father himself.<sup>31</sup> The Father is the beginning without beginning, and he eternally begets the Son from and in himself.<sup>32</sup> Theologically speaking, we could say that the virginal, eternal generation of the Son consists in the Father giving all of himself to the Son and, while letting him be, eternally “expecting,” without claiming, a response of love from the Son, who eternally and super-abundantly gives it. The Father is totally in the Son, identical to him in essence, yet he remains other from him, as another who awaits the always-already-given and overabundant recognition of the Son’s gratitude. The Son’s response, however, neither eliminates the original gift of the Father nor collapses the Trinity into a modalistic Godhead because, as the trinitarian dogma allows us to elucidate, the Son’s response to the Father comes always with the person of the Spirit who proceeds from the Father through and with the Son.<sup>33</sup> We shall return to this last point.

Mary’s virginal motherhood, as a participation in God’s virginal fruitfulness, indicates, of course, that she conceives without knowing a man. Does this mean that we can consider Mary the bride of God? It is true that Mary’s faith, besides revealing her filiality, also discloses itself as a nuptial relation with God from the very beginning: God gives himself to her and she, receiving him in herself, unconditionally gives herself to him.

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31. Council of Toledo XI (DS 526).

32. It is of no avail to consider the divine origin to be a masculine-feminine dyad, because a dyad always requires an ulterior principle that gives a reason for the dyad’s existence and dual unity. The first principle, if it is indeed first, must be one.

33. See my *Gift and the Unity of Being*, 191–259; Balthasar, *TL* 2, 151–70.

Through the Spirit, her unconditional “yes” to God returns to him as the fruit that is both the Father’s eternal Son and her own child. Yet this nuptial relation of the Virgin Mary with God that we see in play already at the Annunciation does not allow us to say that the fruitful union of Mary with God is a hyerogamy.<sup>34</sup> Mary’s Son comes fully from the Father and from herself. Yet the Virgin Mary is not the bride or spouse of the Father. Although the Son proceeds from him, it is the Holy Spirit, not the Father, who effects the conception. She is not the spouse of the Holy Spirit either, because, although he places the Son in her womb, the Son does not proceed from him but from the Father. Nor can Mary be called the bride of God. Nuptial love is always a relation between persons, and a triune God cannot be considered a person in the proper sense. Scripture reserves bridal language for the Christ-Church relation. Within this relation we can say that Mary, archetype of the Church, is the Bride of the crucified and risen Lamb. At the foot of the Cross—seen under the light of the Risen Christ—it becomes apparent that she has always been the perfect Bride. Thus, we cannot say that the Incarnation of the Logos is the fruit of the nuptial relation of Mary with God as if that union were patterned after human spousal relations. Mary’s nuptial relation with God is and remains supra-sexual—although it is so in a way that does not deny her sexuality. It is therefore more fitting to think about Mary’s nuptial relation at the Annunciation in terms of the gift of charity that the Spirit of God bestows upon her and that she receives in faith.

A brief look at the relation between the Holy Spirit and Mary allows us to perceive more deeply the intrinsic relation between faith, that is, the recognition of God’s love present in history, and fecundity. Let us turn to the person of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who seals the union of Father and Son, the kiss of love, and the one who, being their fruit, is also the witness to their unique personhood. Hence, it is the Holy Spirit who interiorly gives Mary the grace to lovingly and completely assent to God, while also ensuring that her total availability represents her exaltation and not her disappearance in God. The Holy Spirit, in allowing Mary to say “yes” to the Father, gives

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34. For the following see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Skizzen zur Theologie*, vol. 5, *Homo creatus est* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1986), 142–47.

her back to herself as *virginal* mother—she is one with God because she *lets him be* God. That the Spirit gives her back to herself as virginal mother precisely through the gift of the child means that the Spirit unites Mary and the beloved Son of the Father in a way that is not given to any other human being—she is the *mother* of God. It is also the Spirit who, by bringing the Son to her, preserves the creaturely difference not only during her earthly life, but also after the Assumption—she is the *mother of God*.<sup>35</sup>

If we look at her relation with the Holy Spirit from Mary’s point of view, we see that her virginal motherhood resembles God’s virginal fruitfulness in yet another way. The Father allows her to give the Holy Spirit together with the Son, as we begin to see after the Ascension when, in the midst of the apostles, Mary, who was overshadowed by the Spirit at the Annunciation, prays for the Spirit to come (Acts 1:14). The Father wishes that Mary, as virginal mother of his beloved Son, may participate at her own level in the giving of the Holy Spirit to man. In this way, Mary’s fecundity becomes also like Christ’s. This paternal condescension reflects in the economy a ray of the unspeakable beauty of the mystery of the Spirit’s procession. This, of course, does not mean that the Virgin Mary participates in his eternal procession. It means more simply that Mary, virgin and mother, endowed with an intimacy with the Holy Spirit unknown to any other human being apart from Christ, prays to the Spirit and, together with her Son, communicates the graces that the Giver of Gifts distributes.<sup>36</sup> Her participation in the giving of

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35. One might assume that Mary’s being embodied sufficiently secures the creaturely difference, since the body is the memory of ontological dependence on and difference from God. Yet, since the body represents finite difference as made for fruitfulness, a further principle is required to preserve God’s otherness. It is thus necessary to specify that it is the Holy Spirit who, by ensuring that the child is both fully Mary’s and fully God’s, makes it possible that her maternity, and hence that Jesus, is not an extension of her own bodiliness but a participation in God’s gift of self—her child is the *eternal* Logos. On the Holy Spirit and Mary see Laurentin, *Short Treatise*, 201–08; Louis Bouyer, *The Seat of Wisdom: An Essay on the Place of the Virgin Mary in Christian Theology*, trans. A. V. Littledale (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), 175–90. See also Antonio Orbe, “La procesión del Espíritu Santo y el origen de Eva,” *Gregorianum* 45 (1964): 103–18.

