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Jean-Herve Nicolas

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Mother of His Many Brethren

JEAN-HERVE NICOLAS, O.P.

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ABOUT THE ARTICLE . . .

The Lourdes year focuses attention once again on the Blessed Virgin Mary's relation with the world and her influence on its destiny. In this article, originally a conference given at the University of Fribourg, Father Nicolas examines the theological meaning of Mary's spiritual motherhood, and, taking account of the difficulties involved in the concept, offers an explanation which allows the Blessed Virgin a role in the redemptive act itself.

Author of Connaitre Dieu (1947) and Le Mystere de la Grace (1951), as well as of numerous articles, Father Nicolas taught theology over a period of 17 years at the Dominican scholasticate of St. Maximin near Marseille, before being assigned the chair of speculative dogmatic theology at Fribourg in 1955. Father Nicolas holds the special Dominican degree of Master of Sacred Theology. The translation is the work of Fathers George Montague, S.M., and August Biehl, S.M.

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MOTHER OF HIS MANY BRETHREN

JEAN-HERVE NICOLAS, O.P.

For those whom he has foreknown he has also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren. (Rom. 8, 29.)

These words of St. Paul do not directly concern the Blessed Virgin, but they are an irresistible invitation to think of her. For the eternal Son of God is also the Son of Mary in time, and it is precisely as He is incarnate, that is, as Son of Mary, that He has become our model. It is natural then to expect that His "many brethren" must also be children of Mary, and that she who gave birth to the First-born is also called to play a mother's part in their birth to the new life in Christ.

The New Eve

When the celebrated theme of the "New Eve" first appeared, it was stated simply as a comparison between the disobedience of Eve, which brought us death, and the obedience of Mary, which brought us life. Mary was thus considered as the cause of our salvation in that to her obedience and faith we owe the Savior. Subsequently the idea developed of Mary's active presence at Jesus' side in the work of salvation. Such a development was quite natural, for the very idea of comparing Mary to Eve makes one think of St. Paul's comparison of Christ and Adam. The comparison suggests not only an opposition in moral conduct, but bears also, and more profoundly, on the role of both in their relation to the human race. From Adam as head not only was the entire race to spring, but from him too was to be transmitted, along with the human life, the life of grace, original justice. Instead Adam lost grace and original justice in consequence of his sin, and thus he could transmit with his nature only this condition of culpable privation of grace, which we call original sin. The new Adam, Christ, is head of humanity, no longer because He is first in the mere order
of succession, but because being the Incarnate Word and having grace by right as Son of God, He is supremely and uniquely qualified to restore humanity, so that in the place of the first defaulting Adam we have a new and more perfect fountain-head of the life of grace.

According to God's original plan, however, there were to be two to constitute a principle of human life and grace, Adam and his helpmate. How then can we avoid thinking that in the order of regeneration there should be at Christ's side a woman to play the counterpart of Eve—not simply because one of them obeyed and the other disobeyed, but because in all truth the "New Eve" also concurred in restoring life to the human race? This idea, contained implicitly in the concept of New Eve, and perhaps already intimated in the concept of the New Adam, came to light from the mysterious presence in Holy Scripture of the Savior-couple, the mother and the Child, in the various stages of our salvation.

At the very beginning of the race, immediately after the fall, we find a prophecy to which exegetes have not been able to give a definitive interpretation, but which remains none the less charged with a very rich meaning: it is not only a Savior that is promised, but a Savior born of the woman, and both the woman and the child are associated in the struggle of man's revenge against Satan. In the New Testament, we find Mary at the side of Jesus on the cross—at that moment which marks the summit in the history of the salvation of the race. Scripture may even show us that Mary has a role in all the stages of the life of the Church, for some exegetes believe that we must see Mary, at least to some extent, in the vision of the victorious woman in the Apocalypse. I cannot tarry here on the exegesis of this difficult chapter; I shall simply point out that there is at least one trait which can apply to none other than the Blessed Virgin, namely that she brings forth a male child who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron. The allusion is certainly messianic, and can be applied only to her who gave birth to Jesus, and hence in no way to the Church itself, for in no way can the Church be said to have given birth to Jesus.

This biblical notion is more striking when we think of the important role played by woman at man's side in his greatest endeavors. She is undeniably man's associate not only in transmitting life, but in all important human works whether in the spiritual or temporal order.
Now it is certain that the redemption is a human work; a divine work, yes, because the Word redeems; but also a human work because He redeems in flesh of the lineage of Adam.

The question naturally arises: if this is a human work, is there not also a feminine action? If woman played such a decisive role in the catastrophe the redemption came to repair, is she to be excluded from the work of reparation?

Helpmate: Mother or Spouse?

