

THE INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH: A MARIAN MYSTERY

• Roch Kereszty •

“The incorruptible permanence of the Church in the divine truth [is] a requirement of the Church’s virginal and, ultimately, Marian nature.”



The development of Christian doctrine does not take place in a historical vacuum, nor is it only the result of the Christian people’s piety or theological reflection. The challenges of the changing cultural environment and the errors deriving thereof are often the stimulant for seeking greater clarity and conceptual articulation of a truth of revelation. A milestone in the development and formulation of the dogma of the Church’s infallibility and, in particular, that of the pope’s participation in it took place in response to the Enlightenment, which attempted to enthrone human reason as the only authority. As a result, theologians, and finally the First Vatican Council, formulated the Church’s teaching on the role and limits of human reason in matters of divine revelation and asserted the final authority of Peter’s successors in defining with the assistance of the Holy Spirit what is and what is not revealed doctrine. In formulating the doctrine of infallibility Vatican I concentrated only on this disputed issue by proving it from the scriptural deposit of divine revelation and the immemorial tradition of the Church. In our age, however, theology and Church praxis alike have turned from investigating individual dogmas in themselves toward focusing on

the whole of the Christian mystery, from further differentiation of doctrine toward re-discovering the original, comprehensive vision of Christian faith. This dialectic of contrary movements, from further differentiation back to the undifferentiated whole, and vice versa, provides an antidote to theological “forgetfulness” and enriches our understanding of the Christian faith.

Such re-rooting of the dogma of infallibility in the totality of revelation has achieved notable success in Karl Rahner’s theology. He has argued convincingly that infallibility is ultimately a necessary, *a priori* condition of effective divine revelation.¹ Unless there is an infallible criterion for us to judge what is and what is not divine revelation, we cannot accept God’s word the way it ought to be accepted, with the absolute surrender of our intellect and will. Without such a final criterion, faith can only mean—as Tillich has logically deduced—a state of ultimate concern without any definite object. The traditional objection to an infallible Magisterium has been the claim that it divinizes the Church, and in particular, the papacy, since God alone is infallible. Rahner, however, has shown that the Catholic dogma does exactly the opposite: it safeguards the divine efficacy of God’s self-communication. Without an agency that can interpret with certainty what God has revealed and explain its meaning, God would have proved to be a woefully ineffective communicator. Thus, the Catholic dogma safeguards God’s transcendent power rather than idolizing human beings.

A few theologians, however, discovered not only its roots in the biblical doctrine of apostolicity and Petrine ministry, but also its link to the Marian mystery of the Church. In other words, whereas most of contemporary theology treats the Church’s infallibility as required by the effectiveness of God’s revelation, patristic and medieval theology see the incorruptible permanence of the Church in the divine truth as a requirement of the Church’s virginal and, ultimately, Marian nature. In this article I plan to summarize the relevant data of this nearly forgotten tradition, and explore its implications for a deeper understanding of the doctrine of infallibility. Finally, I will show how the mystery of Mary is indeed the “Catholic dogma”—to use in a positive sense Barth’s disparaging

¹Of course, under the condition that this divine revelation is addressed also to the human intellect that, for the sake of deeper and more precise understanding, must formulate revealed truths.

statement—that assures the orthodoxy of the main doctrines of Christianity.²

1. *Mary and the Church*

The mystery of Mary and that of the Church appear so closely linked as to imply a certain identity already in the Book of Revelation (12:1–18). The vision of the Woman clothed with the sun, resting her feet on the moon and giving birth amid loud wailing and under attack by the dragon, the ancient serpent, is a complex symbol. The twelve-star crown on her head symbolizing the twelve tribes presents her as Israel; and her struggle with the ancient serpent indicates that she is the new Eve who will not be conquered by Satan. Her giving birth in pain, however, cannot refer to the happy birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. In the light of John 16:21 and 19:25–27, she is also Mary, the virgin daughter Zion, who completes her birth of the Messiah when she suffers the “sword piercing her heart” (Lk 2:35) as she witnesses Jesus enthroned on the cross and taken up to heaven in the resurrection. Finally, Mary, the new Eve and the virgin daughter of Israel, is also the Church, the mother of those who bear witness to Jesus (Rev 12:17).

