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GIFT AND LIBERATION: RECAPTURING THE SOUL OF 'LIBERAL' AMERICAN CATHOLICS THROUGH MARY'S POPE

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Introduction

Cardinal Wuerl of Washington, D.C., voiced the concerns of numerous theologians and churchmen when he observed that a "tsunami of secular influence . . . has swept across the cultural landscape."¹ The damage caused by this tsunami has not respected ideological or religious boundaries, so that numerous Catholics, even those who consider themselves faithful practitioners, have been swept up into the storm, often unconsciously absorbing beliefs that are contrary to the religion they profess. As Avery Dulles so aptly stated, "The members of the Church themselves are tempted by the idols of the prevailing culture,"² a problem that has been compounded by the

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¹ As quoted online in Zenit's article, "Cardinal Wuerl: 'Tsunami of Secularism' Has Swept the Cultural Landscape: Archbishop of Washington, D.C., Discusses Hopes and Challenges of the New Evangelization." Posted 10/08/2012. Available online at <http://www.zenit.org/article-35674?l=english>. Accessed, November, 25, 2012. Hereafter, "Tsunami."

² Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., *Evangelization for the Third Millennium* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009), 30.

extraordinarily poor catechesis of the Catholic laity since the 1970s.³ We are living in a day and age in which the Church herself is in great need of evangelization. This essay is a contribution to the difficult and gravely important task of recapturing the souls of those who have not yet consciously left Catholicism, but have unconsciously absorbed secularist principles that are incompatible with it.

Of particular concern are certain flawed anthropological principles associated with what many call the new "liberal orthodoxy," a world-view that cuts across the platforms of the political "right" and "left" and provides what seems to be a nearly universally accepted and dangerously unquestioned foundation for popular discussions about American civil policies, ranging from same-sex unions to corporate tax breaks. The deficiencies of this so-called "liberal orthodoxy" become apparent, however, when its anthropological assumptions are compared to the profound insights of the late Blessed Pope John Paul II's personalist anthropology, especially as expressed within his Mariology. Catholics who have unconsciously assumed a liberal anthropology, but have retained at least a sentimental attachment to the Blessed Virgin, will find in John Paul II's Mariology an antidote to the spiritual malady that has slowly taken possession of their lives.

I have chosen the insightful summary of liberal anthropological principles provided by Patrick J. Deneen's article "Unsustainable Liberalism" as a platform upon which to build this discussion.⁴ Therefore, the following section will provide a summary of Deneen's thoughts. The section on Deneen is followed by a summary of John Paul II's personalism, demonstrating its stark contrast with "liberal" anthropology. Next, the discussion will turn specifically to John Paul II's personalism as expressed within his Mariology, focusing primarily on *Redemptoris Mater*⁵

³ "Tsunami."

⁴ Patrick J. Deneen, "Unsustainable Liberalism," *First Things* (Aug./Sept., 2012): 25-31. Hereafter Deneen.

⁵ *Mary: God's Yes to Man: Pope John Paul II Encyclical Letter, Mother of the Redeemer*, Introduction by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Commentary by Hans Urs von Balthasar (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988). Hereafter, references to *Redemptoris Mater* will be noted by the title of the encyclical (*Redemptoris Mater*).

and *Mulieris Dignitatem*.⁶ Finally, the essay will close with a few words about the unique benefits of a Marian approach to evangelization—an approach which appeals to the heart as well as the head.

A Brief Exposition of Patrick Deneen's Insights

As one might surmise from the title, Deneen's article "Unsustainable Liberalism" explores the inherently self-destructive elements of a philosophical system that undermines the pre-liberal ideas—ideas this system claims to champion and upon which it stands. Among these ideas are those of "inviolable human dignity, constitutional limits upon central power, and equality under law."⁷ The following quotation provides Deneen's summary of the corrosive elements that are foundational to this liberalism:

The strictly political arrangements of modern constitutionalism do not per se constitute a liberal regime. Rather, liberalism is constituted by a pair of deeper anthropological assumptions that give liberal institutions a particular orientation and cast: 1) anthropological individualism and the voluntarist conception of choice, and 2) human separation from and opposition to nature. These two revolutions in the understanding of human nature and society constitute "liberalism" inasmuch as they introduce a radically new definition of "liberty."⁸

The first assumption listed has its roots in the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, insofar as each in his own way understands human beings to be non-relational and radically autonomous. According to their combined visions, the only real social, political, economic, and familial relationships are (and ought to be) formed by individual choice/consent. There are no objective realities inherent in the nature of beings that bind them together. Furthermore, this mutual consent is irreformably motivated by individual self-interest.

⁶ John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* (Boston MA: Paulist Press, 1988).

⁷ Deneen, 26.

⁸ Ibid.

