

## The Virgin Mary and the Church: The Marian Exemplarity of Ecclesial Faith

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HOW does the faith of the Virgin Mary in her earthly life illumine our understanding of the mystery of the Church, and of the lives of all the Christian faithful? I would like to consider in this essay the exemplarity of the faith of the Virgin Mary with respect to the ecclesial body of Christ. The idea touches upon the interrelation of a set of competing claims in modern Catholic theology. First there is the claim that the Second Vatican Council understood the mystery of the Virgin Mary as something within the domain of the mystery of the Church, an understanding represented by the controversial decision of the Council Fathers to include the Mariological statements of the council within the context of the ecclesiological document *Lumen Gentium*.<sup>1</sup> In one reading of this viewpoint, the Virgin Mary is an archetype of our salvation in Christ because in her person she instantiates in an ideal fashion the process by which divine grace transforms human nature. The Christocentric perspective of the Council is thus seen as ecumenical in orientation, and Mariology is reconfigured around the concerns common to all Christians of the doctrines of salvation and sanctification in Christ. Against such an aspiration—so it is often said—an important minority position sought to give theological priority to the prerogatives of the Virgin Mary (manifested by a separate document on her mystery). A second, completing claim thus emerges. On this view, the mystery of God's grace at work in the Mother of God is not reducible to the life of grace among other believers, for we cannot simply assimilate the intelligibility of her mystery into the immanent circle of all

<sup>1</sup> Cf., *Lumen Gentium*, c. 8, para. 52–69. See also the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 963–75.

other Christians. Her privileges are *sui generis* and an acknowledgment of them forms an integral part of the doctrine of the faith. Her mystery is not entirely reducible to the perspectives of a doctrine of sanctification applicable to all others.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the two perspectives need not be opposed to one another. Arguably, the ecclesiology of the Council Fathers did not cause them to underemphasize the irreducibly distinct sanctity of the Virgin Mary and her unique role in salvation history as the Mother of God.<sup>3</sup> If it did not, however, then how are these two truths inter-related: the ecclesial exemplarity of the Virgin Mary and her uniqueness as the Mother of the Redeemer? How ought these two truths to be simultaneously understood?

In this essay I would like to consider in three stages the topic of the Virgin Mary as a model of ecclesial faith. I will do so by recourse to themes found in the doctrine of grace of Thomas Aquinas, especially as it relates to the unfolding of the divine economy. In the first part of the essay I will consider Aquinas's doctrine of faith in three respects: in terms of the teleology of faith, its ontological degrees of perfection, and its communal character. In the second part of the essay I will consider more briefly the anthropological process of development in faith as it is related to love, particularly with regard to the question: how can faith grow through the occasions of joy and suffering? In the third part of the essay I will consider three mysteries of the life of the Virgin Mary, with respect to her faith: her divine maternity at the Annunciation, her meritorious compassion at the Cross, and her divine queenship in the Assumption, at the term of her earthly sojourn in faith. The goal is to show in these three mysteries how the characteristics of faith elaborated in part one of the essay (which are common to all the faithful) are exemplified in the life of the Virgin Mary, who, like all other Christians, grew in faith both through joy and through suffering. However, these same mysteries of grace are also expressed or realized in her in an absolutely unique mode, one that is not partaken of by another person in the divine economy. As I will argue in conclusion, however, the uniqueness of the

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<sup>2</sup> "The theological commission had carried into the plenary session two different opinions on this matter. Cardinal König of Vienna explained the view of those who desired that there be no separate schema about Mary but that the text on the Mother of God be integrated into that on the Church. In this way the statement about Mary could be integrated into the total ecclesiological picture. Cardinal Santos of Manila expressed the opposing view of those who wanted a separate schema on Mary. As is well known, the vote . . . resulted in a slight majority in favor of those who wanted the text on Mary integrated with that on the Church." Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, trans. H. Traub, G. Thormann, W. Barzel (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), 59.

<sup>3</sup> As noted by Ratzinger, *ibid.*, 60.

Virgin Mary is not something purely extrinsic to the ecclesial life of believers. On the contrary, her prerogatives are intrinsically related to the ecclesial communion of the Church. They are various ways that she affects the lives of all believers, shining forth simultaneously as the Mother of the Redeemer and the Mother of all the faithful.

## Part I. Ecclesiology: Faith as an Ecclesial Mystery

### A. The Teleological Character of Faith

Let us begin with the final purpose of faith as it is present in all who have it, and with the corresponding question of what is anthropologically common to all who have faith. This requires us to pose, however, the basic question of the purpose of the divine economy itself. Why or toward what purpose does God create the human person and give the grace of faith to human beings? In the twentieth century, it became common to consider faith's eschatological orientation as its defining feature and to reinterpret human existence in light of faith, over and against secular accounts of the human person. Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann each had their own well-known appropriations of and responses to Kantian and Heideggerian philosophies in this light.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the topic was not alien to classical Christian culture. On the contrary, the final end of the supernatural life is a fundamental theme in Aquinas, who sees the activity of grace in the human person as eschatological in orientation. For instance, he treats the question of the universality of the priesthood of Christ precisely under this rubric: why is it that Christ fulfills the prophetic foreshadowing of Levitical sacrifice (*ST* III, q. 22, a. 2)? How is it that the priesthood of Christ endures forever and mediates salvation for those in every age? Interestingly, the answer is given in terms of the vocation to sanctification common to all human persons. Aquinas re-reads the history of Christ's own sacrifice and Old Testament ritual sacrifice in light of a common fundamental Pauline theology of grace that Aquinas thinks explains the thread of continuity underlying the divine economy. Human beings in every age are potentially receptive to the graces of justification, sanctification, and eventually divinization (or eschatological union with God).<sup>5</sup> What was only hinted at opaquely in the

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1999); *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity*, 1954–55 Gifford Lectures (New York: Harper, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> *ST* III, q. 22, a. 2: "Now man is required to offer sacrifice for three reasons. First, for the remission of sin, by which he is turned away from God. . . . Secondly, that man may be preserved in a state of grace, by ever adhering to God, wherein his

pre-Christian economy and was implicitly foreshadowed in the Old Covenant rituals has come to fulfillment in the sacrifice of Christ, who is God made man. In this way, Christ's priesthood unveils the purpose of the whole economy. In him the graces of union with God have been poured out, then, bringing to fruition and making manifest the dynamic process that was previously hidden yet implicitly present from the beginning, "before all ages" (2 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:4).

Christ's uniqueness, then, is not opposed to universality. Rather, we see in light of Christ that the dynamic of grace is universalized, as St. Paul rightly identified. We know, in Christ's new economy, the common work of grace as it is structurally effectuated in all who are predestined: this occurs by justification in faith, sanctification in charity, and eventual divinization by way of the eschatological vision of God. All authentic pre-Christian activity of authentic sacrifice, then, was undergirded by this identical mystery of salvation, albeit in less readily recognizable forms. Abraham was justified by faith, sanctified by his obedient love of God, and divinized by way of the beatific vision. His grace is specifically the same as ours, as Paul makes clear in Romans 4.<sup>6</sup> And this is the case as well for all who outside the economy of baptism are saved by grace (Heb 11:1-6). Faith, then, for all human persons who receive and cooperate with this supernatural, infused virtue, is ultimately ordered toward the eschaton. It has no other purpose and intelligible final end than this: it is dynamically ordered toward the beatific vision.<sup>7</sup>

In what faculty of the human subject or what powers of the soul is the work of faith enrooted? "Neither eye has seen nor ear has heard, nor the heart of man has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). Paul clearly understands the vision of God as a higher mode of knowing than that to which we might attain by our natural

peace and salvation consist. . . . Thirdly, in order that the spirit of man be perfectly united to God: which will be most perfectly realized in glory. . . . Now these effects were conferred on us by the humanity of Christ. For, in the first place, our sins were blotted out, according to Romans 4:25: 'Who was delivered up for our sins.' Secondly, through Him we received the grace of salvation, according to Hebrews 5:9: 'He became to all that obey Him the cause of eternal salvation.' Thirdly, through Him we have acquired the perfection of glory, according to Hebrews 10:19: 'We have a confidence in the entering into the Holies' (i.e. the heavenly glory) 'through His Blood.' Therefore Christ Himself, as man, was not only priest, but also a perfect victim, being at the same time victim for sin, victim for a peace-offering, and a holocaust." [All translations of the *ST* are from the 1920 English Dominican Province *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).]

<sup>6</sup> See on this *ST* II-II, q. 2, aa. 6-8.

