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MARY AND THE MILLENNIUM: WOMAN, SON, AND FULLNESS OF TIME

*Fr. James McCurry, O.F.M. Conv.**

In 1986, while leading a group of priests on pilgrimage through the Holy Land, I had an audience with the Most Reverend James Joseph Beltritti, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. He introduced us to the theme "Mary and the Millennium." The Patriarch at that time was going to press with a Pastoral Letter treating the topic, in short-but-substantive booklet form, under the title "Towards the Year 2000 with Mary: A Marian Advent or Spiritual Journey to Prepare for the Bimillennium of Christ's Birth."¹ Having recently completed the celebration throughout the Middle Eastern Patriarchate of a solemn "Marian Year" that ran from 8th September 1984 through 8th September 1985, Archbishop Beltritti inaugurated in 1986 a fifteen-year diocesan plan for a whole Marian period that he termed the "Great Marian Advent." The plan itself was simple. Citing Popes Pius XII and Paul VI on the rosary as a gospel prayer, the Patriarch proposed that its fifteen mysteries serve as guide during the fifteen years leading up to the two thousandth birthday of Jesus:

Each mystery will furnish each year with a central theme of study, of contemplation, of prayer, and of application to our own life. Each mystery can

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¹Jacques Joseph Beltritti, Patriarche, *Vers l'An 2000 avec Marie: un Avent Marial; ou, Itineraire spirituel pour preparer le deuxieme millenaire de la naissance du Christ* (Jerusalem: Imprimerie du Patriarcat Latin, Mars 1986), Lettre Pastorale 31 (hereafter, referred to as Beltritti). This booklet is tri-lingual: French, Italian, Arabic. The translation from French into English is my own.

be studied under diverse points of view: biblical, theological, liturgical, spiritual, anthropological, and marian.²

Archbishop Beltritti acknowledged the two principal sources which influenced his scheme for this "Great Marian Advent"³ in anticipation of the bimillennium of Christ's birth: a) Stefan Cardinal Wyszynski's plan for a nine-year period (1957-1966) of preparation for the grand millennium of Poland's Christianity; and b) Pope John Paul II's discourse in the Grotto of Lourdes, France, on 15th August 1983. Citing the recent historical experience of the Church in Poland, under the leadership of its Primate Cardinal Wyszynski, the Latin Patriarch would see in the Polish program a paradigm of how to anticipate a millennium by a marian period of preparation. Cardinal Wyszynski had organized the Polish millennial program under Mary's patronage as a "Novena," focusing on one chosen theme each year: "faith, grace, life, the family, education, youth, justice and charity, the struggle against national vices and the victory of Christian virtues, love and piety towards the Virgin Mary."⁴ Each year as the national Novena progressed, the Polish Primate issued a pastoral letter presenting and developing the respective theme. Commentators have not failed to note the prominence of the image of Our Lady of Czestochowa, Poland's "Black Madonna," as a touchstone and "rallying-sign" of national identity throughout this period.⁵ The Second Vatican Council would take place during this time frame. Pope John XXIII, in fact, recommended the works of the Council to the prayers of Polish Catholics during their "Great Novena." Accordingly, Poland "orans et vigilans" would gather for a series of so-called "council vigils" at the Shrine of Czestochowa—giving further marian and ecclesial animation to that nation's millennium preparation.⁶ The result of Poland's Novena was a new

²Beltritti, 10.

³Beltritti, 8.

⁴Beltritti, 11-12.

⁵Marian Zalecki, O.S.P., "Theology of a Marian Shrine: Our Lady of Czestochowa," *Marian Library Studies*, new series, 8 (Dayton, Ohio: University of Dayton, 1976): 148-57 (Father Zalecki's doctoral thesis).

⁶Zalecki, "Theology of a Marian Shrine," 149.

spiritual cohesion among its people, renewing the Church's spiritual energy even in the face of the Communist government's opposition.⁷ Noteworthy is the fact that a member of the Polish hierarchy throughout this whole epoch of Poland's "Great Novena" was Karol Wojtyła, later Pope John Paul II.