Yet, if we look closely, we find that this idea of Mary as helpmate gives rise to a great repugnance. For woman’s natural role in man’s lifework is that of spouse. Eve was the spouse of Adam. But Mary is not—she cannot be—the spouse of Christ. She is his mother. If there is an opposition between the role of mother and spouse—as it evidently seems there is—then we must be content to return to the first idea we find in tradition and say that Mary cooperated in our salvation simply by giving birth to the Savior.

But is the role of helpmate so much the prerogative of the spouse that a mother cannot be the associate of her son? Once a mother has guided her child to maturity and to the undertaking of a life-work, it is not contrary to her maternity to put herself at his service and to work for him. This dedication is a mother’s profound desire.

However, in ordinary human motherhood, this maternal desire is more or less impossible to realize. On the one hand, the mother is already dedicated to another man, and even if she finds herself free on that score so as to be able to consecrate all her time and effort to her son, this is for her a second dedication. She does not give herself to him in the freshness of her youth; she has already done something else. On the other hand, even if the son uses his mother’s services and is happy to have her at his side, he will also normally bring another woman into his life; and at that moment, this second woman becomes his primary collaborator and helpmate. Hence, even when a mother puts herself at the service of her son, it is something provisional, imperfect, destined not to endure.

But the desire does exist. And consequently, if there be a motherhood in which these restrictive conditions are eliminated, then, in the
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natural evolution of her motherhood, she will be well suited to be the associate of her son.

This is what happens in a sublime way with Mary. On the one hand, her maternal consent was given in perfect virginity—that is to say, in all the freshness of a being who had never been totally engaged to anyone but God. But her son is, precisely, God. Hence, it is not a question of a new engagement. She gives her whole self for the first time. And this virginal consent is to a Son who is already existing.

The Son, on the other hand, was able to choose His mother. This unique factor means that He singled her out among all women by a choice more perfect and more complete than that by which a man chooses his wife. Hence, in the Divine Motherhood, without leaving the notion of motherhood—and this is the important point: without introducing a foreign element of spousehood—we can find an association as perfect as that between spouses. It is not the spousal relation that we find, but an association as perfect as the spousal relation, the perfect association of a mother with her son. Hence, if the Son wished to make use of a woman for His redemptive work, and if He could choose her, He could not choose as His associate anyone else but His Mother. In other words, the act by which He chose His Mother would be the act by which He chose His associate.

But the question is whether the Word in fact wanted to have an associate for his redemptive work, and whether, even he could have one. And here we meet the second great question: Can we conceive the role of a simple creature, even Mary, as His collaborator?

Role of Mary in the Redemption

To state the problem clearly, we must distinguish the redemptive act of Christ from the participation of each person in the redemption. The redemptive act itself is the Son’s offering of His life to the Father in unbounded love, religion and submission, atoning for sin—the original sin and all the sins following from it. He repaired sin totally and definitively; his act is an affirmation of God so solemn and so perfect that the infinite offense is abolished and the reparation need never be repeated.
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Quite different is the act by which a man associates himself with Christ in his redemptive act. Through faith and the sacraments, a man receives grace, forgiveness, sanctification, eternal life. Unlike the unique and singular Calvary sacrifice, this activity goes on throughout history and successively in the life of each Christian.

Now, taking the redemption in the second sense, every man, from the moment he is justified, can cooperate in the salvation of his fellow-men. That is the dogma of the communion of saints: one man can by his merits, prayers, and satisfactions obtain grace for another, not by a strict right, of course, but by the merit which theologians call de congruo, i.e., a merit that is based not on justice, but on the rights of friendship. When a person loves God and accomplishes His will, it befits God's grandeur and magnificence to fulfill that person's will by saving his brothers.

We can see immediately that this right of friendship is based on two elements: the person's degree of friendship with God (which makes it fitting that God accomplish his will), and the intensity of his desire for his brothers' salvation (for if God accomplishes His will, his will must be to save his brothers). Every Christian aflame with charity, is, of course, interested in the salvation of men. But we are speaking here of a special concern rising from the fact that a given man or group of men mean something to him personally. In this field, the ordinary Christian, even the saint, is necessarily limited, not only by the degree of his charity, but also by circumstances of time and place. He belongs to limited groups. His personal contacts are limited. Consequently his special interests are likewise limited, whether this be in the natural order (his family, his neighborhood, his city) or in the supernatural (a missionary, for example, who burns with zeal for the salvation of all the souls in his mission).

In the Blessed Virgin, this way (de congruo) of cooperating in the salvation of all men is found in a degree absolutely eminent. Immaculate in her conception, and unmatched in holiness, she is God's closest friend. And since Christ, her Son, died for all men, she has a personal interest in the salvation of all. This naturally does not require any miracle, nor a vision which would have permitted the Blessed Virgin to see each man in particular, for one can ardently desire the salvation of a group of men, as does a missionary to a
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foreign tribe, without knowing each individual who composes it.

