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THE PATRISTIC WITNESS TO THE VIRGIN MARY AS THE NEW EVE

A Return to the Historical Witness

The angel who brought the news of Jesus' birth to Mary uses words, recorded by St. Luke, which were hallowed within Jewish tradition. The account is given with a reserve, a purity of expression, and a lyrical form that undoubtedly arose and took shape in the liturgical life of the early Church. Six hundred years after St. Luke composed his Gospel, Germanus, patriarch of Constantinople and devoted supporter of the cult of Mary in that place, acclaimed her thus in a sermon on the Dormition of the Virgin:

Indeed, you are the Mother of true life, the leaven of Adam's recreation, Eve's freedom from reproach. She was the mother of dust, and you of light; hers the womb of death, yours of immortality; she, the dwelling-place of death, you the transition from death.¹

Between St. Luke and St. Germanus lie six centuries of liturgical prayer and theological reflection on the meaning of salvation. The faith of the Christian people was continuously nurtured and their understanding of life in Christ enlarged. That much in the development of Marian piety went beyond the scriptural witness concerning Mary can hardly be denied. By the sixth century, devotion to the Virgin was fully developed, even at times overgrown. It is not the purpose of this essay, however, to apply the well-known canons of John Henry Newman and to assess which developments in Mariology were legitimate and which were not.

¹ Germanus, *In dormitionem b. Mariae*, II; PG 98:349.

The task is simpler, and has two aspects. It is, first, to remind ourselves of the hermeneutical principle by which the New Testament language about Mary is to be interpreted. The New Testament is properly interpreted within a living tradition, and in separation from that tradition it collapses. Any doctrine of Mary will therefore be formulated not simply out of various texts in the Gospels but also out of the faith and life of the people of God. Here, as so often, the *lex credendi* is to be related to the *lex orandi*.

Any remembering of Mary and any form of Marian devotion, however, are to be held "within the limits of sound and orthodox doctrine," to use the more recent words of *Lumen gentium*. And this is the problem. What are these limits? Does the earliest Christian witness impose such limits? Here is the second aspect of our task, and it is well summarised in a comment of John Calvin: "Nothing is better than to consult the original, in order to obtain the true and genuine meaning."² It will therefore be our specific task to inquire what the sources tell us about Mary: to make what R. P. C. Hanson has called "a movement of return in obedience to the pull of the historical witness of the foundation documents of Christianity."³ This consultation of the original has become a matter of priority as we seek in the ecumenical conversation a new basis for the dialogue concerning Mary.

The single most important source concerning the Virgin and her place in God's redemption is found in the patristic witness to the Virgin Mary as the New Eve. This was an idea which could have flowered only in a way of thinking that was saturated with the Bible. In the Church tradition which developed from the time of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus especially, this

² John Calvin, *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote, in Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, repr. 1958) 71.

³ R. P. C. Hanson, *The Attractiveness of God. Essays in Christian Doctrine* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1973) 57.

is probably also the most ancient idea which can be found to explain her role in the history of salvation.

Mary as the Eternal Bearer of Christ

Without Mary, the saving significance of her Son's humanity is lost; for, as Donald Dawe has convincingly shown, Mary the mother, as the bearer of Jesus, makes of the redemptive mystery of Christ a flesh and blood fact in our lives.⁴ Against all false spiritualizing of salvation, docetic or Gnostic, the patristic witness asserted that this salvation is achieved in history, that is, in the event of Jesus Christ, born of Mary, crucified, and raised from the dead. Salvation, as restored communion with God, is not a timeless category within the divine sphere, nor a knowledge of God, truth, or self, gained apart from the specific time of Pontius Pilate and the concrete place of Calvary. It is the fullness and integrity of Christ's human nature, which He received from Mary and which He perfects and consummates in His resurrection from the dead.

By the time of Athanasius, Jesus Christ's birth of the Virgin had come to be regarded as a sign of His divine nature. "He formed his own body from the Virgin," the bishop of Alexandria wrote, "and that is no small proof of his Godhead."⁵ But in the earlier period the birth of Mary was regarded as a sign of his human nature. Mary the mother is the continuing witness that our Savior is truly bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. Jesus shares with us what Irenaeus called the *sarkos kleronomia*,⁶ the inheritance of our physical descent from Adam. Athanasius is in agreement: "He took to himself a body, a body like our own."⁷

⁴ Donald G. Dawe, *From Dysfunction to Disbelief. The Virgin Mary in Reformed Theology*. Occasional paper published by the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Washington, D.C.: 1977) 9.

⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 18.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* (= *AH*), 3:22:1.

⁷ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 8.

A generation after Athanasius, Epiphanius wrote in the same vein: "The body of our Savior which came from Mary is human and true, as holy scripture says, and true because he was in our body. For Mary is our sister, since we are all descended from Adam."⁸ For Epiphanius the implication follows that the body in which our Lord appeared in the resurrection is the self-same body which He took from Mary—transfigured, to be sure, but one and the same. Mary, as we may put it, is not merely the bearer of Christ but the eternal bearer of Christ, for if He did not truly take and if He does not truly still possess our human nature, then our salvation and our resurrection are imaginary.

This appropriation of our human nature by the Word of God through Mary means that it is restored in Christ and not annihilated. Mary's witness remains: God above all remains faithful, and Jesus Christ is the sign for us of that faithfulness. If there is no incarnation of God, as Irenaeus and Athanasius again and again insisted, then no salvation of *our* human nature is possible. If the Uncreated had assumed an uncreated body, the first creation would have come to an end. But Christ is not an end; He is the beginning and fulfilment of the new creation, even in the midst of the old.

From Death to Life: The Reorientation of Human Nature

The concept of Mary as the counterpart of Eve was first suggested, so far as we know, by Justin Martyr. The idea may have been original to him, a comparison suggested by the Adam-Christ typology which the philosopher-Christian had found in Paul. Irenaeus developed the comparison in ways which provide reference points as we investigate the enlargement of the theme in later Christian thought.

Both Justin and Irenaeus refer in their different ways to the parallelism between Eve and Mary. First, Justin:

⁸ Epiphanius, *Adversus haereses*, 77:9; PG 42:653.

He is born of the Virgin, in order that the disobedience caused by the serpent might be destroyed in the same manner in which it had originated. For Eve, an undefiled virgin, conceived the word of the serpent, and brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary, filled with faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced to her the good tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her, and therefore the Holy One born of her would be the Son of God, answered: "Be it done unto me according to thy word."⁹

Irenaeus speaks of "the movement back to Eve from Mary" in contrasting the two virgins:

So also we find the Virgin Mary obedient, saying,
I am the handmaid of the Lord,
let what you have said be done to me.

Eve in contrast was disobedient; she did not obey, even while she was a virgin. . . . So it was that the knot which Eve's disobedience had tied together was unravelled by the obedience of Mary. What the virgin Eve had bound fast by her refusal to believe, the Virgin Mary has unbound by her belief.¹⁰

For both Justin and Irenaeus, Eve is a sign that the human race lives in separation from God. As human beings we all stand in the line that connects us to her. Even as late as the fourth century this idea is still dominant, for example in Aphraates, a fourth century Syriac writer: "It was because of her that the curse of the law was decreed; it was because of her that the promise of death was made; for in sorrows she gives birth to children and gives them over to death."¹¹

⁹ Justin, *Dialogue*, 100.

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *AH*, 3:22:4.

¹¹ Aphraates, *Demonstratio* 6: *de monachis*, n. 6; *Patrologia Syriaca*, pt. 1, I: 265.

The trouble with much theological language, ancient and modern, is that in it sin is reduced to a quasi-physical uncleanness, usually sexual. But the fundamental human dilemma for the ancient tradition from Irenaeus on precisely concerns death. The original catastrophe, as Irenaeus saw it, is that we have "plunged into mortality." We are in a world tyrannized by death. Death has come upon the human race; and because we know we are confronted by this enemy, we shall attempt, in all the vanity of our power, to change our situation of helplessness and finitude. We shall therefore live for ourselves and protect our life against those who threaten it. But we do so, as Irenaeus clearly saw, only by violating the Creator's will, only by our disobedience and sin, by treating others as enemies and threats to our existence. In this theological outlook of the early Fathers there is an integral bond between disobedience and death. To resist the Creator is to be out of communion with life, for God is the life-giving Spirit. It is to be in death *coram Deo*, as it were. And our estrangement and alienation from one another is to be out of communion with life *coram hominibus*.

