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## MARY'S VIRGINITY IN SECULAR CULTURE

Man never responds in pure faith to the gratuitous invitation of God revealing Himself in Jesus Christ. Though the capacity to respond and the act of personal response are both the gift of God, it is the human person who accepts and responds. Nor does he accept and respond in a vacuum. The acceptance and response are always made in the historical condition in which man finds himself. The historical situation which confronts the man of faith today is radically different from that of just one generation ago. If it be true that the process of social change has been so rapid that it challenges the human personality almost beyond the breaking point, it is no less true that these cultural changes have had an almost unsettling effect upon the Christian person in secular society. Not only is it necessary that man re-examine the basis for the ultimate meaning of human life, but the Christian theologian has an imperative to re-examine the meaning of divine mysteries for Christian life in the world. That shall be the bold attempt of this essay: to examine the meaning of the mystery of Mary's Virginity for Christian life in a secular culture.

### *Theological Methodology*

Because at this point in the development of dogma there seems to be so much confusion about precisely what is the task of the theologian in re-examining the meaning of revealed mysteries, I make no apology for prefacing my task with a brief clarification of the theological methodology of this presentation. First of all, I am not calling into question the dogma of Christian faith concerning the Virginity of Mary. A Catholic layman facetiously suggested to me recently that he was drawing up a petition to abolish umpires at baseball games and installing applause meters in their place. While most men of common

sense immediately recognize the incongruity and the implicit humor of such a suggestion, there seems to be a certain blindness on the part of theologians when they seek to validate their acceptance of Christian dogma on the basis of an appeal to popular consciousness. In rejecting a previously accepted neo-orthodox position on the distinction between "religion" and "Christian faith," Peter Berger, one of the most important sociologists of religion in our day, writes.

What he (the theologian) is left with, I think, is the necessity for a step-by-step re-evaluation of the traditional affirmations in the terms of his own cognitive criteria (which need *not* necessarily be those of a putative "modern consciousness").

And he adds that the spirit of this theology "has the courage to find itself in a cognitive minority—not only within the Church (which is hardly very painful today), but in the circles of secular intellectuals that today form the principal reference group for most theologians."<sup>1</sup> For the Catholic theologian the Magisterium of the Church remains one of his fundamental criteria. The dogma of Mary's virginity as a part of the deposit of faith cannot be questioned on the basis of that criterion.

Nor do I consider my task an "apologetic" one in the current acceptance of that theological function. It seems to me that Schubert Ogden speaks for many Protestant theologians of the apologetic task in such a way that it renders untenable the traditional Catholic distinction between the supernatural and natural.

. Protestant theologians today have once more been made aware of their inescapable apologetic task. They (Tillich, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer) insist that the terms of theological adequacy are always set not only by the faith which the theologians must seek to express appropriately, but also by the existence of man himself, to whom the theologian must try to express that faith understandably. This insistence assumes that Christian faith is not utterly alien to man

<sup>1</sup> P. L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York, 1967) 186-187

whatever his historical situation but rather is his own most proper possibility of existence, which can and should be understandable to him, provided it is so expressed as to take his situation into account. I should say it is this assumption which, in some form or other, provides the minimal condition for all properly apologetic theology.<sup>2</sup>

St. Thomas refuted this approach for the Catholic apologist centuries ago when he declared:

The sole way to overcome an adversary of divine truth is from the authority of Scripture—an authority divinely confirmed by miracles. For that which is above the human reason we believe only because God has revealed it. Nevertheless, there are certain likely arguments that should be brought forth in order to make divine truth known. This should be done for the training and consolation of the faithful, and not with any idea of refuting those who are adversaries. For the very inadequacy of the arguments would rather strengthen them in their error, since they would imagine that our acceptance of the truth of faith was based on such weak arguments.<sup>3</sup>

One can understand the acceptability of Ogden's interpretation of the apologetic function of theology in the light of Protestant Christianity's rejection of the distinction between the natural and supernatural. In the words of Tillich,

Protestantism, denying the ontological dualism between nature and supranature, rejected the *donum superadditum* and with it the distinction between *imago* and *similitudo*. Man in his pure nature is not only the image of God; he has also the power of communion with God and therefore of righteousness toward other creatures and himself (*justitia originalis*). With the fall this power has been lost. Man is separated from God, and he has no freedom of return. . . . The difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism here is dependent on a whole group of decisions, basically on the interpretation of grace. If grace is supranatural substance, the Catholic

<sup>2</sup> S. M. Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York, 1966) 6.

