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Mary's Intercession: A Contemporary Reappraisal

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MARY'S INTERCESSION: A CONTEMPORARY REAPPRAISAL

During the most recent International Mariological Congress, held at Zaragoza in Spain, October 3-9, 1979, a number of us, who were participating in the congress and representing various Christian traditions, met on several occasions in order to agree upon an "Ecumenical Declaration" concerning our contemporary perception of Marian doctrine and devotion in our churches. The following is an unpublished translation of the original French text, including both the introduction and section of the consensus statement pertaining to the topic of this paper:

As in the course of former Mariological Congresses, so in this 8th International Mariological Congress . . . , a group of Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed theologians have met with their Catholic brethren. The theme of the Congress, devotion to Mary during the 16th century, gave the opportunity to discuss fundamental questions relating to the place of the Blessed Virgin in doctrine and prayer. In this way they have discovered many common elements in their approach to the Mother of God, more indeed than they could have expected. They feel able to formulate these convictions in the following way: . . .

The problem of the INVOCATION and INTERCESSION of Mary was examined afresh in this Congress. We have considered it against the background of the communion of saints. As a Christian can and should pray for others, we believe that the saints who have already entered into the fullness which is in Christ, amongst whom Mary holds the first place, can and do pray for us sinners who are still suffering and struggling on earth. The one and unique mediation of Christ is in nothing affected by this. The meaning of the direct invocation of the saints who are alive in God, an invocation which is not practiced in all the Churches, remains to be elucidated.¹

¹ This document will be made available with the publication of the proceedings of the International Mariological-Marian Congress. Since this ordinarily

Whether or not the members of our Mariological Society of America who are currently serving on the Board of Directors and who also participated with me in the formulation of the above "Ecumenical Declaration," had it in mind when they decided to invite me to address the question of Mary's intercession afresh, I am in no position to say. It is indeed, however, a very timely topic theologically and pastorally as well as ecumenically. And, in light of the approach adopted by the teaching of Vatican II, we well realize that no significant doctrine of our faith can be adequately considered theologically unless its implications for preaching, liturgical worship, private devotion and the quest for Christian unity are also kept in mind. These three dimensions of Christian doctrine—the theological, pastoral and ecumenical—must always be intimately interrelated and carefully correlated if the truths of revelation and the mysteries of our faith are to be truly intelligible and meaningful today.

Mary's Intercession Today: The Contemporary Problem in Its Three Dimensions

Although those of us who signed the "Ecumenical Declaration" made it abundantly clear that, as members of the Ecumenical Commission of the Congress, we did so on our own behalf, still we were constantly concerned with expressing the faith of our churches. It is not unlike the understanding with reference to those among us who serve as members of the Bilateral Conversations between our churches. While such official dialogues on the national and international levels have the approval of our respective ecclesiastical authorities, they cannot commit the churches they represent to any particular agreement or consensus statement. At the same time, however, there is a special responsibility of the ecumenists involved to communicate as clearly and as accurately as possible the living faith of their churches. This is precisely what we endeavored to do at the Zaragoza Mariological Congress.

As the "Ecumenical Declaration" of the Congress clearly

takes a considerable amount of time, anyone who might be interested in having a copy of the French text or of the English translation may write to the Marian Library at the University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio 45469.

states, the *theological* context for a consideration of Mary's intercession and of her invocation is the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. And among the saints who live in the glory of our risen Lord, Mary holds the principal place. For she is uniquely associated with Christ both by reason of her calling to be his Mother and because of her role in objective redemption. Of all the saints she alone is spiritual mother to everyone who is redeemed by her Son. The basis of her universal mediation of her Son's saving grace in heaven is the fact that upon earth Mary was uniquely chosen by God to be the New Eve in the accomplishment of our salvation. In this presentation, our task precisely is not to address the theological questions of Mary's mediation in the acquisition of grace, but of her heavenly role as Mediatrix in dispensing all redeeming graces to mankind. The former is a presupposition in this paper, which proposes to consider the theology behind an appropriate expression for our contemporaries of the mystery of her heavenly intercession on our behalf and of her spiritual influence upon us.

