

5-22-2016

The Patristic Pre-History of Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary

James K. Hanna

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hanna, James K. (2016) "The Patristic Pre-History of Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 67, Article 6, Pages 133-158.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol67/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

THE PATRISTIC PRE-HISTORY OF DEVOTION TO THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY

James K. Hanna, MA

Devotion to Mary's Immaculate Heart emerged in the Middle Ages and flourished after the apparitions at Lourdes, Rue du Bac, and Fatima. But its roots run deep in tradition and are evident in the writings of the Fathers and the texts of the ancient liturgies. This paper begins by discussing early-Christian exegesis of Luke 2:35 and other key biblical texts. It proceeds to examine the various ways in which the Fathers spoke of Mary's heart, and considers these in light of recent research on the earliest devotion to the Blessed Virgin. It concludes by evaluating Immaculate Heart devotion according to John Henry Newman's seven notes of genuine development.

Introduction

Ambrose (d. 397), as the Bishop of Milan, in his *Duties of the Clergy*, writes "... it is certain that nothing feigned or false can bear the form of true virtue, no, it cannot even last. At first, it flourishes; then, as time goes on, like a flower it

fades and passes away, but what is true and sincere has a deep root....”¹

Devotion to Mary’s Immaculate Heart emerged in the Middle Ages and flourished after the apparitions at Rue du Bac (1830), Lourdes (1858) and Fatima (1917), but its roots run deep in tradition and are evident in the writings of the Fathers and in the text of ancient liturgies. Devoutly approaching the Heart of Mary implicitly draws us closer to Jesus by inspiring us to imitate Mary’s virtues, thereby helping to form in us the virtues of her Son.

To study the development of this devotion to Mary’s heart, we begin by discussing the heart as symbol, follow with early-Christian exegesis of key biblical texts, and examine the various ways in which the Fathers spoke in a spiritual tone of Mary’s heart, especially in light of recent research on the earliest devotions to the Blessed Virgin. We conclude with a brief evaluation of Immaculate Heart devotion according to John Henry Newman’s seven notes of genuine development, found in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. They are: preservation of type, continuity of principles, power of assimilation, logical sequence, anticipation of its future, conservative action on its past, and lastly, chronic vigor.

I. The Heart

A. Heart as Symbol

In the 1956 *Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary* we find The Heart of Mary Immaculate defined as “the physical heart of

¹ Thomas C. Oden, ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on the Scriptures* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 4:371. Ambrose commenting on 2 Samuel 15:3-6.

the Blessed Virgin Mary which is venerated as a symbol of the great love and purity of Mary.” When we speak of symbol, as we do with Mary’s Immaculate Heart, we do well to recall the following words of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274):

The Author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning not only by words (as man also can do), but by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science (theology) has the property that things signified by words have themselves also a symbolic signification the spiritual sense of which is based on the literal and presupposes it.²

The ancients did not have the knowledge of the physiological functions of the heart that we have today, but for them the heart was the personified center of much activity. As Kilian Healy has explained, “It is not difficult to understand this symbolism since among all people in all ages the heart has been associated with love. . . . Moreover, love according to St. Thomas, is the root of all affections of the soul. Consequently, the heart is the manifestive organ of the whole interior life and especially of love.”³ And, while the heart is naturally suited to symbolize love, a deeper understanding of the word and its use in Sacred Scripture is necessary.

B. Relationship of “Heart,” “Soul,” and “Mind”

The heart of Our Lady is explicitly mentioned in Sacred Scripture only a few times, but much more in early liturgical

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, I, I, X.

³ Kilian Healy, “The Theology of the Doctrine of the Immaculate Heart of Mary,” *Journal of the Professional Catholic Theological Society of America*. 4 (1949): 117.

practice and in the writings of the Fathers. Augustine (d. 430), for example, said that “Mary was more blessed for having borne Christ in her Heart than in her flesh.”⁴ But the word “heart” appears many hundreds of times in Sacred Scripture, as do “soul” and “mind,” and at times we find various combinations of heart and soul and mind, and even hands. Further, the implications of these words are not always the same in Hebrew and English.

