

# VENERATION OF THE BLESSED MOTHER IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH:



## A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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In the Spring issue #75 of Collectanea Theologica Aloysius B. Chang addresses certain difficulties in the field of Mariology, which is a specialized area of study in traditional Catholic theology. Father Chang brings fresh insights to old problems. He also acknowledges on his part a certain reluctance to broach a subject so laden with historical controversies among the various Christian denominations, lest in this age of ecumenism, it bring about only further misunderstandings and controversy. However, he also feels duty bound as a theologian to be faithful to his own theological reflections, and not to be intimidated by fears of the negative criticism which such reflections might give rise to. My own article will attempt an outline of Father Chang's, which was written in honour of the Marian Year and represents his reflections on chapter eight of Vatican II's Constitution on the Church.

### Mary as Co-redemptrix: A Source of Controversy

The doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception affirms that the fruits of salvation were applied to Mary in a unique and extraordinary manner. This has led some theologians to see her in her preferential

status in the order of redemption in the role of co-redemptrix with Christ. There can be no doubt of Mary as recipient of God's salvation, but according to Father Chang, there is little room to doubt that "mankind's redemption was effected through the cooperation of Mary with the redeemer, Jesus Christ." It is fundamental to the understanding of mankind's redemption that God, Himself, is its sole source, but "God achieved this through the death of Christ the Redeemer on the cross and the sufferings of Mary, the co-redemptrix beneath the cross."

The question then arises: Are not the terms "to be redeemed" and "co-redemptrix" mutually exclusive? The answer of Father Chang is a simple "no", and for the following reason. God's plan of salvation can be divided into two periods of time. The first period comprised the redemptive act of Christ and God's prior and unique act of redemption of the Blessed Mother through Christ's merits. The second stage is Christ's redemption of mankind with the cooperation of the redeemed Blessed Mother. This explains Mary's "co-redemptive" role. Although the Bible does not explicitly use the term "co-redemptrix," it does point out in many places that in the implementation of the plan of salvation, Mary participated in Jesus' redemptive activity. For instance, when the Word was made flesh, Mary's consent was necessary (Luke 1:26-38). Again, at the wedding feast of Cana and at the foot of the cross, Jesus addresses Mary with the title of "woman" (John 2:4; 19:26), which is clearly in reference to the title "woman" given to Eve, the mother of all mankind, in the Book of Genesis (Genesis 2:23; 3:20). Again at the wedding feast, when Jesus said to his mother, "My hour has not yet come," the reference is to the "time" of his redemptive sacrifice (John 13:1), and when his hour did finally come, Mary was a participant in the event of her Son's sacrifice. These texts of scripture would indicate that God, who created man and woman according to His own image and likeness (Genesis 1:27), would have both man and woman - the New Adam and the New Eve - present in his act of redeeming mankind.

## **The Intercessory Role of the Blessed Mother**

Paragraph 69 of Vatican II's Constitution on the Church encourages Christians to entrust themselves to Mary's intercessory power. It is a fact that most Catholics feel quite comfortable in praying to Mary. They manifest a certain ambivalence in approaching God directly, either out of feelings of awe - God is so far above and beyond them - or because they conceptualize God as the righteous judge of sinful people. Mary, on the other hand, while she is addressed as the mother of God, is perceived to be gentle and kind, and of boundless compassion. Catholics find in calling upon her to intercede for them a certain kind of

security and comfort. Of course, such feelings arise more from imagination than reality, for as 1 Timothy 2:5 clearly states, there is only one Mediator between God and man: Jesus Christ. Moreover, although God is all powerful and all just, He also dwells in intimate union with us (John 17:21). God is the source of all compassion, including the compassion of the Blessed Mother.

Why, then, does the Catholic Church encourage Catholics to seek the intercession of Mary and, along with her, the saints as well? The best answer to this lies in our understanding of different ways in which the Blessed Mother and the saints share in the one mediatorship of Christ. They are mediators within the reality of Christ's mediatorship. "Because all are joined together in the same gloriously resurrected body of Christ and are united in the grace of the same Holy Spirit, the saints in heaven and the pilgrim church on earth are in mutual communication in what is commonly referred to as "the communion of saints." (Constitution on the Church, Chapter 7). Father Chang comments: "A great corporate personality is thus formed, so that prayers to God, whether from the saints in heaven or the people of God on earth, have a community dimension. This communal dimension increases or heightens the quality of the prayers of Christians. In this great corporate personality, whether Christians realize it or not, they always pray in communion with the saints in heaven. Christians on earth and the saints in heaven cannot be separated. Nor when they pray, do they pray as separate entities. When God hears the prayers of Christians, God at the same time is attentive to the prayers of the saints in heaven, who are in a communion with them. In answering the prayers of Christians, God also responds to the saints in heaven united with those Christians. Is not, then, the quality of the Christians' prayer thus enhanced?"

