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PREPARING THE BRIDE TO MEET THE BRIDEGROOM: REFLECTIONS ON THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MARY

Abstract

Within the context of arguing for the continuity of the natural and sacramental significance of sexual complementarity, this contribution calls upon various qualities of the Marian faith, beginning with *its primacy* with respect to all other forms of ecclesial faith, including that of the apostles. Because her assent to God is given for all humankind, Mary is said to be the Bride of Christ *par excellence*. Far from exempting others from their own personal consent to Christ, however, Mary's universal faith is presented as rendering every other act of faith possible. In virtue, moreover, of her unique personal mission as the Mother of Christians, Mary exercises an *ecclesial* faith: a faith that is shared. As complementary to the mission of the apostles and their successors, whom Christ employs as instruments for dispensing of his salvific graces, Mary's mission entails preparing the self-giving faith of each of us in view of our unique, personal and salvific encounters with her Son. Because these encounters bear fruit in the form of a personal mission, the Christian might be said to thereby continue Mary's mission of preparing others for their own "sponsal" union with Christ. Such is the fulness of the Christian life to which all are called as "brides" in the one Bride of Christ, the Church, who in Mary, already exists in the sinless splendor of perfect union with the divine Bridegroom.

KEYWORDS

women, faith, Mary, Church, mission, Bride of Christ, self-gift

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

kobiety, wiara, Maryja, Kościół, misja, Oblubienica Chrystusa, dar z siebie

For my beloved father

INTRODUCTION

In pointing to his indebtedness to innumerable persons, including most especially his mother, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar writes: “All charisms of Christians are inextricably interwoven”, which is to say that “everyone owes himself not only to God but to the whole Church”. By this reference “to the whole Church”, no mention is made of the ministrations of Christ’s bishops, priests and deacons. Rather, Balthasar points to the fact that “everyone is borne by invisible prayers and sacrifices, has been nourished by countless gifts of love, is continually strengthened and preserved by the affection of others”.¹ These beautiful words point to the multifaceted dimensions of ecclesial relations, to the rich interactions, enlivened by charity, that nourish and sustain the faith of the people of God. And in a special way, they remind me of my great-grandmother Catherine Mary Fitzpatrick, to whom I assuredly owe in part my own faith, even if she died before my birth.

Stories of Grandma Katie’s charity abound. It was she who taught love’s lessons to my father during his earliest years: to pray, to honor God, and to serve one’s neighbor. She lived the beatitudes and incarnated the corporal and spiritual works of mercy: she fed the hungry, clothed the naked, sheltered the homeless, visited the sick, comforted the dying, advised and consoled, instructed and prayed. She did all of this while singing, and to sing meant “to pray twice”, as she instructed her twelve children and her many grandchildren. In the midst of all this activity she also served as a midwife. And, during those years – the first half of the last century – this meant keeping vigil not only over life’s tender beginnings but also – tragically – over its much too often early end. In fact, as a witness of

¹ H. U. von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect*, (transl. by B. McNeil *et al.*), San Francisco 1993, p. 88.

life's fragility, the suitcase that accompanied Grandma on her birthing missions included a sick call set: a crucifix, which could be opened from behind to store blessed candles, holy water, and even blessed oil, presumably for the sacrament of the anointing.

None of my family members seems to know how our beloved foremother put that kit to use. Might she have performed emergency baptisms? It is imaginable. But what of the sacred oil that she is said to have brought with her on those missions? Grandma was a very traditional Catholic. Far be it from her to administer a sacrament reserved for the ordained priesthood! Most assuredly she was, rather, like the wise virgins of the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew's Gospel, awaiting the bridegroom's return with both vigilance and prudence (*Mt 25: 1-13*). She would call for the priest, but – since time was often very short – she was prepared in advance for his salvific visit. Her lamp was lit, and there was oil – blessed oil – to spare, lest there be no time for the priest to seek it out himself.

The Scriptural image of the wedding feast of the Lamb (cf. *Rev 19:9*) is one that I will call upon in these pages to contextualize the important mission of women, who – within the shadow of the exemplary mission of the Blessed Virgin Mary – are “called to be unique examples and witnesses for all Christians of how”, as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith puts it, “the Bride [of Christ] is to respond in love to the [always initiating] love of the [divine] Bridegroom”.² In this way witness is likewise given within the sacramental order, or the “economy of signs”,³ to the covenantal nature of God's love. For in the vis-à-vis of the divine Bridegroom (who gives and initiates all acts of love and service) and the Body-Bride (who receives in view of giving in return)⁴ is expressed, as Pope John Paul II instructs us, “the ‘great mystery’ described in the Letter to the Ephesians [5:22-33]: *the bride [of Christ] united to her Bridegroom*; united, because she lives his life; united, because she shares in his threefold mission [of priest, king and prophet] (*tria munera Christi*); united in such a manner as to respond with a ‘sincere gift’ of self to the inexpressible gift of the love of the Bridegroom, the Redeemer of the world”.⁵ That is why the action of Christ's ordained ministers in view of the sanctification of all Christ's members,⁶ is necessarily complemented by the action of each of those members in view of his or her own sanctification – by, that is to say, an act of free adherence to Christ and his saving message in the form of a “bridal” gift of self – and by a willed participation in the universal

² The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, 31 May 2004, Vatican City 2004, No. 16; cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem on the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, 15 August 1988, Vatican City 1988, No. 27.

³ See CCC 1076 (= *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican City 2020).

⁴ In the words of Pope John Paul II, “The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: *it is she who receives love, in order to love in return*”. (*Mulieris dignitatem*, No. 29).

⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 27; original emphasis.

⁶ Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 24; and CCC 1551.

mission of the Church in virtue of the same (bridal gift). Such is the fruitfulness of the Bride and the Bridegroom: of Christ, present in his sacred minister, and of Christ, present in a different, albeit complementary manner in each of his disciples, or members, beginning with his Handmaid and Mother. For, although “they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless”, the Second Vatican Council teaches, “interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ”⁷.

My purpose in what follows is not to directly defend an all-male priesthood. This I have done previously within the context of arguing for the continuity of the natural and sacramental significance of sexual complementarity.⁸ Here, rather, I propose to further develop one aspect of that complementarity, namely, “the vital significance of bridal – and thus Marian or ecclesial – faith, without which”, as I have noted in an earlier contribution, “the sacraments are administered in vain and the sacramental dimension of Christian service is utterly devoid of significance and purpose”.⁹ To that aim, I will call upon various qualities of Marian faith, beginning with (I) *its primacy* with respect to the faith that animates all Christian missions – even those of the apostles – precisely because Mary’s assent to God is given for all humankind; and this fact makes of her the Bride of Christ *par excellence*¹⁰ (II). Far from exempting us from offering our own personal consent to Christ, however, the universal dimension of Mary’s faith is also *exemplary*. Indeed, it actually renders every subsequent act of self-giving faith possible. For as St. Augustine puts it in no uncertain terms, “He who created you without you, will not justify you without you”:¹¹ without, that is to say, giving yourself to Christ, who – it bears insisting – is always the first to give himself (cf. *1 Jn* 4:19). (III) In virtue of her unique personal mission as the Mother of all Christians, Mary’s faith is also *ecclesial*: a faith which is given to be shared; and

⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 10.