In our translations, “mind” often represents one of three Hebrew words: *nephesh* (soul), *ruach* (spirit), and *leb* (heart). The particular distinction between these three words is more easily felt than defined. Often, modern usage does not correspond, and may even obscure the meaning of a scripture passage. In particular our contemporary distinction between mind as the seat of thinking and heart as seat of feeling is often alien from the meaning these terms carry in the Bible⁵; for example, “in the Hebrew the heart is understood as the ‘inside’ of a person in a far wider sense. Apart from feelings (2 Sam. 15:13; Ps. 21:3; Is. 65:14), the heart contains memories and ideas, plans and decisions.”⁶

Commenting on “the great commandment” found in Deuteronomy 6:5-9, Augustine writes, “The number three has an intrinsic relation to the mind. This may be understood from the text in which we are commanded to love God in a

⁴ Ibid., 121.

⁵ Alan Richardson, ed. *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan Pub., 1950), 144.

⁶ Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Ijamsville, MD: Word Among Us Press, 1988), 228.

threefold manner, with the whole heart, the whole soul, and the whole mind” (*Explanation of the Psalms*, 6.2)⁷

Later in Deuteronomy (30:14) we read that God’s word is in both mouth and heart. Clement of Alexandria (d. 444) comments: “‘Anyone who tries to act high-handedly annoys God,’ says Scripture. For bombast is a spiritual vice. Scripture tells us to repent from it as from the other vices by turning from disharmony and by linking ourselves to a change for the better through the three instruments of mouth, heart and hands” (*Stromateis*, 2.19-97.3).⁸

We need to look further than the psychological, physical, and other distinctions to the essence of a person’s being, to the place where he or she opens self to God. In the tangible anthropology that we find in the Bible, a person’s heart is the very source of his or her conscience, the place of decisive choices, the place of the unwritten law (Rom. 2:15) and of the mysterious action of God.⁹

In Genesis 17:17, we find the heart as that place where man enters into dialogue with himself, “*Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, saying in his heart: Shall a son, thinkest thou, be born to him that is a hundred years old? And shall Sara that is ninety years old bring forth?*”¹⁰ On this passage, Ephrem (d. 373) commented:

Now Abraham was not guilty of any doubt by his laughter, for he showed his love toward Ismael by what he said. He had clung to this

⁷ Thomas C. Oden, ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on the Scriptures*, 3:285, Augustine commenting on Deut. 6:5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 325, Clement of Alexandria commenting on Deut. 30:14.

⁹ Leon-Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 228.

¹⁰ Douay-Rheims American Bible, 1899.

hope for twenty-five years. Abraham had manifested his faith in every vision that had come to him. However great his contest with barrenness became, he manifested the victory of his faith. But when old age was added to the barrenness, he laughed in his heart. That the Lord would do these two things was a marvel to him.¹¹

Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) follows suit with, “(Abraham) was not laughing because he did not believe ... but rejoicing because he did. ‘He laughed,’ is sometimes put in place as ‘he rejoiced,’ as it is also in the Gospels. And for this reason, he also ‘fell on his face’ and marveled in his heart.”¹²

John McKenzie, SJ, in the *Dictionary of the Bible*, defines the heart as the seat of the divine operation that transforms the Christian; he refers us to Pauline texts, including, “The Spirit is sent into the heart (Gal. 4:6), and the love of God is poured into the heart through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5; 2 Cor. 1:22). Christ dwells in the heart (Eph. 3:17). The spirit of wisdom and revelation and knowledge of Christ Jesus enlighten the eyes of the heart (Eph. 1:17f).”¹³

John Eudes (d. 1680), referring to Genesis 3:15, writes, “In the first garden God pronounced sentence upon the serpent,” and quotes John of Damascus (d. 749), “In the garden of Mary’s heart, this pronouncement was fulfilled. Her Immaculate Conception crushed original sin, her sanctity routed the powers of evil, and her love obtained the commutation of our death sentence, bringing us the Savior of the world.”¹⁴

¹¹ Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 58.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Bruce Pub. Co., 1965), 343-344.

