

Marian Studies

Volume 45 *Mary and Religious Education:
Proceedings of the Forty-Fifth Annual Meeting
of the Mariological Society of America, held in
New Orleans, LA*

Article 8

1994

The Blessed Virgin in the "Catechism of the Catholic Church"

Michael Wrenn

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wrenn, Michael (1994) "The Blessed Virgin in the "Catechism of the Catholic Church"," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 45, Article 8.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol45/iss1/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

THE BLESSED MOTHER IN "THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH"

Michael J. Wrenn, M.A., M.S., D.H.L.*

Introduction

When Uta Ranke-Heinemann's *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven* was published a few years ago, Cardinal John O'Connor presented a very well-reasoned refutation of her book and likened it to "scrawling dirty words about the Church on bathroom walls." Now, this one-time convert to Catholicism, who was recently stripped of her title and position as a professor of Catholic theology in the University of Essen, has written another work which seeks to distort and explain away the cherished doctrines of our faith. Entitled *Putting Away Childish Things*, it is published by the same firm that published *The Universal Catechism Reader*, containing papers given at the Woodstock Theological Forum of Georgetown University, a preemptive strike on the first draft of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. What follows is Ranke-Heinemann's assessment of Mariology as presented in her latest book (p. 38):

In the following centuries this impressive story by Luke left a unique mark in both folk piety and theology through the rich imaginative unfolding of the image of the "Virgin Mary" and the message of the angel. . . .

This exaggerated stress on Mariology has often turned the meaning and content of Christian doctrine absolutely upside down. The Catholic *Kirchenlexikon* by Heinrich Wetzler and Benedikt Welte, for example, pre-

*Monsignor Wrenn is pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church, New York, NY, and Special Consultant for Religious Education to John Cardinal O'Connor. He is the author of *Catechisms and Controversies: Religious Education in the Postconciliar Years* (Ignatius Press, 1991).

sents a summa of this theological perversion: "The whole center of gravity of Christian faith rests on the fact that Mary conceived and gave birth as a virgin, made fruitful through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Everything that has been subsequently taught and believed about the deliverance from sin and liberation of the human race through the blood of Jesus Christ 'as the unblemished Lamb of God' is based on this fact" (VIII, 719-20).

Is it a coincidence that this work, intent upon revealing "myths behind the Church's key doctrines," should be published just three months before the appearance of the English translation of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*? I think it unlikely.

It has been my pleasure and privilege to compile for you a resource item** detailing the frequent mentions of Our Lady in the *Catechism*. I trust that you will find it a helpful guide to the beautiful mariological treasures contained in the *Catechism*.

The First Pillar of the *Catechism*— The Profession of Faith

The *Catechism* is divided into four major parts, corresponding to the "four pillars" of catechesis traditional since the Middle Ages. Part One focuses on the Apostle's Creed; the presence of Our Lady is highlighted in the Creed and, particularly, in Chapter 3 of Part One (Section 1) where man's response to God is discussed. The first article deals with the obedience of faith. The Virgin Mary is the most perfect fulfillment and realization of this response (no. 144). She is its foremost model (no. 273). Christ is incarnated of Mary and of the Holy Spirit for our salvation. Mary is associated in His work of salvation (nos. 452, 456). Mary is truly the Mother of God (nos. 466, 467) defined at Ephesus in 431 (no. 468) and at Chalcedon in 451. The In-

**The reference is to the handout prepared by Msgr. Wrenn (incorporating an unofficial translation of the Marian texts—which Mr. Erasmo Levia Mirikakis, Father Joseph Fessio, S.J., and Msgr. Wrenn had made, prior to the publication of the official English version of the *Catechism*). It was distributed to those who attended his conference on the evening of May 25, 1994. Readers of Msgr. Wrenn's article here will be able to use the references he provides in their own consultation and study of the official translation of the *Catechism* (now published).

carnation is truly the mystery of the union of the divine nature and the human nature in the unique person of the Word.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Blessed Mother is treated in number 695. Her attitude regarding the expectation of the Messiah is set forth in numbers 711 and 721. She is portrayed as interceding for the unity of the Church (no. 813; cf. *Lumen gentium*,¹ 59). She is the model of virtues and holiness for the Church (no. 829; cf. *LG*, 65 and *Sacrosanctum concilium*,² 103). She is Mother of the Church (nos. 963, 970). Devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin is detailed in number 971; Mary as the eschatological icon of the Church, that is, as the model of the glorified Church, is treated in 972. In the anointing of the sick, the Christian is entrusted to the Virgin in order to pass over into eternal life and a face-to-face meeting with the Redeemer (no. 1020).

