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OBSERVATIONS ON FR. JELLY'S PAPER

On reading Fr. Jelly's paper I felt very enthusiastic for his central contention that Mariology can teach us much about a theology of the body, but at the same time I was somewhat non-plussed as to how one would proceed in the development of this key insight. There is no doubt in my mind that one of the pressing issues of the day is the need for theology to come to terms with the amazing advances in science and technology that are a mark of the age in which we live. A theology of the body is sorely needed, especially today when we are faced with the discoveries of biological science and the invention of laboratory techniques which enable one to accomplish "artificially" what formerly could be done only "naturally." Fr. Jelly's paper, therefore, is one of timely relevance, and we are grateful to him for bringing the issues to our attention.

The major portion of the paper was devoted to giving an outline of the basic theses underlying a theology of corporeity, and then in conclusion Fr. Jelly made some pertinent suggestions as to how Mariology could contribute to rounding out and sharpening the focus of this theology. Almost all the points he made are worthy of comment and development, but in this "reaction" I shall confine myself first of all to two general remarks which have bearing on the mariological dimension of the discussion. Then I shall take up one of the more intriguing suggestions in the paper, scrutinize it critically but positively, and then suggest a possible line of development that will illustrate clearly the rich potential that Mariology has to offer a theology of this sort.

First of all, I appreciate Fr. Jelly's clear insistence on the fact that to be human means also to be bodily. It follows, therefore, that even if we are talking about the most sublime supernatural features of Mary, there will also be a bodily dimension involved. This ensures that we keep our "feet on the ground," as it were, and restrains us when in our enthusiasm for Mary we may feel drawn in effect to make a "goddess" out of her. On the other

hand, this emphasis on the bodily dimension of the human ensures' that if we are talking about something inherently bodily about Mary, e.g., her conception of Christ, then we shall also be talking about the very *person* of Mary, not merely about her body.

Secondly, I would like to emphasize an aspect of corporeity that Fr. Jelly left somewhat implicit in his paper, but which deserves to be mentioned explicitly, because it touches on the centrality of Mary's role in Redemption, or more precisely in the Incarnation. I have in mind the fact that it is through our bodily nature that we human beings can reproduce. Precisely because we are bodily beings, we can generate other beings which have the same nature as ourselves. Pure spirits, angels, cannot reproduce, for (if we follow St. Thomas) each one is a distinct species unto itself; no two angels can be of the same species, since they lack the material component (matter) whereby individuals of the same species are individuated and rendered distinct one from the other.¹

Moreover, it is to be remarked that it is precisely through our bodily nature that we are constituted male and female. The masculine and the feminine, notions so important to Fr. Jelly's exposition, are rooted firmly in the bodily. (This remark is not intended to lessen in any way the importance of the psychological also in understanding differences of gender.)

Following on from this, I would now like to comment on what I found to be the most stimulating thought in the whole paper — and the one which I found most troubling. It was first sounded in the quotation from Robert Brungs S.J.: "The whole meaning of redemption . . . is contained in the union of the Godman and a woman; in other words, the meaning of God's final union with his creation is to be found in a masculine-feminine union." Fr. Brungs means here the union between Christ and Mary, and what he says is surely true inasmuch as Christ is the

¹ Of course humans have the powers of reproduction in common with all animals, but (as Fr. Jelly has made quite plain) there are other factors which serve to distinguish human generation quite adequately from all other forms of animal reproduction.

Redeemer and Mary the most perfectly redeemed. But what *precisely* is the significance here in the fact that Jesus was a male and Mary was a female?

By way of a preliminary remark before I discuss the question more fully, I would like to suggest that it is not strictly accurate to say that "the meaning of God's final union with his creation is to be found in a masculine-feminine union," as if that were the primary place where the union is found. Surely, the primary locus of the union between God and his creation is the Hypostatic Union where the divine and human natures are united in the Person of the Word.

But granted this, there is still a rich suggestion in the idea that the meaning of redemption is to be found expressed in the relationship of Christ and Mary, and therefore in a relationship of the masculine and the feminine. The sexuality of Mary and Jesus is relevant in the relationship, for it is the relationship of a mother and her son. . . .

St. Luke's Gospel portrays Mary as the perfect disciple, the one who fulfills the definition of discipleship given in Luke 8:15; she is the one who hears the word and puts it into practice (8:21; 11:28).² The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception deepens our appreciation of this Lukan portrait by emphasizing that she is also the most perfectly redeemed; from the first moment of her existence she was graced, the favored one of God. This redemption places her in union with her Son long before the Incarnation actually occurs, for she is redeemed in virtue of his foreseen merits. The truth of St. Augustine's aphorism—"*[Christum] prius mente quam ventre concipiens*"—stretches right back to the moment of the Immaculate Conception. Therefore, we can argue that the *fundamental* relationship between Jesus and Mary is the one which was established at the moment of the Immaculate Conception in which Christ is the Redeemer and Mary is the redeemed. The relationship of mother and son is built upon this foundation and presupposes it (as I shall shortly show).

² I have argued for this thesis in my article, "Mary the Perfect Disciple: a Paradigm for Mariology" (*TS*, 41 [1980] 461-504).