Such perspectives are radically different from those that grow out of ancient and medieval philosophies, which envision the human being as a creature who has a fixed nature, oriented toward a particular *telos* that is continuous with a comprehensive natural order. In contrast with the autonomy and self-interest emphasized in Hobbes and Locke, ancient and medieval philosophies emphasize the notion that individual choices must be informed by the ways in which they affect the larger natural order and by the very real personal responsibilities each individual has to it. In addition, if a human being is a creature with a fixed nature, oriented toward a particular *telos* that is continuous with a comprehensive natural order, human flourishing depends upon discovering and conforming one's choices to objective truths already inscribed within human nature and the larger natural order.

As Deneen observes, a variety of thinkers, beginning in the Renaissance and extending into contemporary philosophy, have departed from the above-established, western worldview by envisioning a natural order that can be mastered and manipulated by humans to suit whatever ends might be assigned to it. Currently, many philosophers "extend to human nature itself the idea that nature is subject to human conquest,"⁹ positing a division between nature and humanity that facilitates the denial of objective truths about the nature and purpose of human beings. Therefore, in contrast with Christian teleology that associates human freedom with the realization of divinely ordained perfections, "liberal," subjectivist worldviews associate human freedom solely with the ability to assert individual desires.

Deneen points out that such a vision will eventually destroy the human dignity and freedom that it seeks to promote for two reasons. First, civil order within "liberal" systems of thought depend upon an increasingly powerful and dominating state that can adjudicate between conflicting individual desires. Second, a culture focused on self-interest, rather than objective truth and goodness, promotes hedonism in which "seemingly self-maximizing but socially destructive behaviors begin to predominate in society."¹⁰ Thus, for example,

⁹ Deneen, 28.

¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

short-sighted, destructive competition in the economic realm, selfish exploitation of natural resources, and commodification of children become the social and cultural norm. Liberalism will inevitably implode.¹¹

We would do well as evangelizers, however, to take note of the appeal of liberalism's promises. It gains its seductive power because it appeals to humanity's desire for dignity, which cannot be obtained without freedom. John Paul II recognized a glimmer of evangelical hope in this desire for dignity. As Mary Shivanandan has observed,

Here is the heart of what John Paul II means by the "new evangelization," formulating in a new way the message of the Gospel so that it speaks to the heart of modern man who has lost his faith in reason and social structures but still harbours a sense of the dignity and rights of man [which cannot be secured by] utopian social experiments . . . The full dignity that man longs for can only be gained in union with Jesus Christ.¹²

The desire for human freedom and dignity is good and must be redirected to that which can satisfy it. In Pope Benedict XVI's third general audience during the Year of Faith, he pointed out that "what we have defined as 'desire for God' has not completely disappeared and still today, in many ways, appears in the heart of man."¹³ It can be seen in that which he desires, although his desires are so often misplaced. Indeed,

all that is good and experienced by man is projected toward the mystery that surrounds man himself; every wish that arises in the human heart is echoed by a fundamental desire that is never fully satisfied . . . [Although] One cannot know God, beginning simply with man's desire . . . The eyes

¹¹ It should be noted that some Catholic thinkers have labeled this version of liberalism a distortion of the liberal tradition and defend a purer understanding of the latter. See, e.g., Richard John Neuhaus, "The Liberalism of John Paul II," *First Things* (May, 1997). Available online at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/03/001-the-liberalism-of-john-paul-ii-39>. Accessed Sept. 20, 2012.

¹² Mary Shivanandan, "The New Evangelization of John Paul II," in *Hear, O Islands: Theology & Catechesis in the New Millennium*, ed. John Redford (Dublin: Veritas, 2002), 200.

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, as reported in Vatican Radio Print Service, 11/7/2012. Available online at http://en.radiovaticana.va/print_page.asp?c=636620. Accessed 11/8/2012.

recognize objects when they are illuminated by light. Hence the desire to know the light itself, which makes the things of the world shine and thus illuminate the sense of beauty.

We therefore must believe that, even in our era, seemingly reluctant to the transcendent dimension, that it is possible to open a path toward an authentic religious meaning of life . . . It would be of great use, for that purpose, to promote a pedagogy of desire, both for the journey of those who still do not believe and for those who have already received the gift of faith.¹⁴

So, evangelizers, let us initiate a pedagogy of desire. I propose an exploration of John Paul II's Mariology illuminated by his personalist anthropology as a means by which we might redirect the quest for human dignity and freedom to Christ, the wellspring of all that heals and perfects: "[W]hoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10:39).

Being, Gift, Freedom, and Communion in John Paul II's Personalist Anthropology

John Paul II's personalist anthropology was developed while pursuing a doctorate in ethics and is thus presented within the context of discerning the nature, perfection, and effects of moral choice and action. Philosophically, it is a combination of Thomistic ontology with phenomenology, uniting a belief in being as gift with the conviction that one's moral actions truly constitute personhood. However, John Paul II's philosophy is never separate from his theology and cannot, therefore, be understood apart from his profound meditations on humanity's divinely ordained destiny to share in the Trinitarian Life. The following is an attempt to capture the highlights of this very complex understanding of the human condition.

