

2010

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Robert L. Fastiggi

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### Recommended Citation

Fastiggi, Robert L. (2010) "The Use of the Sensus Plenior in the Mariology of John Paul II," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 61, Article 8.

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# THE USE OF THE *SENSUS PLENIOR* IN THE MARIOLOGY OF JOHN PAUL II

*Robert L. Fastiggi, Ph.D.\**

## INTRODUCTION: MARY'S PRESENCE IN THE SACRED SCRIPTURES

It is sometimes asserted that the Bible provides very few references to the Blessed Virgin Mary.<sup>1</sup> Yet Vatican II, in its *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, states:

The Sacred Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments, as well as ancient Tradition, show the role of the Mother of the Savior in the economy of salvation in an ever clearer light and draw attention to it. (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 55)<sup>2</sup>

One contemporary author reaffirms the prominence of Mary in Scripture in these words:

For Mary fills the pages of Scripture from the beginning of the first book through the end of the last. She was there, in God's plan, from the

\*Dr. Robert Fastiggi is professor of Systematic Theology on the faculty of the Religious Studies Department at Sacred Heart Major Seminary (Detroit), since 1999. He has published and edited several books and contributed many articles and book reviews to theological journals.

<sup>1</sup> See *The New World Dictionary-Concordance to the New American Bible* (New York: World Bible Publishers, 1970), 417, where, after presenting the references to Mary in the infancy narratives of Luke and Matthew, it is stated: "The references to Mary in the rest of the New Testament are very few."

<sup>2</sup> All references to Vatican II are from the NCWC translation, which is the one posted on the Vatican website. References to other ecclesiastical documents also use the translations posted on the Vatican website.

beginning of time, just as the apostles were, and the Church, and the Savior; and she will be there at the moment everything is fulfilled.<sup>3</sup>

How are we to assess the diversity of views on whether Mary plays a prominent or a minor role in the Bible? This essay seeks to explore this question by examining how Blessed John Paul II (in office 1978-2005) frequently made use of the *sensus plenior* (fuller sense) of Scripture when discussing Mary from a biblical perspective. As will be seen, it is only by means of the *sensus plenior* that John Paul II can find a biblical basis for locating Mary at the very heart of salvation history from Genesis through Revelation. As he writes:

Thanks to the special bond linking the Mother of Christ to the Church, there is further *clarified the mystery of that "woman" who, from the first chapters of the Book of Genesis until the Book of Revelation, accompanies the revelation of God's salvific plan for humanity.*<sup>4</sup>

John Paul II, of course, recognizes the centrality of Mary to salvation history for theological reasons and not simply biblical ones. But theology cannot be separated from the study of the Bible. Vatican II refers to Sacred Scripture as "the soul of sacred theology" (*anima sacrae theologiae*).<sup>5</sup> Along these lines, John Paul II finds support for the centrality of Mary in salvation history in Galatians 4:4, the one Pauline reference to Mary. Thus, he writes:

The sending of this Son, one in substance with the Father, as a man "born of woman," constitutes the culminating and *definitive point of God's self-revelation to humanity* . . . A woman is to be found at the *center of this salvific event*. The self-revelation of God, who is the inscrutable unity of the Trinity, is outlined *in the annunciation at Nazareth*.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Scott Hahn, *Hail, Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 9.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), 47.

<sup>5</sup> Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman (Mulieris Dignitatem)* [1988], 3.

In what follows, we will try to examine more closely how John Paul II uses the *sensus plenior* in his Mariology. First, though, we need to discuss the *sensus plenior* itself.

### A. The *Sensus Plenior* in Light of the Different Senses of Scripture

The first papal allusion to the *sensus plenior* is found in Leo XIII's 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*:

The Professor may now safely pass on to the use of Scripture in matters of Theology. On this point it must be observed that in addition to the usual reasons which make ancient writings more or less difficult to understand, there are some which are peculiar to the Bible. For the language of the Bible is employed to express, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit many things which are beyond the power and scope of the reason of man—that is to say, divine mysteries and all that is related to them. There is sometimes in such passages a fullness and a hidden depth of meaning (*ampliore quadam et reconditiore sententia*) beyond what the word and the laws of interpretation seem to indicate. And certainly the literal sense itself frequently admits other senses, adapted to illustrate dogma or to confirm morality. Wherefore it must be recognized that the sacred writings are wrapped in a certain religious obscurity, and that no one can enter into their interior without a guide (no. 14).

This passage from Leo XIII does not use the exact phrase *sensus plenior*, but his insight certainly anticipates what is meant by the “fuller sense” of Scripture. To some extent, the *sensus plenior* of the Bible follows logically from the long-standing recognition of the different “senses” of the scriptural text. Some explanation of these senses is needed.