Mary stands in that line of death and disobedience with us. Justin and Irenaeus regard her as belonging wholly with us to the world of human creatureliness, finitude, and death. Yet there is something in Mary that was not found in Eve. Justin strongly insists that the incarnation of the Word was by the initiative and act of God. The Spirit of the Lord came upon her and the power of the Highest overshadowed her. Salvation is of God, as much for Mary as for anyone. But the incarnation is made possible by Mary's obedience and faith. Irenaeus in this regard speaks of her as "the cause of salvation:"

Just as [Eve] became disobedient, and became for herself and for the whole human race the cause of death, Mary, who was the spouse of a man predestinated for her, and yet a virgin, became

by her obedience the cause of salvation both for herself and for the whole human race."¹²

In the person of the Virgin, humanity has opened the way for God to fulfill His work. Mary is properly called therefore the bearer of salvation. A new Eve, and more than Eve, she held in her hands the life by which we receive life.

Mary As Participant in Redemption

The above citation from Irenaeus shows that the Virgin Mary plays a decisive role in his theology of redemption. She had in her hands the salvation of the human race. She is therefore properly called a participant in this redemption on the ground of her belief and joy in the gospel.

She was herself a believer, who rejoiced in the good news of the gospel. In patristic literature the contrast between Eve's temptation in paradise and the annunciation of Mary is described in loving and at times tedious detail. It is a common idea that Mary is bearer of the Word of God in the double sense of mother and believer or hearer. An angel led Eve astray by his words; an angel brought Mary good tidings. Irenaeus, indeed, says that Mary was "evangelized" (*evangelizata est*, in the Latin translation) by the messenger of God.¹³ She was the truly blessed Virgin, as John of Damascus called her, "who inclined her ear to the Word of God [and] was filled with the energy of Spirit."¹⁴ In a sermon on Christ's nativity, John Chrysostom elaborates the parallelism from the annunciation to the cross of Calvary:

Of old the devil deceived Eve, who was a virgin; for this reason Gabriel brought good tidings to Mary, who was a virgin. But

¹² Irenaeus, *AH*, 3:22:4.

¹³ Irenaeus, *AH*, 5:19:1.

¹⁴ John of Damascus, *Homilia II in dormitionem b.v. Mariae*; PG 96:728.

when Eve was deceived, she brought forth a word that was the cause of death; when the glad tidings were brought to Mary, she gave birth in flesh to the Word, the author for us of life eternal. Eve's word made known the wood, through which it cast Adam from paradise; but the Word from the Virgin made known the cross, through which he brought the robber into paradise in place of Adam.¹⁵

Mary is participant in the redemption in the sense that she is herself redeemed by Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit. She is the cause of salvation for the whole race *through Christ*. As Irenaeus consistently stresses, redemption is the work of God through His Word and Spirit. Ephraem, who elaborated in exquisite detail the implications of the Eve-Mary analogy, remained profoundly sensitive to this truth. In a sermon on the nativity he puts these words into the mouth of Mary:

Lord should I call thee, O child that didst give thy mother a second birth from the waters? . . . I am thy mother because of thy conception, thy handmaid and thy daughter from the blood and water wherewith thou hast purchased and baptized me.¹⁶

It is unclear whether Ephraem meant that Christ baptized Mary, but there is clearly a sense in which the larger baptism of Christ's death at Calvary also redeems Mary. Her response to God, "Let what you have said be done," is the moment at which she appropriated the atonement accomplished by Christ's passion and the Pentecostal empowering of the Holy Spirit. This whole line of thinking from Irenaeus to Ephraem preserves and vindicates the Pauline gospel: it is in Christ, not in

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, *In Christi nativitatem oratio*; PG 56:392-3. The homily was published under the name of Gregory the Wonder Worker in 1893. J. P. Martin has shown, *La Muséon*, 54 (1941) 30-33, that it is an authentic work of John Chrysostom.

¹⁶ Ephraem, *Hymns on the Nativity*, 11; in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 13, p. 245.

Mary, that all are made alive. Mary is not a Co-redeemer, but the believing one through whom the First-begotten was made flesh for the life of the world.