The *ecumenical* dimension of the problem has been nicely put by Canon A. M. Allchin, one of the Anglican signers of the declaration at Zaragoza. In an article that appeared recently, he observes:

Do the saints departed pray for us? May we ask them to pray for us? If so, in what way should we do it? All these were seen as questions which still demand attention in the dialogue between Protestants and Catholics. They are questions in which it is vital to see clearly what is at stake and to avoid simple misunderstandings over terms and words, as Anglicans, for whom they have at times been matters of sharp controversy, are particularly well aware.²

The article deals with two seventeenth-century views on the intercessory power of saints represented in the writings of William Forbes (1585-1634) and of Henry Thorndike (1598-1672). Both are enlightened positions regarding traditional Protestant difficulties with Roman Catholic doctrine and devotion about intercession and invocation of the saints, especially of St. Mary.

² A. M. Allchin, "The Prayers of the Saints: Two Seventeenth-Century Views" in *MLS*, 10 (1978) 131.

The main objections of the Protestant Reformers with this practice of the Church of Christ, which had been going on for over a millenium prior to the Reformation, were: 1) the lack of a biblical basis for it, contrary to their *sola scriptura* principle; 2) the danger of idolatrously attributing to a saint the divine prerogative of hearing prayers and granting favors which is opposed to their *solus Deus* or *solus Christus* principle, since it apparently compromises the unique mediatorship of the risen Lord; and, 3) the heretical belief in the merits of the saints, especially of Mary as mediatrix of all graces, in opposition to their *sola gratia* or *sola fide* principle, according to which our salvation in Christ is completely gratuitous or the result of God's freely bestowed favor. Another kind of difficulty included the absence of any biblical revelation regarding the condition of the blessed, particularly whether or not their vision of God in heaven would reveal to them the invocations of their clients on earth. As we well realize, there were certain abuses and exaggerated forms of piety in the Middle Ages that unfortunately tended to foster such misinterpretations of the traditional teaching and authentic Catholic practice in the matter.³

And, lest we be led to believe that these are ecumenical difficulties of the past which have been resolved by recent dialogue between Protestants and Roman Catholics, let us listen at some length to one of our esteemed colleagues who has been a careful observer and concerned participant in Marian ecumenism:

It is Catholic belief, consistent with pre-Reformation tradition and shared with the whole body of Eastern Christians, the majority of whom do not possess a Roman allegiance, that calling upon our friends for help in prayer extends beyond the barrier of death, and those we know to have been close friends of God, above all the Mother of Jesus, the perfect Christian, the closest disciple of Christ, are still in a position to help us. This is the most sensitive issue in the differences about the Virgin Mary between Protestant and Catholic, most sensitive not only because it touches belief and doc-

³ Cf. Robert E. McNally, S.J., *The Unreformed Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965) 148-186.

trine, but touches practice also. If I were a Protestant looking at Roman Catholic piety toward the Virgin Mary, the most evident aspect of what Catholics hold about our Lady would be that they pray to her. A whole pattern of piety is built around Roman Catholic practices of devotion to the Virgin Mary . . .

One of the questions put to me in ecumenical gatherings over and over again is the place of the Virgin Mary in the communion of saints, why Catholics pray to Mary and the saints. If we could first begin to understand what each side really holds about this and why it holds it, then perhaps in God's good time we could achieve some sort of consensus. I am convinced that we are dealing here with something that belongs to basic Christian understanding and practice and that the protest of the Reformation in this respect was extreme.⁴

The ecumenical dimension of the question, therefore, leads immediately to the *pastoral*, since it directly involves devotion and popular piety.

