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CONFIRMATION IN THE SPIRIT BY CONFORMATION TO MARY: THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT IN MARIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Jacob Phillips

This article investigates a Mariological interpretation of the sacrament of confirmation, exploring the figure of Mary as a model recipient of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, with broader implications for understanding the interrelation of nature and grace. It draws upon a strand of patristic Mariology that relates Christian initiation to conformation with Mary. Such passages are found in Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, who all speak of the souls of the faithful being conformed to Mary. As Mary received the Word of God in her womb, so Christ is formed more deeply in the soul of the Christian strengthened by confirmation.

Introduction

At first glance, this essay seems to have a rather difficult task. Firstly, the sacrament of Confirmation is arguably the more obscure of the sacraments of initiation for the contemporary mindset. While *Lumen Gentium* reaffirmed the centrality of Baptism in Christian life, and the twentieth century saw a

large-scale growth in appreciation of the centrality of the Eucharist, Confirmation has perhaps not had quite the same renaissance.¹ Certain problems behind this are longstanding. For some time, the question of whether Christ directly instituted this sacrament has been posed, and this proved to be a vexed issue during the Protestant Reformation, when Luther argued that only the sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, and Penance are genuinely grounded in Scripture. More recently, problems attending the understanding of Confirmation were sufficient enough in the 1960s for Yves Congar to claim that this sacrament is in an “unstable state.”² Yet more recently, various commentators have described it as a sacrament looking for a theology.³

Things are made more challenging in that Confirmation is particularly linked with the Person of the Holy Spirit. At least in terms of academic reflection, the Spirit has proved to be one of the most elusive elements of theology for many years. Of course, this goes back to the very nature of the Spirit—spoken of in Scripture as fire, wind, or a hovering dove—that is, in symbols suggestive of something fleeting, subtle, or elusively intangible; not concretely circumscribed like Jesus of Nazareth, or directly referred to as often as the Father is, by Jesus himself. Whereas Christ’s institution of Confirmation formed part of the Reformation debates, the

¹ See *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 14–15, for example. While baptism is mentioned twenty times in this document, confirmation is mentioned on only three occasions.

² Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Smith (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 3:218.

³ This phrase has become very common in the literature, as discussed in Daniel G. Van Slyke, “Confirmation: A Sacrament in Search of a Theology?” *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1041 (2011): 521–551.

ambiguities surrounding the Person of the Spirit touch on a contentious point in the relationship between Greek and Latin theologies, particularly the vexed issue of the Spirit's relationship to, or rather proceeding from, the Son. Moreover, the various ambiguities surrounding the theological understandings of the Spirit inevitably affect understandings of the gifts of that Spirit, gifts that tradition holds to be imparted by Confirmation. There is little in the way of systematic theological consensus on the precise nature of these gifts, and indeed saints and doctors of the Church—such as Hilary of Poitiers, Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas—all seem to account for and describe these gifts in different ways.

So, there is a twofold challenge ahead: the first involves Christ's institution of the sacrament of Confirmation, and the second, the delineation of the intangible and uncircumscribable work of the Spirit in us. Yet, things begin to feel even more unwieldy when the Blessed Virgin is brought into the picture. Formal Marian dogma witnesses to the distinctiveness of Catholic tradition over against other approaches, so the questions just raised can be intensified by making recourse to the Blessed Virgin. But bringing Mary into a discussion of the sacramental grace of Confirmation is perhaps challenging even on intra-ecclesial grounds. That is, the Virgin's interrelatedness with Baptism can relatively and straightforwardly be connected with the exercise of her spiritual maternity when people are declared adopted children of God. Similarly, Mary's connection to the Eucharist is well-established, perhaps most famously by John Paul II's exploration of the Virgin as "Woman of the Eucharist," having a "profound relationship" with the

Blessed Sacrament (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 53). Our Lady at the font and Our Lady at the altar, then, are each well-established, but what of Our Lady at Confirmation?