### B. Divisions of the Senses of Scripture

In their manual, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa* [1950], the Spanish Jesuits examine various senses of Scripture, of which the following seem to have prominence: 1) the literal sense (*sensus litteralis*); 2) the real or typical sense (*sensus realis vel typicus*); 3) the metaphorical or tropological [figurative] sense (*sensus metaphoricus vel tropologicus*); 4) the fuller sense (*sensus plenior*): for example, Wisdom 9:19, where the personal character of Wisdom insinuates the mystery of the Holy

Trinity, which is later known more fully; 5) the consequent sense (*sensus consequens*); 6) the accommodated sense (*sensus accomodatus*).<sup>7</sup>

A similar though slightly different breakdown of the different senses is found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992/1997; nos. 115-117): There are two senses: the literal and the spiritual; and the spiritual sense is subdivided into the: a) allegorical; b) moral; c) anagogical. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, in its 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, provides an overview and explanation of the different senses of Scripture in Chapter II ("Hermeneutical Questions"). In part B of this chapter ("The Meaning of Inspired Scripture"), three main senses of Scripture are noted: 1) the literal sense, 2) the spiritual sense, and 3) the fuller sense.<sup>8</sup> How are these three senses described? With regard to the *literal sense*, we are told:

...The literal sense of Scripture is that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors. Since it is the fruit of inspiration, this sense is also intended by God, as principal author. One arrives at this sense by means of a careful analysis of the text, within its literary and historical context...<sup>9</sup>

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] provides a similar description of the literal sense, describing it as "the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegetes, following the rules of sound interpretation."<sup>10</sup> The CCC also quotes St. Thomas Aquinas who said that "all other

<sup>7</sup> M. Nicolau, S.J., and J. Salaverri, S.J., eds., *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, Vol. 1 (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1950), Tract IV, nos. 195-225, pp. 1032-1042 (my translations). There are other senses mentioned, but I have listed those that seem to be the most prominent.

<sup>8</sup> The 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* can be found on the Vatican website in Italian, German, Spanish, Swahili, and Ukrainian, but not in English. A translation in English, though, was published in *Origins* (vol. 23, no. 29: 497-524), and this translation can be found on a number of websites, including that of EWTN.

<sup>9</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Chap. II, B. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 116.

senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal."<sup>11</sup> With regard to Mary, the literal sense is important for understanding the exact meaning of the words used in Scripture, for example the meaning of the Greek term, *parthénos* (virgin), used in Matthew 1:23.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission describes the *spiritual sense* in this way:

... As a general rule we can define the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, as the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it. This context truly exists. In it the New Testament recognizes the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It is therefore quite acceptable to reread the Scriptures in the light of this new context, which is that of life in the Spirit. ...

... One of the possible aspects of the spiritual sense is the typological. This is usually said to belong not to Scripture itself but to the realities expressed by Scripture: Adam as the figure of Christ (cf. Rom 5:14), the flood as the figure of baptism (1 Pt 3:20-21), etc. Actually, the connection involved in typology is ordinarily based on the way in which Scripture describes the ancient reality (cf. the voice of Abel: Gn 4:10; Heb 11:4, 12:24) and not simply on the reality itself. Consequently, in such a case one can speak of a meaning that is truly Scriptural. ...<sup>12</sup>

The CCC complements this description by noting that the spiritual sense is an expression of the unity of God's plan. This unity helps us appreciate not only the literal text of Scripture, but also how "the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs."<sup>13</sup> The CCC further breaks down the spiritual sense into the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical senses. The *allegorical sense* leads to "a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance for Christ."<sup>14</sup> By this sense, we can understand the crossing of the Red Sea as "a sign or type of Christ's victory and also of Christian baptism."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., n. 83 (*STb* I, 1, 10, *ad* 1).

<sup>12</sup> *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Chap. II, B. 2.

<sup>13</sup> CCC, 117.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., cf. 1 Cor. 10:2.

The *moral sense* helps us know that "the events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly"<sup>16</sup> because they were written "for our instruction" (1 Cor. 10:11) and "for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). Finally, the *anagogical sense* (from the Greek *anagoge*, "leading to") enables us to "view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us to our true homeland: thus the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem."<sup>17</sup>

The *fuller sense* of Scripture sometimes is understood as another way of viewing the spiritual sense, but it can also be understood as a preeminent expression of the spiritual sense. The Pontifical Biblical Commission offers this description, which deserves to be quoted in full:

The term "fuller sense" (*sensus plenior*), which is relatively recent, has given rise to discussion. The fuller sense is defined as a deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author. Its existence in the biblical text comes to be known when one studies the text in the light of other biblical texts, which utilize it, or in its relationship with the internal development of revelation.

It is then a question either of the meaning that a subsequent biblical author attributes to an earlier biblical text, taking it up in a context which confers upon it a new literal sense, or else it is a question of the meaning that an authentic doctrinal tradition or a conciliar definition gives to a biblical text. For example, the context of Matthew 1:23 gives a fuller sense to the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 in regard to the "*almah*" who will conceive, by using the translation of the Septuagint ("*parthénos*"): "The 'virgin' will conceive." The patristic and conciliar teaching about the Trinity expresses the fuller sense of the teaching of the New Testament regarding God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The definition of original sin by the Council of Trent provided the fuller sense of Paul's teaching in Romans 5:12-21 about the consequences of the sin of Adam for humanity. But when this kind of control—by an explicit biblical text or by an authentic doctrinal tradition—is lacking, recourse to a claimed fuller sense could lead to subjective interpretations deprived of validity.