Just how does our theology of Mary's intercession, refined by a reconsideration of traditional Protestant difficulties that are still very much with us, influence our pastoral practice of preaching, spiritual direction, and similar priestly ministries? This is the most critical question of all, the third dimension of the contemporary problem to which the other two necessarily lead. For the theology of any Christian truth, particularly of devotion, is quite meaningless apart from its relevance to a living faith; and the ecumenical significance of any doctrine will prove fruitless unless the people of our churches come to appreciate its importance for organic unity in Christ. The contemporary reappraisal of Mary's intercession, that this presentation proposes to provide, basically addresses the following kinds of questions about the attitudes and motives of the faithful when they invoke Mary's intercessory power today: Do they approach her directly because they somehow look upon Christ as remote from them or not immediately accessible to them?; Do they believe that Mary must make our risen Lord or the triune God merciful or more fa-

⁴ Eamon R. Carroll, O.Carm., *Understanding the Mother of Jesus* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1979) 78-79.

vorably disposed towards us?; Are some of them so anthropomorphic in their thinking about God that they consider the saints to be relay stations for sending the messages of their prayers to the Father?; Is the average believer aware of the profound difference between the worship and adoration due to the divinity alone and the veneration proper to Mary and the saints?; Do those who make this distinction between *latria* and *dulia* realize that the *hyperdulia* fitting for our Blessed Mother differs in degree and not in kind from the veneration appropriate for the saints?; How many tend to make Mary's mediation a practical substitute for the unique mediatorship of Christ?; Would many have superstitious beliefs and practices that virtually make Mary and the saints, because of their great merits, sources instead of channels of redemption?; and, finally, Are there not a large number who never pray directly to Christ or to the triune God in their private devotions, because they consider themselves unworthy?

The contemporary reappraisal that this paper proposes is primarily a response to such questions. Basically it poses the query whether or not certain images that have come to be associated with Mary's intercession ought to be replaced. Please note, I said "replaced" and not "displaced," since too much of that sort of irresponsible injustice has already been perpetrated upon the People of God leaving them in a spiritual vacuum. And grace as well as nature abhors a vacuum! No, we wish to recommend some possible lines of development in Marian devotion that will provide the basis of a reconceptualization that might do justice both to the traditional doctrine and to the theological, ecumenical and pastoral dimensions of the contemporary problem.

Mary's Intercession in Recent Magisterial Teaching

A text of Vatican II's teaching on devotion to Mary which has not been very often quoted appears in the first conciliar document to be promulgated, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, which was issued at the end of the second session, December 4, 1963. In the context of the liturgical year, this document declares:

In celebrating the annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy

Church honors the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, with a special love. She is inseparably 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.⁵

"She is inseparably linked with her son's saving work." This statement sums up beautifully and succinctly the doctrinal foundation of our devotion to Mary's intercessory role in heaven as mediatrix of all her son's saving graces. And the central place of Marian devotion in the Church is emphasized by the fact that this teaching is communicated in the context of the Council's teaching on the liturgy, which the same document calls "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed . . . and also the fount from which all her power flows."⁶

This text was a fitting preparation for Vatican II's more detailed teaching on Mary's intercession in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. Issued on November 21, 1964, at the termination of the Council's third session, the Marian chapter entitled "The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church" is a most balanced magisterial statement about devotion to Mary. The decision by the conciliar fathers to include it in the teaching on the Church of Christ instead of in a separate document is *theologically* significant, since the mystery of Mary is contemplated in the proper perspective of her unique relationship to Christ and to his redeemed-redeeming body, the Church, as the chapter title clearly shows. It is *ecumenically* significant as a manifestation to our sisters and brothers in the other Christian churches that we consider Marian doctrine and devotion to be Christocentric and ecclesiotypical, i.e. centered in her Son and exemplary for all the members of his Church, or, to borrow Cardinal Newman's phrase, to be for his sake and ours.⁷ Likewise, the decision to treat her in this con-

⁵ Austin Flannery, Gen. Ed., *Vatican Council II—The Conciliar and Post-conciliar Documents* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., 1975) No. 103, p. 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 10, p. 6.

⁷ J. H. Newman, *The New Eve* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1952) 89.

text is *pastorally* important, since it says to the faithful that Mary's privileges and graces are to lead us closer to Christ and to one another in his ecclesial communion through true devotion to her. The Council taught a "sharing-oriented Mariology" and not a "privilege-centered" one.

Let us now listen at length to the teaching of Vatican II on Mary's mediation as the wider context for her intercession:

In the words of the apostle there is but one mediator: "for there is but one God and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a redemption for all" (I Tim. 2:5-6). But Mary's function as mother of men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power. But the Blessed Virgin's salutary influence on men originates not in any inner necessity but in the disposition of God. It flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on his mediation, depends entirely on it, and draws all its power from it. It does not in any way hinder the immediate union of the faithful with Christ but on the contrary fosters it.

