

Look on the Faith of Your Church: Mary's Assent and the Task of Theology*

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HERE I WOULD LIKE TO REFLECT briefly on the task of Christian theology—that is, Christian teaching, Christian doctrine—by thinking about Mary, the mother of Jesus, as Scripture and Catholic worship present her to us. Mary is, perhaps unexpectedly, the model theologian. In order to see how, we need to think about Mary's faith, and the relationship of her faith to our own. Thus my title: "Mary's Assent"—that is, the faith of Mary—"and the Task of Theology."

I

In the communion liturgy of the Mass, between the doxological conclusion of the Our Father and the kiss of peace, the celebrant offers the following prayer for peace, eliciting the congregation's assent:

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Lord Jesus Christ,
 who said to your Apostles:
 Peace I leave you, my peace I give you,
 look not on our sins,
 but on the faith of your Church,
 and graciously grant her peace and unity
 in accordance with your will.¹

Here I will focus on a single petition from this prayer: “Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church.” How is it that the faith of the Church draws the gaze of Christ, sacramentally present before us, away from our sins? Answering this question will help us understand, I think, the importance of Mary—not just of a doctrine about her, but of her person and presence—for the task of Christian theology.

The question itself needs, perhaps, a bit of explanation. How can we, the Church’s members, appeal to the Church’s faith in order to deflect the Lord’s judgment on our sins? The Church’s faith is, after all, our own faith, to the extent that we are her members. In appealing to the Lord to look on the Church’s faith we are therefore asking him, in some sense, to have regard for our own faith. But is our faith, individually or collectively, of such worth that it entitles us to ask Christ to look away from our sins? Surely we have to admit that our faith cannot bear this burden. It is weak, inadequate, and prone to fail. Our faith, it seems, should not prompt us to say, “Look not on our sins,” but rather to say, like Peter by the lake of Gennesaret, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk 5:8). Yet this prayer is offered at every Mass in the confidence that it will be heard.

The prayer itself is medieval in origin, first entering the western rite through German sacramentaries in the eleventh century.² Originally it

¹ Following the translation in the new third English edition of the Roman Missal. In the Latin of the 2002 *Typica*: “Dómine Iesu Christe, qui dixísti Apóstolis tuis: Pacem relínquo vobis, pacem meam do vobis: ne respicias peccáta nostra, sed fidem Ecclésiæ tuæ; eámque secúndum voluntátem tuam pacificáre et coadunáre dignéris. Qui vivis et regnas in saecula saeculórum.”

² So Josef Andreas Jungmann, S.J., *Missarum Sollemnia: Eine genetische Erklärung der römischen Messe*, vol. 2, 4th ed. (Vienna: Verlag Herder, 1958), 411. Translated into English as *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, vol. 2 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1955), 330. It replaced an earlier prayer for peace based on a Greek model and worded quite differently.

was said *sub secreto* by the celebrant, and so differed in one important way from the prayer with which we are now familiar. The priest asked that the Lord not look upon his own sins (*ne respicias peccata mea*), without the congregation's amen. With the advent of the *novus ordo* this petition for peace became a public prayer, and accordingly the celebrant now asks Christ to look away not just from his own sins, but from the sins of all those gathered around the altar, for the sake of the Church's faith.

Commenting on the original, private form of the prayer, the great Catholic liturgical scholar Josef Andreas Jungmann interprets *ne respicias peccata mea* as follows: "Appealing to [Christ's] promise of peace (Jn 14:27), the priest begs the Lord not to look upon his sins, but rather upon the faithful attitude of the people gathered in church."³ This is no doubt right as far as it goes, and can easily be extended to the later public form of the prayer. Each of us now openly asks Christ to look away from our individual failings, and to look at the faith of the whole gathered community instead. No doubt we have all taken heart from the faith of others present with us at worship, confident that their manifest trust in the Lord will make good our own lack in his eyes. That we can and should do, but on reflection it poses a problem. Those around us also pray, "Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church," which suggests that they too are aware of their shortcomings, and are looking to the faith of others—including our own—for support. Our common petition that the Lord look not on our sins evidently creates a precarious situation, where one bruised reed leans uncertainly upon another.