¹⁴ John Eudes, *The Admirable Heart of Mary*, trans. Chas. Di Targiani and

In summary, the heart is “naturally fitted to symbolize love.”¹⁵ It is fitting that we find The Heart of Mary Immaculate defined as “the physical heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary which is venerated as a symbol of the great love and purity of Mary.”¹⁶

II. The Heart in Early Christian Thought

A. Commentary on the Song of Songs

Pope Pius XII said (in *Urbis et orbis*, AAS 3[1945], n. 50) “that the remote vestiges of the devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary of our Blessed Mother are to be found in the commentaries of the Fathers on the *Sponsa* of the Canticle of Canticles.”¹⁷ There is no explicit literal reference to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Hebrew Scripture; nonetheless, as Pius XII indicates, the commentaries of the Fathers on certain passages comprise the beginnings of the devotion.¹⁸

Among these early commentators we find Ambrose, who writes in a letter to his sister (*Letter 62*), “But the church does not cease to kiss Christ’s feet, and she demands not one but many kisses in the Song of Solomon, since like blessed Mary she listens to his every saying, she receives his every word, when the gospel or prophets are read, and she keeps

Ruth Hauser (Buffalo, NY: Immaculate Heart Publications, 1947), 35.

¹⁵ John F. Sweeney, SJ, quoted in Healey, “The Theology of the Immaculate Heart of Mary,” 127.

¹⁶ *The Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary* (Wilkes Barre, PA: Dimension Books, 1965).

¹⁷ John F. Murphy, *Mary’s Immaculate Heart: The Meaning of Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary* (Milwaukee: Bruce Pub. Co., 1951), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, fn. 2.

all these words in her heart.”¹⁹ Others, including Hippolytus (d. 235), the Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394), Peter Chrysologus (d. ca. 450), and John of Damascus, associate certain phrases of the Canticle with the Blessed Virgin.²⁰ Epiphanius (d. 403), in a homily, refers to the Blessed Mother using the text “a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up” (Cant. 4:12) [*Homilia V in Laudes Sanctae Mariae Deiparae*, PG, 43, 491].

John F. Murphy, in his 1951 book *Mary’s Immaculate Heart*, focuses on two special texts of the canticle which are particularly associated with the Heart of the Beloved: “*I sleep, and my heart watcheth: the voice of my beloved knocking: Open to me my sister, my love, my undefiled*” (5:2), and “*Put me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon the arm ...*” (8:6). The Fathers and early ecclesiastical writers in their commentaries on these two passages give us an insight into the qualities of the heart of the Beloved Bride.

Of the latter passage, Murphy refers to the commentaries of Origen (d. ca. 254), Theodoret (d. 457), and Gregory the Great (d. 604), while allowing it is the Blessed Virgin who above all others most perfectly fills the requirements implied in the words, “*Put me as a seal upon thy heart*”--for it is she who bears Christ as a seal that she might forever love Him, that she might excel in the power of contemplation, and, while devoting herself ardently to meditation, might never cease to imitate Him in her external actions.²¹ Murphy further summarized by saying

¹⁹ Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 9:292.

²⁰ Murphy, *Mary’s Immaculate Heart*, 3, fn 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

This assimilation to Christ is of course attained by no soul to the extent realized in the person of the Blessed Virgin. It is she who could say *my heart watcheth*, for most ardently did she strive to imitate the Heart of her divine Son and thereby live in perfect obedience to God's holy will. It is she who more than all others has placed Christ as a *seal upon her heart*. As Christ is the perfect image of the Father, so Mary is humanity's best image of the Son, and since internally and externally no created soul has so perfectly resembled the Source of all Grace, we are not surprised to see in the commentaries of the Fathers on the sublime Canticle, the vestiges of the devotion to that Heart which pre-eminently loved Christ, and which in charity resembled His divine Heart most closely.²²

B. Early Christian Exegesis of Luke 2:19 and 2:51

While the distant vestiges of the devotion may be found in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is in the Gospel of St. Luke where most people recognize immediately that the devotion of the Immaculate Heart of Mary has its beginning, or its first justification, where the evangelist twice calls the heart of the Mother of Jesus to our attention (2:19, 2:51).

In these passages, Maximus the Confessor (d. 662) sees Mary as keeping in her heart not only those things regarding the shepherds, but also that which was seen and heard from the beginning

... in the temple and after the temple, the Annunciation by the angel, the seedless conception, the painless birth, and the virginity after birth.... Behold the economy of divine activity and transformation of natures ... Such were the ineffable and unattainable wonders that the all-holy Mary kept and reflected on in her heart, and in all this she was content that the true God was born of her, the one who made his immaculate and most gracious mother blessed among all

²² Ibid.

generations and glorified her in heaven and on earth and made her praised by all.²³

And Bede the Venerable (d. 735) sees Mary learning from Jesus as from God:

Consider the most prudent woman Mary, mother of true Wisdom, as the pupil of her Son. She learned from him, not as from a child or man but as from God. Yes, she dwelt in meditation on his words and actions. Nothing of what was said or done by him fell idly on her mind. As before, when she conceived the Word itself in her womb, so now does she hold within her his ways and words, cherishing them as it were in her heart. That which she now beholds in the present, she waits to have revealed with greater clarity in the future. This practice she followed as a rule and law through all her life.²⁴

C. Early Christian Exegesis of Luke 2:35

Even in Patristic times, the sword foretold by Simeon is understood as piercing Mary's Heart. We find this in Origen's homilies on Luke (*In Lc. Hom 17*, PG, 13, 1845) when he asks "Thereupon Simeon says, 'A sword will pierce your very soul.' Which sword is this that pierced not only other's hearts, but even Mary's?"

Basil the Great (d. 379), in a letter (*Letter 260; PG 32, 965 C-968 A*), recalls the prophecy thus:

Simeon calls a sword the word that has the power to test and discern thoughts, that penetrates unto the division of the soul and spirit, of joints and marrow (cf. Heb. 4:12)... Even you (O Mary), who

²³ Maximus the Confessor, *The Life of the Virgin*, trans. Stephen J. Shoemaker (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2012), 65-66.

²⁴ Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 3:55.

learned about the Lord from above, will be affected by doubt. ‘That thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed’ means that after the scandal caused by the Cross of Christ, the Lord wished a ready remedy to follow, both for the disciples and for Mary, confirming their hearts in faith to him.²⁵ Thus we see that even Peter, after having stumbled, clung more firmly to his faith in Christ. What was human, therefore, was proven unsound in order that the power of the Lord might be manifest.²⁶

For John of Damascus, the sword that pierces Mary’s heart is her grief:

However, this blessed one, who had been found worthy of gifts surpassing nature, did at the time of the passion suffer the pangs which she had escaped at child-birth. When she saw him put to death as a criminal—the man she knew to be God when she gave birth to him—her heart was torn from maternal compassion and she was rent by her thoughts as by a sword. This is the meaning of “and a sword will pierce through your own soul.” But her grief gave way to the joy of the resurrection which proclaimed him to be God who had died in the flesh.²⁷

For Ambrose, the sword is the Word of God:

Neither Scripture nor history tells us that Mary departed this life by a violent death. For it is not the soul, but the body, that can be pierced by a material sword. This, therefore, proves that Mary was not unaware of the heavenly mystery: “for the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the

²⁵ Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 147.

²⁶ Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 3:50-51.

²⁷ Ibid.

thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). God’s Word exposes the thoughts and intents of the heart, because all things are open and naked to the eyes of Mary’s Son, to whom the secrets of our conscience are visible.²⁸

All of the commentary of the Fathers on Luke may be summarized in a few words from Ambrose, who depicts Mary’s Heart as “the receptacle or tabernacle for the divine mysteries and arguments of faith” (Ambrose, *Expositionis in Lucam, Lib. II*, PL, 15, 1654).²⁹

III. An Examination of the Various Ways in Which the Fathers Spoke of Mary’s Heart in Light of Recent Research on the Earliest Devotions to the Blessed Virgin

While we do not look to Scripture for explicit texts depicting the dogmatic content of the devotion, we have seen how references to the Heart of Mary in Scripture could serve as an antecedent for the development of a devotion to her Immaculate Heart, and an examination of the writings of the Fathers begins to clarify for us what is implicitly contained therein concerning the Heart of our Blessed Mother.

This is confirmed in paragraph 44 of the 1956 encyclical of Pope Pius XII, *Hauretis Aquas* (Devotion to the Sacred Heart):

The holy Fathers, true witnesses of the divinely revealed doctrine, wonderfully understood what St. Paul the Apostle had quite clearly declared; namely; that the mystery of love was, as it were, both the foundation and the culmination of the Incarnation and Redemption. For frequently and clearly we can read in their writings that Jesus

²⁸ Ibid., 3:51.

²⁹ Murphy, *Mary’s Immaculate Heart*, 8.

Christ took a perfect human nature and our weak and perishable human body with the object of providing for our eternal salvation, and of revealing to us in the clearest possible manner that His infinite love for us could express itself in human terms.

Likewise, these same Fathers of the Church often meditated and praised the singular love and faith of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who so generously offered Herself to God to fulfill His plans for our redemption, and who so steadfastly persevered with Her Son Jesus Christ in His ignominious crucifixion and death.