Pope John Paul II's 1983 homily at Lourdes on the Solemnity of Mary's Assumption is the other principal influence cited in Archbishop Beltritti's Pastoral for the "Great Marian Advent" towards the year 2000.⁸ In his Lourdes homily, Pope John Paul had not only given—as he had done on countless previous occasions—an "Advent" label to the historic period of the 1980s and the 1990s, as humanity anticipates the bimillennium of Christ's incarnation, but he also specifically termed this Advent the "time of Mary"; and, moreover, he even alluded to the bimillennium of Mary's birth as "the beginning of the salvific Advent" that would culminate in Christ's birth.⁹ Archbishop Beltritti would now seek to give these papal insights concrete application:

Following the suggestion of the Holy Father, we therefore ought to undertake making of these fifteen years which separate Mary's birth from that of her divine Son a *Marian Advent*.¹⁰

It has previously been noted that the Latin Patriarch had already "prefaced" this fifteen-year "Marian Advent" by a diocesan "Marian Year" in 1984–85. That Marian Year was actually designated to celebrate the bimillennium of Mary's birth, as was a similar Marian Bimillennium Year in the Philippines (1985–86).¹¹ In all references to Mary's bimillennium—as well as to Christ's—the Pope, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, and

⁷Beltritti, 12.

⁸Beltritti, 3–4.

⁹Beltritti, 3. The full text of Pope John Paul II's homily "Mary a Witness to God in the Mystery of the Redemption of Man and the World" (Lourdes, 15th August 1983), from which Archbishop Beltritti quotes, is found in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. Ed., 36/799 (5 September 1983), 3–4.

¹⁰Beltritti, 4.

¹¹René Laurentin, *A Year of Grace with Mary: Rediscovering Her Presence and Her Role in our Consecration* (Dublin: Veritas, 1987), 17.

the Philippine hierarchy would take great care to avoid the issue of precise chronological dating; rather they would focus on the sweep of related events in the salvific history of Christ's coming. Speaking about the nativity of Mary, the Pope at Lourdes affirmed:

... we want to honor the *blessed moment of her birth on earth*. Many ask themselves: when was she born? when did she see the light of day? This question is being asked now especially as we approach the second millennium of the birth of Christ. The birth of the Mother obviously had to come *before the birth of her Son*. So would it not be appropriate to celebrate first the second millennium of the birth of Mary?

The Church has recourse to history and historical dates in order to celebrate anniversaries and jubilees (taking into account the precision supplied by science). All the same, the true rhythm of anniversaries and jubilees is set by *the history of salvation*. So we want especially to situate in time the events related to our salvation and not only to note with historical precision the moment of these events. . . . *The attention of the Church* is directed primarily to the salvific event . . . and not to the historical date alone.¹²

It will be remembered that the Pope was speaking these words during the year 1983 which he had designated as the "Jubilee of the Redemption"—commemorating nineteen hundred and fifty years of that salvific event. He himself noted the spiritual link among all these jubilee celebrations:

This year's extraordinary Jubilee is preparing the Church for the great Jubilee of the second millennium (the year 2000). In this way our Year of the Redemption also takes on the form of *an Advent*: it leads us to anticipate the jubilee of the coming of the Lord.

But *Advent* is especially *the time of Mary*. It is in her alone that the expectation of the entire human race for the coming of Christ reaches its highest point. She brings this expectation to its fullness: the fullness of Advent.

With this year's Jubilee of the Redemption, we want to *enter into this Advent*. We want to share in the expectation of Mary, the Virgin of

¹²Pope John Paul II, Lourdes Homily (15 August 1983), *L'Osservatore Romano*, 36/799, 3.

Nazareth. In the jubilee of this salvific event, which is also like an Advent, we want to include *also her own coming*, her own birth on earth.

Yes, the birth of Mary is the beginning of the salvific Advent.

And that is why we make this pilgrimage to Lourdes: not only to honor the birth of Mary in heaven through the Solemn Feast of the Assumption, but also to honor the blessed moment of her birth on earth.¹³

Suffice it to say that all of these papal insights would germinate not only in the soul of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, but in the universal Church, as Pope and faithful would advance together through the epoch of this "Marian Advent."