For this reason it seems unwise to limit the *ecclesia* of whom our prayer speaks to the visibly gathered local assembly. The Church upon whose faith we ask the Lord to look is surely the whole community, the one universal Church to the limits of her extension across time and space. So an earlier Catholic commentator on the prayers of the Mass, Nikolaus Gühr, suggests, also commenting on the traditional private

³ Jungmann, *Missarum Sollemnia*, 2.411 (*Mass of the Roman Rite*, 2.331; unless otherwise noted, though, this and all other translations are my own). Jungmann, *Missarum Sollemnia*, 411n55, supports this interpretation (*Roman Rite*, 331n56) by reference to the prayer near the beginning of the Roman Canon, "You know how firmly we believe in you" (*quorum tibi fides cognita est*), which includes a specific reference to "all of us gathered here" (*omnium circumstantium*). One may reasonably ask, however, why either prayer should be taken as referring only to the local assembly.

form of the prayer. The priest, he argues (and so, by extension, each of us), entreats the Lord not to look upon himself, an unworthy servant of the Church, “but rather upon the holiness and worthiness of his beloved bride, the Church.”⁴ The “bride,” of course, is not the local community as such, but the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, whose reality undergirds, includes, and transcends that of every local assembly. She is the community, embracing all who belong to Christ in every time and place, upon whose holiness and worthiness we ask the Lord to look.

Non-Catholics present at Mass may naturally wonder whether they are included within the “Church” of all times and places whose faith this prayer lifts up. Do we ask Christ Jesus, now substantially present on the altar in his body and blood, to look upon their faith, or only that of Catholics?

To whom, or what, the term “Church” refers when modified by the creedal adjectives “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” remains deeply contested among Christians. Here we may simply observe that as uttered by the community to whose liturgy it belongs, the term “Church” in the petition “look . . . on the faith of your Church” refers first of all to the Catholic Church, united as a visible society across time and space in communion with the See of Peter. According to Catholic teaching, though, the faith of the Church can also exist outside of this visible communion, in greater or lesser degree. Outside the Catholic Church, just as within her visible boundaries, faith is inextricably linked to baptism; it is fundamentally a baptismal gift. Together, baptism and faith would seem to be the most basic among the “many elements of sanctification and of truth” that the Catholic Church recognizes as present “outside its visible confines.”⁵ All who believe and are baptized, even those who belong to communities retaining little of the sacramental practice and ancient ordering of ministry essential to the Catholic Church, have been “incorporated into Christ,” and are put by their baptism and their faith in Christ “in some real, though imperfect, communion with the Cath-

⁴ Nikolaus Gehr, *Das heilige Meßopfer, dogmatisch, liturgisch und ascetisch erklärt*, 6th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1897), 679. Translated into English as *The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass: Dogmatically, Liturgically, and Ascetically Explained* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1902), 722. Similarly Valentin Thalhofer, *Handbuch der katholischen Liturgik*, vol. 2, 2nd revised edn., ed. Ludwig Eisenhofer (Freiburg: Herder, 1912), 212.

⁵ In the language of *Lumen Gentium* §8.

olic Church.” For this reason “the Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers.”⁶

All of this suggests that in the Eucharist the Catholic Church does ask her Lord to look upon the faith of all who believe in him, and not only of Catholics, or merely of those Catholics present at the local Eucharistic assembly. Their faith is weak and imperfect, but ours is too, if not in just the same way.⁷ When we entreat the Lord to look upon the faith of his Church, we expect his gaze to take in all those among whom this faith is found, in whatever degree.