36. Without fear or anxiety and mindful of her Son’s promise (Jn 14:16), Mary ardently longs for the Holy Spirit to come and prepares the apostles to receive him while she “implores a multiplicity of gifts for everyone, in ac-



the Spirit is a sharing in God's bottomless and ever-new gratuity that never tires of giving.<sup>37</sup>

### 3. CRUCIFIED IN FAITH

Mary's faith is a fruitful nuptial union with God and *eo ipso* a call to participate in Christ's sufferings. In our historical condition, there is no nuptial mystery—the fruitful union in which one gives all of oneself to the other and remains oneself—that does not participate in Christ's sufferings. No nuptial union is true unless it participates in the task that the Father assigns to it. Nuptial joy is given to Mary so she can venture into the exodus of love and ever more deeply embrace the Cross from within. The Father will let this joy, sign of the Holy Spirit's presence, re-emerge in all its beauty after both the Son and the Virgin Mary have embraced the unspeakable sacrifice. Mary's enduring faith at the foot of the Cross discloses further that man's destiny is to receive and belong to Christ's love within the communion of saints. The believer's nuptial relation with Christ is indeed personal and unique *because* it always takes place within and is at the service of communion with God and the saints. Let us now look at Mary's exodus of love: her participation in Christ's obedience unto death.

To enter into Mary's "pilgrimage of faith," we must keep firmly in mind the special grace of virginal motherhood that Mary received, since it is this grace that will need to be offered at Calvary.<sup>38</sup> As John Paul II said, "The collaboration of Chris-

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cordance with each one's personality and mission" (John Paul II, *Theotokos*, 197–99; *LG*, 59, AAS 57 [1965]: 62).

37. Mary's virginal motherhood images therefore the fruitfulness of the triune God: she begets virginally like the Father; together with the Incarnate Logos, she is given to participate in the generation of the children of God and the communication of the graces that the Father wishes to bestow through his Son; and her fruitfulness has the universal measure given by the Spirit through whom men are united to God as sons in the Son. Obviously, these properties (virginal, personal, and universal) belong in different ways to each of the three hypostases, and each hypostasis represents them only together with the other two hypostases. The justification of the universality of Mary's mission will be offered in the following sections.

38. *LG*, 58, AAS 57 (1965): 61. John Paul II will unfold this theme in his

tians in salvation takes place after the Calvary event, whose fruits they endeavor to spread by prayer and sacrifice. Mary, instead, co-operated during the event itself and in the *role of mother*; thus her co-operation embraces the whole of Christ’s saving work.”<sup>39</sup> When she gave her assent to allow the beloved Son of the Father to take flesh in her womb, Mary was also assenting to all of his salvific work. This is not simply because, humanly speaking, a mother never stops being a mother. More importantly, if the original sin is the rejection of divine fatherhood, redemption—that is, the possibility of receiving the unforeseeable gift of having God as father—can only be given by man’s passing through the darkness of radical fatherlessness. The Paschal Mystery is the sacrifice of affirming God’s unfailing fatherhood from the very depth of unfathomable abandonment (“Why have you forsaken me?” Mt 27:46). To enter into this humanly unbearable realm of forsakenness, Jesus also had to let go of the one whose presence was a constant and veiled reminder of the Father’s faithful love, the Virgin Mary. Christ’s sacrifice would not have been complete if the Father’s dereliction did not also include separation from his mother, who taught him the hope of Israel that he came to fulfill. With this in mind, it is possible to suggest that Jesus’ acceptance of the Father’s design that Mary be given over to John, the beloved disciple, also means that Christ embraces the decision not to rest in Mary’s faith and thus to enter into complete solitude. Only at this point does what he said about himself earlier become true: “The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” (Lk 9:58). On the Cross, Jesus embraced from within the abandonment of the divine Father and the inaccessibility of his human mother. Christ’s sacrifice is truly brought to its end (*tetelestai*, Jn 19:30) because all forms of human love (fatherhood, motherhood, filiality, and nuptiality) are offered up to the Father. The filth of sin can touch his body and nail him to the Cross only because it seems to have found a way to separate him from the relations

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*Redemptoris Mater*. In his commentary to the encyclical, Balthasar contends that “through ingenious inspiration, the encyclical gives a most prominent place to Mary’s faith. Perhaps never before in Mariology has this been done with such decisiveness” (John Paul II, *Mary: God’s Yes to Man; John Paul’s Encyclical Redemptoris Mater*, with commentary by Hans Urs von Balthasar [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988], 165).