<sup>3</sup> St. Thomas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 9; Eng. tr. Image Books, 1, 77-78.

position is consistent. If it is forgiveness received in the center of one's personality, the Protestant position is necessary.<sup>4</sup>

This essay, then, is not an attempt to make the doctrine of Mary's virginity acceptable to a secular culture. If it can be said that this is perhaps the first era in human history when it appears reasonable in our cultural context to abandon the personal God of revelation, the Christian theologian would be "shadow-boxing" to defend the doctrine of Mary's virginity against "adversaries." Modern man is not an adversary in the sense that he is militantly atheistic, but rather acculturated to be unconcerned about the existence of the Divine Being and even less concerned about the mysteries connected with the revelation of such a Being. Indeed, as Harvey Cox commented recently, the angry atheists appear most consistently these days within the Christian community!

How then do I view the task of the theologian as he theologizes about the virginity of Mary in a secular age? In every age Christians are confronted with the seeming antithesis between revealed mysteries and the natural culture in which they live. Catholics know that they can never perfectly resolve this antithesis because they believe that revealed mysteries are of an order which totally transcends either their natural ability to know or comprehend. They know, however, that uncertainties created by this apparent antithesis can be resolved, though such resolution never substitutes for the certitude of faith by which they adhere to the truth of the mystery. Today our secular culture poses problems concerning the meaning of Mary's virginity which Christians of a previous generation did not have to face. The theological apologetic task requires that the theologians re-examine the traditional arguments given for the revealed mysteries to see whether they can resolve the uncertainties which are raised. It is in this way that I view the intent of my task.

<sup>4</sup> P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1 (Chicago, 1951) 258-259

Just one final note on this theological methodology. In keeping with the distinction between natural and supernatural, one must remember that the reasons used in the theological process are not merely those of a natural analogy of being. When one questions why the mysteries of the Rosary are denominated as "mysteries," there is every indication that the interrogator may no longer be a theologian. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are supernatural as are all those revealed mysteries connected with the divine economy of salvation. In the words of Cardinal Journet:

We are forced, then, to admit, even in the case of the same words and the same concepts, a double transposition and a double analogy. One of these analogies is the means by which human reason, having seen certain perfections existing in creatures, transfers them to God, where they exist as in their source. . . . The second of the two analogies mentioned is that by which faith uses certain perfections which are mentioned in Scripture and which at times may be those used by metaphysics. This second kind of analogy we can call the superanalogy or transanalogy of faith. These two analogies—that of metaphysics and faith—do not belong to the same order. As the theologians say, the notion of analogy is itself analogous and proportional.<sup>5</sup>

### *Man and Culture*

G. K. Chesterton once remarked that the most important part of any man is what he thinks of this world. For it is true that one's whole life is influenced by his view of the world at large. His world view determines what a man will make of himself insofar as it sets the limits to his horizon of personal development. But what is the place of man in the world? This depends on a prior question: What is the place of the world in the total cosmos? Depending upon this picture of the whole, this "world-view," there are various alternatives open to man. He can deny the existence of the world and exist in a solip-

<sup>5</sup> C. Journet, *The Wisdom of Faith* (Westminster, Md., 1952) 19-20.

sistic world all his own. He can passively accept the world and live out his life in resignation to fate. He can fight the world. He can fight the world as inimical to his being, to his freedom and personality, finding the purpose of life in such defiance and "courage to be." Or, he can affirm the world, take responsibility for it, and create it according to his own designs or according to the designs of God revealed to man. In all this the crucial question remains: What is the world—its origin, its nature, its "place," and its destiny? However, there is a reciprocal relationship here. Man's world-view tends to be formed and shaped by the "world" he lives in, that is, by his own corner of the world—by his society and culture. As human societies evolved and took on new forms of life and activity, the symbols by which these societies lived, too, took on new forms. Thus there was a mutual influence between socio-cultural change and a changing world concept.

For example, various factors contributed to the origin of the city in ancient times, but it appears that the weight of religious-cosmological belief was paramount. Lewis Mumford, a foremost authority on the history of the city, in discussing the transition from village to city, writes that "no mere enlargement of its parts could turn the village into a new urban image; for the city was a new symbolic world, representing not only a people, but a whole cosmos and its gods."<sup>6</sup> This process of evolution in society and changing world-views continued down through the centuries. Each succeeding epoch of human history provides the socio-cultural setting—its "shape"—for a particular conception of man and his world, a setting which has its own characteristic "style," that is, its peculiar way of understanding and expressing itself, its distinctive character, coloring all aspects of its life.<sup>7</sup>

It is customary to delineate three periods of human history with corresponding typical world-views. pre-biblical, biblical,

<sup>6</sup> L. Mumford, *The City in History* (New York, 1961) 35.