. . . in a wholly singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior in restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is mother to us in the order of grace.

This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth, surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led into their blessed home. Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix. This, however, is so understood that it neither takes away anything from nor adds anything to the dignity of Christ the One Mediator.⁸

This passage particularly calls for prayerful and careful reflec-

⁸ Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, Nos. 60, 61, 62, pp. 418-419.

tion.⁹ The meaning of the mystery of Mary's intercession is her spiritual motherhood of redeemed humanity throughout salvation history. Her being "a mother to us in the order of grace" and her "salutary influence on men," as the Council teaches, make for a certain presence of Mary in our daily Christian lives, both personally and communally, as members of her Son's redeemed-redeeming body, the Church. She helps beget the life of loving faith and hope in us. As with the mystery of her mediation, there are two important aspects of her spiritual maternity: one is her unique and intimate association with the work of Christ in salvation history; the other is the continuation of her motherly care for mankind in heaven, which is the special object of our consideration. What she did on earth in such close connection with Christ's life and mission is present before the Father as a powerful intercession of concern for the spiritual welfare of us all. And so "the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church . . . (as) Advocate, Helper, Benefactress and Mediatrix" according to the above conciliar text. It is indeed to be noted that the conciliar fathers decided to use the title "Mediatrix" of Mary but once, and carefully distinguished it from that of "Christ the One Mediator."

The mystery of Mary's intercession, as that of all in the Communion of Saints, receives its redemptive meaning and value from the unique Mediatorship of her Son. Unlike the intercessory power of the other saints in glory, however, hers is truly universal since she received into herself the source of all life and so has been divinely designated as the spiritual mother of us all. Although God has freely willed to endow her intercession with exceptional efficacy, it must never be placed on the same level with that of her Son, as the conciliar teaching makes abundantly clear. The incarnate Son of God alone can be the eternal high priest reconciling the world with the Father in the Holy Spirit. This ministry on earth is exercised through the ordained priest

⁹ Cf. Otto Semmelroth, "Chapter VIII—The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church," in Herbert Vorgrimler, Gen. Ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, I (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967) 290-292.

who officially represents Christ. Mary's motherly influence on each one of us in the order of grace is an exercise of her sublime share in the general priesthood of Christ in the Church, whereby one who is redeemed receives the calling to be a channel of redemption to others. For Mary belongs to the Church most precisely in the more important aspect of the ecclesial mystery, namely, as the fellowship or communion of life in Christ. The ecclesiological teaching of Vatican II strongly emphasized that the significance of the Church as a hierarchical structure, with her sacraments and ordained ministries, is for the sake of building up this Christian community in love. Consequently, it does not diminish the grandeur of Mary in the slightest to distinguish her intercessory role carefully from that of those among us called to share by ordination in the ministerial priesthood of her Son. The tendency in the past to equate Church with hierarchy was frequently the occasion of inserting Mary's intercession into the same framework which then seemed to place her mediation in a confusing conflict with that of her Son in glory and of his ordained priests on earth.

Finally, in our careful consideration of the text from Vatican II, we take note of the teaching that Mary's mediation in no way interferes with the "immediate union of the faithful with Christ but on the contrary fosters it." Thus the intercession of Mary and of the saints in glory should not be interpreted as meaning that they are a link between us and a distant Christ, as though we were unable to encounter him directly. Here the Pastoral Letter of the American Bishops on Mary might be cited as a commentary upon the teaching of Vatican II:

Pope Paul put it this way: "Since Mary is rightly to be regarded as the way by which we are led to Christ, the person who encounters Mary cannot help but encounter Christ likewise." Father Frederick Jelly explains how Mary's mediation . . . fosters "immediate union of the faithful with Christ." Father Jelly writes: "Mary is not a bridge over the gap that separates us from a remote Christ. . . . Such an approach to Marian devotion and doctrine would minimize the deepest meaning of the Incarnation, the fact that he has become a man like us, and that his sacred humanity has made him the unique mediator between God and us. Mary's greatness is that she

brought him close to us, and her mediation continues to create the spiritual climate for our immediate encounter with Christ."¹⁰

