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# Mary—An Answer to Woman's Role in the Church?

William J. Cole, S.M.

After having heard and responded to lectures and discussions on the feminine movement, the place of womanhood and Mary in the Old and New Testament, her relationship to the roles of wife and mother and consecrated servant of the Lord, and then having considered woman's presence (or shall we say absence?) in the institutions of the Church, and finally having experienced Father Schmemmann's masterful exposition of the Orthodox point of view, what more can one hope to say about Mary and womanhood? It would seem that the whole ground has been covered, and yet one of the fundamental questions has been simply alluded to and the answer has perhaps been taken for granted. The very title of the conference "Womanhood and Mary: Archetype of Mankind in the History of Salvation," is based on the presupposition that Mary is in a very special way a model for woman in her participation in the work of the Church to bring all men to salvation. (Parenthetically I might say here that since I consider the work of the Church in saving men to include all the spheres of life in which Christians operate, I have considered it unwise, and even unnecessary because of previous papers, to limit myself to what are considered strictly churchly roles in considering whether Mary can be a model for today's women in the Church). And yet we must frankly admit that this idea is being challenged in our day as it never has been before.

Father Rene Laurentin in his lecture on "Mary and The Woman in the Renewal of Christian Anthropology" delivered at the University of Dayton's summer school sessions in 1968 and 1970 dwelt upon the obscurity and difficulty of the problem:

Mary and the Woman. This question seemed clear a few decades ago. At that time the Virgin Mary was proposed as a mirror in which Christian women were invited to recognize their ideal image. But most women today no longer find themselves in this mirror, which has become opaque, or rather has become like the surface of agitated waters in which one no longer finds anything except clouded, deformed, or broken images.<sup>1</sup>

## FIRST Difficulty—The Image of Mary

It would seem that, no matter what may have been the situation in the past, Mary can no longer serve as a model for woman. The very first difficulty concerns the *image of Mary* which has come down to us. She might be called an impossible dream, an utterly illusory, unrealizable ideal, better abandoned now in these days of ruthless

honesty in the Church. This objection was well portrayed in an article written for the December, 1972 issue of the *Ladies' Home Journal* by John O'Connor. After referring to Bishop Fulton Sheen's frequent references to the "Lovely Lady, dressed in blue," so acceptable in the atmosphere of Marian piety twenty years ago, he castigates the ideal, rather ethereal image of Mary. With obvious exaggeration in making a valid point, he says,

In all cases Mary was seen and approached as something less than a woman: untouchable, sexless, floating around Palestine in one idealized pose after another. She awaited a pale, yet painless childbirth. She was the quiet housewife of Nazareth. She was the solicitious but discreet guest at Cana when Jesus performed his first miracle, turning water into wine. She stood weeping under the cross at Calvary. She received the corpse of her Son and was immortalized by Michelangelo's Pieta.

He then goes on to characterize this description of Mary as *Part of this not-quite-a-woman and almost-a-divinity image*.<sup>2</sup>

Be that as it may, the ideal of virginity and motherhood combined in one person (as we shall see more in detail later), her Immaculate Conception, her exalted Queenship, and the humanly incomprehensible closeness to God, etc., made of Mary a remote creature who could not be humanly approached not to speak of being imitated as a model.

### **Second Difficulty—The Evolution and Relativity of the Female Situation**

The second objection helps to explain the reasons behind the first or perhaps why Mary can no longer be considered a model for women, even if in the past she truly was an ideal. I might call it woman's coming of age, facing of reality. Father Laurentin refers to it as the "evolution and relativity of the female situation" and calls it "the first and fundamental explanation" of why "the classical theme *Mary, model of woman* has become so old-fashioned that even preachers no longer dare to speak of it today.<sup>3</sup> I accept Fr. Laurentin's opinion about the fundamental nature of this objection; so I would like to dwell on it at some length.

The situation of women changed very little between the first centuries of the Judaeo-Christian era and the beginning of our own century. Women were doing almost the same jobs and their economic and civil rights were inferior to those of men. They did not vote or take part in the political life of the country. Women had little or no access to intellectual culture, to education, to the professions. In short, their function could be what the Germans called the three K's: *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*: children, kitchen, the church. Moralists and preachers defined a woman as wife and mother with a special accent on the mother. Thus Mary was a model of the housewife, of domestic work, of a submissive life, bound to the home.

As Fr. Laurentin pointed out so well,

She was a psychological model of an eternal minor living in the shadow of



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man in an underdeveloped situation in a civilization which was itself underdeveloped: the model of the woman who sews, who draws water from wells, and who keeps the fire going, as so many women were still doing at the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when farms held the major part of the population.<sup>4</sup>

Times have changed. We rarely find young women who wish to resemble their mother and certainly not their grandmother. Not less rare are those who would recognize the Virgin Mary as a living model.

In this connection it is interesting to observe that even so perceptive an observer of the modern scene as John XXIII had to correct himself. In the early 1960's, he gave an audience to an association of Italian working women, and he sympathized with them about the sad necessity of gaining their own livelihood. This surprised the women, since for them work represented an entirely different thing: an irreplaceable element of their insertion into the world and into its culture. A little afterwards, John XXIII recognized this aspect of the *feminine movement* in *Pacem in Terris*, in which he hailed the work of women as a sign of the times. This evolution has come about for at least two reasons: 1) First it would be simplistic to attribute the change to the fact that the number of working women has increased since 1900. No, the change is due to quality, not quantity. It is no longer the same work. In 1900, women were exploited in inferior and poor-paying jobs. Today they are found in professions worthy of the name: lawyer, doctor, industrial leader, professor at the university, etc. 2) Secondly, the duration and efficiency of human life are prolonged. Many young women are preparing a second life for themselves, which they will start to live at the age of forty or so, when their children have been reared. Meanwhile some will sacrifice partially or totally their professional life. These new aspects, these new forms of the feminine situation, were not experienced by the Virgin Mary. How then can she possibly be a model now?

