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THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION: GIFT AND SIGN FOR THE NEOPHYTE

Danielle M. Peters

Mary's indispensable participation in the historical event of the Incarnation which we profess in our baptismal belief, leads us to reflect on her participation in the sacramental event of the rebirth of her spiritual children. The PAMI Document "The Mother of the Lord: Memory, Presence, Hope"¹ (art. 47; cf. USCCB, Behold your Mother, 55) points out that in the light of Ephesians 1:3-5 "baptism, the immersion into the Paschal mystery of Christ, (cf. Rm 6:3-5) corresponds sacramentally to Mary's Immaculate Conception." This article explores the Immaculate Conception as "a forceful sign of God's grace operative within a creature" (art. 48) for the neophyte. Among the themes explored are: Mary's maternal role at baptism, May's womb as a type of the baptismal font, and the archetypal function of the Immaculate Conception at baptism. As the Immaculate Conception prepared Mary to be the "Theotokos" or God-bearer, baptism enables

¹ (Staten Island, N.Y.: St. Paul, 2007). The Letter, promulgated on December 8, 2000, is addressed: to Marian and Mariological Societies, to Students of Mariology, to Rectors of Marian Shrines, and to All Interested in the Future of Marian Devotion in the Church; it presents a Review of the Actual Questions facing Mariology Today.

Christians to be “Theotokoi” or God-bearers through grace of the sacrament.

Introduction

The Christian life does not begin with simply human dispositions and endowments, but with a sacrament assisting the neophyte, or newly initiated Christian, in becoming a new creation in Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) explains that being “a new creature” signals a new level of existence, one that is comparable to a second birth. Through this sacrament of Baptism, the neophyte becomes an adopted child of God, a child who is a “partaker of the divine nature” (2 Cor 5:17; 2 Pt 1:4; cf. Gal 4:5–7), a member of Christ as well as co-heir with him (cf. 1 Cor 6:15; 12:27; Rom 8:17), and “a temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 6:19).”² Thus, Baptism effects a profound spiritual transformation that sets Christians apart.³ They are holy and must remain so in order to grow in holiness.⁴

The Blessed Virgin Mary is both a gift and sign of God’s grace operative within the neophyte. I find support for this thesis in *The Mother of the Lord: Memory, Presence, Hope*, a document promulgated by the International Pontifical Mariological Academy (PAMI).⁵ This document—

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), no. 1265.

³ For more, see John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifidelis Laici* (December 30, 1988), no. 15.

⁴ Cf. CCC, nos. 1266, 1831, 1832.

⁵ International Pontifical Mariological Academy (PAMI), *The Mother of the Lord: Memory, Presence, Hope*, trans. Thomas A. Thompson (Staten Island, NY: St. Paul, 2007). Cf. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Behold your*

addressed “to Marian and Mariological Societies, to Students of Mariology, to Rectors of Marian Shrines, and to All Interested in the Future of Marian Devotion in the Church”—presents a “Review of the Actual Questions facing Mariology Today.” Article 67 appeals to theologians to take up “the responsibility ... to further develop the nature of the presence of the Blessed Virgin in the life of the Church.” In doing so, they should pay particular “attention to one aspect of that presence which has great theological and pastoral importance: the active presence of Mary in the mystery of Christian worship.” In the context of our conference and, in particular, in view of the topic of my presentation, two questions from the PAMI document deserve our attention:

(1) If she [Mary] is truly our mother in the order of grace, [it is legitimate to ask:] What is her [specific] role ... in the Sacrament of Baptism, in which we become adopted children of God?⁶

(2) If in light of Ephesians 1:3–5, “Baptism, the immersion into the Paschal mystery of Christ, (cf. Rm 6:3–5) corresponds sacramentally to Mary’s Immaculate Conception,” how can the paradigm of the sinless one become “a forceful sign of God’s grace operative within a creature”?⁷

This paper will delve into these two queries.

Mother: Woman of Faith (Washington, DC: US Catholic Conference Publications Office, 1973), 55.

⁶ PAMI, *Mother of the Lord*, 67.

⁷ PAMI, 48.