The young Karol Wojtyla expresses important aspects of his philosophical synthesis in the following statement: "In experience, the human being is *given* to us as *someone* who *exists* and *acts*" (emphasis added.).¹⁵ This truth, he maintains, applies

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Karol Wojtyla, "The Person: Subject and Community," in *Person and Community: Selected Essays by Karol Wojtyla*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: P. Lang, 1993), 221. Hereafter Wojtyla, "The Person."

to the individual's experience of him- or herself as well as the individual's experience of others. At least three anthropological principles undergird the above assertion. First, following the Thomistic principle *operari sequitur esse* (act follows being), John Paul II upholds the objective reality of being as that which has been given.¹⁶ The implications of this "givenness" extend to the moral life and all that is required to perfect human dignity, freedom, and ultimate happiness; for, if being is first a gift from the Christian God, human perfection depends upon conformity to the order and truth already objectively inscribed within human nature.¹⁷ Second, drawing from phenomenology, John Paul II asserts that ethical actions, unlike other types of action, although directed to beings other than one's self, actually form the quality of the agent's own personhood. The agent makes free and rational choices that are either in cooperation or at odds with divine grace, which either contribute to or detract from the formation of the agent's character. (It should be noted that John Paul II insists that it is the person as a unified whole—including cognition, subconscious tendencies, will, and physiological processes—who acts through consciousness and becomes the agent of ethical action.) Third, because *all* humans are experienced as beings who act, and activity is inherently self-transcendent, relation too becomes somehow constitutive of the human person. In the following paragraphs, I will provide a brief summary of these anthropological points, illustrating the extent to which John Paul II's vision of the human person clashes with the liberal vision described thus far.

John Paul II's anthropology builds on the peculiarly Christian development of the terms "substance" and "person," a tradition in which theologians and philosophers have struggled with the seemingly opposing concepts of unity and

¹⁶ Ibid., 223.

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion of John Paul II's thought about objective truth and natural law, see his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor_en.html. Accessed, January 7, 2013. Hereafter, *Veritatis Splendor*.

distinction and subsistence and relation.¹⁸ John Paul II reconciles these tensions by acknowledging the reality of substance from which action emerges, but further proposing that substance is only made manifest through particular persons who are properly characterized as consciously acting and therefore relational subjects. His discussion focuses specifically on freely chosen action:

I believe that the form of human *operari* that has the most basic and essential significance for grasping the subjectivity of the human being is *action*: conscious human activity, in which the freedom proper to the human person is simultaneously expressed and concretized.¹⁹

Such activity reveals the individual's status as a person, unique from other creatures in that the person has been endowed with reason and free will in the image of the Creator.²⁰

As mentioned above, human activity is not only *revelatory* of the human person, it is a significant factor in the *formation* of the human person. The human subject is a conscious being, experiencing both external and internal realities. Internal realities include intentions, emotions, thought processes, and all manner of psychological, spiritual, and somatic factors available to human consciousness. The human being experiences

¹⁸ For an excellent historical overview of the Christian development of the concept of "person," see Antoine E. Nachez, B.S.O., *The Mystery of the Trinity in the Theological Thought of Pope John Paul II*, American University Studies, Series VII, Theology and Religion, Vol. 211 (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 11-18. For an excellent historical overview of the philosophical development and corruption of the concept of substance, see W. Norris Clarke, S.J., "To Be Is to Be Substance-in-Relation," in his book, *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being—God—Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). Finally, for Josef Ratzinger's insights about the relational dimension of the person as discovered in the divine revelation of the Trinity, see "Concerning the Person in Theology," *Communio* 17 (1990): 438-54.

¹⁹ Wojtyla, "The Person," 224. The essay acknowledges various forms of *operari*, which technically includes everything that happens in the human being at a somatic and psychic level as well as everything that a human being does. The latter is properly called "action."

²⁰ For a very helpful summary of John Paul II's thought about consciousness and the image of God, see Richard M. Hogan and John M. LeVoi, *Covenant of Love: Pope John Paul II on Sexuality, Marriage, and Family in the Modern World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 39-42.

him- or herself as an object (that which receives activity/is acted upon) as well as a subject (that which initiates and performs activity). The human being is able to reflect upon his or her internal reality, freely choosing actions that shape its development: "The self constitutes itself through action."²¹

Specifically, when the human person acts as God acts in accordance with truth, he or she transcends his or her current natural state, developing into a more perfect, more God-like being.²² For John Paul II, conformity to truth, especially as expressed in God's law, is fundamental to human perfection and freedom:

In fact, human freedom finds its authentic and complete fulfillment precisely in the acceptance of [God's] ... law. God, who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man. ... God's law does not reduce, much less do away with, human freedom; rather, it protects and promotes that freedom.²³

This relationship between objectively given truth and freedom is a recurring theme in John Paul II's work. He was fond of quoting John 8:32—"You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free"—and, in *Redemptor Hominis*, he explains the significance of the passage:

These words contain both a fundamental requirement and a warning: the requirement of an honest relationship with regard to truth as a condition for authentic freedom, and the warning to avoid every kind of illusory freedom, every superficial unilateral freedom, every freedom that fails to enter into the whole truth about man and the world.²⁴

Clearly, he would consider liberal subjectivist notions of freedom dangerous illusions.