In a word, one might think of the "fuller sense" as another way of indicating the spiritual sense of a biblical text in the case where the spiritual sense is distinct from the literal sense. It has its foundation in

<sup>16</sup> CCC, 117.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

the fact that the Holy Spirit, principal author of the Bible, can guide human authors in the choice of expressions in such a way that the latter will express a truth the fullest depths of which the authors themselves do not perceive. This deeper truth will be more fully revealed in the course of time—on the one hand, through further divine interventions, which clarify the meaning of texts, and, on the other, through the insertion of texts into the canon of Scripture. In these ways there is created a new context, which brings out fresh possibilities of meaning that had lain hidden in the original context.<sup>18</sup>

Here we see that the *sensus plenior* is an expression of the spiritual sense of a biblical passage. This “fuller sense” is verified when either a subsequent biblical author confers a meaning on an earlier biblical text (as is done with certain Old Testament prophecies) or when “an authentic doctrinal tradition or conciliar definition” gives a biblical text a certain meaning or application. The example of Isaiah 7:14 (*almah*) understood as “virgin” (*parthénos*) in Matthew 1:23 is a perfect example of the former, and the Council of Trent’s understanding of Romans 5:12-21 with respect to original sin is an apt example of the second. To better understand how the *sensus plenior* operates with regard to Mary, it might be helpful to provide some possible examples.

### C. Some Possible Marian Applications of the Spiritual and/or Fuller Senses of Scripture

With regard to the Old Testament, references to Mary often are discerned by what is called “prefiguration.” Fr. Paul Haffner explains that: “Prefiguration involves the foreshadowing of the New Testament through persons, events and things.”<sup>19</sup> Another way in which Marian references are found in the Old Testament is through the “typical sense” of the Bible. The word “typical” comes from type (*typos*), “which originally meant a ‘model’ or ‘pattern’ or ‘mould’ into which clay or wax was pressed that it might take the exact shape of the mould.”<sup>20</sup> With respect to the

<sup>18</sup> *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Chap. II, B. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Fr. Paul Haffner, *The Mystery of Mary* (Herefordshire, UK and Chicago, Ill.: Gracewing and Liturgy Training Pub., 2004), 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 25; cf. CCC, 128-130.

Old Testament, a type means a "person, place, thing, or event that prefigures a person, place, thing, or event in the New Testament called the antitype."<sup>21</sup> Catholic theologians believe typologies manifest the divine inspiration because they show that the Holy Spirit was investing certain passages with a "deeper meaning" beyond what the author might have even realized.

With regard to Marian types or pre-figurations in the Old Testament, the following are often given: 1) *The woman at enmity with the serpent* (Gen. 3:15), as a foreshadowing of the Immaculate Conception. 2) *Eve: the mother of the living* (Gen. 3:20), as a type of Mary, the New Eve and "Mother of the living" (*Mater viventium*). 3) *The "daughter of Sion"* (or Zion) of Zechariah 2:14 [2:10 in some versions], as a type of Mary (especially in the following passage: "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo, I come and will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord"). 4) *The Ark of the Covenant*, as a foreshadowing of Mary who carries the New Covenant, Christ, in her womb (This is found in Exod. 40:34: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." It is also found in 2 Sam. 6:9 [David says]: "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" See Luke 1:43: "And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" 2 Sam. 6:14-15: David dances before the Ark and he and the people shout before the Ark. In Luke 1:44, John the Baptist leaps in the womb of St. Elizabeth before Mary carrying the child Jesus. Finally, there is Rev. 11:19 where the ark of God's covenant is seen within the heavenly temple. In Rev. 12:1 [the next passage], the woman clothed with the sun appears). 5) *The Queen Mother* (or *gebirah*, "great lady") of 1 Kings 2:19 (Bathsheba, King Solomon's mother, sits at her son's right hand and makes a request. The king says to her: "Make your request, my mother, for I will not refuse you" [1 Kings 2:20]). 6) *Holy Old Testament women* (cf. CCC, 489 and Haffner, 33-34): Sarah conceives a son miraculously in her old age (Gen. 18:10-14; 21:1-2); Esther intercedes for her people (Book of Esther); Judith slays the evil

<sup>21</sup> Haffner, *Mystery of Mary*, 25-26.

king, Holofernes, as Mary helps to overcome Satan (Jth. 13:5-8); Hannah, who was thought barren, becomes the mother of Samuel and praises God for her Son (1 Sam. 2:1-10) in a prayer that prefigures Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:47-55). 7) *Mary as the Seat of Wisdom* (title found in Church Fathers, such as St. Augustine, and the Litany of Loreto, ca. A.D. 1587, and foreshadowed in Proverbs 8 and Sirach [Ecclesiasticus] 24). 8) *The burning bush* (Exod. 3:2): the bush burns but is not consumed; Mary gives birth as a virgin, but does not lose her virginity. 9) *Gideon's fleece* (Judg. 6:37-38): the fleece is wet with dew while the ground around it remains dry—a symbol of Mary's fertility. 10) *The daughter of the king clothed with splendor* (Ps. 45:1-14). 11) *The Beloved Bride*—Song of Songs, especially 2:11-14 (for the Assumption). 12) *The locked garden* (for Mary's virginity)—cf. Song of Songs 4:12; and 13) *The closed gate* (Ezek. 44:1-2)—as symbols of Mary's perpetual virginity and her virginity in giving birth (*virginitas in partu*).