Perhaps all that we have said can be summed up in a review of Elizabeth Janeway's book *Man's World, Woman's Place* (Morrow, 1971) by Barbara M. La Rosa:<sup>5</sup>

Peculiar to Christianity, says Mrs. Janeway, is the myth of *female power* that honors women not as goddesses but as typified by the *Mother of God*. Her divinity, then, belongs to her motherhood. So we see the Christian view of a proper woman has been one of wife and mother.

### Third Difficulty—Distinction between Masculine and Feminine

Although I have expressed my agreement with Fr. Laurentin that the evolution and relativity of the female situation is a fundamental difficulty, perhaps it would not be wrong to suggest that a consideration of the advances in a woman's role in life which we have summarily delineated lead us to an even more fundamental difficulty—there appears to be such an obliteration of the differences between man and woman that every attempt along these lines seems to many as unacceptable since it militates against an unspoken assumption that every difference betokens superiority



or inferiority, which cannot be admitted in this age of women's liberation and equality of women. If there are really no differences except the purely biological, then it is easily seen that it is difficult to speak of Mary as being a special model for woman in contradistinction to her being a model for all human beings. Modern literature, secular and religious, is replete with considerations of this problem. Father Laurentin asks the question: Are there differences between man and woman which imply the superiority of the one and the subordination of the other? And he replies that *here is a question about which there are great reservations today*. Then, in language which would gladden the hearts of ardent women liberationists, he points out that *many superiorities of men have been revealed to be the fruit of preconceived ideas or of conditions imposed on women by civilization*. He illustrates his point by a rather striking example. Reminding us of the fact which off hand no one (including women liberationists) would be inclined to doubt—namely that in the area of physical force women seem to be manifestly inferior—he cites for our edification the fact that certain feminine athletic records of today surpass masculine records of the early nineteen hundreds.<sup>6</sup>

An author who has undoubtedly been one of the great leaders in raising the consciousness of women, Simone de Beauvoir<sup>7</sup> thinks that all differences are really deceptive. She sees in them only conditionings to which liberty should not submit, but which it should surpass. She even goes so far as to defend the thesis that man and woman are beings who are equally and entirely free to reconstruct themselves beyond the accidental particularities of their respective conditions.

An attempt to so differentiate between men and women as to claim a basic difference in psychological traits is seen by some women as succumbing to an outmoded stereotype. Margaret O'Gara in a recent talk addressed to women in 1973 *Women in the Church*, discredited attempts along this line:

By nature, runs the stereotype, each sex possesses certain qualities which are inherent—natural. Thus a woman is regarded as gentle—soft—not aggressive. Women are more seen to be more emotional than men, not as rational, often unable to think clearly in difficult situations. Women cry easily—OK, even feminine. For men to cry is not only irrational; it is un-masculine. Man is head, woman is heart.

Women are passive, open literally and psychologically to men's contribution and men's initiative. Women enter freely such relationships, but with "a different role." Biological differences are not in dispute . . . But the prevailing view says the shape of body determines consciousness—that there are natural and inevitable (connections) between physical and psychological characteristics. We can list these characteristics. In this sense, biology is destiny.<sup>8</sup>

She suggests that the Galatian passage, (3:28), which speaks about the oneness of man and woman in Christ Jesus

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might well be the Word for our society. Thus the Gospel may well be talking for us about liberation—not men's or women's, but human liberation—from tyrannizing stereotypes about sexual roles.<sup>9</sup>

Mr. Edward J. Foye, Managing Editor of *Front Line*, the Pallotine publication, in an article *The Androgynous Church*, written a few years ago, before the women's liberation movement started gaining force, agrees with the women above, and seems to go even further with the support of scholarly associates:

I understand from friends who know about such things as biology that every human being is androgynous, that is, contains the masculine and the feminine physiologically. This seems to be even more true on the psychic level. On a very obvious plane: When I speak, I emit the word; I sow the seed. When I listen, I receive the word; I am the receptacle of the seed.

He then goes on to quote two giants of recent history—Carl Jung, who believed that the unconscious of every male is female, and vice versa; and Karl Barth, who had such a consciousness of the necessity of each person's accepting the human race as androgynous and making peace with the other sex, that he thought a person sinned if he consciously chose a vocation calculated to remove himself or herself from contact with the other sex.<sup>10</sup>

Recent writings indicate quite a difference of perspective regarding the identification of the differences between man and woman. In a recent *Parade* feature article entitled, *The First Woman President of the U.S.—Why Not and When?* the joint authors (Lloyd Shearer and Carol Dunlap) in discussing three women who have been Prime Ministers of their countries—Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, and Sirimavo Bandaranaike (Ceylon), claimed that “most political observers agree that these three women bring valuable feminine qualities to their work” and they quote Betty Friedan of *Feminine Mystique* fame:

The naturalness of Indira Gandhi's authority comes from using not alien abilities copied from men, but abilities that are very much her own as a woman. For instance, her ability to compartmentalize her time and her thinking, to do four or five jobs at once, has always been the secret of a woman's creative energy.

And the authors go on to relate the description by a close associate of Golda Meir: Golda has the strong qualities of a man, and the extra qualities of a woman—intuition, sensitivity and humane feelings.<sup>11</sup> *Parade* . . .

A woman who is probably one of America's oldest suffragists, 86 year old, Alice Paul of Washington, D.C., agrees in attributing something special to women:

The women's half is the constructive half. It's hard to find a woman who is not for peace. The most fundamental way to work for peace is to work for power for women. We still have no power.<sup>12</sup>

And yet the issue is rather confused. While we can find no less an authority than Mahatma Gandhi pointing out that "if only women will forget that they belong to the weaker sex, I have no doubt that they can do infinitely more than man against war," and subscribing to the fact that women are a real force for peace (See Chapter 11 of *All Men Are Brothers* on "Women"), yet we cannot avoid pointing out that a Women's Peace Conference ended up in a fight and that women themselves are now resisting the temptations to exalt themselves above men and protesting the exaggerations of some speakers for the Women's Liberation Movement.

