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## THE BIBLE, REVELATION AND MARIAN DEVOTION

by  
C. Gilbert Romero, Ph.D.\*

### *Introduction*

One of the measures of status in our society is the number of instances one appears on the cover of *Time* magazine. Given that criterion, Mary of Nazareth should have tremendous status in our society, for according to one assessment,<sup>1</sup> she has appeared on the cover not once but several times. Of course, the question of "covergirl" status may be fueled by nothing more profound than simple curiosity. At any rate, Mary is considered hot property by the print media. Consider the December 30, 1991, cover of *Time* presenting Mary as "Handmaiden or Feminist?" Or a recent issue (March 29, 1993) of *U.S. News and World Report* discussing the phenomenon of weeping madonnas. What does this all mean? At the very least, it means that Mary as a religious issue in our modern society is very much alive and flourishing.

What are we to make of this Mary phenomenon? How can we make sense of what is actually happening without lapsing into an apocalyptic fundamentalism that seems to place Mary above God and Jesus with regard to revelation?<sup>2</sup> A simplistic

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<sup>1</sup>As described by Robert M. Hamma, "The Feasts of Mary," *Catholic Update* (May, 1992): 1.

<sup>2</sup>A classic example of hysteria promotion is the newspaper *Mary's People*, published by the Pittsburgh Center for Peace (McKees Rock, PA). The special edition (no. 2/Winter, 1993), attempts to explain Marian apparitions in terms of excessive

response, yet one with more than a grain of truth, would be that the further away one gets from Scripture and official church teaching, the greater becomes the potential for distorting Mary's role in history and revelation. Some perspective can be brought to understanding the modern Mary phenomenon by first understanding the inter-relationship of the three aspects that form the title of this presentation: the Bible, revelation, and Marian devotion. First, even though it sounds like a truism, it is important to realize that all Marian devotion is culturally based. Second, for the culturally based Marian devotion to have theological legitimacy, it is necessary that the devotion be grounded in Sacred Scripture. Third, in order for the Marian devotion to have pastoral relevance, it is important that it be perceived as having a revelatory dimension.

#### *A. Marian Devotion*

It has long been a fact of Catholic life that our spirituality has received some of its nourishment from various forms of Marian devotion, whether it was the rosary, a novena to Mary under a special title, private prayers, or something else. Part of our Catholic lore deals with a multitude of Marian apparitions and their impact on our spirituality. Though it is not my intention to deal with Marian apparitions per se, it is important to see them in perspective—at least as connected with Marian devotions. It is my impression that a great deal of Marian devotion has emerged in connection with some kind of apparition. And for that reason, it is necessary to deal with the phenomenon of Marian apparitions without at the same time legitimating them all.

From a liturgical point of view, several apparitions have been commemorated as special feasts on the Church's calendar, for example, Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady of Guadalupe. This liturgical status bestows a sort of legitimacy on

use of apocalyptic language and imagery, with little regard to theology or Church magisterium. The danger of apocalyptic interpretation is in the great potential for distortion of meaning.

the appearance itself.<sup>3</sup> Yet even alleged apparitions, those not officially approved, can be considered to form one aspect of Marian devotion that merits consideration. The reasons for this would be primarily more cultural than theological. This means that people respond to Mary more out of socio-political and anthropological reasons, such as appeal for help from a compassionate mother-figure, rather than out of any dogmatic convictions. At any rate, the dominant motive for a Marian devotion would seem to be the meeting of a specifically felt need on a psychological, spiritual, or emotional plane, and not on a theological one. However, for a Marian devotion to be truly life-giving, it must be related somehow to the community of faith which we call Church. More on this below.

The challenge to understanding the Mary phenomenon would be, in the case of apparitions, to distinguish between the apparition itself and the message conveyed. The apparition itself is culturally conditioned in terms of the cultural elements used to convey the message. For example, Our Lady of Lourdes was dressed in a white garment with blue sash, appeared to a young shepherdess and spoke the local French patois understood primarily by the young girl, while Our Lady of Guadalupe was dressed as an expectant young Indian woman, appeared to an illiterate middle-aged man, and spoke in the Nahuatl language. The cultural framework was different, but the message was virtually the same, namely, to build a special shrine in honor of Mary.

We have parallel cases in the Hebrew scriptures, where individuals have visions but the focus of attention is more on the content of the message rather than on the vision itself. The cultural context of the visions allows for wide latitude in their expression. Whether a thing actually happened or not, as in the case of a vision described in the text, was not so important. What *was* important for the person in biblical times was that something was *believed* to have happened,

<sup>3</sup>Yet this liturgical "legitimacy" does not by itself guarantee the absolute historicity of every detail in the event itself.

and it was that belief which had an impact on both one's personal and community life.