In light of such teaching, Mary's intercessory role, the exercise of her spiritual motherhood in the distribution of her Son's saving graces, seems more aptly conveyed by an image and analogical concept of her being present to help dispose us towards a closer union with Christ, rather than to look upon her as a go-between. Issued on November 21, 1973, just nine years to the day after the appearance of *Lumen Gentium*, the Pastoral Letter of our American Bishops draws out the theological implications of the Council's doctrine on the question.

On February 2, 1974, Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, appeared and had this to teach about Mary's intercession:

Devotion to Mary recalls too her mission and the special position she holds within the People of God, of which she is the preeminent member, a shining example and the loving Mother; it recalls her unceasing and efficacious intercession which, although she is assumed into heaven, draws her close to those who ask her help, including those who do not realize that they are her children.¹¹

The papal teaching in this document of the past decade characteristically portrays Mary's intercessory role in the context of her spiritual motherhood and further develops the doctrine of Vatican II about Marian devotion. Pertinent to our topic, Pope Paul VI was particularly concerned with showing the perennial relevance of devotion to Mary through her example of Christian discipleship. We should never separate her role as Mediatrix of all graces from that of her being the universal Archetype of the Church as a redeemed community or the greatest example of receiving redemption and of following her Son faithfully. Al-

¹⁰ A Pastoral Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary from the American Bishops. *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith* (Washington, D.C.: USCC Publications Office, 1973) No. 67, pp. 25-26.

¹¹ Pope Paul VI, *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1974) No. 56, p. 47.

though uniquely redeemed by him in her Immaculate Conception, she is truly "within the People of God, of which she is the preeminent member" as Pope Paul of happy memory put it. Likewise she is not to be isolated from her fellow saints in glory. Paradoxically, that which is unique or very special about Mary among us redeemed People of God is just what brings her closest to us in that we are all called to complete union with her Son. As Vatican II teaches in conjunction with her glorious Assumption:

. . . the Mother of Jesus in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven is the image and the beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise she shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10), a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim People of God.¹²

Mary's Intercession in the Revised Roman Liturgy

Marialis Cultus was written for the right ordering and development of devotion to Mary and sought to accomplish this purpose primarily by reflecting upon her special place in the renewed liturgy. Let us, therefore, now turn our attention to some liturgical prayers used in various feasts of the Blessed Virgin in order to analyze the manner in which holy Mother the Church invokes Mary's intercession within her official life of worship. This should be very helpful in our meditation upon the mystery of Mary's intercession since the Church's liturgical prayer is the most constant and faithful witness to her traditional faith (*ecclesia orans, ecclesia credens*).

On the solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, celebrated January 1st each year, we say in the opening prayer: "God our Father, may we always profit by the prayers of the Virgin Mother Mary, for you bring us life and salvation through Jesus Christ her Son . . ."; or in the alternate prayer, "Father, source of light in every age, the Virgin conceived and bore your Son who is called wonderful God, Prince of Peace. May her prayer, the gift of a mother's love, be your people's joy through all ages. May her re-

¹² Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, No. 68, p. 422.

sponse, born of a humble heart, draw your Spirit to rest on your people." From the outset, may I call your attention to the fact that, in the Eucharistic Liturgy, the general rule is to address God the Father directly in prayer with a trinitarian and/or Christological conclusion. And the intercession of the saints is ordinarily included by asking the Father directly to hear their prayers on our behalf. This certainly makes clear that the Father is the giver of every good gift and the primordial source of every grace and favor granted in response to our invocation of them. And so we beseech the first Person of the Blessed Trinity that Mary's prayers of intercession bring us many blessings.

