

Marian Faith in a Time of Crisis

MICHELE M. SCHUMACHER

University of Fribourg

Fribourg, Switzerland

Among the reasons to rejoice over the year 2018 is, Pope Francis mentions in his Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia, the canonization of the nineteen martyrs of Algeria: “nineteen lives given for Christ, for his Gospel and for the Algerian people . . . models of everyday holiness, the holiness of ‘the saints next door,’” he explains.¹ These so-called “ordinary” saints are nonetheless extraordinary, for they proclaimed their faith in Christ by the shedding of their blood. In these lives fully surrendered to Christ, there is an exact accordance between the message and the messenger. Their final proclamation is perfect, because they witness to what the *Catechism* presents as “an organic connection between our spiritual life and the dogmas [of our faith],”² that is to say, the content of what the Church proposes as worthy of faith and even “obliging”³ for those who bear the name of Christ. Their martyrdom, likened unto that of Christ himself, embodies what Pope Francis calls “the *divine logic* that does not halt before evil, but instead transforms it . . . into goodness.” It likewise reminds us that “God’s salvation, freely bestowed on all humanity . . . does not act independently of our will, our cooperation, our freedom and our daily efforts.” “Salvation is a gift, true enough,” Francis continues in his typically matter-of-fact manner, “but one that must be accepted, cherished and made to bear fruit (cf. Mt 25: 14-30).”⁴

¹ Thomas Georgeon, “Nel segno della fraternità,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, December 8, 2018, p. 6, cited by Pope Francis in his Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2018, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/december/documents/papa-francesco_20181221_curia-romana.html.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], §89.

³ CCC, §88.

⁴ Pope Francis, 2018 Christmas Greeting.

How different is this attitude from that of those chided by the Pope for “frequently com[ing] to think and act as if they were the owners of salvation and not its recipients, like overseers of the mysteries of God and not their humble ministers, like God’s toll-keepers and not servants of the flock entrusted to their care.” “Instead of following God,” they put themselves “in front of him,” Pope Francis suggests, “like Peter, who remonstrated with the Master and thus merited the most severe of Christ’s rebukes: ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on the things of God but on the things of men’ (Mk 8:33).” Likening these unfaithful servants to King David, who committed the triple sin of “sexual abuse, abuse of power and abuse of conscience,” Francis observes that they take “advantage of their position and their power of persuasion. They perform abominable acts, yet continue to exercise their ministry as if nothing had happened. They have no fear of God or his judgement, but only of being found out and unmasked.” They discredit “the Church’s saving mission and the sacrifices of so many of their confrères.” In contrast to those who witness to Christ, even to the point of death, they, like Judas, are willing to sell him for thirty pieces of silver. In short, by their “infidelity and shame,” they “disfigure the countenance of the Church and undermine her credibility.”⁵

A Crisis of Credibility: A Crisis of Faith

A “crisis of credibility” is, in fact, what we are currently experiencing in the Church, Francis suggests no less than six times in his letter to the bishops of the United States on the occasion of their recent retreat at Mundelein Seminary (January 2–8, 2019). “The Church’s credibility has been seriously undercut and diminished by these sins and crimes, but even more,” he explains, “by the efforts made to deny or conceal them. This has led to a growing sense of uncertainty, distrust and vulnerability among the faithful.”⁶

To be sure, some have recognized in Pope Francis’ words of reproach just another example of the very attitudes behind much of the scandalous cover-up at the heart of this crisis, namely the fear that “*This makes us look bad.*” Hence, for example, Amy Welborn asks in reaction to this letter whether the problem is not to be situated in the sins of using people, of doing “great harm to God’s children,” and of “offend[ing] and disobey[ing] God who created us for good, not evil”—rather than in the diminished

⁵ Pope Francis, 2018 Christmas Greeting.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Letter of the Holy Father Pope Francis to the Bishops of the United States of America*, January 1, 2019, uscbb.org/about/leadership/holy-see/francis/upload/francis-lettera-washington-traduzione-inglese-20190103.pdf.

credibility of the institution and the resultant threat to the “bonds of communion.” Exemplary of the suspicion that many now harbor against their pastors, Welborn’s question—phrased in terms of either-or⁷—ironically overlooks the important connection between the sinful acts of the clergy and the diminished credibility of the Catholic Church.