In both these approaches the Fathers of the Church laid the foundation for true devotion to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary by clearly indicating the union of charity which bound them both in the work of redemption.³⁰

The French Benedictine monk and archaeologist Bernard de Montfaucon is quoted as having said, in 1708, that he had never seen a papyrus. Since the nineteenth century many, often fragmentary, have been discovered by excavation,³¹ including a papyrus in Egypt that includes a prayer to the Mother of God, the *Sub tuum praesidium*. Experts confidently date this papyrus to the year 250. It is known as the John Rylands Papyrus 470 after the library where it resides. The prayer must have been extremely popular, because it survived in many ancient copies, in many places, in many languages—Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian.³²

³⁰ <https://www.ewtn.com/library/christ/dev2hear.txt> (accessed February 17, 2016).

³¹ A. Hamman, ed., *Early Christian Prayers*, trans. Walter Mitchell (Chicago: Regnery, 1951), 62.

³² Mike Aquilina and Fred Gruber, *Keeping Mary Close* (Cincinnati: Servant, 2015), 75.

Here, too, we find evidence that the language used in liturgy about Mary included calling her *Theotokos*. The use of the title is found in an early fourth-century encyclical of Alexander of Alexandria directed against Arianism. But the sources of the idea of the *Theotokos* are to be sought in devotion, perhaps in the early Greek version of the *Sub tuum* where, Jaroslav Pelikan noted, “theology had come to terms with liturgy.”³³

Catholic author Mike Aquilina has pointed out that in the Greek we find the word *εὐσπλαγγίαν* which is usually translated as “patronage” or “compassion” but, according to several Greek lexicons, it means “good heart.” Pelikan further observed that, in the conflicts with Gnosticism,

Mary had served as proof for the reality of the humanity of Jesus: he had truly been born of a human mother and therefore was a man. But as Christian piety and reflection sought to probe the deeper meaning of salvation, the parallel between Christ and Adam found its counterpart in the picture of Mary as the second Eve, who by her obedience had undone the damage wrought by the disobedience of the mother of mankind. She was the mother of the man Christ Jesus, the mother of the Savior; but to be the Savior, he had to be God as well, and as his mother she had to be “Mother of God.” In popular devotion these themes were interwoven with other speculations about the manner of Christ's birth and about the later life of the Virgin, but in its fundamental motifs the development of the Christian picture of Mary and the eventual emergence of a Christian doctrine of Mary must be seen in the context of the development of

³³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971), 1:241.

devotion to Christ and, of course, of the development of the doctrine of Christ.³⁴

Msgr. Arthur Calkins, in *Marian Devotion* (Feb. 11, 2012), made the following observation:

It does not seem presumptuous to see the first adumbrations of the tradition which would come to be known as Marian consecration in the Church are found in the most ancient recorded prayer to the Mother of God ... the *Sub tuum praesidium*. It is the filial prayer of Christians who know Mary's motherly mercy and therefore do not hesitate to have recourse to her protection.³⁵

This ancient Marian invocation is of capital importance from many perspectives. First, it constitutes a remarkable witness to the fact that prayer was already explicitly addressed to Mary as *Theotókos*, or "Mother of God" long before the Council of Ephesus which vindicated the use of this title in 431. Secondly, it may well reflect a tradition even older than the third century ... going all the way back to the apostolic period.³⁶

In the fourth century we begin to notice a more developed interest in Mary. Marian literature in this century "is enriched by the contributions of such great names as Athanasius, Epiphanius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom in the Eastern Church. In the Western Church, we meet Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine."³⁷

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ <http://www.motherofallpeoples.com/2012/02/marian-consecration-and-entrustment/> (accessed February 17, 2016).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers*, 97.

Sebastian Brock in *Bride of Light* reminds us that it is often forgotten that the Church has a threefold heritage from early Christianity: not just the Latin West and the Greek East, but also the Syriac Orient—the Christian tradition of the Aramaic-speaking populace of the Eastern Roman Empire and of the Persian Empire, beyond it to the East.