<sup>7</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 3.

powers.<sup>8</sup> It is something that utterly transcends us. At the same time, it is something we clearly can aspire to in faith: “For now we only see as in a glass darkly . . . but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor 13:12). It is to this intuitive perception that Paul aspires in Philippians 1:21–24 in saying that he should be better off with the Lord after his death than he is in his current life in the body. But if faith is intrinsically ordered to the vision, then it introduces the mind into an intimacy with God that is not something intrinsic to our native human capacities or range of knowing. In other words, just because it is ordered toward the vision, the supernatural faith therefore necessarily both transcends the intellect’s natural realm of knowing *and* sanctifies the intellect.<sup>9</sup> Faith is given into the intellect.<sup>10</sup>

This transcendent character and aspiration of the grace of faith, however, allows us to see at once the fittingness of the willed character of faith. Faith is received into the spiritual faculty of the intellect but maintained vibrant and alive only in love, by the graces of charity and hope active in the human will (Jas 2:20).<sup>11</sup> This is the case precisely because of the supernatural character of faith: it not something unavoidable or inherent to human nature but is a gift that must be received in and through free action. Love and hope are also required for the exercise of faith because of its eschatological dynamism: we are invited in faith to be united with the very life of God, by love in this life and by vision in the next. Such a union in this life, then, is only imperfect and initial. Consequently, it requires the ongoing activity of charity so that the heart might be sanctified in a stable union with God despite the absence of immediate evidence of the promises of faith. This form of union is also by its very nature hope-filled: it has an eschatological horizon.<sup>12</sup> It tends toward the vision in desire or aspiration to possess God. In his commentary on the Creed, Aquinas refers to this eschatological orientation

<sup>8</sup> See Aquinas commenting on this point, in *ST* I–II, q. 5, a. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *ST* I–II, q. 3, aa. 4 and 8.

<sup>10</sup> *ST* II–II, q. 4, a. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *ST* II–II, q. 4, aa. 3–4.

<sup>12</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Theological Compendium* II, c. 1: “We naturally desire to know truth, and when we do know it, our craving in this direction is satisfied. But in the knowledge of faith man’s desire never comes to rest. For faith is imperfect knowledge: the truths we accept on faith are not seen. This is why the Apostle calls faith ‘the evidence of things that appear not’ (Heb. 11:1). Accordingly, even when we have faith, there still remains in the soul an impulse toward something else, namely, the perfect vision of the truth assented to on faith, and the attainment of whatever can lead to such truth. Therefore. . . after faith, the virtue of hope is necessary for the perfection of Christian living.” *Theological Compendium*, trans. C. Vollert, S.J. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1947).

by use of a spousal metaphor. "Faith is like a marriage" he says, because it unites us to God.<sup>13</sup> The union has taken place already in this life, and yet it is anticipatory of a more profound unity that is to come in the vision of God. This spousal form of faith—by which it unites us to God—has a Marian exemplarity, to which we will return below.

### *B. Hierarchy (degrees of perfection)*

Hebrews 11 offers homage to historical biblical figures who exercised the theological virtue of faith to a heroic degree. The problem or quandary of the hierarchy of perfection of the grace of faith is ensconced in that text. On the one hand, the mystery of supernatural faith is present across the ages, not only among Christians and Jews, who have received explicit revelation from God, but also among "holy pagans," who were sanctified by the grace of God outside any visible encounter with the covenant of God.<sup>14</sup> This understanding of grace suggests a movement toward universality or common extension. The same supernatural faith is available to at least some persons in every age since the beginning of the world. On the other hand, there is, by the very nature of the encomium, the presupposition of exemplarity: some have lived the mystery of faith to exceedingly perfect degrees and therefore are models for us. Here there is a movement toward a notion of intensity of degrees of faith and a sense of hierarchy among those who are sanctified by faith.

Aquinas understands there to be a unity within this twofold truth, such that a deeper consistency emerges. On the one hand, he has a striking doctrine of the homogenous and identical character of supernatural faith across time and culture. The grace of faith tends inherently in all its recipients toward the knowledge of the same, identical divine subject. Faith is a mystery of coming to know the Triune God, revealed in the Incarnation by the person of the Son, Jesus Christ. Consequently, all faith in every age tends implicitly toward the cognizance of this mystery.<sup>15</sup> In order to articulate this possibility within a seamlessly unified divine economy, Aquinas distinguishes between implicit and explicit faith.<sup>16</sup> That is to say, faith knows degrees of explicit development. The first parents of the human race, even before the fall, he speculates, must have had explicit awareness of the mystery of God and even of the Incarnation, but they had no explicit awareness of the reasons for the Incarnation (as it would come to

<sup>13</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Creed*, Prologue.

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 11:4–7. Cf. Jean Daniélou, S.J., *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament*, trans. F. Faber (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1957).

<sup>15</sup> *ST* II–II, q. 2, aa. 7–8.

<sup>16</sup> *ST* II–II, q. 2, a. 5.

pass in response to their sin, which God permitted and foresaw, but in no way willed).<sup>17</sup> After the fall, all men of good will can come to know the Triune God and the Incarnation by faith implicitly, if they consent to believe by grace not only that God exists but that by his providence he cares for those who seek him.<sup>18</sup> Gentiles before the time of Christ, then, could know God in faith explicitly insofar as they confided themselves to his providence and sought the remission of their sins in prayer and sacrifices, in ways that gave outward expression to inner instincts of supernatural faith, charity, and true contrition.<sup>19</sup> The Scriptures affirm that there have been and are such persons.<sup>20</sup> The recipients of the Old Testament revelation, meanwhile, benefited from more explicit revelation of the mystery of God. Aquinas thinks that certain Old Testament prophets foresaw explicitly that the God of Israel would in some mysterious way enter history to save us (by his Incarnation and Passion), but most did not explicitly foresee the paschal mystery of Christ.<sup>21</sup> They adhered to these mysteries implicitly insofar as they sought in faith to obey the Law of God that typologically signified Christ.<sup>22</sup> Even after the coming of Christ and the age of the apostolic deposit of faith, when objectively revelation knows no addition, Christians who live subsequent to the New Testament revelation explicitly know in faith who the Triune God is, and how human salvation has been offered in the mystery of Christ and the Church, but they do not have an explicit knowledge of every potential teaching of Catholic truth contained in the deposit of faith.<sup>23</sup> Thus the explicit understanding of the deposit of faith grows through time through conceptual precision and greater theological understanding.<sup>24</sup>

Aquinas considers there to be a unique structure of Trinitarian and Christological faith implicitly common to all believers. However, from these brief observations it is also clear that a hierarchy of faith emerges even in the midst of this commonality. The source of a hierarchy of perfection in faith can first be enunciated by the degree of explicit knowledge of the revealed truth. To one extent this is a matter of the objective public revelation that obtains in a given age and is made available to the adherent to the revelation. Those who come after Christ potentially have a

<sup>17</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 7, corp.

<sup>18</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 7, ad 3.

<sup>19</sup> *ST* I-II, q. 103, a. 1; *ST* I-II, q. 98, a. 5, ad 3; *In IV Sent.* d. 1, q. 2, a. 6, sol. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *In Heb.* XI, lec. 2, 576-79 [Marietti edition].

<sup>21</sup> *ST* I-II, q. 103, a. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *ST* I-II, q. 102, a. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *ST* II-II, q. 1, aa. 9-10.

greater degree of familiarity with the mystery of God who reveals himself to us in history than those to whom that revelation remains unknown. In another way, however, there is the perfection of the adherent's subjective assimilation of the revelation. Thus in any given age or time and place, two persons with relatively similar objective degrees of revelation may have differing degrees of explicit subjective apprehension of the mystery that is given to them to know. Aquinas here distinguishes between the *Maiores* and the *Minores* of both the Old and New Covenants, between those who attained to a greater degree of insight into the mystery, and those whose knowledge remained more implicit and less developed.<sup>25</sup>

This differentiation of knowledge is not based, however, uniquely on what we might call a theologically developed awareness of the object of faith. Theology is an acquired science, not an infused one, and so it can be the occasion for growth in faith, when it is rightly motivated by a love for the divinely revealed truth, and especially when it is informed by the intellectual gifts of the Holy Spirit. But theological acumen need not translate into an objectively greater degree of the possession of the habit of faith. The contrary is at times manifest: the theologically educated mind of someone who believes in the revelation of God less avidly. This is why saints who are theologians are more illuminative than theologians who have neglected the call to holiness.

Aside from theological reflection, however, the deepest mark of differentiation of degrees of faith comes from two other factors, one extraordinary and one more common. The first is the extraordinary information of one's faith by the grace of prophetic insight. There are members of the people of God down through history who have received the graces of a higher, more elevated manner of grasping the object of revelation. I am referring here to prophetic *species* or divinely revealed insights into the mystery of God. These do not alleviate the grace of faith but qualify it by granting the recipient a deeper knowledge of the divine mystery. Classically, theology ascribes such insight to the Old Testament prophets and in an especial way to the Apostles, who taught the Church and whose teaching gave rise to the New Testament.<sup>26</sup> Their "explicit" knowledge of the mysteries of Christ came through the concrete familiarity they shared with him in his human life, but it came also from the plenitude of prophetic knowledge that they received by the gift of the Holy Spirit subsequent to the Resurrection of Christ.