Because authentic freedom is achieved through consciously willed conformity to truth, the beginning of personal freedom

²¹ Wojtyła, "The Person," 225.

²² Hogan and Levoir, *Covenant of Love*, 41.

²³ *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 35.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 12. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jpii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html. Accessed Dec. 1, 2012. Hereafter, *Redemptor Hominis*.

does not, as liberalism insists, depend upon the ability to assert personal desires. Rather it begins in the kind of self-mastery that renders the passions obedient to reason: "The spiritual elements of cognition and consciousness, along with freedom and self-determination, gradually gain mastery over the somatic and rudimentary psychic dimensions of humanity."²⁵ Without such self-mastery, the human person remains a slave to psychological, emotional, and physical impulses or desires, a state that is just as dangerous, if not more dangerous, than enslavement to external authority.²⁶

Specifically, the illusion of associating freedom with radical individual autonomy and the promotion of self-interest erodes the very notion of human rights and the practical possibility of democracy:

The basis of these values [human rights] cannot be provisional and changeable "majority" opinions, but only the acknowledgment of an objective moral law, which, as the "natural law" written in the human heart, is the obligatory point of reference for civil law itself. If, as a result of a tragic obscuring of the collective conscience, an attitude of skepticism were to succeed in bringing into question even the fundamental principles of the moral law, the democratic system itself would be shaken to its foundations, and would be reduced to a mere mechanism for regulating different and opposing interests on a purely empirical basis.²⁷

John Paul II expressed a similar idea in *Centesimus Annus*:

If there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism.²⁸

²⁵ Wojtyła, "The Person," 225.

²⁶ For a clear overview of John Paul II and the concept of freedom, see "The Free Person in a Free Society," in *The Splendor of Faith: The Theological Vision of Pope John Paul II* by Avery Dulles (New York: Crossroads Publ. Co., 1999): 141-154.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 70. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html. Accessed Dec. 1, 2012.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 46. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html. Accessed Dec. 1, 2012. Hereafter, *Centesimus Annus*.

Finally, because every consciously chosen action includes self-transcendence as the human subject directs his or her action toward an object external to the self, every consciously chosen action is relational. If these inherently relational actions both constitute and reveal the self, then it is fair to say that human persons are only able to constitute themselves within the context of relation. This is a key principle undergirding John Paul II's development of the concept of "solidarity" as an ontological reality, an attitude, a virtue, and a moral obligation. Human persons are inherently communal beings who cannot separate individual well-being from the common good. Failure to recognize and act in accordance with this truth produces alienation and despair.²⁹

The pope's characterization of human persons as inherently communal is rooted in an intense awareness of man as a being made in the image and likeness of a triune God. His thought progresses from the human experience of the self as a self-transcending subject/object in relation with other self-transcending subject/objects to the Divine self-transcending subjects who subsist in the free and conscious act of self-giving. John Paul II references these thoughts in his "Letter to Families," promulgated in 1994: "The divine 'We' is the eternal pattern of the human 'we,' especially of that 'we' formed by the man and the woman created in the divine image and likeness."³⁰ Furthermore, this divine "We" is characterized by the free gift of self, in other words, love. So, John Paul concludes, referencing *Gaudium et Spes*, "After affirming that man is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, the Council immediately goes on to say that he *cannot 'fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self.'*"³¹ He reiterates this theme in *Centesimus Annus*, saying "Indeed, it is through the free gift of self that one truly finds oneself. This gift is made

²⁹ For an outstanding analysis of John Paul II's development of "solidarity," see Kevin Doran, *Solidarity: A Synthesis of Personalism and Communalism in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II* (New York: P. Lang, c1996).

³⁰ John Paul II, "Letter to Families," no. 6. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_02021994_families_en.html. Accessed Dec. 1, 2012. Hereafter, "Letter to Families."

³¹ "Letter to Families," no. 11.

possible by the human person's essential 'capacity for transcendence.'³² Finally, in *Dominum et Vivificantem*, he expands upon the notion of self-determination, pointing out that having been made in the image and likeness of God "means not only rationality and freedom as constitutive properties of human nature, but also, from the very beginning, the capacity of having a covenant, which will take place in God's salvific communication with man."³³

John Paul II's anthropology is profoundly rooted in his soteriology. The self-transcendence achieved through free and rational cooperation with divine grace is perfected when the person is united with Christ and swept into the eternal self-giving and receiving exchange of Trinitarian life. It is here, in the overwhelming infinite abundance of a God who is gift, that the human finds personal perfection and the infinite satisfaction of all healthy desires.