At the same time, the baptismal faith that effects a real communion of all who receive it with the Catholic Church aims, by its very nature as Christ's gift to his Church, at the visible perfection of that communion. Together with the rest of the “elements of truth and sanctification” present outside the Catholic Church, baptism and faith “are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ,” that is, to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of the Creed, which “subsists in the Catholic Church.”⁸ For this reason baptism and faith, wherever they are found, “are forces impelling towards Catholic unity.”⁹ That is: full visible communion with the Catholic Church is the baptismal vocation of every Christian. Just because baptism into Christ really takes place outside the Catholic Church, and faith in him is genuinely present there, every baptized believer is drawn by the nature of what she has received into the fullness of life in Christ that “subsists” in the Catholic Church.

All of this suggests that when we implore Jesus to look on the faith of his Church, we are asking him to look especially at the faith of those who cling most closely to him, and not simply at the numberless frail believers like ourselves across space and time, or at the humble band visibly gathered with us for the Eucharist. Those who cling most closely to Christ are his saints, whose faith the Church herself celebrates through-

⁶ The quoted phrases are from *Unitatis Redintegratio* §3; cf. *Lumen Gentium* §15.

⁷ Like the faith of non-Catholic Christians, that of Catholics is prone to waver in depth and devotion. Their faith is thus likely to be intensively imperfect. Normally, however (viz., barring an impairment deliberately introduced by the believer himself, in particular the explicit denial of an article of faith), the faith of Catholics is extensively complete—it embraces “all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God.”

⁸ *Lumen Gentium* §8; cf. *Unitatis redintegratio* §4.

⁹ *Lumen Gentium* §8.

out the year. So when we say, "Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church," we are leaning on the faith of the saints, trusting that Christ will have regard for our union with them in love, and not for the weakness of our own faith.

This too is surely right as far as it goes, and it goes much farther than the suggestion that the "Church" upon which we ask Christ to look is no more than the local assembly. In my own case these words from the Mass often call to mind St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who faithfully embraced the darkness of her last year, when heaven was closed to her.¹⁰ This she accepted in love as a trial from God and a share in the dying of Jesus, for the sake of those who "really have no faith" and struggle to live without God.¹¹ Or the words of the Mass bring to mind Edith Stein, St. Teresa Blessed by the Cross, who went to her death at Auschwitz consoling countless terrified companions, in an unearthly repose of soul. The magnitude of her faith in the goodness of God gave St. Teresa a fortitude, as Fr. Robert Barron has observed, which exceeded any earthly courage.¹² In calling upon Christ to look upon the faith of his Church we are asking, one could say, for a share in the faith of these holy women.

And so we should. Yet a striking feature of the faith of the saints, repeatedly evinced in the accounts we have of their lives, is to be far more acutely aware of their sins than most of us, whose sins are usually far more grave. Think again of St. Thérèse, whose extraordinary purity of life is just what prompts her to recognize the seriousness of her own sins, however small, and to say with the prophet, "all our justice

¹⁰ "For me the veil of faith is no longer a veil, it is a wall that rises all the way to the heavens and covers the starry firmament." Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus et de la Sainte-Face, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf & Desclée de Brouwer, 1998), 244 (Ms. C, 7v^o). Translated into English as *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, 3rd ed., trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), 214.

¹¹ "During the exceedingly joyous days of Easter [April 1896] Jesus made me to feel that there really are souls who have no faith . . . He permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness, and the thought of heaven, once so sweet for me, was no longer anything but a subject of combat and torment." Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus et de la Sainte-Face, *Œuvres complètes*, 241 (Ms. C, 5v^o) (*Story of a Soul*, 211).

¹² Cf. Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Towards a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 281–97.

is stained in your eyes" (cf. Is 64:6).¹³ The saints' awareness of sin extends, of course, to their own faith, to the recognition of its weakness and inadequacy. The earnestness with which they pray, "Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church," is not diminished by the magnitude and depth of their own faith. On the contrary: the saints realize, far more than we of lesser holiness, how much they too rely on the faith of the Church.