In the same perspective, Irenaeus presents the symbol of the womb, which is both the womb of Mary and the Church:

The pure One [Christ] opens purely that pure womb, which regenerates men unto God and which He Himself has made pure.³

There is a plethora of patristic texts in which Mary and the Church interpenetrate each other and are seen as it were in a *perichoresis*. The Marian church is a spotless, immaculate virgin, the spouse of Christ, the mother who bears children configured to Christ, the first-born

²On Barth’s comments see Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1963), 198–200. Next to the invaluable studies of Hugo Rahner, *Symbole der Kirche. Die Ekklesiologie der Väter* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1964) and *Our Lady and the Church* (Chicago: Regnery, 1965), I relied most on de Lubac’s *The Splendor of the Church* for his comments and for his rich collection of patristic texts.

³*Adversus Haereses* IV.33.2; cf. also IV.33.4.

of many brothers, or—what is equivalent to the latter—she gives birth to Christ unceasingly by regenerating people through baptism and by preaching to them the word of Christ. In the *Letter of the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne*, written probably by Irenaeus, we find the Church described as a virgin and mother who rejoices over those Christians who had first denied the faith under torture, but with the help of their martyr brothers and sisters were “conceived” again and “reanimated” and thus made ready for martyrdom. Watching the revived Christians being torn to pieces by the wild beasts in the arena, Alexander, a Christian physician, acted out in pantomime the pangs of labor. By acting out Mother Church’s childbearing, he was interpreting to the martyrs what was happening to them in the arena.⁴

Not only the Church, local or universal, is spouse and mother, but so too are individual Christians who, having an intact faith, firm hope, and genuine charity, realize in themselves the Church’s spousal mystery. And as the fruit of their virginal love they give birth to Christ in themselves, meaning that they are transformed unto the image and likeness of Christ. At a higher state of perfection, they give birth to Christ in others, in those who are entrusted to their care. This insight also derives from Paul who addresses his “foolish” Galatians in these terms: “My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!” (Gal 4:19).

From an early time on, the baptismal pool was also called the *uterus Ecclesiae* (“womb of the Church”), from which the catechumens arose reborn to a new life in Christ.

Blessed Isaac of Stella, a twelfth-century Cistercian abbot, formulated the terminology by which we can legitimately speak about these three interpenetrating realities: Mary, Church, and the individual soul:

[I]n the divinely inspired Scriptures what we say about the virgin mother Church in a universal sense we understand in a singular sense about the virgin mother Mary, and what we say about the virgin mother Mary in a special sense we rightly understand in a general sense about the virgin mother Church. And when a text speaks about one or the other, its meaning applies almost without distinction to both. In addition, each faithful soul may be considered in its own way as the spouse of the Word of God,

⁴Letter quoted by Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V, 1, 45–46.

as the mother, daughter, and sister of Christ and as virgin and fecund.⁵

But going beyond the terminological distinctions, how can we clarify the relationships themselves? In promulgating the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* of the Second Vatican Council in 1964, Pope Paul VI solemnly declared that the Virgin Mary is the mother of the Church. We see the beginnings of this teaching present in the early Fathers' identification of Mary with the New Eve, the "mother of all the living." This view was further developed by the contemporary exegesis of John 19:25–27. In the Fourth Gospel most events and utterances of Jesus have—beyond the obvious—a deeper meaning. Thus in Jesus' last words to his mother and to the beloved disciple ("Woman, behold your Son . . . Behold your mother") the ecclesial dimension of Mary's motherhood is disclosed to us: the beloved disciple represents all the disciples of Jesus, and thus Mary's motherhood is stretched by Jesus so wide as to embrace all of them. At the foot of the cross, "wailing aloud in pain,"⁶ she completed, by her consent to the self-offering of her Son, the birth of Jesus into the enthroned Messiah, the king of Israel and the world. Thus Mary's (existential) consummation of giving birth to the Son of God coincides with receiving her universal vocation as the mother of all believers, the mother of the Church.