A more common form of special understanding, however, is that given by the intellectual gifts of the Holy Spirit, and particularly the gifts of under-

<sup>25</sup> ST II-II, q. 2, a. 6.

<sup>26</sup> ST II-II, q. 171, a. 1; q. 174, a. 4, corp. and ad 3.

standing and of wisdom.<sup>27</sup> These qualify those habits of the human intellect which correspond in Aristotelian epistemology to *nous* or *intellectus* (intuitive insight into realities) and to *sophia* or to *sapientia* (seeing all things intellectually in light of the sovereign first cause of all things).<sup>28</sup> While faith is common to all believers who have the infused intellectual habit, this faith is qualified in some more profoundly than in others, according to the degree in which they receive the gifts of understanding and wisdom. The former gift allows the intellect—even under the veil of faith—to perceive or penetrate more deeply into the structure of the mystery of God. This gift is contemplative insofar as it allows the mind to understand more readily the connections of the mysteries to one another and to adhere to the presence of God in faith, by way of a greater or more intense love.<sup>29</sup> Such insight focuses the movement of the will toward the mystery of God in his goodness and so traditionally it is seen to lead to the beatitude of purity of heart. “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5: 8). The gift of understanding elevates our vision of God in faith, purifying the heart so that it moves out into God in a love that is more transparent and pure.<sup>30</sup>

The gift of wisdom, meanwhile, has the capacity to move the intellect by connaturality with God to perceive all other realities in light of God’s love. What happens in the world is read “from the inside” by faith with a penetration that perceives within all things the hand of God, however obscurely. This gift is associated traditionally with the beatitude of pacification.<sup>31</sup> “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God” (Mt 5: 9). The gift of wisdom elevates the mind to contemplate all things in light of God’s mystery and the goodness of his bounty expressed through the mystery of Christ and the paschal mystery. It therefore unites all things under a single gaze, giving order to the unfolding of events in light of Christ. It gives peace to the heart, inspired by understanding of this higher evangelical order.<sup>32</sup>

Due to the degrees of explicit knowledge of divine revelation, of prophetic insight, and of gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as differences of theological learning, believers across time have varying degrees of perfection in the habit of faith. This range of perfection affects the common good of the Church as her mystery unfolds through time.

<sup>27</sup> ST II–II, qq. 8 and 45.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 6–7.

<sup>29</sup> ST II–II, q. 8, aa. 4–6.

<sup>30</sup> ST II–II, q. 8, a. 7.

<sup>31</sup> ST II–II, q. 45, a. 6. Aquinas appeals here to the authority of Augustine in *De Sermon. Dom. In Monte* I, 4.

<sup>32</sup> ST II–II, q. 45, aa. 2–3.

### C. The Communal Character of Faith

The beatific vision is itself a mystery of common life. If God is the transcendent common good of the whole cosmos, then spiritual creatures who enjoy God by the direct vision of his essence partake of the greatest communitarian shared life. For this reason, Aquinas underscores that the beatific vision has an intrinsically communal character. This is the case for two distinct but related reasons. First because the vision of God is one shared by all the blessed, such that their joy and restfulness derive from the same source. All possess the vision of the unique Triune God. Second, however, they also all know not only God but also one another each in his or her uniqueness, and complementarity. This is not a collective knowledge merely of a conglomerate of individuals but is the participation of each one in a shared life that is common to all. They are therefore happier because of a shared life, a collective happiness, obtaining for each one personally in a distinct way but impossible without participation in the whole.

In the glory of heaven, two goods above all fulfill with joy the blessed: the possession of God and the common society of the saints (*communis sanctorum societas*). The ‘complement’ of the saints is their common society . . . that is to say, their habitual company, because there are always with one another, both angels and men . . .<sup>33</sup>

This collective life is also marked by degrees of perfection in love and in insight into the mystery of God that are attained by individual human beings and angels, and such a hierarchy of sanctity is not something alien to this collective good; rather, it enriches that very good and gives rise to it or helps to constitute it. The difference of degrees of holiness is not a source of mutual alienation or spiritual sorrow but a source of mutual friendship and enjoyment. There is a mutual and reciprocal delight among the blessed to encounter the distinctness of graces that each one receives, including hierarchical degrees of participation in the divine nature.<sup>34</sup> Consequently the blessed are fulfilled by God, but are also—precisely in their distinct degrees of deification in God—a source of friendship to one another. They are partakers in a mutual shared life in which each enriches the happiness of the others.

What is it that accounts for the differentiation of degrees of beatitude in heaven? Is it not the degrees of faith during one’s earthly life that we have alluded to in the previous section of this essay? Formally speaking, it is not, because sanctification in the vision is based not on the intensity

<sup>33</sup> *In Hebr.*, XII, lect. 4, 706–7 [my translation].

<sup>34</sup> *In Hebr.* XII, lec. 4, 708.

of faith, per se, but on the intensity of love.<sup>35</sup> The degree of beatitude we attain to in the world to come directly correlates with the degree of charity, supernatural love, that we attain to in this life. While knowledge is assimilative, charity is appetitive and, in a sense, spiritually ecstatic. It takes us out of ourselves into the other, in this case, God, who is the transcendent good who is loved above all by grace. But in just this way, because charity in this life opens the spiritual soul to the mystery of God's own life, conforming the soul's inward powers to God himself by an eccentric movement of the self out into the divine, therefore divine love is the most perfect and most proximate disposition for union of the spirit with God by vision.<sup>36</sup> Love, in a certain sense, stretches the spiritual faculties to dispose them to divinization by an incomprehensible, utterly transcendent reality in a way that knowledge alone cannot do.

This being said, the degrees of faith we attain to in this life are, of course, not accidental to the degrees of beatitude that are made possible in the next. The degree to which we grow in faith is itself dependent in great part on supernatural love. So, for instance, we seek God in faith, both by theological scrutiny and by prayer (assisted by the gifts of understanding and wisdom) because of the motions of divine love. At the same time, however, greater knowledge attained in faith can be the occasion for a growth in love: if we know God more profoundly, we are simultaneously invited to love God more intensely. This chain of knowing unto love, and loving unto knowledge, progresses ideally throughout one's life and up into the illuminating graces of the vision of God. Among members of the city of God the intensity of such knowledge is diversified, based on love, including love of the divine truth, in this life already and in the world to come as well, in the final graces of beatitude. The diversity is complementary because the common life of heaven is one of shared knowledge and love: not a seminar of exchange of ideas, exactly, but a mutual conversation of delight, of *delectatio*, moved from within by the common inhabitation of the Holy Trinity, prompting all minds and hearts to partake of and communicate truth spiritually grounded in a shared life in God. This diversity is also Christocentric. The blessed are united and diversified in various ways by the graces of knowledge and love they receive from Christ, and thus they are also united in Christ. Not only as God but also as man, he is the source of their perpetual illumination.<sup>37</sup> As God the eternal Logos of the Father, he is the eternally begotten wisdom by which the mind of each one is specified and fulfilled and in whom one might know the immanent presence of the

<sup>35</sup> *ST* I, q. 12, a. 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *ST* III, q. 22, a. 5, corp. and ad 1; a. 8, a. 6.

Father and the Holy Spirit. As man he is also in a subsidiary way the measure of human beatitude. No one knows and loves humanly with such a degree of grace as does the Lord Jesus Christ, who is in his human nature the instrumental and exemplary cause of the inner graces that animate the blessed from within.<sup>38</sup> All of their graces are derived from him, not only because he has merited their salvation during the course of his earthly life, but also because he is the instrumental efficient cause of their new life in God.<sup>39</sup> He directs and wills humanly the graces they receive eternally, in concord with the divine will that he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Thus Jesus is the perennial source of grace for the entire Church. This is precisely the image of the last chapters of the Apocalypse, which envisage the humanity of Christ illumining the whole of the holy city of God. "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rv 21:23).

## **II. Anthropology: The Development of Faith, amidst Joy and Suffering**

### *A. The Development of Faith as Related to Love*

In the second part of the essay I will consider more briefly the personal process of development in faith as it is related to love, particularly with regard to the question: how can faith grow through the occasions of joy and suffering? To consider this issue in more detail I will return briefly to the question of the interrelation of knowledge and love, and subsequently to the interrelation of growth in faith and growth in charity.