The Second Pillar of the *Catechism*— The Celebration of the Christian Mystery

The Holy Spirit actualizes the mystery of Christ. In association with the Anamnesis and the Epiclesis, He is at the heart of each and every sacramental celebration and most especially the Eucharist. Through action of the same Spirit, Christ is gloriously present in the Eucharist (no. 1106). The liturgy is the work of the whole Christ. The earthly liturgy participates in the liturgy of heaven—in union with Christ the eternal high priest, with Mary the Mother of God, and with all the saints (nos. 1138, 1187, 1195).

In the celebration of the Christian mystery during the course of the Liturgical Year, and specifically in the prayers of the sanctoral cycle, the *Catechism* (no. 1172) cites *Sacrosanctum Concilium*:

In celebrating this annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honors the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, with a special love. She is in-

¹*Lumen gentium* (the Constitution on the Church, issued by Vatican Council II); hereafter cited as *LG*.

²*Sacrosanctum concilium* (the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, issued by Vatican Council II); hereafter cited as *SC*.

separably linked with her son's saving work. In her the Church admires and exalts the most excellent fruit of redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be. (SC, 103)

Our Lady, thus, is a most pure image in which the Church is reflected. The holy images found in our churches and our homes are intended to awaken and strengthen our faith in the mystery of Christ. It is useful to venerate the Virgin by means of sacred works of art and statues (no. 1192).

The Eucharistic sacrifice is offered by the Church in communion with the Blessed Virgin and with all the saints. In the Eucharist the Church, with Mary, is, as it were, at the foot of the cross, united to the offering and the intercession of Christ (no. 1370). The Eucharist unites us to the Church in heaven, to the Blessed Virgin and to all the saints (no. 1419). In the communion of saints is found the "spiritual treasure of the Church," the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of all the saints (nos. 1476, 1477).

In a homily preached at the obsequies of Cardinal designate Hans Urs von Balthasar, Cardinal Ratzinger cast further light on this beautiful section of the *Catechism* when he remarked:

We know that the souls of those who have died are alive in the Resurrected Body of the Lord. The Lord's body shelters them and carries them towards the common Resurrection. In this body which we are permitted to receive, we remain close to one another, and we touch each other.

In this joint action of the Mystical Body of Christ, in which the interchange of prayers and good works take place, the Virgin Mary holds pride of place (no. 1477; cf. Paul VI, apostolic constitution [1967], *Indulgentiarum doctrina*, 5).

At the very beginning of his public life, Jesus performed his first sign, at the request of his mother, on the occasion of a wedding banquet (no. 1613; cf. Jn. 2:1-11). Christ chose to be born and raised in the bosom of the Holy Family, model of all homes and of the domestic Church (nos. 1655, 1656; *LG*, 11; John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*, 21).

Popular religiosity demonstrates with dynamism and faith its devotion to the Virgin Mary (no. 1676; cf. CELAM document [Puebla, 1979], 448; Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation [1975],

Evangelii nuntiandi, 48). Christian life is nourished in various forms of popular piety rooted in different cultures.

The Third Pillar of the *Catechism*—Life in Christ

The Beatitudes already began in the life of the Blessed Virgin (no. 1717). She is the image and fountain of holiness, of maternal love, of education in the faith (no. 2030). The liturgy beckons us to celebrate the Marian feasts (no. 2043). Mary in sacred and inspiring art is the shining model for the pursuit of beauty (no. 2502).

To adore God is to praise and exalt Him with submission and humility, following the example of Mary who proclaims wondrous deeds of the Lord in the Magnificat (no. 2097). Based on the mystery of the Incarnate Word, the Council of Nicea, in 787, judged the cult of sacred images of Christ, of the Blessed Mother, and of the angels and saints to be appropriate (no. 2131).

The Fourth Pillar of the *Catechism*—Christian Prayer

Possessing a human heart, Jesus learned to pray at home in Nazareth. Mary taught Jesus to pray (no. 2599). The prayer of Mary at the Annunciation, at Ain Karin, at Cana and at Pentecost is treated in numbers 2617 to 2619. In our prayer to Jesus, we cannot forget Mary, His Mother, who is so intimately united to the entire work of salvation (no. 2665).