Nevertheless, she is an *active* participant in the redemption. It is through *her* faith and *her* listening to God that life came into the world. When Irenaeus said that the human race is saved by a virgin, he meant that, as the one who said Yes, Mary revealed paradoxically both the finitude of her human nature and also the freedom with which she was endowed. There is something in Mary that is not found in us. She is the boundary, *methorion*, to use Gregory Palamas' phrase, between created and uncreated nature. On our side she is marked by the finitude and helplessness of our nature. But she does not live for herself, as we do, in the imperfection of our fallen human nature. Like Paul, she has nothing but her weakness; like Paul, and more than Paul, she knows that God's grace is enough. She is accepting of her weakness, for in it she possesses the power of her utter openness of God.

She is active participant in redemption on the ground that she is the cause of salvation, to use the language of Irenaeus. Epiphanius called Eve "a sign of Mary," since in a hidden sense, he says, Eve too was "the mother of the living."

Eve was the cause of death in the human race; death came into the world through her. Mary was the cause of life; through her, life was brought to us. For this reason the Son of God came into the world, and "as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous." Life came where death prevailed, to take the place of death, to cut off the death that Eve produced, so that he who was born of woman might be our life again.¹⁷

Chrysippus in one of his sermons on Mary refers to the miracles performed by Christ, the cross, the resurrection of

¹⁷ Epiphanius, *Adversus haereses*, 78:18; PG 42:729.

Christ and of the dead, and he asks: "Of all these, who is cause? Who else save her who gave birth to him who performed these wonders?"¹⁸ For the Greek theological tradition that reached its height in Gregory Palamas the synergy of grace and human effort was a self-evident truth. It is not a contradiction to be "in God" and at the same time to be free and responsible for our human choices. Indeed, the opposite is true. The fullest expression of our personality resides in our self-determination, *autexousia*, but we are never more free than when we live in conformity with the Creator. God's grace and Mary's free response presuppose each other, and in the communion with God which is given to her through Christ, the restoration of human freedom is begun. At that boundary, grace and freedom are not in contradiction.

Mary, Witness to the Divine Benevolence

With his characteristic discretion Irenaeus offered a theological interpretation of Mary and her relation to Eve which pushed out in a direction of its own. We may say of Irenaeus that he helped to formulate a concept in which later theologians found richer meaning than almost any other, save for the critical Christological formulas of the tradition from Nicea to Chalcedon. For him, the center of the Christian message is expressed in the well-known preface of Book V of the *Adversus haereses*: "The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is himself."¹⁹ By the fourth century the concept of Mary as the counterpart of Eve had been incorporated into the soteriology of the Greek-speaking Church, where it was a commonplace. In the fifth century,

¹⁸ Chrysippus, *In sanctam Mariam deiparam*, n. 3; *Patrologia Orientalis*, vol. 19, 340-341.

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *AH*, 5: Pref.

parallels between Eve and Mary proliferated, at times to the point of preciousness.

Yet as theologians continued to explore the inner meaning of the mystery of Christ, and bishops preached their homilies on such themes as the annunciation, the incarnation, and the divine motherhood, new insights into the meaning of God's transcendent love were achieved. And characteristically in this Greek tradition Mary is regarded as witness to the divine benevolence. She is, as in St. Luke, the graced woman, *kecharitomene*, who is also for us the bearer of the grace of God. It was from her that Christ took the human nature in which He died and in which He arose. Ephraem here is typical, and in one of his favorite images he contrasts the two wombs that have been changed by Christ. The Virgin brought Him forth in gladness, Sheol the barren brought Him forth in sadness. He means that the joy of His conception in the womb is bound up with the joy of the resurrection from the dead. "The womb and the sepulchre, being sealed, were witnesses to you. The belly and hell cried aloud your birth and your resurrection."²⁰

In the patristic witness to the Virgin Mary as the new Eve grace refers primarily and essentially to that total divine benevolence which was manifested in Christ's birth, death, and resurrection. In Christ, the union between God and man is personal and complete. Our union with Christ is a result of that grace. In us, God's grace means that we are admitted into intimate communion with God, through Christ, by the power of the Spirit. Only the word *theosis*, deification, was regarded as sufficient to describe this transforming inhabitation of God.

In Mary there is an anticipation and realisation of the eschatological grace which will allow all who hear God's

²⁰ Ephraem, *Hymns on the Nativity*, 8; in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 13, p. 241.

Word and obey Him to become the sons, daughters, and friends of God. In Mary the immortality and immutability which we have at present only in hope and figure became a concrete actuality.

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