⁸ See, for example, M. M. Schumacher, *The Unity of the Two: Towards a New Feminist Theology of the Body*, (in:) *idem* (ed.), *Women in Christ: Towards a New Feminism*, Grand Rapids 2004, pp. 201-231; and *idem*, *The Natural and Sacramental Significance of Human Sexuality: A Presupposition to the Question of Admitting Women to the Ordained Diaconate*, “The Thomist” 2022, Vol. 86, No. 1, pp. 581-624.

⁹ *Idem*, *The Natural and Sacramental Significance of Human Sexuality*.

¹⁰ In the person of Mary, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, “the Church [whom St. Paul presents as Christ’s Bride, cf. *Eph* 5: 22-33] has already reached that perfection whereby she is without spot or wrinkle [cf. *Eph* 5:27]”. (*Lumen Gentium*, No. 65). See also CCC 773. On the image of Mary as Bride, see M. M. Schumacher, *Revelation and Human Sexuality*, (in:) B. M. Mezei *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Divine Revelation*, Oxford 2021, pp. 571-596; and *idem*, *A Trinitarian Anthropology: Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar in Dialogue with Thomas Aquinas*, Washington 2014, p. 152, 156, 192-95, 263-64, 285-307.

¹¹ Augustine, *Sermo* 169. *De verbis apostoli. Ephes, cap. VI, 23, c. 11* (PL 38:923) (= J.-P. Migne (ed.) *Patrologiae Latina*, Vol. 38: *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi, Opera Omnia* 5, pars 1, Paris 1841.

it is precisely by sharing her faith and other virtues with the entire people of God that she might be said to prepare the Bride of Christ, the Church (cf. *Eph* 5: 22-33). As differing from (and complementary to) the mission of the apostles and their successors, whom the Lord uses as instruments to give himself and his saving graces for our salvation, Mary's mission entails preparing each of us for a unique, personal, and salvific encounter with her Son, the Church's Bridegroom. (IV) Because, moreover, bridal union with Christ always entails bearing Christ's fruit, all Christians (and women in an exemplary manner) are called, under Mary's mantle, to likewise prepare others for the wedding banquet (for, that is to say, "sponsal" union with Christ by grace in this life and glory in the next) by sharing the faith we have received. (V) Such is the fulness of the Christian life to which all are called as "brides"¹² in the one Bride of Christ, who in Mary, already exists in the sinless splendor of perfect union with the divine Bridegroom.

I. MARY'S FAITH AS UNIQUE AND PRIMORDIAL: THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

To be sure, Mary's mission, or "office", within the Church is absolutely unique and unrepeatable, whence her "wholly exceptional and unique"¹³ election, as evidenced by the doctrines that mark her life's beginning and end: her immaculate conception¹⁴ and her bodily assumption into heaven.¹⁵ She is, as John Paul II acknowledges, at the center of the salvific event that marks "the fullness of time" (cf. *Gal* 4:4) and likewise the fullness of revelation: "the culminating and *definitive point of God's self-revelation to humanity*",¹⁶ namely the moment at which "God sent forth his Son, born of woman" (*Gal* 4: 4). From this unique vantage point, Mary is also "a singular witness" to the events of Christ's infancy and his hidden life at Nazareth: events that she pondered "in her heart" (*Lk* 2:19; cf. *Lk* 2:51),

¹² "In the Church every human being – male and female – is the 'Bride', in that he or she accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person". ; John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, No. 25.

¹³ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater* on the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church, 25 March 1987, Vatican City 1987, No. 9.

¹⁴ In the words of Pius IX, she was "preserved immune from all stain of original sin [...] in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race". (Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* Defining the Immaculate Conception of Mary 8 December 1854; DZ 2803 (= H. Denzinger (ed.), *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd ed., English edition edited by R. Fastiggi and A. Englund Nash, San Francisco 2012). See also CCC 491–492.

¹⁵ See Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1 November 1950); DZ 3900-3904.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, No. 3.

which – to borrow an image from Adrienne von Speyr, Balthasar and Pope John Paul II – served as a sort of “storehouse”¹⁷ or treasury for the essential mysteries of the Christian faith, which were later passed on to the Church, in the form of the Scriptures, Tradition and the sacraments. This is not to deny that “Jesus’ words and actions during his hidden life and public ministry were already salvific”, as the Catechism insists, “for they anticipated the power of his Paschal mystery. They announced and prepared what he was going to give the Church when all was accomplished”, that is to say, what would henceforth be dispensed in the sacraments, through the Church’s ministers.¹⁸ It is nonetheless Mary, who is “the first to share in this new revelation of God” in the form of God’s “new ‘self-giving’”,¹⁹ and it bears repeating that she is also the first to benefit from the gift of salvation. That is why, she “prefigures the Church’s condition as spouse [of Christ] and mother [of the faithful]”.²⁰ It is from her that “the Church learns the intimacy of Christ”,²¹ the union that entails a share in his divine life of grace and his threefold mission.

As if to prepare or foreshadow all Christian missions that will follow in her wake, Mary alone accompanies the Lord throughout his entire life’s work: from his incarnation and birth to the beginning of his public ministry, with the miracle at Cana that she initiates (cf. *Jn* 2: 1-10), and all the way to the Cross, where she willingly offers her Son in sacrifice.²² He, in turn, offers not only himself for the salvation of the world, but also his own mother to us all in the person of the beloved disciple (cf. *Jn* 19:25). It is precisely in that role – as the mother of the young community of Christ’s disciples – that she is also present at Pentecost (cf. *Acts* 1: 14). At that moment – together with the apostles – she is overshadowed a second time by the Holy Spirit: this time as he gives birth to the Church, of whom she is a “type [...] in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ”, and to whom (the Church) she is “intimately united” by reason of her spiritual maternity.²³

As such – as Christ’s most faithful disciple – Mary is also an image of the first woman, created from Adam’s side as a “helper fit” for him (cf. *Genesis* 2: 18), whence the presentation of her Immaculate Conception as the first fruits of her Son’s passion. Noteworthy is the fact that Christ addresses her at the key moments of his public mission – at its inception at the wedding at Cana (*John* 2: 4) and at its

¹⁷ See, for example, A. von Speyr, *Das Wort und die Mystik II: Objektive Mystik*, Einsiedeln 1970, p. 26–27; H. U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory V: The Last Act* (transl. by G. Harrison), San Francisco 1998, p. 496; and John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae on the Rosary of the Virgin Mary*, 16 October 2002, Vatican City 2002, No. 13.

¹⁸ CCC, No. 1115.

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 3. See also *ibid.*, No. 14.

²¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the Word*, No. 15.

²² She is presented there by the Second Vatican Council as “lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth” (*Lumen Gentium*, No. 58).

