

Mary as the Full Image of Humanity – *Poverty and Joy* – Wm. Short, OFM – pp. 55-57

When the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was solemnly proclaimed on 8 December 1854, many Franciscans saw the event as an honour, not only to Mary, but also to Scotus. As a corollary of his view of Christ, incarnate because of love, not because of sin, he maintained that Mary of Nazareth was conceived without sin. Without analyzing here the various texts of Scotus about Mary, I would like to offer a simple explanation of some of his thinking about the notion of Mary as the fully human person.

It often seems that when we speak of Mary's conception without sin we imply that something is 'missing' in her, namely 'original sin.' But we also say that sin is the *lack* of something: it is *not being* like God. What this doctrine celebrates is that Mary is fully and clearly what a human person is meant to be, what all of us are created to be: clear images of God. To understand the beauty of this approach, we may take a moment to look at Scotus' view of the human person in Christ.

Because Scotus always considered Christ first, he saw the person as the living image of the Word incarnate. In Scotus' view (we call this the Primacy of Christ or Christocentrism) creation is modelled on the humanity of Christ. That human person is the goal of creation. Everything is made through him, for him, and in him. He is really Adam, the first Adam. The Adam of Genesis is his image. The beginning of Genesis, the story of the world and humanity before sin, is the image of who Christ is.

God plans all things in view of the human form of the Son, Christ, and intends the Son to be 'born of woman.' To use the mundane metaphor of making a plan, we could say that after deciding that the Son shall be incarnate as a human, the Trinitarian God next chose the woman who will be invited to share her humanity with God.

What kind of human being shall she be? The clearest image of the Son, the most appropriate: she will be *fully* human. And so she was, as God intended, a woman who lived as a fully human person. Only now can we move to the beginning of Genesis. God's logic moves backwards, it seems, from one point of view, God starts with the New Testament and then goes to the beginning of the Old Testament: Christmas comes logically before creation. Christ precedes Adam, and Mary precedes Eve. The medieval Scholastics had a Latin phrase for this: *primum in intentione, ultimum in executione*, 'the thing you first intended is the last thing completed.'

Following this logic, Christ comes first, then Mary, then Adam and Eve. As we read the Genesis story, we see the full God-image of Adam and Eve change, as they freely choose to be something else than God's full image. That decision makes them less who they really are as human persons; it is the denial of full humanity, but it was their choice and God does not prevent them from making it. To take away their freedom would make them 'incomplete images of the free Son.'

We call that choice 'original sin', and according to the Scriptures, that choice has an impact in the next generation, with Cain and Abel, and the next and the next, through Noah to Abraham to Moses to David to Solomon, to our own day.

But the image of God is not lost, it is obscured. It is harder to see true humanity, Christ's humanity, but the image, tarnished, is still there.

With the conception of Mary, the Great Plan, the book before Genesis, begins. A human person is conceived in *full* humanity. Mary is who we really are: freely, fully soul and body, her humanity *for* Christ, *in* Christ, *of* Christ.

It would be better to give a different name to this doctrine. It is the doctrine of Mary-who-was-conceived-without-sin. But why define someone by what they are *not*? This could be named the doctrine of Mary, Fully Human. For in God's logic, that is what all of us are to be, ultimately, and what we are in God's design.

Was she conceived without sin? I saw this answer in the crude lettering on a shrine at the friary of Belmonte in Northern Italy. Mary is painted there, Scotus on the left beside her crude image and Francis on the right. Above her, the words badly lettered, is the Scotist's explanation of God's reasons – *Potuit, Decuit, ergo Fecit*: it could be done, it should be done, so God did it.' A traditional hymn, sung on Saturday evenings in Franciscan houses around the world, has brought this Scotistic message home over the centuries:

*Tota pulchra es, Maria
et macula originalis Non est in te.
Tu, Gloria Ierusalem!
Tu, laetitia Israel!
Tu, honorificentia populi nostri!
Tu, advocata peccatorum!
Oh, Maria! Oh, Maria!
Virgo prudentissima,
Mater clementissima,
Ora pro nobis,
Intercede pro nobis,
Ad Dominum Jesum Christum.*

Mary, you are the most beautiful
No stain from the beginning is in you.
You, glory of Jerusalem!
You, Israel's joy!
You, our people's pride!
You, the sinners' advocate!
Oh, Mary! Oh, Mary!
Wise virgin,
Merciful mother,
Pray for us,
Intercede for us,
With the Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Church – Dogmatic Constitution on the Church – Lumen Gentium – Paragraphs 66 & 67

66. Placed by the grace of God, as God's Mother, next to her Son, and exalted above all angels and men, Mary intervened in the mysteries of Christ and is justly honored by a special cult in the Church. Clearly from earliest times the Blessed Virgin is honored under the title of Mother of God, under whose protection the faithful took refuge in all their dangers and necessities.(21*) Hence after the Synod of Ephesus the cult of the people of God toward Mary wonderfully increased in veneration and love, in invocation and imitation, according to her own prophetic words: "All generations shall call me blessed, because He that is mighty hath done great things to me".(301) This cult, as it always existed, although it is altogether singular, differs essentially from the cult of adoration which is offered to the Incarnate Word, as well to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and it is most favorable to it. The various forms of piety toward the Mother of God, which the Church within the limits of sound and orthodox doctrine, according to the conditions of time and place, and the nature and ingenuity of the faithful has approved, bring it about that while the Mother is honored, the Son, through whom all things have their being (302) and in whom it has pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell,(303) is rightly known, loved and glorified and that all His commands are observed.