For example, the prophet Isaiah had a vision in the Temple (Is. 6), and the prophet Amos had a series of visions which virtually dominate the second half of his book (Am. 7-9). We do not know the exact nature of Isaiah's vision in the Temple. We do know that Isaiah believed it happened. What was important was the message contained in Isaiah's vocational call and his consequent responsibilities toward the wider community. In the case of Amos, the text says nothing about how the visions in chapters 7-9 came about. The focus of attention is on the content of the message, namely, judgment on the people Israel. The vocation of the prophet and judgment on Israel were constant themes in the prophetic literature, but the visionary modes of expressing those themes, or any others, varied. Jeremiah's vocational call (chap. 1) was similar to Isaiah's in content, but different in its visionary expression. Ezekiel had a multitude of visions, many of which are still the subject of scholarly debate. Thus, we can see a pattern in some of the prophetic literature of a constant message, sometimes delivered via different visionary experiences. The message takes precedence over the vision itself.

There are numerous claims of Marian apparitions with their thousands of devotees from around the globe, and it would be interesting to see how often the message is clouded by the medium. That is to say, why is more attention often given to the phenomenon of the apparition itself than to the nature of the message? For example, in apparitions of the last thirty or so years more attention seems to have been paid to the preternatural phenomena surrounding the visions and visionaries than on the presumed message itself. There continues to be a fascination for the supernatural. Could it be that people tend to pay more attention to a message if it is wrapped in the marvelous? After all, the miracles of Jesus were also learning experiences for those who observed them, yet even Jesus had to make sure that his audiences did not remain on the level of the exterior and neglect the deeper message. For example, Jesus healed the paralytic as

proof of his power to forgive sins; so that his audience might understand the true lesson of divine love and forgiveness, he said:

Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Rise and walk"? But *that you may know* that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home." (Lk. 5:23-24, CSB:NAB/1990<sup>4</sup>) [*Italics mine*]

Perhaps in the modern Marian apparition there is a confusion about the message that deflects attention away from its ambiguity and onto the vision or visionary. This confusion can thus accidentally benefit the medium. How many apparitions are needed to encourage people to pray and do penance? This is the central message of the apparitions.<sup>5</sup> Why should we wonder about that? Prayer and penance are threads that run throughout the Old and New Testaments, and have been constantly emphasized in Christian spirituality. Does this mean there are revelatory shortcomings in the scriptures that necessitate restatement after restatement by means of apparitions? I think not. A significant distinction between a Marian apparition and a Marian devotion is that the latter may or may not have emerged from the former, but, as devotion, it can claim more solid roots in theology and Catholic tradition.

The multiplicity of Marian devotions, as well as the myriad claims of apparitions from virtually all over the world, lead us to conclude that these devotions have a cultural basis with solid foundations in socio-political and anthropological realities. Basically, this means that in order to properly under-

<sup>4</sup>Donald Senior et al., eds., *The Catholic Study Bible: The New American Bible* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990); hereafter indicated as CSB:NAB/1990.

<sup>5</sup>Not all visionary claims have been validated. In fact, quite a few have been judged to be spurious. For helpful insights into the psychological dimensions of Marian apparitions, see the useful study by Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), especially the first half of the book. Though one may not agree with all his conclusions, it would be a mistake to ignore everything he has to say.

stand, let alone interpret, any one of the Marian devotions, one must first take into account a people's perception of Mary through that people's traditions, imagery and symbolism. Then it is necessary to consider the historical as well as sociological and anthropological contexts of the devotions, even before their theological ramifications. In effect, each devotion says more about the devotees than it does about Mary. This will become clearer below.

The cultural framework of traditions, imagery and symbolism, together with their sociological and anthropological underpinnings, conditions our interpretation of Mary's "message," such as it comes to us in the apparitions. For example, why do people from Portugal (Our Lady of Fatima) view Mary differently from the people of France (Our Lady of Lourdes) or Mexico (Our Lady of Guadalupe)? Each of these countries has a rich Marian tradition, strongly influenced by historical circumstances which have conditioned the people to see a special mediatory role in Mary that gives the cultural framework a particular Portuguese, French or Mexican flavor. The historical conditions could have been a world war, the threat of communism, conquest, a plague or pestilence, or one of many other potentially chaotic situations. Furthermore, we may legitimately ask what are the cultural lenses through which people see Mary as their own special advocate against the various threats and, especially, as evidenced in the various images and symbols represented in Marian iconography? Culture and a people's historical reality are tightly bound.