²³ *Ibid.*, No. 63. See also *ibid.*, No. 59.

climax on the Cross (*Jn* 19:26-27) – as “woman” and not as “mother”, for example, nor as “Mary. Assuredly, this is to highlight her role – so vividly acknowledged by the Church fathers²⁴ – as the New Eve beside the New Adam: the one, who crushes the head of the serpent by the “weight” of her child (cf. *Gen* 3:15; *Apoc.* 12), and whose consent must be offered to God on behalf of all humanity, “so that just as a woman contributed to death, so also a woman should contribute to life”.²⁵

Particularly significant to this presentation of Mary as the New Eve is the necessary value of her assent for the world’s salvation. For it is only in virtue of her free assent that the divine “bridegroom” – in whose blood is founded the new and everlasting Covenant – weds himself to the Church. Still more explicitly, it “makes possible”, Pope John Paul II observes, “as far as it depended upon her in the divine plan, the granting of her Son’s desire”, to become man.²⁶ That is why the Church “encounters Christ and Mary indissolubly joined” at the moment of the Incarnation: “he who is the Church’s Lord and Head and she who, uttering the first fiat of the New Covenant, prefigures the Church’s condition as spouse [of Christ] and mother [of the faithful]”.²⁷

II. MARY’S FAITH AS *EXEMPLARY*: THE PERSONAL DIMENSION OF BRIDAL ASSENT

It is thus obvious that to address Mary as a type (or more properly the “archetype”²⁸), model, or figure of the Church is to acknowledge not only her *uniqueness*

²⁴ In the famous insight of St. Irenaeus of Lyon, “Just as Eve, by disobeying, became the cause of death for herself and the whole human race, so Mary [...] by obeying, became the cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race”. For “what was bound could not be untied without a reversal of the process of entanglement. The first bonds had to be untied by the second, so that the second might set free the first” (English translation by J. Saward (in:) Irenaeus of Lyon, *The Scandal of the Incarnation. Irenaeus Against the Heresies*, selected and introduced by H. U. von Balthasar, San Francisco 1990, p. 61. (*Sources Chrétiennes* [SC] 211: *Contre les hérésies*, livre III, ed. A. Roureau, L. Doutreleau, Paris 1974, p. 440, 442).

²⁵ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 56. One need only think of the beautiful homily of St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “Tearful Adam with his sorrowing family begs this of you, O loving Virgin, in their exile from Paradise. Abraham begs it, David begs it. All the other holy patriarchs, your ancestors, ask it of you, as they dwell in the country of the shadow of death. This is what the whole earth waits for, prostrate at your feet. It is right in doing so, for on your word depends comfort for the wretched, ransom for the captive, freedom for the condemned, indeed, salvation for all the sons of Adam, the whole of your race”. (Hom. 4, 8-9: *Opera omnia*, Edit. Cisterc. 4 (1966), 53-54; taken from the *Office of Readings* for December 20).

²⁶ John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, No. 13.

²⁷ *Idem*, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 3. See also *ibid.*, No. 14.

²⁸ See the argument of Hans Urs von Balthasar in *idem* and J. Ratzinger, *Mary, the Church at the Source*, (transl. by A. Walker), San Francisco 2005, pp. 141-144.

but also and most especially her *exemplarity*. Indeed, it is this exemplarity that is highlighted by the apparently belittling remark of the Lord when she is praised by a woman in the crowd for her exceptional quality of giving birth and nursing the very Son of God.²⁹ “Blessed rather are those”, he responds, “who hear the word of God and obey it” (*Lk* 11: 28). With this “shift into the sphere of spiritual values”, the Lord highlights, as Pope John Paul II points out, the very qualities of Mary that are most imitable: most especially her obedience of faith in virtue of which “she ‘kept’ the word and ‘pondered it in her heart’ (cf. *Lk* 1:38, 45; 2:19, 51) and by means of her whole life accomplished it”.³⁰ Indeed, Mary is the Lord’s mother on earth, because she so faithfully accomplishes the Father’s will in heaven (cf. *Mt* 12: 48, 50). “For”, as the Lord further insists, “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my [...] mother” (*Mt* 12:50). The spiritual “shift” in the aforementioned Gospel passage thus expresses the fact that Mary’s exceptional virtues not only *can*, but really *should* be emulated by all of Christ’s disciples.

These, of course, are her particular virtues of faith, hope, and burning charity in virtue of which she conceives, by the will of God, the very Son, or Word, of the Father. “The Virgin Mary does not conceive and believe”, St. Augustine of Hippo teaches, “but believes and conceives”.³¹ “With faith she believes, with faith she conceives”.³² That is why she is often artistically portrayed as meditating upon the Scriptures at the moment of Gabriel’s sacred visit. Alert and attentive to the significance of what remains utterly inexplicable – whence the importance of her question, “How can this be, since I know not man?” (*Lk* 1:34) – Mary takes on her sacred mission in the most humanly possible manner. She is neither blind nor ignorant; indeed, it is only as attentive and attuned to God’s Word that she is capable of cooperating with the “fullness of grace” (cf. *Lk* 1:28) that was allotted to her from the first moment of her conception. This she does – willing cooperates – by way of what John Paul II presents as her most archetypical virtue: the “obedience of faith”, whereby she offers the “full submission of [her] intellect and will” to God, who reveals himself and his project of salvation through the angel’s message.³³ Standing “at the very center of those ‘inscrutable ways’ and ‘unsearchable judgments’ of God [cf. *Rom* 11: 33]”, Mary “conforms herself to them in the dim light of faith”, John Paul II observes, “accepting fully and with a ready heart everything that is decreed in the divine plan”.³⁴ There is thus, as I have put

²⁹ “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you!” (*Lk* 11: 27).

³⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 20.

³¹ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo* 233, 3, 4 (“In diebus Paschalibus, IV”); PL 38:1114: “Virgo ergo Maria non concubuit et concepti, sed credidit et concepit”.

³² *Idem*, *Sermo* 25 (*De verbis Evangelii Matth. XII*, vers 41–50); PL 46: 937: “Fide credidit, fide concepit”. (*Patrologiae Latina*, Vol. 46: *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi*, Opera Omnia 11, pars 1, ed. J.-P. Migne, Paris 1864).

³³ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* on Divine Revelation, 8 September 1965, Vatican City 1965, No. 5; cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 13.

³⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 14.

it elsewhere, “a perfect concordance, or unity, between *faith’s object* – the Word [eternally] spoken by the Father, namely his own Son, [our Lord Jesus Christ,] to whom confidence is accorded [cf. 2 Cor 1:20] – and *faith’s act*: the subjective disposition that obediently surrenders”,³⁵ the “Yes” that means not only, “I believe”, but also “I will to follow and obey”. Such, more specifically, is a *concordance of wills*: God’s will to save us in Christ and Mary’s will to be in service of God’s saving plan.

This means that Mary – to highlight the personal dimension of her exemplary faith – is “*the authentic subject* of that union with God which was realized in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word”, to quote Pope John Paul II.³⁶ It is not passively that she is used by God, but “as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience”, as the Second Vatican Council teaches.³⁷ She is not, in other words, merely a *hollowed-out space* that God might occupy in the absence of her willing cooperation. Far more personally, she is a *hallowed being*: one whose abundance of grace “overflow[ed]” from her spirit “into her flesh”, as Aquinas puts it, “fitting it for the conception of God’s Son”.³⁸ Indeed, without denying the exceptional grace that is granted to her to be the very mother of God,³⁹ it might also be acknowledged that this same Word of God is first of all spiritually present to her, who is physically and spiritually present to him. Because, in fact, her intellect and will are attuned to God’s word, that same sacred Word really does abide within her soul by faith “as in his own temple”.⁴⁰ even before he actually weds her flesh to himself in her womb.⁴¹ To borrow from St. Thomas, he is present within her by faith and charity in the manner whereby “the object known is in the knower, and [as] the beloved [is] in the lover”.⁴²

³⁵ M. M. Schumacher, *Marian Faith in a Time of Crisis*, “Nova et Vetera” (English Edition) Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 323-338, at 330.