Two subsequent documents of Pope John Paul II become crucial for our understanding the underlying assumptions and dynamics of this "Marian Advent": his 1987 Encyclical *Redemptoris mater* ("Mother of the Redeemer"),¹⁴ and his 1994 Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* ("As the Third Millennium Draws Near").¹⁵ Most significantly, both documents begin by referring to the same biblical passage that the Second Vatican Council used to open its long treatment of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Chapter 8 of *Lumen gentium*¹⁶: "When the fullness of time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman . . . that we might receive the adoption of sons" (St. Paul to the Galatians 4:4-5). "Fullness of time" is the underlying assumption that serves as the golden thread linking the thoughts of Pope John Paul in both *Redemptoris mater* and *Tertio millennio adveniente*. In fact, the "Fullness of Time" theme not only links the two documents, but also ties both to the Scriptures, the Second Vatican Council, and the continuum of Pope John Paul II's writings on the bimillennium throughout his pontificate. The Pope explains the "fullness of time" as the definitive context where

¹³Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁴Pope John Paul II, *Mother of the Redeemer (Redemptoris mater)*: . . . on the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church, March 25, 1987 (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1987); hereafter cited as *RM*.

¹⁵Pope John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente: Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful on Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000*, 10 November 1994 (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1994); hereafter cited as *TMA*.

¹⁶*Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1975 and 1984), 413-23.

the deepest mysteries of our faith are brought together in unity: "the love of the Father, the mission of the Son, the gift of the Spirit, the role of the woman from whom the Redeemer was born, and our own divine filiation"¹⁷:

This "fullness" indicates the moment fixed from all eternity when the Father sent his Son "that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). It denotes the blessed moment when the Word that "was with God . . . became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:1, 14), and made himself our brother. It marks the moment when the Holy Spirit, who had already infused the fullness of grace into Mary of Nazareth, formed in her virginal womb the human nature of Christ. This "fullness" marks the moment when, with the entrance of the eternal into time, time itself is redeemed, and being filled with the mystery of Christ becomes definitively "salvation time." Finally, this "fullness" designates the hidden beginning of the Church's journey.¹⁸

The papal claim that Jesus' Incarnation transforms the reality of time into "salvation time" rings consistent with the biblical view. Scripture scholars like J. L. McKenzie have shown that time in the Bible is no abstraction; it is driven by concrete events, one succeeding the next, all according to the dynamics of the Father's plan:

The Bible contains no abstract philosophy of time as the universal measure of movement such as we find in Greek philosophy. . . . The biblical conception of time is governed by the thought that time is ordered by the succession of events which are expected in due time. . . . for salvation comes in its time (Gk *Kairos*). This set time is not understood as postulated by preceding events, as the time of death follows the time of birth and the time of harvest follows the time of sowing. The time of salvation is retained by the Father in His own power . . . "the times" are the course of events, all of which lead up to the time, the *Kairos* of salvation and judgment. The process by which the *Kairos* is reached is not the result of casual coincidence.¹⁹

¹⁷RM, no. 1.

¹⁸RM, no. 1.

¹⁹John L. McKenzie, S.J., *Dictionary of the Bible* (London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 891.

The Father has a divine agenda that will climax in the definitive salvation event of the coming of Jesus. That event is the *Kairos* in its primary sense.²⁰ Yet each important preparatory step in the process, in the long Advent of Jesus' coming, is also a *Kairos*—*Kairos* in the sense that each step is a decisive moment that hastens or retards the *Kairos* of salvation.²¹ There is nothing automatic here. Time as *Kairos* is an appointed, set, established event, and the Eternal Father is the one Who does the establishing.

What can be deduced about our "Marian Advent" and "Bimillennium" from this notion of time? "Advent" (from Latin *ad-venire*, to come to) is an approach to "Event" (from Latin *eventire*, to come from or to happen as an occurrence). Through Mary's "Advent" expectation, humanity approached the "Event" of Emmanuel. The whole biblical cast of characters represents a succession of events that God's eternal purpose orders towards one climactic objective: the Birth of Christ in the fullness of time—a fullness that continues through the present. Pope John Paul II wants our present Jubilee celebration of this climactic Event's Bimillennium to retain the authentic character of *Kairos*. Though the "fullness of time" has never ceased to be "fullness" since the climax was definitively reached in Christ, yet does our Advent stance of marian expectancy renew the spiritual vigor of our participation in that "fullness." In *Redemptoris mater*, the Pope goes on to discuss the dynamics of "fullness" in respect to this Marian Advent, building upon the themes already seen in his Lourdes homily of four years earlier:

The circumstance which now moves me to take up this subject once more is *the prospect of the year 2000*, now drawing near, in which the Bimillennial Jubilee of the birth of Jesus Christ at the same time directs our gaze towards his Mother. In recent years, various opinions have been voiced suggesting that it would be fitting to precede that anniversary by a similar Jubilee in celebration of the birth of Mary.