Thus Ruth Brine in her *Time* essay, *Women's Lib: Beyond Sexual Politics*<sup>13</sup> *Time*, while voicing approval for the goal of the National Women's Political Caucus: "To seek out and promote candidates of either sex, preferably women, who will work to eliminate sexism, racism, violence, and poverty," yet castigated a few speakers of the caucus who made what she considered "farfetched assertions." Among those she singled out were Betty Smith, who said "We must humanize America and save her," implying that it is up to women to do the job, and Gloria Steinem who railed at the "masculine mystique belief in the inevitability of violence." Her reply certainly asserts a view contrary to many liberationist and traditional statements and indicates the confusion of the present time:

To imply that they (women) are more humane and peace-loving than men is to make not only a dubious claim but a sexist one.

Granville Stanley Hill, a non-Catholic Christian, emphasizes the same point:

I envy my Catholic friends their Marian devotion. Who has ever questioned himself about whether the holy mother Mary, whom wise men have honored, knew Chaldaic astronomy, or had learned Egyptian or Babylonian, whether she could read or write her own language. She has been, therefore, no less an object of devotion through the long sequence of the centuries, because she is the *glory of women*, the woman who is nearer to nature and the human race than man is, *richer than him in love and mercy and in disinterested self-sacrifice, and also in understanding*. This woman teaches us how much more important and holier it is to be a woman than an artist, a speaker, a professor, and after all, she suggests to my own sex that being a man is more than to be a count, an intellectual, a general, a president, or a millionaire.<sup>14</sup>

It seems quite clear from all these soundings and samples, which are merely an indication, that Mary's being a model of women has to be in a confused state if we find it hard, if not impossible, to agree on what distinguishes man from woman, after we get beyond the biological.

#### **Difficulty Four—Mary, Model of Woman and Christ, the Universal Model**

The operational principle of preachers—Mary is the model of women as Jesus is the model of men—now appears to be nonsensical.



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As has already been indicated, there is much more reserve today about masculine and feminine characteristics, for accepted distinctions have been shown to be deceptive: the active man, the passive woman, for example.

Furthermore, masculinity and femininity do not exist in a pure state. They are two elements which join together in diverse proportions. Even if it be true that there exists a certain predominance on the part of the woman, emotivity exists likewise on the masculine side; and some men are more emotional than certain women. Besides, it is claimed that this ambiguous situation is materialized on a physiological level by the initial embryological indifferentiation of the sexes, and by physical elements which are witnesses of virility among women and of femininity among men.

These precisions lead us to stress the truth that Christ is the supreme and universal model for men as well as for women, and first of all for Mary. But we must say this: it is by His *humanity*, not His *masculinity*, that Christ has saved us. It is essentially on this level that He reveals himself to us and attracts us. Likewise Mary is more profoundly a *human ideal* than a *feminine ideal*. She is a supreme realization of the human in the feminine, *but in relationship with Christ*, for masculine and feminine are indissolubly correlatives in salvation, as elsewhere. The humanity of Christ has been constituted by the work of the woman, "blessed among women." He would not have been fully man if He had not been referred, from His very beginning among us, in His physical and psychic genesis, to a woman: His Mother. As every man, He had been awakened and modeled by this presence and this first image, whereas Mary herself was modeled on Him according to grace.<sup>15</sup>

### Fifth Difficulty—Mary the Virgin Par Excellence, and the Actual Misunderstanding of Virginity

There is another special difficulty among men of today, who give value to the sexual fulfillment of the woman, both physiologically and psychologically. That Mary is a Virgin, a Virgin *par excellence*, is an obstacle to them. She appears to them as a type of incomplete or underdeveloped femininity, if not a frustrated or artificially compensated sexuality; in brief, a dangerous model. A French author, Philippe Heriat, has written a *futuristic* drama in which a young woman hostile to the other sex bears a child by way of parthenogenesis. The title of the play is *The Immaculate*. This reference is significant as an indication of the contemporary mentality.

There is another difficulty so close to the one we are considering that it can be considered the other side of the coin. It is well presented by Harvey Cox who, in his *Secular City*, contrasting the Mary ideal of the past to the *Girl Ideal of today*, touches this point:

The Girl is . . . the omnipresent icon of the consumer society. Selling beer, she is folksy and jolly. Selling gems, she is chic and distant . . . (Her function is) to provide a secure personal identity for initiates and to sanctify a particular value structure (p. 194) . . . Her sharply stylized face and figure

beckon us from every magazine and TV channel, luring us towards the beautiful vision of a consumers' paradise. The girl is *not* the Virgin. In fact she is a kind of anti-Madonna. She reverses most of the values traditionally associated with the Virgin—poverty, humility, sacrifice.

And he agrees with:

Those who claim this excision (of the Mary's ideal) constituted . . . an impoverishment from which (Western culture) has never recovered.<sup>16</sup>

### **Sixth Difficulty—Mother of an Only Son**

This difficulty can be stated in this fashion: Mary is mother of a unique Son. She is not the model of mothers of many children. She has neither their worries nor their responsibilities.

### **Difficulty Seven—Mary is Not a Priest**

Two contrasting facts—1) Mary is not a priest and—2) there is a movement in the Church which asserts the essential equality of men and women before God and declares the aptitude of each for all the offices in the Church—would seem to militate against Mary's being a model of modern women. There can be no doubt about the Church's attitude towards a possible priesthood for Mary. Although one finds in the course of history that the term *Virgin Priest* was allowed by Pope Pius X and that an indulgence was even granted for a prayer to the Virgin Priest, yet devotion to Mary under this title was forbidden by the Holy Office a few years later because the devotion, particularly in the iconography being used to promote it, may very well have led the faithful to conclude that Mary was a true priest.<sup>17</sup>

### **Response to Difficulties**

It is obviously impossible to respond adequately to all difficulties, but since some are more important than the rest I would beg your indulgence in giving a rather short reply to some and a more extended response to others.