1. Mary's Maternal Role at the Baptismal Font

The Blessed Virgin Mary's time-transcending mission is to bring the Redeemer to humanity.⁸ How and to what extent does she do this specifically at the baptismal font? We take our bearing from the Incarnation since this ineffable mystery initiates Mary's vocation and mission.

1.1. The Two Dimensions of Mary's Maternity

Of the countless possibilities, we might wonder, why was it that, at the Father's will, the Word became man, veiled in flesh, through the power of the Holy Spirit and with the cooperative *fiat* of an immaculate maiden, a virginal mother?⁹ Our feeble understanding can only touch the surface of an awesome mystery. Our Judeo-Christian tradition reveals that God, from the beginning, sought to enter into a covenant relationship with humanity.¹⁰ After a series of broken covenants, a new and eternal covenant was instituted by Jesus Christ with his mother, Mary, as the human covenant partner.¹¹ The privileges bestowed on Mary from the first moment of her conception enabled her to seal this new and everlasting covenant freely, totally, and perpetually.

A close examination of the Annunciation reveals an obvious and *a priori* truth; namely, on the human level, Mary's *fiat* was indispensable for the Incarnation, as we

⁸ See Anton Ziegenaus, "Der Menschheit den Erlöser bringen: Die bleibende Berufung Mariens in der Heilsgeschichte," *Mariologische Studien IX: Maria und Evangelisierung: Beiträge zur mariologischen Prägung der Verkündigung* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1993), 59–73.

⁹ Cf. PAMI, *Mother of the Lord*, 45.

¹⁰ Cf. Hos 1; Is 1:2–4; Jer 2; 31:31–34; Is 55:3.

¹¹ Gal 4:4.

know it, to take place. For the Holy Spirit to overshadow her, the Virgin's free and willing cooperation was required. While Mary's participation in the mystery of the Redemption is "unique and unrepeatable in the history of the human race," her consequent maternity "is also unique in profundity and range of action."¹² Her *fiat* resulted in such an intimate participation in Christ's life and work that they no longer exist except in relationship to each other.¹³ From this follows that Mary's mission surpasses that of interceding for graces for us; rather, it consists in her cooperation in the entire work of salvation at the side of Christ. Through her free and unconditional cooperation with God's plan, a cooperation best revealed at the Annunciation and while standing beneath the Cross, a new dimension was added to her divine maternity: "Mary enters the history of the salvation of mankind as Mother of us all" in and through her "participating at the birth of the Church."¹⁴

Mary's *fiat*—her free cooperation with a magnanimous divine initiative—constitutes a theological act: the handmaid of the Lord becomes the New Eve from whom the New Adam is born.¹⁵ This typology signifies that Mary's *fiat* transcends the Incarnation. Benedict XV speaks of Mary's motherly rights, which she exercised on Golgotha, in

¹² John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis* (March 4, 1979), 22.

¹³ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater* (March 25, 1987), 39.

¹⁴ Karol Wojtyła, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, trans. P.S. Falla (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 106. Cf. Vatican Council II. *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*, 58f. Henceforth cited LG. Pope Francis recently gifted the Church with a Memorial of the *Blessed Virgin Mary Mother of the Church* to be celebrated on the Monday following Pentecost.

¹⁵ René Laurentin, *A Short Treatise on the Virgin Mary*, trans. Charles Neumann (Washington, NJ: AMI Press, 1991), 224.

aligning herself with her Son to the Father's will.¹⁶ While Mary's presence and surrender at the climax of salvation did not add anything to Christ's redemptive sacrifice, her close union with him, unimpeded by sin, allowed her to assume the attitude of Christ by her own self-emptying. St. John Paul II likened the degree of submission achieved by the Mother of God at that moment of utter darkness on Golgotha (cf. Jn 19:25) to the *kenosis* of her Son.¹⁷

Thus, at the apex of her Son's passion, Mary reaches a fuller consciousness of "her part beside her Son."¹⁸ As if it were a fruit bursting forth from the redemptive act, a new dimension is added to her virginal motherhood. In this mysterious manifestation, the "espousal through blood" of the New Adam to the New Eve was ratified through the Spirit (cf. Jn 19:30).¹⁹ The hour of giving birth had come once again on Golgotha; it was the hour initiating Mary's spiritual maternity (cf. Jn 16:21). As the new Eve, she becomes the mother of believers and of all the living (cf. Gn 3:20), a mission prefigured and even already included in her first *fiat*.²⁰

¹⁶ Benedict XV, Apostolic Letter *Inter Sodalicia* (March 22, 1918) in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 10 (1918), 182.