²⁰McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 892.

²¹*Ibid.*

In fact, even though it is not possible to establish an exact *chronological point* for identifying the date of Mary's birth, the Church has constantly been aware that *Mary appeared* on the horizon of *salvation history before Christ*. It is a fact that when "the fullness of time" was definitively drawing near—the saving advent of Emmanuel—she who was from eternity destined to be his Mother already existed on earth. The fact that she "preceded" the coming of Christ is reflected every year *in the liturgy of Advent*. Therefore, if to that ancient historical expectation of the Savior we compare these years which are bringing us closer to the end of the second Millennium after Christ and to the beginning of the third, it becomes fully comprehensible that in this present period we wish to turn in a special way to her, the one who in the "night" of the Advent expectation began to shine like a true "Morning Star" (*Stella Matutina*). For just as this star, together with the "dawn," precedes the rising of the sun, so Mary from the time of her Immaculate Conception preceded the coming of the Savior, the rising of the "Sun of Justice" in the history of the human race.

... With good reason, then, at the end of this Millennium, we Christians who know that the providential plan of the most Holy Trinity is *the central reality of Revelation and of faith* feel the need to emphasize the unique presence of the Mother of Christ in history, especially during these last years leading up to the year 2000.²²

If I have belabored this overview of "time" vis-a-vis the "Great Marian Advent" and the Bimillennium, my intention has been to offer a sound Catholic antidote to offset any forms of millenarianism that not surprisingly might raise their heads in these last years of the present millennium. "Millenarianism, also known as chiliasm (from the Greek for a thousand) is the expectation of a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth prior to the last judgement."²³ Based on a faulty interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6, this Christian heresy, in a narrow sense, literally believes that Christ's Second Coming will establish an earthly kingdom over which He will reign for a thousand years in company with the saints who have experienced a "first resurrection," while Satan remains fettered until a final clash before the

²²RM, no. 3.

²³Estêvão Bettencourt, "Millenarianism," in *Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner et al. (6 vols.; New York: Herder and Herder, 1968-1970), 4:43-44.

end of the world, the Last Judgment, and the General Resurrection.²⁴ In the broad sense, millenarianism includes "every conception which expects the world to come under the image of a promised land or an earthly paradise."²⁵ This earthly messianism, with its utopian idea of universal happiness, enticed a few early Fathers of the Church, but was rejected by Jerome and Augustine. It reappeared in the Middle Ages among extreme Franciscan spiritualists like Joachim of Fiore, who predicted a new thousand-year age of the Holy Spirit in which Christ would reign as earthly messiah. Since the sixteenth century, it has resurfaced in reform religions such as the Anabaptists, Adventists, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* warns that a modern guise of this kingdom falsification lurks in the "intrinsically perverse political form of secular messianism."²⁶

The Catholic interpretation of Revelation 20, and the whole of the gospels, is that Christ's spiritual reign is already established in the Church and will last throughout an indefinite period of time (symbolized by a "thousand years") until Christ's final return in glory to judge the living and the dead. A true understanding of salvation time in the biblical sense of *Katros* enables us to see that we are already living an epoch of grace within the Church, where the symbolic "thousand" has already been stretched through two millennia. In *Tertio millennio adveniente*, Pope John Paul II not only rejects the false historicism of millenarianism within Christianity; he also rejects its secular counterparts which seek "fulfillment" in various material, mythic, or cosmic terms:

. . . Time is indeed fulfilled by the very fact that God, in the Incarnation, came down into human history. Eternity entered into time: what "fulfillment" could be greater than this? What other "fulfillment" would be