On the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, December 8th, we pray "(that through the prayers of the sinless Virgin Mary, God will free us from our sins)—Father, you prepared the Virgin Mary to be the worthy Mother of your Son. You let her share beforehand in the salvation Christ would bring by his death, and kept her sinless from the first moment of her conception. Help us by her prayers to live in your presence without sin." Here let us take special note how the Church at prayer so beautifully links up the mystery of the particular Marian feast with the request to the Father that Mary's intercession be efficacious for us, which is an excellent example of the close connection between exemplarity and intercession in our devotion to Mary and the saints. The prayer over the gifts on the Immaculate Conception repeats the same petition addressed directly to the Lord: "Help us by her prayers, and free us from our sins."

In celebrating the glorious mystery of Mary's Assumption on August 15th each year, we pray in the Vigil Mass: "Almighty God, you gave a humble virgin the privilege of being the mother of your Son, and crowned her with the glory of heaven. May the prayers of the Virgin Mary bring us to the salvation of Christ and raise us up to eternal life." The alternative opening prayer for this Marian solemnity and holy day of obligation utters; "Let us pray (with Mary to the Father, in whose presence she now dwells)—May the prayers of this woman clothed with the sun bring Jesus to the waiting world and fill the void of incompleteness with the presence of her child, who lives and. . . ." It strikes me as very significant that holy Mother the Church in-

vites us here to "pray *with* Mary to the Father." Although this is not what is usually considered to be part of our devotion to Mary and the saints, since we pray *to* them in order that they might pray *for* us in heaven, it is most salutary, especially in the Eucharistic Liturgy, to be mindful of the consoling truth that we pray *with* Mary and the whole celestial communion of saints. This is a healthy reminder for several reasons: 1) we are made aware more often that God, and most precisely God the Father, is the primordial source of all our blessings through prayer; 2) we are made more conscious of our constant companionship in love with the saints in glory; and, 3) we acknowledge that the efficacy of all intercession is rooted in the sovereignly free and loving holy will of the Father who chooses to make our prayers, and particularly the intercessory prayers of the saints on our behalf, a condition of our salvation. The very power of our prayer is a grace, the gift of the Father bestowed in the Spirit of our risen Lord.

Now let us turn to the weekday feast of the Visitation which occurs on May 31st in the Church's liturgical calendar and where we pray: "Eternal Father, you inspired the Virgin Mary, mother of your Son, to visit Elizabeth and assist her in her need. Keep us open to the working of your Spirit, and with Mary may we praise you forever." Here we behold an inspiring way of asking the Father for the grace of appropriating the mystery of the feast, the second joyful mystery of the Rosary, which is the emulation of Mary's openness to the Spirit in her going immediately from the experience of the Annunciation to help her kinswoman Elizabeth prepare for the birth of her own son wondrously conceived. Again exemplarity is intimately associated with our Marian devotion. Also the completely Christocentric character of our liturgical piety towards Mary is clearly manifested in this feast's prayer after communion: "May we always recognize with joy the presence of Christ in the Eucharist we celebrate, as John the Baptist hailed the presence of our Savior in the womb of Mary."

In concluding this section on Mary's intercession in the revised Roman Liturgy, we might well glance briefly at the intercessions found in the Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Liturgy of the Hours. In Morning prayer we ask the Lord directly: "May

your Mother intercede for us, Lord." While at Evening Prayer I and II, we pray: "Mary, full of grace, intercede for us." It is relatively rare that, in liturgical prayer, we address Mary or any saint directly. The fact that it is done at all, however, is a sign of its acceptance in the universal Church.

Conclusions Concerning a Contemporary Reappraisal of Mary's Intercession

Now we wish to propose some recommendations respectfully made for your consideration and discussion regarding some possible revision of images and concepts used to communicate the mystery of Mary's intercession. Towards the conclusion of the first encyclical letter of his pontificate, dated March 4, 1979, Pope John Paul II spoke of Mary's intercessory role in the Church in terms of her being "present" to us: ". . . Mary should be present on all the paths the Church follows in her daily life. Because Mary is present as a Mother, the Church can be certain that she herself is living the life of her Master and Lord and that she is living by the mystery of redemption in all its life-giving plenitude."¹³ Again, when he prayed on behalf of all us Americans in the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, D.C., Sunday morning, October 7, 1979, the final day of his pilgrimage of peace in our country, the Pope uttered: "Today, as I thank you, Mother, for this presence of yours in the midst of men and women of this land—a presence which has lasted two hundred years—giving a new form to their social and civic lives in the United States, I commend them all to your Immaculate Heart."¹⁴

Although Pope Paul VI did not use the image of "presence" explicitly, the idea must have been in his mind when he spoke of Mary's being "within the People of God" and when he said also in *Marialis Cultus* that "her unceasing and efficacious intercession . . . draws her close to those who ask her help, including

¹³John Paul II, *The Redeemer of the Human Race* in *PSP*, 24, No. 2 (Summer, 1979) 146.