The meaning of the title (mother of the Church) clarifies Mary's relationship to the Church. She gave birth bodily to the Head of the Church, Christ, and spiritually to the members of the Body of Christ. As Augustine says, "she contributed by her charity so that the faithful might be born in the Church."⁷ Relying on Origen's insight, Blessed Gueric explains that Mary has the desire to form her only begotten Son in all her adopted sons:

[E]ven though they were already conceived by the word of truth, she still gives birth to them every day by her desire and

⁵*Sermo 51 in Assumptione*, 8.

⁶Rev 12:2. Only later reflection, interpreting Rev 12:1–18, Jn 16:21, and 19:25–27 together, grasped the full meaning of Jesus' last words to his mother and the beloved disciple. See A. Feuillet, "L'heure de la femme (Jn 16,21) et l'heure de la Mère de Jésus (Jn 19,25–27)," *Biblica* 47 (1966): 169–84, 361–80, 557–73.

⁷*De sancta virginitate*, 1, 6.

tender care until they reach the state of the perfect man to the extent of the full stature of her Son.⁸

2. The faith of Mary and the faith of the Church

In this context, then, the Church as mother appears not as a vague poetic hyperbole but a concrete personal reality: she is Mary, the mother of all believers, and along with her, all faithful and loving members of the Church who have become particular mothers of souls. Thus, when we speak about the “faith of the Church,” without which the sacraments could not be validly administered and the Church could not have existentially fully appropriated the sacrifice of Jesus in the offering of the Eucharist, we mean the perfect faith of Mary and secondarily the faith of all the believers in heaven and on earth in whom the Holy Spirit is actively present. The role of Mary in the communion of the saints, however, is unique: had she not been immaculately conceived and full of grace, her *fiat*, that is, her response to God in accepting the Son and his redemptive work, could not have been complete. The work of redemption could not have been fully accomplished without an adequate human response. Mary’s motherly role, then, is to include us in her acceptance, in her full yes to God’s entire plan of salvation.

A false way to imagine Mary’s motherly role would be to assume that it merely parallels the role of the Holy Spirit and the sacraments. Obviously, Mary’s activity and that of the saints, let alone the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, cannot be limited to the sacraments and the other official ecclesial acts. The Holy Spirit blows where he wills; and Mary and the saints always freely communicate with us and pray for us as they carry out God’s plan. Outside the Church’s liturgy we cannot predict when and how Mary and the saints intercede for us. In the sacraments and in the official prayers of the Church, however, we know that the faith and prayers of Mary and the saints are always active. When we pray to

⁸*Sermo II in Nativitatem Mariae*, 3, 84–87. According to Origen, Mary has only one son, Jesus. When hanging on the cross Jesus tells his mother, “‘behold your son’ not that ‘behold, this also is your son.’ What he meant is: ‘behold this is Jesus to whom you have given birth.’ For everyone who is perfected no longer lives but Christ lives in him. Since Christ lives in him Mary was told: ‘behold your son the Christ’” (*In Johannis evangelium*, I, 4 [6], 7–11).

Christ during Mass that he should not look at our sins but “at the faith of your Church,” when we offer in the Mass “this holy and perfect sacrifice” to the Father, when in the priest’s absolution the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ is offered to the penitent, we always share—whether we know it or not—in “the faith and prayers of the Church,” which is that of Mary and the saints. Thus, when we say “the Church prays” we mean not a mere literary device or legal person. It is the prayer of Mary and the other living members of the Church in heaven and on earth, united with the prayers of Christ and effective with, and pleasing to, the Father.