<sup>7</sup> H. Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, 1965) 5.

and the world-view of modern man. The various conceptions of the world which run through these phases of mankind's history can be reduced to two basic views. an "open" world-view and a "closed" world-view. In both views there is a mystery behind things, that is, the "real"—the inexplicable reality behind the phenomena that we see or sensitively experience. To the closed world-view this mystery is completely innercosmic; there is nothing beyond the cosmos, nothing transcendent. Mystery lies not beyond man and his world but only beyond man's comprehension. To the open world-view, on the other hand, the mystery of its essence is transc cosmic, utterly "beyond," completely transcendental—mystery with a capital "M." In this perception of reality the cosmos is not a self-enclosed house with opaque walls but rather "an immense house, as it were, with transparent walls", man's world is "transparent for the transcendent."<sup>8</sup> While our primary interest is in the modern—or post-modern, if you will—world-view, it will serve our purpose to summarize briefly the previous world-views insofar as they did influence the meaning of Mary's virginity in previous cultures.

Primitive man's view of the world is termed childlike because he did not approach it objectively but rather in a personal manner. But even in this simple view the twofold world-view emerged either by the attempt of man to manipulate the mysterious powers for man's use or by an openness to the mysterious power of the transcendent. As man's attitude became more objective there resulted a new phase of the "open-closed" bi-polarity. Within the framework of our own cultural heritage, the Hebrews were aligned on one side and the Greeks on the other.<sup>9</sup>

The biblical view of the world is a decidedly open one. While the gods within the world were dispelled and inner-

<sup>8</sup> Bro David, OSB, *The Biblical View of the Cosmos*, in *Cosmic Piety*, ed Christopher Derrick (New York, 1965) 26-28

<sup>9</sup> Bro David, *art. cit.*, 35-36



cosmic mystery discarded, the True Mystery, the God of Israel, was seen in His wonderful and absolute transcendence. He is the "Holy One," the absolute "Order." And yet the God of the Hebrews, however transcendent, is not remote. He is "immanent transcendence." The world is full of His divine immanence, and for the Jews this immanence becomes a divine entering-in and commitment to human history. The culmination of this paradox of transcendence and nearness was the event of Jesus Christ. While the Greeks came to realize that their mythical gods were man-made, the philosophical reflection of the Greeks left them with the bare walls of the world as the ultimate reality. As Guardini wrote, "classical man never went beyond his world; his feeling for life, his imagination and his vision of existence were one with the limited world he knew"<sup>10</sup> Greek thought is indeed the forerunner of the modern world-view. With the advent of Greek scientific thought classical man was led to the point where he considered the world as his own domain whose cosmic powers he could control, whose intelligible order he could comprehend. Because this limited scientific approach was extended to the whole of reality and did not admit of anything outside the observable cosmos, this attitude degenerated into an absolutizing of "scientism" in which man becomes the measure of all things, for he alone can know the world and shape its destiny. Here is an opaque view of the world which allows no room for the transcendent.

In the Middle Ages biblical thought and Greek thought merged. What Greek cosmology added to the biblical view, wherein man's destiny eventually included communion with the Godhead, was the idea of hierarchically structured order of being. Things were seen in terms of their forms or essences which shared in a graduated participation of God, but forms pointed to "something higher, ultimately to the things of eternity, to the Most High Himself, to God. All forms became symbols of the divine"<sup>11</sup> This same synthetic approach was

<sup>10</sup> R. Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (New York, 1956) 17.

<sup>11</sup> Guardini, *op. cit.*, 42

carried out at the societal level. Every member and class within society was ordained to the whole, and the whole itself was unified under the dual authority of God. "Human life in the total sweep of its existence and in all its works must be founded upon and ordered by the transcendent sublimity of the Lord"<sup>12</sup> Man, then, in the medieval view, has a well-defined and dignified place in the cosmos. The cosmos of which he is a part and at whose center he stands is ordered to God its Creator who transcends it but who is, nevertheless, also immanent to it. It borrowed from the Greek classical thought which had been bound in a closed system, but it retained its openness to the Mystery of Hebrew and biblical thought. The finiteness of man and his world has been broken into by the Infinity of God.