In this essay, I want to cast some light on all this, but I do not want to consider the ambiguity surrounding the Blessed Virgin's role in Confirmation as symptomatic of the confusions at play. Rather, I want to suggest that studying Confirmation mariologically can actually offer us a more effective understanding of the issues and provide greater clarity in responding to them. In what follows, we shall see that, by linking Christ's baptism in the Jordan with Confirmation, certain themes come to the fore, namely the "taking hold" and "going forth" of a hitherto unseen anointing of the Spirit made to Christ in the womb of Mary. Approached more conceptually, this will be connected with the "taking hold" or "forming" of human nature by grace in Confirmation, through the candidate's personal assent. This will then be seen as a point where a state of affairs in the order of grace given by Baptism ("This is my beloved Son") goes forth as assent to an imperative taking root in human life ("Listen to him").

Studying certain elements of theological tradition, we shall see that the gifts of the Spirit are, for some key writers, very difficult to define as "pure" grace. They are gifts of a divine Person, yes; but they are the flourishing of natural human faculties too, which some hold to operate with a relative autonomy. Therefore, the gifts can be approached as a sort of "point of contact," if you will, between nature and grace—as places or moments within human subjectivity where grace takes hold and gives concrete form to human personhood. Mary herself can be approached as occupying

precisely this hinterland of human subjectivity in Christ where the gifts of the Spirit are active. That is, in the person of Mary, we encounter a sort of “missing link” between nature and grace, or a point where nature can no longer be understood apart from grace, and grace apart from nature, or where creaturely human nature is at its most graced—“full of grace”—and divine grace is at its most natural, most concretely tangible in space and time. In this way, confusion around how Mary might relate to the sacrament of Confirmation is not an intensification of existing contentions, but the nub of the problem itself. Mary will thus emerge from what follows as she to whom candidates for Confirmation should be con-formed. She will emerge as both a model of a creatureliness that is inseparable from the life of God and an active agent herself in forming the candidate’s assent. What follows will present a view of con-formation to Mary and by Mary as a formation that confirms her children in the fullness of life in the Spirit.

1. Confirmation

Beginning with the sacrament itself, Confirmation has something of an identity crisis with quite ancient roots. In the early Church, it was of course not generally a separate sacrament from Baptism, as is recorded most famously in Cyprian of Carthage’s *Letters*, which describe how the “newly baptised are presented to the head of the church; [and] receive the Holy Spirit through our prayer and the imposition of our hand.”⁴ The sacrament had developed a certain

⁴ St. Cyprian of Carthage, Epistle 71, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886).

autonomy by the Fifth Century, where the name “confirmation” is first used by the councils of Riez and Orange in 439 and 441, respectively. So, one can say that “baptism and the [confirming] ‘seal of the Spirit’ are really two aspects and two actions in the same sacramental process,”⁵ insofar as that which is confirmed—that is, sealed or consolidated—is the gift of Baptism.⁶

Further discussions on how exactly to situate the theology of Confirmation can be found at least as far back as the medieval period. This is because rooting Confirmation in the narrative of Christ’s earthly life can be quite difficult. Some, like Schillebeeckx, avoid the question of Christ’s direct institution by working from the link between Baptism and the Passion (cf. Rom 6:8) and connecting Confirmation to the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. Now, one can argue that the Spirit is particularly involved in definitively instituting those sacraments that are hard to root in a definite intention of Christ, as Alexander of Hales and Bonaventure did, arguing that the Spirit was the “active *inspiratio*” of Confirmation, Ordination, and Marriage.⁷ But the Council of Trent states that the Spirit is the “co-instituting principle” of all the sacraments and that Christ gave “certain actions a signification of grace,” while the “sacramental rites” themselves are “determined by history” and thus are

⁵ Congar, *I Believe*, 1:105n3.

⁶ “After the triple confession of faith, the priest anoints those who have just been baptised with chrism and the bishop lays on his hand and pronounces ... the prayer of ‘confirmation.’” Congar, *I Believe*, 1:105.