In the second part of the Fourth Pillar (Part Four, Section 2), we are presented with a commentary on the Our Father. Numbers 2676 through 2678 of the *Catechism* also present a beautiful commentary on the Hail Mary. The Virgin is the perfect *Orans* (pray-er) and figure of the Church (nos. 2679 and 2682). The Church is fond of praying in communion with the Virgin Mary by virtue of her unique cooperation with the action of the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Church lauds with Mary the great things which God has accomplished in her and entrusts to Mary her supplication and praises.

Christ is the bread from heaven, sown in the womb of the Virgin (no. 2837). The Ascension is the victory of Christ over

death, a victory participated in first of all by Mary; for this reason we venerate her, having been assumed into heaven, as the glorious queen at the side of Christ her beloved Son (nos. 965-66, 974).

Mary within the Content of the *Catechism*

From the time of the Council of Trent, which produced the Roman Catechism, up until the Catechism of Pius X (1903-1914), instruction about Mary mainly consisted of Marian devotion, prayer, and reflection on Marian dogma. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* treats with clarity and lucidity the theme of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the mystery of Christ and His Church. It is neither a systematic treatment nor one limited to a separate chapter. Rather, Mary's role in the drama of our salvation is inserted throughout the four pillars of the *Catechism*. The theological and pastoral reflection on Mary is developed in the light of the Marian teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Biblical and patristic teachings on the New Eve, as well as recent statements of the magisterium, are highlighted.

Mary is present in the four pillars of the *Catechism*. The Christian mystery is the object of faith (first pillar): Mary, Mother of Christ, associated with his salvific work; the mystery is celebrated and communicated in liturgical actions (second pillar): Mary, mother of the Church. The Christian mystery is present in order to illuminate and sustain the children of God in their ecclesial life (third pillar): Mary, the New Eve, the first Christian, the perfect disciple (*Marialis cultus*³, 35-36), leads the faithful to Christ through the example of her virtues and maternal love. The Christian mystery is the foundation of our prayer, which is expressed in a privileged fashion in the Our Father (fourth pillar): Mary the pray-er is shown in the Magnificat, at Cana, at Pentecost (*MC*, 18).

The *Catechism* briefly summarizes essential elements of the teaching on Mary without adding lengthy commentaries. The

³*Marialis cultus* (apostolic exhortation of Paul VI, on the right ordering and development of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1974); hereafter cited as *MC*.

Christian community is centered around the Word of God and the Eucharist. Mary is preeminent as a witness of the Word (cf. Lk. 2:19-51), but also in her mission as the Mother of Christ and the Church. Aside from emphasizing her privileges, the *Catechism* presents her to the Church as the model of virtues (LG, 65). Throughout the ample and varied panorama of the *Catechism*, we are constantly led to consider the Virgin as the Icon (the image) of the Church, the holiest and most perfect disciple of Christ.

Conclusion

As Valerio M. Maccagnan has pointed out in his recent article "La Virgen Maria en el Catecismo de la Iglesia Catolica" (*Maria y sus Siervos*, 6/21 [Jan.-Feb.-Mar. 1994]):

Our task consists in emphasizing the content that the *Catechism* offers relating to the mystery of Mary, her presence and her testimony in the faith and life of the Church. It is not a Mariological treatise but rather sets forth the essentials and fundamentals of what the Church celebrates, lives and prays when she enters into communion with Mary. The reflection on the Marian mystery is presented as a "memory" of the faith of the Church. This permits us to contemplate the Virgin in the history of salvation, favors the common language of the faith, helps us to pass from doctrine to catechesis. The exemplary nature of her life is emphasized. Belief in and proclamation of the Marian mystery is interwoven with life and is translated in our ecclesial journey, highlighting the evangelical virtues (cf. MC, 57) of Our Lady. We speak of Mary in the Mystery of Christ and of the Church. What is proclaimed in Vatican II is synthesized: "Through her intimate participation in the history of salvation, Mary reunites in herself and reflects in a certain way the supreme truths of the faith" (LG, 65). Actually, the *Catechism* speaks of Mary in each of its four parts, thus showing the intention to emphasize the Marian dimension in the entire Christian mystery. (p.11)

In its exposition of the Christian truths, the *Catechism* is not a dogmatic exposition based on the "hierarchy of truths"; rather, it is rooted in Scripture, the magisterium and tradition. The central focus, of course, is Christ, the salvific meaning of each truth and the interdependence of Christian truths. Without neglecting dogma, the symphony, the harmony and the reference to Christ is shown forth. For the use of Sacred Scripture,

the *Catechism* relies on the methodology of *Dei Verbum*,⁴ particularly the use of analogy.