### **Reply One—The Image of Mary**

There is no doubt that there is much that is valid in the objection of a too ethereal, almost deified Mary—an unreal, almost sexless creature. Fr. Laurentin, the Marian theologian, frequently returns to a rather striking example of the rediscovery of Mary's image. He speaks about a famous French statue which the piety of the French in successive generation had burdened with layer after layer of rich adornments. One fine day, it was decided to strip the statue of the embellishments of centuries and it was then discovered what an artistic work had been hidden. So, too with our Lady. Vatican Council II in its Constitution on the Church, Chapter 8, has tried to restore the true image of Mary and, while it has confirmed the dogmas already defined by the Church, has depicted Mary as a very human woman who shared our

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lot, who lived by faith, who suffered with her Son as she participated in His mission. The Church in proclaiming Mary *Mother of the Church* wished to stress her solidarity with us in the spiritual life we all share from Christ. Or, to put it as the Council did, she "occupies a place in the Church which is the highest after Christ and yet very close to us."<sup>18</sup>

Modern authors seem to vie with one another in stressing the human condition of Mary. If there is one theme running through all of Father Laurentin's work it is that Mary is a servant of the Lord, a fellow-believer like ourselves, who is to be praised and imitated not precisely because she is the Mother of God, the Immaculate, Ever-Virgin, taken body and soul into heaven, but because she heard the word of God and kept it in perfect union with Her Son and His saving mission. His counterpart among German Marian theologians, Fr. Henry Koester, has a similar insistence on the reality of a flesh-and-blood creature making a vital, free contribution to the history of salvation in such a way that she will forever serve as a model for all Christians who will come after her. For Fr. Koester, Mary is the *first Christian*, really representative of all who will follow her. His analysis certainly counteracts the static image of the Virgin, which removes her from our human setting, and it deserves to be quoted extensively.

The pivotal point of all this history is without doubt the assumption of one single human nature into hypostatic union with the Son of God. Now this single human nature, the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth, was given up and surrendered to the Son of God by Mary. In so doing, Mary herself became part of the central event of Salvation History, the event which is the foundation of the whole structure of our salvation. Mary has, therefore, an objective, all-embracing import and significance. In this event she has an active, conscious part; deliberately pondering, freely accepting, obediently accomplishing the role assigned to her.

According to St. Luke, she acted as an embodiment of God's people, as spokesman of Israel, as daughter-Sion, as the representative of all mankind, in whose name she consented to the sacred wedding between God's Son and human nature. The biblical patristic idea, which understood the relationship between God's Son and our race as a marriage, put in bold relief the bilateral character of this basic event and the substantial part given to mankind itself, and to its representative—Mary.

Holy Scripture shows Mary's subjective attitude matching this objective role. She is aware of its importance. Being a virgin and probably having already decided to remain a virgin, she is prepared to play the part of mankind-bride before God. She is revealed in the Annunciation scene as the model of man confronting God and His revelation: believing His word, obedient to His will. As servant and handmaid of God, she thus sums up the Old Testament ideal of the man; she stands out above all, as the exemplar of faith, of a faith which, unlike ours, could not base itself on the Incarnation



of God's Son, on His signs, miracles and resurrection, since her faith precedes all these mysteries and, in fact, is required before they are accomplished! Yes, "Blessed is she who believed," says Elizabeth with Luke, (1, 45).<sup>19</sup>

One of America's leading theologians, a member of the select council of thirty papal theologians, Fr. Walter Burghardt, of Woodstock College, New York, says:

She gave a total response to God's call in her faith and love without knowing all the facts. We who have been raised on a diet of security think Mary felt very secure. But I don't think she was that sure of anything—including the Resurrection. Her faith was a vision in the dark. She could hardly have been a placid woman, leading a life like that.<sup>20</sup>

Considering all the signs of the times, at which we surely can rejoice, one can readily subscribe to the judgement of John O'Connor that

a new Mary is emerging—not the medieval virginal Queen, but the personification and prototype of the Christian mission—a woman who humanizes the world by being present where needed.<sup>21</sup> (*Ibid.*)

### **Second Reply—A True Image of Mary Can Meet the Challenge of the Evolution and Relativization of the Feminine Image**

The mistake in the past both in regard to the imitation of Christ and the saints, particularly Mary, was that our idea of imitation was rather slavish and mechanical. We should have been led to the essence of imitation by the very words of Christ informing us in no uncertain terms why Mary was of value, why she was blessed among women: "Yes, rather blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it." (Luke 1:45) But unfortunately, this very text indicating the source of Our Lady's true greatness was considered an anti-Marian text by some theologians involved in controversy and, in fact, was not used for one hundred years in papal encyclicals and, in fact, was only restored to an honored place in the *Constitution on the Church* (No. 58):

In the course of her Son's preaching, she received His praise when . . . He declared blessed (cf. Mk. 3:35; Lk. 11:27-28) those who heard and kept the word of God, as she was faithfully doing. (cf. Lk. 2:19, 51)

We really can thank God that changing conditions of modern life have forced us to come to grips with the spirit which must inform the imitation of Mary. Father Laurentin correctly assesses the changing situation in regard to Mary when he describes the present state of affairs and the way in which Mary remains a model in a changing world.