¹⁷ Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 18; Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 58. Mary's complete self-emptying can only be understood in virtue of the fullness of the gift she had received at her Immaculate Conception.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 20. See also John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 22; Encyclical Letter *Dominum et Vivificantem* (May 18, 1986), no. 51; Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (December 7, 1990), no. 92.

¹⁹ PAMI, *Mother of the Lord*, 41.

²⁰ PAMI, 60. The increasing attraction for the ancient title addressing the Virgin Mary as the *mother of life* has contributed to a growing interest of moralists in the Virgin Mary. The mother of Christ who is the life (cf. Jn 11:25; 14:6), is also the mother of the living (cf. Gn 3:20), of those reborn by the baptismal waters. In response to the tragic incursion of the culture of death, Mary is the eminent figure of the culture of life. Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen*

At Pentecost, as the *Mother of the Church*, she again cooperates with the Holy Spirit in the birthing act of the Church. Pondering the two dimensions of Mary's maternity led St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort to the insight that "two alone are capable of giving birth together in synergy, to the Son of God in the flesh and, in Him, to us, too, as children of the Father: namely, the Holy Spirit and Mary."²¹ Elsewhere, he noted: "If Jesus Christ is born of Mary, also the elect, who are members of the Head, must as a necessary consequence be born of her."²²

As a result, baptismal rebirth "is transmitted from her to us by osmosis, less by imitation than by generation," due to her effective mediation and the work of the Holy Spirit.²³ Mary's fecundity is perpetual insofar as her role as mother and mediatrix extends to all members of the Body of Christ "until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect."²⁴ Appropriately, Ignatius of Antioch identifies Christians in likeness to Mary

Gentium, no. 62.

²¹ Cited by Piero Coda, "The Ecclesial Movements, Gifts of the Spirit: A Theological Reflection," in *Movements in the Church: Proceedings of the World Congress of the Ecclesial Movements: Rome, May 27–29, 1998* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), 103. See also CCC, nos. 485 and 505.

²² Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort, *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, trans. Francoise de Castro (Bay Shore, NY: Montfort Publications, 1955), 32.

²³ Marc Ouellet, "The Beauty of Being Christians," in *The Beauty of Being a Christian—Movements in the Church: Proceedings of the Second World Congress of the Ecclesial Movements and New Communities: Rocca di Papa, Italy, May 31–June 2, 2006* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), 49. Cf. Bonaventure, Collation on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, trans. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., *Works of St. Bonaventure*, vol. 14 (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2008), 130. St. Bonaventure interprets the passage from the prophet Isaiah, "can a woman forget the child of her womb," to mean that "the whole Christian people is begotten from the womb of the glorious Virgin."

²⁴ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 62.

as Christ-bearers (*christophoroi*) and “God-bearers” (*theophoroi*)²⁵ since they are “full of God”²⁶ and “called to participate in God.”²⁷

1.2 The Indelible Character

Although Mary did not baptize or belong to the hierarchy, her presence at Pentecost, the archetypal event of birthing in the Church, highlights her unique role as our mother in the order of grace.²⁸ For this reason, John Paul II was convinced that “she is at every baptismal font, where in faith and in the Holy Spirit the members of the Mystical Body are born to divine life.”²⁹ Paragraph 57 of *Lumen Gentium* affirms that the birth of Our Lord sanctified His mother’s virginal integrity, thereby leaving an everlasting effect on her interior disposition.³⁰ Commenting on this reality, Rev. René Laurentin emphasized that, whenever God enters into relationship with a human being, an imprint is left on the latter and is often accompanied by a change of name. For the Blessed Virgin Mary, the change in name happened at the Incarnation when the angel addressed her as “full of grace.” Mary’s divine maternity is analogous to the indelible character imprinted upon the receiver of the Sacrament of

²⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians, 9.2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Letter to the Magnesians, 14.1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Letter to the Ephesians, 4.2.