"Catholics seek the intercession of Mary because as the Mother of the Redeemer she has a special place in God's plan of salvation" (Letter of (Encyclical Pope John Paul II on the Marian Year, paragraph 7). Thus we can say that salvation history has a Marian dimension. The church also calls Mary the Mother of the Church because of her special relationship with redeemed mankind. This relationship does not spring from any sincere aspirations on the part of mankind, but finds its raison d'être in God's eternal plan and in a salvific order already realized.

The Marian dimension of salvation history leads us to seek Mary's intercession. In concrete terms, the Marian dimension of the plan of salvation places believers in a special relationship with Mary; we are her spiritual children. As Father Chang says: "Before God, believers are always the children of Mary. Whether they realize it or not, they always carry within them the Marian dimension of salvation. Therefore,

when we pray, is it not as children of our Blessed Mother? When God answers the prayers of Christians, it is not in response to the prayers of the children of Mary? And does this not give to the prayers Christians a certain added weight? This is the basis for the church's traditional counsel to seek Mary's intercession. Mary's intercession is not the same as that of the saints. In the 'collectivity' of the communion of saints, Mary enjoys the unique position of being both Mother of the Redeemer and Mother of the church."

## Mary, Model and Symbol of the Church

Paragraph 63 of the Constitution on the Church reads: "According to the teachings of St. Ambrose, the Mother of God is a type of the church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ." As paragraph 65 explains further: "Having entered deeply into the history of salvation, Mary in a way, unites in her person and reflects the most important doctrines of the faith, and when she is the subject of preaching and worship, she prompts the faithful to come to her Son, to his sacrifice and to the love of the Father. Seeking after the glory of Christ, the church becomes more and more a model of her." Paragraph 68 also states: "The Mother of Jesus in the glory her body and soul possess in heaven is the image and beginning of the church as it will be in the world to come."

The full meaning of the 'model' and 'image' spoken of here goes beyond Mary's moral role in the salvific plan. Not only does the church take Mary as a "clear mirror of all the virtues" whose example the church must follow in order to become virtuous, but in her role as model and image, there is a deeper, existential meaning, closely connected to the role of human nature in the plan of salvation. We can find a basis for this both in the Bible and in the documents of the church.

Genesis 1:27 tells us that God made man and woman in his own image and likeness. Therefore the deepest part of human nature must reflect this image of God. Further, Colossians 1:15 says that Jesus Christ "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." Human nature, which is visible and created, must then possess elements which reflect Christ's image. As St. Paul has written: "We all, with unveiled faces beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18). This "same image of the Lord" is interior to the existential elements of human nature and it exists prior to any human activity. Thus the relationship between God and human nature, or between Christ and human nature expressed by the word "image" describes



the internal condition of human nature itself. This is the meaning of an existential nature. It precedes moral behaviour and is the presupposition of all moral activity.

Can this existential meaning be used when referring to the Blessed Mother as model and image of the church? In other words, based on the relationship between the Blessed Mother and humankind in the plan of salvation, can we affirm that God created men and women not only according to His own image and to the image of Jesus, but also in accordance with the image of the Blessed Mother? Father Chang considers this to be a reasonable deduction. He writes: "Jesus is the Son of the Blessed Mother. Their images should be similar to one another. If human nature contains elements which mirror the image of Jesus Christ, it seems that it also ought to contain elements which reflect the model and image of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Moreover, in the plan of salvation, Jesus is, in actuality, always with his mother."

In the final analysis what are the mirroring elements of Mary's model and image? Chapter Eight of the Constitution on the Church points to her being both virgin and mother: "Actually, the church can be rightly called virgin and mother, but in the mystery of the church, the Blessed Mother stands out in eminent fashion as an example of both virgin and mother." Father Chang adds a further explanation of the text: "The Blessed Mother, Mary, is the most perfect of those who have been redeemed. Her identity as mother and virgin symbolizes redeemed human nature. Standing in the presence of the self-communicating God, she displayed an attitude of openness and complete acceptance. Thus in the plan of salvation, Mary represents our encounter with God's self-communication with an attitude of complete openness and total acceptance. God not only made us in his own image and in the image of Christ, but he also made us to conform to the model and image of the Blessed Mother."

Mary's life as mother and virgin is the implementation in history of human nature's complete self-openness to and total acceptance of God's self-communication. In Father Chang's words: "In the Gospels when the Virgin Mary answered the angel and accepted the mission of being the mother of the Messiah, and again at the foot of the cross when Mary accepted the responsibility of being the mother of all mankind, she becomes human nature's unique model of openness to and complete acceptance of the will of God."

I recommend to all our readers that they turn to Father Chang's original article in Collectanea Theologica for the fuller presentation of his thoughts which I merely summarize here in an effort to help give them wider circulation among a larger audience.