Let me put it straightforwardly: the profound tragedy of the Church of our time is—such I truly believe—that those entrusted with the mission of preserving the “full and living Gospel” of Christ and of teaching in his name,⁸ have in fact—by their personal sins of sexual abuse, abuse of power, and abuse of conscience—actually endangered it. It is moreover precisely this endangering of the faith that renders their sin all the more abominable. “It would be better,” the Lord says, “if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he cause one of these little ones to stumble” (Luke 17:2). It does not suffice to point a finger toward similar crimes in other sectors of society, in an effort to lighten the culpability of our pastors. We have a right to expect integrity of those who not only bear the name of Christ, but who also—and this is what sets them apart—speak and act for Christ, even on behalf of his other members.⁹ After all, the Catechism incites us—the lay faithful—to exercise “docility” toward their teaching and directives, “mindful of Christ’s words to his apostles, ‘He who hears you, hears me.’”¹⁰ In question is what the *Catechism* claims as proper to Catholic faith: a “remarkable harmony between the bishops and the faithful” in “maintaining, practicing, and professing the faith that has been handed on.”¹¹ As Father Regis Scanlon put it recently, “The problem of clergy sexual abuse is so serious, entrenched and widespread that it must somehow be related to a misunderstanding—or rejection—of something fundamental to the Catholic Faith itself. This is not primarily an administrative or educational problem. It is fundamentally a spiritual and pastoral problem.”¹²

⁷ “Is this situation a problem because it diminished the institution’s credibility and threatens bonds of communion, or because people committed all sorts of sins of commission and omission, used other human beings, did great harm to God’s children, and offended and disobeyed the Lord who created us for good, not evil?” (Amy Welborn, “The Problem with Pope Francis’ Letter to the U.S. Bishops,” *The Catholic World Report*, January 3, 2019, catholicworldreport.com/2019/01/03/the-problem-with-pope-francis-letter-to-the-u-s-bishops/.)

⁸ CCC, §77.

⁹ CCC, §85.

¹⁰ CCC, §87.

¹¹ CCC, §84.

¹² Regis Scanlon, “A Three-Day Meeting in Rome to do What?” *Crisis Magazine*,

From this point of view, the crisis of credibility is quite clearly a crisis of faith: a crisis that might be likened to others that the Church has weathered, but not without great suffering and casualties. Take, for example, the Donatist controversy in the aftermath of the Roman persecutions: persecutions offering Christians the choice between idolatry and martyrdom. Born of the heresy that only “sinless” priests—those who had not given over to the Romans—could validly administer the sacraments, the Donatist crisis threw the Church of Carthage into a state of turmoil for nearly two centuries (fourth–sixth centuries). We owe most certainly to that crisis these powerful words from St. Augustine of Hippo, who had studied in Carthage during the time of the controversy, and who, as bishop, championed against the Donatists:

As for the proud minister, he is to be ranked with the devil. Christ’s gift is not thereby profaned: what flows through him keeps its purity, and what passes through him remains clear and reaches the fertile earth. . . . The spiritual power of the sacrament is indeed comparable to light: those to be enlightened receive it in its purity, and if it should pass through defiled beings, it is not itself defiled.¹³

There is still another important lesson that we might learn from that terrible trial. After the great Roman persecution had come to an end, the question was raised: what do we do with the “traitors” (*traditors*), those, that is to say, who had given up the sacred books or sacred vessels, those who had denounced brethren to the Romans or those who had directly renounced Christ? It was decided that they would undergo a more or less long period of purification by way of penitence, but—and here is the clincher—the merits of those who had remained faithful in persecution (they were called “confessors” if they were not martyred) could be offered—if they would be so generous—to diminish the length and/or severity of the penitence of their sinful brethren. Such is the power of the communion of saints. It points to the powerful force of good in fighting evil!

And what of the Protestant reformation that has divided the Church for five centuries and counting? Born of the personal agony of Martin Luther with regard to the certainty—or rather uncertainty—of his own salvation, but also of his rightful resistance to terrible corruption in the

January 8, 2019, crisismagazine.com/2019/a-three-day-meeting-in-rome-to-do-what.