She is no longer a material model. One can no longer subject the woman to the image of Mary in the measure in which she is a witness of the state of civilization which has been surpassed. She remains a universal model on

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another level. She remains the woman who knew how to take to herself in God the universality of the world and of salvation in the particular historical situation which was hers, by receiving Christ, and by giving him birth. The situation is no longer the same, but the manner in which the Virgin knew how to accept the situation which was hers in order to receive Christ in faith, remains a model.<sup>22</sup>

### Third Reply—Male-Female Differences

We may be in a state of confusion in regard to the exact differences between man and woman, but we need not accept the extremes of either the subordination and inferiority assumed by the differences posited between man and woman in the past or, on the other hand, limit all differences merely to the obvious undeniable biological ones for fear of offending equality by acknowledging differences. Perhaps I should preface my remarks by the observations of a "sensitive but unsympathetic" observer of women's liberation, novelist Anne Bernays, who has written that "liberation is irresistible to women who want to be men." Be that as it may, whether one agrees or disagrees, she may have exposed the root problem of both the liberation movement and our own quandary in attempting to decipher the differences between man and woman when she speaks about "the disabling anxiety that different means the same thing as inferior." She even claims that for a woman dedicated to liberation, "the psychic imperatives have blinded her to the pleasures of her own uniqueness."<sup>23</sup>

This is rather strong language, but it is equivalent to the "rather obvious fact—which psychological research is now beginning to document—that women are not men, and men are not women, and there is not sense in a member of either group trying to pretend otherwise."<sup>24</sup>

No matter how difficult the problem of assessing the differences may be, there certainly is an urgency about the problem if we agree with what some authors here and abroad think about the necessity of woman's unique contribution. Listen to the world-famous Romano Guardini, who states:

Life has more and more virilized, as it seems, even women themselves. Reason, *technology*, *power* increasingly take over the decisive control of existence. *The knowledge of the silent and quiet things that really are the most powerful ones seems to disappear. The forces of the heart seem to decrease.* By all this the life of mankind risks not only becoming ill, but even dying of this *predominance of masculinity*. There is no prospect of coping with this danger. Out of this, somebody who is not by nature enthusiastically concerned at the Mary-idea, will guess, I suppose, what it did for the spiritual and psychological economy of life, when this idea in the Middle Ages bore fully upon the common consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

An American Passionist editor saw woman's contribution as essentially connected with the fundamental realities of creaturehood and life. He was sure that this is

Woman is obviously a kind of sacrament in creation. She, perhaps much more than man, gives voice to a hidden mystery about the meaning of creaturehood . . . . Until the end of time, woman will go on telling all men that God is forming a mystic bride for Himself out of the flesh of mankind. If she is a living sacrament, she is constantly voicing this message: to be a person is to surrender for the sake of an enlargement of life. Acceptance is the secret of fruitfulness.<sup>26</sup>

Although there is continuous argument about the nature of male-female differences, it would seem that every attempt to demonstrate these difference, whether of theologian, psychologist, or spiritual leader, relates in some way to a woman's closeness to life. It would be futile simply to write off these attempts as simply a transference of biology to psychology or spirituality. I believe that Father Laurentin is very perceptive when he points out:

In the species, there certainly exists a differentiation between men and women. On the physical level, there is a role proper to a woman in generation: her constitution is adapted to this end and to all the psychological continuance of this constitution. This function places woman on the side of receptivity, of *vital continuity*. She is in more intimate, closer connection with the life which goes on, and with the cosmos. She plays a mediating role between man who fights with the cosmic forces to dominate them and the life which she assumes and perceives from the interior. She is thus an irreplaceable intermediary between man who is *psychologically discontinuous* and the continuity which is called for by the perpetuation of the human race, or in broader terms, the survival of groups and societies.<sup>27</sup>

The Dutch psychologist Buytendijk who eliminates many deceptive differences between men and women asks us to retain this distinctive characteristic: the woman is "full of solicitude for the world." What dominates in her is the sense of *values*, while in man the fundamental experience is the resistance of the cosmos on which he works. For man, everything is matter to be transformed and the means to realize an end, whereas woman respects and protects the *rights* and the *integrity of the realities of nature*. Man would thus be characterized by *finalization* and the woman by *gratuity*; man, by *duty*; and the woman, by *spontaneity*. Man would be polarized by the *thing*; and woman, by the *person*.<sup>28</sup> It is precisely because of woman's connection with life that it is claimed that she is capable of that love and suffering which can bring peace to the world. In a passage which makes one think instinctively of the Gospel and Our Lord's own references to women, the great spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi declares:

*Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who, but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure? She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and derives joy in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffer-*



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ing caused by the pangs of labor? But she forgets them in the joy of creation. Who again suffers daily so that her babe may wax from day to day? Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget that she ever was or can be the object of man's lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker and silent leader. *It is given to her to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar.*<sup>29</sup>

It certainly is worthy of note that two modern women who are leading a new movement entitled "Christianity and Womanity" in presenting a program in Danville, California, on "Mary: the New Woman," characterized Mary as the "Woman of Life." (Pat Driscoll and Mary Rose Osborne of San Damiano—Danville, California)

Along this line it would seem difficult to explain by mere conditioning women's overwhelming participation in the positive movements relating to the struggle against abortion, such as *Birthright*, *Right to Life*, etc. And if this is true, it certainly is appropriate that in their first joint pastoral ever on the *Blessed Virgin Mary*, the Bishops of the United States should make such a striking connection between the value of all human life and the ideal woman Mary:

Because she is seen as the Mother of all the living, Mary is viewed properly as the guardian of the child in the womb, as well as of the child that enters this earth alive. More than any other person, the Blessed Mother understood that the beginning of human life is attributable to God's creative love, as well as to the parents' action. When God became man within Mary, the incarnation began. When Mary accepted the message from the angel and the Holy Spirit overshadowed her, the Divine Word, the God-man began to live. Entrusted with this precious life of her Child, Mary loved it, and defended it against all dangers. She protected Jesus before and after He was born. (No. 135)

### Fourth Reply—Model for Both Sexes

The fact that Mary, like Christ, can be and is a model for both sexes doesn't militate against the fact that both Christ and Mary can be special models for the feminine and masculine sexes respectively. To decide otherwise is tantamount to denying the sex of both Christ and His Mother.