³⁶ John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, No. 4.

³⁷ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 53.

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Hail Mary, The Three Greatest Prayers: Commentaries on the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Apostles’ Creed*, (transl. by L. Shapcote), Manchester 1990, p. 167.

³⁹ In the words of the Second Vatican Council, “she is endowed with the high office and dignity of being the Mother of the Son of God, by which account she is also the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Because of this gift of sublime grace she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth”. (*Lumen Gentium*, No. 53).

⁴⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas *ST I*, q. 43, a. 3 (= *Summa theologiae*, J. Mortensen, E. Alarcón (eds.), (transl. by L. Shapcote), Vol. 13–20, Lander 2012).

⁴¹ “The Word, you see, is the bridegroom, and the bride is human flesh”, St. Augustine of Hippo explains. “When he became the head of the Church, that womb of the Virgin Mary was his bridal chamber, from which he came forth like a bridegroom from his chamber, as scripture had foretold [cf. Ps. 18:6]” (*Tractus in Iohannis Evangelium* VIII, 4; (in:) A. D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century Homilies on the Gospel of John 1-40*, part III, Vol. 2, (transl. by E. Hill), New York 2009, p. 172 (*Bibliothèque augustinienne*, 71: *Homélies sur l’évangile de Saint Jean I-XVI*, (transl. by M.-F. Berrouard), Paris 1993, p. 474, 476).

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 43, a. 3.

In short, it is precisely as faithfully listening and discerning God's word (cf. *Lk* 11: 28) that Mary is prepared to respond (in obedience) to this same Word, with her entire "personal and feminine 'I'".⁴³ She is not simply swept up into the mystery, but enters freely therein, as the archetypical believer *par excellence*: the one who willfully offers herself to him, who initiates every gift with his preceding and assisting grace, but also with his own "salvific giving of himself and his life" at this "high point" of revelation.⁴⁴ Gift meets gift: God's giving of himself to all of humanity in the womb of the Virgin, and Mary giving of herself to God "in lieu of [...] all human nature", as St. Thomas teaches.⁴⁵ Because, in fact, God's interventions in human history always respect the free will of his creatures, her response to his invitation is, as Pope John Paul II acknowledges, "decisive", humanly speaking, "for the accomplishment of the divine mystery" of the Incarnation.⁴⁶

At the very center of the salvific event of God's self-revelation, Mary is thus present as the image of the Church and likewise of the Christian: not simply as a sacred dwelling place for his abiding presence (a bodily temple), but also far more personally, as his mother and even his "handmaid" (*Lk* 1: 38): as, that is to say, the one who freely offers herself to him and his saving plan with faith enlivened by charity. In the picturesque words of Joseph Ratzinger,

Mary becomes a model for the Church's mission [...] of being a dwelling place for the Word. [...] She lets the word sink deep into her. So the process of fruitful transformation can take place in a twofold direction: she saturates the Word with her life, as it were, putting the sap and energy of her life at the Word's disposal; but as a result, conversely, her life is permeated, enriched and deepened by the energies of the Word, which gives everything its meaning.⁴⁷

III. MARY'S FAITH AS *SHARED*: PREPARING THE BRIDE

To share Christ's mission in this sense – in virtue of a shared life of grace and theological virtues – is very different from the manner whereby a sacred minister may be said to partake of Christ's mission by way of representation. Acting

⁴³ Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, No. 4. See also *ibid.*, No. 13.

⁴⁴ *Idem*, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 9.

⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 30, a. 1: "*loco totius humanae naturae*". Or as John Paul puts it, "The fullness of grace announced by the angel means the gift of God himself. Mary's faith, proclaimed by Elizabeth at the Visitation, indicates how the Virgin of Nazareth responded to this gift". (*Redemptoris Mater*, No. 12).

⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 13.

⁴⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Seek That Which is Above: Meditations through the Year*, (transl. by G. Harrison), San Francisco 1986, pp. 102-103.

in persona Christi, the bishop and those who share in his ministry – namely the priest and to a more limited extent the deacon⁴⁸ – are those in whom Christ himself is said to act, regardless of their own personal attachment to the Lord,⁴⁹ at least for certain liturgical acts.⁵⁰ In other words, they act in Christ’s “stead”,⁵¹ not by their own power, “but as the minister[s] of Christ” and in his Person;⁵² whence the sacramental formulas: “I [Christ] baptize you...”; “I [Christ] absolve you of your sins...”; “This is my [Christ’s] body”. Such is the “guarantee that it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments through the Holy Spirit for the Church”.⁵³ “The ordained minister is”, therefore, as the Catechism teaches, “the sacramental bond that ties the liturgical action to what the apostles said and did and, through them, to the words and actions of Christ, the source and foundation of the sacraments”.⁵⁴

Distinctive to the liturgy is, therefore, the fact that it “does not come from what *we do*”, but rather, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger points out, “from the fact that something is *taking place* here that all of us together cannot ‘make’. In the liturgy there is a power, an energy at work which not even the Church as a whole can generate, what it manifests is the Wholly Other, coming to us through the community (which is hence not sovereign but servant, purely instrumental)”.⁵⁵ It is thus not surprising that it is in virtue of a ministry “conferred by a special sacrament” – namely that of holy orders – that the Lord’s ordained minister speaks and acts not on his own authority, “but by virtue of Christ’s authority; not as a member of the community, but speaking to it [*vis-à-vis*] in the name of Christ”.⁵⁶

Christ acts in Mary in a far more personal manner – in a manner more fully engaging her freedom – for she is “really present in the mystery of Christ precisely because she ‘has believed’”.⁵⁷ In other words, it is only in virtue of her willed cooperation with sanctifying grace that he may be said to act in and through her,

⁴⁸ See CCC 875, 886, 939.

⁴⁹ “[A] man can be Christ’s minister”, Aquinas teaches, “even though he be not one of the just” (*ST* III, q. 82, a. 5). See also CCC 1584.

⁵⁰ “This presence of Christ in the minister is not to be understood”, the Catechism teaches, “as if the latter were preserved from all human weaknesses, the spirit of domination, error, even sin. The power of the Holy Spirit does not guarantee all acts of ministers in the same way. While this guarantee extends to the sacraments, so that even the minister’s sin cannot impede the fruit of grace, in many other acts the minister leaves human traces that are not always signs of fidelity to the Gospel and consequently can harm the apostolic fruitfulness of the Church” (CCC 1550).

⁵¹ See Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 82, a. 1.

⁵² Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 82, a. 5. See also CCC 875, 1127, and 1548.

⁵³ CCC 1120. See also CCC 874.

⁵⁴ CCC 1120. Hence, for example, far from compromising the absolute uniqueness of Christ’s priesthood, the ministerial priesthood is that through which the former “is made present”. (CCC 1545).

⁵⁵ J. Ratzinger with V. Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, (transl. by S. Attanasio, G. Harrison), San Francisco 1985, p. 126.