Each of these three traditions has something special to contribute to the Christian tradition as a whole and perhaps one of the most distinctive features of the early Syriac Christian tradition lies in the poetic character of its spirituality: poetry, not prose, is seen as the best expression of theology. Through poetry, insights can be conveyed in a way that would be impossible in prose; poetry thus becomes the ideal medium for meditation on the mysteries of the Incarnation and that, of course, includes the place of Mary within these mysteries.³⁸

According to Brock, the Syriac poets, including Simon the Potter,³⁹ but above all, Ephrem

have a theological vision which might be described as holistic: for them everything in both the material and the spiritual world is mysteriously interconnected: nothing and nobody exists in isolation. This of course also applies to Mary and one of the great merits of St. Ephrem and the other Syriac poets ... lies in the way they show how complex is Mary's relationship with her Son—she is sister, bride, handmaid and daughter, as well as mother; and likewise how intricate is the web of interconnections between Mary and the Old Testament, between Mary and the Church, between Mary and the individual Christian. In order to bring out these interrelationships, use is made of types and symbols—hints and pointers to be found in

³⁸ Sebastian Brock, *Bride of Light* (Kerala, India: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994), 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

the Old Testament which direct the eye of faith towards the New Testament, or to the heavenly world. What is obscure in the Old Testament becomes illumined in the New, and thus takes on a deeper meaning.⁴⁰

In the fourth century we find Prudentius (d. ca. 405). Sebastian Brock claims that of all the early Christian Latin poets, Prudentius is the one whom the student of literature takes up with the most satisfaction, while noting “here are numerous references to the Blessed Virgin Mary scattered throughout his works. By their highly developed form they point to the fact that she was exercising a growing attraction on the minds of poets, which was certain soon to make her an independent subject for the exercise of their best talent.”⁴¹ Among these writers we find Juvenius (fl. ca. 330), St. Paulinus of Nola (d. 431), and St. Hilary of Arles (d. 449).

Also, to the fourth century, we assign the *Carmen de Salvatore*.⁴² It celebrates in twenty lines the praise of Christ as the Only-begotten of the Father, become man to redeem us by His passion and death, and returning again to Heaven, and concludes with a prayer for the emperor. The lines (7-14), referring to the Incarnation may be rendered: “By a word he was enclosed, and soon the virginal womb of Mary by a visible Divine influence was pregnant, and the unwedded Mother wondered how with secret fruit her body grew; she was to give birth to her Maker. A mortal heart

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1-2.

⁴¹ Andrew Bernard Heider, “The Blessed Virgin Mary in Early Christian Poetry: A Dissertation” (Miami: Hardpress Pub., 1918), 40.

⁴² It is called also “The Carmen de Pachale of Pope Damasus.” The authorship has not been established; some attribute it to Claudius.

sheltered the creator of sky and earth in the depths of her bosom, Him who embraces the whole wide world. And He who is not confined by the expanse of the earth or by the waters of the sea nor by the heavens, passed into the limbs of a child.”

The poem was highly esteemed in the early middle ages, as can be judged from the fact that some of its ideas were repeatedly used by later writers.⁴³ First among these later writers, but not much later, we would of course include Cyril of Alexandria, the distinguished doctor of the school of Alexandria, who will always be known for his defense of the doctrine of Mary as the Mother of God.

Finally, it should be noted that the earliest Marian feast for which there is any significant evidence is from the early fifth century, even before the Council at Ephesus (431): the Feast of the Memory of Mary; it was celebrated in Palestine and elsewhere.⁴⁴

IV. An Evaluation of Immaculate Heart Devotion, According to John Henry Newman’s Seven Notes of Genuine Development

We can conclude from this assortment of clues and testimony relative to the role of Mary in the early Church that we have the genuine development of devotion; many of the beliefs and practices that have become common in devotion to Mary’s Immaculate Heart were nascent in the early Church.

⁴³ Heider, “The Blessed Virgin,” 25-26.

⁴⁴ Stephen Shoemaker, *The Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 115.

Development is not innovation; it introduces nothing new. Development is not evolution; it does not cause the devotion to morph into something different from what it has been since the beginning. Development is a deepening of understanding, an elaboration.⁴⁵

Basil the Great, noted this very dynamic in the fourth century, stating that the same doctrine has been developed through progress: “What now is mine has not taken the place of what existed in the beginning.... through progress we observe an amplification of what we say, which is not a change from worse to better, but is a completing of that which was lacking, according to the increment of our knowledge.”⁴⁶

He gives this example:

The notion of God which I have received since childhood from my blessed mother (Emmelia) and my grandmother Macrina (the elder), I have kept in me that it might grow: I did not exchange it for others, but I have completed the rudiment that has been transmitted to me. A growing (plant), tiny at first, becomes bigger but emains what it is without changing its nature, developing itself as it grows; likewise, it seems to me, that the doctrine itself did grow by degrees as life progresses.⁴⁷

Fifteen centuries after Basil, John Henry Newman proposed testing genuine developments against corruptions by applying a seven-point assessment. He sees the seven

⁴⁵ Aquilina and Gruber, *Keeping Mary Close*, 6.