To summarize, John Paul II provides an anthropology one hundred-eighty degrees from the liberal principles described by Deneen, yet promising the fulfillment of the desire for human dignity and freedom to which liberal principles appeal. His argument ought to be particularly persuasive to Catholics who have not consciously left the Church, but have unconsciously absorbed the liberal milieu. Still, rational arguments do not always prove as persuasive as the living witness provided by the saints. In John Paul II's Mariology, we find the powerful witness of his anthropological principles as lived by the Mother of God.

The Mother of God is, indeed, an extraordinary evangelical aid, for, as Pope Benedict XVI (then Joseph Ratzinger) observes,

Mary dwells not just in the past or in the lofty spheres of heaven under God's immediate disposition; she is and remains present and real in this historical moment; she is a *person acting* here and now. . . . She offers a

³² *Centesimus Annus*, no. 41.

³³ John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, no. 34. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_18051986_dominum-et-vivificantem_en.html. Accessed Dec. 1, 2012.

key to interpret our present existence, not in theoretical discourse but in action, showing us the way that lies ahead.³⁴ (Emphasis added.)

"I am the Lord's servant . . . May it be to me as you have said" (Lk 1:38).

Being, Gift, Freedom and Communion in John Paul II's Mariology

John Paul II's Mariology, a glorious expression of his anthropology, is a supreme refutation of the errors noted by Patrick Deneen above. Mary is the woman who, after having received her uniquely privileged being as an unmerited gift from the Trinity, consciously chose to empty herself in imitation of her Divine Creator and, thus, achieved unsurpassed creaturely freedom and the full dignity of her motherly personhood. The Virgin Mother's life is a profound testimony to being as gift, a relationship as both condition for and effect of personal growth, freedom's dependence on truth and self-mastery, and creaturely fulfillment as the result of transcendent, active participation in God's election—in other words, God's desire for divine-human communion within the divine life. Indeed, these themes so permeate John Paul II's Mariology, selecting only a few instances with which to illustrate them can be overwhelming. Such a selection is, however, what I will attempt in the following pages, beginning with the concepts of relation/communion and being as gift.

Contrary to liberalism's radically autonomous vision of the human person, the late pontiff's two most substantial Marian treatises, *Redemptoris Mater* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*, underscore "*the exceptional link between this 'woman' and the whole human family.*"³⁵ Mary is the "woman," the New Eve,

³⁴ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "The Sign of the Woman," in *Mary, God's Yes to Man: Pope John Paul II Encyclical Letter, Mother of the Redeemer*, with Introduction by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and commentary by Hans Urs von Balthasar (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 21.

³⁵ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, published under the name *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* (Boston, MA: St. Paul Books & Media, 1996), no. 2. Hereafter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

whose ontological communion with all humanity is a necessary condition for her role in salvation history and whose exemplary reception of humanity's "inheritance"³⁶ and "election"³⁷ will enable the same for each individual in history and for all time.

The terms "inheritance" and "election" used within this context deserve some consideration. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "the inheritance that belongs to all humanity . . . is linked with the mystery of the biblical 'beginning': 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them' (*Gen* 1:27)."³⁸ In other words, human individuals, having been designed in the image of Trinitarian communion, lay claim to the riches promised them by living in a state of self-giving and receiving with other humans and with God. As John Paul II so often states, one can only find one's self in a sincere gift of self.³⁹ Furthermore, the reality of this condition was *ordained* from the beginning by the Creator as *constitutive* of human nature: an objective, unchangeable truth, adherence to which will determine the level of human freedom and dignity obtained.

Humanity's "election" brings us home to our pre-ordained inheritance insofar as it bespeaks God's desire to draw the human race into perfect divine and eternal communion with himself through Christ.⁴⁰ The concept of "election" is explained in *Redemptoris Mater* as the broader context within which to understand Mary's title, "Full of Grace." The grace with which Mary's being was flooded from the moment of conception was the gift of God's very self and the fruit of this gift is "election," salvation, divine communion.⁴¹ God gives himself to the creature who receives and responds with her own gift of self, imitating the eternal Trinitarian exchange and freely participating

³⁶ Ibid., no. 2.

³⁷ *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 7.

³⁸ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7.

³⁹ Cf., *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Accessed Jan. 10, 2013.

⁴⁰ *Redemptoris Mater*, nos. 7 and 8.

⁴¹ Ibid., no. 8.

in the creation of a communion that will perfect her being and save her from death. Thus, the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception is a description of Mary's saving relationship with God, a relationship that determined the nature of her being as it was given to her by her Creator and then perfected her being throughout her earthly life. Mary "belonged to Christ," body, mind and soul, from all eternity.⁴² Yet the dogma is also a beacon of hope guiding the entire human race to its proper *telos*, expressing the "eternal truth about the human being," which only becomes apprehensible in Christ, but is, nonetheless, "immutably fixed in human experience,"⁴³ and preeminently in Mary's experience.