⁵⁶ CCC 875. See also CCC 1536.

⁵⁷ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 12.

raising her own spiritual powers of knowing and loving so that they might attain that which far exceeds human understanding. One need only think of the biblical scene of the Visitation in which Mary's service to her cousin Elizabeth – prompted by the angel's message⁵⁸ – becomes the occasion whereby Christ consecrates his predecessor from within Mary's womb. Like Christ's action in the sacramental ministry of the priest, it is Christ in Mary who accomplishes this action, but not without her willing cooperation. On the other hand, this scene sheds an additional light on what Pope John Paul II identifies as "an essential Mariological content",⁵⁹ namely the vital role of her faith, for the Blessed Virgin is hailed by Elizabeth as "blessed" not only in reason of "the fruit of her womb" (*Lk* 1:42), but also because she "believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (*Lk* 1:45). She simultaneously carries within herself the incarnate Son of God, and bears witness to him and his saving mission. Such is her role of intercession at the wedding of Cana, for it is Mary's faith that initiates Christ's first miracle on that occasion with the simple remark, "They have no wine" (*Jn* 2:3). "What deep understanding existed between Jesus and his mother?", John Paul II almost provocingly asks. "How can we probe the mystery of their intimate spiritual union? But the fact speaks for itself",⁶⁰ he rightfully acknowledges, and it is from within the depths of this intimacy that Mary exercises her mediating role between Christ and those invited to the wedding feast of the New Covenant that she inaugurates with her Son. For, as Aquinas comments on this Gospel scene, "In its mystical meaning, the mother of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin, is present [at the wedding...] because it is through her intercession that one is joined to Christ" – the "true bridegroom of the soul" – "through grace".⁶¹ That is why Mary is not only the "spokeswoman of her Son's will, pointing out those things which must be done so that the salvific power of the Messiah may be manifested"⁶² – whence her directive, "Do whatever he tells you" (*Jn* 2:5) – but also the archetypical believer, whose faith provokes Christ's first "sign" which in turn nourishes the faith of his disciples.

In precisely this way Mary is both our model and our Mother. She points the way and prepares the path for each of us in our journey to the wedding feast of the divine Bridegroom, but she also dresses us, as it were, for the wedding, sharing with us her own virtue as a mother shares her jewels with her daughters. For as the Lord teaches in one of his parables, no one may be admitted to the wedding feast without the proper attire (cf *Mt* 22: 11-13). "What is this garment [necessary for

⁵⁸ "For with God nothing will be impossible" (*Lk* 1: 37).

⁵⁹ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 21.

⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ioan*, II, lectio 1, No. 343 (= *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, (in:) *St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Gospel of John*, (transl. by F. R. Larcher), Vol. 35–36, Lander 2013).

⁶² John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 21.

admittance to the wedding banquet]?” Aquinas asks in his commentary of this Gospel scene. Quite simply “Christ”, he responds.

We who are Christ's, let us put on Christ [cf. *Rom* 13:14]. [...] For some put on Christ through the sacrament; *for as many of you as have been baptized in Christ, have put on Christ* (*Gal* 3:27). Some are in Christ through charity and love [cf. *Col* 3:14-15]. [...] Also through likeness of [charitable] works; *but put on the Lord Jesus Christ* (*Rom* 13:14). Therefore, to have a wedding garment is to put on Christ through good works, through a holy life, through true charity [in short, through the virtues that characterize all the saints, but most preeminently the Blessed Virgin Mary].⁶³

As if to complement the ministry of those who administer the sacraments that conform us to Christ, Mary also likens us to her Son by sharing, more specifically, her own virtuous dispositions whereby we are made receptive to those same sacramental graces. After all, it bears repeating that God will not save us – that is to say, he will not make of us his children: sons (and daughters) in his Son – without our cooperation, far less against our wills. In her preeminent but nonetheless imitable roles of intercessor, spokeswoman, teacher, disciple, and mother, Mary is thus present at every sacramental encounter between Christ and the believer: between the divine bridegroom and the Christian, who is called to “spousal” (cf. *2 Cor* 11:2), albeit spiritual, intimacy with her Son by way of a free self-gift in response to his own. Her presence there can hardly be denied, given the continuity between all the events of Christ's life – including the miraculous signs that he worked to invite and sustain the faith of his disciples – and the sacramental “signs” of the economy of salvation by which the faith of the pilgrim people of God continues to be nourished. For as the Catechism teaches, “The mysteries of Christ's life are the foundations of what he would henceforth dispense in the sacraments, through the ministers of his Church, for ‘what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries’”.⁶⁴ Because, moreover, every sacramental celebration joins “the hour” of our salvation, that is to say, the hour of the Lord's Passover, which “reaches across and underlies all history”,⁶⁵ it also joins the hour in which Mary “lovingly consent[ed ...] with a maternal heart [...] to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth”.⁶⁶ That is why Mary's obvious role of intercession at the first of Christ's earthly “signs” at Cana, in virtue of which “his disciples believed in him” (cf. *Jn* 2:11), together with her prayerful presence at the foot of the Cross of our salvation, where she is given by Christ as a Mother to each one of us in the person of John (*Jn* 19:27), point to her role of preparing the bride to meet the bridegroom in each sacramental encounter.

⁶³ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Matt.*, 22, lectio 1, No. 1770) (= *Super Evangelium S. Matthaei lectura* (in:) *St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (transl. by J. Holmes), Vol. 33-34, Lander 2013).

⁶⁴ CCC 1115. The internal reference is to St. Leo the Great, *Sermo*. 74, 2; PL 54: 398.

⁶⁵ CCC 1165.

⁶⁶ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 58.

Since none of us – excepting Mary – actually receive Christ “wholly according to his intention of giving himself to us”, it is with good reason that Hans Urs von Balthasar imagines Mary, whom he presents as “the *Ecclesia immaculata*, the spotless Church”, standing behind “each of our [Eucharistic] communions”: assuredly *not* for the purpose of usurping our own reception of her Son, but of completing, rather, what is still lacking *to the perfection* of our receptions.⁶⁷ For Christ’s abundant – indeed unlimited – outpouring of grace in the Eucharist always far exceeds our limited reception thereof. We might likewise imagine Mary’s presence at each sacramental reception, beginning with baptism. For to be baptized into the faith of the Church is necessarily to be baptized into the faith of Mary.

Because, moreover, Mary’s surrender to God – her *Ecce ancilla* – included from the beginning everything that God might ask of her, she willingly carried the faith of the entire people of God (that is to say, the faith of the Church) within her own (personal) faith, as a woman carries a child within her womb. To be sure, “When the Church celebrates the sacraments”, it is, as the Catechism points out, “the faith received from the apostles” that she confesses.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, it is Mary’s faith that “‘precedes’ the apostolic witness of the Church”, as Pope John Paul II acknowledges, and “remains in the Church’s heart” throughout time, “like a special heritage of God’s revelation”.⁶⁹ For, as I put it elsewhere,

As differing [...] from the apostles, who testify to “the word of life” whom they have “seen with their eyes”, “looked upon and touched with their hands” (1 *Jn* 1: 1) and “heard” with their ears (v. 3), Mary says “yes” to what is yet intangible, unheard of, indeed unfathomable. She remains, furthermore, faithful to the incomprehensible mystery even in the darkest hour when all the apostles except John have abandoned the Lord (cf. *Jn* 19: 25-27). That is why Mary’s faith is presented by Pope John Paul II as inaugurating the New Covenant, so as to be comparable to the faith of Abraham, whom St. Paul calls “our Father in faith” (*Rom* 4:12). The “conviction of things not seen” (*Hebrews* 11:1; cf. *Rom* 8:24), her faith nonetheless enlightens the hearts of all the faithful, precisely by giving flesh to faith’s object: the true Son of God.⁷⁰

In short, Mary is our true *Mother of faith*.