When he examines the mutual interrelation of knowledge and love in *De malo*, q. 6, Aquinas helpfully distinguishes a twofold form of primacy: one by which the intellect moves the will and the other by which the will moves the intellect. The first pertains to the knowledge of the object, that is to say, to intellectually apprehended knowledge of a given truth, with the appreciation of the ontological goodness of the reality that such knowledge makes possible. We can love only what we first know, and consequently in coming to know we gradually discern the appetible or desirable (lovable) dimensions of that which has being. In this way, he says that the intellect specifies or orders the movements of the will, by providing the heart with objective content in the order of the good. At the same time, the mind is itself moved from within by the will, to look to and to seek to discern the truth of what the heart finds appetible. So, for instance, a habit of mind can form in favor of philosophical reflection

<sup>38</sup> ST III, q. 7, a. 9; q. 8, aa. 1 and 5.

<sup>39</sup> ST III, q. 48, aa. 3 and 6.

because of a love of the truth, or a habit of economic prowess due to a love of good, vibrant stewardship of resources or due to the indulgence of a taste for excessive wealth. The will has a primacy then, not of specification of object, but of exercise of the faculty of knowing. How our knowledge develops repetitively depends upon the habits of the will and the exercise of love ordering from within the inherent inclinations of the intellect. If the intellect's specification of the will is objective, the will's influence of exercise upon the intellect is tendential.

How, then, does this twofold form of primacy affect the process of sanctification in the development of the theological virtues of faith and charity? Evidently, in a sense that is utterly basic, charity and hope—which are supernatural movements of the will—presuppose faith, which illumines the mind. We can aspire to perfect supernatural union with God in love only if we already have some imperfect supernatural knowledge of God, and one which implies a promise. Knowledge of God in faith engenders hope and love, but if this is the case, then when the specification of the intellect is more acute, a more intense desire and love for God become possible. Growth in more elevated forms of faith permits the occasions for more profound forms of charity. The other form of primacy obtains also, however. As the will deepens in its love for God and tends toward union with him more ardently, this love affects intimately from within the life of the intellect, so that the life of the mind will tolerate no disunion from the object of love. The love of God can fix the mind in the life of contemplation but also introduce it into the habitual process of seeking God, across the spectrum of all forms and activities of speculative and practical knowledge. Love unites and informs the lives of Christians so that all that they do comes to be ordered in some way toward God, made connatural to his higher wisdom and divine life, through the medium of love. Love causes us to come under the sway of divine truth at depth levels in the self that are otherwise inaccessible except by love, but that in turn cause the inner light of the mind to tend toward God more incessantly. This process of mutual influence in this life is ultimately ordered toward union in the next. Due to the intensity of the love we bear for God in this life, the life of the intellect will blossom in the eternal life of the world to come with the vision of God that is proportionate to our supernatural desire. As St. Catherine of Siena was wont to say, “the greatest thing on earth is desire,” because this desire for God disposes our intellect immediately to the deifying radiance of the glory of God himself, who, while he remains unseen, acts as a hidden cause to draw us into utter relativity to himself, under the form of expectation.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the recurring theme of desire in St. Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue*, “A Treatise on Divine Providence.”

### *B. The Development of Faith amidst Joy and Sorrow*

It remains to examine briefly the relation between contrasting human states of joy and sorrow as they are related to the growth or development of faith. In speaking of both of these human experiences, we should note three things: first, how each implies an emotional (or sensate passion-based) response and a simultaneous spiritual disposition; second, how each affects the person in the core of his being as a spiritual being capable of loving; and third, how this capacity for love in the face of joy or sorrow affects the overall exercise or growth of faith. Of course the idea is to transition from this more general anthropological account to the specific question of how the Virgin Mary is, in and through the joyful and sorrowful mysteries of her life, a model for Christians in the growth in personal faith in Christ.

Joy and sorrow are words that can simultaneously denote both spiritual (intellectual) states and affective (passionate) states of our being, affecting us in our unity of body and soul as embodied persons.<sup>41</sup> Therefore there is an inherently flexible range of significations to our language when we employ these terms: the joy of a truly mystical experience is distinct from the joy a person might have from falling in love.<sup>42</sup> The transports entailed can be more or less sensible or spiritual, and according to a gradient of nobility of objects, from the joy of listening to music to that of winning money at the lottery. Sorrow likewise has an identical set of conditions that is inherently varied, depending on objects and ways of attaining that object. That is, we can become sorrowful over the demise of a relationship, or the poor health of a friend, in a more passionately felt or in a more spiritually interior way.

What joy and sorrow have in common, however, albeit as contraries in a common genus, is that they both pertain to the possession of some kind of important good. We experience joy, both spiritual and sensible, in the presence of a good that is given to us to possess in some kind of stable fashion.<sup>43</sup> We feel sorrow at the loss of a highly desired good that has fallen out of our reach or which is absent from our possession.<sup>44</sup> Both experiences, then, presuppose the intellectual awareness of the good in question as well as an intuitive judgment regarding its possession or absence. They also require a desire and love for the object, whether present and beloved in its accessibility or absent and mourned.

<sup>41</sup> See the helpful study of the passions by Nicholas Lombardo, O.P., *The Logic of Desire* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> ScG I, cc. 89–90; ST I–II, q. 31, a. 3; q. 35, a. 2.

<sup>43</sup> ST I–II, q. 33, aa. 3–4.

<sup>44</sup> ST I–II, q. 36, aa. 1–2.

When supernaturalized, the experiences of joy and sorrow revolve around the givenness or absence of great spiritual goods that either are God himself or that conduct us in and through the economy to God himself. We can rejoice supernaturally, in faith, in the presence of God or mourn spiritually his absence. This presence or absence is felt along a spectrum of conditions, due to the range of effects through which we might perceive or know the presence of God. For instance, through the conditions of basically natural goods, like the conception of a child or the death of a child, we can come to experience, not only great natural joy or the grief of bereavement, but also the supernatural perception of God's providence, felt as either a source of consolation or a mystery in which we are profoundly tried. More immediately supernatural effects can also affect the soul deeply, as when we experience the joyful presence of Christ in the Most Holy Eucharist, given to us to contemplate and possess spiritually, albeit under the veil of faith, or when we experience a deeper, divinely inspired restlessness: the absence of God as a purifying cure or salve that burns into the soul a mourning for God in his divinely felt absence.

Joy and sorrow, then, alternately, in a myriad of ways, affect the soul in its perceptions of the effects of God in his economy, as each person is challenged to find God faithfully among the presences and seeming absences of divine providence in the midst of human affairs. Our capacity to love is directly attained through this process in converse ways. By the spiritual presences of God that elicit joy, the aspirations of the heart can flower through the stable or habitual possession of God. The habits of the will are turned incessantly, habitually toward God as the greatest good the soul can aspire to possess. By the spiritual absences of God, on the other hand, the aspirations of the will toward God are tried (so that one might cease to wish to find God at all). But they can also in such trials be strengthened, particularly by the endurance and perseverance of love in and through the nights of God's seeming absence, or the dis-investitures endured at the hands of his divine providence. Consequently, the habitual growth of love, as the greatest of goods in human life, finds itself set over and above the extremes of joy and sorrow, presence and absence, consolation and trial, and love is able potentially to thrive and develop in either. It is not surprising then, that God's providence should make use of these extremes wisely (and of all that is in the seeming middle between such states) to invite the soul to deeper surrender to God in love.

This process of enduring growth in love, amidst the contraries of joy and sorrow, then, touches immediately upon the growth of faith as well. To love in view of union with God by the instigations of charity instills in the soul a desire for God and a vital tendency that can incline the

intellect from within, even in the midst of deep darknesses of faith, or even despite the seeming completeness of a joy-filled sense of God's presence in faith. Love pushes the thirst for knowledge further and in turn inspires a desire for the fullness of the truth, a desire for the intellect's stable possession of the vision of God, and a desire for enduring and everlasting happiness. This inner motion of love in view of truth, in view of the contemplation of the one thing necessary, can be honed, and in fact purified and fortified, by the gifts of God and the trials of life, so that the growth in faith is a constitutive part of the supernatural development of the human person. The poignant gifts of God's providence, whether more distinctly supernatural or natural, can be referred back to God as the source of every good, in view of the vision of God. The trials of absence or of the loss of the most cherished of created goods can be borne despite all grief in view of the hope and consolation of union with God, in view of the promised good of heaven. Thus faith grows, or can grow, habitually, in joy and sorrow, in view of the eternal destiny of each human being who is called to divine life.