#### JOHN PAUL II'S USE OF THE *SENSUS PLENIOR*

John Paul II (1920-2005) has been rightly called "Mary's Pope."<sup>22</sup> Devotion to the Blessed Virgin played a special role in his pontificate (1978-2005), both in his personal piety and in his writings. In his scriptural references to Mary, John Paul II made frequent use of the *sensus plenior*. This should come as no surprise, since scholars agree that the *sensus plenior* has special relevance for the Marian texts.<sup>23</sup> Our presentation of examples cannot be exhaustive, so we will limit ourselves to the two following groupings of images: A) New Eve, B) Woman, C) Mother; D) Virgin, E) Spouse. In reality all of these images are interconnected. They are also examples of the *sensus plenior* of Scripture, either because they bring out a spiritual sense distinct from the literal sense or because they reflect an authentic doctrinal tradition of the Church in reference to the Scripture.

<sup>22</sup> See Antoine Nacheff, *Mary's Pope, John Paul II: Mary, and the Church since Vatican II* (Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> See Michael O'Carroll, C.S.Sp., *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Pub., 2000), 82.

### A. New Eve

In his 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II applies the *sensus plenior* of Genesis 3:15 to Mary as the "New Eve." In doing so, he is following a long Catholic tradition that goes back to St. Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165) and St. Irenaeus (ca. 130-202).<sup>24</sup> He first begins by highlighting the fuller sense of the text as referring to Mary as the *progenitrix* of the future Redeemer and the woman at enmity with the Devil:

The Book of Genesis attests to the fact that sin is the evil at man's "beginning" and that since then its consequences weigh upon the whole human race. At the same time it contains *the first foretelling of victory over evil, over sin*. This is proved by the words which we read in Genesis 3:15, usually called the "*Proto-evangelium*": "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." It is significant that the foretelling of the Redeemer contained in these words refers to "the woman." She is assigned the first place in the *Proto-evangelium* as the *progenitrix* of him who will be the Redeemer of man. And since the redemption is to be accomplished through a struggle against evil—through the "enmity" between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of him who, as "the father of lies" (Jn 8:44), is the first author of sin in human history—it is also *an enmity between him and the woman*.<sup>25</sup>

John Paul then uses the *sensus plenior* to highlight Mary's role as not only the New Eve but also the "type" of the new humanity redeemed by Christ. He also points to the pattern of God choosing special women in the unfolding of his Covenant. These women anticipate, in a certain sense, Mary, who is "the woman" and "mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20). He then meditates on the deeper sense of the words of Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman":

These words give us a comprehensive view of the whole of Revelation, first as a preparation for the Gospel and later as the Gospel itself. From this vantage point the two female figures, *Eve* and *Mary*, are joined under the *name of woman*.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See O'Carroll, *Theotokos*, 139-141.

<sup>25</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

The words of the *Proto-evangelium*, re-read in the light of the New Testament, express well the mission of woman in the Redeemer's salvific struggle against the author of evil in human history.

The comparison Eve-Mary constantly recurs in the course of reflection on the deposit of faith received from divine Revelation. It is one of the themes frequently taken up by the Fathers, ecclesiastical writers and theologians. As a rule, from this comparison there emerges at first sight a difference, a contrast. *Eve*, as "the mother of all the living" (*Gen* 3:20), is *the witness to the biblical "beginning,"* which contains the truth about the creation of man made in the image and likeness of God and the truth about original sin. *Mary is the witness to the new "beginning"* and the "new creation" (cf. *2 Cor* 5:17), since she herself, as the first of the redeemed in salvation history, is "a new creation": she is "full of grace." It is difficult to grasp why the words of the *Proto-evangelium* place such strong emphasis on the "woman," if it is not admitted that *in her the new and definitive Covenant* of God with humanity *has its beginning*, the *Covenant* in the redeeming blood of Christ. The *Covenant* begins with a woman, the "woman" of the Annunciation at Nazareth. Herein lies the absolute originality of the Gospel: many times in the Old Testament, in order to intervene in the history of his people, God addressed himself to women, as in the case of the mothers of Samuel and Samson. However, to make his *Covenant* with humanity, he addressed himself only to men: *Noah, Abraham, and Moses*. At the beginning of the New *Covenant*, which is to be eternal and irrevocable, there is a woman: the Virgin of Nazareth. It is a *sign* that points to the fact that "in Jesus Christ" "*there is neither male nor female*" (*Gal* 3:28). In Christ the mutual opposition between man and woman—which is the inheritance of original sin—is essentially overcome. "For you are all *one* in Jesus Christ," Saint Paul will write (*ibid.*)...<sup>27</sup>