### *Secular Culture*

As indicated above, Greek classical thought was the forerunner of that modern world-view which we call secular culture or "secularity." There are innumerable definitions put forth by current writers concerning the nature of secularity. Whatever their various merits, the one suggested by Peter Berger contains the essential characteristics which are included in most of them.

By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. When we speak of society and institutions in modern Western history, of course, secularization manifests itself in the evacuation by the Christian churches of areas previously under their control or influence—as in the separation of church and state, or in the expropriation of church lands, or in the emancipation of education from ecclesiastical authority. When we speak of culture and symbols, however, we imply that secularization is more than a social-structural process. It affects the totality of cultural life and ideation, and may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most

<sup>12</sup> Guardini, *op cit.*, 35

important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world. Moreover, it is implied here that the process of secularization has a subjective side as well. As there is a secularization of society and culture, so there is a secularization of consciousness. Put simply, this means that the modern West has produced an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without benefit of religious interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

It is not to our main purpose here to discuss the problem of how and to what extent biblical revelation and the Gospel message contributed to the process of secularization. Though I am inclined to favor the opinion of those who see such revelatory roots in the secularization process, the acceptance of this position does not include approval for the absolutized imperatives of secular culture which exclude the necessity for a personal God. As Lesslie Newbigin declares:

Only an interpretation of the Gospel which puts in the centre God's total purpose for human history is true to the Bible, and I am persuaded that only such an interpretation can meet the realities of a world in the process of secularization.<sup>14</sup>

But it should not appear that we take an anti-modern view which condemns scientific progress as "secularism" and contrary to Christian principles. It seems to me that Vatican II has once and for all made such a stance untenable for the Catholic Christian. Indeed, the very excesses of modern secularity have exercised a prophetic function in calling the Church back to its divine mission: witnessing to the love of God for man and his world in Jesus Christ, rather than a totally supra-historical reality whose primary task is the preservation of divine revelation.

<sup>13</sup> Berger, *op. cit.*, 107-108

<sup>14</sup> L. Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (Philadelphia, 1966)

Our purpose in the discussion of secular culture is to determine those characteristics of this culture which, while essentially good, are in their absolutized form threats both to the human and Christian dimensions of man and, because of their very universality and intensity, create insecurities in the modern Christian about the divinely revealed mysteries of his faith, specifically that of Mary's virginity.

Perhaps the basic characteristic of the pure secularist is his opaque world-view. Rather than letting in the light of the Transcendent, which gives meaning to the world, the world is self-explanatory; it has value without any reference to the Transcendent. For modern secular man, like the philosopher of ancient Greece, can see no farther than the walls of this world. There has been a definite transition in Western thought which has replaced the religious vision of medieval Christendom by the secular vision of modern civilization. Beginning in the Renaissance and passing through the Reformation, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and nineteenth-century Scepticism, into what Arthur Koestler has called "The Age of Longing,"<sup>15</sup> the religious faith of the Middle Ages has continued to recede, and now faster than ever before. Although the nineteenth-century sceptics got rid of the God of religious faith, they had a faith of their own and they substituted gods of their own. Humanity, Society, Science, History, and even Culture Professor Baumer, speaking of the "Great Substitution," writes:

In general, the new ersatz-religions represented versions of the humanistic faith of the Enlightenment, adapted, however, to new movements and events. Like Condorcet's faith, they were mostly all anti-metaphysical and earth-bound. Essentially, what they worshipped or deified was Man—man's power, man's work in some shape or form—as, again, the Enlightenment had done.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> A. Koestler, *The Age of Longing* (New York, 1951).

<sup>16</sup> F. L. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism* (New York, 1960) 163.

Even if many are longing and looking for a "new transcendental faith," it is a faith that will re-establish man's relations with the universe, that will give him "a new cosmic loyalty" which will give meaning to life here below.<sup>17</sup> This means that man himself is the lord of the universe; *he* is the shaper of its destiny. Repudiating any tendency to lean upon other-worldly powers for his achievements, and granting no validity to the statements and commandments of a self-revealing God—all projections of childish illusions and dependencies—man is free to use his reason to discover the laws which govern the universe and use them to attain his own goals. Rather than being the steward of God who must answer to Him for his activities, man is the "creator" of the universe who has only himself to answer to. This leads to the second characteristic of the secular age, autonomy, which, writes Alfons Auer, is "the pith of modern secularism."<sup>18</sup>