²⁸ The notion of archetypal experience is developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, 301 ff. It implies the idea of model but also that of mediation. “The archetype, by its very nature, has a maternal form and under its ‘protective mantle’ it embraces the progeny that will imitate it” (313).

²⁹ John Paul II, “Angelus Address of 12 February 1984,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition (February 20, 1984), 10.

³⁰ Cf. PAMI, *Mother of the Lord*, 42.

Baptism because it is everlasting; it cannot be undone, removed, or lost. Likewise, comparable to the sanctifying grace aiding the baptized to live in Christ, the fullness of grace offered to Mary Immaculate enables her to spend her life conscious of her calling as mother of the whole Christ.³¹

Moreover, Laurentin observes that Mary's divine maternity, as well as Baptism, engender an incorporation into the Body of Christ, in which Mary has a unique place.³² Whereas her divine maternity generates the Son of God, the Sacrament of Baptism is a rite in which the neophyte is regenerated in the Son. The latter presupposes the first: generation involves filiation in nature, and regeneration implicates an adoptive filiation.³³ Mary's dignity as Mother of God is thus superior to that bestowed by Baptism. While Baptism configures us to Jesus Christ as sons and daughters of the Father, Mary's filial relationship to the Father is established in her Immaculate Conception, so she could address her Redeemer as "Son." The Incarnation adds the maternal dimension to Mary's filial relationship to the Father. Although the comparison of the immaculate mother to the neophyte has merit, Laurentin underscores that

the two relationships are not on the same plane: the baptized person becomes a child of God in dependence on the Mystery of the Incarnation, whereas the divine motherhood is involved in the very realization of this mystery. [Furthermore] ... the sacramental character configures the baptized person to the Son of God

³¹ Limits of this comparison: Divine Maternity proceeds from the order of natures; Baptism from the order of rites. Generation implies similitude of nature; Grace implies participation in the divine nature. Cf. Laurentin, *A Short Treatise*, 216; see footnote 17.

³² Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 54.

³³ Cf. Laurentin, *A Short Treatise*, 218.

according to grace, in view of divinization, whereas Mary's motherhood integrated God in the human race. And this humanization of Christ is the condition for the divinization of man.³⁴

1.3 Mary's Womb as Type of the Baptismal Font

In her organic understanding of Baptism, the Church intuitively linked this sacrament to the mystery of Christ's Incarnation. Both are made possible by Mary's faith and by the power of the Spirit, whereby "the Church and the Virgin Mary appear to act in perfect synergism as the newly baptized through the baptismal font truly become children both of the Church and of Mary."³⁵ As virginal mother, Mary is a type of the Church and the original cell of the organism united to Christ. Like her, the Church is virgin because she conceives her children through the working of the Holy Spirit, and as mother, she gives birth and nourishes the new members of Christ.³⁶ In this vein, Pope St. Paul VI emphasized in his *Credo*: we "believe that the Blessed Mother of God, the New Eve, Mother of the Church, continues in heaven her maternal role with regard to Christ's members, cooperating with the birth and growth of divine life in the souls of the redeemed."³⁷

The typological relationship between Christ's conception in Mary's womb and that of Christians in the baptismal font was pondered astutely by the Fathers of the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁵ PAMI, *Mother of the Lord*, 67.

³⁶ Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 64.

³⁷ Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Credo of the People of God* (June 30, 1968), 15. Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 53, 56, 61–63; and Paul VI, Allocation for the Closing of the Third Session of the Second Vatican Council, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 56 (1964), 1016; Apostolic Exhortation *Signum Magnum* (May 13, 1967), no. 1.