A Brief Meditation on the Significance of Mary's Motherhood

The title of John Paul II's Marian encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater*, is not without significance. For John Paul II, Mary is first and foremost the *Theotókos*, whose preeminent dignity is derived from her unique relationship with her Son. The significance of the title does not end here, however. Mary is mother of the *Redeemer* and is therefore, herself, central to humanity's redemption. Once again, the reader encounters profound implications for humanity's constitutively relational condition, a condition that is formed, maintained, and perfected by relationships that radiate horizontally through time and space and vertically from eternity.

The coming of the Messiah, and therefore Mary's maternity, was prepared for by the entire history of Israel,⁴⁴ and the saving bond enabled by the *fiat* of the New Eve radiated throughout humanity's past, present, and future.⁴⁵ In fact, John Paul II observes that, in the words of the Magnificat, we see a woman who is "aware that concentrated within herself as the Mother of Christ is *the whole salvific economy* . . ."⁴⁶ Furthermore,

⁴² Ibid., no. 10.

⁴³ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 2.

⁴⁴ *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 8.

⁴⁵ Ibid., nos. 13 and 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid., no. 36.

John Paul II points out that "the reality of the incarnation finds a certain extension *in the mystery of the Church—the Body of Christ*."⁴⁷ Mary is mother of the Church as "an extension" of her historical motherhood of Christ.⁴⁸ Similarly,

Being in relationship with the Spirit, Mary's action is able to reach the entire human race, because the Spirit abides in the Church in every stage of the Church's life. Mary's presence in the Church would be reduced to a mere historical fact, were she not envisioned in relation with the Holy Spirit Who extends her activity to the dimension of the kingdom.⁴⁹

The *Theotókos* brings God to humanity and *humanity to God*.

Mary's universal maternity is already dimly visible during Mary's earthly life at the wedding feast of Cana. Those who know the story will recall that it is at Mary's request that Christ miraculously replenishes the wine for the feast, which had been running dry. The benefits of this miracle include the preservation of the bride and groom from embarrassment, the sensual pleasure of unparalleled quality of drink for the guests, and, most importantly, new insights as to Christ's messianic power that will grow in the minds and hearts of those few who witness Christ's actions. John Paul II underscores Mary's role as catalyst for all these graces, pointing out that Christ would not have even been present at the wedding feast were it not for Mary, for the text implies that Christ and his disciples were invited because of her.⁵⁰

In this short story, we have a great synopsis of Marian spirituality. Mary's own relationship with Christ has made her profoundly sensitive to the needs of humanity with whom she shares an ontological unity that is as universal as Christ is universal. She thus brings their needs to her Son, who responds, drawing all who desire unity with Him into the fullness of His grace. Mary's action in the story consists precisely in entrusting herself and the world around her to Christ's care: "Do whatever

⁴⁷ Ibid., no. 5.

⁴⁸ Ibid., no. 24.

⁴⁹ Antoine Nachez, *The Faith of Mary: Vatican II Insights on the Humanity of Mary* (New York: Alba House, 2002), 29.

⁵⁰ *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 21.

he tells you" (Jn 2:5). This gift, this relinquishing of the self and the world to Christ, does not result in the loss of self and the world, but rather the lifting up and transformation of the self and the world to an unimagined perfection symbolized in the unexpectedly delicious wine.

The pattern of gift and reception is continued in the exchange with Mary and John at the foot of the cross, as Christ "entrusts" his mother to humanity and humanity to his mother, charging Mary with the care of God's children and asking Christians to entrust themselves to their mother, allowing her "into their homes," so that she might form them for Christ.⁵¹ The pope, whose motto was *Totus tuus*, recommends the consecration promoted by St. Louis de Montfort "as an effective means for Christians to live faithfully their baptismal commitments."⁵² John Paul II's recommendation springs from a keen awareness of a complex network of horizontal and vertical relationships between creatures and Creator that benefits the human givers and receivers in innumerable ways. Once again, John Paul II's Mariology confounds the "liberal" ideal of radical individual autonomy. In the next section, I will illustrate the refutation of a "liberal" understanding of freedom and dignity inherent in John Paul II's exposition of Mary's kenotic faith.

Mary's Faith, Freedom, and Glory

According to John Paul II, Luke 1:45, "Blessed is she who believed," is "*a kind of 'key'* which unlocks for us the innermost reality of Mary."⁵³ The Virgin of Nazareth is the one who is "full of grace," the one who receives the gift of God's self and responds with the gift of her self wholly and without reservation. Mary's *fiat* is a kenotic and fruit-bearing act in imitation of the Trinitarian exchange. Indeed, "It can be said that this *consent to motherhood* is above all a *result of her total self-giving to God in virginity*."⁵⁴ Thus, Mary is "blessed" with the riches of her inheritance: creaturely perfection and divine

⁵¹ Ibid., nos. 40-48.