²⁴Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Terrence Prendergast (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 290. Also see Jean Danielou, "Millenarianism," in *Sacramentum Verbi*, ed. Johannes B. Bauer (3 vols.; New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 2:582-84.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Eng. Ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), no. 676.

possible? Some have thought in terms of certain *mysterious cosmic cycles* in which the history of the universe, and of mankind in particular, would constantly repeat itself. True, man rises from the earth and returns to it (cf. *Gen 3:19*): this is an immediately evident fact. Yet in man there is an irrepressible longing to live forever. How are we to imagine a life beyond death? Some have considered various forms of *reincarnation*: depending on one's previous life, one would receive a new life in either a higher or lower form, until full purification is attained. This belief, deeply rooted in some Eastern religions, itself indicates that man rebels against the finality of death. He is convinced that his nature is essentially spiritual and immortal.

Christian revelation excludes reincarnation, and speaks of a fulfillment which man is called to achieve in the course of a single earthly existence. Man achieves this fulfillment of his destiny through the sincere gift of self, a gift which is made possible only through his encounter with God. It is in God that man finds full self-realization: *this is the truth revealed by Christ*. Man fulfills himself in God, who comes to meet him through his Eternal Son. Thanks to God's coming on earth, human time, which began at Creation, has reached its fullness. "The fullness of time" is in fact eternity, indeed, it is *the One who is eternal*, God himself. Thus, to enter into "the fullness of time" means to reach the end of time and to transcend its limits, in order to find time's fulfillment in the eternity of God.²⁷

Millenarianism, on the contrary, seeks fulfillment in an earthbound kind of immortality. Sometimes it wears the face of a rosy, utopian, earthly paradise; while other times it bears the grimace of apocalyptic fear that paradise will disappear. The twentieth-century "post-Christian" Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, immortalized the latter vision in his literary masterpiece "The Second Coming," which prophesies the ending of Christian millennia in terms of a coming chaos:

.....
 Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .
 Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

²⁷TMA, no. 9.

When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
 Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun . . .
 The darkness drops again; but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough beast, its hour come around at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?²⁸

Pope John Paul's contemporary approach to the ending of these two Christian millennia offers an alternative perspective that eludes both secular utopianism and neo-pagan apocalypticism. The Holy Father's Christian vision wholly accepts the earthly realities of material time and space, but links them to higher eternal, heavenly realities that transcend material time and space:

In Christianity time has a fundamental importance. Within the dimension of time the world was created; within it the history of salvation unfolds, finding its culmination in the "fullness of time" of the Incarnation, and its goal in the glorious return of the Son of God at the end of time. *In Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, time becomes a dimension of God, who is himself eternal.* With the coming of Christ there begin "the last days" (cf. *Heb* 1:2), the "last hour" (cf. *1 Jn* 2:18), and the time of the Church, which will last until the Parousia.

From this relationship of God with time there arises *the duty to sanctify time*. . . . *Christ is the Lord of time*; he is its beginning and its end; every year, every day and every moment are embraced by his Incarnation and Resurrection, and thus become part of the "fullness of time."²⁹

To assure that within this "fullness of time" milieu, the eternal remains tangible and accessible to the faithful, Pope John Paul has mapped out a final three-year phase in his grand Marian Advent plan.³⁰ Christ in His fullness occupies center stage during these three years, yet seen in relation to the Trinity. The Pope avoids any semblance of millenarist age-superseding-age,

²⁸W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: MacMillan, 1983), 187.

²⁹*TMA*, no. 10.

³⁰*TMA*, nos. 39-54.

by setting the Christ of time in real relief against the backdrop of the eternal, timeless Trinity. A Trinitarian thematic structure is given to these final three years of the Bimillennial Advent. The Marian coefficient figures prominently in each year's program. Before reviewing the papal proposal for these three final preparatory years and their Marian dimensions, I find it helpful to introduce one brilliant Patristic image of Mary that, bridging the temporal and eternal, illuminates the rationale for her involvement as woman in these dynamics of millennium and fullness of time: Mary as "Terra Virgo" (Virgin Earth).³¹