¹⁴John Paul II, *U.S.A. The Message of Justice, Peace and Love* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1979) 250.

those who do not realize that they are her children."¹⁵ He wishes those of us who have been blessed by the Father with explicit faith in the mystery of Christ and his Church to practice our Marian devotion primarily in the renewed liturgy and to harmonize our private or para-liturgical Marian devotions, especially the Rosary, with our liturgical celebrations: "... meditation on the mysteries of the Rosary, by familiarizing the minds and hearts of the faithful with the mysteries of Christ, can be an excellent preparation for the celebration of those same mysteries in the liturgical action and can also become a continuing echo thereof."¹⁶ Along with this Christocentric character of all true devotion to Mary, Pope Paul VI also brings out an ecclesiotypical emphasis, particularly in his meditation upon Mary as the Model *par excellence* of the Church in divine worship. When reflecting upon her presence in the Upper Room, praying with the other faithful disciples of her Son in preparation for the first Pentecost, he says: "We have here the prayerful *presence* [italics mine] of Mary in the early Church and in the Church throughout all ages, for, having been assumed into heaven, she has not abandoned her mission of intercession and salvation."¹⁷ Her prayerful presence continues in the Church as the salutary influence of Mary's intercession inspires us to receive the Holy Spirit of her Son more fully into our daily lives of faith. We Christians, therefore, along with praying *to* Mary, may well be urged to pray *like* her as well as *with* her.

In our devotions to Mary expressed outside of liturgical worship (although the Liturgy of the Hours does include a bit of direct invocation of Mary), we are certainly being faithful to a long and trustworthy tradition in the West and even more in the East when we pray directly to Mary and the saints. It would be wise, however, to practice and to encourage the people to practice veneration of Mary by more consciously and frequently praying to Christ and the triune God directly *with* her and *like* her. The emphasis in the mystery of Mary's intercession which has evi-

¹⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Devotion to B.V.M.*, No. 56, p. 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 48, p. 42.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 18, p. 18.

dently been renewed by Vatican II and the recent Mariology inspired by it revives the early Church's loving awareness of her risen Lord's abiding presence and continuous intercession for us without in any way minimizing the intercession of Mary and the saints in glory. Rather it has been seeking to restore the whole mystery to a more balanced perspective. Just as we should not naively ask Mary to relay messages for us to the Lord who knows our prayer even before we utter it, so we should not look upon her mediation as though it were a necessary means of making accessible to us the Christ who is the merciful God incarnate ever present to us. Jesus *is* the nearness of God revealing how approachable the gracious Father really is to each one of us. And so we ought not think that somehow even Christ has to persuade the Father to be merciful towards us. In fact we should not imagine and conceive of the mediation of Christ and his Body the Church, especially through her sacraments, as a go-between. They bring humanity into immediate touch with the triune God. Although the fullness of this reality is reserved for the beatific vision, it really does exist on earth through the indwelling of the triune God within all who are united to Christ by a loving faith and hope. "Thus the relation of man to God under the New Covenant may be characterized as a 'mediated immediacy.'"¹⁸ Obviously this is no lessening of our constant need for the efficacy of Christ's mediation working through his ordained priests and the sacraments; rather, this is a more marvellous manifestation of its loving power. Similarly, Mary's intercessory role in heaven is in no way diminished by our *replacing* (not displacing) images that may connote her standing between us and a remote Christ. As one catechetical work seeks to express the mystery:

Catholic devotion speaks of invoking or "praying to" the saints, "on whose constant intercession we rely for help." We do not address the saints as though they were God. To invoke the intercession of the saints, including Mary, is really to pray that, together with them, we may grow in the love of the triune God who wills the salvation of all. It is to express the longing that the saints, living in