Of course, “faith is”, as the letter to the Hebrews confirms, “the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). By clothing in her own flesh the invisible Word and Son of God, in whom alone is beheld the Father (cf. *Jn* 14:9), who in turn is seen by “no one” (*Jn* 1:18), Mary nonetheless provokes and nourishes the faith of all Christ’s disciples: all of those who have since come to see his glory (*Jn* 1:14) and

⁶⁷ H. U. von Balthasar, *The Threefold Garland: The World’s Salvation in Mary’s Prayer*, (transl. by E. Leiva-Merikakis), San Francisco 1982, p. 34.

⁶⁸ CCC 1124.

⁶⁹ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 27.

⁷⁰ M. M. Schumacher, *Marian Faith in a Time of Crisis*, p. 332; cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 14.

have thereby come to believe in him (cf. *Jn* 2:11). Because, moreover, she continued to believe the promise spoken by the angel (*Lk* 1: 31-36) in the “dark night” of Calvary and throughout the dark hours of Holy Saturday, she sustains the faith of all who doubt in moments of trial. That is why, as St. Thomas attests, “we keep the Saturdays in veneration of the Blessed Virgin, in whom remained a firm faith on that Saturday while Christ was dead”.⁷¹ It is therefore rightfully to her that the Church’s members continually turn – in every period of human history⁷² – to find “in her faith support for their own”.⁷³

IV. MARY’S FAITH AS *ECCLESIAL*: LIFE “IN CHRIST”

To share in Mary’s faith therefore implies more than adhering to her conviction that “nothing is impossible to God” (*Lk* 1:37) and even more than imitating her courageous walk toward Calvary. It likewise entails more than willingly embracing the substance, or content, of her faith: her steadfast belief in the divinity of her Son. Beyond all of this, partaking of Marian faith also means partaking of her mission, which remains within the Church in the multiple forms whereby the bride of Christ responds with faith and love to his absolutely primary gift of himself.

Although the Blessed Virgin has no successors, as do the apostles, she nonetheless incarnates in many ways the Church’s own mission as *Sponsa et Mater Christi*. That is why, as the Second Vatican Council points out, “the Church in her apostolic work also, justly looks to her, who, conceived of the Holy Spirit, brought forth Christ, [...] so that through the Church he may be born and may increase in the hearts of the faithful also”.⁷⁴ As the Church’s “type” and its “excellent exemplar in faith and charity”,⁷⁵ she is like “a mirror placed before the Church”,

⁷¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Third Commandment in God’s Greatest Gifts: Commentaries on the Commandments and the Sacraments*, (transl. by J. B. Collins), Manchester 1992, p. 19

⁷² Indeed, Mary’s role throughout time is witnessed already in the protoevangelium of *Genesis* 3:15, foretelling the mission of the Messiah, in union with his mother. That is why, as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger points out, “There has never been a moment in history without a gospel. At the very moment of the Fall, the promise also begins”; J. Ratzinger (in:) H. U. von Balthasar, J. Ratzinger, *Mary, the Church at the Source*, p. 51). One might also keep in mind the teaching of St. Thomas, who reasons that even without knowledge of the fall, Adam necessarily had “an explicit faith in the Incarnation of Christ” and that in his own love for Eve, he had a certain knowledge of “the great mystery” (*Eph.* 5: 32) of the love of Christ and the Church (*ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 7), and thus in some sense Mary, who bridges the Old Testament ecclesia and the Church of Christ.

⁷³ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, No. 27.

⁷⁴ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no 65.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 53.

the Second Vatican Council teaches; a mirror “in which the Church is invited to recognize her own identity as well as the dispositions of the heart, the attitudes and the actions which God expects from her”.⁷⁶ As such (as mirror and type of the Church), Mary also incarnates the dispositions, attitudes, and actions proper to the members of Christ’s body, each of whom is called – in virtue of baptism – to be an *alter Christus*: one who has “put on Christ” (*Gal* 3: 27; cf. *Rom* 13:14; *Eph* 4:24; *Col* 3:10) so as to live “in Christ” (*Rom* 8:1; *Phil* 3:9; *2 Cor* 5:17; *Jn* 5:7,10; 15: 4; 17: 21; etc.) and Christ “in him” (*Gal* 2: 19-20; 4: 19; *Rom* 8: 9-11; *Eph* 3: 17; *2 Cor* 4: 16, 13: 2-5; *Jn* 6: 56; 14: 23; 15: 4; 17: 23, 26; etc.).

This does not mean, however, as is particularly evident in the figure of the New Eve beside (or better: vis-à-vis) the New Adam – that the Christian is obliterated or otherwise absorbed into Christ, nor that Christ’s members are used as mere instruments, as is necessarily the case of his ministers in the specific acts that they accomplish by his power and in his name. On the contrary, like Mary, the Christian lives in virtue of a new life of grace, the fruit of Christ’s passion, whereby she or he is pushed inwardly to act, out of love for Christ, as his partner (*sponsa*) and handmaid (*ancilla*). For “strictly speaking, those things are said to live which are moved by an inner principle”, St. Thomas explains,⁷⁷ and because Christians are said to live in virtue of a new life of grace, it is Christ who is our “affection”: the motivating principle of our life, which sets us into action.⁷⁸

To admit that Christians are “made one body with Christ”⁷⁹ does not therefore entail that our own bodies are no longer animated and moved by our own souls, but rather that our souls are moved by Christ, who is the object of our love.⁸⁰ Indeed, as St. Paul puts it so poignantly, “the love of Christ controls us”, which is to say that it compels us to live no longer for ourselves “but for him who for our sakes died and was raised” (cf. *2 Cor* 5:14). And that is why all that we do should be done first and foremost *for Christ*, who – it bears repeating – is always the first to love us (cf. *1 Jn* 4:19). If then, and in fact, God makes use of *our* members, this is because our very persons (body and soul) really are *his* members. They are grafted to the one vine of Christ (cf. *Jn* 15:5) in virtue of our free (bridal) consent: the “spiritual worship”, whereby we offer our “bodies as a living sacrifice, holy

⁷⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, No. 15.

⁷⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Gal.*, II, lectio 6, No. 109 (= *Super Epistolam B. Pauli ad Galatas lectura*, (in:) J. Mortensen, E. Alarcón (eds.) *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, (transl. by F. R. Larcher, M. L. Lamb) Vol. 39, Lander 2012).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 107. To admit with St. Paul that “I no longer live” means, St. Thomas adds, that “I no longer live as though having any interest in my own good”. Instead “I have Christ alone in my affection and Christ himself is my life”. (*ibid.*)

⁷⁹ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 31.