¹³ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Johannis Evangelium* 5.15 (PL, 35:1422), cited in CCC, §1584; see also §1128.

Catholic Church at the time, it has a much less positive view of the practice of offering indulgences. This crisis has, in fact, challenged, as perhaps no other ecclesial controversy, the very meaning of faith and salvation. Luther is, of course, famous for his insistence upon salvation by “faith alone.” By this, he means in the absence of works. We do not earn our way to heaven. It is given to us by means of faith, by which he means confidence in God’s promise.¹⁴ And “Since our salvation depends only on God’s free mercy, the transfer of merits in the heavenly bank from one account to another has,” as Luther specialist Paul Althaus puts it, “lost all meaning. . . . For God deals with each man by himself and no one can believe or obey or die for another.”¹⁵ We could hardly be further from the corrupt practice, current in the Catholic Church of Luther’s time, of selling indulgences: “*As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul out of purgatory springs.*”¹⁶

“Yes” to Christ, “No” to the Church

It should not be surprising that in these very crucial moments of Church history—moments in which the Church’s ministers have been unfaithful, and such is obviously the moment in which we find ourselves today—that the temptation is great to say “yes” to Christ, and “no” to the Church: to seek a personal relationship with the Lord that is not mediated by a corrupt body, or at least not one with a corrupt institution at its head. I cannot help but think of the last will entrusted by Martin Luther to his disciples, “Preserve this one thing when I am dead: hatred of the roman pontiff.”¹⁷

To be sure, “in the Apostles’ Creed we profess ‘one Holy Church’ (*Credo. . . Ecclesiam*), and not to believe in the Church, so as not,” the Catechism explains, “to confuse God with his works.” Yet, the Catechism continues, “To believe that the Church is ‘holy’ and ‘catholic,’ and that she is ‘one’ and ‘apostolic’ (as the Nicene Creed adds), is inseparable from belief in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ We are not,

¹⁴ “Faith” for Luther means, Paul Althaus explains, “accepting God’s promise from the heart and taking a chance on it” (*The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966], 44).

¹⁵ Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 300.

¹⁶ “Sobald der Pfennig im Kasten klingt, die Seele aus dem Fegfeuer springt.” Attributed to the Dominican preacher Johann Tetzel.

¹⁷ “Hoc unum me mortuo servate: odium in pontificem Romanum” (Hans Preuss, *Martin Luther, der Prophet* [Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1933], 173; cited by Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, trans. André Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 16.

¹⁸ CCC, §750. Indeed, “the article of faith about the Church depends entirely on the articles concerning Christ Jesus. The Church has no other light than Christ’s”

interestingly enough, far from Luther's own view: "Whoever seeks Christ must first find the church," he preached in a Christmas homily. "Now the church," he adds, "is not wood and stone but the group of people who believe in Christ. Whoever seeks the church should join himself to them and observe what they teach, pray, and believe. For they certainly have Christ among them."¹⁹

The point is well made: we never believe alone. Our a-s-sent (that is to say, our Yes *to* Christ) is always a con-sent: a yes with (*con*) others: a yes with all those who believe and who, precisely by their own acts of faith, have given a certain credibility to the person of Christ, inciting us to likewise cling to him. Many are the testimonies of those who look to the Church for help when their faith is weak in moments of temptation or those that the tradition presents as suffering the "dark night" of faith. One need only think of the famous scene from the autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux in which, during her terrible crisis of faith at the end of her life, she quite literally writes the creed in her own blood: a final effort, as it were, to grasp at what is tangible and objective in a faith that she could no longer subjectively feel. Certainly in that moment, we might recognize something of a heavenly conspiracy whereby the witness of those martyrs who had given their lives to defend that creed were able to bring her solace, just as her own faithfulness in adversity does for so many of us today. Take, for example, those who suffered during the Arian heresy of the fourth century: women and men—indeed some thirty bishops—who died defending the true divinity of Christ, thereby writing, as it were, a creedal article in their own blood.