⁵² Ibid., no. 48.

⁵³ Ibid., no. 19.

⁵⁴ Ibid., no. 39.

communion. The latter is inextricable from the brotherly communion of all who believe and bears the fruit of election for the whole of God's family. For John Paul II, it is Mary's faith in particular through which "an *interior space* was reopened within humanity which the eternal Father can fill 'with every spiritual blessing.'"⁵⁵

The handmaid of the Lord, who emptied herself to the Lord, did so as a freely willed, conscious choice. The Marian *fiat* in response to Gabriel's annunciation is often described by the Church as the supreme act of creaturely freedom. How could such an act of self-abandonment, of complete submission of body, mind and soul, be an act of freedom? To understand, one must first recall freedom's relationship to truth and the objective realities implied by a given, fixed human nature and teleology. Mary knows and "boldly proclaims the *undimmed* truth about God . . . who from the beginning is the *source of all gifts* . . ." including human perfection.⁵⁶ Second, we must recall the relationship between self-mastery and the gift of self in John Paul II's anthropology. The latter is conditioned by the former and is the ultimate indication of the individual's ability to choose. The following quotation alludes to both concepts:

[T]hrough her response of faith Mary exercises her free will and thus fully shares with her personal and feminine "I" in the event of the Incarnation. With her "*fiat*," Mary becomes the *authentic subject* of that union with God which was realized in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, who is of one substance with the Father.⁵⁷

The phrase "personal and feminine 'I'" alludes to the personalist concepts described earlier in this essay that link freely chosen, ethical actions with the formation of personhood as well as concepts developed in John Paul II's theology of the body, in which femininity is representative of divine receptivity.⁵⁸ "Authentic subjectivity" occurs when one is fully aware of the

⁵⁵ Ibid. no. 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid., no. 37.

⁵⁷ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 4.

⁵⁸ The concept of femininity as representative of divine receptivity permeates the entirety of *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

self as an agent of ethical action. Antoine Nacheff has observed, "The 'obedience of faith' becomes meaningless in the life of Mary if she is not conscious of the purpose of her actions."⁵⁹

Because Mary fully possesses herself, she is capable of making a free and total gift of herself. In doing so, she transcends her former state, becoming more God-like. Far from losing herself or her freedom in this gift, Mary actively participates in the formation of her own selfhood, her own subjectivity, and acquires the fullness of freedom that can only come with the fullness of participation in divine life.⁶⁰ Mary is the one who acts with every last fiber of her being, bringing about the union in which she *finds* herself and is elevated to the glory of the *Theotókos*.

The glorious effects of Mary's kenotic faith only appear as momentary glimmers of light during her earthly life, however, as she is asked to repeat this exchange in increasingly more difficult ways. In *Redemptoris Mater*, Mary is described as the woman of faith whose every earthly breath was a gift of self to God, Who in turn filled her with grace (i.e., Himself).⁶¹ The exchange reaches its apex when Mary stands at the foot of the cross: "This is perhaps the deepest '*kenosis*' of *faith* in human history."⁶² Mary, who remembers Gabriel's prophecies of kingly grandeur for her Son, must stand at the foot of the cross shrouded in pain and the darkness of confusion, still actively

⁵⁹ Nacheff, *The Faith of Mary*, 110.

⁶⁰ See *Dominum et Vivificantem*, no. 51. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_18051986_dominum-et-vivificantem_en.html. Accessed March 12, 2013:

Mary entered the history of salvation of the world through the obedience of faith. And faith, in its deepest essence, is the openness of the human heart to the gift: to God's self-communication in the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul writes: "The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17). When the Triune God opens himself to man in the Holy Spirit, this opening of God reveals and also gives to the human creature the fullness of freedom. This fullness was manifested in a sublime way precisely through the faith of Mary, through the "obedience of faith": truly, "Blessed is she who believed."

⁶¹ For commentary on John Paul II's focus on Mary's faith, see Antoine Nacheff's *The Faith of Mary*, and pages 24-27 of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's introduction in *Mary, God's Yes to Man*.