John Paul then probes even deeper into the *sensus plenior* of Genesis 3:15. He finds in the Eve-Mary typology a sign that Mary is the "the woman" who embraces the mystery of all women. In this sense, Mary is the exemplar of the dignity possessed by all women. As he writes:

...The "woman" of the *Proto-evangelium* fits into the perspective of the Redemption. The comparison Eve-Mary can be understood also in the sense that *Mary assumes* in herself and embraces the *mystery of the "woman"* whose beginning is Eve, "the mother of all the living"

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

(Gen 3:20). First of all she assumes and embraces it within the mystery of Christ, "the new and the last Adam" (cf. 1 Cor 15:45), who assumed in his own person the nature of the first Adam. The essence of the New Covenant consists in the fact that the Son of God, who is of one substance with the eternal Father, becomes man: he takes humanity into the unity of the divine Person of the Word. The one who accomplishes the Redemption is also a true man. The mystery of the world's Redemption presupposes that *God the Son assumed humanity as the inheritance of Adam*, becoming like him and like every man in all things, "yet without sinning" (Heb 4:15). In this way he "fully reveals man to himself and makes man's supreme calling clear," as the Second Vatican Council teaches. In a certain sense, he has helped man to discover "who he is" (cf. Ps 8:5).

In the tradition of faith and of Christian reflection throughout the ages, *the coupling Adam-Christ* is often linked with that of *Eve-Mary*. If Mary is described also as the "new Eve," what are the meanings of this analogy? Certainly there are many. Particularly noteworthy is the meaning which sees Mary as the full revelation of all that is included in the biblical word "woman": a revelation commensurate with the mystery of the Redemption. *Mary* means, in a sense, a going beyond the limit spoken of in the Book of Genesis (3:16) and a return to that "beginning" in which one finds the "woman" as she was intended to be in *creation*, and therefore in the eternal mind of God: in the bosom of the Most Holy Trinity. Mary is "the new beginning" of the *dignity and vocation of women*, of each and every woman.<sup>28</sup>

## B. Woman

The *sensus plenior* allows John Paul II, as well as many before him, to find a link between "the woman" of Genesis 3:15 and the "woman" of John 2:4, John 19:25-27, and Revelation 12. The link between all these biblical references to the "woman" has both Patristic and papal support.<sup>29</sup> In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), John Paul II makes use of the deeper Marian sense of Revelation 12 to hold up Mary as the exemplar of all women. She is also the "type" of the Church at enmity with the forces of evil. In particular, he finds in Revelation 12

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> O'Carroll, *Theotokos*, 95-97 and 370-377.

a reference to Mary as the Mother of the Church. Mary is crowned with glory in heaven (Rev. 12:1), but she nevertheless intercedes as a spiritual mother for the Church, undergoing the pangs and labor of giving birth (Rev. 12:2), "in constant tension with the forces of evil."<sup>30</sup> John Paul II provides the following insights on the "woman" of Revelation 12 and John 19:26 in *Evangelium Vitae*:

The mutual relationship between the mystery of the Church and Mary appears clearly in the "great portent" described in the Book of Revelation: "A great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (12:1). In this sign the Church recognizes an image of her own mystery: present in history, she knows that she transcends history, inasmuch as she constitutes on earth the "seed and beginning" of the Kingdom of God. The Church sees this mystery fulfilled in complete and exemplary fashion in Mary. She is the woman of glory in whom God's plan could be carried out with supreme perfection.

The "woman clothed with the sun"—the Book of Revelation tells us—"was with child" (12:2). The Church is fully aware that she bears within herself the Savior of the world, Christ the Lord. She is aware that she is called to offer Christ to the world, giving men and women new birth into God's own life. But the Church cannot forget that her mission was made possible by the motherhood of Mary, who conceived and bore the One who is "God from God," "true God." Mary is truly the Mother of God, the Theotokos, in whose motherhood the vocation to motherhood bestowed by God on every woman is raised to its highest level. Thus Mary becomes the model of the Church, called to be the "new Eve," the mother of believers, the mother of the "living" (cf. Gen 3:20).

The Church's spiritual motherhood is only achieved—the Church knows this too—through the pangs and "the labor" of childbirth (cf. Rev 12:2), that is to say, in constant tension with the forces of evil which still roam the world and affect human hearts, offering resistance to Christ: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1:4-5).