Just as Mary completed the birth of the Messiah under the cross by identifying with her Son up to his final “handing over the spirit” (Jn 19:30), her motherly role for the members of Christ is completed when members die and are born to eternal life in heaven. For this reason do we recite in the Hail Mary, “Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.”

Hans Urs von Balthasar remarks that it took the Church about a millennium to discover the identity of the “*ecclesia immaculata*,” the “*ecclesia sine macula et ruga*” in Ephesians 5:27, and the “*columba immaculata*” in the theology of the Fathers, that immaculate Church without stain and wrinkle, the immaculate dove of the Song of Songs who absolves the sinner from excommunication through the bishop. The Church has known from the beginning that these terms cannot mean the empirical Church as she appears to believers and unbelievers alike, full of the stain and filth of her members; eventually they realized that she is the immaculately conceived, full of grace mother of God in communion with all the saints, who as the *ecclesia immaculata* is at work in the Church’s perfect response to the Son’s gift of self.⁹

3. *Infallibility in the context of the mystery of Mary*

After outlining the Marian mystery of the Church, we need to explore how the Marian context enriches and deepens the meaning of the dogma of infallibility. There is only one Bridegroom, Jesus Christ and one Bride, the Church. Whoever know-

⁹Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 226–29.

ingly denies or distorts any truth of God's revelation sins against the pure virginal dedication of the Bride to the Bridegroom. Just as in the Old Testament idol worship was considered adultery against the bridal relationship of Israel to God, for the Fathers of the Church any heresy is judged to be adultery.¹⁰ As St. Cyprian declares: "Whoever separates himself from the Church, unites himself with an adulteress."¹¹ Origen complains that the heretics, by being heretics, build a brothel.¹² Augustine expresses the mind of all the Fathers by explaining that what corrupts the chastity of the virgin spouse is the violation of the Church's faith.¹³ For Hildegard of Bingen the most wicked corrupting agents are the errors of the heretics,

who attack her by trying to corrupt her virginity which is the catholic faith; she, however, strongly resists them lest she be corrupted for she has always been and is and will remain a virgin [...].¹⁴

The Church remains a virgin even while "she gives birth to her sons without any opposing error remaining in the integrity of faith."¹⁵ Particular local churches may develop heresies and thus they may change from virgin to adulteress, just as, according to Hegesippos, the church in Jerusalem lost her virginity after the death of her bishop Simeon.¹⁶ The bishops of Rome, however, have been aware that, due to the Lord's promise to Peter, "in the Apostolic See the Catholic religion has always been preserved without any stain."¹⁷

¹⁰Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* III, 12.

¹¹*De unitate Ecclesiae*, 6, line 146: Cetedoc vol. I.

¹²*Hom. in Ezech*, 2.

¹³*Tractatus in Johannis evangelium*, 8, 5.

¹⁴*Scivias*, 2, 3.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶See Hegesippos in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, IV, 22, 4.

¹⁷H. Denzinger, and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, 36th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1976): "in Sede Apostolica immaculata est semper catholica servata religio" (363). See the so-called "Decretum Gelasianum": "Est ergo prima Petri Apostoli sedes Romanae Ecclesiae, non habens maculam neque rugam nec aliquid eiusmodi" (*ibid.*, 351). ("Therefore the first see is that of the apostle Peter's Roman Church which has no stain or