Church. This relationship led St. Irenaeus (†202), for example, to the insight that the Virgin’s womb comes to coincide mystically with the Church’s baptismal womb, when Jesus Christ, the “Pure One, in a pure way, opened that pure womb that regenerates men in God.”³⁸ Significant is also the thought of Ephraim the Syrian (†373), who compared the baptismal waters of the Jordan with the womb of Mary in giving birth to Christ and even viewed the Incarnation of Christ as Mary’s own baptism:

O Christ, you have given birth to your own mother in the second birth that comes from water.... The Son of the Most High came and dwelt in me [Mary], and I became his mother. As I gave birth to him, his second birth—so too he gave birth to me a second time. He put on his mother’s robe—his body; I put on his glory.³⁹

Finally, St. Leo the Great (†461) emphasized that the birth of Christ is the beginning of the rebirth of neophytes. Drawing attention to Mary’s unique role at both instances, he stated:

the water of baptism is a little what was the Virgin’s womb, in the sense that the same Spirit who filled the Virgin fills the water of the font; the sin that was abolished there by the holy conception, is abolished here by the mystic washing.⁴⁰

³⁸ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 33, 11. Cited by Corrado Maggioni in “Mary, An Icon of the Church that Baptizes in Jesus Christ,” *Tertium Millennium* (September 1997), accessed at Vatican, https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01091997_p-60_en.html. Emphasis in text.

³⁹ Ephraim the Syrian, *Hymns on the Nativity*, XI, 9.

⁴⁰ Leo the Great, Tractatus XXIX (In Nativitate Domini), 1, 3, in *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina (Turnhout, 1953–) [CCL] 138, 147. This

1.4 Liturgical Applications

What was noted by the Fathers is sublimely expressed in the liturgy, which, as emphasized by Paul VI, has not only rich doctrinal content, but also an incomparable pastoral effectiveness.⁴¹ In paragraph 19 of *Marialis Cultus*, we read “that the Church prolongs in the sacrament of Baptism the virginal motherhood of Mary.” The liturgist and Montfort Missionary Corrado Maggioni notes that “the Virgin’s joy at Christmas night is the Church’s joy at Easter night.”⁴² In support, he cites St. Leo the Great:

The birth that Jesus assumed in the Virgin’s womb, He has placed in the baptismal font: He gives to the water what He gave to his mother; the power from the Most High and the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit that made Mary the Mother of the Savior, now brings the faithful new birth through this water.⁴³

To this day, the relationship between Mary and the Church, between the Incarnation and Easter, is recalled in the prayer for the blessing of a baptismal font (in the Roman Rite):

quotation is also cited by Maggioni in *Icon of the Church*. In the same work, Maggioni also quotes St. Cyril of Alexandria (†444), who asserted, “Through you, Mary, believers come to the grace of Baptism” (Homily 4).

⁴¹ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (February 2, 1974), no. 1. In addition, honoring Mary’s position at the baptismal font has also an ecumenical dimension (no. 32).

⁴² Maggioni, *Icon of the Church*. The Supplement to the Gregorian Sacramentary for the Preface of Easter night follows the same pattern: “Like the Mother of the Lord, our holy Mother Church conceives them (children) without stain, she gives birth to them painlessly, and leads them with joy to the heavenly realities.”

⁴³ Leo the Great, Tractatus XXV (*In Nativitate Domini*), 5, in CCL 138, 123.

Almighty God ... The power of the Spirit made the Virgin Mary the mother of your Son; send forth the power of the same Spirit, so that your Church may present you with countless sons and daughters and bring forth new citizens of heaven.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, this mystery is not alluded to during the baptismal ceremony of the Easter Vigil or any other baptismal celebration for adults. The baptismal rite for children, however, does contain references to Mary. They occur in 1) the invocation to Mary in the litanies; 2) the mention of the Virgin in the profession of faith; 3) the invitation to parents and the community to sing the Magnificat as a hymn of thanksgiving; 4) the discrete suggestion to bring the child to Our Lady's altar; and 5) the memory of the Mother of the Lord in the words of the final blessing. The relationship between Mary and Baptism is also prominently articulated in the Votive Mass to the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Fountain of Light and Life*.⁴⁵ The prayers invoke Our Lady to instruct the Universal Church in her spiritual motherhood. "Mary cannot but be present at the rebirth of the children of light, since she, with her *fiat*, made possible Christ's coming and in him, his Body. The miracle of the Spirit in Christ's Incarnation is renewed in a certain sense in the generation of his Mystical Body: Mary is the Mother of Christ, the Head, and the Mother of the members of his Body."⁴⁶ Therefore, Mary is invoked as mother and

⁴⁴ *Book of Blessing: General Introduction and Introductions to Each of the Orders of Blessing* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, c1990), 1187.