These beautiful examples serve to illustrate what the *Catechism* presents as "an organic connection between our spiritual life and the dogmas. Dogmas are lights along the path of faith; they illuminate it and make it secure. Conversely, if our life is upright, our intellect and heart will be open to welcome the light shed by the dogmas of faith."²⁰ It is this unity of the objective and subjective aspects of the Christian faith—the unity of

(CCC, §748). Similarly, "The article concerning the Church also depends entirely on the article about the Holy Spirit, which immediately precedes it" (CCC, §749).

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. WA 10/I-1, *Weihnachtspostille*, ed. Joachim Karl Friedrich and J. K. F. Knaake (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1910), 140, cited by Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 287. For Luther, Althaus explains, "the Church is defined by the Apostles' Creed as a 'communion of saints.'" He "does not understand this as a separate doctrine, but translates it as the 'community' [*Gemeine*] of saints and as an appositional phrase explaining 'one holy Christian church'" (*The Theology of Martin Luther*, 288).

²⁰ CCC, §89.

what we believe and the actual *act* of believing—that points, in fact, to our need for the Church. How easy it is to be misled by our own subjectivity, to reduce Christian faith to what Friedrich Schleiermacher calls “God consciousness”: a religious sentiment, or a feeling of dependence upon God, not unlike Luther’s understanding of faith. Schleiermacher even attempted to derive the entire content of the Christian faith from such a religious experience. The Christian faith is neither based upon nor derived from a religious experience, however, but upon, rather, an historical event: an event that nonetheless implied an absolutely unique, indeed unrepeatable, religious experience, namely, the dialogue between God’s messenger and the humble handmaid of Nazareth (see Luke 1:26–38).

Marian Faith at the Heart of the Church

This, of course, is where Mary comes in. When we find ourselves asking whether the Church is really necessary, “we forget,” Antonio Sicari reminds us, “that the Church is not a consequence of the Incarnation but a constitutive part of it. . . . It flows from the seriousness of his Incarnation and of his life as a human being, the seriousness of his being true God and true man.”²¹ Being human means, in fact, Hans Urs von Balthasar observes, being “with others,” and Christ, he adds, “is no exception.”²² The presence of Mary at the center of the event of the Incarnation witnesses to this fact. If Mary’s Son were not truly human, but “merely the product of an idea,” then it would have sufficed that she become spiritually pregnant, the Swiss mystic Adrienne von Speyr reasons. The real Incarnation requires that, in contrast, she really “feel his weight in her body and, after his birth, in her arms.”²³

Hers is thus necessarily an “incarnate” faith: a faith that “embraces body, soul, [and] spirit,”²⁴ so as to be entirely disposed to God’s self-revelation and even to be assumed into the mysteries to which she personally contributes. In receiving Christ, Mary receives the entire deposit of the Church’s faith. She receives “Truth itself (*ipsa veritas*)” (see John 14:6), to quote St. Thomas Aquinas; the Truth upon which faith is “established

²¹ Antonio Sicari, “Mary, Peter and John: Figures of the Church,” trans. Michael M. Waldstein, *Communio* 19 (Summer 1992): 189–207, at 192–93.

²² Balthasar, *Office of Peter*, 136.

²³ Adrienne von Speyr, *Mary in Redemption*, trans. Helena M. Tomko (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 67. For a more extensive development of these ideas, see Michele M. Schumacher, *A Trinitarian Anthropology: Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar in Dialogue with Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 176–79.

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 107.

and founded.”²⁵ For in “giving us His Son, his only Word,” God “spoke everything to us at once,” St. John of the Cross explains; “and he has no more to say.”²⁶ The sacred deposit, or treasury of the faith, that finds expression in Church doctrine is thus little more than an unpacking of God’s full self-revelation in the person of his Son. Because, moreover, “all the promises of God find their Yes” in this one Word, it is also “through him” that “we utter the Amen . . . to the glory of God,” St. Paul reasons (2 Cor 1: 20). As for Mary’s “yes,” it is “decisive, on the human level,” John Paul II explains, “for the accomplishment of the divine mystery,” making “possible, as far as it depended upon her in the divine plan, the granting of her Son’s desire.”²⁷