Like the Church, Mary too had to live her motherhood amid suffering: "This child is set . . . for a sign that is spoken against—and a sword will

<sup>30</sup> *Evangelium Vitae*, 103.

pierce through your own soul also—that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed” (Lk 2:34-35). The words which Simeon addresses to Mary at the very beginning of the Savior’s earthly life sum up and prefigure the rejection of Jesus, and with him of Mary, a rejection which will reach its culmination on Calvary. “Standing by the cross of Jesus” (Jn 19:25), Mary shares in the gift, which the Son makes of himself: she offers Jesus, gives him over, and begets him to the end for our sake. The “yes” spoken on the day of the Annunciation reaches full maturity on the day of the Cross, when the time comes for Mary to receive and beget as her children all those who become disciples, pouring out upon them the saving love of her Son: “When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’” (Jn 19:26).<sup>31</sup>

John Paul continues his application of the *sensus plenior* with specific reference to Revelation 12:4, which speaks of the dragon standing before the woman about to give birth “to devour her child.” He sees in this passage Satan’s enmity toward Mary, the New Eve, and the Church. He finds in this passage a profound revelation of the struggle between good and evil that has the protection of life at its center. Continuing his analysis of Revelation 12:4’s deeper sense, John Paul sees the child threatened by the Devil to be not only Mary’s child, Jesus, but also every child who, by the Incarnation, has been, in some way, joined to Christ. Thus, he writes:

In the Book of Revelation, the “great portent” of the “woman” (12:1) is accompanied by “another portent which appeared in heaven”: “a great red dragon” (Rev 12:3), which represents Satan, the personal power of evil, as well as all the powers of evil at work in history and opposing the Church’s mission.

Here too Mary sheds light on the Community of Believers. The hostility of the powers of evil is, in fact, an insidious opposition which, before affecting the disciples of Jesus, is directed against his mother. To save the life of her Son from those who fear him as a dangerous threat, Mary has to flee with Joseph and the Child into Egypt (cf. Mt 2:13-15).

Mary thus helps the Church to realize that life is always at the centre of a great struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. The dragon wishes to devour “the child brought forth” (cf. Rev 12:4), a

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

figure of Christ, whom Mary brought forth "in the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4) and whom the Church must unceasingly offer to people in every age. But in a way that child is also a figure of every person, every child, especially every helpless baby whose life is threatened, because—as the Council reminds us—"by his Incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every person." It is precisely in the "flesh" of every person that Christ continues to reveal himself and to enter into fellowship with us, so that rejection of human life, in whatever form that rejection takes, is really a rejection of Christ. This is the fascinating but also demanding truth which Christ reveals to us and which his Church continues untiringly to proclaim: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Mt 18:5); "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).<sup>32</sup>

### C. Mother

John Paul II's use of the *sensus plenior* of Scripture finds very clear expression in his 1987 encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*. He sees in Jesus' reference to Mary as "woman" at the wedding feast of Cana (John 2:4) an anticipation of Mary as the "woman" under the foot of the Cross (John 19:26). This "woman" is Mary, who is given as "mother" to the beloved disciple and, by extension, to all members of the Church:

If John's description of the event at Cana presents Mary's caring motherhood at the beginning of Christ's messianic activity, another passage from the same Gospel confirms this motherhood in the salvific economy of grace at its crowning moment, namely when Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, his Paschal Mystery, is accomplished. John's description is concise: "Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother: 'Woman, behold your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (Jn 19:25-27).

Undoubtedly, we find here an expression of the Son's particular solicitude for his Mother, whom he is leaving in such great sorrow. And yet the "testament of Christ's Cross" says more. Jesus highlights a new relationship between Mother and Son, the whole truth and reality of which he

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 104.

solemnly confirms. One can say that if Mary's motherhood of the human race had already been outlined, now it is clearly stated and established. It emerges from the definitive accomplishment of the Redeemer's Paschal Mystery. The Mother of Christ, who stands at the very center of this mystery—a mystery which embraces each individual and all humanity—is given as mother to every single individual and all mankind. The man at the foot of the Cross is John, "the disciple whom he loved." But it is not he alone. Following tradition, the Council does not hesitate to call Mary "the Mother of Christ and mother of mankind": since she "belongs to the offspring of Adam she is one with all human beings. . . . Indeed she is 'clearly the mother of the members of Christ . . . since she cooperated out of love so that there might be born in the Church the faithful.'"

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.<sup>33</sup>

In the same encyclical, Blessed John Paul II also extends the *sensus plenior* of Genesis 3:15 in a way that links Mary, the New Eve, to the Church given "birth" at Pentecost. In this sense, Mary's role as the Mother of the Church is even more deeply expressed. The Holy Father highlights the profound "correspondence" between the Incarnation of God's Word at the Annunciation and the birth of the Church at Pentecost. As he explains, Mary is at the center of these two key moments in salvation history:

Thus we find ourselves at the very center of the fulfillment of the promise contained in the Proto-gospel: the "seed of the woman . . . will crush the head of the serpent" (cf. Gen. 3:15). By his redemptive death Jesus Christ conquers the evil of sin and death at its very roots. It is significant that, as he speaks to his mother from the Cross, he calls her "woman" and says to her: "Woman, behold your son!" Moreover, he had addressed her by the same term at Cana too (cf. Jn. 2:4). How can one doubt that especially now, on Golgotha, this expression goes to the very heart of the mystery of Mary, and indicates the unique place which she occupies in the whole economy of salvation? As the Council teaches, in Mary "the exalted Daughter of Zion, and after a long expectation of the promise, the times were at length fulfilled and the new dispensation established. All this occurred

<sup>33</sup> *Redemptoris Mater*, 23.

when the Son of God took a human nature from her, that he might in the mysteries of his flesh free man from sin."