39. John Paul II, *Théotokos*, 185–86. Emphasis added.

of love that constitute him. Only after he has given his mother Mary to John and his beloved disciple to Mary can Jesus drink the vinegar of man's sins, bow (*klino*) his head, and send the Spirit back to the Father (Jn 19:30).<sup>40</sup>

Mary was prepared for Golgotha from the very beginning. She had already discovered in Bethlehem, when they were not welcomed and she had to give birth (Lk 2:7), that the joy of her motherhood was tied to suffering and sorrow. She was told as much when Simeon prophesied shortly after, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also" (Lk 2:34–35). Living with Jesus and following him, she learned that she was called to make her Son's mission her own through the acceptance of the sacrifice of her own motherhood. She had to surrender her own motherhood if the Father's glory was to be revealed. Thus in the way that Mary lived her faith, we see the mysterious dynamic proper to the dealings of God's triune love with man: God gives—in her case, divine motherhood—and takes away in order to give anew in a superabundant fashion what was originally given. Let us consider three fundamental aspects of Mary's sacrifice of faith.

Just as Christ learned obedience through suffering every day until the hour came, so Mary lived obedience throughout her life. The first aspect of her sacrifice, then, was accepting that her life was a *pilgrimage of faith*. Mary was "in contact with the truth about her Son only in faith and through faith!"<sup>41</sup> Her presence to her own child did not mean, as we mentioned, that she

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40. It would be inappropriate to interpret this "completion" of Christ's sacrifice quantitatively. If grace superabounds (*hupereperisseusen*, Rom 5:20) it is because the measure of the sacrifice that the Father determines has in view the grace of filial adoption that he wants to give and not so much the paying back of a debt. Persons (divine or human) and relations among persons are not "things" that can be replaced with other things. This is also why the Son's sacrifice has to be revealed to him by the Father through the Spirit. If it were not mediated by the latter at the appropriate time, Christ would not really be in the hands of the Father, but would be carrying out a drama that had already been played out. If Christ knew beforehand all the suffering he had to endure, his sacrifice would not be truly human, and its victory would be a settling of accounts rather than a superabundant fulfillment. The measure of human suffering—and the good that comes from it—is always in the Father's keeping. See Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr, *To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 73–86.

41. *Redemptoris Mater*, 17.

had the same knowledge of her Son that the Father has. Mary had a knowledge and love of God and of his plan for salvation that, although far higher and deeper than that of any other human being, was still commensurate with her own person. This is why Scripture tells us that, although she knew of his divine origin, she still needed to grow in faith and learn ever more deeply the mystery of her Son through her own suffering.<sup>42</sup> Thus, her growth in faith also related to the knowledge of the extent and nature of his mission, the time of its unfolding (Jn 2:4), and what that mission entailed for her.<sup>43</sup>

From the moment when he reached adult awareness, Scripture tells us that Christ affirmed a distance between himself and his mother. This distance, which at times seems like a humiliation, increased in time. His seeming rejections of her happened at the temple (Lk 2:49–50), at Cana (Jn 2:4),<sup>44</sup> when she was brought to Christ (Lk 8:19–21), and when a woman in the crowd cried out, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and

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42. Laurentin explains that the correct interpretation of Lk 2:49–50 (“They did not understand the saying he spoke to them”) is neither that Mary was ignorant of Jesus’ divinity nor that this *logion* is not to be taken literally. Rather, Mary had a glimpse of Christ’s divinity and she had to grow in understanding. “In 2:49 Luke invites us (in agreement with Lk 1:28–35) to limit the explicit knowledge that Mary had of Jesus’ divinity. In Lk 2:51, he invites us to think that Mary’s meditation gave her the meaning of the word that momentarily disconcerted her” (Laurentin, *Luc I-II*, 165–75, at 173).

43. Although we can assume that Mary was present at certain moments of Christ’s public mission (Lk 4:6–30; Lk 8:19–21), most of the time she followed him from a distance, learning mainly through others what he said during his public life.

44. Regarding the difficult exchange between Jesus and Mary at Cana, some think that the question is rhetorical and offer arguments to read the question as: “Is it not the case that my hour has arrived?” Others retain the most difficult reading and preserve the literal meaning: “What have you to do with me?” Regardless of the reading, it is clear that Mary did not know at that time the full meaning of the “hour.” Christ had not performed miracles before, so she was not asking for something about which she knew and others did not. See de la Potterie, *Mary*, 157–208; Albert Vanhoye, *Let Us Confidently Welcome Christ Our High Priest: Spiritual Exercises with Pope Benedict XVI*, trans. Joel Wallace (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2010), 73–83; André Feuillet, *Johannine Studies*, trans. Thomas E. Crane (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1966), 17–51; André Feuillet, “La signification fondamentale du premier miracle de Cana (Jo. II, 1–11) et le symbolisme johannique,” *Revue Thomiste* 73, no. 1 (1965): 517–35; Raymond E. Brown et al., eds., *Mary in the New Testament*, 182–94.

the breasts that you sucked!” (Lk 11:27–28). In service to Jesus’ mission, these seeming rejections revealed to everyone that the bond established by faith is deeper than that of flesh and blood. They also taught Mary that, although her union with her Son in faith was unspeakably profound, her motherhood would have to undergo a transformation. She was to become ever more clearly the “woman.”