⁸⁰ See Thomas Aquinas, *Super Gal.*, II, lectio 6, No. 109.

and acceptable to God” and renew of our minds to seek “the will of God” in all things: “what is good and acceptable and perfect” (*Rom* 12: 1-2).⁸¹

Hence, as the beautiful example of Marian faith demonstrates so well, Christians are those who have been radically given in service to others, *precisely because* they have freely given themselves to Christ. They are those who order all other loves according to the love of predilection for the pearl of great price (*Mt* 13: 45-46): the love for Him who “loved us first” (*I Jn* 4:19) and who loved us “to the end” (*Jn* 13:1). For to believe, as Aquinas describes it, is “an act of the intellect narrowed to one thing by the command of the will”.⁸² In keeping, moreover, with the most basic insights of Catholic moral principles, the Christian life is ordered according to the natural desire for the good, which has been definitively revealed as the “good Master” himself, who incarnates the substantial goodness of God (cf. *Mk* 10:18; *Lk* 18:19).⁸³

Nature and grace are thus joined in the most harmonious manner, because it is our Creator who has become our “husband” (*Is* 54:5), by way of his good providence; whence also the continuation of Christ’s mission through his ordained ministers, on the one hand, and in his members, on the other hand, who have become “one body, one spirit in Christ”.⁸⁴ It nonetheless bears repeating that the former (the ordained ministry) is “totally ordered” to the latter: “to the holiness of Christ’s members. And holiness”, as the Catechism continues in words borrowed from Pope John Paul II, “is measured according to the ‘great mystery’ in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom”.⁸⁵ That is why the apostle to the Gentiles incites us to “desire the higher gifts” (*I Cor* 12:31): higher than those of the administrators, of the healers, of the miracle workers, of the teachers, of the prophets, and even higher than those of the apostles (v. 27). Indeed, all the Spirit’s gifts, which are destined to build up the Church, are as naught if not for charity (cf. 13:1-3), whereby Christ has free reign of his members, who have given themselves to him.

We could not be further from a functional mode of acting. The Christian does not fulfill a role akin to those promoted by the secular world, whose highest

⁸¹ The reality of what Paul is expressing here is poignantly apparent in words attributed widely, albeit questionably, to St. Teresa of Avila: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now but yours”; cited by E. Knowles, *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Oxford 2009, p. 684.

⁸² Thomas Aquinas, *Super Heb* XI, lect. 1, No. 553 (= *Super Epistolam B. Pauli ad Hebraeos lectura*, (in:) J. Mortensen, E. Alarcón (eds.), *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (transl. by F. R. Larcher) Vol. 41, Lander 2012).

⁸³ This thesis is developed at length in the beautiful encyclical letter by Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor on the Splendor of Truth*, 6 August 1993, Vatican City 1993.

⁸⁴ From the Third Eucharistic Prayer.

⁸⁵ CCC 773; cf. John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, No. 27.

values have become those of productivity, efficacy, and professionalism. That is why women do well to heed the warning of Pope Francis to avoid “machismo with a skirt”⁸⁶ or that of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to avoid responding to the abuse of power by seeking power.⁸⁷ On the contrary, as the Second Vatican Council put it so clearly, “It is the love of God and the love of one’s neighbor which points out the true disciple of Christ”,⁸⁸ and this is hardly a quality that might be institutionalized, systematized, or organized by merely human effort, which is not to deny the innumerable manners in which charity is ever inventive within what Pope Francis calls an “ecclesial existence”.⁸⁹

An ecclesial existence is, more specifically, “a life lived in [and for] the Church”, because it is lived for Christ (cf. *Gal* 2:20), who has transformed us by his love. Despite impressions to the contrary, such an existence “does not imply”, Francis continues, “that the believer is simply one part of an anonymous whole, a mere cog in a great machine; rather, it brings out the vital union of Christ with believers and of believers among themselves (cf. *Rom* 12:4-5). Christians are ‘one’ (cf. *Gal* 3:28), yet in a way which does not make them lose their individuality; in service to others, they come into their own in the highest degree”.⁹⁰ “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (*I Cor* 12:12).

V. CONCLUSION: KEEPING VIGIL AS BRIDES IN THE BRIDE

In the extraordinary example of Mary within this one body of Christ is highlighted the “purpose which governs everything” within the Church, namely, “communion of men [and women] with God, in the ‘love [that] never ends’”⁹¹; whence the precedence of the “Marian” dimension of the Church over the “Apostolic-Petrine”. It could hardly be otherwise since the hierarchical structure of the Church is fully ordered to the holiness of her members, which in turn – it

⁸⁶ Holy See Press Office, Summary of Bulletin, *Meeting on “The Protection of Minors in the Church” – Intervention by the Holy Father Francis after hearing the report by Dr. Ghisoni, under-secretary of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life* (22 February 2019): <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2019/02/22/190222c.html>

⁸⁷ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, No. 2.

⁸⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 42.

⁸⁹ Francis, Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei* on Faith, 29 June 2013, Vatican City 2013, No. 22.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ CCC 773.

bears insisting – “is measured according to the ‘great mystery’ [of *Ephesians* 5] in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom”.⁹²

In fact, in virtue of Mary’s exceptional charity, it “behooves” all “who cooperate in the apostolic mission of the Church for the regeneration of men” to be “animated”, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, with her “maternal love”.⁹³ For, although it is unique in its grandeur, amplitude, and perfection,⁹⁴ Mary’s maternity “in the order of grace”⁹⁵ is one in which all Christians have a share: not just as beneficiaries (as sons and daughters of this most noble mother), but also as those “in labor” until Christ is formed in each of his members (cf. *Gal* 4:19). For in accord with Christ’s own words, we are called to be not only his “brothers” – by adhering to him with faith – but also his “mothers” by begetting him in others.⁹⁶ To be a mother in the specifically Christian sense of the term thereby implies participating in the baptismal priesthood of *all* the faithful: in, that is to say, “the apostolic and missionary activity of the People of God”, who “profess before men the faith” they “have received from God through the Church”.⁹⁷

This means professing the faith of Peter, of course (cf. *Mt* 16:16-18), but also more fundamentally, clinging to, imitating and participating in the faith of Mary: in, that is to say, her obedient and loving self-surrender whereby the unfathomable Word of God (cf. *Rom* 11: 33) is clothed in human flesh, making this sacred Word visible for all who will eventually follow in her footsteps. Because, in fact, Mary’s exceptional grace also implies an exceptional mission, her faith – indeed her entire existence – is a fully ecclesial one: a “Yes” that bears within itself the response of the entire Bride of Christ – that of all God’s people – to the divine Bridegroom. As a good mother, Mary does not simply take our place, however, so as to substitute (as it were) her own fully faithful response for our much too imperfect one. After all, faith is “a *personal* adherence of man to God”,⁹⁸ and that is why it is a requirement for baptism: “not a perfect and mature faith”, however, the

⁹² CCC 773. As John Paul II specifies, “In the context of the ‘great mystery’ of Christ and of the Church, all are called to respond - as a bride - with the gift of their lives to the inexpressible gift of the love of Christ, who alone, as the Redeemer of the world, is the Church’s Bridegroom”. (John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, No. 27).

⁹³ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 65.