In order to deal with these questions effectively, it is necessary to look at a particular cultural group and the anthropological and socio-political framework out of which it expresses Marian devotion. Because of my pastoral experience and personal history, I choose to focus on the Hispanics of the southwestern United States. To begin with, part of the historical, socio-political reality of the Hispanic people (or Latinos as some prefer to be called) in the southwestern United States is a matter of ownership of the land. The date 1848 is as pivotal in the history of the U.S. Hispanic (mostly from Mexican origins) as 587 B.C. was for the Israelites of the Old Testament.

In 587 B.C., Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and a number of the people were taken into exile in Babylonia. Their history and theology, as a result of the exilic experience, underwent a radical reinterpretation. Similarly, in 1848, land belonging to Mexico was acquired by conquest and ceded to the United States through the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Hispanics from Mexico then became exiles in their own land and began to experience the indignities of second-class citizenship. Hispanics and Latinos from other Latin American and Caribbean countries came as immigrants and also suffered the indignities of exploitation, not only in housing and employment, but also in the marketplace.<sup>6</sup>

From an anthropological perspective, we see that these Hispanics and Latinos place great emphasis on the family and especially on the role of the mother within the family. By extension, the family is broadened and bonded through social relationships called *compadrazgo*, which is occasioned by sacramental ceremony such as baptism or marriage. Members of the community or relatives receive special status of extended family by becoming *compadre* or *comadre*. Often in devotional practices, Mary and the saints take on familial roles. Mary is primarily referred to as mother, *madre*, in Hispanic devotions.

In the iconography of Mary in the various cultures, we see her garbed in the typical dress of the specific Latin American country in which she is venerated, and we find her addressed in the native language. This reflects the multiplicity of the various Hispanic and Latino cultural groups claiming her as a personal advocate. Nevertheless, it is clear that the historical aspects of these peoples' experience in the United States are virtually the same. There is exploitation and oppression on a variety of levels, perpetrated consciously or subconsciously by both society and Church.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>This can be documented in most studies that deal with the emergence of the Hispanic in the U.S.A., especially with regard to self-affirmation. See, e.g., Moises Sandoval, *On the Move: A History of the Hispanic Church in the United States* (NY: Orbis, 1990).

<sup>7</sup>Until relatively recently the "cultural imperialism" of the Church had not been articulated, so the mistaken impression was left that previously it did not exist. See Sandoval, *On the Move*.



Hispanics who come to the United States as immigrants often experience the opprobrium and xenophobia of those who see them as threats to their economic and societal well-being. If work is found by the immigrant, it is often under exploitative conditions. And the Church has manifested in many places a pattern of neglect which includes, for whatever reason, a distinct lack of pastoral concern. One of its most obvious forms in the not-too-distant past was a failure to provide a Mass in Spanish in parishes where the majority of the congregation was predominantly Spanish-speaking.

This experience of oppression, in whatever political or cultural form it took, led the Hispanic in the United States to focus on devotional piety as a way of coming to grips with the sense of helplessness. This was true principally because the symbolizing aspect of devotional piety promotes a kind of involvement between the secular, painful world of the daily life and the sacred, trouble-free world of the transcendent. Because of the significant role played by the mother in the Hispanic family—for it was the mother who often comforted the children in times of stress, trial, and tribulation—Mary took on a special advocacy role in Hispanic devotional piety. It was primarily to her as *madre* that people prayed and asked for her help.

Curiously, a number of Mary's titles in Hispanic devotional piety reflect her responsive role as mother relating to children experiencing tribulation. For example, there is devotion to *Nuestra Señora del Socorro* (Our Lady of Perpetual Help), *Nuestra Señora de la Soledad* (Mother of Good Counsel), and *Nuestra Señora de Dolores* (Mother of Sorrows)—all of which plays a prominent role, especially during Holy Week, by presenting Mary as accompanying Jesus during his journey of suffering, much the same way a modern mother suffers with her troubled children. The lived experiences, especially those of pain and suffering, are borne with greater equanimity if one is assured of a mother's love and advocacy. This turns out to be Mary's major role in Hispanic devotional piety.

We have seen to some extent that Marian devotions, whether or not they originate in apparitions, are culturally

based, because they manifest a people's identity and because of the historical, socio-political, and anthropological contexts of the people who express the devotions. In the case of U.S. Hispanics of the Southwest, we may say that their Marian devotions emerged and developed out of a sense of who they were and out of the historical and socio-political context of exploitation. Part of the anthropological reality for their devotions has been the great value they put on motherhood and family, which are the principal lenses through which Mary is viewed by Hispanics. Now, our concern is to see theological legitimacy in these culturally based Marian devotions. In order to do this validly, we must be able to see an organic relationship between these devotions and the Bible.