The most crucial test of Mary’s faith, however, was given when she stood at the foot of the Cross (Jn 19:26) and contemplated what, humanly speaking, seemed to be the complete negation of the angel’s promise (Lk 1:32–33). “This,” said John Paul II, “is perhaps the deepest ‘*kenosis*’ of faith in human history.”<sup>45</sup> Standing at the foot of the Cross, Mary’s faith was asked to recognize, in a more radical way than that required of Abraham, that the Father is true to his promise and that his almighty love is able to carry out what is literally unthinkable to man. Her persistence in faith on Calvary—*stabat mater*—is a witness that, unlike all the rest, she was certain that her Son’s promise—that he would “be raised on the third day” (Mt 17:23)—would be fulfilled, although she knew neither how this fulfillment would take place nor what life would look like after such a dreadful death. She believed that she and the entire world would see the Father’s glory. Hoping against all hope, Mary believed because she accepted that the word her Son had spoken, and which he himself was, was true. She believed because she allowed her own will to be identified with that of her Son. In the consummation of love, his will was also hers. She freely entrusted herself to Christ, her Son and Lord, and to his own mission. Because of this, she was the first one in whom faith, the Father’s work, was perfectly accomplished (Jn 6:29).<sup>46</sup>

The second element of Mary’s sacrifice of faith at the foot of the Cross was her embrace of a unique participation in Christ’s sacrifice, a participation that does not undermine his sal-

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45. *Redemptoris Mater*, 18.

46. In light of this we can also say that for Mary, too, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). In this, again, Mary is the exaltation of man’s reason and freedom. Luigi Giussani, *Perché la Chiesa* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003), 307–10; Luigi Giussani, “Moved by the Infinite,” *Traces* 5, no. 7 (July–August 2003): 1–3.

vific priority. Mary’s direct contemplation of her crucified Son, from whom she never removed her gaze, pierced through her soul. It caused her endless pain to see the head she had caressed and the hair she had combed crowned with thorns and marred by blood; to see the strong hands that had learned so well the skill Joseph had taught him and the feet that she had kissed so many times now pierced with nails; to see his whole body abused and beaten so severely that it was hard to recognize. Her deepest pain, however—even greater than that caused by this utterly unjust suffering—came from knowing why her Son had so eagerly sought and embraced this hour. Mary was asked to accept, that is, to will with her Son, that he die for our sake and because of us. He took flesh from her so that he could die for the sake of those who did not welcome him (Jn 1:11). With Balthasar we can call Mary’s sacrifice a sacrifice of love. There is in fact nothing harder “for the one who truly loves than to let the beloved suffer, to ‘permit’ him to take the path he himself has chosen into suffering, abandonment by God, death and hell.”<sup>47</sup> Allowing the beloved to suffer, which is indeed a difficult aspect of every human love, is infinitely more difficult for her, the mother of the Incarnate Logos. She participated in his Cross by accepting to let him die, by assenting to his dying for all. And she did so willingly, as the action of standing at the foot of the Cross silently reveals.

Mary’s acceptance in faith of Christ’s sacrifice was an act of love because in it she wanted nothing other than what her Son wanted *and* wanted this to happen in the same way that he did. Mary’s suffering witnesses to her perfect, loving, and hopeful faith because she actively forgave and prayed for those who were crucifying him. Just as Christ’s death on the Cross was an act of prayer to the Father and an act of unspeakable forgiveness, so Mary’s “yes” at the foot of the Cross was full of understanding and forgiveness, that is, of hope for those who “know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).<sup>48</sup> Mary could not stand at the foot of the Cross and look with joyful gratitude at the one whom they had

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47. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Mass: A Sacrifice of the Church?” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3, *Creator Spirit*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 185–243, at 217.

48. Joseph Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 13–47.

pierced (Jn 19:37) without at the same time being herself pierced most deeply (Lk 2:34–35) by Christ’s suffering, that is, by the sacrifice of letting her Son suffer for us and of loving his Cross in the same way that he did. Pierced in this way, unlike everyone else, she was intimately associated with Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. This brings us to the last aspect of the sacrifice of Mary’s faith.<sup>49</sup>

Mary was asked to accept in silence the expropriation of her own motherhood. She too, though without dying, had to go through the dreadful experience of fatherless solitude. She too was asked to trust at the foot of the Cross in the Father’s omnipotent goodness and faithful love. Christ could not have proffered the cry of dereliction if Mary had not been given to embrace a loss similar and yet dissimilar to his. This, of course, meant that she had to surrender to the fact that her Son was going to die and that his ugly death was not an illusion. Yet, more deeply, she was called to willingly embrace the most difficult sacrifice a mother can make. As Ratzinger says, “she must learn to release the Son she has borne.”<sup>50</sup> She had to accept the real distance between herself and her Son; that is, she had to accept—while still not seeing how such acceptance was part of her being present to her Son—that in her another motherhood was to take place. The Virgin Mary had to (and does) love this destiny of being expropriated of her Son, of her own motherhood. Other human beings, too, know a little bit of this darkness of the Cross when God appears to them silent and distant, and they seem to be fatherless. Yet, unlike Mary, they know that their suffering is a purification of their own sins. The Virgin Mary, pre-redeemed by Christ, knew an abandonment far greater, since she, the *théotokos*, is humble, pure, and beautiful like no other creature.<sup>51</sup>

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49. We are misled if we forget that Christ’s solitude was his allowing Mary to participate most intimately in his own sacrifice. She, who because of her motherhood was closer to him than anybody else, had to be brought furthest away from him so that, without either of them being allowed to see it, she could also participate in his redemptive sacrifice. It is this unity in distance that further grounds Mary’s unique prerogative to mediate together with her Son the graces God wishes to bestow on the believer. This mediation is itself a grace that requires Mary to be present to every man’s life.

50. Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Church at the Source*, 76.

51. The Virgin Mary accepts her sacrifice in utter silence and confident prayer to the Father that his will be done. Scripture does not tell us if Mary ut-

If she is truly to forgive as her Son does on the Cross, she has to accept that the Incarnation arrives at its fullness. This means that she is not simply to accept that her Son's death on the Cross will fulfill the lives of men throughout history. She also, as Louis Bouyer writes, is asked to embrace “that further giving by which we are brought to birth by her in Him, born in the death of the Only Son, that he might be ‘the first-born among many brethren.’”<sup>52</sup> The deepest meaning of Christ's utterance “Woman behold your son; son behold your mother” (Jn 19:26) lies here. Mary's association with Christ through faith makes her fully a mother in a new childbirth. The separation from Christ is revealed to be an incorporation into his sacrifice so that she, too, may participate in the birth of every believer. Her participating in Christ's sacrifice in a unique fashion means that, in a certain sense, Mary gives birth to Christ again at the foot of the Cross. She is to receive anew the gift of the Father's Son, her own Son, with all of herself, body and soul. This new childbirth means that, by letting him die, she accepts to communicate the whole of Christ (*Christus totus*) to the world and to the Father. Mary is both the spiritual and (eucharistically) the bodily mother of the Church, which is represented at Golgotha by John. Christ unites himself to all the faithful through Mary. At the foot of the Cross, she receives the water and blood flowing from the pierced side of Christ. His body, blood, and water—that Christ received from Mary—are present in every Eucharist, the mystery that constitutes the Church. Through Mary, believers are incorporated into Christ's eucharistic body. Mary's motherhood, which passed through the most radical kenosis of faith in history, is thus unexpectedly given back to her transfigured: she becomes the mother of the Church.

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tered any word at the Crucifixion. This is most fitting because Mary's silence is a consent to and fulfillment of that same openness that allowed her to utter her *fiat*. Her silence is a reflection of God's gratuitousness that pre-redeemed her and made her mother of God. It is also a sign of her intimate participation in Christ's sacrifice, whose primacy her silence highlights even further. Positively speaking, it is perhaps possible to say that her silence is the radiation of her beauty that, in the midst of darkness, receives all that the Lord wants to give her. Only reckless, superabundant love can satisfy God and redeem man.

52. Bouyer, *Seat of Wisdom*, 161–62.



## 4. NUPTIAL UNION

Christ's entrustment of the Virgin Mary, the woman, to John (Jn 19:26–27) renders her not only the mother of the Church but also the Bride of the Lamb (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:26–27).<sup>53</sup> To see, without being trapped in rigid stereotypes, the nature of the nuptial dimension of the unity with God that Mary's faith obtains, it is good to recall the threefold duality that characterizes Mary's personhood. First, since woman has a dual role with regard to man—mother and wife—the Virgin Mary, as the new Eve, is the true icon of woman and hence is called to represent the woman both as mother and as spouse. Thus Mary is mother—inasmuch as she begets Christ and mediates grace—and, beyond the sphere of bodily sexuality, the Bride of the Lamb.<sup>54</sup>

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53. Mary's title "Mother of the Church" appears in Benedict XIV, *Bullarium romanum* 1748, series 2, t. 2, n. 61, p. 428, cited in John Paul II, *Théotokos*, 233. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 3, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (=TD 3), trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 300–18; Balthasar and von Speyr, *To the Heart*, 50–54. The Marian interpretation of Rev 12—which is rare in the Fathers of the Church—is commonly accepted by contemporary exegetes. Rev 12 refers to both Mary and the people of God. As Laurentin explains, "Whereas these latter texts [Jn 19:25–27; Lk 1:28–55 and 2:35] put the person of Mary in the foreground, Apoc. 12 refers in the first place to the community. Nonetheless, the terms also fit Mary, who is preeminently the eschatological culmination of Israel, the Daughter of Zion giving birth to the Savior" (*Short Treatise*, 41–46, at 43). The first to call Mary "bride" was Ephrem: "I am your sister, of the House of David, who is father to both of us. I am mother too, for I bore you in my womb. I am also your bride, for you are chaste; I am the handmaid and daughter of the blood and the water, for you have bought me and baptized me" (Hymn 16, 10 on the birth of Jesus, cited in Balthasar, *TD* 3, 305). The woman can be either a virgin or a bride and a mother if she is to join a man in marriage. "The bride," as von le Fort says, "is, to be sure, the first step to the mother; but she is likewise the bearer of an independent feminine mystery" (*Eternal Woman*, 37).

54. The woman is bride inasmuch as she is receptive and responsive to the love of the husband. In this sense we can say that her bridal character is retained throughout her married life. The permanence of this character also entails that the role of the woman is never exhausted in her being the mother of the couple's children. "To see in the bride nothing more than the maiden of the wedding day," writes von le Fort, "is to give the mystery a purely naturalistic interpretation. In her attitude toward the man who loves her, the wife remains a bride throughout her life. In similar fashion the wedding day repeats itself as long as life lasts, and the bridal quality of the woman corresponds to love in its unending renewal" (*Eternal Woman*, 38).