In the meeting of God’s “yes” in Christ to all mankind and Mary’s “yes” spoken to God “in lieu . . . of all human nature,” as St. Thomas Aquinas claims,²⁸ there is thus a perfect concordance, or unity, between *faith’s object*—the Word spoken by the Father, to whom confidence is accorded—and *faith’s act*: the subjective disposition that obediently surrenders. Because, in fact, Mary is preserved from original sin by the merits of her Son,²⁹ her *fiat* is “made possible by the Incarnation and cross of the Son.” It is nonetheless “one of the presuppositions of the Incarnation,” accomplishing the “one flesh” union of Christ and the Church, as announced in St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5 (vv. 21–33), while simultaneously “establishing, precisely here,” Balthasar observes, “the radical opposition between head and body, lord and handmaid, bridegroom and bride.”³⁰

Mary, to put it still more explicitly, “*becomes*,” Pope St. John Paul II explains, “*the authentic subject* of that union with God which was realized in the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word.”³¹ The formulation is significant. She is not absorbed into the hypostatic union; nor is she effaced. Instead, she becomes a true actor in the mystery of redemption,

²⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologia* [ST] III, q. 1, a. 2.

²⁶ Cited by the CCC, §65.

²⁷ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter on the Mother of the Redeemer, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), §13.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, ST III, q. 30, a. 1: “loco totius humanae naturae.”

²⁹ See Pius IX (1854), Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, in Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* [DZ], 43rd ed., English edition ed. R. Fastiggi and A. Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), nos. 2800–2804, at no. 2803.

³⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil, ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 94.

³¹ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), §4 (original emphasis).

for as the Catechism attests, it is only freely that one enters into a communion of love. "God's free initiative demands *man's free response*."³² By the descent of the Son of God, who takes on her flesh, Mary is really elevated into the holy mystery of his Incarnation and of the entire earthly mission of her Son, so as to willingly participate therein. Such is what the Fathers of the Church call the "marvellous exchange," the *admirabile commercium* of salvation: the becoming man of the Son of God in view of the divine adoption of the sons and daughters of man.³³ In this way, Mary's faith also reveals the two-fold dimension of salvation: the objective gift of Christ, who has come for the redemption of all, and the subjective surrender of the human person to Christ; for, as St. Augustine preaches, "He who created you without you, will not justify you without you."³⁴ The assent of faith is thus the means whereby the gift of the salvation in the form of very person of the Savior is actualized, becoming effective for oneself and likewise for others: especially for those whose faith is weak, for those who need to be carried, for all of those for whom the Church remains in labor until, as St. Paul puts it, "Christ be formed in you!" (Gal 4:19).

Indeed, often enough the weak one is you or me. Short of a private revelation, moreover, it must be admitted that if we believe, this is due to the fact that someone, somewhere, at some time, shared his or her faith with us or, still more profoundly, was for us the very image of Christ, whose spirit had taken possession of him or her so as to speak and act through this person.³⁵ Those of us who were baptized as infants, moreover, were baptized because our parents and godparents quite literally gave their assent of faith for us: in our place. But before anyone did this for any one of us, Mary did it *for all of us*, even for the entire Church and for all mankind. The communitarian dimension of the faith is, in fact, implied in St. Thomas's recognition that Mary gave her Yes for us all.

Mary is thus not only the Mother of Christ; she is also the Mother of the Church and the Mother of Christians: again, precisely by her faith, which not only models and incites the faith of Christ's members, but also

³² CCC, §2002 (original emphasis).

³³ See CCC, §460; and Thomas Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 1, a. 2.

³⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo* 169 ("De verbis apostoli. Ephes, cap. VI, 23") ch. 11 (*PL*, 38:923).

³⁵ I can hardly help but think of the beautiful reflection of St. Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has not body now but yours."

precedes and sustains it. Indeed, it even “*precedes*’ the apostolic *witness* of the Church,” as Pope John Paul II notes. As the one “who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45), Mary is “at the very basis of what the Church has been from the beginning, and of what she must continually become from generation to generation, in the midst of all the nations of the earth.”³⁶ “The mold into which the Church is formed,”³⁷ as well as its “deepest origin and unsullied kernel,”³⁸ Mary was, Balthasar reasons, present in the Church, “before men were set in office.”³⁹ Or as the Catechism reasons, because “Mary goes before us all in the holiness that is the Church’s mystery as ‘the bride without spot or wrinkle’ [Eph 5:27],” it is true to say that “the ‘Marian’ dimension of the Church precedes the ‘Petrine.’”⁴⁰