⁹⁴ Mary, the Second Vatican Council teaches, is “endowed with the high office and dignity of being the Mother of the Son of God, by which account she is also the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit” (*ibid.*, No. 52). That is why she “occupies a place in the Church which is the highest after Christ and yet very close to us”. (*ibid.*, No. 54)

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 62.

⁹⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Matt.*, XII, lectio 4, No. 1076.

⁹⁷ CCC 1270. This, the Catechism specifies, is a responsibility of “all Christ’s faithful” who are “called to hand it [the treasure received from the Apostles] on from generation to generation, by professing the faith, by living it in fraternal sharing, and by celebrating it in liturgy and prayer”. (CCC 3).

⁹⁸ CCC 150; emphasis added.

Catechism specifies, “but a beginning that is called to develop”⁹⁹ and “grow”.¹⁰⁰ And this it does – develop and grow – precisely within the faith of the one whom the Catechism honors as faith’s “most perfect embodiment”,¹⁰¹ the one whose faith “never wavered”,¹⁰² whence her mission of “cooperat[ing] with a maternal love” in the “birth and education” of the faithful.¹⁰³ Indeed, Mary’s personal faith grounds the faith of the entire Church, which, in turn, “precedes [and accompanies] the faith of the believer who is invited”, the Catechism explains, “to adhere to it”.¹⁰⁴ It is, moreover, by sustaining, encouraging and nourishing the faith of each one of us that Mary prepares us for the wedding of the Lamb: not only as guests but also as brides. For, as St. Thomas comments on the scene of the wedding of Cana, it is to Mary that is entrusted the role of “arranging” the marriage between her divine Son and each human soul.¹⁰⁵

Such also, I am suggesting, is the particular mission that is shared by Mary’s daughters: that of preparing the Bride of the Lamb to offer her nuptial vows: the Yes of faith that is simultaneously a gift of self. Preparing the Bride – that is to say, each and every man, woman, and child personally called by God to an intimate relationship with Christ – thus means nourishing the faith of the people of God: our own faith, of course, but also the faith of all whom God has entrusted to our care. It cannot be otherwise, because the response of faith that is required of each of us cannot be made alone. As the Catechism puts it straightforwardly, “faith needs the community of believers”, and that is why it is “only within the faith of the Church” – and thus within the faith of Mary – “that each of the faithful can believe”.¹⁰⁶ The “I believe” of the *Credo* is thus always simultaneously *personal* and *communitarian*. Because faith comes from hearing, as St. Paul acknowledges (cf. *Rom* 10:14), and is destined, in turn, to find expression in words and actions,

⁹⁹ CCC 1253.

¹⁰⁰ CCC 1254.

¹⁰¹ CCC 144.

¹⁰² CCC 149.

¹⁰³ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 63.

¹⁰⁴ CCC 1124. In the powerful words of John Paul II: “At the basis of what the Church has been from the beginning, and of what she must continually become from generation to generation, in the midst of all the nations of the earth, we find the one ‘who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord’ (*Lk* 1:45)”. (*Redemptoris Mater*, No. 27.)

¹⁰⁵ “In its mystical meaning, the mother of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin, is present in spiritual marriages as the one who arranges the marriage, because it is through her intercession that one is joined to Christ through grace” (Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ioan* II, lect. 1, No. 343).

¹⁰⁶ CCC 1253. Similarly or more specifically, “faith needs the community of believers” (*ibid.*). After all, as John Paul II points out, “Faith demands a free adherence on the part of man, but at the same time faith must also be offered to him”. (Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* on the Mission of the Redeemer, 7 December 1990, Vatican City 1990, No. 8).

it is “not a private matter”.¹⁰⁷ On the contrary, it is radically dependent upon the faith of those who precede us, and it already bears within itself – as a sort of seed – the faith of those who will succeed us.

There could hardly be a better way to describe the discrete, but powerful presence of Mary, who remains within the Church until the end of time, as the immaculate Bride of Christ (cf. *Eph* 5:27) reminding each one of us who we are constantly called to become. Nor could there be a better way to describe the mission of so many great women throughout history,¹⁰⁸ for it is women who know experientially what it means to be a bride and a mother, in both the physical and the spiritual senses. Among these great women is (it bears repeating from my introduction) my own saintly, great-grandmother, Catherine. Like innumerable daughters of Mary throughout the centuries, this beloved ancestor of mine delivered babies, accompanied the dying, and performed countless other good works, all of which were enlivened by her faith in Christ. This, of course, was the faith that she received at her baptism, the faith that was renewed at her confirmation, and the faith that was strengthened with every one of her Eucharistic communions, thanks to the ministry of Christ’s ordained ministers.¹⁰⁹ Precisely because it was also – indeed first of all – the faith of Mary, hers was what might be considered a “manly” faith: at least for the purpose of clarifying that Marian faith breaks out of sexual stereotypes.

Such, more specifically, is a faith that is prepared to go to battle against the advances of the enemy, who “prowls around [...] seeking someone to devour”, as St. Peter puts it in no uncertain terms (*1 Pt* 5:8). Indeed, the legend of Grandma Katie is one of far more than maidenly charm! Armed with a warrior’s faith – and not merely a sick call set – this midwife of souls knew that a dragon was waiting to “devour the child” at the moment of its birth (cf. *Rev* 12:4); that is why she delivered babies and prepared the brides of the Lamb under the protection of the one who “crush[es] the head of the serpent” (cf. *Gen* 3:15; *Apoc* 12), namely, the very Mother of God Most High.

Thanks to her unyielding faith, my beloved ancestor was also prepared to meet the divine bridegroom at all hours of the night. Unlike the wise virgins of the Gospel parable, however, she did not decline requests to share her oil (cf. *Mt* 25:9).

¹⁰⁷ Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, No. 22. On the contrary, it is “necessarily ecclesial”, which is to say that it is “professed from within the body of Christ as a concrete communion of believers”, and it simultaneously “opens the individual Christian towards all others” (*ibid*).

¹⁰⁸ John Paul II points to the fact that holy women “have shared in every age in the apostolic mission of the whole People of God. They are the holy martyrs, virgins, and mothers of families, who bravely bore witness to their faith and passed on the Church’s faith and tradition by bringing up their children in the spirit of the Gospel”. (*Mulieris dignitatem*, No. 27). See also the portraits of saintly women throughout the ages by Benedict XVI, *Holy Women*, Huntington, 2011.

¹⁰⁹ It is, after all, these sacraments of initiation that “ground the common vocation of all Christ’s disciples”, namely, the Catechism specifies, the “vocation to holiness” and “the mission of evangelizing the world” (CCC, 1533).

Under the mantle of Mary, she knew that faith is increased when it is shared,¹¹⁰ and it was faith and good works that kept her lamp burning, as St. Thomas suggests they should. For “lamps are vessels of light”, by which might be signified “souls enlightened with the light of faith, which they received in baptism”.¹¹¹ The oil in her sick call set might well have been used for anointings by Christ’s sacred minister, but the oil of her faith and good works also served as an anointment for many weak and suffering souls, who were blessed to share her destiny. That is why her lamp is still burning today, some fifty years since her death, illuminating the path to the wedding feast of the Lamb for all who continue to see her good works “and give glory to our Father who is in heaven” (*Mt* 5: 16).

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