### *B. The Bible*

I have treated the issue of the relationship between Hispanic devotional piety and the Bible elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> In sum, the relationship has roots in a commonality of experience, that is to say, both the Israelites and Hispanics share the historical experience of exploitation and suffering as a people. Secondly, because of a proclivity to express religious belief in imagery and symbolism, Hispanics tend to appropriate biblical imagery and symbolism because of their analogous experience. For example, Hispanic mothers whose sons have become a source of grief and sorrow are able to identify with those events in the New Testament that show Mary as a sorrowful mother—from the time of Simeon's oracle in the Temple (Lk. 2:25-35) to her witnessing Jesus' death at the foot of the cross (Jn. 19:25-30). Consequently, we can say that the relationship between the Bible and Hispanic devotional piety is based on analogous experience, with subsequent appropriation primarily through symbolism and imagery.

What about Marian devotion and the Bible? If we accept the basic teaching that Mary has theological value only in relationship to Jesus, then her biblical identity emerges from

<sup>8</sup>C. Gilbert Romero, *Hispanic Devotional Piety: Tracing the Biblical Roots* (NY: Orbis, 1991), esp. 19-21.

that relationship. This means that all Marian references and allusions in the Bible are, ultimately, Christological in orientation. Further, since in the Old Testament there are no direct references to Jesus, there are consequently no direct references to Mary. Wherever there is an indirect relationship between Jesus/Mary and the Old Testament, it is always from the perspective of the New Testament authors and their subsequent interpreters. In the question of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, it is important to recognize that the dynamics of the relationship work to the back; that is, the New Testament authors, in order to deepen their understanding of Jesus, hearkened back to and utilized the themes of their Sacred Scripture (which Christians call the Old Testament and Hebrews call *tanak*). Chief among these themes was messianism. So, when we look at the Old Testament to see what it tells us of Mary, we must take into account two things: first, that all references will be indirect and related to Jesus from the viewpoint of the New Testament authors and their subsequent interpreters, and, second, that the indirect references will be thematic, that is, they most likely will emerge through imagery and symbolism.

Briefly, let us take a look at three common Marian references from the Old Testament: Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 7:14; and Sirach 24. These biblical references have their perceived Marian implications completely from the perspective of the New Testament authors and their subsequent interpreters, as well as from the community of faith we call Church.

The passage from Genesis is from the account depicting the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. It is part of the broader story in the first eleven chapters of Genesis dealing with the question of the origins, nature, and extent of evil in a world which was created as good. This particular chapter deals with the issue of how the relationship between God and humanity was weakened. In effect, it was the creature '*Adam*' (Hebrew for the human person), initially created in God's image and likeness, who ultimately chose to fracture the relationship. Yet, because of his unfailing love, God holds forth a promise of reestablishment of the relationship through the instrumentality of the woman's

"seed." This can generally be considered the beginning of the messianic theme.<sup>9</sup>

Some New Testament authors see in Genesis 3:15 an allusion to Jesus. For example, Paul in his letter to the Romans speaks about various factions in Rome and urges the people to avoid factionalism and to model themselves after the behavior of Jesus Christ which promotes peace. The result of this would be that "the God of peace will quickly crush Satan under your feet" (16:20). The direct reference is Christological, with an indirect reference to the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15.

A more-striking parallel to the antithetical roles prescribed to the seed of the woman and the serpent of Genesis 3:15 is the account of the woman and the dragon of Revelation 12. Since the book of Revelation belongs to the genre of apocalyptic literature, it is necessary to bear in mind several characteristics of the genre. First, apocalyptic writing was undertaken primarily to console a people experiencing historical oppression and persecution; it uses a language filled with hope and expectation of deliverance. Second, apocalyptic literature is generally characterized by a high degree of imagery and symbolism with a not-infrequent use of numerology. Third, because of the historical situation of persecution and the people's need for a symbolic language of hope, apocalyptic writing had a sense of contemporary urgency. While some of the imagery was future-oriented, such as proposed victories over chaos, the message of hope was oriented to the present day.