As differing, in fact, from the apostles, who testify to “the word of life” whom they have “seen with their eyes,” “looked upon and touched with their hands” (1 John 1: 1) and “heard” with their ears (v. 3), Mary says “yes” to what is yet intangible, unheard of, indeed unfathomable. She remains, furthermore, faithful to the incomprehensible mystery even in the darkest hour when all the apostles except John have abandoned the Lord (see John 19: 25–27). That is why Mary’s faith is presented by Pope John Paul II as inaugurating the New Covenant, so as to be comparable to the faith of Abraham, whom St. Paul calls “our Father in faith” (Rom 4:12).⁴¹ Her faith is “the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1; cf. Rom 8:24), which nonetheless enlightens the hearts of all the faithful, by giving flesh to the very object of our faith: the true Son of God. “The Virgin Mary does not conceive and believe, but believes and conceives,”⁴² as Augustine puts it in one of his homilies. “With faith she believes, with faith she conceives.”⁴³

For this reason, Mary’s faith retains a certain prominence with regard to the faith of Peter, to whom the Lord entrusted the keys to heaven, along with the promise that the “gates of hell will not prevail” against the Church under his care (see Matt 16:18–19). Despite his privileged mission,

³⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, §27.

³⁷ Balthasar, *Office of Peter*, 207.

³⁸ Balthasar, *Elucidations*, 108.

³⁹ Balthasar, *Elucidations*, 113.

⁴⁰ CCC, §773.

⁴¹ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, §14.

⁴² St. Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo* 233, 3.4; (PL, 38:1114).

⁴³ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo* 25 (PL, 46:937). Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, §13: “She conceived this Son in her mind before she conceived him in her womb: precisely in faith!”

Peter and his successors remain members of the Marian Church,⁴⁴ and it is precisely the faith of Mary—"hidden," as Pope John Paul II puts it, "like a special heritage of God's revelation . . . in the Church's heart"⁴⁵—that Peter and his successors are charged to preserve and transmit throughout all time and places. In fact, Balthasar argues therefore that "the Petrine universality is subject to the formative influence of the Marian, but not vice versa."⁴⁶

It follows that the Christian faithful do not only believe *as* Mary believes; they also believe *what* she believes: the very mysteries to which she gave perfect consent before she actually lived through them at her Son's side. As the archetypal Christian believer, she does far more, however, than model the attitude of faith for Christ's disciples, even in faith's darkest hours. She also transmits to us the very content of her faith in such a way that what is *personal* becomes *ecclesial*: the faith of the entire people of God. "The memories of Jesus, impressed upon her heart, were always with her, leading her," John Paul II explains, "to reflect on the various moments of her life at her Son's side."⁴⁷ Advancing with him, as his mission led to its consummation on the Cross, she carefully guarded these mysteries "in her heart," as Luke's Gospel attests (2:18; 51), so as to finally entrust them to the Church, through those whom Christ had entrusted to her as a final testament on the Cross (cf. John 19: 26–27). No one other than Mary, Balthasar has reason to note, has such an "unbroken memory" of the Christian events: "from the first moment of the Incarnation to the Cross, to the taking down from the Cross, to the burial and to the Resurrection."⁴⁸ Even today, John Paul II suggests, she "*constantly sets before the faithful*" the mysteries of her Son's life, "desir[ing] that the contemplation of those mysteries will release all their saving power."⁴⁹ In the person of Mary is thus supremely true what the Second Vatican Council says of the Church: that she "perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Balthasar, *Office of Peter*, 210.

⁴⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, §27.

⁴⁶ Balthasar, *Office of Peter*, 206.

⁴⁷ Paul John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on the Rosary of the Virgin Mary, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), §11.

⁴⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for Today*, trans. Robert Nowell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 38.

⁴⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, §11 (original emphasis).

⁵⁰ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, §98, cited in CCC, §98.