Certainly modern man enjoys a degree of freedom from enslavement to nature which was unknown to previous generations, even the last. This freedom has been made possible through great technological advances. Through the development of hybrid corn and the building of irrigation ditches, the farmer is free in large measure from the fear of drought. But the mastery over nature is only the lesser side of man's new drive for freedom. The autonomous man of the secular culture wishes to see his own will present in all decisions of authority, and he wishes to be treated as a free person when authority is exercised over him. As Dr. John E. Smith of Yale University writes: "Autonomy finds its crucial test in the sphere of religion because the free being is led to question the divine ground of his own existence and to ask for an *intelligible* moral law

<sup>17</sup> Baumer, *op. cit.*, 191

<sup>18</sup> A. Auer, *The Changing Character of the Christian Understanding of the World*, in *The Christian and the World*, compiled at the Canisianum, Innsbruck (New York, 1965) 9

and an *intelligible* God."<sup>19</sup> Much is being written today about having attained the maturity of mankind, but I would rather be inclined to think that the present stage is rather one of adolescence. Though we have passed out of that period which gave rise to superstition about the mysteries of nature, the ability of man to deal responsibly with his new freedom is still problematic. The cultural optimism of so many, such as Harvey Cox, seems to be based on only half-truths. As Newbigin suggests:

To see the whole truth of the situation you must read the fiction of our time, as well as the scientific and technical journals. You must attend the theatre as well as the seminar. You must consult the psychiatrists as well as the cyberneticians. When you do this, it is clear that there is another side to the picture. Alongside of, or perhaps underneath, the sense of mastery, the assurance that we are only at the beginning of the developments made possible by modern techniques, there is also a sense of something meaningless and even terror as man faces his future.<sup>20</sup>

Tillich echoes this attitude: "Our present situation is characterized by a profound and desperate feeling of meaninglessness."<sup>21</sup> As Smith indicates that when this freedom lacks a religious corrective "it degenerates into an irresponsible individualism of self-expression in which there is no place for community and no concern for that sharing of burdens without which neither social nor political life is possible."<sup>22</sup> And Keniston, remarking on the "enormous freedom" brought on by the historical dislocation caused by our rapidly changing society, concludes:

<sup>19</sup> J. E. Smith, *Experience and God* (New York, 1968) 183. The epilogue to this volume, *Religion and Secularization*, from which this quotation is extracted, is a brilliant summary and critique of the characteristics of secular culture. The italics in the quotation are ours.

<sup>20</sup> Newbigin, *op cit*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Tillich, *op cit*, 201.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *op cit*, 186.

Yet characteristically a philosophy of absolute freedom, based on a denial of any necessary relationship with the past, is usually a philosophy of the absurd; the signs of this freedom are not joy and triumph, but nausea and dread; and its possessors are not the creators but the Strangers and Outsiders of the universe<sup>23</sup>

A third characteristic of secular culture is its emphasis on time, on the present moment, on the activities which are time consuming, on "doing your thing," on being "where the action is." Perhaps in the past there has been a temptation to an exaggerated "eternalism" which was overly complacent about contemporaneous social evils. In commenting upon this exaggeration of the temporal, Macquarrie writes:

The secularist, then, is the man who affirms the temporal, this-worldly character of existence. For him, indeed, an expression like "other-worldly" could only be meaningless unless, perhaps, it stands for an illusory point of view. There is, for the secularist, only this world, there is no other world<sup>24</sup>

Again, this emphasis on the temporal results from the rapidity of social change which in turn causes a psychological sense of disconnection with the past and guarantees that the future will be "unpredictably different"

What is left, of course, is the present, and all that can be enjoyed therein "today" becomes the one rock of constancy in a shifting sea of change . . . The resulting cult of the present takes many forms—sometimes the raw hedonism of the spiritually demoralized; sometimes the quest for "kicks," speed, sex, and stimulants of the beats.<sup>25</sup>

We must not understand this characteristic as merely a shift from the eternal to the temporal but

<sup>23</sup> K. Keniston, *The Uncommitted* (New York, 1965) 238.

<sup>24</sup> J. Macquarrie, *God and Secularity* (Philadelphia, 1968) 45.

<sup>25</sup> Keniston, *op. cit.*, 226-227.

a second shift from the temporal understood as past, present and future to the momentary in which only the present counts. . . [which] taken as the standard of life quite clearly excludes both the extended loyalty needed for sustaining the stabilizing institutions of society and the purposive aim without which individual life can find no enduring satisfaction <sup>26</sup>

While there are other characteristics of our secular culture, it is especially in the light of these three—the denial of transcendence, the autonomous man, and temporalism, that I would like to consider the significance of Mary's virginitv for the Christian in a secular culture.