<sup>9</sup>While the messianic dimension of Gen. 3:15 is promoted by Catholic tradition, particularly in the subsequent developments involving Jesus and Mary, it is rejected by notable non-Catholic biblical scholars, e.g., Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Old Testament Library; Phila.: Westminster, 1961), 90; and E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible; NY: Doubleday, 1964), 24. Speiser explicitly states that the passage does not justify eschatological connotation on etymological grounds. See also Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), who says, "The traditional interpretation of the clause '... it will crush your head and you will snap at its heel' as a protoevangelium is therefore impossible, if only because the 'seed' of the woman and the serpent can mean only the generations to come, not an individual (Mary or Jesus)" (p. 25).

There is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding any interpretation of apocalyptic material, due to the symbolic nature of the language and the complexity of the methodology. The book of Revelation is no exception. Therefore, from the outset, we see hermeneutical difficulties with an interpretation of Revelation 12 and its proposed relationship to Genesis 3:15. Our guide in this search is the monograph *Mary in the New Testament*, prepared by an ecumenical team.<sup>10</sup>

The initial parallel between Genesis 3:15 and Revelation 12 is of Eve and the woman whose offspring will ultimately overcome the serpent and dragon. The identity of the woman is not given in Revelation, but the majority of later exegetes see her as primarily Israel and secondarily the Church.<sup>11</sup> For it is through Israel and her messianic hope and through the Church and her Christological focus that victory over the powers of chaos, represented by the serpent and dragon, will be achieved. Revelation 12:1—the woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars—evokes the dream of Joseph in Genesis 37:9, where the sun represents Jacob and Israel, the moon Rachel, and the twelve stars the twelve tribes of Israel. Israel's twelve tribes become the people of God from whom the messiah will come. For the author of Revelation, it was not difficult to see a distinct parallel to Genesis 3:15.

For the early Christians, who believed in Jesus as the longed-for messiah and the fulfillment of promises made to Israel, it was not a major jump in their faith to see Mariological inferences, albeit retrojected ones, in the texts. Though there are biblical scholars who see no Marian implications in Revelation 12,<sup>12</sup> there is a strong tradition, coupled with the faith of the people, that does. For example, one might wonder whether or not part of the symbolism surrounding the

<sup>10</sup>Raymond Brown et al., eds. *Mary in the New Testament* (NY: Paulist Press, 1978). See esp. chap. 8, "The Woman in Revelation 12," 219-239.

<sup>11</sup>See the cogent argument presented in Brown, *Mary in the NT*, 232.

<sup>12</sup>E.g., J. Massyngberde Ford, in *Revelation* (The Anchor Bible; NY: Doubleday, 1975), who says quite frankly: "The present writer is not convinced about the Marian interpretation of Rev 12 . . ." (p. 207).

image of Our Lady of Guadalupe might not have biblical roots, specifically in Revelation 12. The image of Guadalupe has Mary surrounded by what can be construed as rays of the sun, standing on a crescent shaped moon, and surrounded by stars embedded in her garment.

Another interesting biblical allusion to the Guadalupe iconography is Isaiah 7:14 (describing a young woman who will give birth to Immanuel, meaning "God with us") and the Guadalupe image of Mary as a pregnant young woman, symbolized by the black band wrapped around her midsection. There is something to be said for popular interpretation of Scripture in devotional practice.

In this second Old Testament passage with Marian inferences, the oracle of the young woman of Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah falls within the block of material known as the "Book of Immanuel" (chaps. 7-12). The name Immanuel means "God with us" and so continues the theme of God's presence among his people—a constantly recurring theme in the Hebrew scriptures. Because the king, Ahaz, refuses to call upon God for help, the prophet Isaiah proclaims that a divine sign will assure the people Israel of divine protection through divine presence. This sign is that a young woman of marriageable age, as the original verse (7:14) reads, will bear a son and name him Immanuel. When Matthew reflected on the significance of Jesus as fulfillment of God's promise to be with his people, this Isaianic passage came to mind. The Immanuel oracle, in the mind of Matthew, spoke to this reality, which is why, I would suspect, he makes a direct correspondence and translates the name in 1:21-23.

The identity of the young woman in Isaiah 7:14 has been a problem since the beginning.<sup>13</sup> What we can infer from the text is that the young woman will mediate effectively God's presence to his people through the birth of a child. In his retrospective reflection on the significance of Jesus for the Jews

<sup>13</sup>See the commentary by Otto Kaiser as typical of scholarly speculation: *Isaiah 12* (Old Testament Library; Phila.: Westminster Press, 1972), 96-106, esp. 102-103. Against Kaiser, who sees this oracle as one of doom, I see it as one of hope, with messianic orientation.

of his time, Matthew believed that the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of that Isaianic oracle. Subsequent Christian faith, with its developing messianic belief and Christological orientation, endorsed the identity of the young woman as Mary.