⁷ The emphasis here is on the Spirit as particularly active in tradition, in the early sedimentations of the deposit of faith in the centuries immediately after Christ. Cf. Congar, *I Believe*, 2:9.

augmentations of Christ's institutive action by the Spirit in the ongoing life of the Church by way of Sacred Tradition.⁸

Trent suggests that Christ gave a certain action "the signification of [the] grace" of Confirmation, which leads the approach to this question taken by L.S. Thornton and Jacques Lécuyer to appear apposite.⁹ They keep Christ himself in the center of things by highlighting Christ's being anointed in the womb of Mary (as an analogue to Baptism) and then having that anointing confirmed at his own baptism in the Jordan (an analogue to Confirmation).¹⁰ The action of Christ given a "signification of [the] grace of confirmation" is thus his baptism in the Jordan. Accordingly, just as Jesus is anointed by the Spirit in the womb of Mary and then confirmed in that anointing publicly by his baptism, the faithful are baptized in the Spirit, and then confirm and declare that anointing in Confirmation.

To my mind, this works quite well, but it has a troubled history because of various external factors. These factors arose because, in seeking to interpret the event of the baptism of Christ, the early Fathers were fighting on at least two fronts. There were, in the first place, some heterodox with whom Justin Martyr took issue because they saw Jesus actually becoming the Christ, the anointed, and the beloved Son of God during the baptism itself.¹¹ Others took the more radically heterodox approach that there was some sort of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See L.S. Thornton, *Confirmation: Its Place in the Baptismal Mystery* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1954) and Jacques Lécuyer, *Le sacrement de l'ordination: Recherche historique et théologique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1983).

¹⁰ Congar, *I Believe*, 3:219.

¹¹ St. Justin Martyr, Dialogue 88, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-dialoguetrypho.html>.

divine “Christ-force” that descended on Jesus and could descend on those with *gnosis* in like manner. The best way to deal with these theologically is to take the course of action that the Church took some years later with the more subtle variant of the same impulses in Nestorianism. That way is “to trace the saving and sanctifying activity of Jesus Christ back to the personal union of the Word with humanity” in the womb of Mary and pointedly not, therefore, to “the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism.”¹²

Rooting Confirmation in Christ’s baptism, however, has certain advantages, I suggest. In the first place, it has been pointed out that neither of the two Gospels that mention the virginal conception “connect the fact that Jesus is to act through the Spirit and will finally communicate that Spirit with his birth.” Instead, they make the connection “with his baptism.”¹³ The confirming in the Spirit at Confirmation can be considered the pledge of the fuller submission of the will and intellect to that Spirit and an analogue to Jesus’ acting and communicating through the Spirit declared at the Jordan. Moreover, the Father’s statement at the event of Christ’s baptism (“this is my beloved Son”) is not a call. It is not like Paul’s road-to-Damascus experience, or even the calling of the prophets, but the “confirmation of [an existing] condition,” a condition that “qualifies Jesus in what he is.”¹⁴ By being connected with Christ’s baptism, then, we can understand Confirmation as rather like Pope St. Leo the Great’s famous command, “Christian, remember your

¹² Congar, *I Believe*, 1:21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1:16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:17.

dignity, now that you share in God's nature,"¹⁵ which could be paraphrased simply as: "Christian, be who you are." This fuses the indicative statement, "you are" (like Luke's "you are my beloved Son" [3:22]), with an imperative (like the Father's voice at the transfiguration "listen to him" [Lk 9: 25]). Leo points to an existing state of affairs granted by Baptism and urges his hearers to have their characters ontologically formed by it, to "take on" or "to be" shaped after the manner of the gift of Baptism. This, in turn, connects with Aquinas speaking of two missions of the Spirit in Christ's incarnate life: an invisible mission "to" the womb of Mary and a "visible mission" at his baptism, described as "a sign given ... of an invisible mission that had been previously carried out fully."¹⁶ This also connects with Herbert Mühlen's ecclesiology, which explores the considerable ramifications of focusing on Christ as anointed and the Church, therefore, not as a "continual incarnation" so much as the community "anointed" by the same Spirit who anoints Christ.¹⁷ Membership of this community is then at the forefront, and the significance of the laying on of episcopal hands is perhaps made more perceptible.

Already in this discussion, we are being pointed toward discussions surrounding the interrelation of nature and grace.

¹⁵ Leo the Great, Sermon 21, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360321.htm>. Translation altered.