Long before the Lord called the apostles and charged them after his Resurrection to go and teach all the nations, Mary had already accepted to become the mother of the Son of God and thereby she has accepted the fullness of redemption for the human race. Thus, the primary ecclesial reality is the Marian Church; namely, the Church as virgin, spouse, and mother in which Mary (with the growing number of the saints joining her) is active by her motherly intercession. The apostolic ministry, including the Petrine office, is posterior to this Marian aspect. Moreover, the apostolic ministry including the Petrine office has been established for the sake of guarding and guiding the virginal Bride Church to full eschatological union with her Divine Bridegroom. The apostolic Church structure exists for and because of the Marian Church. Moreover, without her Immaculate Conception, Mary would not be full of grace and thus the Church could not have fully embraced God's gift in the Son, with the result that there would not be an immaculate spouse to be guarded and led to final union with God. Thus, we could confidently say with Hans Urs von Balthasar that the immaculate Marian Church is prior to the apostolic mission including the infallibility of its Magisterium.¹⁸

As long as the virgin Church lives her life of dedication and love, her ministers do not need to judge and condemn but only nourish the faithful by preaching and by administering the sacraments. Only when a false doctrine threatens the community, do the ministers intervene by denouncing the error and warning the Church. Thus, Paul protects the Corinthian church in these words:

I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God, since I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts may be corrupted from a sincere and pure commitment to Christ. (2 Cor 11:2–3)

In the twenty-first century the attitude of the apostles and their patristic and medieval successors appears strange and unduly harsh. We would prefer a more irenic approach to allow for the

wrinkle or anything of this kind.”) This was repeated by the First Vatican Council (*ibid.*, 3066).

¹⁸Cf. *Theological Explorations*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 239–40.

good faith and good intentions of the heretic. It is true that the apostolic, patristic, and medieval Church had not developed sufficient sensitivity to consider the heretic's subjective state of mind. If heresy, however, is perceived to be not simply a theoretical error but the corruption of the virginal bride of the Lord, and if we consider ourselves to be the father and mother of this virgin bride, we can more easily empathize with the fierce reaction of the apostles and their successors.

The Marian context of the Church's infallibility sheds light also on the epistemological structure of the Church's object of faith. The deposit of faith did not begin as one global idea that, with the passing of time and through encountering different cultures, gradually developed into a list of increasingly more differentiated propositions. If we reflect on the remarkable fact that the early Fathers recorded rules of faith (*regulae fidei*) of varying length and content and dependent upon the nature of the heresy they each opposed, it becomes clear that behind the different sets of propositions there exists a more fundamental reality that, in response to different situations, calls for different propositional truths. This fundamental reality is Christ present "in the womb of the Church's faith" and, as a result, to varying extents in the hearts of believers. Thus, the genesis and growth of faith in the believer is not only an intellectual process but a giving birth to Christ in the believers' hearts. Similarly, as seen above, the work of evangelizing is characterized by enduring labor pains until Christ is shaped and formed in the evangelized. These images evidently need conceptual articulation. We may explain them as the process of the increasing intensity of Christ's indwelling in the soul and the conforming of the soul to Christ by the Holy Spirit. In the light of the Marian mystery, then, the primary object of faith is not assent to a set of propositional truths but the person of Christ himself in his transforming presence within the Church. St. Thomas' view can be interpreted as leading in the same direction: he explains that "the act of the believer terminates not in what can be enunciated but in the reality [of what is believed]."¹⁹ And this reality, Christ crucified and risen, is present within us.²⁰

¹⁹ST II-II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2.

²⁰See, among many other texts, *Comment. in Johannem* 6, l. 6: "It is evident that he who believes in Christ takes him into himself according to Eph 3:17, namely,