Though the connection between Mary and the young woman of Isaiah 7:14 is not made directly in Hispanic devotional piety, it is possible to link the relationship in the religious practice of the *Quinceañera* which is a common Hispanic family celebration of a young girl's fifteenth birthday.<sup>14</sup> The link would occur primarily in the anthropological reality that a fifteen-year-old Hispanic young woman is virtually ready for motherhood and so has an important role to play in her family and the wider society. Secondly, just as the young woman in Isaiah 7:14 was to be an effective mediator of God's presence among his people, so the young woman celebrating her *Quinceañera* is committing herself to be an effective mediator of God's presence to his people through her love and example. For the Hispanic young woman the obvious model for this task is Mary.

A third Old Testament Marian allusion under consideration is Sirach 24, the hymn in praise of wisdom, which has remarkable parallels to Proverbs 8. (This wisdom notion bears further reflection, particularly since the motto on the coat of arms of the Mariological Society of America is "Mary, mother of wisdom.") In this personification of wisdom in Sirach 24, we see wisdom present at the beginning of creation, looking for a place to reside, and ultimately dwelling in Jerusalem. It is not difficult to see how the author of John's gospel sees in the prologue an allusion to Jesus as the *Logos*, also present at creation and pitching his tent among God's people (Jn. 1:14). However, for Sirach, the personification of wisdom was Torah, the law of Moses.<sup>15</sup>

The Marian allusions in Sirach 24 are totally liturgical, in the sense that it is the worshipping community through of-

<sup>14</sup>This religious practice together with its biblical analogues is described in detail in Romero, *Hispanic Devotional Piety*, 71-82.

<sup>15</sup>See commentary on Sirach 24 in Patrick Skehan and Alexander Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (Anchor Bible; NY: Doubleday, 1987), 327-338.

ficial liturgy that sees Mary as the referent. In a footnote to the beginning of Sirach 24, the *Catholic Study Bible* says, "In the liturgy this chapter is applied to the Blessed Virgin because of her constant and intimate association with Christ, the incarnate Wisdom."<sup>16</sup> This idea of the worshipping community interpreting Scripture is linked to the issue of revelation (which will be treated in the next section); but, first, a comment about the connection between wisdom and Mary in Hispanic devotional piety and, then, how Marian devotion can be biblically grounded.

From the viewpoint of Hispanic devotional piety, there does not seem to be a direct connection between Mary and wisdom. However, indirectly a link can be maintained through reflection on the feminization of wisdom itself. The characteristics of wisdom—to guide along the right path, to be solicitous about the welfare of the young and impressionable, to be protective—all are feminine in orientation, in both biblical and modern societies. Given the important framework of the family and the significant role of the mother, Hispanic culture has no difficulty with the personification of wisdom as woman nor with seeing Mary as the personification of that wisdom in the terms described above.

Wisdom personified as woman is easier to understand when one takes into account the fact that the word for wisdom in the biblical languages of Hebrew (*hokmâh*) and Greek (*sophia*), as well as in the early liturgical language of Latin (*sapientia*) and the present-day Spanish (*sabiduría*), is feminine. And, in light of Sirach 24, which sees wisdom personified as woman and shows distinct connections with Proverbs 8 and John 1:14 (a definite Christological allusion), the popular response could easily view Mary as somehow connected with personified wisdom—as the new *Catholic Study Bible* (*New American Bible*) footnote (above) indicated. The Marian allusion to Sirach 24 is reflected in popular belief and expressed in the liturgy's Masses in honor of Mary. In Hispanic devotional piety, the Marian link is basically Christological but with no direct reference to wisdom.

<sup>16</sup>CSB:NAB/1990, 845.



However, wisdom personified as woman, showing the characteristics of a loving, caring mother (as in Prov. 1:20-38 and Prov. 8), *indirectly* allows the Hispanic to associate these characteristics of a caring *madre* with Mary.

The wisdom personification in Sirach 24 presents a woman of self-sufficiency and strong character—qualities one can easily associate with Mary. But it is the probable Christological allusions—to the theme of God's presence with his people in verses 7-8 (possibly connected with the Immanuel motif of Jn. 1:14 and Is. 7:14) and to the theme of God's love for humanity in verses 26-29 (possibly connected with the context of Gen. 3:15)—that can enable one to establish viable Marian connections.

Finally, how does biblical grounding of Marian devotion take place? This question becomes necessary if we are to postulate a theological legitimacy for Marian devotion itself. I offer three criteria.