### Fifth Reply—Virginity—Understandable in Faith

It cannot be denied that the doctrine of faith concerning Mary's perpetual virginity is a difficulty in the light of the current misunderstanding and devaluation of virginity. Yet the problem is really no different from the one that religious face in trying to make sense of their own lives to themselves and before the world. I would venture that the consecrated life has always been and will always be, whether in Mary or ourselves, *a spectacle to angels, to saints, and to men*. Father Laurentin proposes a solution which is in line with traditional thinking and tries to come to grips with the modern difficulty in such a way as to leave Mary a flesh-and-blood creature, but as

the Lord pointed out (Math. 19:12) there will always be difficulty in understanding from the outside the consecration of virginal chastity. As Fr. Laurentin indicates:

A first element of a response is inscribed in the situation of Mary such as the gospels describe it. At the time of the Annunciation she is a "virgin engaged" to a man named Joseph (Luke 1,27). Except for the sexual union excluded by her exclusive consecration to the Son of God, she lived a common life with a man. This presupposes a profound union of responsibilities of work, of mutual help, with a certain affective element on the level of friendship lived between a man and a woman in the solidarity of building a household.

More profoundly, the resolution not to know man is not for Mary the incapacity to give herself; neither is it a withdrawal, nor a refusal of sexuality, but a surpassing of it. Mary was led to the vocation of virginity not by reason of any pre-established ideas on the hierarchy of states in which virginity would be superior to marriage. The idea of her times was deliberately contrary to this. She discovered virginity as a means of realization of a divine purpose, that of an exclusive gift to God, and of a total consecration to salvation. She did it, as certain men have done it in the natural order, for the realization of a commanding and universal objective: the salvation of men. She did it, as many women after her, were going to do, in order to testify in the world here below that the other life, to which we are called, which no longer makes use of ordinary means (material goods, sexual love) is already viable in God, by God, and for God. Consecrated life is an eschatological witness.<sup>30</sup>

### **Reply Six—Mary, A Universal Mother**

The fact that Mary was the mother of an only son need not militate against her being considered the model of mothers who may have large families. Actually this objection is a rather secondary one. It can be resolved in the same way that we, along with Father Laurentin and others, have tried to resolve more weighty difficulties; namely, by universality.

Mary gave birth to a Son who is universal by his divinity as well as his mission of Savior. She accepted him as such. In him, her maternity had a universal extension. And this universality is realized in the spiritual maternity promulgated by Christ on Calvary, when he said: "Mother, behold your son." (John 19:25).<sup>31</sup>

### **Seventh Reply—Mary Has the Priestly Spirit**

At the present moment the fact that Mary is not a priest should cause no difficulty in her being a model for woman, even for those who do think it is of the essence for woman's equality and participation in the Church that woman should no longer be barred from the priesthood. Certainly the spirituality behind the priesthood, the idea of a complete offering of oneself and Christ in union with Christ Himself to the



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Heavenly Father is of the very essence of the Church's description of the union of Mary's will with Christ's in the redemption.

Strangely enough, Father Laurentin who is so open to change, while tentatively admitting the possibility of female ordination and even demonstrating past and future possibilities of female ministries, shows himself uncharacteristically unsympathetic to female ordinations. He even seems to imply that the latest movement for female ordination can be attributed to an improper functioning of the priesthood among the male practitioners:

*In the measure in which the hierarchy appears in its true light as a humble function of service, and not as lordly glory, the sentiment of frustration that a woman feels in finding herself excluded from the priesthood loses its foundation.<sup>32</sup>*

### Conclusion

I hope that the method I have employed has shed some light on the question of Mary's being a model for modern woman. I do realize, of course, that there is more to the question than a simple attempt to clear away difficulties, but time and space preclude the possibility of doing more than sketching.

It seems to me that in these last few years as never before, theologians with the help of others, have been realizing the nature of theology not as the science of God in himself, but of the relationship of the God-Savior to man, and have been led to do something about it by trying to elaborate an anthropology. Perhaps the lead was taken by the Fathers of Vatican Council II, no doubt inspired by their theological experts, when in the very first lines of the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, giving the Church's new attitude towards the world, they claimed that nothing human leaves a Christian unmoved. It is in the light of this renewed anthropology that one must understand the role of the woman and see that among women Mary holds a place in the first rank as the Woman *par excellence*. As Father Laurentin points out so concisely, "The dissipation of a thousand false and old-fashioned ideas does not diminish her, but gives her more importance and situates her in a much more convincing and brilliant place."<sup>33</sup>

Not all may agree with the correctness of the attempts to "liberate" Mary from the false, material images, which have shrouded her true visage from our regard, but they do try to elucidate a fundamental insight: "Mary has been given a place in the Divine Plan in order to play a feminine and maternal role: a mediating role between the Creator and the cosmos in which God becomes incarnate in order to save man."<sup>34</sup> A survey of how this insight has been applied can be very instructive even if there is a natural tendency to hesitate before some of the expressions and conclusions.

Sidney Callahan in an article written four years ago, but which, I believe, is still not dated, speaks of her "personal Mariology" under the rubric: "Mary Was No Moderate," a take-off on the cry of a Black United Front making demands before the Shrine



of the Immaculate Conception (in Washington, D.C.), on the Feast of the Motherhood of Mary. She decries old-fashioned Mariology whose imagery "is all wrapped up with sweetness, humility, and submission" and proceeds to give her own personal interpretation of Mary in the Gospel:

Mary doesn't impress one in the Gospel account as being submissive. She rebukes Jesus in the temple, and presses him to do something, anything, at the wedding of Cana. Her words in the Magnificat must stand as some of the proudest words ever spoken: those of a chosen person among a chosen people. And those references to "princes being pulled down from their thrones" and "the rich being sent away empty" don't sound sweet.