### **III. Mariology: The Mysteries of the Life of the Virgin Mary and Her Growth in Faith**

#### *A. The Immaculate Conception as a Disposition*

What has been discussed up to this point is in fact a prelude to speaking about the growth in faith of the Virgin Mary, which is no mean task. In what follows I will be presupposing the fine exegetical treatments of New Testament Mariology by such scholars as Marie-Joseph Lagrange, André Feuillet, René Laurentin, and Ignace de la Potterie.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, I will not be considering but will only be presupposing two fundamental dogmatic truths that form the background to any proper consideration of the Annunciation: the mystery of the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception in grace and that of her virginal consecration to God sometime after the dawn of the life of reason. Both of these mysteries are integrally related to the divine maternity of the Virgin Mary and are in fact ontological preparations or dispositions for her becoming the Mother of God in the Annunciation. Traditionally, the majority of theologians have considered that the Virgin Mary from the time of her

<sup>45</sup> See Marie-Joseph Lagrange, O.P., *Évangile selon saint Luc*, 2d edition (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1921); René Laurentin, *The Truth of Christmas: Beyond the Myths* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982); André Feuillet, S.S., *Jesus and His Mother*, trans. L. Maluf (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Press, 1984); Ignace de La Potterie, S.J., *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, trans. B. Buby (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1992).

conception received a greater plenitude of grace than any angelic or human creature has received even at the term of his or her existence.<sup>46</sup> The idea seems to be implicitly present in the teaching of Pope Pius IX in *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854).<sup>47</sup> Marian holiness in the order of faith, hope and love, the infused virtues, as well as the gifts of the Holy Spirit, must begin at a higher echelon than exists for any other creature subsequent to an entire lifetime of cooperation with God's grace. And yet two caveats are necessary: first, this need not involve any extraordinary form of consciousness in the Virgin Mary, if by that we are referring to charismatic or prophetic phenomena. According to the traditional understanding, her faith is primarily contemplative and not apostolic in expression. Her extraordinary understanding of the mystery of Christ, to the extent that it must have existed, was integral to her personal, maternal relation to Jesus and to his mission, which was in turn interpreted publicly by the apostolic Church. Second, whatever plenitude must have existed prior to her pregnancy with Jesus the Word incarnate, she must also have undergone a tremendous growth or development in faith, hope, and charity subsequent to the Incarnation and by way of her participation in the redemption. In what follows I will consider briefly three mysteries of the Virgin Mary's life—the Annunciation, her suffering at Golgotha, and the Assumption—with a view of considering her faith under two aspects in each case. First, in what sense is her growth in faith amidst joy and sorrow indicative of a life of faith that she holds in common with all believers, albeit realized in her person to an extraordinary degree of perfection? Second, in what ways does she live each of these mysteries not only in an exemplary fashion but also in a radically unique, and in a certain sense incommunicable, way, due to her personal privileges of intimacy with God? In answering these questions we can begin to discern in what sense

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<sup>46</sup> For the examples of this teaching from the historical tradition, see Jean-Baptiste Terrien, S.J., *La Mère de Dieu et la Mère des Hommes. D'Après les Pères et la Théologie*. Tome II (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1954), 191–234.

<sup>47</sup> *Ineffabilis Deus*, prologue: "From the very beginning, and before time began, the eternal Father chose and prepared for his only-begotten Son a Mother in whom the Son of God would become incarnate and from whom, in the blessed fullness of time, he would be born into this world. Above all creatures did God so love her that truly in her was the Father well pleased with singular delight. Therefore, far above all the angels and all the saints so wondrously did God endow her with the abundance of all heavenly gifts poured from the treasury of his divinity that this mother, ever absolutely free of all stain of sin, all fair and perfect, would possess that fullness of holy innocence and sanctity than which, under God, one cannot even imagine anything greater, and which, outside of God, no mind can succeed in comprehending fully."

the faith of the Virgin Mary is the exemplar of the faith of the Church.

*B. Joy of the Annunciation: Discovery of the Person  
of the Word and the Divine Maternity*

If we begin to consider the faith of the Virgin Mary in relation to the mystery of the Annunciation, we can first identify her solidarity with all believers in this mystery, even as we underscore that her faith in this mystery must have been lived to an extraordinary degree of perfection. Here the classical vision of St. Augustine is pertinent, who teaches that at the message of the Angel the Virgin Mary conceived in her mind and heart the truth of the Word of God, before she conceived him in her womb.<sup>48</sup> In other words, Augustine underscores her noetic solidarity with the human race in faith, as the first of all believers to receive the fullness of the New Covenant understanding of the eternal Son. “Behold, Mary, you shall conceive in your womb and bear a child . . . and he shall be called the Son of the Most High” (Lk 1:31–32). Evidently, the term Son of God—in the Aramaic context of first-century, second-Temple Judaism, as well as in the Greek-speaking Christian Church of the author of the Gospel of Luke—could know a varied array of significations.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the Church traditionally and in modernity has perennially maintained that Luke is teaching us a truth about the reality of the faith of the historical Mary: that at the Annunciation she begins to understand explicitly the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, albeit in a way that does not do violence to the cultural mode of understanding she possessed at the time. That is to say, she begins to know explicitly, in however veiled a fashion, of the reality of the existence of the Son of God, who is conceived in her womb, of the Holy Spirit, by whose power he is conceived, and of the Father, who is the God of Israel, and who has also sent his Son into the world as the descendent of David.

To this idea we should add that there must have been present in the soul of the Blessed Virgin the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and perhaps infused forms of knowledge as well, sufficient to penetrate into the mystery of the faith to a unique degree. Her understanding of the person she conceives is necessary if she is to be the mother of this person *qua* person, but it is also congruent with her own uniquely perfect form of sanctification, by which she is conformed spiritually, inwardly to the life of God who has come to inhabit among us. The contemplative virginity of Mary that

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<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *Sermo* 25, 7: PL 38, 937.

<sup>49</sup> See Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007).

preceded the divine maternity in her life of faith now takes on a new intensity and depth by virtue of the fact that she comes to know God explicitly on such a profound level in the mystery of the Incarnation.

We are not obliged, nor is it necessarily advisable, to attempt to recreate a Marian psychology of the Annunciation event, and appeals to private revelation that claim to do so are perhaps always in some way inherently defective as theological tools for understanding the revealed mystery. Furthermore, they can be unambiguously subjective in tone, or betray their non-Semitic cultural situatedness in ways that make them simply a-biblical. Equally problematic are revisionist theologies that attempt in Kantian fashion to construe Marian psychology from within a spacio-temporal Jewish context, so as to identify her inner categorical moral stances as a prelude to a critique of modern political or ecclesiological institutions. By contrast, however, Catholic theology can safely treat the Most Holy Rosary as a trustworthy *locus theologiae*, or theological source of reflection, if we understand it as an expression of the supernatural *sensus fidei* of the whole people of God, meditating upon the Gospel collectively in faith, down through the ages. Thus we could safely affirm a rather modest claim based upon the Rosary as a source of theological insight: that the mystery of the Annunciation is for the Virgin Mary a joyful mystery.

Joy, as we have discussed above, is a spiritual experience of exultation of the appetitive powers stemming from the secure possession of a good that is present in a stable way. The new revelation of the mystery of the inner life of God to the Virgin Mary in the Annunciation is in fact inevitably the source of her more intense possession of God in faith, and thus it is the invitation to a new form of joy. By her free acceptance of the will of God, that she become the Mother of Jesus, Mary experiences what in one sense is most natural to a female human person: freely and lovingly to become the mother of another human being. Yet she experiences this as the locus of the presence of God in a new and utterly unique way. The miracle of her conception of the child Jesus, then, must be a mystery of joy, as is, fundamentally, the subsequent experience of her maternity of the child Jesus, through embryonic and fetal gestation, as well as birth and early childhood.

The Virgin Mary can therefore also experience the time of the development of Jesus in her womb as a time of development of love and faith. What she comes to know in meditation upon the mystery that is at work in her makes possible a deeper love of God, just as knowledge specifies the appetites of the will. This movement of the will in turn inclines faith ever more to seek to penetrate more deeply into the mystery of God, in

contemplative fashion. The Annunciation, then, is the beginning of a new life of discipleship in the heart of the Virgin Mary, as one who seeks to come to know the Son she has conceived and to perceive the meaning of his life and his mission. This joyful experience is lived in solemn domestic privacy, in one sense, presumably accompanied uniquely by the explicit and contemplative faith of Joseph. However, it is also implicitly ecclesial. The mystery of the eventual mission of the Christ child looms large behind the framework of the time of the nativity, as exemplified by Matthew's gentile wise men and Herod's wrath. The mission of God is coming into this world, and Mary in her faith adheres to the fullness of that plan, known only imperfectly, however it will eventually unfold.

Despite its joy, the faith of the Virgin Mary is also ordered toward the beatific vision, and so it is experienced also as a veil, and under the form of obscurity. The angelic prophecy may be believed, not seen, as is the case with the identity of the Son she has conceived. Her maternity is not without its initial inward trials, then, even as it is the source of indiminishable joy. Luke shows this in the occasion of troubled faith Mary manifests in the Annunciation (Lk 1:29, 34), in the trial she experiences at the prophecy of Simeon in the temple (2:33–35), and in the discovery of the child Jesus in the Temple at age twelve (2:49–51). There is a theme of a joyful but also obscure Marian faith in this infancy narrative of Luke, suggesting the inherently imperfect and therefore open character of the faith of the Virgin Mary, which tends by its very structure toward the cross and toward the mystery of beatitude.