67. This most Holy Synod deliberately teaches this Catholic doctrine and at the same time admonishes all the sons of the Church that the cult, especially the liturgical cult, of the Blessed Virgin, be generously fostered, and the practices and exercises of piety, recommended by the magisterium of the Church toward her in the course of centuries be made of great moment, and those decrees, which have been given in the early days regarding the cult of images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin and the saints, be religiously observed.(22*) But it exhorts theologians and preachers of the divine word to abstain zealously both from all gross exaggerations as well as from petty narrow-mindedness in considering the singular dignity of the Mother of God.(23*) Following the study of Sacred Scripture, the Holy Fathers, the doctors and liturgy of the Church, and under the guidance of the Church's magisterium, let them rightly illustrate the duties and privileges of the Blessed Virgin which always look to Christ, the source of all truth, sanctity and piety. Let them assiduously keep away from whatever, either by word or deed, could lead separated brethren or any other into error regarding the true doctrine of the Church. Let the faithful remember moreover that true devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity, but proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to know the excellence of the Mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love toward our mother and to the imitation of her virtues.



GOD'S PLAN FOR MARY

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that Mary is a member of the Church who "occupies a place in the Church which is the highest after Christ and also closest to us" (LG, no. 54). She is the first and the greatest of all the disciples of Christ.

When the Gospel of St. Luke (1:26-38) narrates God's call to Mary, the Virgin of Nazareth, to be the Mother of the Savior, his Son, from all eternity, she consents to this call with profound faith and trust. Thus, she "gave to the world the Life that renews all things, and who was enriched by God with gifts appropriate to such a role" (LG, no. 56).

"BLESSED ARE YOU AMONG WOMEN"

An essential part of God's plan for the mother of his Son was that she be conceived free from Original Sin. "Through the centuries the Church became ever more aware that Mary, 'full of grace' through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception" (CCC, no. 491).

In anticipation that she was to bear the Son of God, Mary was preserved from the time of her conception from Original Sin. We call this the Immaculate Conception. No sin would touch her, so that she would be a fitting and worthy vessel of the Son of God. The Immaculate Conception does not refer to the virginal conception and birth of Christ, but rather to Mary's being conceived without inheriting Original Sin.

In the course of time, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception became more precisely enunciated, as its truth—long supported by the universal popular devotion of the faithful—was better understood by

deepening theological inquiry. In 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed this dogma infallibly: that is, in his role as supreme teacher of the Church, he declared that this doctrine is divinely revealed and must be accepted with faith by the entire Church.

It is also the faith of the Church that Mary is to be called the “Mother of God.” “The One whom she conceived as man by the power of the Holy Spirit, who truly became her Son according to the flesh, was none other than the Father’s eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hence, the Church confesses that Mary is truly the ‘Mother of God’” (CCC, no. 495, citing Council of Ephesus: DS 251). In the Eastern Churches Mary is honored by use of the Greek expression *Theotokos* or “Birth-giver of God” (sometimes translated as “God-Bearer”).

The Holy Spirit’s power made possible the conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb. There was no human father. The Gospels clearly present the virginal conception of Jesus as a divine work (cf. Mt 1:18-25; Lk 1:26-38).

Mary was always a virgin, both in conceiving Jesus, giving birth to him, and remaining virgin ever after. God granted her this privilege to emphasize that this was a unique moment in history—the birth of Jesus who is the Son of God and the Son of Mary. The liturgy of the Church speaks of Mary as “ever virgin.” In the early Church some denied this, arguing that the Gospels speak of the brothers and sisters of Jesus, and thus maintained that Mary did not remain a virgin after the birth of Jesus. But already in the fourth century, theologians pointed out that the Greek word for brother used in the New Testament can refer also to cousin. A second explanation was that these brothers and sisters were children of Joseph by a previous marriage. However, it is the constant teaching of the Church that Mary remained a virgin even after the birth of Jesus. In her virginity, Mary lived a life dedicated exclusively to her Son and his mission. Her example has been followed by some of Christ’s disciples who have lived lives of consecrated virginity and celibacy from apostolic times to the present.