Following the patristic tradition, Aquinas shows also the necessity and the function of enunciating propositional truths about the object of our faith: “[W]e do enunciate propositions in order to know about the realities both in science and in faith.”²¹ This, then, is the paradoxical character of the object of faith which is disclosed in the perspective of the Marian mystery. Faith embraces the living reality of Christ himself by one global act, but it cannot say anything true and definite about his reality and its implications without formulating true propositions. Through particular propositions, each of which is incomparably less comprehensive than our intuitive grasp of the whole reality present within us, we can, slowly and piecemeal throughout the centuries, shed light on this one reality. Without this painstakingly long and never-ending process by which the Magisterium formulates the mysteries of faith, our faith cannot be explained to ourselves or to others, cannot be distinguished from errors, and, above all else, it cannot be confessed by the martyrs as truths more important and more valuable than their own lives. However, each particular truth of faith has its full truth and full value by its relationship to the one reality of Jesus Christ in his relationship to the Trinity and the history of salvation. And in the light of the Marian mystery we begin to see that all these propositional truths relate to the person of Christ as the Church’s Bridegroom; they shed light on his person, on his Father and Mother, on his Holy Spirit and on his work in creation and in history. Therefore, as indicated before, no heresy is seen to be only about truth or error in itself: spreading a false teaching is the betrayal of the Divine Bridegroom and an attempt to corrupt his Bride. Viewed from this perspective, the otherwise strange phrase used by the Fathers and medieval theologians to describe the faith of the Church becomes intelligible: *fides incorrupta* (uncorrupted faith). It expresses the faith of the Church in so far as it is modeled after the faith of Mary. More than assent to the fullness of God’s revelation as preserved by the Church in its integrity, it is the total surrender of the Church’s mind and heart to her Bridegroom of which the possession of the truth of the Gospel is only an essential part.

The Church is striving with her *fides incorrupta* toward full union with the Bridegroom, expressed in the kiss of the Bride and

Christ dwells through faith in our hearts.”

²¹*ST* 1, a. 2, ad 2.

Groom in the Song of Songs; and, as the fruit of this union, she bears children to God.²² This is a theme that runs from Origen through the later Fathers to the medieval monastic writers. For the Church, just as for the perfected soul, the mediated knowledge of the Bridegroom received from angels and prophets is not enough. The Church herself, along with each holy soul in the Church, begs the Father that the Bridegroom himself “may come in person and that he may kiss her with the kisses of her mouth, that is, that he may pour into my mouth the words of his mouth, that I may hear himself speaking, that I may see himself teaching me.”²³

Vatican I’s definition of the pope’s decisive participation in the Magisterium’s infallibility concerns only the intellectual aspect of faith. It defined that under definite conditions the Bishop of Rome shares in the infallibility of the Church in such a way as to exclude error in defining matters of faith and morals.²⁴ This indeed is that minimum necessary for the Church’s faith to be preserved from corruption. Yet, the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and bodily Assumption of the Virgin Mary reveal and assure for us that this faith, guarded by the Magisterium, remains faith informed by charity, a faith aiming at the eschatological union of the immaculate Church with her Divine Bridegroom.

4. “*You vanquished all the heresies.*”

In the preceding sections we have inquired into what light the Marian mystery sheds on the doctrine of the Church’s infallibility. Here we will reflect briefly on how the acceptance of the Marian doctrine assures orthodoxy in other key areas of Catholic teaching. For this reason I have chosen a part of an ancient antiphon as the title of this subsection: “you vanquished all the heresies.” It is well known that the title *theotokos*, God-bearer or mother of God, as defined by the Council of Ephesus in 431, became the battle cry

²²The symbol of the kiss comes from the Song of Songs 1:2. Beginning with Origen, the Christian tradition saw in it both the intimate union between the Word and human nature in the Incarnation, and/or the eschatological union of the Church with Christ anticipated in the saints’ mystical union.

²³Origen, *Comment. in Cantica* I, 1, 10.

²⁴Denzinger, 3065–3075.

of orthodoxy against all forms of Nestorianist reduction of the Incarnation to a mere indwelling of God in Jesus. The Marian dogmas reveal also God's transcendent *eros* toward his creation, his respect toward human freedom; and they guarantee the final consummation of the Church and all creation.