⁴⁶ George Barrois, ed., *The Fathers Speak* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1986), 40-41.

⁴⁷ Barrois, *The Fathers Speak*, 40-41 (as Basil wrote to Eustathios of Sebastaea).

notes as “distinguishing the true development of an idea from its corruptions and perversions.”⁴⁸ Newman’s seven notes are: 1) preservation of type, 2) continuity of principles, 3) power of assimilation, 4) logical sequence, 5) anticipation of its future, 6) conservative action on its past, and finally, 7) chronic vigor.

In the opening paragraph of Chapter Five of his *Essay*, the chapter titled “Genuine Developments versus Corruptions,” Newman writes about Catholicism, and what he wrote in 1844 we can likewise say today parallels devotion to Mary’s Immaculate Heart:

I have been engaged in drawing out the positive and direct argument in proof of the intimate connection, or rather oneness, with primitive Apostolic teaching, of the body of doctrine known at this day by the name of Catholic, and professed substantially both by Eastern and Western Christendom. That faith is undeniably the historical continuation of the religious system, which bore the name of Catholic in the eighteenth century, in the seventeenth, in the sixteenth, and so back in every preceding century, till we arrive at the first;--undeniably the successor, the representative, the heir of the religion of Cyprian, Basil, Ambrose and Augustine. The only question that can be raised is whether the said Catholic faith, as now held, is logically, as well as historically, the representative of the ancient faith. This then is the subject, to which I have as yet addressed myself, and I have maintained that modern Catholicism is nothing else but simply the legitimate growth and complement, that is, the natural and necessary development, of the doctrine of the early church....⁴⁹

⁴⁸ National Institute for Newman Studies, accessed February 17, 2016, at <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/chapter12.html>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

“It becomes necessary,” he continues, “to assign certain characteristics of faithful developments, which none but faithful developments have, and the presence of which serves as a test to discriminate between them and corruptions.” Hence, his seven notes.

We can trace genuine development to Mary’s Immaculate Heart beginning with the first note, Preservation of Type. Newman asserts that a valid development does not become something dissimilar. To illustrate, he quotes Vincent of Lerins (d. ca. 445): “Let the soul’s religion imitate the law of the body, which, as years go on, develops indeed and opens out its due proportions, and yet remains identically what it was. Small are a baby’s limbs, a youth’s are larger, yet they are the same.”⁵⁰

Today’s novenas, for example, are not a different species from the *Sub tuum* where refuge is sought in Mary’s heart, nor do they differ from the pondering in Mary’s heart found in the second chapter of Luke.

Note two, Continuity of Principles, means that a valid development becomes expounded and clarified. The life of doctrines may be said to consist in the principles which they embody. Newman writes: “Principles are abstract and general, doctrines develop, and principles at first sight do not; doctrines grow and are enlarged, principles are permanent; doctrines are intellectual, and principles are more immediately ... practical. A development, to be faithful, must retain both the doctrine and the principle with which it

⁵⁰ Ibid.

started.”⁵¹ Here, for example, we may turn to Augustine and his revulsion of any mention of sin in Mary.

Note three, Power of Assimilation states that a validly developing doctrine is alive and growing with a power of assimilation and revival. In the physical world, according to Newman, whatever has life is characterized by growth. It grows by taking into its own substance external materials; and this absorption or assimilation is completed when the materials appropriated come to belong to it or enter into its unity. Two things cannot become one, except there be a power of assimilation in one or the other. An eclectic, conservative, assimilating, healing, molding process, a unitive power, is of the essence, and a third test, of a faithful development.⁵²

“Thus, a power of development is a proof of life, not only in its essay, but especially in its success; for a mere formula either does not expand or is shattered in expanding. A living idea becomes many, yet remains one.”⁵³ We have seen that in antiquity there was already catholicity, an authority found in Syria, Greece and Italy—an authority not peculiar to any one culture or geography—but an authority universal, catholic.