In the mystery of her Assumption, Mary experiences immediately what we all will experience eventually, a bodily resurrection like Christ’s own. “The Immaculate Virgin . . . when the course of her earthly life was

FROM THE CATECHISM

1. What is the role of Mary's faith in the plan of salvation?

The Virgin Mary "freely cooperat[ed] in the work of man's salvation through faith and obedience" (LG, no. 56). She uttered her yes "in the name of all human nature" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, 30, 1). By her obedience she became the new Eve, the mother of all the living. (CCC, no. 511)

2. Does Mary intercede on our behalf?

This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly. . . . Taken up into heaven she did not lay aside this saving office, but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. (CCC, no. 969, citing LG, no. 62)

3. How does the Church honor Mary?

The Church rightly honors the Blessed Virgin with special devotion. "From the earliest times the Blessed Virgin is honored under the title Mother of God, whose protection the faithful take refuge together in all their perils and needs. . . . This cult . . . differs essentially from the cult of adoration, which is offered equally to the Incarnate Word and to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and it is most favorable to it" (LG, no. 66). The liturgical feasts dedicated to the Mother of God and Marian prayer, such as the rosary, an "epitome of the whole Gospel," express this devotion to the Virgin Mary. (CCC, no. 971)

finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of death" (CCC, no. 966, citing LG, no. 59).

Finally, in Mary we behold what the Church is already like during her pilgrimage of faith—and what the Church will become at the end of the journey. “Mary figured profoundly in the history of salvation and in a certain way unites and mirrors within herself the central truths of the faith” (LG, no. 65).

MARY AS MOTHER OF THE CHURCH

At the beginning of the third session of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI announced that Mary would be honored under the title “Mother of the Church.”

From Christ’s conception until his death, Mary was united to her Son in his work of salvation. From the Cross, Jesus entrusted his beloved disciple to Mary, telling him to see her as his own mother (Jn 19:27). When the Apostles and disciples gathered to pray after the Ascension of Jesus, Mary was with them praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Mary continues to pray before God for the Church and all humanity.

Like Mary, the Church has a maternal role, giving birth to people in Christ. The Church can never cease to look at Mary, who gave birth to Jesus Christ. The Church contemplates Mary’s motherhood in order to fulfill her own calling to be mother of the members of Christ’s Mystical Body, the Church. Also like Mary, the Church is virginal. The description of the Church as virginal is used here in the spiritual sense of the undivided heart and of fidelity in its most luminous form. God calls all the members of the Church to fidelity to the union with him begun at Baptism and continued in the other Sacraments.

MARY’S MATERNAL INTERCESSION

In our culture, there can be a discomfort with praying for Mary’s intercession on our behalf. This seems to be a mediating role that crosses a line set out in the First Letter to Timothy: “For there is one God. / There is also one mediator between God and the human race, / Christ Jesus, himself human / who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tm 2:5). So Jesus Christ is the one and only mediator. Jesus alone is the Savior.

But this does not deny the possibility that Christ would permit others to share in his mediating role. Here on earth we routinely ask others for prayers. Instinctively, we turn to holy people for their prayers because they seem nearer to God. Why would we stop asking saints for their prayers after they die? If we believe they are in heaven, would not their prayers be even more effective?

From the earliest times, Christians have sought Mary's prayers and help. There has been the basic sense on the part of the Church that Mary continues in heaven to be concerned for the growth of all members of the Church into holiness and an intimate relationship with her Son.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you explain to others the connection between Mary as the Mother of God and all her special gifts: the Immaculate Conception, perpetual virginity, and the Assumption? Why is it important to understand that Mary, too, needed to be redeemed?
2. In what ways can you identify with Mary's "yes" to God at the Annunciation? If Mary's life serves as an example for us of an undivided heart in response to the love of God, how are you able to daily demonstrate your love for God?
3. Mary was the greatest disciple of her Son. How are you growing in your call to discipleship?

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS

- "What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illuminates in turn its faith in Christ" (CCC, no. 487).
- "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman" (Gal 4:4).
- An essential part of God's saving plan for the mother of his Son was that she be conceived free of Original Sin. "Through the centuries the Church became ever more aware that Mary, 'full of grace' through God, was redeemed from the moment of her conception" (CCC, no. 491). This is the doctrine of her Immaculate Conception.

- At the Annunciation, Mary responded to the angel Gabriel with these words: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). This was her consent to the Incarnation. From that moment onwards the Virgin Mary cooperated freely and in the obedience of faith with the plan of salvation. She uttered her yes to God “in the name of all human nature” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, 30, 1).
- The Gospels call Mary the “Mother of Jesus.” Mary is truly the Mother of God since she is the mother of the Son of God made man. In the Eastern Churches Mary is honored as the *Theotokos*, or “Birth-giver of God.”
- Mary was always a virgin, in conceiving Jesus, in giving birth to him, and for the rest of her life.
- “The Most Blessed Virgin Mary, when the course of her earthly life was completed, was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven, where she already shares in the glory of her Son’s Resurrection, anticipating the resurrection of all members of his Body” (CCC, no. 974). This is the doctrine of her Assumption into heaven.
- “We believe that the Holy Mother of God, the New Eve, Mother of the Church, continues in heaven to exercise her maternal role on behalf of the members of Christ” (Pope Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God*, no. 15).

<http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/uscca/#170>

Scripture Reflection *Acts 1:14*

All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.