In all of this, I have underscored Mary's solidarity with the human race in her faithful awareness of the mystery of the Incarnation. Her understanding of the explicit revelation of the mystery of the Triune God is in a sense first in the historical order of unfolding, and it is most perfect in degree. Her act of faith serves as a kind of immanent measure of the Church's Trinitarian contemplation.<sup>50</sup> However, there is also an irreducibly unique character to her maternity as well. We can identify this briefly by discussing the personal character of her motherhood, and this from two sides; pertaining to the person she gives birth to, and to the personal character of her maternal act as a human act.

When St. Thomas speaks of the mystery of Mary as the Mother of God, he asks the decisive question: Is the Virgin Mary the mother of the *person* of the Son?<sup>51</sup> Of course he is thinking about the anti-Nestorian definition

<sup>50</sup> See in this respect, the reflections on the Marian character of the internal development of the Church in Jean-Miguel Garrigues, *L'Épouse du Dieu Vivant. Marie plénitude trinitaire de l'Église* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> ST III, q. 35, a. 1.

of the Council of Ephesus: by virtue of the hypostatic union, Christians must attribute all the human and divine characteristics of Jesus to a single subject, the person of the Word. Jesus gestated in the womb of Mary and she gave birth to him. Consequently she is the mother of the person of the Word, even though the hypostatic subject of the Son is uncreated.<sup>52</sup> This is the case precisely because the man Mary begot is himself personally God the Son. To speak about this mystery in more depth, however, Aquinas applies to this singular case of motherhood the doctrine of non-reciprocal relativity, which is otherwise known as the doctrine of mixed relations.<sup>53</sup> Analogies exist with respect to creation, the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ, and the Eucharist. Creatures, for instance, are utterly relative to God, who is himself in no way ontologically relative to or dependent upon creatures for the qualification or determination of his transcendent being.<sup>54</sup> In the hypostatic union, then, the human nature of Christ that is united to his person is utterly relative to the divine nature that is the author of the created human nature, but the inverse is not the case.<sup>55</sup> The divine nature remains immutably inviolate and unchanged in its perfection and splendor, by its union with human nature. So likewise, with some differences in concept, the accidents of bread and wine that remain in the transubstantiated host and chalice are utterly relative to the glorified humanity of Christ, who is present substantially “in” them and whom they manifest ontologically and symbolically simultaneously. But the glorified Christ is himself not rendered ontologically relative in any way to the changes to which the accidents of the Eucharistic species are subject, as when they are moved about in a chapel, consumed by the faithful, or preserved in a tabernacle.<sup>56</sup> Something like this is the case in the unique motherhood of the Virgin Mary as well. Unlike any other person born of woman, the man born of her is not ontologically relative to her or dependent upon her in any way *in his very person as God*. Nevertheless, that she is the true mother of this human being does affect intimately the well-being of the body and soul of Christ as man. As man, Christ is deeply relative to and affected by his relation to the Virgin Mary. We could also say that as a person who is human he is profoundly dependent upon her in his development in utero, his infancy, and his childhood. But insofar as he is divine, the Lord is in no way dependent upon the Virgin Mary, whereas she is utterly relative to him in an ontologically non-reciprocal way, since he is

<sup>52</sup> ST III, q. 35, aa. 1 and 4.

<sup>53</sup> ST III, q. 35, a. 5.

<sup>54</sup> ST I, q. 13, a. 7; q. 45, a. 3.

<sup>55</sup> ST III, q. 2, aa. 7–8.

<sup>56</sup> ST III, q. 76, a. 6, corp. and ad 3.

her creator.<sup>57</sup> There is no clear parallel here to any other instance of human maternity in history, nor could there be. Mary, in her very act of caregiving, is always at the most basic and most radical level the Mother of God, even when she truly assures the physical life and development of her Son, as a human being.

Furthermore, this mystery is one that characterizes her own typically human act of motherhood from within its most intimate core. For we must acknowledge that when it is lived out in a perfectly human way, as the result of a virtuous life based in free human acts, motherhood entails a fundamental personal choice of some kind (for instance, the choice to marry and to welcome generously children that come naturally from that marriage). Yet in the case of the Blessed Virgin Mary, her choice to give birth to the Christ is made not formally by natural motives, as noble as these might be, but uniquely in faith, in obedience to the angelic prophecy. Consequently, not only the initial human acceptance of her becoming a mother, but also all of her subsequent maternal referentiality to the child she bears is informed at its core by a personal act of supernatural faith that structures all that she is and does. She chooses freely to be the mother of the Son of God, and her maternal acts of love and the subsequent interpersonal development that ensues are entirely informed or circumscribed by the mystery of the Incarnation to which she assents freely and by charity. Consequently, while her motherhood is something immanently human, it is also something utterly divine, and indeed, everlasting because of the person to whom it refers, and to whom it makes her personally relative in this unrepeatable way. She alone among all women is—both by grace and by nature—the Mother of God.

*C. Sorrow of the Crucifixion: Congruous Merit and the  
Unique Intercession of the Compassion of the Virgin Mary*

If the natural joy of motherhood can be assumed into the supernatural mystery of the divine maternity of Mary, then the natural vulnerability and struggle with the loss of one's own child by death is also incorporated into the development of her faith, in the mystery of the crucifixion. Sorrow, we noted above, is a spiritual and emotional grief that comes from the loss of possession of an important good, a loss that affects us in our intimate capacity to love and in our deepest desire for happiness. By the experience of the seeming absence of God, or of the assistance of his providence, the aspirations of the will's desire for God can be severely tried. However, they can also be strengthened in such trials, particularly

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<sup>57</sup> ST III, q. 35, a. 5.

by the endurance and perseverance of love in and through the nights of God's seeming absence. What appear to be the dis-investitures of the self endured at the hands of divine providence can become the occasions for growth in the most immovable form of faith and hope, directed at God in unconditional and subsequently utterly stable fashion.

The tradition rightly accords this form of development to the faith of the Virgin Mary during the course of the crucifixion of Jesus, as indicated in Spartan but unmistakable fashion by the Gospel of St. John. The gospel writer notes that the Mother of Jesus stood at the cross (Jn 19:25), *Stabat Mater*. And as the subsequent canonical tradition of iconography of the Church would legislate theologically, Mary may not be depicted as wilting at the cross, because the *sensus fidei* of the Church assures us that she alone, in fact, did not lose the faith through the duration of the crucifixion event.<sup>58</sup> If this is the case, then her faith in the course of the paschal mystery continued to grow and to develop amidst sorrow, and indeed, the deepest possible natural sorrow and angst conceivable, that pertaining to the witness of the death of one's child. Based upon the loss of this natural good alone, it would be necessary to affirm that the faith of the Blessed Mother attained to heroic proportions of self-surrender and trust in God that was made possible only through the reception of extraordinary supernatural graces of hope and love, by means of which her faith was lifted up into God even amidst the turmoil of her Son's execution. Nevertheless, to say this is in fact still too minimalistic, since it is a firm judgment of the Church that the trial of the cross for the Virgin Mary pertained not only to the loss of natural goods that were of the most extraordinary kind, but also to the inner spiritual graces that she received for the duration of the event. That is to say, it is a doctrine of the faith that Mary not only understood something of the mystery of redemption that was unfolding in the crucifixion of her Son, but that in some deeper sense, in spite of the trial of intelligibility this represented to faith, she consented, or abandoned herself, to the will of her Son and to the will of God. Mary believed that her Son's death was redeeming the world, and she acknowledged this truth in the innermost depths of her heart and her

<sup>58</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 58: "[T]he Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan (John 19:25), grieving exceedingly with her only begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart with His sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth. Finally, she was given by the same Christ Jesus dying on the cross as a mother to His disciple with these words: 'Woman, behold thy son' (John 19:25-26)." (Translations taken from A. Flannery, O.P., *Vatican Council II*, Vol. 1 [Newport, NY: Costello, 2004].)

person, in union of prayers with her crucified Son, and in loving and unconditional faith in God.<sup>59</sup> By faith alone, she “sees” into the depths of the mystery of the compassion of God and perceives the unmerited mercy that springs from the cross for all human beings. The gift of herself is a conformity not to the violence of human beings (which she, like us, can see is utterly wrong) but to the response of God to give without measure the grace of salvation even from the cross, through a superabundance of love.