Conclusion

We might conclude that just as the mystery of Christ is unthinkable without Mary, so too the Church is incomprehensible without Mary: except perhaps as a lifeless, bureaucratic entity. When, on the other hand, the Church is adequately addressed as the partner, bride, and living body of Christ, then it is to the Marian dimension of the Church that we make reference. So important is her place in the salvific mission of Christ from its inception until his ascension into heaven and the sending of his Spirit, that it is already prefigured in the creation of Eve from Adam's side and again in the *Protoevangelium* of Genesis, chapter 3, wherein is foretold the Church's final victory over the forces of evil: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15).

Particularly striking in this depiction, which has inspired innumerable Christian artists throughout the ages, together with the woman of the Apocalypse, chapter 12, is the fact that this victory is accorded to the Woman: not in virtue of her own merits, but those of her child. For, "In the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman," as St. Paul points out. As if in fact to highlight the divinely willed connection between the original couple and the definitive one—the new Adam united to the new Eve—the apostle to the gentiles recognizes that "as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God" (1 Cor 1:11–12). This means that in the work of redemption, as in the original work of cultivating and populating Eden, it is "not good"—to continue the scriptural analogy—"that the man be alone." That is why God makes a "helper fit to him" (2:18).

"It is a question," Saint Pope John Paul II explains of this text from Genesis, "of a '*help*' on the part of *both*"—of woman for man, but also of man for woman—"and at the same time a mutual '*help*.'" After all, "to be human means," to summarize what has been a key point in my argument, "to be called to interpersonal communion," and thus to exist not only "side by side" or "together," but rather, John Paul II continues, "*mutually 'one for the other'*" in accord, namely, with the original "unity of the two," that is to say, man and woman, designed by the Creator. Hence, the "whole of human history"—including, as we have seen, the history of salvation—"unfolds within the context of this call" to "interpersonal communion," wherein might be recognized "in accordance with God's will," as Pope John Paul II observes, "the integration" within humanity "of

what is 'masculine' and what is 'feminine.'"⁵¹

This means not only that the mystery of the new Adam is necessarily complemented by the new Eve, since Christ associates his Mother in his salvific mission in obedience to the Father's will. It also means that the Petrine mission of the Church has dire need of the Marian. "Where the mystery of the Marian character of the Church is obscured or abandoned, there Christianity must become unisexual (homo-sexual), that is to say, all male," Balthasar argues.⁵²

Whether in fact, as much media coverage suggests,⁵³ the current ecclesial crisis is grounded in problems stemming from a homosexual clergy often engaged in abusive acts—sexual and other—and connected by dangerous networking systems and even a so-called "lavender mafia," or whether, as Pope Francis suggests, the problem is more properly that of clericalism or a "top-heavy" Church, as it were, Balthasar's point remains highly pertinent. So too does he deserve a hearing when he argues that in virtue of "its unique structure, the Catholic Church is perhaps humanity's last bulwark of genuine appreciation of the difference between the sexes."⁵⁴ The Marian dimension must be allowed to shine in the countenance of the Church, indeed to permeate and even sustain it in this moment of darkness.

It is not a question of bringing balance, in an extrinsic manner, as one

⁵¹ Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, §7.

⁵² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, 109.

⁵³ See, for example: Mathew E. Bunson, "Is Catholic Clergy Sex Abuse Related to Homosexual Priests?" *National Catholic Register*, January 4, 2019, ncregister.com/daily-news/is-catholic-clergy-sex-abuse-related-to-homosexual-priests/; Kevin Jones, "Clergy Sex Abuse On the Rise Again, and Church Leaders are Ignoring Why, Sociologist Says," *The Catholic World Report*, November 17, 2018, catholicworldreport.com/2018/11/02/clergy-sex-abuse-on-the-rise-again-and-church-leaders-are-ignoring-why-sociologist-says/; Francis X. Rocco, "The Tense Debate Over Gay Priests," *The Wallstreet Journal*, January 17, 2019, wsj.com/articles/the-tense-debate-over-gay-priests-11547743698; Justin Huggler, "Homosexuality is to Blame for Sexual Abuse, Not Catholic Church, Claims German Cardinal," *The Telegraph*, January 4, 2019, telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/01/04/homosexuality-blame-sexual-abuse-not-catholic-church-claims/; Jennifer Roback Morse, "About Those Gay Clergy Networks," *National Catholic Register*, November 12, 2018, ncregister.com/daily-news/about-those-gay-clergy-networks/; Aline Lizotte, "Deux types de prêtres hétérosexuels et homosexuels," *Smart Reading Press*, November 16, 2018, srp-presse.fr/index.php/2018/11/16/deux-types-de-pretres-heterosexuels-et-homosexuels/