⁴⁵ Congregation for Divine Worship, *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 48–50.

⁴⁶ Maggioni, *Icon of the Church*. Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 53.

model of the Church at the baptismal font.⁴⁷ We have explored her role as spiritual mother and will now turn to the latter aspect of our reflections.

2. The Archetypical Function of the Immaculate Conception at Baptism

The PAMI document encourages this exploration and sets the tone for it. Article 46 points to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which—though “binding and irreformable ... was (in 1854) stated in a precise cultural context and language and influenced by its history.” A faithful interpretation of the doctrine, therefore, “does not exclude that new points of view may arise in the course of time and that new formulations may be sought.”⁴⁸ Accordingly, and in the context of our theme, a new approach could focus on the significance of Mary’s fullness of grace rather than her freedom from sin.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ The entrance antiphon of the votive Mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Fountain of Light and Life*, cited above, implores Mary, who as “a Virgin, gave birth to Christ and became the model of the Church, our Mother, to bring to new birth in the chaste waters of Baptism a people of faith.” The prayer poetically weaves together the two dimensions of Our Lady’s maternity as they are actualized in the Sacrament of Baptism.

⁴⁸ Pontifical Theological Commission, “Interpretation of Dogma” (October 1989) in *Origins* 20, no. 1 (May 17, 1990), 10; see section C. I. 1.

⁴⁹ The definition of the dogma in *Ineffabilis Deus* focuses on the latter: “We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.” (Declaramus, pronuntiamus et definimus doctrinam quae tenet beatissimam Virginem Mariam in primo instanti suae conceptionis fuisse singulari Omnipotentis Dei gratia et privilegio, intuitu meritorum Christi Jesu Salvatoris humani generis, ab omni originalis culpae labe praeservatam immunem, esse a Deo revelatam, atque idcirco ab omnibus fidelibus firmiter constanterque credendam.) DS, no. 1641.

2.1 Blueprint of the Re-Created Order in Christ

“At the baptismal font, the newly baptized, illuminated by the light of Christ, become adopted children of the Father (2 Cor 5:17; 2 Pt 1:4; cf. Gal 4:5–7) ... (and) members of Christ’s mystical body (cf. 1 Cor 6:15; 12:27; Rom 8:17). They are enriched by the gifts of the Holy Spirit who makes them his dwelling place and clothes them in nuptial garments (cf. 1 Cor 6:19).”⁵⁰ How are we to understand the role of the Immaculate at this first sacrament of initiation, who herself is the favorite daughter of the Father, the mother and helpmate of the Son, and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit?⁵¹ The PAMI document suggests that, in light of Ephesians 1:3–5, Baptism relates sacramentally to Mary’s Immaculate Conception.⁵² To pattern Baptism after this event of grace at the inception of Our Lady’s existence highlights “the universality of redemption,” of which Mary, holy and immaculate (cf. Eph 1:4), is “the most excellent fruit.”⁵³ It further sheds light on redemption as an abundant outpouring of grace, a gift reaching far beyond the deliverance from original sin. Mary is the highest personification of the re-created order in Christ, and each

⁵⁰ PAMI, *Mother of the Lord*, 47. Cf. CCC, no. 1265.

⁵¹ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 53. By implication, the Incarnation forged an indissoluble bond between the Trinity and Mary of Nazareth. The hitherto “unbridgeable distance between God and humanity has been filled by the condescension of the Word, who ... became consubstantial with his mother’s human nature” by the power of the Holy Spirit (PAMI, *Mother of the Lord*, 42).

⁵² Cf. PAMI, *Mother of the Lord*, 47.