¹⁶ Congar, *I Believe*, 1:21–22n45. See also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 486: "The Father's only Son, conceived as man in the womb of the Virgin Mary, is 'Christ', that is to say, anointed by the Holy Spirit, from the beginning of his human existence, though the manifestation of this fact takes place only progressively: to the shepherds, to the magi, to John the Baptist, to the disciples. Thus the whole life of Jesus Christ will make manifest 'how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power' (Acts 10:38)."

¹⁷ Congar, *I Believe*, 1:22.

The grace-filled anointing that was originally invisible to the world in the womb of Mary is shown forth as a visible declaration; it is “taken on” by Christ concretely. As in the words of Matthew 3:17, the Spirit “alights” or “rests” (*erchomai*) on the human Jesus of Nazareth. Discussions surrounding nature and grace are no doubt familiar to many of us, so I will give just the briefest of overviews by pointing out that nature refers here to human nature, that which is shared among members of the human family. Grace of course refers to God’s free and gracious gifts *to* humanity, those aspects or dimensions of life that are not ours by virtue of our human createdness, but are freely bestowed on us in God’s sovereign freedom. That Baptism is grace *par excellence* need hardly be reiterated here.¹⁸ Confirmation, a distinct but inseparable moment of initiation often happening sometime later, is certainly a grace and an impartation or conferral *of* grace, but it requires a little more from us. That is, Confirmation is different from infant Baptism in that, in the Latin Rite, it requires an assent, a personal declaration of faith, the submission of the natural faculties of will and intellect.¹⁹ Confirmation is a concrete statement of that assent, marked with the episcopal seal. In short, there is cooperation *with* grace by nature here; those of the age of reason (formed nature) are invited to make the faith-filled judgement to obey Christ and enter fully into the sacramental economy of his Church, the Church that shares that Spirit who anointed Christ in the womb of Mary and came forth in the waters of the Jordan.

¹⁸ Cf. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 40, 3–4; quoted in CCC, 1216.

¹⁹ Cf. First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, no. 3.

There are good grounds already to approach Confirmation in terms of the concretion of grace “in” or “by” nature. This two-stage dimensionality can be connected with the initial call of the disciples and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost—one relatively hidden, the other public and going unto the ends of the earth—and in the Eucharist, with the words of consecration and the epiclesis, the secondary showing forth of the Spirit’s anointing of the elements through a visible gesture. In all this, there is a sense of Christ’s grace imbuing createdness with a distinct character, a “taking form” or “taking root,” a cultivating or restructuring of nature and personhood—in short, fully active nature cooperating with grace, a moment where the Spirit is enabled to “rest” or “alight” “on” or “in” human nature, as it “rests” on Jesus in Matthew 3:16.

Interestingly, approached in this way, the ambiguities surrounding the Scriptural roots of Confirmation are not intensified by bringing Mary into this discussion. Quite the opposite, in fact, is the case. For Mary exemplifies precisely the two-stage dimensionality of these sacramental initiations. There is firstly her assent to the Spirit at the Annunciation, an attentive receptivity for God’s grace-filled initiative, a kind of receptive cooperation: “Let it be done to me.” But there is then the more outgoing and active cooperation with that work of redemption, its being made visible in its perceptible concretion. This is seen particularly at Cana, which is the moment where the mission of the Redeemer begins publicly in John’s Gospel, roughly equivalent to the Synoptic baptism narratives. At Cana, Mary gives the imperative, “Do whatever he tells you,” which could be approached as meaning, “share in the assent I made for you,

join your assent to mine.” Mary’s echoing of the Father’s imperative at the Transfiguration calls to mind Maximilian Kolbe’s meditation on Mary participating in the Father’s “paternal love of God for Jesus.”²⁰ The move from the indicative to the imperative, exemplified by Leo the Great’s “Be who you are,” is thus the move from a state of affairs pertaining to the order of grace (“you are” or “this is”) gaining traction in the order of nature by the submission of human will and intellect (“*Be* who you are” or “*do* whatever he tells you”). Mary herself lies at the very heart of this, as human creatureliness “filled with grace” (*kecharitomene*, Lk 1:28).