The words uttered by Jesus from the Cross signify that the motherhood of her who bore Christ finds a "new" continuation in the Church and through the Church, symbolized and represented by John. In this way, she who as the one "full of grace" was brought into the mystery of Christ in order to be his Mother and thus the Holy Mother of God, through the Church remains in that mystery as "the woman" spoken of by the Book of Genesis (3:15) at the beginning and by the Apocalypse (12:1) at the end of the history of salvation. In accordance with the eternal plan of Providence, Mary's divine motherhood is to be poured out upon the Church, as indicated by statements of Tradition, according to which Mary's "motherhood" of the Church is the reflection and extension of her motherhood of the Son of God.

According to the Council the very moment of the Church's birth and full manifestation to the world enables us to glimpse this continuity of Mary's motherhood: "Since it pleased God not to manifest solemnly the mystery of the salvation of the human race until he poured forth the Spirit promised by Christ, we see the Apostles before the day of Pentecost 'continuing with one mind in prayer with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren' (Acts 1:14). We see Mary prayerfully exploring the gift of the Spirit, who had already overshadowed her in the Annunciation."

And so, in the redemptive economy of grace, brought about through the action of the Holy Spirit, there is a unique correspondence between the moment of the Incarnation of the Word and the moment of the birth of the Church. The person who links these two moments is Mary: Mary at Nazareth and Mary in the Upper Room at Jerusalem. In both cases her discreet yet essential presence indicates the path of "birth from the Holy Spirit." Thus she who is present in the mystery of Christ as Mother becomes—by the will of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit—present in the mystery of the Church. In the Church too she continues to be a maternal presence, as is shown by the words spoken from the Cross: "Woman, behold your son!"; "Behold, your mother."<sup>34</sup>

#### **D. Virgin**

In his 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II points to Mary as the one who unites the "two dimensions of the female vocation" in "an exceptional manner."<sup>35</sup> Not only

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>35</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 17.

does Mary unite these two vocations by being herself both virgin and mother; but she also exemplifies how both these callings involve "the personal dimension of the gift."<sup>36</sup> In a very real way, Mary's virginity ushers in the Messianic Age in which celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is held up as both a free choice and a special grace. The great sign of the virgin who conceives and bears a child (Matt. 1:23; Isa. 7:14) has, therefore, a deeper spiritual and analogical sense. It not only testifies to the miraculous nature of Jesus' conception and birth, but it also points to virginity for sake of the kingdom as a privileged manner of giving oneself without reserve to God. In a preeminent way, the ever-virgin Mary embodies the new awareness of the coming of the eschatological kingdom. As the Holy Father writes:

From the moment of Christ's coming, the expectation of the People of God has to be directed to the eschatological Kingdom which is coming and to which he must lead "the new Israel." A new awareness of faith is essential for such a turn-about and change of values. Christ emphasizes this twice: "He who is able to receive this, let him receive it." Only "those to whom it is given" understand it (Mt 19:11). *Mary* is the first person in whom this *new awareness* is manifested, for she asks the Angel: "How can this be, since I have no husband?" (Lk 1:34). Even though she is "betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph" (cf. Lk 1:27), she is firm in her resolve to remain a virgin. The motherhood which is accomplished in her comes exclusively from the "power of the Most High," and is the result of the Holy Spirit's coming down upon her (cf. Lk 1:35). This divine motherhood, therefore, is an altogether unforeseen response to the human expectation of women in Israel: it comes to Mary as a gift from God himself. This gift is the beginning and the prototype of a new expectation on the part of all. It measures up to the Eternal Covenant, to God's new and definitive promise: it is *a sign of eschatological hope*.<sup>37</sup>

### E. Spouse

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul underscores Mary's spousal love, which is present in her free gift of herself to God. The tradition of Mary as "spouse of God" goes back to the early

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 20.

Church and continues up to the present.<sup>38</sup> St. Ephraem of Syria (ca. 306-373) understood Mary as the spouse of Christ, but others, such as Rupert of Deutz (ca. 1075-1130) and Cardinal Bérulle (1575-1629), favored Mary as the spouse of God the Father.<sup>39</sup> John Paul II follows the tradition of St. Lawrence of Brindisi (1559-1619), St. Louis de Montfort (1673-1716), Leo XIII, and Pius XII, who all describe Mary as the spouse of the Holy Spirit. John Paul II finds an intimate connection between Mary's virginity and her spousal love, and in this sense, she provides a model for all women who consecrate themselves as virgins. He offers this insight in *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

In this wider context, *virginity* has to be considered *also as a path for women*, a path on which they realize their womanhood in a way different from marriage. In order to understand this path, it is necessary to refer once more to the fundamental idea of Christian anthropology. By freely choosing virginity, women confirm themselves as persons, as beings whom the Creator from the beginning has willed for their own sake. At the same time they realize the personal value of their own femininity by becoming "a sincere gift" for God who has revealed himself in Christ, a gift for Christ, the Redeemer of humanity and the Spouse of souls: a "spousal" gift. *One cannot correctly understand virginity—a woman's consecration in virginity—without referring to spousal love.* It is through this kind of love that a person becomes a gift for the other. Moreover, a man's consecration in priestly celibacy or in the religious state is to be understood analogously.