St. Irenaeus in the second century wrote that the first Adam was fashioned from the "virgin earth," a type of the Virgin Birth of the second Adam.³² Tertullian in the third century similarly used the image of the incorrupt "Virgin Earth," from which Adam was formed, as a type of the pure Virgin from which Christ took his earthly origin.³³ Several references cite Isaiah 45:8 as a prefiguration of the Incarnation—Jesus springing up from a sanctified and fertile earth: "Let justice descend, O heavens, like dew from above; like gentle rain let the skies drop it down. Let the earth open and salvation bud forth; let Justice also spring up. I the Lord have created this" (New American Bible). Modern liturgy evokes the same theme in the new Mass of "The Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary" in its Prayer over the Gifts: "Lord may our gifts be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, who formed the Blessed Virgin Mary to be a new creation, and bathed her with the dew of heavenly grace, so that she might bear the fruit of salvation, Jesus Christ, your son . . ." ³⁴ The

³¹Emmanuele Testa, O.F.M., *Maria Terra Vergine* (2 vols.), Vol. 1: *I rapporti della Madre di Dio con la SS. Trinità (Sec I-LX)*; Vol. 2: *Il culto mariano palestinese (Sec. I-LX)*; Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Collectio Maior, n. 31 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1984).

³²St. Irenaeus (*Demonstratio apostolicae praedicationis*, 32), cited in Michael O'Carroll, C.S.Sp., *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1982), 190.

³³Tertullian (*De carne Christi*, 16,5, PL 2, 694; 17,3, PL 2, 782), cited in O'Carroll, *Theotokos*, 338.

³⁴"The Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary," in *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, vol. 1: *Sacramentary* (2 vols.; New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1992), 36.

same theme is evident in the communion antiphon of the Mass of "Holy Mary, the New Eve": "Blessed are you, Virgin Mary; through you . . . Christ has prepared the new wine for the Church."³⁵

A cursory look at this ancient Marian title indicates Mary's absolute uniqueness before God, unlike any other woman of the Old or New Testament. Even the Eve-Mary parallel does not typify Mary as perfectly. While the first Eve is imaged as being formed out of the first Adam (Gen. 2:21-23), the second Adam is in fact formed out of the second Eve. A more basic prototype of the Virgin Birth is the *Terra Virgo*: Just as the first Adam came from the virgin earth (incorrupt clay created by God and admired as good), so the second Adam came from the Virgin womb of Mary (preserved Immaculate by God). In this Patristic view, which had ancient roots in Christian Palestine's liturgy, iconography, and architecture,³⁶ only the "Virgin Earth" is the pristine uncorrupted (and God-created) reality that serves as perfect prototype of the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

How can this *Terra Virgo* image help illuminate the Marian dimension of our Bimillennium celebration? First it helps us avoid two extremes prevalent today in Marian discussion. Mary cannot be reduced to the status of any ordinary woman. To the contrary, her absolute and extraordinary uniqueness in God's plan, even prior to Adam's creation, is prefigured in the Virgin Earth of Paradise. Neither can Mary be exalted, in the current neo-pagan fashion, to the status of a feminine earth-goddess. To the contrary, her lowliness as a woman of our race, a human creature totally dependent upon God for existence and fertility, is prefigured in the Virgin Earth of Paradise. Both extremes would distort the mystery of Christ as true God and true man. A second light that the *Terra Virgo* image provides is a focus on the relationship of Mary to the Blessed Trinity. Once the Trinity chooses to become involved in anything outside Itself—an economy or plan of creation/salvation—that development would remain incomplete without a fourth figure, wholly a

³⁵"Holy Mary, the New Eve," in *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, 1:196.

³⁶Testa, *Maria Terra Vergine*, vol. 2, passim.

creature, to collaborate perfectly in the plan's implementation. By reason of her perfect creaturely relationship to each of the three Divine Persons, Mary renders God's restored Paradise neither a secular utopian dream nor a neo-pagan apocalyptic myth. Her real relationships with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit give concrete reality to their plan for us all in this epoch of the "fullness of time," rendering that plan relational and accessible to all of the faithful who would come after her.