Mrs. Callahan then suggests that we "remythologize with the revolutionaries" and see that "Mary, as the daughter of Israel, is heir to the struggle for justice." Then following the lead of Walter Brueggemann in his article on David in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* ("The Trusted Creature," Vol. 31 (1969), 484-98), she characterizes Mary as one who "fulfills David's role as innovator and trusted creature." Mary, she claims is "the trusted creature and innovator *par excellence*." Finally, she sums up her view of Mary in words which have a modern ring, but which conform to the patristic tradition:

I find in Mary's importance an affirmation of man's dignity and destiny. She said "yes" freely. The freedom of it appeals to us. The fact that it was a feminine "yes" to childbirth is not irrelevant, only secondary.<sup>35</sup>

Mrs. Callahan's views of Mary would be considered by some as a definite change; by others, simply as a rediscovery of the real Mary. "Either way," as John O'Connor observes,

Christianity's avant-garde philosophers are taking a new look at Mary—and where they find her is seemingly where the action is: within Scripture at the birth of the Messiah; at his disclosure of a sense of mission; at Cana telling the startled servants to "go and do as he says"; at Calvary, where everything seemed lost; and with Jesus' friends waiting for the descent of the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup>

One author, Dr. Howard P. Kainz of Marquette University has taken this idea of Mary as *the involved woman* to what some might consider an outrageous extreme by suggesting that Mary "might even have been an activist, or even a subversive, praising God for putting down the powerful and the rich, and thanking him for giving an abundance of good things to the poor."<sup>37</sup> What these authors are really saying, it seems to me, is that the Mary of the Gospel is of enduring importance to women of this age because as a real person in an age when women were often regarded as not much more than chattel, she is shown as playing a decisive role in the birth of the Savior and, in fact according to the Church's vision, in the whole history of salvation. So, in spite of any difficulty in assigning specifically feminine roles, it cannot be doubted that Mary, already a "free" and "liberated" woman in the best sense of those terms,

can speak to the women of our times who, if I read the signs of the times correctly, seek beyond all else to be recognized as autonomous persons, capable of making their own special contributions to humanity, as Mary did. The Bishops of the United States in their pastoral on devotion to Mary (1973) after pointing out incidents in the life of our Lord in which He gives us *a basis for a genuine emancipation and liberation of womanhood* (No. 141), stress Mary as a model for modern women precisely from the viewpoint of freedom:

The dignity which Christ's redemption won for all women was fulfilled uniquely in Mary as the model for all real feminine freedom. The Mother of Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as: *intelligent* (the Annunciation, "How can this be?"); *apostolic* (the visit to Elizabeth); *inquiring and contemplative* (the Child lost in the temple); *responsive and creative* (at Cana); *compassionate and courageous* (at Calvary); a woman of great *faith*. These implications in the lives of Jesus and Mary need to be elaborated into a sound theology on the role of Christian women in contemporary Church and society. (No. 142)

Whether we listen to a religious sister or a leader of the Women's Liberation Movement, the message in the final analysis is the same. A Franciscan Sister, Betty Berger of Little Falls, Minnesota, tells us:

Women in the church and elsewhere are beginning to influence policy and demand a share in decision making. Women are becoming leaders.<sup>38</sup>

And Kate Millett, woman liberationist, describes the real goal of the liberation movement in terms generally acceptable to a "free" Virgin Mary.

We really don't have many fatuous hopes of taking over . . . We are each half of a person, we are each less than we could be. If we did not have these rigid sex roles, we would all have so much more room for spontaneous behavior—for doing things that we feel like doing, for following our own instincts, for being imaginative, for being creative. The great thing about it all is that we could not only change this, but, in the process, really improve everything as well."<sup>39</sup>

These areas of concern are corroborated by local experience. Last year at the University of Dayton, we had a weekend's women's study entitled "The 51 Percent Minority" in which one woman summed up the result of the entire workshop for herself (and undoubtedly for many others) by saying that she was just beginning to feel that she was "an individual, and not an extension of man."<sup>40</sup>

At almost the same time, Cynthia Morgan, a junior in engineering at the University of Dayton, was explaining why she had chosen engineering:

At the risk of seeming trite, a woman who cares about the situation of the world may pick engineering as the profession through which she can contribute the most concretely to solving the problems facing the world. For example, as a chemical engineer she could combat pollution. It is not too far



fetched to think of the woman engineer as a militant for better environment. The prospect of a world polluted to the point where human existence is endangered arouses the maternal instincts in a woman.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps all of these ideas of freedom, of responsibility, of creativity, of real personhood can be summed up in what our young people might call "openness" or even the ability "to do one's own thing" according to the demands of the time. Barbara M. La Rosa describes the answers to women's dilemmas in these terms:

Women must proceed with caution and boldness at the same time. Women must be free to "do their own thing" yet find "useful, tested patterns of living in the past which can be adjusted to new needs."<sup>42</sup>

The exegate Father Eugene Maly expresses the same opinion from a biblical point of view:

Mary's openness to the Word of God is a powerful model for us today. With all our justified concern to bring about the fullness of community life, the completion of God's creation, we will fail miserably unless we open ourselves wholly and completely to the Spirit of God alive in the world.<sup>43</sup>

How is this openness so necessary for doing God's work in this world going to come about? Without attempting to give a complete answer, it is undoubtedly true that it demands self-confrontation, introspection, what the Gospel would call "pondering in one's heart." It is certainly not without interest that in a sermon delivered shortly after Christmas last year, Pope Paul VI referred to the fact that St. Luke, in recording the Christmas event, shares with us what he calls a "very delicate and wonderful confidence," "the precious testimony" that "Mary kept all these things (within herself) pondering them in her heart." (Luke 2:9 and 51) and then gives the following explanation:

It reveals to us the inner life of the Blessed Virgin, a second form of making her own the exterior event of the birth of Jesus, in which she, the Blessed Virgin, had played the leading part, the Mother. She thought it over again, lived it over again. She herself tried to understand better, to realize, to translate into terms of thought and love . . . what had happened, in her and by means of her, in terms of fact, concrete history, the exterior circumstances, which we describe as real. She sought the superior and total reality of this fact, in its prophetic significance, that is, in the divine thought, of which she was the expression; she sought to penetrate, to grasp as far as was possible, to enjoy the mystery. As the Council teaches us, she progressed in faith. (Constitution on the Church, n 61-65)<sup>44</sup>

For women of our time, particularly those who accept the Gospel message, it is imperative, especially in the light of the excesses to which any movement for human freedom is exposed, that they follow the example of Mary and ponder both the signs of the times and the Gospel message in their hearts. Only in this way can they suc-



ceed as Mary did "in discovering their innermost selves" and be able "to exercise the unique role that is theirs." (*The Power of a Woman*, in *Christopher News Notes*, June, July, 1970, No. 181)<sup>45</sup>

In conclusion, I would like to express a debt of gratitude to Fr. Laurentin, whom I have frequently cited. I do not think anyone has succeeded in indicating both the scope of the problem and the directions in which a solution is to be sought. I quote him by way of conclusion:

In spite of the evolution of morals and of surface objections, Mary is the woman *par excellence*, the supreme accomplishment of femininity, but we must today situate this model at a less material level, one which is less particularistic and more universal.