Classically, this participation of the Virgin Mary in the mystery of the crucifixion by way of her inward acts of faith, hope, and love is deemed her “compassion,” and this act of union with Christ crucified is understood, in the longstanding theological tradition, to have had a meritorious character. Here we begin the transition from what the Virgin Mary holds in common with us (albeit in a wholly exemplary way) to what is unique to her alone. However, the transition is a subtle one, and in a certain sense, not an abrupt one. We have first to make a distinction in the order of merit, not between Mary and all other redeemed persons, but between Mary and all others together in distinction from Christ. Here Aquinas takes up and develops the traditional language of merit by distinguishing between that merit which is condign, or “of full dignity,” and that which is congruent, or “fitting in kind.”<sup>60</sup>

Condign merit is reserved to Christ alone, because he alone can truly atone for human wrongdoing in a radical and utterly righteous way. Aquinas underscores that God need not have redeemed the world by means of the Incarnation and suffering of the Son, and had he not done so, he could have redeemed the world by sheer mercy, without undue prejudice to divine justice.<sup>61</sup> However, it is more merciful, Aquinas argues, to redeem the world in justice, in and through the righteousness of Christ, who satisfies for human sin in the fullness of justice before God, substituting his human obedience and charity in place of our defective lack of love and obedience.<sup>62</sup> Because of the plenitude of Christ’s grace as man and the dignity of his person as God, his acts of reparation on our behalf bear within them an infinite dignity. The merits of his passion then are utterly sufficient and even superabundant as an atoning offering for all human sins.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, this condign merit that comes from Christ alone is made ours, or given to us by way of participation, in faith and the

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 58.

<sup>60</sup> See *ST* I–II, q. 114, a. 6.

<sup>61</sup> *ST* III, q. 1, a. 2; q. 46, a. 1, corp.

<sup>62</sup> *ST* III, q. 46, a. 1, ad 3; q. 1, a. 1.

<sup>63</sup> *ST* III, q. 48, a. 1 corp., and a. 2, corp. and ad 3.

sacraments, so that we are justified by faith and baptism in Christ, with the very merits that Christ possesses as the head of the Church.<sup>64</sup>

Congruent merit, meanwhile, pertains not to Christ but to the purely derivative graces of merit that come from Christ or that are given by him as graces to those who participate in his mission, in such a way that their prayers and good deeds accomplished in faith are a kind of participated wellspring of grace given to others. Here we are no longer speaking about an order of just necessity but only one of pure gratuity, in which Christians are invited to participate in Christ's giving of divine life to others by their prayers and actions, not because God needs them, but because God by grace has wished them to cooperate in the mission of Christ, out of a shared life of friendship with God in charity.<sup>65</sup> Such intercessory merit is merely fitting, rather than condign, but it is truly fitting. This association of Christ and the saints is the expression of a deeper wisdom and love of God who wishes to assimilate the saints into his own work of salvation, by a sheer mystery of gift. This assimilation is an expression of the power of the all-sufficient sacrifice of Christ to redeem the world. The congruent merits of the saints in respect to others do not detract from the office of Christ as high priest, but rather are expressions of the riches of his one and true saving priesthood. Their graces unveil the riches of the inner plenitude of the redemption accomplished by him alone.

With these qualifications in place, we can note first, of course, that the Virgin Mary's act of union with Christ crucified by way of her faith, hope, and love is meritorious only in the order of fittingness, by a congruency of God who wishes her friendship with Christ to stand at the center of the divine economy of salvation at Golgotha. She is there while the mystery of redemption unfolds in its most ultimate hour. Her action adds nothing to the grace of her Son, but on the contrary, insofar as it is truly inspired by God, derives entirely from him and returns to him in prayer. It is she who is assimilated into his mystery of redemption in a preeminently Christocentric fashion.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>64</sup> ST I-II, q. 114, a. 3; III, q. 8, a. 1.

<sup>65</sup> ST I-II, q. 114, a. 6; II-II, q. 23, a. 1.

<sup>66</sup> See *Lumen Gentium*, 60, which intimates the distinction employed above: "There is but one Mediator as we know from the words of the apostle, 'for there is one God and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as redemption for all'. (I Tim. 2:5) The maternal duty of Mary toward men in no wise obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows His power. *For all the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on men originates, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. It flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on His mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its*

However, there is a sense in which she is also unique and unlike any other person precisely in the way she participates in this event. Aquinas alludes implicitly to the idea in his commentary on the angelic salutation of Luke 1:26–28:

The plenitude of grace in Mary was such that its effects overflow upon all men. It is a great thing in a Saint when he has grace to bring about the salvation of many, but it is exceedingly wonderful when grace is of such abundance as to be sufficient for the salvation of all men in the world, and this is true of Christ and of the Blessed Virgin. Thus, “a thousand bucklers,” that is, remedies against dangers, “hang there from” (Sg 4:4). Likewise, in every work of virtue one can have her as one’s helper. Of her it was spoken: “In me is all grace of the way and of the truth, in me is all hope of life and of virtue” (Sir 24:25). Therefore, Mary is full of grace, exceeding the Angels in this fullness and very fittingly is she called “Mary” which means “in herself enlightened”: “The Lord will fill your soul with brightness” (Is 48:11). And she will illumine others throughout the world for which reason she is compared to the sun and to the moon.<sup>67</sup>

Aquinas’s etymological rendering of the name of Mary is seemingly inaccurate. The theological idea regarding her congruent merits, however, is quite clear. First, the Virgin Mary intercedes in union with Christ in the very hour of the crucifixion, understanding at some level what is taking place and uniting herself to him in prayer on behalf of the redemption of humanity. Therefore, her merit is differentiated from that of all other saints by the fact that it is universal in extension. She alone participates with Christ in the redemption of the entire human race in and through the event of the cross. This participation is derivative and adds nothing to the grace of Christ upon which in fact it depends entirely. Yet it is real nonetheless and is willed by God as an expression of the fullness of his divine mercy. Second, however, Mary’s meritorious participation in the redemption of others is not only the most extensive in kind, but also the most intensive. She accepts in faith the crucifixion of her Son in a unique

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power from it. In no way does it impede, but rather does it foster the immediate union of the faithful with Christ” (emphasis added). Compare this to St. Pius X in the 1904 Encyclical *Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum*: “We are, then, it will be seen, very far from attributing to the Mother of God a productive power of grace—a power which belongs to God alone. Yet, since Mary carries it over all in holiness and union with Jesus Christ, and has been associated by Jesus Christ in the work of redemption, she merits for us *de congruo*, in the language of theologians, what Jesus Christ merits for us *de condigno*, and she is the supreme Minister of the distribution of graces.”

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Angelic Salutation*, trans. Joseph B. Collins (New York, 1939).

intensity of holiness, derived from the inner perfections of grace that enshroud her soul by virtue of her immaculate conception; by that holiness she is free to cooperate in faith in this mystery with a profundity that is proper to the Mother of God alone. In doing so, she becomes from within her divine maternity, at the cross, the mother of the Church, the mother of all the faithful, for all the redeemed. John's Gospel portrays the symbol of this mystery in Jesus' decision to make the Virgin Mary the adoptive mother of the beloved disciple: "Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother" (Jn 19:26–27). It is because she is the Mother of God in *faith* that the Virgin Mary allows herself to be conformed to the mission of the person of Jesus even amidst the crucifixion, in her meritorious compassion for the crucified Lord. And it is precisely in living out her motherhood toward Jesus in this way that she becomes—in the order of grace and by her intercession—the mother of all the faithful, the mother of the Church.<sup>68</sup>

#### *D. Glory of the Assumption: Beatific Vision and the Queenship of the Virgin Mary*

When we consider the passage of the Blessed Virgin Mary into the beatific life of glory, we must of course affirm that this is accomplished by the assumption of her body and soul into heaven. It is perhaps theologically advisable to follow the more traditional understanding of the Assumption: that this event was preceded by a true physical death of some kind, in which the Mother of God, though sinless, was conformed in faith to the death and resurrection of her Son.<sup>69</sup> This was a final earthly expression of her union with the crucifixion, albeit one that announced the near-immediate transformation of her body and soul into the state of glorified life, an event patterned ontologically after the example of the risen life of Jesus Christ.

What has this event to do with faith? In effect, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is the place of encounter, where faith attains to its final term or purpose, transitioning into the beatific vision of the life of God. It is also where the communal dimension of grace has its deepest expression and realization. The Virgin Mary is in her faith in the midst of death a model for all Christians of the passage by grace into eternal life.

Here, it is interesting to note, we are not dealing with a mystery characterized particularly by either joy or sorrow, by either the presence or absence of God, but rather by the stillness of a deeply oriented contemplation that

<sup>68</sup> See the remarks to this effect in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 964–65.