First and foremost, all devotion to Mary should be an outgrowth of her relationship to Jesus in his salvific work. Simply put, Mary was/is Jesus' mother. And it is in the role of mother that Mary was able to partake in the salvific mystery of the Incarnation and in every other event in Jesus' life by providing love, guidance, caring concern, and, ultimately, letting go. This way, by seeing Mary as a caring mother, a proper theological perspective can be maintained and absurdities and excesses can be avoided. For example, there is near the basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem a shrine known as the "milk grotto," which supposedly commemorates a spot where Mary breastfed the child Jesus and spilled milk in the process. Soon there rose a grotto and devotion. Mercifully, this devotion is waning.

Secondly, Marian devotion should have an established connection with some biblical event, theme, or image. In the New Testament, the connection could be direct, as are the devotions surrounding the role of Mary in the sufferings of Christ, or indirect, as in the probable case of the woman in Revelation 12. In the case of the Old Testament, the connection should be referential and thus thematic or symbolic, as in the case of Genesis 3:15.

Thirdly, Marian devotion should be a genuine expression of piety by a community of faith in communion with the Church. This latter qualification brings into focus the question of popular liturgy and devotion and their theological legitimacy vis-a-vis the Sacred Scriptures. For guidance we turn to the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council, also known as the Constitution on Divine Revelation. We read in paragraph 25 of the document,

Likewise, the sacred Synod forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful . . . to learn "the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. . . . Therefore, let them go gladly to the sacred text itself, whether in the sacred liturgy, which is full of the divine words, or in devout reading, or in such suitable exercises and various other helps which, with the approval and guidance of the pastors of the Church, are happily spreading everywhere in our day.<sup>17</sup>

We see in this document that the bishops of the council recognize that the liturgy and other "suitable exercises and various other helps," which include devotions, can have legitimacy as long as they are connected with the Scriptures and are exercised under the guidance of the pastors of the Church.

### *C. Revelation*

To this point, we have seen that Marian devotion is culturally conditioned; to be understood and appreciated, it must be seen in its socio-political, historical, and anthropological context. Then we noted that, for theological legitimacy, Marian devotion must be grounded in Sacred Scripture. Now we explore the question of Marian devotion and pastoral relevance through the prism of revelation. What does this mean? It means, above all, that Marian devotions, which are genuine cultural expressions of faith and have some established link with Scripture and the believing community of faith called

<sup>17</sup>Austin Flannery, gen. ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (NY: Costello Publ. Co., 1975), 764.

Church, may be said to have a revelatory dimension. First, a word about revelation.

For insight and guidance, we again turn to the dogmatic constitution of the Second Vatican Council on divine revelation. Here we read that divine revelation is the self-manifestation of God and his plan of salvation for humanity, opaquely in history and creation and clearly in the person and message of Jesus Christ as found in the Word of God (nos. 2-6).<sup>18</sup> Revelation has three distinctly interdependent elements, namely, sacred text, tradition, and magisterium. And it is clear that "one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls" (paragraph 10). The document unequivocally states that each element is at the service of the others and there is not a hierarchy among them.

The key difference here would be the distinction between tradition and magisterium. Both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition form the Word of God. By tradition is meant transmission of the apostolic teaching by means other than the inspired books. Tradition includes all that helps the people of God live in holiness and grow in faith. This tradition grows and develops with the help of the Holy Spirit, providing new insight for subsequent generations through contemplation and study, through experience of spiritual realities, and through preaching from those who have received the sure truth. The magisterium, which is the teaching office of the Church, is not tradition. Tradition is the apostolic teaching guarded by the entire people of God, and magisterium is the episcopal interpretation of that teaching.

The Church is community, people of God, and the repository and interpreter of revelation. But the people of God defines itself within the framework of a cultural context, that is, it has socio-political, historical, and anthropological referents. Consequently, the sense of "Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church with the help of

<sup>18</sup>For an extensive discussion on the relationship between revelation and Hispanic devotional piety, see Romero, *Hispanic Devotional Piety*, 34-56.

the Holy Spirit. There is growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on" (no. 8). This openness to growth in the tradition which is part of revelation is possible through the ongoing guidance by the Holy Spirit enabling the people of God to reach a "plenitude of truth." This plenitude of truth is gradually being reached by various cultures, as people of God, through means of their own history, traditions, and symbolism.