2. Pneumatology

Turning now to the second set of challenges I mentioned at the beginning, it seems that a host of ambiguities can surround understandings of the Spirit, perhaps almost as numerous as the hosts of heaven. On the Spirit’s intangibility, it has been said that he does not have “a revelation in the objective sense as there is in the Person of the Word,... and, through [the Word],... the Person of the Father.”²¹ Added to this, the Spirit seems to suffer from what Congar calls “a lack of conceptual mediation,” by which I think he means the mediation of non-Person specific concepts. “Holiness” and “spirit” apply equally to both Father and Son, and do not

²⁰ “Jesus is the Son of God and the Son of Mary. The heavenly Father and Mary have the same Son; Jesus. He is the same object respectively of each, the eternal from the Father, the temporal from the Mother; He is the same object of love by Father and Mother. This gives us insight into the dedication and power of the love of Mary for Jesus ... Mary participates on earth in the paternal love of God for Jesus.” *Roman Confernces of St Maximilian Kolbe* (New Bedford MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2004), 23.

²¹ Congar, *I Believe*, 1:vii.

apportion a Person-specific relational structure in the way that concepts like “fatherhood-sonship” and “begetting-begottenness” do.²² The Personhood of the Spirit is thus transparent, perhaps—or at least subtle—with an identity opening out or pouring forth the Persons of Father and Son. Moreover, this transparency of the Spirit is operative not only *ad intra* or immanently, but *ad extra*, or rather, *ad hominem*. That is, the intangible and indeterminate activity of the Spirit also seems to open out or pour forth into human personhood, so the intricate intertwining of the Spirit with our own subjectivities can be very hard indeed to pin down.

In English (as in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin), the word “spirit” itself can of course be *either* divine or human, and it is therefore at times hard to tell which is which. There are good grounds to suggest that this is not merely about semantics and grammar, but deeply indicative of the complexity involved in the Holy Spirit’s relatedness to and with us, so that the boundary between the divine and human S/spirit is at times very difficult to determine. Let us take the Hebrew *ruach*, for example, which has meanings of not only “the force that vivifies man” (or the “principle of human life”) and “seat of knowledge” (all aspects of the human spirit), but also “the life of God himself, the force by which he acts and causes action.”²³ The Greek *pneuma*, similarly, “expresses the living and generating substance (‘life’) diffused in creatures, described as a sort of ‘subtle corporeality,’”²⁴ as well as the divine life of God.²⁵ In the Wisdom literature, this

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 1.3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Moreover, *ruach* in the Old Testament is apportioned to what seems to be

ambiguity is perhaps most intense, for there is human “wisdom” and what seems to be divine Wisdom, and wisdom is called Spirit (“Wisdom is a spirit” [Wis 1:6, 7; 7:22–25, 27; 8.1]). Divine and human wisdom are thus “brought so close ... that the two realities are almost identified.”²⁶ It was this that led the mid-century biblical critics, D. Lys and J. Isaac, to argue that “there is a continuity and connection between the movement that God gives to creatures of the cosmos ... and that which he puts into them to establish a personal relationship with him, in other words, between nature and grace.”²⁷ The intricacy of divine-human relationality in the Spirit of course defines the New Testament particularly. There, the fullness of the economy of salvation is given forth in the direction of “greater and deeper interiority” within human life; there, the Son’s work of redemption is embedded in humanity through “sanctification, and intimacy,” by “God’s love being poured into our hearts” (Rom 5:5). This reaches an apogee, arguably, with “indwelling,” where divine-human relationality shares in the intra-Trinitarian movement of *perichoresis*.

One contention of this essay is that the indeterminacy of locating what “belongs” or is “proper” to the Holy Spirit and to the human spirit undergirds some of the difficulties attending the theological understanding of Confirmation. That is, some have struggled to articulate exactly what is imparted or bequeathed *by* Confirmation, not only because the divine-human relationality in the Spirit is supremely

a human “discernment and wisdom” (Gn 41:38 and Nm 11:16ff, 25). Cf. Congar, *I Believe*, 1:5.