Pope John Paul's program for the final three years of the current millennium³⁷ is itself Trinitarian, and does not fail to highlight Mary's Trinitarian bonds as a means of drawing the faithful into the fullest possible sharing of the mysteries being contemplated. While the whole Trinitarian period is to be Christ-centered, 1997 is specifically designated as the Year of Jesus Christ. 1998 is the Year of the Holy Spirit. 1999 is the Year of God the Father. For each of these years, the Pope designates one theological virtue to be accented: *Faith* in Jesus Christ; *Hope* through the Holy Spirit; and *Charity* which has its source and goal in God the Father. Keyed to the theme of each year, three sacraments are to be respectively emphasized: *Baptism* as the basis of life in Jesus Christ; *Confirmation* as testimony to the active presence of the Holy Spirit; and *Penance* as summons to a journey of authentic conversion towards the Father. The Pope summarizes his goal in this way:

... the aim will be to *give glory to the Trinity*, from whom everything in the world comes and to whom everything returns. This mystery is the focus of the three years of immediate preparation: from Christ and through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to the Father.³⁸

The Pope gives special prominence to the presence of Mary in each of these three preparatory years. He proposes for each year one particular aspect of the Marian mystery that could lend clarity to the respective themes: in 1997, her maternity—founded upon Christ's Divine Presence; in 1998, her spirituality—founded upon the Holy Spirit's Divine power;

³⁷TMA, nos. 39-55.

³⁸TMA, no. 55.

in 1999, her discipleship—founded upon the Father's Divine plan. The faithful are invited to contemplate and imitate the Blessed Virgin Mary within this framework.

In the first year, we are to contemplate *Mary as Mother of God*. We are to focus on her *identity*, an identity wholly defined by her faith—faith in the Incarnation, faith in “Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of the world, yesterday, today and for ever” (cf. Heb. 13:8). We are to imitate her as the model of faith in practice.³⁹ In the second year we are to contemplate *Mary as the Woman of Hope*. We are to focus on her *interior life*—an inner spirituality wholly defined by her longing for God, her attentiveness to the power and sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit—an interior life of docility to the Spirit's voice. We are to imitate her as the model of total trust in God's promise.⁴⁰ In the third year we are to contemplate *Mary as Handmaid of the Lord*. We are to focus on her *mission*—a mission wholly defined by her discipleship as God's highly favoured daughter working for humanity to “Do whatever Christ tells you” (cf. Jn. 2:5), so that all might “return to the House of the Father.” We are to imitate her as the perfect model of love towards both God and neighbor.⁴¹

One could perhaps study the life of Pope John Paul II himself to see how effective can be this dynamic of contemplating and imitating Mary in her relationship to the Trinity during this Advent of the Third Millennium. The Pope has admitted in *Tertio millennio adveniente* that “preparing for the year 2000 has become as it were a hermeneutical key of my Pontificate.”⁴² In other words, all of the writings he has published, the global journeys he has undertaken, the various holy years and lesser jubilees that he has caused to be celebrated can be interpreted as a cumulative preparation for the Great Jubilee 2000:

Since the publication of the very first document of my Pontificate, *I have spoken explicitly of the Great Jubilee*, suggesting that the time leading up to it be lived as “a new Advent.” . . . It is certainly not a matter of indulging

³⁹TMA, nos. 40–43.

⁴⁰TMA, nos. 44–48.

⁴¹TMA, nos. 49–54.

⁴²TMA, no. 23.

in a new millenarianism, as occurred in some quarters at the end of the first millennium; rather, it is *aimed at an increased sensitivity to all that the Spirit is saying to the Church and to the Churches* (cf. Rev. 2:7ff).⁴³

Lest this holy enterprise be too daunting of an undertaking even for the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II has repeatedly entrusted to Mary the responsibility of guiding himself and the Church throughout this Advent of the Third Millennium. He concludes *Tertio millennio adveniente* by renewing that Marian entrustment, and I bring to an end this modest reflection on Mary and the Millennium by invoking the same:

I entrust this responsibility of the whole Church to the maternal intercession of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer. She, the Mother of Fairest Love, will be for Christians on the way to the Great Jubilee of the Third Millennium the Star which safely guides their steps to the Lord. May the unassuming Young Woman of Nazareth, who two thousand years ago offered to the world the Incarnate Word, lead men and women of the new millennium towards the One who is "the true light that enlightens every man" (Jn 1:9).⁴⁴

⁴³*TMA*, no. 23.

⁴⁴*TMA*, no. 59.