### *Mary's Virginitv in a Secular Age*

I First, what has Mary's virginitv to do with secular man's denial of the Transcendent? The fact of Mary's virginitv is a contingent fact that cannot be theologically deduced by reason from the revealed truth. Once revealed, however, the Christian mind seeks to attain some insight into the significance of this fact and its connection with the other mysteries of salvation and with man's final destiny. Hence, it seems that one can, at best, only give theological interpretations to the revealed facts as they are contained in the tradition of the Church. The first reason given by St. Thomas for Mary's virginitv is that: *Cum enim Christus sit verus et naturalis Dei Filius, non fuit conveniens quod alium patrem haberet quam Deum. ne Dei dignitas transferretur ad alium*<sup>27</sup> The primacy given to this first response is that Mary's virginitv points to the transcendence or divinitv of Christ. Without going into a detailed historical account of the controversies over Mary's perpetual virginitv, which Father Donnelly has treated so well,<sup>28</sup> Father Neubert summarizes this history quite accurately:

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *op cit.*, 194-195

<sup>27</sup> *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 28, a. 1, c.

<sup>28</sup> P. J. Donnelly, S.J., *The Perpetual Virginitv of the Mother of God*, in J. B. Carol, O.F.M. (Ed.), *Mariology*, 2 (Milwaukee, 1957) 228-296



Theoretically, God could have been born of a father and mother according to His humanity: we can see nothing which might have prevented the Almighty from contracting a hypostatic union with a human nature thus formed. But practically, without His virginal origin, the divinity of Jesus would have run a great risk of not being admitted. The history of heretics, from the Ebionites of the first century to the Modernists of the twentieth, shows that all the opponents of Mary's virginity have been opponents of Jesus' divinity at the same time, and all who pledged themselves to defend the virginity of the Mother have done so principally because they felt that in defending it they were defending the divinity of the Son. The correlation between Mary's virginity and Jesus' divinity is not, perhaps, strictly logical, but it is profoundly psychological.<sup>29</sup>

Though this theological reasoning has been implicit in devotion to the Blessed Virgin, one may rightly question whether it has been the predominant motive. While there have not been, to my knowledge at least, any polls taken on the reasons for acceptance of the dogma of the virginity of Mary, it seems to me that one may safely conjecture that much popular piety concerning Mary's virginity has been due in part to a distorted attitude toward sex. Nor would this be a new phenomenon in the Church. Again and again, as Father Donnelly points out, the protagonists of Mary's virginity often founded their arguments for its significance on a false asceticism. Against the tract of Jovinian attacking the virginity of Mary, which implied that St. Ambrose was a Manichean in advocating it, St. Jerome wrote so strongly in describing the place of married persons in the Church that he pictured them as second-class Christians.<sup>30</sup>

If my surmise be correct, namely that much popular veneration of Mary's virginity has been tinged with Manichaeism, then some of the uncertainty concerning the meaning of Mary's virginity should be intelligible. Catholics have been doing the right thing, accepting Mary's virginity, but perhaps not wholly for the right reason. Nor can this uncertainty about Mary's

<sup>29</sup> E. Neubert, S.M., *Mary in Doctrine* (Milwaukee, 1954) 170.

<sup>30</sup> Donnelly, *art. cit.*, 286-287.

virginity be blamed entirely on the exaggerated emphasis given to sex in modern secular culture. Rather it should be attributed in some measure to the new emphasis by Vatican II on "the sacrament of the world." For one cannot separate the theological discussion about the meaning of Mary's virginity from the total response of the Church's mission in a secular culture. Due to many socio-historical circumstances the Church has tended to take a supra-historical stance, to give way to an ecclesiastical docetism, to assume that Christian life had a totally otherworldly meaning. This affected all aspects of Christian life, including the distortion that the religious life, including virginity and celibacy, was the only truly Christian form of life. If we see within the Church an over-reaction to this one-sided emphasis by theologians, who would minimize if not completely negate the value of celibacy and virginity, the task of orthodox theologians must be to restate these values in the proper perspective. This will not be easy. For if saints in previous ages succumbed to exaggeration in their defense of Mary's virginity, we should not approach our task lightly. That task, as I see it, is once again to emphasize the primacy of Mary's virginity as tradition has taught us: namely, that it safeguards the divinity of Christ. This meaning will, of course, have little cogency for those who fail to acknowledge the divinity of Christ. But as I have indicated, such is not the apologetic task of the Catholic theologian. His task is to reset this jewel within the whole ornament of revelation so that its true brilliance will be visible to those with eyes of faith. Devotion to Mary's virginity based on such a reasoning will, it seems to me, serve to support the faith of the believing community in these days of crisis. If this mystery does not lend such support to belief in the divinity of Christ, one may question why the fact of Mary's virginity was either willed or revealed by God. For to those without faith it can be a scandal and it may be such even to believers who misunderstand its true significance. To conclude this approach permit me to quote these remarks of Father Rahner:

Because he is not of this world, but from on high, Mary is the Virgin. In her it is made plain and manifest that there is something beyond the powers and forces of this world, even the noblest, the most important, those that serve to increase humanity, to found nations and produce human life, something that transcends them and is beyond their scope, which is grace, and occurs only by the favor of the eternal God. Her virginity, and the origin of our Lord without an earthly father, signify one and the same thing, not in words, but in easily understood terms of human life. God is the God of freely bestowed grace, who cannot be drawn down from on high by all our endeavors, whom we can only receive as the inexpressibly freely given gift of himself. Mary was not only called to live that, in heart and mind, but visibly to represent and proclaim it by all she was, even in her physical existence. That is why she is a virgin spiritually and physically, solely and entirely at God's disposal.<sup>31</sup>

II What significance does Mary's virginity have for Christian life in an age which tends to absolutize human freedom? Mary's free acceptance of the virginal state as intimately connected with the divine maternity, though she could not understand how they could be reconciled, serves as the model for the perfect freedom of the mature Christian. Modern man, as we have suggested, tends to reject all authority as an infringement upon his personal freedom. Undoubtedly this may be due in part to reaction against a false paternalism in the exercise of authority. But in every age man's basic problem is giving an unconditional surrender in faith to that which is unknown. With the knowledge explosion of our century, that consent seems ever more difficult to give, not only when the darkness of a divine faith is involved, but even a commitment to human values when their realization seems problematic. Christian piety has always extolled Mary's free acceptance of her virginity. But again one must confess, I think, that despite the clear testimony of Luke that her heart was troubled by the Angel's salutation, we tend to romanticize Mary's situation. Somehow

<sup>31</sup> K. Rahner, S.J., *Mary, Mother of the Lord* (New York, 1963) 69

we "feel" that from a purely human point of view her response was the "right" thing to do. Far from realizing that it called for an heroic degree of faith unknown to any other human person, Mary's cooperation does not seem to us too difficult. While we have revered Mary's free cooperation, perhaps we have done so from the wrong perspective.

Certainly never before in living memory, and one wonders if ever at all in Christian history, has faith placed so many demands upon the freedom of the Christian person. Though in the past we have all experienced individual crises of faith when our free acceptance of faith seemed challenged, we were always in a position to turn back to the unchanging structures of the Church for security and strength. But that situation no longer prevails. In a very real sense the whole Church is in darkness, in crisis. There are no foxholes deep enough to escape the crossfire which surrounds us. Perhaps for the first time we are beginning to realize the depth of free assent which faith requires in us. We are beginning "to understand that the basic principle of all spiritual freedom, all freedom from what is less than man, means first of all submission to what is more than man. And this submission begins with the recognition of our limitation."<sup>32</sup>

In Mary we find perfectly typified the unity of freedom and obedience which Jesus Christ came to teach as the way to the Father. Christ did not come to teach us how a God should love God, but rather how a man should love God in freedom. To do this He emptied Himself that in His creaturely nature He might give an unconditional affirmative to the demands laid upon Him by the Father. His surrender to the will of the Father based upon absolute dependence upon the Father is the perfect realization of human freedom. It was such unconditional surrender which Mary made in her acceptance of human freedom. It was such unconditional surrender which Mary

<sup>32</sup> T. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York, 1966)  
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made in her acceptance of God's role for her in the economy of salvation. Her acceptance was not conditioned on her own preconceived idea of how she would "work things out," but solely upon confidence in the power of God

The Yes of Christ and his mother-bride-Mary-Church is absolute because it is freed of all conscious or unconscious restrictive conditions, and the Christian life of the Christian is measured against this absolute Yes. This acceptance is the form of Christianity—the form which can be put on only by the man who wishes to enclose his life in it. It is an absolute form and impatient of all conditions. It asks everything and makes excessive demands of the sinner—who always sets conditions. It allows the man who has said Yes faithfully to discover, humbly though inexorably and perhaps brutally (or possibly the cross isn't brutal?), the unexpected consequences of his agreement. For he hasn't said Yes to a predictable plan of his own, but to the plan of God who is always greater than man and whose ways of doing things always seem different to man's expectations. This experience of the Other will prove decisive; it will show whether his Yes was spoken to God or to himself, whether it was faithful obedience or personal speculation, whether God's kingdom or the kingdom of men is to come.<sup>33</sup>