⁵³ Vatican II, *Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963), no. 103; *Lumen Gentium*, no. 53. Cf. Danilo M. Sartor, *Le feste della Madonna. Nostri storiche e liturgiche per una celebrazione partecipata* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1988), 67.

neophyte is offered a share in this dominion of love through baptismal grace (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:9–10).⁵⁴

The Servite Danilo M. Sartor refers to two salvific events in support of modelling baptismal grace after the Immaculate Conception. The first concerns the Protogospel (Gn 3:15) and points to the Immaculate Conception as fulfillment of its prophecy. Our Lady's radical new beginning necessitated a fierce struggle between Christ, the descendent of the woman, on the one hand, and the serpent, the murderer and liar from the beginning (Jn 8:44), on the other hand. The second salvific event refers to the almighty arm of God, which led the people of Israel to the freedom from slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea (Ex 14–15). When transposing both events on a supernatural level, the Immaculate Conception becomes a precursor of God's liberation of all people from the slavery of sin because the agonizing battles of Genesis 3:15 and Exodus 14–15 were won ultimately through the Paschal mystery. In virtue of faith in the death and resurrection of Christ, and in the sign of the water, the Holy Spirit has restored the freedom of the children of God, just as he has preserved Mary from any kind of lack of freedom from the beginning of her life. Karl Rahner, S.J. asserts that, while Mary was "enveloped from the beginning of her life in the redemptive and saving love of God," we through Baptism are being wrapped in the "redeeming and saving love of God."⁵⁵ The difference, as Rahner states, is in the fact that Mary possessed these gifts in a radical way, "from the

54 Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 10; *Redemptoris Mater*, no. 8.

55 Karl Rahner, S.J., *Mary, Mother of the Lord*, trans. W. J. O'Hara (London: Catholic Book Club, 1963), 43–44.

beginning, and incomparably.”⁵⁶ Thus, Mary’s experience of God’s mercy and redemption is “greater, (and) more profound, and far-reaching than ours,”⁵⁷ adds Edward Schillebeeckx, OP.

2.2. Full of Grace

Mary, the first fruit of a pure love, is a forceful sign of God’s grace operative within a creature. She collaborated in her own redemption with “pure receptivity and openness towards God’s potential gifts.”⁵⁸ Thus, in her, *gratia sanctificans* and *gratia gratis data*, holiness and mission, coincide. Fr. Joseph Kentenich, founder of the international Schoenstatt Work, adds: Mary “is willingness personified to receive divine grace: for herself; as representative ... of all of creation; for our benefit and as example for our imitation.”⁵⁹ The Immaculate proves to the neophyte that the Garden of Eden is not simply the wonderland of the past or nostalgia of the present. On the contrary, Mary is the witness and evidence that the divinization of the human race is no longer out of reach.⁶⁰ To this, the Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky adds:

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48–49. Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1978), 387.

⁵⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 50.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁹ Joseph Kentenich, Lenten Sermons 1954 in *Mary, Our Mother and Educator: An Applied Mariology* (Waukesha WI: Lithoprint, 1987), 362.

⁶⁰ David Vincent Meconi, S.J., and Carl E. Olson., *Called to Be the Children of God: The Catholic Theology of Human Deification* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016), 282; see footnote 13.

If the Mother of God could truly realize, in her human and created person, the sanctity which corresponds to her unique role,... then the destiny of the Church and world has already been reached not only in the uncreated person of the Son, but also in the created person of his Mother.⁶¹

The radical newness of the Christian life generated through baptism is mirrored in the Immaculate. She is the blueprint of what it means to be created in God's image and likeness. It is she who challenges us to live up to our human and religious identity, "to be holy and blameless in God's sight."⁶² In this light, the neophyte accepts and wears the white garment as an outward sign of Christian dignity. The rebirth and regeneration effected through Baptism imply that the Christian vocation surpasses the mere preservation of the sinless status. We are called to the original unity of creation and grace, the *donum integritatis*, the most authentic and beautiful form of human existence.⁶³

2.3. On Target

Like the Immaculate, the neophyte is by no means incapable of sin nor, unlike Mary, a person who *de facto* does not sin. Baptism, however, destroys the power of sin, the unbecoming mode of being, which exhibits a distortion of the true human structure. "What emerges (from 1 Corinthians 15) is that Christ is not only a new beginning for humanity but a new humanity. He himself constitutes the

⁶¹ Vladimir Lossky, "Panagia," in *The Mother of God: A Symposium*, ed. E.L. Mascall (London: Dacre Press, 1959), 34.