The naturally spousal predisposition of the feminine personality finds a response in virginity understood in this way. Women, called from the very "beginning" to be loved and to love, in a vocation to virginity *find Christ* first of all as the Redeemer who "loved until the end" through his total gift of self; *and they respond to this gift with a "sincere gift" of their whole lives.* They thus give themselves to the divine Spouse, and this personal gift tends to union, which is properly spiritual in character. Through the Holy Spirit's action a woman becomes "one spirit" with Christ the Spouse (cf. 1 Cor 6:17).<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> O'Carroll, *Theotokos*, 333-334.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>40</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 20.

In addition to being the spouse of God, the Holy Spirit, Mary is also the legal spouse of St. Joseph. John Paul believes there was an authentic spousal love between Mary and Joseph. In his apostolic exhortation on St. Joseph, *Redemptoris Custos* (1989), John Paul II cites St. Augustine on the three "goods" of marriage. He points out that all these goods were present in the spiritual union of Mary and Joseph—even though they had no conjugal relations:

The Son of Mary is also Joseph's Son by virtue of the marriage bond that unites them: "By reason of their faithful marriage both of them deserve to be called Christ's parents, not only his mother, but also his father, who was a parent in the same way that he was the mother's spouse: in mind, not in the flesh." In this marriage none of the requisites of marriage were lacking: "In Christ's parents all the goods of marriage were realized—offspring, fidelity, the sacrament: the offspring being the Lord Jesus himself; fidelity, since there was no adultery; the sacrament, since there was no divorce."

Analyzing the nature of marriage, both St. Augustine and St. Thomas always identify it with an "indivisible union of souls," a "union of hearts," with "consent." These elements are found in an exemplary manner in the marriage of Mary and Joseph. At the culmination of the history of salvation, when God reveals his love for humanity through the gift of the Word, it is precisely the marriage of Mary and Joseph that brings to realization in full "freedom" the "spousal gift of self" in receiving and expressing such a love. "In this great undertaking which is the renewal of all things in Christ, marriage—it too purified and renewed—becomes a new reality, a sacrament of the New Covenant. We see that at the beginning of the New Testament, as at the beginning of the Old, there is a married couple. But whereas Adam and Eve were the source of evil which was unleashed on the world, Joseph and Mary are the summit from which holiness spreads all over the earth. The Savior began the work of salvation by this virginal and holy union, wherein is manifested his all-powerful will to purify and sanctify the family—that sanctuary of love and cradle of life."<sup>41</sup>

Although Mary has spousal love for St. Joseph, her status as the ever-virgin Mother of God, points to her total spousal gift of self to God. Her spousal love for God is a mystical love.

<sup>41</sup> *Redemptoris Custos*, 7.

This is why John Paul II, when speaking of Mary as the spouse of the Holy Spirit, adds the word "mystical" to make it clear that her union with the Holy Spirit is a spiritual, mystical one. Thus, in his "Prayer for the Marian Year" of 1987-1988, he speaks of the love which the Holy Spirit had for Mary "as his mystical spouse":

Mother of the Redeemer,  
with great joy we call you blessed.  
In order to carry out  
his providential plan of salvation,  
God the Father chose you  
before the creation of the world.  
You believed in his love  
and obeyed his word.  
The Son of God desired you for his Mother  
when he became man to save the human race.  
You received him  
with ready obedience and undivided heart.  
The Holy Spirit loved you  
as his mystical spouse,  
and he filled you with singular gifts.  
You allowed yourself to be led  
by his hidden and powerful action.<sup>42</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In John Paul II's Marian writings, he makes extensive use of the *sensus plenior* in his approach to Mary in the Scriptures. In doing so, however, he is part of a long tradition that has understood the deeper Marian applications of the Scriptures, for example, Genesis 3:15 (Mary, the New Eve); John 19:25-27 (Mary as Mother of the Church); and Revelation 12:1-17 (Mary as the Woman Clothed with the Son).<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the Marian

<sup>42</sup> This prayer is listed as the "Marian Prayer of John Paul II" in the "Mary Prayer Page" available on the website of The Marian Library at the University of Dayton (Marypage.org).

<sup>43</sup> See O'Carroll, *Theotokos*, 370-377.

feast days make use of these Scriptures, showing a liturgical appreciation of their Marian dimensions via the *sensus plenior*. For Catholics and Orthodox, who both share a mystical sense of the Bible, the use of the *sensus plenior* is almost second nature. It is an approach to the Sacred Scriptures that "has its foundation in the fact that the Holy Spirit, principal author of the Bible, can guide human authors in their choice of expressions in such a way that the latter will express a truth the fullest depths of which the authors themselves do not perceive."<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, it is impossible to understand the central role of Mary within salvation history without an appreciation of the *sensus plenior* of Scripture.

<sup>44</sup> *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church* (1993), Chap. II, B. 3.