¹⁸ E. D. O'Connor, "Mediation," in *NCE*, 9, 570.

the personal love of God, will also embrace us in that personal God-given love, and will by their prayers assist us in obtaining benefits from God.¹⁹

When we invoke Mary and the saints directly, therefore, our prayer should be a pleading for the same gift as when we pray immediately to God, i.e., the grace of growing more receptive to the triune God and to his holy will. Prayer is a means of God's acting upon us in giving himself and his gifts to us with perfect regard for our freedom to desire this more intimate fellowship with him in the communion of saints. When we pray, including our direct invocation of the saints, we do not act upon God nor do we ask our brothers and sisters in glory to "influence" an already loving and merciful God for us. We pray to be touched by the Spirit of God, the "digitus Dei," *directly*, and to be influenced *dispositively* by the saints, especially by Saint Mary, in order to become more docile to the direct action of the Holy Spirit.

In the theology behind the intercession of Mary and the saints as it applies to their experience of the beatific vision and what God reveals to them in glory, we should follow the mode of speaking used in the magisterial teaching on the question. Instead of encouraging any images of a "heavenly computer," let us emphasize that God manifests to them in glory whatever pertained to their Christian life and ministry upon earth. This is the theological basis for holding that Mary's intercession or mediation in heaven is universal in the distribution of Christ's graces. For her mission in salvation history was to be intimately and uniquely associated with his redemption of all humanity. Of all the saints, she alone is welcome into the complete confidence of God's saving designs for each one of us. Through the mediation of the risen Lord, she receives the light of glory that enlightens her about the needs of us all. In proclaiming the Good News about this mystery, we ought to emphasize that the quasi-infinite details of our needs for God's redeeming love does not

¹⁹ R. Lawler, D. Wuerl, T. C. Lawler, Eds., *The Teaching of Christ—A Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1976) 241.

"confuse" those who behold everything in the wondrous order and unity of the triune God's omnipotent and loving wisdom.

Finally, to stress the realism of Mary's spiritual, salutary influence upon us, we must strive to avoid any infelicitous confusion of her active presence in our lives with that of God's Spirit, whether the Holy Spirit is working through the instrumentality of the sacraments or not. Only the Spirit of God can act directly upon our free human spirits without doing violence to them. In the causation of grace, that action is always through the conjoined instrument of God's humanity in the risen Lord which is the "organ of divinity" for us. When the redeeming triune God wills to reconcile and sanctify us through the sacraments, then the ministry of the one conferring the sacrament as well as the efficacious sacramental sign itself become a perfective instrument of God in giving grace. It is called "perfective" because the instrumental cause, entirely due to the divine designs, acts *ex opere operato* or better *in virtute Christi* (efficaciously in the power of Christ), attaining to the very effect of gracing a person. In the hands of God's Christ and his minister, the sacrament instrumentally effects what it signifies. On the other hand, the mystery of Mary's salutary influence might better be communicated according to the analogy of a dispositive instrument. Her intercessory role helps create the spiritual atmosphere which disposes us to meet Christ more intimately, whether the Spirit is working in us through the sacraments or not. Pastorally, one may argue that many of our people feel unworthy to approach God directly, and, with genuine humility, invoke the saints to pray for them. While we must never disparage sincere piety, it is our pastoral responsibility to guide our people towards a deeper understanding of the mysteries of their faith. And the most basic step in this process is to help purify their faith-understanding by replacing misleading images and notions with more suitable symbols and analogies. In this context, it does appear that their humility will be objectively sounder as well as subjectively sincere, if they look upon Mary as the one among the saints who is in the best position to enlighten and inspire them to feel more at home in the intimate presence of the triune God. Since the Father chose her from all eternity to be the mother and perfect

disciple of his own Son incarnate, Mary is most able to dispose us to become more docile to the direct actions of their Holy Spirit. Thus her intercession not only does not interfere with the mediation of her Son and the sanctification by his Holy Spirit, but even enhances it, by preparing us for more intimate immediate encounters with the triune God dwelling within us and among us.

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