⁵⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *New Elucidations*, trans. Sister Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 195.

branch of government balances another, for the Church is not a government. Nor can she be likened to a business or any other humanly-created entity, to “a mere administrative or organizational function in the ‘evangelization business,’” as Pope Francis puts it, rather sarcastically, in his letter to the U.S. Bishops. Rather, precisely as a divine creation, the Church of Christ must reflect the Creator’s intentions: intentions that point to the natural and even supernatural complementarity of man and woman, of the male and female: “not” simply “in isolated individual acts of specific organs,” Balthasar rightly insists, “but in the total surrender of one’s own being.”⁵⁵ After all, St. Paul does not hesitate to recognize in the original creation of man and woman an illusion to the mystery of the one-flesh union of Christ and his Church (see Eph 5: 29–33), whose wedding feast is announced by the book of the Apocalypse (see 19: 6–9) for the end of time.

If, for example, it is true that—as John Paul II explains in his letter on the dignity and vocation of women—men must “learn their fatherhood” through their wives,⁵⁶ might it not also be the case that pastors must learn their fatherhood through Mary, who was, “in a singular way,” as the Second Vatican Council acknowledges, “the generous associate” of the new and definitive Adam,⁵⁷ ‘the new Eve,’ who ‘brought forth on earth the very Son of the Father . . . whom God placed as the first-born among many brethren [see Rom 8:29], namely, the faithful, in whose birth and education she cooperates with a maternal love’⁵⁸? Indeed, *Lumen Gentium* continues, “the Church in her apostolic work also, justly looks to her, who, conceived

⁵⁵ Balthasar, *New Elucidations*, 196. “Who,” then, “has precedence in the end?” Balthasar asks. “The man bearing office, inasmuch as he represents Christ in and before the community, or the woman, in whom the nature of the Church is embodied—so much so that every member of the Church, even the priest [indeed, even the pope himself, we might add!], must maintain a feminine receptivity to the Lord of the Church? This question is completely idle, for the difference ought only to serve the mutual love of all the members in a circulation over which God alone remains sublimely supreme” (197–98). In a similar manner, Pope John Paul II recognizes that “*all human beings—both women and men—are called through the Church, to be the ‘Bride’ of Christ, the Redeemer of the world*” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, §25).

⁵⁶ See Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, §18. My thanks to Steven Long for the precision. Although John Paul II writes that a man learns his fatherhood “from” his wife, it more true to say, as Long has pointed out in a private conversation, that he learns his fatherhood “through” her.

⁵⁷ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), §61 (DZ, no. 4176).

⁵⁸ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §63 (DZ, no. 4177).

of the Holy Spirit, brought forth Christ, . . . so that through the Church he may be born and may increase in the hearts of the faithful also.”⁵⁹

As for the rest of us—the lay faithful, whom they have been charged to shepherd—we must remember that infallibility (the divine protection accorded to the Church’s teaching office)—is not impeccability: the purity of the “unblemished” bride of Christ, announced by St. Paul—the bride “without spot or wrinkle” (Eph 5:27)—whom the Church has always been in the person of her Holy Mother, conceived without sin, and never guilty sinning. In moments of darkness, she encourages us, assuring us that evil will not prevail, that goodness, truth, and light are of God, and to Him has been granted the victory over evil, lies, and darkness once and for all by her Son. She shares her unstained purity with us all, as well as her own faith, interceding for us in every moment of moral and spiritual darkness. Indeed, we might imagine that she too interceded for the apostle Paul, when he wrote these important words within the very context of expounding his analogy between the original unity of man and woman and the sacramental union of Christ and the Church in Ephesians chapter 5:

Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said:

⁵⁹ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §65 (DZ, no. 4178).

“Wake up, sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:1–20)

And, of course, we do well to likewise heed the advice of Mary, when she says to the servants at the feast of Cana with regard to her Son, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). Indeed, we can rest assured that neither the Mother, nor the Son will ever lead us astray.

Mary, Mother of the Church and our Mother, pray for us!

N·V