In the final analysis, the key to the problems which we have raised, and in particular that of Mary as the model of the woman, in this universality. From the viewpoint of the Gospel, the *emancipation and the liberation*, of the woman, as formerly of the slaves, are only means. What counts is fulfillment on the level of human and divine universality. Mary is the evangelical model of the woman less by the particular characteristics of her condition *than by the manner in which she assumed this condition*. In the ordinary and limited situation which was hers: that of a poor woman in a lowly village (John 1, 46); she is an example of

the possibilities of which human nature, feminine as well as masculine, is capable in the authenticity of nature and grace.<sup>46</sup> (*op. cit.*, p. 336)

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> René LAURENTIN, *The Present Crisis in Mariology*. University of Dayton, 1968, p. 313.

<sup>2</sup> John O'CONNOR, *The Liberation of the Virgin Mary*, in *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec., 1972, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 313.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *America*, Sept. 18, 1971.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, 326.

<sup>7</sup> Simone de BEAUVOIR, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949.

<sup>8</sup> Unpublished mimeographed manuscript, p. 9, 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *The Front Line*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Spring, 1967), p. 154-155, citing Karl Barth, *Church Dog-*

*matics* III: *The Doctrine of Creation*, Part II, Edinburgh, 1960, 290ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Parade*, Feb. 24, 1973, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> "The Personal Views of Eight Women Who Succeeded," *Life*, September 4, 1970, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Time*, July 26, 1971, p. 36-7.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Fr. Henry Koester, S.A.C., in an address on *God—Mary—Mankind* given at the University of Dayton, Summer, 1967, p. 14 of hectographed text.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. R. LAURENTIN, *op. cit.*, 329.

<sup>16</sup> Harvey COX, *Secular City*, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. René LAURENTIN, "The Cult of Mary" in *Mary in An Ecumenical Age*, Course 19, University of Dayton, 1966, p. 19-11 (hectographed).

<sup>18</sup> *Constitution on the Church*, No. 54.

<sup>19</sup> *The Role of Mary in a Genuine Christian Life*, University of Dayton, 1967, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> John O'Connor, *art. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* As this talk was being given, a book by Father George H. Tavard appeared in which the celebrated author claimed that "the ancient or modern models of womanhood which present Mary as the theological pattern for all believing women suffers from a radical fallacy" (*Woman in Christian Tradition*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1973, p. 187).

He makes this remark in the context of his search "toward an anthropology" of woman in which he claims that such a search focuses on "man as he experiences himself in our time. For we cannot directly experience mankind in any other way." In elaborating on this point, he comes to the conclusion that "a theological reflection on woman should not take as its chief focus the feminine image of the Virgin Mary, even though this image has long been close to centrality in the faith of a large number of Christians" (*Ibid.*).

This reasoning is unconvincing. Taken literally, it proves too much. If we would take it to its logical conclusion, considering the evolution of man, his cultural development, etc. (insisted upon by Father Tavard), we would find it difficult to consider Abraham as "Our father in faith" or even Christ as our supreme model. While it certainly is true that "Mary insofar as she is a woman . . . participates in the general structure of womanhood," we cannot dismiss as lightly as Father Tavard seems to the probability that God Himself in creating Mary specifically to be the Mother of God, in giving her a vocation which made her "blessed among women," was signaling her out as the glory of womankind, the highest representative of femininity. A Christian anthropology of woman certainly must give primacy to the data of revelation on the relationship of the God-man to the woman who was closest to Him. Therefore, I believe that although Father Tavard's structures have a partial validity, they do not invalidate any of our conclusions in this section or the succeeding ones.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 316.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Russel SHAW, *The Christian and Women's Lib*, in *Catholic Telegraph*, March 3, 1972, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Quoted by Fr. Koester, S.A.C., in an address on *God—Mary—Mankind*, given at the University of Dayton, Summer, 1967, p. 14 of hectographed text.

<sup>26</sup> Augustin HENNESSY, *The Sign*, July 1967, 110, 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, 327.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. L. BUYTENDIJK, *La Femme, ses modes d'être, de paraître, d'exister*, Bruges, 1954.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 319.

- <sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 319.
- <sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 331.
- <sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 335-336.
- <sup>34</sup> R. LAURENTIN, *op. cit.*, p. 336.
- <sup>35</sup> *National Catholic Reporter*, December, 1969, p. 8.
- <sup>36</sup> J. O'CONNOR, *art. cit.*, p. 127.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> *Letters*, in *Time*, March 20, 1972, p. 6.
- <sup>39</sup> *Who's Come A Long Way Baby?*, in *Time*, August 31, 1970, p. 21.
- <sup>40</sup> Helene KINGSLAND, *Women's Weekend Studies Conventional Female Role*, in *UD Flyer News*, March 28, 1972, p. 8.
- <sup>41</sup> *U.D. Engineer*, February, 1972.
- <sup>42</sup> Barbara M. LA ROSA, *op. cit.*
- <sup>43</sup> *Catholic Telegraph*, Dec. 4, 1969, p. 4.
- <sup>44</sup> "The Teaching of Christmas." *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, January 4, 1973, p. 5.
- <sup>45</sup> "The Power of a Woman," in *Christopher News Notes*, June, July, 1970, No. 181.
- <sup>46</sup> R. LAURENTIN, *op. cit.*, p. 336.