Mary’s eminent role in this way of saving men places her truly at the heart of the Church, that is to say, there is absolutely nothing in the life of the Church which escapes her solicitude and influence.

But we can ask: isn’t there something more for the Blessed Virgin? Did she not play a role in the redemptive act itself? There are rather strong reasons for an affirmative answer.

Reasons for Mary’s Role in the Redemptive Act

The first is that Mary is the New Eve. To say that the New Eve concurs only in the redemption’s application, however abundant her prayers and merits, seems insufficient. She would be cooperator in an eminent way when compared to the other saints, but her cooperation would nevertheless be of the same order. If she is fully Christ’s helpmate, is she not also his associate in the very act by which he saved us?

A second reason is well established in revelation: Mary was at the foot of the cross. Now our faith must see things as they are: Mary’s son was God, the Lord of events, who held in his power all that happened to his mother. On the other hand, he had toward her all the noblest sentiments a man could have toward his mother. What son is there, who, being in a situation like Christ’s, a situation which He clearly foresaw, would not have arranged for His mother not to be there to suffer this unspeakable torment? Hence, the sole fact that Mary was there suggests that she had to be there, that Christ needed her.

Whence comes this necessity of her presence? In no way from the personal needs of Mary, for she is immaculate and completely holy. She has no need whatever of purification, and especially no need of purification by suffering. She doesn’t need suffering to merit for herself, and I would say that she didn’t need suffering to merit for others, for the principle of merit is not suffering but charity. And charity does not need suffering to grow—certainly not in the immaculate soul of Mary. We might indeed say that charity impelled her to be with Jesus; but that the Son should want her to be there is not understandable if it was only to increase her merit. Whereas her pres-
ence is much more understandable if He wanted her there for what He had to do. Such an association would illuminate the words of Jesus at Cana, as Father Braun shows in *La Mere des Fideles*, “What is it to me and to thee? My hour has not yet come.” *My hour* is the passion. Now is not the moment, but when *My hour* comes, I shall need you.

**Reasons Against Mary’s Role in the Redemptive Act**

The reasons against giving Mary a role in the redemptive act are also very strong. First: Mary herself is redeemed. This point, though strangely contested today by some theologians, is found expressly in the Bull *Ineffabilis* proclaiming the Immaculate Conception; and in the history of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, we see that the Church could not reach a formulation of the dogma until it was possible to explain how Mary was preserved from original sin by the redemption of her Son. Further, if Mary is Christ’s masterpiece, she should depend on him even more intimately than others. Hence, it is inconceivable that a person belonging to the race of Adam should have grace otherwise than by Jesus in his role as Redeemer, *intuitu meritorum Jesu Christi Salvatoris*. Hence all the grace Mary has comes from the redemptive act of Christ. How then can we understand that she concurred in this redemptive act? Can a living being concur in the very act by which it receives life?

A second reason: Christ is the sole Redeemer. The profound sense of the Incarnation, at least according to St. Thomas, is given us in the radical insufficiency of a mere man to save man. As the offense was infinite, so must be the reparation. The Son comes because He alone can do what nobody else can.

Now if we make Mary enter this act, are we not giving to a mere creature something that the Word alone could do? Does this not render useless the Incarnation and the Redemption by the Son? How is it conceivable that the Father should deliver his Son to death, if not that the salvation God willed for the race could be obtained only in that way. If a simple creature could suffice, should not a simple creature have done it? It would seem, then, that any effective sharing of the role of redeemer is impossible.

The balance-sheet of reasons for and against comes to this: the
reasons against are so strong that if we cannot resolve them, we must renounce trying to find a place for Mary in the Redemptive act itself. But the reasons for are so pressing, that if we can resolve the difficulties, we must go to the very limit in the association of Jesus and Mary and say that she has played a role in the Redemptive act itself. What role? The role which the resolution of the difficulties just presented will permit and indicate.

Mary's Role as Indicated by the First Difficulty

If Mary is redeemed, it is in an exceptional way, in a more sublime way, says the Bull *Ineffabilis*. She is redeemed in such a way that she is preserved from the sin from which she is redeemed. If we examine closely this notion of preventive redemption, we find not only that Mary was redeemed before being touched by sin, but that she is redeemed before the rest of mankind, not according to a priority of time, because in that order all the saints of the old order were somehow redeemed before her, but according to a priority of nature, that is, the redemptive act was ordered primarily to redeem her and only after she was redeemed did it concern the rest of mankind. That is the profound meaning of the Immaculate Conception. In other words, if an act is specified by its object, the first object of the redemptive act is the purity of Mary. The second object, ordered to the first, is the human race, and thereafter, each person in particular. Hence we can consider the redemptive act in two phases. Mary is redeemed first, and then is immediately associated with Christ for the second phase of the redemptive act, the redemption of all other men.