The universality of her motherhood also brings to light the dual dimension of her mission: in her particular person she is the one who receives the Word, gives birth to him, accompanies him, and suffers with him at the Cross. Yet, since Christ’s mission is one of universal salvation, Mary’s mission, and hers alone, is also universal, that is, catholic. Thus Mary also represents (is *typos* of) the whole Church and embodies the spiritual fullness later found in the Church.<sup>55</sup> Mary is thus the *real symbol* of the Church and one of her members. Lastly, the Virgin Mary’s time expresses the tension between heaven and earth. “That to which Mary gives birth, out of the virginal purity of paradise yet in the pains of time and the ‘desert’ (Rev 12:6), is fruit for eternal life.”<sup>56</sup>

In light of this threefold polarity it is possible to perceive more clearly the relation between the maternal and the spousal dimensions in the Virgin Mary. It is true that the maternal relation, made possible by her being the perfect daughter of God, precedes the Incarnation and enables the Virgin Mary to become ever more the “woman” who responds to Christ’s mission. Yet her motherhood is possible because Mary, as woman, is directly engaged from the beginning and called upon as the goal of the relation of love; she is wanted for her own sake. We already indicated that Mary’s unconditional and joyful assent also expresses the nuptial dimension of faith. At the Cross it is possible to consider her the bride of Christ, in a suprasexual sense, because she is asked to respond to Christ’s command and to share with him in the sacrifice of the Cross. She is to receive and to reciprocate fully the sufferings of Christ, as the previous section illustrated. Mary’s allowing herself to be brought into her Son’s sacrifice is a nuptial act of reciprocation to God’s bottomless and antecedent love for her. In their separation they are thus nuptially united in an unbreakable bond

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55. Mary is the “type of the Church” (*LG*, 53, AAS 57 [1965]: 58–59) because, as John Paul II said, “of her immaculate holiness, her virginity, her betrothal, and her motherhood.” Mary is not a type of the Church in the way that the figures of the Old Testament were prefigurations of Christ; she is the “spiritual fullness which will be found in various ways in the Church’s life” (John Paul II, *Theotokos*, 217–19). For the relation between Mary and the Church see Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1999), 314–79; Hugo Rahner, *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. Sebastian Bullough (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961).

56. Balthasar, *TD* 3, 334. This threefold duality is thoroughly developed by Balthasar in *TD* 3, 318–39.

that will only be revealed in all its beauty after the Resurrection.

Despite the fact that Mary represents woman as spouse from the beginning, Scripture reserves the title “Bride” until Christ’s Paschal Mystery is accomplished. Besides the need to avoid a mythical account of Jesus’ origin and to preserve the full integrity of Mary’s nuptial gift of self—a nuptial assent that transforms her into the mother of God—Scripture offers us another reason why this is the case. In the Old Testament, as is well known, the prophets presented God’s covenant with man in terms of nuptial love. Israel is the unfaithful spouse who must be reminded of the origin and meaning of her own beauty, as well as of the infinite patience of God’s love. For this reason, during Christ’s life, Mary Magdalene—who personifies the unfaithful Israel and fallen humanity—takes on the role of the spouse who has betrayed and who, after being forgiven, returns to God (Jn 20:1–18), giving herself to her Lord and spouse in utter paschal joy.<sup>57</sup> In this return, Mary Magdalene must learn to belong to her beloved in a new way (Jn 20:17). She must let him go to the Father and discover in this distance the beginning of a deeper union. The immaculate Virgin Mary was given to live this nuptial relation with Christ from the beginning and grew in it, without sinning, as she walked her pilgrimage of faith.

Indeed, we realize with the help of the Marian texts of the book of Revelation (Rev 12, 19:5–10, 21:1–14) that Mary’s bridal union with Christ takes on yet another necessary dimension: through this union, it becomes possible for every believer to enjoy, at his or her own level, the same filial, nuptial, and fruitful relationship with God. In the case of the believer, of course, we need to acknowledge a temporal tension that speaks of the inseparable relation of faith, hope, and charity: he is given to participate in this union from the moment of baptism but will not enjoy it fully until the eschaton.

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57. See André Feuillet, “La recherche du Christ dans la nouvelle alliance d’après la christophanie de Jo. 20, 11–18: Comparaison avec Cant. 3, 1–4 et l’épisode des pèlerins d’Emmaüs,” in *L’homme devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac*, vol. 1, *Exégèse et patristique* (Paris: Aubier, 1963); Divo Barsotti, *Il mistero cristiano nell’anno liturgico* (Milan: San Paolo, 2004), 264–69. For a remarkable yet little-known reading of St. John’s gospel in nuptial terms see Erich Przywara, *Christentum gemäß Johannes* (Nuremberg: Glock und Lutz, 1953).

The second pair in the threefold polarity outlined above helps us understand how this union is opened up to all believers. The book of Revelation presents Mary as the Bride and the new Jerusalem (Rev 12, 19:7). The first aspect highlights the personal dimension of the union with God; the second, the communal. The Bride is she who “is with” the groom, the one “in whom” he “dwells,” the one who is finally “his” (Rev 21:3). The Bride therefore will no longer know death, crying, mourning, or pain (Rev 21:4). Living in him, she will possess God in a relation of reciprocal, indwelling love: the spouse gives all of his life to her and he wants nothing but that she be with him. Unlike the relation of (human) motherhood, where there is the risk that the mother’s love for the child, if he is taken to be a part of her, will be merely an extension of her self-love, in the nuptial mystery the bride is drawn to the spouse who is radically *other* from her.