The Vatican II document *Ad Gentes* (Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity) affirmed the revelatory potential of culture when it stated that the Church should be present to various cultures in her missionary enterprise by establishing relationships of respect and love. And while sharing in the social and cultural life of various peoples, the Church's missionaries "should be familiar with their national and religious traditions and uncover with gladness and respect those seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them" (no. 11). Familiarity with the cultural traditions of a people means especially familiarity with their religious beliefs and devotional practices which are culturally influenced.

Lest there be a confusion between revelation as found in Scripture, which forms the backbone of Christian theology, and revelation developing out of cultural understanding of God's actions in history, it is necessary to make a distinction between what we can call foundational revelation and dependent revelation. *Foundational* revelation is the original deposit of faith, namely the Sacred Scriptures and apostolic tradition. *Dependent* revelation is derived from the foundational, develops as the generational reinterpretation of that foundational revelation, and so is a deepening of an understanding that already exists. Dependent revelation does not add anything new to the deposit of faith; it expands its meaning by broadening and deepening our understanding.<sup>19</sup> Devotional practices of a people, insofar as they are genuine cultural expressions and expressive of personal religious belief and have a legitimate connection with the Scriptures,

<sup>19</sup>For further discussion of dependent and foundational revelation with regard to devotional piety, see Romero, *Hispanic Devotional Piety*, 37-41.

may be said to be part of the dependent revelation. In devotional practices, there is genuine divine self-revelation taking place, but under the conditions indicated above.

What can we conclude regarding the relationship between Marian devotion and revelation? First, Marian devotion, culturally expressed and related to Scripture, belongs under the category of dependent revelation. Secondly, neither the Assumption nor the Immaculate Conception is taught in Scripture nor do these doctrines follow from scriptural evidence. This means, then, that, in the words of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (no. 8):

The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts (cf. Lk 2:19 and 51). It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. . . . Thus as the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her.<sup>20</sup>

Part of the total reality that has been handed down, the tradition, is the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Growth in insight into the realities of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus takes place as the disciples seek to understand the meaning of Jesus. And the people's consideration of the total Christ-event includes his mother's contemplating those "spiritual realities" which are experienced and which become the basis for some form of devotional practice. Reflection on the role of Mary in the life and work of Jesus became a serious theological enterprise after the second or third century, not only because of personal thematic appropriation from the Scriptures, due to historical experience, but also because of the challenges made by heretics to the redemptive role of Jesus himself. These reflections have revelatory implications.

<sup>20</sup>Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 754.

Francis Sullivan, professor of theology at the Gregorian University in Rome, sees that Christian contemplation of Mary's role in Jesus' work of salvation:

... led to the realisation that, having been so closely associated with her Son in his incarnation and passion, she must also share in a unique way in the fruits of his death and resurrection. And so, over the course of the centuries, the conviction grew that Mary could never have been alienated from God by original sin, and that she must already share, body and soul, in the glory of resurrection which is his. Admittedly, these conclusions do not follow with metaphysical necessity from what Scripture tells us about Mary. They are seen to be contained in the total mystery of Christ, by a kind of intuition, rather than by a process of logical deduction. As contained in this total mystery, they are believed not only to be true, but to be revealed, since it is the whole Christ-event which is God's word to man.<sup>21</sup>

From this it is clear that—for theological legitimacy, revelatory potential, pastoral significance, and official acceptance—Marian devotion must be seen as part of the revelatory Christ-event. In order to be understood as revelatory, the Christ-event is reinterpreted generationally and within a cultural framework, which takes into account devotional practices, according to the criteria established above in *Dei Verbum*. For the vitality of Marian devotions, a community of faith is necessary to reinterpret continually the community's familial understanding of the on-going Christ-event and the role that Mary has within the event and the community.

### Conclusion

What can we conclude from the study regarding the relationship between Marian devotion and the Bible and between Marian devotion and revelation? First, that Mary is alive and well in our history and has relevance and significance for many people. Secondly, that Mary's relevance and significance will be dependent upon the nature and expres-

<sup>21</sup>Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (NY: Paulist Press, 1983), 18.

sion of those devotions dedicated to her. If the devotions are genuine expressions of cultural realities, firmly grounded in Scripture, and products of ongoing familial interpretations of the Christ-event from within the framework of a believing community and according to the criteria established above, then there is more than a very good possibility that these Marian devotions will indeed be relevant and revelatory. Otherwise there is a problem.

Perhaps our most significant conclusion—in light of what has been said regarding the Bible, revelation, and Marian devotion—is that we acknowledge our participatory role in the ongoing understanding and interpretation of the Christ-event and then pledge ourselves to recognize and honor, however we can, the part that Mary plays in that ongoing event through some form of devotion, so that through the motivation of the devotion we can transform ourselves and the world.