²⁶ Congar, *I Believe*, 1:9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:8.

difficult to demarcate, but also because this is particularly the case when it comes to the gifts of the Spirit, meaning precisely that giftedness granted by this sacrament of initiation. In order to draw this out more fully, I need to build on the general ambiguities just discussed, to show how the gifts themselves sit right on the point where the Spirit is at work in us, where grace intertwines with nature, and therefore, to show how focusing our attention on Mary promises to help us think about Confirmation afresh.

3. Gifts of the Spirit

The gifts of the Spirit are of course listed in Isaiah 11, where they are connected in the Septuagint to the Spirit “resting” (*requiescet* in the Vulgate), as the Spirit “remains” (*manentem*) in Mark 1:10: “the Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him” (Is 11:2). As implied by the Wisdom literature, this resting of the Spirit shows forth in human qualities, in the flourishing of human nature: in wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord, with the Vulgate differentiating *pietatis*, or piety, as the penultimate of these gifts, bringing the full list to seven. The key point here is that, in the tradition, these human qualities cannot be understood straightforwardly as the Spirit “inhabiting” or “indwelling” human subjectivity in the way, say, the theological virtues are understood as the direct “action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being.”²⁸ But neither can the gifts be understood as just natural, like the cardinal virtues, which are described as “attitudes” and “perfections” of “intellect and will” that are

²⁸ CCC, no.1813. See also CCC, no. 1831, on how the gifts of the Holy Spirit complete and perfect the human virtues.

“acquired by human effort,”²⁹ thus pertaining exclusively to the endowments of intellect and will, and the hard work of human moral striving.

Ever since the earliest years of the Church, the messianic promise of Isaiah was of course linked with the impartation of these seven gifts in the lives of the faithful. Justin Martyr, for example, “linked each ... to a specific Old Testament hero and attributed the presence of all ... [these heroes] in Jesus to the work of the Holy Spirit.”³⁰ Irenaeus and Origen, also, are deeply attached to this septenarium.³¹ Augustine gave the gifts a sense of bearing more directly on our lives, by linking them with the Ten Commandments,³² and Gregory the Great linked them directly with the virtues themselves, specifically the theological virtues.³³ In the modern-day *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, it is true that the gifts are clearly not endowments of nature as such, but gifts, and therefore grace, given by the divine Person of the Spirit. But, at the same time, they are described in ways that strongly suggest their proper belonging to human nature, their genuine humanity over and above a straightforward indwelling of uncreated grace. They are described as “permanent dispositions,”³⁴ for example, and so not like the effervescent, ephemeral, or at times fleeting workings of purely divine grace. As Aquinas puts it, these are gifts that

²⁹ CCC, no. 1804.

³⁰ George P. Evans, “The Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 436–439.

³¹ Congar, *I Believe*, 2:134.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ CCC, no. 1830.

are “deep and lasting,” inseparably intertwined with our own personhood.³⁵

In the twelfth century, a more exact classification and taxonomical analysis of the gifts of the Spirit became common in the West, begun, it is thought, by Philip the Chancellor, who clearly demarcated the gifts as distinct from the virtues. This move was followed by Aquinas and Bonaventure in a time when “the theology of the gifts ... has its greatest development and its systematic completion in the great masters of the 13th Century.”³⁶ Although the angelic and seraphic doctors have different approaches, their respective analyses share certain characteristics, not the least of which is the indistinguishability of nature and grace for each account of the gifts they provide.

Aquinas maintains in the *Sentences* that, “with the help of the gifts, the believer [is] able to act *ultra modum humanum*, ‘beyond the means of man.’”³⁷ Yet, in the *Summa*, while certainly not denying that there is *inspiratio* at work here,³⁸ it is instructive that the interlocutor who enables him to articulate his understanding of the gifts is actually the philosopher Aristotle, one who has in his sights only the nature of man, not man’s grace. That is, Aquinas speaks of the *inspiratio* of the Spirit at work in imparting the gifts with a terminology borrowed from Aristotle’s descriptions of the

³⁵ Congar, *I Believe*, 1:119.

³⁶ Antonino Poppi, O.F.M., “The Gifts of the Holy Spirit according to Bonaventure,” Trans. Solanus M. Benfatti, C.F.R., *The Dunwoody Review* 35 (2012): 154.