<sup>69</sup> See Bl. John Paul II, "Mary and the Human Drama of Death," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2 July 1997, 11.

has nothing left to desire other than deifying union with God. In other words: at the end of her earthly pilgrimage the Virgin Mary, who never ceased to grow in faith, hope, and charity, had attained to the plenitude of grace to which she was destined in this life. The faith of the Virgin Mary at death, then, is the nearest it ever will be to the fulfillment of the life of grace toward which it tends inherently: the vision of God. Vision, however, tolerates no intermediary, and it is only ever immediate. In the proximate preparation for the deification of her soul's spiritual faculties, then, the soul of the Virgin Mary in faith and charity enjoys the deepest proximate union to God possible without the presence of the vision per se, and as a prelude to the vision. Some theologians, understandably, then, have characterized this event as a moment of extreme darkness of faith, but also of complete calm.<sup>70</sup> The darkness comes from the character of faith exercised in this extremely elevated mode. No prophecy, no mediation, no grace of ecstasy or consolation—however exalted—can substitute for the vision of God toward which the soul tends and to which it aspires under the supernatural influence of grace. Consequently, the obscurity of faith is most intense and extensive in the hour of her death, conforming the powers of the soul to God and preparing them from within, as it were, for deifying union. Yet this darkness is not angst-ridden or tormented but is utterly peaceful. This is on account of the will: the love by which the Virgin Mary is transported into God is so utterly elevated at death that she possesses the object of her desire in hope with a sureness and fixity, a calm and a depth of totality that is unique and that unites her soul with the mystery of Christ—even through death—in a way that is utterly final, peaceful, and solemn. The Virgin Mary dies in Christ without even a shadow of disunion.

The irreducible uniqueness of her life appears in this mystery more poignantly in her resurrection, or glorification in both body and soul. Evidently the glorification of her physical body prior to the time of the universal resurrection is an extraordinary privilege that shows forth in a unique way the fruits of Christ's redemption. The Virgin Mary is in this mystery particularly the New Eve, the most solemnly redeemed creature of God.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, the glorification of the soul of the Virgin Mary

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Mother of the Saviour and Our Interior Life* (Rockford, IL: Tan, 2003), 134–38, and the treatment of the Dormition by Marie-Dominique Philippe, O.P., in *The Mysteries of Mary: Growing in Faith, Hope, and Love with the Mother of God* (Charlotte, NC: Saint Benedict Press, 2011).

<sup>71</sup> CCC, 966–67: “The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin is a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians. . . . By her complete adherence to the Father's will, to his Son's redemptive work, and to every prompting of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary is the Church's

by virtue of the beatific vision also communicates to her a distinct set of privileges. By her beatific vision the Virgin Mary has a unique degree of insight into the essence of God and deifying familiarity with the persons of the Most Holy Trinity, evidently, stemming from this ground of union: the depths of charity that she attained to in her earthly life by virtue of the grace and predestination of God. Furthermore, however, her vision pertains not only to the incomprehensible essence of God but also to the members of Christ's body, whom she is given to know in God in an elevated and mysterious way, with a universal extension that she shares with no one other than Christ. In other words, in her beatific vision the Virgin Mary is given to perceive the life of the Church, and to know the members of Christ's mystical body, in the light of the life of God. What this knowledge must be like completely evades us, but that it is real is inevitably a doctrine of faith, for the Blessed Virgin is a universal patron and intercessor for the whole of the Church in a way that is not proper to any other saint, and this is possible only because of the graces of intellectual illumination that she receives in the vision of God.

It follows from what has been said that the Assumption introduces Mary into a life that is centered around the Triune God and the knowledge of the risen Christ, but which also is perfectly ecclesial in scope. Not only does she possess the deepest intensity of the vision of God that is found in any creature, outside of the sacred humanity of Christ, but her vision is also of the greatest extension, as it extends to the perception of the personal uniqueness and holiness of all the members of the Church, in heaven and on earth, in their hierarchical perfections and complementarity. She is, as it were, the apogee at the central heights of the geometrical splendor of heaven, by which its frame receives its balance and symmetry, all in subordination to Christ, from whom the whole edifice receives its foundation and cohesion.

Although the relationship of the Virgin Mary to the redeemed—and indeed to all those who receive grace from Christ—can be thought of in terms of her maternity, which endures in heaven, it is also the case that by the universal scope of her intercession, there is a distinct way in which we should attribute queenship to her with respect to the activities of divine providence. Here it is a question of the ways her contemplative desires and intercessory prayers are inspired gratuitously by God in view of the effects

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model of faith and charity. Thus she is a 'preeminent and . . . wholly unique member of the Church'; indeed, she is the 'exemplary realization' (*typus*) of the Church." The Catechism explicitly references here to both *Lumen Gentium* 53 and 63, seemingly aligning the theology of Mary as the New Eve with the ecclesiological implications of the Assumption.

he wishes to engender in the world (Rv 22:17). We can say that not only are the graces of Christ distributed in accord with the accompanying prayers of the Virgin Mary, but also that ordinary events that come under the scope of God's providence in the natural world—that of angels and men, as well as physical and animal creatures—can be subject in some way—at least at times—to her prayers as well. She can be treated then, not only as an eschatological forebear of the world to come, in whom Christians look to see the potential realization of our own destiny in Christ. She is also a portal of grace, as the Latin chant states: an intercessor and guardian whose prayers accompany, in some real and vivid way, the earthly life of the Church during the course of her pilgrimage in faith.

### **Conclusion: The Marian Exemplarity of Ecclesial Faith**

We began this essay with a question. How are we to understand the inner relationship of the ecclesial exemplarity of the Virgin Mary and her uniqueness as the Mother of the Redeemer? In what sense is her faith characteristic of the Christian life, yet realized to an exemplary degree, and to what extent are her privileges as the Mother of God unique and incommunicable, and thus in some sense outside the common ecclesial life of the faithful? In answer to this question we can pose three basic conclusions.

First, the graces that the Virgin Mary shares with us as Christian believers and those that she possesses in a unique way are clearly to a certain extent distinguishable, but they are in no way inseparable. The perfection of her faith, for example, as a grace that she shares with us, and in which she is exemplary, is due at base to the graces of her immaculate conception and the privileges associated with the divine maternity. Her congruent merits, both in her earthly life and in her heavenly intercession, are the highest instantiations of mysteries of saintly intercession that are shared by others. And yet they are present in her as a person uniquely bound to the destiny of Christ such that she is a unique creaturely intercessor on behalf of all other human beings. The boundaries between her inclusion in the common polity of the Church and her transcendence of that polity are not entirely distinct. She is above us (in a way that should inspire no alienation), even as she with us.

Second, then, as she is the exemplar of the development of the faith of the Church, one can consider the Virgin Mary as the “type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ” (*Lumen Gentium*, 63). Theologians sometimes speak in this sense of Mary as the “immanent term” of the inner development of the life of the Church. Just as the Church develops “outwardly” toward the transcendent God, and toward greater degrees of participation in the grace of Christ, so she

develops “inwardly” toward a more Marian state, a state of more perfect union with God exemplified by Mary, who remains in this sense the eschatological icon of the Church.<sup>72</sup> In the words, once more, of *Lumen Gentium* (68): “[J]ust as the Mother of Jesus, glorified in body and soul in heaven, is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come, so too does she shine forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, as a sign of sure hope and solace to the people of God during its sojourn on earth.”

Third, the unique privileges of the Virgin Mary are of importance, not only to a proper theological understanding of God’s work of salvation, but also in the ordinary lives of Christians. Her immaculate conception, personal consecration, divine maternity, meritorious suffering at the cross, her assumption and her queenship: because of all of these, the Virgin Mary transcends in some real sense the common life of other Christian believers. However, and this is the key idea to hold all else together: precisely in her “transcendent” privileges that make her unique, the Virgin Mary is essential to the common good and the shared life of all believers in the Church. It is because she alone is the Mother of God and the Mother of all the redeemed that a shared common life *with her* in the grace of Christ forms an integral part of the supernatural good *of all* believers. An analogy (which is only proportionate, and acknowledges the differences!) can be made here with the Eucharist, the headship of Christ as the source of all grace, and with God himself as the “common good” of the whole universe. Each of these sublime realities transcends the common life of the Church to differing degrees, and yet that common life is possible and sustained in being only by and for a shared participation in these various “transcendent” goods. It is precisely the sharing in these goods (however imperfectly) that constitutes in some fundamental sense the common patrimony of the Church. The Church is a place where creatures can come into sanctifying union with God, by the grace of Christ and through communion in the body and blood of Christ. So likewise, the Church is a place where human beings acquire a supernatural familiarity with and likeness to the Mother of God, in faith, and by the grace that calls them forth into a communion in which she is the preeminent member. There is no opposition here between the unique privileges of the Virgin Mary and the common life of the Church, for they are not one and the same, but the latter is enriched in a singular and irreplaceable way by the presence of the former. The Virgin Mary is and remains not only the preeminent Christian disciple but also the Mother of the Church. NV

<sup>72</sup> See the development of this theme in Garrigues, *L'Epouse du Dieu Vivant*.