The Virgin Mary and the Pope:

Portrait of Benedict XVI

On the day after his election as pope, Benedict XVI addressed the cardinals, pledging to “work without sparing energies for the reconstitution of a full and visible unity of all followers of Christ.” Looking to Christ, Benedict renewed his “unconditional promise of fidelity. Him alone I intend to serve, dedicating myself totally to the service of his Church.” Then he added: “To support me in this promise, I invoke the maternal intercession of Most Holy Mary, in whose hands I place the present and the future of my person and the Church.”

Joseph Ratzinger does not speak in a glib manner. We may be sure his modus operandi will not be lacking German Gründlichkeit—thoroughness. In other words, he meant what he said about Our Lady. Although a Marian reference can be a matter of convention rather than conviction, the final sentence of his first message to the cardinals had the ring of authenticity and, more, of anticipation. His first words placed both pope and Church in the hands of Mary, an act of entrustment, an expression of both need and trust. Benedict recognized Mary’s “encompassing motherliness,” an expression dear to his revered friend, Hans Urs von Balthasar. He highlighted the noble role of Mary’s maternal intercession, and so pointed out her noble and totally dependent relation to Christ. In his funeral homily, he had entrusted the “dear soul” of John Paul II to the Mother of God that she might guide him to the eternal glory of her Son.

A Different Style

Benedict XVI is not John Paul II. He never claimed to be a committed follower of Grignon de Montfort. He is not known for effusive expressions of Marian devotion, as found in Polish or Latin cultures. Cool and disciplined, hardly expansive, he keeps the sentiments of his heart within the depths of his German soul. Is Benedict XVI a pope for Mary? To state the obvious, he will not try to imitate the style of John Paul II which was engaged and engaging, emotional, and even daring. Benedict XVI is a piano player and aficionado of Mozart’s music. Like the genius from Salzburg, the man from Regensburg is all nuances and cadences, a theological virtuoso of artful and measured variations supported by a powerful cantus firmus of revealed essentials. Benedict’s attitude toward Mary fits the theological context of Germany. In his own words: “Personally, my attitude was shaped from the beginning by the strongly christocentric aspect of the liturgical movement, and this has been further strengthened in dialogue with our Protestant friends” (Seewald, 296). Here we have the cantus firmus which has its roots in Scripture, liturgy and dogma. The variations are the May devotions, the October rosary, and the places of pilgrimage. And there may be a further variation due to age: “…the older I am, the more the Mother of God is important to me and close to me.” (Seewald, 296).

Mary, Star of Hope

Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a journey in which we watch for the stars to show the route. The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope. Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by—people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way. Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us? With her “yes” she opened the door of our world to God himself.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to his Kingdom! Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way!

Benedict XVI: Spe Salvi, 49-50
We do not praise God sufficiently by keeping silent about the saints, especially Mary, ‘the Holy One’ who became his dwelling place on earth. The simple and multiform light of God appears to us exactly in its variety and richness only in the countenance of the saints, who are the true mirrors of his light. And it is precisely by looking at Mary’s face that we can see more clearly than in any other way the beauty, goodness and mercy of God. In her face we can truly perceive the divine light.

Benedict XVI: Homily, Assumption 2007

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The School of Mary

The words close and closeness seem to have a special fascination for Benedict. When asked what does Mary mean to him, his first response is that she is “an expression of the closeness of God.” There are two meanings to the word close. Mary offers the closeness of a mother, but even more important, she is herself an expression of the closeness of God. Because of Mary’s closeness to God and to us, we may conclude, as Benedict himself invites us to “contemplate Christ with Mary’s eyes.” In doing so, he follows the example of John Paul II, who taught by example “to contemplate Christ with Mary’s eyes.” In his own way, Benedict XVI values the prayer of the rosary. For a “restless spirit” like his, the rosary “allows the soul to settle into tranquility... (makes it) calm and free and grant(s) it a vision of God” (Seewald, 319). He associates the rosary with consolation and healing; it is an inner refuge, with the certitude of being “enfolded in the rhythm of the prayer of the whole Church” (Seewald, 320). Praying three rosaries daily, even one, would be too much for him: “I would wander too much.” He fits two or three mysteries “in a certain interval when I want to get away from work and free myself a bit, when I want to be quiet and clear my head.” He humbly recognizes that “the older you get, the less you are able to make great spiritual efforts” (Seewald, 320). Just as humbly, he admits: “I do it quite simply, just as my parents used to pray” (Seewald 319). But he is very much aware of the deeper theological meaning of the rosary. It takes people “out of themselves” to experience Mary’s feminine and motherly closeness, and makes the soul become “one with the words,” those words which convey closeness with the Lord. From the very first days of his pontificate, Benedict urged his many and varied visitors to “enter the school of Mary to learn to love and follow Christ above all else” (General Audience, May 4, 2007).