³⁷ See Joseph de Guibert, “Dons du Saint-Esprit et mode d’agir ‘ultrahumain’ d’après Saint Thomas.” *Revue d’Ascétique et de Mystique* 3 (1922): 394–411.

³⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 68, a. 1.

impulses or inclinations of the superior appetite, for which Aristotle uses the word *hormē* in the *Eudemeian Ethics*. So, Aquinas uses a word for the promptings of nature in Aristotle to describe the promptings of grace of the gifts. That he is fully aware of the peculiarity of this, I suggest, is shown by his repeated use of the formulation *et etiam Philosophus* (even Aristotle) when he does it.³⁹ Most importantly, Aquinas states that, in order for the virtues to be “practised ... fully,” God has “to play a part in man’s practice of them” by “creating in the soul a habitual availability—by means of the *habitus*” of the gifts. These gifts, we read, enable us to “to receive from [God] a movement enabling us to practice the virtues”⁴⁰ in a way not merely bestowed on unaided nature, but intricately intertwined with the operational working of that nature.

This strange nature-grace hinterland of the gifts is perhaps articulated most fully by Bonaventure, for whom the development of “the divine life” in us—that is, “[t]he sanctifying grace obtained by Christ and infused by the Spirit”—requires that this “grace penetrate the different faculties of the soul, rectifying their sinful inclinations and empowering them in striving towards the soul’s final end.”⁴¹ Bonaventure considers this “taking root,” or “penetration,” of the Spirit down into the very depths of the life of man to occur through what he calls “ramifications of grace” in the *Breviloquium* [5.2]; that is, the gifts of the Spirit. Knowing exactly how to classify the gifts as “ramifications of grace” remains very difficult, perhaps inevitably so, for he

³⁹ Congar, *I Believe*, 1:119.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:120.

⁴¹ Poppi, “Gifts,” 156.

differentiates them from “simple natural goods” on the one hand and straightforward “graces *gratis datae*” on the other.⁴²

Bonaventure, like many other scholastics, connects each gift with a specific virtue and also with one of the beatitudes. The virtues, he argues, are “initial acts,” or stimuli, of God that “rectify the operative powers” of the soul “in view of the moral good” (*habitus rectificantes*). The beatitudes speak of a final, or perfect, summation of these faculties operating in the fullness of divine life (*habitus perficientes*). But—and this is the salient point for us today—in between there is an intermediate stage in which these faculties are fitted, made “ready and able in their exercise even in supererogatory, non-obligatory actions,” or *habitus expedientes*.⁴³ That is, they are human faculties, of course, not quite infused with the fullness of divine life, yet going forth *ultra modum humanum*, beyond the means of man. Indeed, this indistinguishability of the gifts from that which is “properly human” and that which is “properly divine” is intensified by the fact that the virtues, which they improve and furnish *ad expediendum*, are not divided as natural, cardinal virtues and gracious, theological virtues. That is, the gifts operate equally on the “purely” natural faculties and the purely gracious actions of the Spirit in us. For example, for Bonaventure, the gift of understanding forms and shapes the entirely gracious virtue of faith, while the gift of fortitude of course forms and shapes natural fortitude, the straightforward human capacity to “suffer with patience the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

great adversities of life,” a capacity that is advanced and extended into the toleration of “sufferings” in imitation of “Christ crucified.”⁴⁴

4. Con-formation to Mary

The preceding should have made clear that, with the gifts of the Spirit, we are dealing with what we could term “deeply graced nature”—a point at which nature can no longer be understood apart from grace, and grace apart from nature. To receive, cultivate, nourish, and accept these gifts, then, would seem to con-form the believer after the manner of Mary, who is creatureliness “full of grace,” the highest daughter of God. Matthias Scheeben refers to Mary as “living, passive, and active susceptibility to regenerating grace.”⁴⁵ Perhaps in this, we can see both Mary at the font and Mary at Confirmation, passive and active susceptibility, respectively, in the public assent to Christ, framed as an imperative in its “taking hold” of nature and forming it for the fullness of the divine life. Indeed, here, we touch on a theme of Patristic Mariology often neglected in our contemporary situation; that is, our con-formation to Mary, such as that found in Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and particularly Ambrose.⁴⁶ Ambrose draws on the account of Christ addressing Magdalen directly as “Mary” in the resurrection garden, and states that Christ’s use of the

⁴⁴ See p. 10 of the online version of Poppi’s article, which is available here: https://www.academia.edu/7828692/Poppi_Bonaventure_on_the_Gifts_of_the_Holy_Spirit trans. Solanus Benfatti.