⁶² *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 18.

willing to trust the joint destinies of her Son and herself to a God who seems absent. In faith, Mary suffers and dies with her Son, sharing in his redeeming work.⁶³

The astute observer of this horrific scene may, even in these darkest hours, catch a glimpse of the riches that await the Mother of Sorrows revealed in Christ's dying words to Mary and John, by which Mary "is given as mother to every single individual and all mankind"⁶⁴ (cf. Jn 19:25-27). The woman who willingly abandons her earthly family and happiness to her heavenly Father's care, will gain a universal family that will never die. Again, John Paul emphasizes Mary's free and conscious role in the formation of her own glorified motherhood as he says:

And so this "new motherhood of Mary," generated by faith, is *the fruit of the "new" love* which came to definitive maturity in her at the foot of the Cross, through her sharing in the redemptive love of her Son.⁶⁵

Mary realizes the great paradoxical truth preached by Christ who said that those who lose their lives for his sake will save their lives (cf. Lk 9:24; Mt 10:39). She achieves the perfection of her own personhood in giving herself to Christ, imitating the life of the Trinity and experiencing unprecedented vertical transcendence made visible to the world in the dogma of the Assumption:

By the mystery of the Assumption into heaven there were definitively accomplished in Mary all the effects of the one mediation of *Christ the Redeemer of the world* and *Risen Lord*: "In Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Cor 15:22-23).⁶⁶

The self-mastery evident in Mary's faithfully obedient, sinless life enabled her to freely give every aspect of her being to the Divine source of all gifts, opening a relational channel through

⁶³ Ibid., nos. 18-19.

⁶⁴ Ibid., no. 23.

⁶⁵ Ibid., no. 23.

⁶⁶ Ibid., no. 41.

which she could receive God's gifts which, in turn, enabled the perfection of her person. Now, the handmaid of the Lord is the Queen of the Universe who fully possesses that "state of royal freedom' proper to Christ's disciples: to serve means to reign!"⁶⁷

Seeking the Heart of Mary

In his book *Evangelization for the Third Millennium*, Avery Dulles observes that "The apologetically oriented theology of recent centuries . . . was too rationalistic and ecclesiocentric to be called evangelical."⁶⁸ What is needed in the third millennium, he argues, is an approach that involves "the whole person—mind, will, and emotions," in the entrustment of the self to God.⁶⁹ This entrustment must begin with the evangelist who will be a witness to and agent through which the Holy Spirit, the real "transcendent agent of evangelization," will change the world.⁷⁰

Many have recognized the way in which Mariology can unite scholarly study with more affectively appealing devotion, bridging the divide between head and heart in the quest for truth. This is an invaluable aid in evangelization because, as John Paul II observes in *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*:

Christ is the supreme Teacher, the revealer and the one revealed. It is not just a question of learning what he taught but of "*learning him*." In this regard could we have any better teacher than Mary?⁷¹

Many have also recognized the need for evangelists to be first themselves evangelized, giving themselves entirely to the power of the Holy Spirit Who is the evangelizer par excellence. Here Mary is not only our great exemplar, but the most powerful and active intercessor on our behalf. John Paul II explains,

Given Mary's relationship to the Church as an exemplar, the Church is close to her and seeks to become like her: "Imitating the Mother of her

⁶⁷ Ibid., no. 41.

⁶⁸ Dulles, *Evangelization for the Third Millennium*, 80.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁷¹ John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, no. 14. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20021016_rosarium-virginis-mariae_en.html. Accessed March 12, 2013.

Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she preserves with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope, and a sincere charity." Mary is thus present in the mystery of the Church as a *model*. But the Church's mystery also consists in generating people to a new and immortal life: this is her motherhood in the Holy Spirit. And here Mary is not only the model and figure of the Church; she is much more. For, "*with maternal love she cooperates in the birth and development*" of the sons and daughters of Mother Church. The Church's motherhood is accomplished not only according to the model and figure of the Mother of God but also with her "cooperation."⁷²

In the end, the success of evangelization, as with every human endeavor, rises and falls with the prayer life of the Church—a prayer life that pleads for a change of hearts as well as minds, knowing that there are certain obstacles to conversion that cannot be overcome through even the most insightful discourse. For example, many who have been formed within a hedonist culture, when confronted with the great suffering endured by Christ, Mary, and Christ's followers will, no doubt, flee to the warmth of liberalism's falsely comforting embrace. How does one summon the strength to hope for resurrection in the midst of crucifixion? The promise revealed in Mary's assumption into heaven provides some help, but, in the end, faith and hope in the midst of suffering must be received as gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the end, John Paul II's example of entrusting himself, his work and the world to Mary as our universal mother and intercessor is our most powerful Marian aid. So, in keeping with this thought, I would like to end with the words that close John Paul II's encyclical on the Redeemer of man. After acknowledging that the many tasks of the Church are overwhelming and impossible without Christ, the late pontiff says:

Above all, I implore Mary, the heavenly Mother of the Church, to be so good as to devote herself to this prayer of humanity's new Advent, together with us who make up the Church, that is to say the Mystical Body

⁷² *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 44. John Paul II is quoting *Lumen Gentium*, no. 64. The latter is available online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. Accessed Jan. 10, 2013.

of her Only Son. I hope that through this prayer we shall be able to receive the Holy Spirit coming upon us and thus become Christ's witnesses "to the end of the earth," like those who went forth from the Upper Room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.⁷³

⁷³ *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 22. This quotation references Acts 1:13 and 1:8.