Catechesis is an education in the faith in an organic way which aims to initiate the faithful into the fullness of Christian life. To "the law of prayer," "the law of beliefs" or "the law of living" is added. The unity of the Christian mystery unfolded in the sweep of the *Catechism* allows us to contemplate both the mission and the presence of the all-holy Virgin Mary, with all her great privileges, as well as the magnificence of her example for all the People of God. Although we do not encounter Mary on every page of the *Catechism*, the Marian dimension sustains and animates the structure of the *Catechism* like a recurring musical refrain.

Mary is at the center of the Christian mystery. The *Catechism*—in its discourse about God, about His plan of salvation, about the mystery of Christ, the mission of the Church and the vocation of man—highlights the privileged place which Mary occupies, her singular and discreet presence, humble and exceptional but unique. Apart from Pastoral Theology, there is no omission of the *Via pulchritudinis*, the "Way of Beauty"; Mary is the all-holy one, the all-beautiful one, and the immaculate one. In her is reflected the Church in the course of her journey of conversion and purification (SC, 103).

In language and content, the Western and Eastern traditions are joined together; they are, as it were, the two lungs of the Church. In the *Catechism* we find evidence of ecumenical sensibility. This sensibility is evidence of a sound balance and directs us to the universality of the Church. Consequently, it is hoped that unity and communion with the other churches may increase. The *Catechism* is a gift of the revealed Word. Mary, who welcomed Jesus into her womb and gave him to humanity, now welcomes, in her very hands, this precious gift and, as a sign of spiritual life (MC, 21), gives it to the Church.

The reflection on the Marian mystery joins the various sources or languages of ecclesial faith: biblical, patristic, liturgical, magisterial, living—and does not neglect iconography. In Part One, we encounter a Marian image on the frontispiece (of

⁴*Dei Verbum* (the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, issued by Vatican Council II).

the original French edition): "a fragment of a fresco, of the catacomb of Priscilla (Rome) from the beginning of the third century. It is the most ancient image of the Blessed Virgin: a primitive figure of Christian art, and represents the central theme of Christian art, namely, faith: the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary."

In conclusion, we should observe that a catechism has as purpose education in faith and Christian living. We have received this *Catechism* as an ecclesial gift—a light, a guide, and our way toward the Kingdom. To contemplate Mary with her privileges and testimonies in the Trinitarian and ecclesial communion is both fascinating and delightful. Our attitude should not only be translated into study and praise, but also into living the evangelical virtues as Mary did (cf. *MC*, 57). Proclaiming our faith in the mystery of Christ and of the Church, we have encountered Mary, dynamic exemplar for all the baptized and redeemed. All Christians are called to contemplate the marvels and great things which God has done through his humble servant, the glorious Mother of Christ.

With a prophetic and liberating spirit, the Virgin of Hope, the Virgin of the Magnificat, joins her song with our voices and accompanies us on our way—in order to announce the coming of the Kingdom, the liberation of all mankind, and to bring her brothers and sisters to Christ, to attain with them a more intense communion of love. Enriched with the gifts of the Spirit, united by the same faith, Jesus teaches us to pray using the Our Father. Mary, New Eve and Ark of the New Covenant, the most revered recapitulation of the Church, teaches us to pray using the *Magnificat*, so we might glorify with her the mercies of the Lord and chant the joy of salvation—the great, marvelous works of the Lord in our life and in our final destiny.

Finally, let us reflect on the closing lines of the beautiful prayer composed by our Holy Father Pope John Paul II, contained in his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici* (no. 64):

O Virgin Mother,
guide and sustain us
so that we might always live
as true sons and daughters
of the Church of your Son.

Enable us to do our part
in helping to establish on earth
the civilization of truth and love,
as God wills it,
for his glory.Amen.