It is only in such unconditional surrender that virginity can attain its true positive worth in Christian life. In the past we have emphasized the value of consecrated virginity too often from a purely negative point of view as freedom from concupiscence. But Mary's consent to her virginity illustrates the freedom which it gave her to be totally dedicated to her Son and to the mission entrusted to Him by the Father. It extended her maternity beyond the divine maternity, singular privilege that it is, to the spiritual maternity of all men. It is precisely this aspect of virginity for the Kingdom of God which requires re-emphasis in religious life today. In a very special way, therefore, Mary's virginal consecration, rightly explained, serves as never before as the model for all consecrated virginity.

<sup>33</sup> H. von Balthasar, *Who Is a Christian?* (New York, 1968) 66

III Authors are in disagreement as to the causes for the resurgence of a "theology of hope" which has currently attracted theological study. Some would suggest that it is due to the "meaninglessness" which has entrapped modern man; still others indicate that the cultural optimism of secular culture has prompted Christians to produce a corresponding Christian optimism. Whatever the cause—and we have suggested in our treatment above that it is the former reason—there is new emphasis upon the eschatological dimensions of Christian faith and its mysteries. The Fathers of the II Vatican Council clearly indicated Mary's role in this ever-present reality of the mystery of Christ and His Church in the final chapter (Ch 8) of the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

In the bodily and spiritual glory which she possesses in heaven, the Mother of Jesus continues in this present world as the image and the first flowering of the Church as she is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise, Mary shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, as a sign of sure hope and solace for the pilgrim People of God.

Father Eamon Carroll has given a clear treatment of the eschatology of Mary's virginity insofar as he sought "to illustrate the bond between Mary's virginity on earth and fulfillment of the divine plan of salvation in the world to come."<sup>34</sup> In a very real sense this aspect of the eschatological significance of Mary's virginity has received the greater emphasis. What demands exploration, if the eschatological aspect of Mary's virginity is to influence Christian life in a secular age, is the meaning of Mary's virginal commitment to Christ as part of the present "end-time." The overwhelmingly affirmative response of the faithful to the question of affirming our Lady's Assumption as a dogma of Christian belief seems indicative that there is a general appreciation of the relation of her vir-

<sup>34</sup> E. R. Carroll, O. Carm., *The Theological Significance of Mary's Virginity*, in *MS 13* (1962) 122-151

ginity to the glory of heaven and bodily resurrection. Indeed, one may make bold to suggest that this may be part of the "exaggerated eternalism" which has characterized too much of Christian life.

It seems to me that in furnishing a sound foundation for devotion to Mary we must explicate what has always been implicit in devotion to the Mother of God among Christians, namely, that the spiritual motherhood of Mary is exercised not merely in the attainment of a heavenly reward but in her intercessory power here and now to effectively promote the Kingdom of God both in ourselves and in the human community. If the redemption of Christ was truly to make *all* things new, then the Christian must recognize that spirituality, while it continues to mean growth into the fullness of Christian life through the grace of the Savior, includes also the work of the Christian as he assumes the responsibility for the realization of God's Kingdom in the world.

As suggested above, the world is indeed on the verge of a new maturity. But whether that maturity will be realized depends precisely upon whether the Christian dynamic will be able to serve as a corrective to the values of the secular age which are today being absolutized and hence corrupted. The Fathers of Vatican II have indicated in broad outline that the form of witness assumed by the Church and Christians must be concomitant with the age in which we live, for the Church has a mission to the world. The Church of Christ must live in a new age and it too must approach a new maturity. The adolescent behavior of many Catholics is a sign of the dangers which we must undergo in transition. The challenge to the Church is the preservation of traditional Catholic truths while giving expression to them in a more mature fashion. Those devoted to our Lady must not let aberrations "freeze" them theologically to the extent that they reject the impact of this new age on the meaning of Mary. This would be both childish and unfaithful. The imperative upon theologians of Mary is, to

critically re-examine the socio-historical conditions which may have influenced devotion to Mary's virginity and all her prerogatives as Mother of God in an attempt to more clearly delineate the true basis upon which they rest. Then it will be our task to teach others these truths so that the Marian devotion of the faithful may have that mature quality which is demanded by fidelity to Jesus Christ and His Church in this secular age

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