⁴⁵ Matthias Scheeben, *Mariology*, (London: B. Herder, 1946), 5–6. Translation altered.

⁴⁶ See Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999).

name Mary here indicates that “[w]hen the soul . . . turn[s] to Christ, she is addressed as “Mary.”⁴⁷ Confirmation here, then, is the state of affairs of the order of grace taking hold in nature, when the soul can be called “Mary,” and Christ can fully take root in us.

We, however, would be doing a disservice to this discussion were we to leave things here and suggest only that Mary, in her being perfectly shaped by the divine life, offers only a model or exemplar for us, only an example of creatureliness at its most graced through her occupying precisely this hinterland in question. In order to draw out this last point, let us cast our minds back to the Mariology of Matthias Scheeben, who highlighted that many of the mariological dogmatics of his day were restrained by trying to “systematise Mariology under two basic principles,” or opting for one or the other: in the first place the maternal principle (Mary as *Theotokos*)—central for Suárez, for example—and in the second, the bridal principle (Mary as New Eve)—central for Billot, by contrast.⁴⁸ Scheeben opted instead for a “double principle,” one of “bridal motherhood,” which I merely touch on here to remind us of the spousal dimension to Mary, “a virgin espoused to the Holy Spirit,” and who therefore gives herself “wholly and unconditionally to the bridegroom, in order to beget and educate the child in and with him.”⁴⁹ Bringing this spousal dimension into view here is important, I suggest, for reminding us that Mary herself is personally active in and with the Spirit, and

⁴⁷ Ambrose, *De Virginitate* 4, 20, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, ed. J-P Migne (Paris, 1844ff), 16, 271.

⁴⁸ T. Geukers, translator’s preface to *Mariology*, by Scheeben, xxv–xxix.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xxx–xxxi. Referring to Mary as bride of the Son.

therefore our con-formation to Mary at Confirmation is not mere modelling, but our being parented by Mary, who defines and gives shape by actively shaping our personhood in the Spirit. One is reminded here of Bernadine of Siena's radical statement that Mary has "a certain jurisdiction or authority over the temporal procession of the Holy Spirit, to such an extent that" graces of the Spirit are dispensations "of the Virgin herself."⁵⁰ Scheeben also states that the bridal dimension is supremely important, for it emphasizes Mary's active cooperation with the work of redemption and thus challenges what he considers a tendency of Protestantism to consider human nature a mere "lump of clay" in which grace can have "no interior hold."⁵¹

Nuptial imagery of course calls to mind Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. In the opening hymnic rhapsody to this letter, several of the words used for the gifts of the Spirit in the Septuagint translation occur after Paul mentions our being blessed in Christ with "every spiritual blessing" (1:3). He goes on to mention God's acting in all "wisdom and knowledge," according to the "counsel" of his will, according to his great "fortitude," and so on—that is, God acting in the economy of salvation in Christ with the perfect expression of these gifts. When Paul says this grace has been "freely bestowed on us," he uses a construction that is the only place in the New Testament where the term used for "full of grace" in Luke 1:28 reoccurs (*kecharitomene*). And what is the result of this? As Paul says, that we should be

⁵⁰ Congar, *I Believe*, 1:164.

⁵¹ Scheeben, *Mariology*, xxi. Scheeben connects this with Luther, which is not really fair considering the Lutheran-Calvinist differential of *capax* and *incapax*.

“holy and blameless before God”—that is, to quote the Vulgate’s rendering of St. Paul’s word, *immaculata*.

By joining our assent with Mary’s in this sacrament and by consciously and freely submitting our will and intellect to the will of God, grace attains its interior hold in us, by the workings of the Holy Spirit through Mary in us. In this way, Confirmation is best understood, I contend, as con-formation to Mary and by Mary, who enables us to share in the fullness of the divine life.

Biographical Note

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