Here, however, I would like to concentrate only on one issue: if understood in its ecclesial dimension, the mystery of Mary provides the orthodox antidote to the feminist crisis. Evidently, the feminist movement would have arisen in the world and in Christianity even if Marian doctrine and piety had not been at a very low ebb after Vatican II. I am convinced, however, that it would not have struck such a responsive chord in many Catholics had they not forgotten Mary's role in the Church. There appears to be a close link between the crisis in Marian piety and the feminist outcry against the male hierarchy of the Church. In this article I hope it has become clearer that an integral and catholic view of the Church understands the Marian principle to be prior to, and more fundamental, than the Petrine ministry. At the beginning of the Church there stands the Immaculate Conception, and at its consummation the Assumption of Mary invites the entire Church to join her. The Petrine ministry, including the episcopal college, exists only to preserve the virginal Marian Church and assure her safe arrival to heaven for the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Moreover, the Marian mystery clarifies the relationship between the priestly ministry and the universal priesthood of all the faithful by disclosing the latter's full realization in Mary. The universal priesthood's fundamental activity is to consent to the Son's perfect self-offering to the Father and unite with that offering. But how could a church full of sinners—asks Balthasar—consent perfectly to Christ's sacrifice of infinite love and purity?

The assent of the *Ekklesia* to the sacrifice of the Son must press on until it reaches Mary's perfect selflessness, so that this agreement may not retain any stain of the egotism that allows Jesus the Paschal Lamb to be slain for one's own redemption and perfection.²⁵

²⁵*Theological Explorations*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit*, 239–40.

Thus, only in union with Mary can the rest of the Church exercise her priesthood, which is the final goal of the Church's existence. The result of the Church's sacrifice (in the Eucharist and in its existential realization in our living and dying) is the union of the Bride and Groom, from which the mystical Body of Christ is being daily built up and nourished, as Christ is being shaped and formed in every member. This, then, is the most sublime task of all members of the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or not. The role of the hierarchy serves the Church's universal priesthood; it is to make present Christ sacrificed as head of the Church so as to enable the entire body of the Church to participate in the Son's self-donation to the Father. Thus the two priesthoods compare as means to the goal, the role of the ministerial priest is to provide a twofold service: he is a servant of Christ for the service of the faithful in order to enable them to offer Christ's perfect sacrifice, and themselves with him; in the words of Augustine they offer themselves as "*multi unum corpus in Christo*: the many forming one body in Christ."²⁶ The priesthood of all the faithful in union with Mary is permanent: it will be fulfilled in heaven and become the saints' eternal joy and honor; whereas the ministerial priesthood is transient: it will cease upon achieving its goal at the end of history.

Thus, if the radical feminists were willing to consider the issue of ordination of women not in terms of demanding equal rights and equal power-sharing in the Church (a battle Jesus had consistently reprovved in his disciples) but in terms of the nature and function of the two priesthoods, they might appreciate more what the female gender can best live and express—the ecclesial role of Mary, virgin, bride, and mother. Of course, men are also called in the Church to become bride, virgin, and mother; but women are, by their very nature, even more suitable to express and fulfill this eschatological vocation.

In the figure of the eschatological Woman, fully realized in Mary, glorified in soul and body, and—to a lesser degree—in the saints in heaven, "the eternal feminine," the new and eternal Eve, obtains its full realization, which has always been the final goal of all of God's works. This final perfection of creation is achieved through the Holy Spirit, through whom redeemed humankind, uniting to itself the whole cosmos, becomes the beautiful, highly desirable, and

²⁶*De Civitate Dei* 10, 6.

beloved Spouse of the Son. More than that, in this Woman the creature is in some sense raised by God's free mercy above God himself, because in Mary, and analogously in the whole Church, the Woman becomes the mother of God, she brings forth the Son of God in the flesh and in the hearts of all redeemed men and women. The eschatological Woman, then, reveals what is most divine in God, his infinite humility and gratuitous love. Through this love and humility, God elevates creation out of nothing to the status of a worthy partner for himself (as bride) and even above himself (as mother). The Woman remains a creature, but she is endowed by God's grace with such beauty that God himself finds in her his joy and delight.²⁷

Conclusions

Our age is thirsty for spiritual, even mystical, experience but it ignores or rejects as useless squabble any discussion about "doctrine." Indeed, how could our age believe that the human mind can attain to supernatural truths, when our post-enlightenment age questions its competence even within the realm of nature? The very word "dogmatic" has gained a pejorative meaning of mindless intellectual rigidity. Consequently, the Church's Magisterium appears *a priori* as an odd remnant of a defunct culture.