However, even at this very fundamental level, the femininity of Mary is a relevant factor, for the graces of redemption and discipleship were given to her in this extraordinary fashion in view of the role she was to play in the Incarnation and historical redemption of the world. It was because she was predestined to be the Mother of the Word-made-flesh that she was graced and favored, long before the event historically occurred. And, of course, in order to be the mother of Christ she had to be a woman.

But we must not think the significance of Mary's femininity was limited to her being merely a biological receptacle within which the Incarnation could take place. In becoming human, the Word did not merely take the form of a human body. He became fully human with a human mother and all that that implied. Mary's womanhood reached its fulfillment in her motherhood; in becoming a mother she realized her full potential as a woman, and therefore as a human person. And it was necessary that the fulness of motherhood be found in Mary so that her Son could be fully human.

Moreover, it was to this end that she was perfectly redeemed at her conception. The redemption she received was a redemption of her person in its entirety; she was not redeemed just in her soul (the spiritual part of her nature), but in her body too. For God saves *persons*, body and soul. And since Mary was a female person, she was redeemed in her femininity as well. And this redemption of her femininity was of the essence of God's plan, for it was precisely because she was a woman that she was chosen to be the instrument of the Incarnation, i.e., chosen to be the mother of the Word-made-flesh.

But Mary's Immaculate Conception was not just a privilege granted her so that she could be *worthy* to become the mother of the Word. Much more importantly it was given her so that she could be *capable* of becoming the mother of the Word. Her Immaculate Conception was also her redemption; it made her a Christian, a disciple, living by faith. And it was precisely through her faith that she became the mother of God. As St. Augustine so nicely put it: "[*Virgo Maria*] *non concubuit et concepit, sed credidit et concepit.*" Mary did not have intercourse

and conceive; rather she *believed* and conceived. At the moment of the Incarnation Mary was not completely passive, acted upon by the Holy Spirit. Rather, she too was active. By freely consenting to what the angel proposed—"Let what you have said be done to me"—Mary was actively conceiving Christ. Her act of abandonment to God, her act of faith, was itself a generative act; it was the act whereby she became the Mother of God (through the power of the Holy Spirit). In the natural order, a woman gives herself to her husband and conceives; Mary gave herself to God and conceived. And so, if we should ask—what did Mary do to conceive Christ?—the answer is simply, she made an act of faith. "And the Word was made flesh." But this act whereby she conceived her Son was not a purely natural act. It was of the supernatural order—an act of faith. And Mary would not have been capable of making such an act, if she were not already redeemed, i.e., a graced person. This is why her Immaculate Conception is so important; it was her gift of redemption which made her capable of the act of conception. As an act of faith it was also the act of a disciple. As an act which made her a mother, it was also the act of a woman.³

Thus, this act whereby Mary conceived Christ was a completely human act in the fullest sense. It was a bodily act, for it was uttered by her mouth and the other organs necessary for a fully conscious speech act. (Moreover, the conception took place in her womb.) It was also a spiritual act in the sense that it involved her intellect and will. It was a fully rational and responsible act, for she had sufficient knowledge (after ascertaining from the angel what was involved) and the consent she gave was free. Moreover, it was a supernatural act made with the power of grace. In other words, it was the supreme act of a human person whereby she made a gift of herself to another (God). Thus it fulfilled the conditions of what Pope John-Paul II calls "the nuptial meaning of the body." For, although the basic meaning of this phrase is derived from the mutual self-giving and communication of love

³ The implications of this for all of us who claim to be disciples of Christ and look to Mary as the model disciple are many and various. But it would take me too far from the topic of Fr. Jelly's paper to develop them here.

between spouses in the marital act, nevertheless what is conveyed in that situation was conveyed even more perfectly in the mutual self-giving between God and Mary at the Annunciation.

Thus we can say that Mary's conception of Christ was paradigmatic for all human conception, even though the *mode* of conceiving was unique in her case. For it was fully human (as we have just argued), both in body and spirit. Moreover, it is part of human nature to be open to the transcendent, even in the natural order. This aspect of our humanity was realized most perfectly in Mary at the Incarnation, for she was utterly open in receiving Christ, the transcendent One. Hence, we can look to Mary and her conception of Christ as the very paradigm of all human conception. We have here a standard; and a theology of the body can argue that modern science may not deviate from this standard, for to do so would be to deviate from what is truly human.

One final remark can be made with reference to Fr. Jelly's fourth and fifth convictions (concerning the sense of one's sexual identity gained through complementarity with the sexuality of other persons and familial relationships). It is not unreasonable to suppose—in fact it is most likely—that Jesus gained his own self-understanding and awareness of his masculinity primarily through his relationship to Mary his mother. (St. Joseph too would have had an important role to play as well.) The influence would have been reciprocal: Mary's sense of identity as a woman and as a mother would have grown through her relationship with Jesus her Son (and Joseph her husband).

Much more can be said, but I hope that these few considerations will show that there is indeed a rich vein of theological ore to be mined lying beneath the surface of the suggestion that Mariology has something important to say to a theology of the body.

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