The fourth note, Logical Sequence, suggests a certain continuous advance and determinate path which impresses upon the common sense of mankind that what it ultimately becomes is the issue of what it was at first. “This sentiment is expressed in the proverb ... warning us against false prophets ... ‘Ye shall know them by their fruits.’” Devotion,

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

then, practiced in its mature years, “is likely to be a true development, not a corruption, in proportion as it seems to be the logical issue of its original teaching.”⁵⁴ There is a certain utility to the patristic, a utility that finds its praxis in the nineteenth-century formulation of the Immaculate Conception dogma. The fourth-century witnesses to devotion to Mary’s Immaculate Heart are suited to the apologetic needs of the nineteenth-century dogma.

Note five, *Anticipation of its Future*, asks if the devotion could be seen naturally in an earlier practice. Did its beginnings anticipate its subsequent phases? Newman writes

Since, when an idea is living, that is, influential and effective, it is sure to develop according to its own nature, and the tendencies, which are carried out on the long run, may under favorable circumstances show themselves early as well as late, and logic is the same in all ages, instances of a development which is to come, though vague and isolated, may occur from the very first, though a lapse of time be necessary to bring them to perfection.⁵⁵

Evidence, then of the faithfulness of an ultimate development is its definite anticipation at an early period in the history of the idea to which it belongs.⁵⁶

Mother M. Francesca Perillo and others have pointed out that we find such anticipation in the Greek of the *Sub Tuum Praesidium*.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Mother M. Francesca Perillo, FI, “*Sub Tuum Praesidium: Incomparable Marian Praeconium*,” in *Mary at the Foot of the Cross—IV: Acts of the Fourth International Symposium on Marian Coredemption*, (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2004), 138.

Note six, *Conservative Action on its Past*, asks if the devotion expands, expounds and clarifies the past. Does its later phenomenon protect the earlier? A true development, Newman states, “may be described as one which is conservative of the course of antecedent developments being really those antecedents and something besides them: it is an addition which illustrates, not obscures, corroborates, not corrects, the body of thought from which it proceeds; and this is its characteristic as contrasted with a corruption.”⁵⁸ Here Newman himself includes the cultus of Mary in his example:

When Roman Catholics are accused of substituting another Gospel for the primitive Creed, they answer that they hold, and can show that they hold, the doctrines of the Incarnation and Atonement, as firmly as any Protestant can state them. To this it is replied that they do certainly profess them, but that they obscure and virtually annul them by their additions; that the cultus of St. Mary and the Saints is no development of the truth, but a corruption and a religious mischief to those doctrines of which it is the corruption, because it draws away the mind and heart from Christ. But they answer that, so far from this, it subserves, illustrates, protects the doctrine of our Lord's loving kindness and mediation.⁵⁹

Lastly, note seven, *Chronic Vigor*, expresses that valid development stands the test of time with a vigorous action from first to last. A corruption, even if vigorous, is of brief duration, runs out quickly, and ends in death; or if it lasts a

⁵⁸ National Institute for Newman Studies, accessed February 17, 2016.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

little while eventually it fails in vigor and passes into a decay.⁶⁰

Mary herself can be seen envisaging chronic vigor: “For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.” Pelikan has noted that “the content with which those successive generations would invest the title ‘blessed’ would vary greatly through the centuries, but the striking quality would be the success with which ... Mary’s blessedness would be seen as relevant to men and woman in an equal variety of situations.”⁶¹

Chronic vigor is found in our liturgies and the preaching on Mary’s pondering heart. Chronic vigor is evident when contrasting the images found on the walls of the catacombs and the cemeteries of Fayum with the walls of our churches today.

Conclusion

In summary, Newman’s notes ring true when applied to the devotion to Mary’s Immaculate Heart. We see it early as evidenced in the *Sub tuum*. We see also by the number of languages into which the *Sub tuum* was translated that devotion was widespread by the mid-fourth century. This is how people were praying; they invoked the Heart of Mary. We find it in the writings and hymns of the patristic era and we can follow the thread through the centuries to the present day.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, c1996), 20-21.

Author Biography

James K. Hanna holds a master's degree in theology from Duquesne University. He is an online instructor for the University of Notre Dame's Satellite Theological Education Program (STEP) and a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in *Our Sunday Visitor Newsweekly*.