In the Biblical figure of Eve drawn from the side of Adam, we find the expressive symbol of the association of Mary with Christ. Eve was formed from Adam to be his associate in the transmission of life. So Mary is formed from the grace of Christ in her supernatural being and is immediately associated with Him to transmit the life of grace to the human race.

Mary's Role as Indicated by the Second Difficulty

To resolve this second difficulty, the one created by the fact
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that Christ is sole redeemer, we must analyse the redemptive act on Calvary. In this sacrifice Christ is both priest and victim. As priest, Christ could have no associate, for he alone is capable of offering a sacrifice acceptable to God in atonement for sin. “Sacrifice and oblation thou wouldst not” from any creature; “then, said I: Behold I come.” (Heb. 10. 5-7). Hence we must exclude Mary’s cooperation in Christ’s offering as priest.

But Christ is also victim. Now to declare simply that Mary was victim with him because she suffered with him and her suffering could be accepted by God would be too facile a solution. For any saint can unite his sufferings with Christ. This is quite different from saying that this saint cooperates in the redemptive act itself. How then can the compassion of Mary be part of the sacrifice that Christ himself offered on the cross?

In any redemptive suffering, there is what we might call the matter of suffering; and then there is the spirit in which one suffers, the spirit of charity and obedience. Suffering alone cannot please God, and hence cannot be offered. The only thing that can please him in suffering is that it be the expression and the effect of love and obedience. Now, if we consider the immense charity and perfect obedience of Mary at th foot of the cross, we must say that even on that score she could add nothing to the sacrifice of Christ, because this charity and obedience was hers from Christ. All Mary’s grace, like that of any other saint, comes from Christ’s redemptive act itself. It is as inconceivable to say that she added to the charity and obedience of Christ as it is to say that a fire can reheat itself by its own heat.

We must therefore look at the suffering itself, which is the matter of the sacrifice. And here appears the unique role of Mary. Christ, in effect, wishing to expiate all man’s sins, wished to undergo all man’s sufferings. Theologians point out that the least act of Christ had an infinite value, because he was the Word, and a spiritual value quasi-infinite because he was inspired by a charity and obedience that had no limit. Why then, and the question is classic in theology, did He wish to undergo such immense suffering, when the least act would have sufficed? The admirable answer of St. Thomas is this: Christ wanted His sacrifice to be perfect in every way, not only in the person Who sacrifices Himself, not only in the charity which inspires this
sacrifice, but also in the thing offered. He willed that there be an exact balance between human sin and its expiation. And that is why He wished to undergo all human suffering.

Now there is one suffering most characteristically human—seeing a loved one suffer and die. This we call compassion. Now Christ could not suffer this compassion in Himself, for it is contradictory to say that one co-suffers with one's own suffering and death. And here appears in brilliant clarity the necessity of Mary—that this suffering, too, might be offered by the High Priest of the New Alliance. We must not say that the Blessed Virgin was so necessary that without her Christ could not have saved the world; but we can say that he willed to need her to realize his design to offer a perfect sacrifice.

This explanation gives a rich and profound meaning to the primal prophecy of Genesis, to the prophecy announcing the sword that would pierce Mary's soul, to her presence at the foot of the cross, and also to her presence throughout the history of the Church, indicated perhaps by the Apocalypse.

_Mediatrix of All Graces_

It seems, then, that the reasons against are sufficiently resolved that we can affirm that she really participated in the redemptive act, and consequently that all the graces given in the world she truly concurred in gaining. Note that whatever be the manner of her cooperation, it is recognized by theologians and by the habitual teaching of the Church that she is mediatrix of all graces. It could suffice, as we said at first, that she merited _de congruo_ the graces for the entire race, and that her prayer now is based on the merit she acquired on earth. But it is certain that her mediation takes on a more profound and complete meaning if, as we have said, her prayer is based on the fact that the application of the redemption is the application of an act in which she herself concurred.

In accepting, with a wholly lucid and perfectly generous love, to become the Mother of the Savior, Mary consecrated herself wholly to Him and to His work as only a mother could do. Thereby she already became our mother, espousing in the depths of her great and holy soul, the love and saving solicitude of her Son. How could He refuse
this humble offering of total devotedness? He wished her to be at His side at the hour of His supreme sacrifice. If He accepted her offering, if He mingled His mother's tears with His own blood into a single sacrifice, then she became fully our mother at the cross, and her sorrows are the pangs of an immense spiritual childbirth, of which her incessant prayers merely extend from generation to generation, to all who believe in Jesus, the effects of resurrection and of life.
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