⁶² Eph 1:4; Col 1:22.

⁶³ Cf. Joseph Kentenich, *Marianische Erziehung: Pädagogische Tagung vom 22–26 Mai 1934* (Schönstatt: Schoenstatt Verlag, 1971), 192.

heavenly humanity, and we must put it on, as Paul says.”⁶⁴ In other words, our sharing in the attributes of divinity is conditioned on our fully acquiring the “attributes of humanity.”⁶⁵ Yet, as Eduard Schweitzer suggests, whereas “in Baptism the old Adam, that is the old sinful self, is indeed drowned, ... the scoundrel can still swim.”⁶⁶ This drama points to Mary’s pedagogical role from the onset of the Christian’s existence, a reality that could without difficulty find entry into the Rite of Baptism and even earlier when the “Rite for the Blessing of a Child in the Womb” is administered.⁶⁷ The Immaculate Conception as the neophyte’s model for self-realization, reminds us of the true meaning of sin. Mary never missed the target (Gk. *harmatia*; to sin, to miss the target). Sin is the failure to stay on target or to be what we were meant to be in virtue of our baptismal calling.

Conclusion

We have shed light on the twofold role of the Immaculata for neophytes at the sacrament of initiation. From our examination of the Incarnation, we deduced that Mary’s *fiat* assented to the Father’s plan for our redemption. Her *Yes* brought us the Redeemer and, at the same time, became the cradle of every Christian. Her maternal mission culminated on Golgotha and Pentecost, where she cooperated with the

⁶⁴ Meconi and Olson, *Children of God*, 35.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 37; see footnote 41.

⁶⁶ Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. A. Chester (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 202.

⁶⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Rite of Baptism for Children: The Roman Ritual* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002) and *Rite for the Blessing of a Child in the Womb*; *Rito de Bendición de una Criatura en el Vientre Materno* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2012), 18–19.

birth of the Church.⁶⁸ By virtue of her office as Mother of the Church, Mary stands at each baptismal font cooperating with the Holy Spirit in the birth and growth of each Christian.

Doctrine and dogma are both meant to mediate and develop life.⁶⁹ Seen in this light, the Immaculate Conception presents us with the ontological image and eschatological type of the neophyte, as well as the ethical exemplar for the Christian way of life. Like Mary's sinlessness and holiness, the Sacrament of Baptism calls the neophyte to the fullness of love in being and action. The Immaculate Conception teaches us by her example to set the love in us aright, even as she forms the likeness of Jesus Christ in us.

The Christian life from its onset at Baptism is, in its very essence, a *consortium cum Christo*, a union of life and therefore a union of hearts, a union of tasks and a union of destiny with Christ. Only in Mary Immaculate has this union reached its perfect actualization.⁷⁰ But, as Notre Dame Lutheran theologian Max Johnson observes, "there is indeed a close parallel between what is asserted of Mary's Immaculate Conception in service of her ultimate role as Theotokos in the Incarnation and the ultimate role of ... the baptized.... For baptism makes us all *Theotokoi*."⁷¹ As Mother and Model of the Church, she welcomes each one of her children at the baptismal font, and in view of her

⁶⁸ Cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, 58f.

⁶⁹ Cf. Joseph Kentenich, *Sign of Light for the World: A collection of Aphorisms* (Constantia, South Africa: Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary, 1980), 18.

⁷⁰ Joseph Kentenich, "Study in Milwaukee" in *With Mary into the New Millennium. Selected texts by Father Kentenich about the Mission of the Blessed Mother* (Waukesha, WI: Lithoprint, c. 2000), 62.

⁷¹ Maxwell E. Johnson, *Images of Baptism*, Forum Essays 6. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001), 128f.

vocation, she becomes our *hodegetria*—the Gift and Sign for the Neophyte.

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