Conversational Mariology?

Scanning Ratzinger’s considerable bibliography, the reader discovers a rather modest number of Marian titles, mostly articles and homilies and only a single monograph, Daughter of Zion (1977, 1983 English). Ratzinger did not spontaneously, much less impulsively, take up his pen to write about Mary. It was Hans Urs von Balthasar who “patiently wrested” the manuscript of Daughter of Zion from him, the same Balthasar who criticized Ratzinger’s lack of clarity in formulating Jesus’ divine sonship, and to whom Ratzinger concedes: “Yes, I admit that I did not make the point clearly enough” (Daughter of Zion, 51, footnote 11). Most of what Ratzinger wrote about Mary were writings commissioned or of circumstantial character. The future Pope seems more at ease to talk about Mary when asked questions in conversations with journalists, as for example with V. Messori (The Ratzinger Report, Ignatius 1985) and P. Seewald, (God and the World, Ignatius, 2000). In 1985, Cardinal Ratzinger saw in Mary a remedy and a pedagogy: “Mary must be more than ever the pedagogy, in order to proclaim the Gospel to the men of today” (Messori, 106). He urged a return to Mary to rediscover the truth about Jesus Christ, the truth about the Church, and the truth about the human person: “If the place occupied by Mary has been essential to the equilibrium of the Faith, today it is urgent, as in few other epochs of Church history, to rediscover that place” (Messori, 105). There was a time, as a young theologian, when Ratzinger had “some reservations in regard to certain ancient Marian formulas, such as De Maria numquam satis’ and ‘Conqueror of All Heresies.’” No longer in 1985—in a “confused period where truly every type of heretical aberration seems to be pressing upon the doors of the authentic faith” (Messori, 105).

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Six Indicators

How does Benedict see in Mary a warrant for the “equilibrium of faith”? He lists six points, “six reasons for not forgetting.” It is most revealing that these reasons are not primarily characterizations or privileges of Mary herself, but theological indicators of what Mary and Mariology mean for our faith. These six “benchmarks” should come as no surprise:

1. In Marian dogma and tradition we have a solid foundation for authentic Christology.
2. Mariology expresses the right relationship and integration of Scripture and tradition.
3. Mary—both as Jewish girl and mother of the Messiah—“binds together, in a living and indissoluble way, the old and the new People of God, Israel and Christianity, synagogue and Church.” (Messori, 107)
4. Rightly ordered Marian devotion strikes an indispensable balance between heart and mind, assuring the faith its full dimension.
5. Mary is figure and archetype of the Church, the human face of the Church. In her, “the Church again finds her own visage as mother.” Mary is the antidote against faith as abstraction and Church as a sociological organization or pressure group.
6. Finally, Mary projects a “light upon that which the Creator intended for women in every age: through her virginity and motherhood, the mystery of woman receives a very lofty destiny from which she cannot be torn away” (Messori, 108). *Lumen Gentium* states that Mary “unites in her person and reechoes the most important mysteries of the faith” (#65). Benedict does not hesitate to remind his readers that authentic Mariology is a true guardian of revealed truths: the truths about Christ, the relation between Scripture and Tradition, Old and New Testament, heart and reason in faith, the Marian and Petrine Church, and the essence of femininity.

“Completely a Christian”

Fifteen years later, in 2000, Cardinal Ratzinger’s reflections about Mary seem more relaxed and reflective, even meditative. Questioned about Mary in Scripture and dogma, about Marian devotion and apparitions, he developed a portrait of Mary adorned with a throng of interesting insights and original formulations. This woman, he says, had “a quite unique union with God,” but she was fearless. Her story shows that we do not need to be afraid of God. In his greatness, God makes himself small, he saves and does not frighten. He brings life. Being the mother of the One who is life and gives life, Mary is mother “of life and of the living,” the fulfillment of what Eve was meant to be. Ratzinger sees in Mary the “original image of woman.” She is the “pure figure of humanity and the Church,” not withstanding the little information about her in Scripture. “I would say here,” the Cardinal remarks, “people were discreet so long as she was alive. And obviously she herself was always discreet” (Seewald, 297). In Luke she appears as the mother not only in her body but in her mind and heart, mother of those who hear and believe, and keep the Word. In John, at Cana and at Calvary, her role as mother “has been more clearly worked out.” At Cana she is the “prototype of the interceding Church.” At the cross, Jesus’ “new family” begins, in which Mary holds a new and essential place. The name woman is a “theological image,” pointing out that Mary “plays a role beyond that of an individual: She appears as the “image of the New Eve.”