The present essay does not claim to overturn this mindset. I hope, though, that it has helped to clarify a number of points.

1. The Church's charism of infallibility follows not only from the efficacy of divine communication but also from the Church's virginal Marian nature. For the Fathers heresy means adultery, the corruption of the virginal union between Christ and the Church. Individual local churches may be corrupted but the Church of Rome has always preserved the virginal integrity of her faith.

2. Even in the patristic age, however, it has become evident that the sins of her members including her bishops and even the bishops of Rome do stain the church on earth. The virginity of the

²⁷The last paragraph has been taken, with some modifications, from my *Jesus Christ. Fundamentals of Christology* (New York: Alba House, 2002), 423.

Church of Rome that God has preserved intact means only the integrity of her faith.

3. Yet, on account of Mary, the integrity of the Church's faith can never be fully separated from her immaculate, spotless holiness. Beginning from her Immaculate Conception up to her glorious bodily Assumption she realizes and reveals in herself the immaculate Church, the wholly beautiful Bride of Christ, and as the Church's mother she shares by her intercession her holiness with all her children, the brothers and sisters of Christ.

4. Our essay, I hope, has also shed some light on the nature of the Church's faith. The primary object of her faith is Christ himself, and in Christ the totality of the triune God. Her secondary object, the creeds and dogmatic definitions, however, are necessary on earth for articulating and communicating—though partially and as in a mirror—the reality of Christ. Thus the Marian mysteries bring to light the final intentionality of all the theoretical truths of revelation. Dogma and spiritual/mystical experience are not only not in conflict but the former should lead to the latter. Moreover, while poetic language may intimate much more than proper theological discourse can, the latter still has the indispensable task to clarify and distinguish genuine spiritual experience from its counterfeits.

5. Thus, viewed from the perspective of the patristic tradition, the Church's authority, and in particular her Magisterium, is an indispensable but not central truth of Catholic ecclesiology. It only serves as a necessary temporary means to protect and safeguard the virgin Church for her eschatological nuptials and to help anticipate this consummation in the holy souls' mystical kiss of the Divine Bridegroom. In heaven the Church as virginal spouse and mother will display her full beauty primarily in Mary and to varying degrees in all her holy members, where, having completed its duty, church authority and teaching office will disappear.

6. After seeing how the Marian context illumines the charism of infallibility, we have briefly mentioned its role of safeguarding the Catholic faith in many areas and concentrated in more detail on its great potential for showing the way for the great energies of the feminist movement. Without women, redemption through Incarnation into the human race and the Church's role of giving birth to Christ in innumerable human beings would have been impossible.

It seems appropriate to conclude with St. Francis of Assisi's jubilant greeting of Mary and the Church. Francis sees Mary and the Church existing not only parallel to one another but also *within* one another. Just as the Woman clothed with the sun in the Book of Revelation, and just as Irenaeus identified the womb of Mary and the womb of the Church, Francis addresses Mary and the virgin church in one enthusiastic exclamation:

Hail holy Mistress and Queen, O Mary, the holy mother of God who have been made and chosen by the most holy Father in heaven to be the virgin church, whom the Father with his most holy and beloved Son and the Holy Spirit the Paraclete has consecrated, you Mary in whom was and is all the fullness of grace and all good²⁸

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²⁸*Salutatio Beatae Mariae Virginis*, 1.