The believer, who is brought to birth by Mary in Christ, is given to enjoy this union of indwelling from baptism on and is called to grow in it during his earthly existence. Just as in Mary’s nuptial relation with Christ, the believer is asked to complete in himself the sufferings lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his Body, the Church (Col 1:24). There is no true reciprocation of Christ’s love without a participation in his mission of redemption. At his own level, the believer, with Mary, is asked to allow himself to be taken, broken, and distributed as a fruit of grace so that the world, laboring in pain, can receive the revelation of God’s final glory (Rom 8:22).

The believer’s nuptial union with God, which is proper to the existence of faith, finds its final truth in the eschatological nuptials of the new Jerusalem and the pierced Lamb: there, God gives all of his life to his spouse and she to him, and they both remain what they are in an inseparable union. Thus, the nuptial union is virginal: the creature remains creature, even though, unfathomably, it comes to possess God; God remains God even though, in his unfathomable love, he gives all of himself to the Bride. God will always love the Bride (Mary-Church) and the Bride will always love God without confusion precisely because in their union he does not absorb her. True delight, in fact, is found not so much in “possession” but in the personal “otherness” of the beloved. If persons were reducible to one another, if they did not remain themselves in their most intimate union,

the gift of love (in God and to man) would simply not be. Without exhausting it, faith introduces the believer into the ineffable mystery of love in which the gift of love is what differentiates and what unites. The persons are irreducible selves who remain themselves in the event of *agapic* communion in which, without confusion, one is from, for, with, and in the other.

This union without confusion is also why the Bride is the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21:2), *one* “city,” the communion of the blessed born not from a divine and human mingling but from God’s virginity, communicated to Mary. Just as there is no relation with Christ that is not also a relation with the triune God, and just as there is no relation with Christ that does not pass through Mary, so there is no personal relation with Christ that is not always already part of the communion of Christ’s body. Communion, constitutive of God, is also constitutive of the believer. The believer, participating in the relation of love with God through Mary, already has a foretaste of this communion while on earth. He meets the body of Christ in the communion of saints that the Church is and grows in holiness with them as he lives his life of faith.<sup>58</sup> The image of the heavenly “city” speaks of this “horizontal” aspect of the nuptial relation with God, inchoately experienced already *in statu viae* and inseparable from the love of the brethren and of the world. In heaven, the nuptial relation will be with God, and this relation takes place within the brotherhood of all the blessed, a perfect communion that constitutes the body of the Spouse.<sup>59</sup> Analogically to the Father’s love for the Son that without the Spirit is not, so the believer’s personal union with the Father in Christ through the Spirit simply is not without the Bride, that is, the *théotokos* and the communion of saints. Therefore, the nuptial relation can be the union of God with the concrete human person—who, as person, is assigned a unique mission by the Father—precisely *because* this union

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58. *Lumen fidei*, 37–45; Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996); Joseph Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 112–20.

59. In addition to the image of marriage, the content of this eternal life is also expressed through the image of the heavenly banquet. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5, *The Last Act* (=TD 5), trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 470–87.

happens within the communion of saints, of which Mary is the highest expression. That the believer’s personal nuptial union with God in heaven takes place within the communion of saints, who form part of the one glorious body of Christ, confirms anew that the virginal dimension of love fulfills the nuptial, since in it the union with God is complete and eternally fruitful: the Bride is loved by and loves God virginally.

5. “HE WILL BE MY SON” (REV 21:7)

All along we have pondered the threefold union with God that Mary’s faith reveals. We have seen that just as we cannot separate the Virgin Mother from the eschatological Bride of the Lamb, so we cannot abstract these two roles from the filial relation they presuppose and lead to. We have already indicated that the Virgin Mary epitomizes the figure of the child in her being and in her complete and ongoing trust in the Father’s omnipotent and unfailing goodness. We also elucidated that the fulfillment of the promise of divine motherhood is the virginal bestowal upon believers of the grace to enter into the filial relation with the Father of Jesus Christ. Through Mary, virgin, bride, and mother, the prophetic words of the Lamb, “I will be his God and he shall be my son” (Rev 21:7), become a reality for those who, *in statu viae*, are “thirsty” for God and will be fulfilled in those who “will be victorious,” that is, faithful to the end (Rev 21:6). The filial relation emphasizes the final aspect of the union with God to which faith begets the believer.

If the believer lives a nuptial relation with God, receiving in faith the gift of God himself and reciprocating it with the gift of all of himself, in this nuptial relation he remains and grows as a son in the Son. To grow as sons in Christ is the fulfillment of man’s creatureliness, as we have seen in Mary. Faith reveals that the form of our constitutive poverty is that of being begotten, a being-born whose ultimate expression is to be freely given the grace of adoptive sonship. To believe, through Mary, Mother of the Church, in the one the Father sent entails being loved with the same love the Father has for the eternal Son. The gift of faith that Christ together with the Virgin Mary bestows on the believer allows him to participate, within the person of the Son, in

the same divine tri-unity and life, and to do so in the manner of the Son of God: receiving and reciprocating the Father's love in thankfulness and giving with the Father the Spirit in whom they are one. Further, the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ is completed only when, by being made Christians thanks to the Spirit who comes through Mary, the believer lets the Son be born in him. This filial dimension of the union with God opens onto the dimension of fruitfulness. The believer's allowing himself to be begotten as a son of God in the Church coincides with his letting the Son be born in himself—analogically to what we saw in Mary.<sup>60</sup> Her mediation in this wonderful fruitfulness completes overabundantly Mary's motherhood.