As the “New Eve,” Mary was *His* (Jesus’) mother “and could not afterward belong to anyone else.” She is the “actual door into history” through which came the Messiah. “She remains in the same reserved position as the gate (cf. Ezekiel), which belongs to the king alone” (Seewald, 303). This means, for Cardinal Ratzinger, that the notion of brothers and sisters can be understood only in the “framework of clan thinking.” Her being set apart for Christ—the Immaculate Conception—“was the characteristic trait of her life... She stands from the outset, in a special way, in the sight of God, who had looked upon her (Magnificat) and allowed her to look upon him” (Seewald, 304). The Immaculate Conception brings with it “a complete state of grace,” which with the Assumption is transformed into full community with Christ. Notwithstanding the difficulties of this dogma, for example, what is meant by heaven, by glorified body? The “essential point of this dogma is that Mary is wholly with God, entirely with Christ, completely a Christian” (in another corporal identity, which we cannot imagine)” (Seewald, 305).

“It has always been the Mother”

“Mariology has expressed the inmost feelings of Christianity. Here people can have direct experience of Christianity as the religion of trust, of certainty” (Seewald, 299). Through the mother, they find God. Religion is no longer a burden but a help in coping with life. Mary, in a special way, is the key to missionary activity. “There is one thing we must not forget,” Benedict has said, “it has always been the mother who reached people in a missionary situation and made Christ accessible to them” (Seewald, 300). People hold tight to Mary because she is “the open door to God,” the key to a deeper under-
For Benedict, Christianity is a “religion of the heart,” especially when the “simple soul becomes the seeing soul.”

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standing of God. Benedict uses this symbolism frequently: “Through Mary they are able to look upon the face of Christ and of God, so that they are able to understand God,” or, in a different context: “The mystery of the Son and the mystery of God are made accessible to men in a special way through the mother” (Seewald, 307).

“The simple soul becomes the seeing soul”

For Benedict, Christianity is a “religion of the heart,” especially when the “simple soul becomes the seeing soul.” Confronted with questions regarding apparitions, he bundles the deeper and lasting meaning of major and recognized events in the symbol of the “woman clothed with the sun,” which stands for the People of God of the Old and New Testament but also for Mary herself. He sees in the sun in which she is arrayed the true light of the world, Jesus Christ. Apparitions express Mary’s “radical connection with Christ.” He calls the image of the Apocalyptic Woman “frightening,” and, more importantly, it is “power enthroned.” Visitors of Lourdes, Fatima, and Guadalupe experience “the greatness of this figure, as well as the consolation and healing it brings” (Seewald, 309).

Church in Person

What counts in Ratzinger’s eyes are the “essentials,” the “profound inner level” of understanding, conviction, and commitment. Here may be one of the reasons, both personal as well as professional, why he assesses the movement in favor of the dogmatization of Mary’s co-redemption with caution. He points out that Christ “builds a profound and new community with us” (Seewald, 306). Redemption is the heart of the “great exchange”: what is his became ours, and what is ours becomes his. This “being with” is expressed in exemplary fashion in Mary who is the “prototype of the Church” and, so to speak, “the Church in person.” It must not lead us “to forget the ‘first’ of Christ: …Mary, too, is everything that she is through him” (Seewald, 306). He finds that the expression “co-redemptrix” would obscure this absolute origin in Christ, and departs to “too great extent from the language of Scripture and the Fathers.” The continuity of language with Scripture and Fathers is essential for matters of faith. It would be improper, according to Ratzinger, to “simply manipulate language.” He sees in the movement promoting Mary’s co-redemption a “correct intention” being expressed in the wrong way.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith holds that “what is signified by this (namely, ‘co-redemptrix’) is already better expressed in other titles of Mary.” And so his answer to the request is summarized in the following sentence: “I do not think there will be any compliance with this demand, which in the meantime is being supported by several million people, within the foreseeable future” (Seewald, 306).

Home of the Word

Benedict’s approach to Mary follows the pattern of ecclesiotypical Mariology. In doing so, he finds himself in the company of theological luminaries such as Przywara, Congar, de Lubac, and, to an extent, Balthasar.

The ecclesiotypical point of view rests on solid patristic foundations and uses typological methodology. Derived from this approach is a double mirror-effect. The Church reads and explicates itself in Mary, and vice-versa. Mary, for her part, explains the Church’s relationship with Christ. In Mary, the Church is Bride, Virgin, and Mother. Conversely, Mary’s membership in the Church, eminent as may be, is solidly established. We find all of these characteristics in Ratzinger’s Marian thinking. He pictures Mary as the “personal concretization” of the Church, the true “Daughter of Zion,” the personalized beginning of the New Covenant (Introduction to Christianity, 1969; Daughter Zion, 1983). We have here the foundation for Mary’s role of model and exemplar for our faith. In a homily to conclude the month of May in 1979, the Archbishop of Munich hailed Mary as the one who keeps the word in her heart. She is the one who believed and was praised “blessed” because she believed (Lk 1, 45). Commenting on all the so-called rejection texts about Mary in the New Testament (Lk. 11, 27: 2. 49: Mk 3, 34: John 2, 4), he showed that in fact they lead us to the very nature of Marian devotion. How is that? Mary is the “dwelling place for the Word of God,” a place where the word is accepted, nurtured, protected; where it is given space, allowed to grow and be at home in a homeless world. Most important, Mary is the fertile ground where the seed of the Word bears fruit. The Marian character of the Christian existence is expressed in Luke’s definition of true blessedness.

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Blessed are those who “hear the word of God and observe it” (Lk. 11, 28). Benedict sees in this Marian attitude a sure direction and trustworthy reference for all those pilgrims in route to eternity who have to brave confusion and contradictions, trial and hardship, anxiety and rejection. 

Fr. Johann G. Raten, S. M.

The Mariological Society of America will be meeting in St. Augustine, Florida, May 26-29, 2009. The theme will be “Telling the Story: The ‘Life of Mary’ through the Ages.” Presentations will study Marian biography as found in the apocrypha, medieval and mystical sources, the visual arts, and contemporary media. For the “Call for Papers,” visit www.mariologicalsociety.com.

The Promised Woman was the first book, he noted, to be published on that topic in twenty-five years. The selections in these anthologies were not simply articles listed in a standard periodical index, but “the very best that has been written on the subject,” excerpts from the works of spiritual authors such as Emil Neubert, Fulton Sheen, Ronald Knox, Thomas Stanley, Caryll Houselander, William Most, Gerald Vann, Marie-Michel Philipon—all who attempted to relate Marian doctrines to the faith-life of the believer.

The second anthology, *The Queen of the Universe*, presented essays on the Assumption and Our Lady’s Queenship, with some selections appearing for the first time in English. In the introduction, he wrote, “In years past, American Marian literature has occasionally been castigated for its subjective, sentimentalized character, often the result of poor translations of European works. Nevertheless it is fair to say that the aversion which some people have developed towards devotion to Mary may be attributed, at least in part, to the former inadequacy of our doctrinal and devotional literature in our country.” He also voiced a sentiment.

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well embedded in the Marian Library’s mission: “The Marian apostolate will be as solid as the books which form the ideas of the apostles.”

Along with Fr. Philip Hoelle, Bro. Stan edited the Marianist, transforming that periodical from a general miscellany of articles into a digest of Marian focus. Regular features included an article on the month’s Marian feast, news from The Marian Library, and the Marian Bookshelf. He accomplished much with limited resources and frequently referred to the Marian Library’s minor miracle: “It existed entirely on donations.”

Bro. Stan held significant positions in the Marianist province—principal of secondary schools, director of renewal programs, province Councilor and Assistant Provincial, and the first Marianist Rector at the University of Dayton. In retirement, he tutored students at St. Aloysius School, in Cleveland, Ohio.

As the many tributes at his funeral indicated, he was neither judgmental nor a moralizer. He treated both the influential and God’s little ones with respect and dignity. His influence came from the ever-fresh way he conveyed vision and hope. Words which he once used to describe the writings of Gerald Vann are applicable to his own life: “He shook our religious reactions out of the rut of habit by vivid insight.”

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Brother Stan Mathews, (right) with Brother Mike O'Grady, S.M.

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Our Lady of Fatima with Children
Illustration by Anne Simoneau.

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