What is this birth of the Son in the believer that speaks further of the fruitfulness promised by God and to which faith assents? Of course, it is neither the eternal generation of the Son—the believer remains a son—nor Mary's conception of the Logos. If "being born" regards that constitutive relation of love in which one comes from and reciprocates gratuitously the Father's love, then the birth of the Son in the believer places the believer's *fiat* inside the Son's eternal relation with the Father. The believer participates in the Logos' relation of love with the Father not only because he is made the object of the Father's love but also because in Christ he allows himself to be begotten by the Father, reciprocates the Father's love, and accepts the task allotted to him. In this allowing, reciprocating, and carrying out love's task, the believer is sustained and spurred on by Mary's *fiat*. In asking Christ to come, he not only acknowledges his own being the son of God; he also participates in his own being begotten. Through this asking and participation, the mystery of the believer's relation to the Father in Christ begins to be seen during his earthly existence in his prayer and work. When he prays, he asks together with Mary in Christ that the Father's will be done, that is, that the Father continue to give him the being and the love already bestowed in his creation and redemption. He asks that this relation with the Father be put at the service of God's glory. When

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60. Hugo Rahner, "Die Gottesgeburt: Die Lehre der Kirchenväter von der Geburt Christi aus dem Herzen der Kirche und der Gläubigen," in *Symbole der Kirche: Die Ekklesiologie der Väter* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1964), 13–87; Balthasar, *TD* 5, 425–70; Barsotti, *Il mistero cristiano*, 228–33.

he lets his work be informed by the memory of Christ's love, and hence, when he offers it to the Father, the believer participates in the recapitulation in Christ of all that is. Christ then presents the redeemed world to the Father as part of his own being, his own body. This is indeed a marvelous mystery. The triune God wishes that the human “yes,” in all its concrete richness and variety, be part of the exchange of love that constitutes God's very being. Just as the Father gives all of his glory and the world to the Son, so the Son returns the world to the Father informed by the Spirit with the glory given to the Son—the glory given from the beginning and left in the Father's keeping at the Incarnation to be received again at the Paschal Mystery (Jn 17:20–26). In this continual exchange, we see that when the Son listens, contemplates, and loves the Father back, the Son listens, contemplates, and loves him also within our own listening, contemplating, and loving him. Just as Christ found delight in revealing the Father's face to men through the flesh he took from Mary, so he rejoices in presenting himself to the Father with his pierced body that is enriched by the unity with all those who believe in him. This mysterious but real twofold birth of Christ in believers and of believers in Christ witnesses to the indwelling of the trinitarian persons in the believer. It also reveals that the relation of fruitfulness remains as part of the filial identity of believers who, in the communion of saints, are nuptially united to God in Christ, yet distinguished from him by the Spirit.

Our account of the filial relation that faith represents would remain unbalanced if we did not recall that, as we saw with the Virgin Mary, the believer's reception and reciprocation of the Father's love in the Son do not mean his disappearance in God: the Holy Spirit, given to us through Mary, both seals our union with the God of love in Christ and witnesses to our personal difference from him. In reciprocating the Father's love, the believer gives God (the Son) to God (the Father) with all of himself because the silent and veiled Holy Spirit allows his eucharistic thankfulness to be one with Christ's and yet fully his. That God (the Father) loves God (the Son) in the believer, who while on earth responds to him in faith, means that God loves himself in one other than himself; that is, God loves himself in a redeemed creature on whom the gift of divine adoption has been bestowed by the Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son



also through the Virgin Mary. In heaven, man is made like God when in his nuptial union with Christ, to whom the Ever-Virgin Mary gave birth, the believer becomes one with the Son. In God, there is only one Son whose resurrected body gathers within itself, thanks to the Holy Spirit, the communion of all the blessed, and whose eternal and grateful “yes” to the Father gathers within itself, without silencing it, the “amen” of all the blessed.<sup>61</sup>

Our reflection on Mary’s faith, we can say now in conclusion, has brought us to recognize that the gift of faith establishes a threefold union with God: filial, nuptial, and fruitful. Only Mary is Mother of God, Daughter of Zion, and Bride of the Lamb. Yet, through her, the believer becomes a son in the Son and lives a nuptial union with Christ in which he is called to eternally participate, together with all the blessed, in God’s triune life. The gift of faith, given to man through the *théotokos*, makes man become ever more like God, that is, eternally fruitful and gratuitous, by drawing him into a communion that embraces the believer and imparts to him its own eternal and ever-new dimensions. □

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61. In light of this threefold form of union with God to which faith asents—nuptial, filial, fruitful—it is necessary to rethink eternal life in the direction suggested by Balthasar when he explained that eternal life “cannot consist merely in ‘beholding’ God. In the first place, God is not an object but a Life that is going on eternally and yet ever new. Secondly, the creature is meant ultimately to live, not over against God, but in him. Finally, Scripture promises us even in this life a participation—albeit hidden under the veil of faith—in the internal life of God: we are to be born in and of God, and we are to possess his Holy Spirit” (*TD* 5, 425).