So whose faith is it, then, upon which we beseech the Lord to look, if not that of the visible assembly or even of the saints in their earthly pilgrimage? Naturally, that faith is Mary's. She is the bride upon whose holiness and worthiness saint and sinner alike hope the Lord will look. Upon her alone was placed the most stringent demand God ever made of a creature, calling upon her to be conformed to God in body and soul so totally that his only-begotten could take flesh from her and dwell in her womb. Yet she, alone among all creatures, simply accepted the purpose God had for her, this most stringent purpose, holding back nothing. "Blessed is she who believed that what was said to her from the Lord"—this, of all things—"would be fulfilled" (Lk 1:45).

Scripture, it might be objected, actually proposes to us the faith of Abraham as the chief model for our own, rather than the faith of Mary. It was Abraham, after all, who "in hope believed against hope" (cf. Rom 4:18–22), and who was reckoned righteous before God, as we will be reckoned with him, on account of this faith (thus Rom 4:3, 5, 12 and Gal 3:6–7; cf. Gn 15:6).

The importance of Mary's faith, I think, is not chiefly that it serves as a model for our own (on which more momentarily). But in any case Abraham's faith surely needs to be understood as a type of Mary's, as the initial and formative instance of the uniquely Israelite faith that finds its perfection in Mary's *fiat*. Abraham's is the faith that looks forward to Christ still to come, and longs for his intimate presence, which is precisely what Mary's faith not only receives, but realizes or brings about. Being reckoned as righteous on account of having a faith like Abraham's is not, moreover, quite the same thing as asking the Lord to look on that faith in order that we may receive him in the Eucharist. We who make

¹³ Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus et de la Sainte-Face, *Œuvres complètes*, 963 (Of-frande à l'Amour Miséricordieux) (*Story of a Soul*, 277).

this prayer of the Mass our own—"look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church"—hope that ours is the faith of Abraham, yet it turns out not to be our own faith upon which we can confidently ask the Lord to look.

II

Mary, then, is the one perfectly faithful creature, the one creature whose consent of mind and heart to God wholly corresponds to God's entire purpose for her. A standard thought about Mary, surely, but how does it answer the question before us? We want to know who, precisely, is the subject of that faith we offer up to the Lord in the confidence that it will draw his gaze away from our sin. It turns out to be Mary's faith, and hers alone out of all the members of the Church. But clearly this appeal to Mary's faith answers our question only if her faith is somehow, here and now, the Church's faith. After all, we do not pray "Look on Mary's faith," but "look on the faith of your Church." How, then, is Mary's faith at the same time the faith of the Church?

It will not quite do, I think, to answer this question by appeal to Mary as the chief model of faith for the whole Church. She is that, of course. But simply to observe that the faith of the whole Church is to be *like* Mary's, that the faith of every Christian must conform to this model, is not yet to say that the faith of the Church is the *same* as Mary's. After all, the faith of every member of the Church, if it really is true faith—a gift of grace and not simply an opinion formed in accordance with our own will—is at least in some degree like Mary's. And it is just this faith, the faith of all the Church's members save Mary herself, which is, so we have suggested, inadequate to be the faith invoked by our prayer at the Eucharist. Simply to have a faith to some extent like Mary's is not, by itself, to have a faith upon which we can pray to the Lord to look, rather than upon our sins. Such a faith, it seems, must in some sense be nothing other than the faith uniquely Mary's, yet at the same time genuinely our own, that of the Church and not simply of Mary as a single individual.

We can get some traction on how the faith of Mary might also be the faith of the Church by thinking about other cases where the action of one member of the Church genuinely counts as the action of another, in virtue of a bond that unites—makes into one—all those who belong

to Christ. One such case is baptism, especially the baptism of infants. How is it that the Church can baptize infants, when faith is necessary for the efficacious reception of baptism—baptism is the *sacramentum fidei*—and infants can have no faith of their own? The baptism of those incapable of a personal act of faith has not posed theological questions only for those who rejected it. On the contrary, the Catholic tradition has always assumed that faith is necessary for baptism, and then tried to understand the baptism of infants, and others incapable of faith, on that assumption.

Reflecting on some passages in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas answers this question by arguing that infants actually do have a faith that belongs to them, even though they themselves make no act of faith. The Church's faith is in reality also their faith, and suffices for their effective reception of baptism. This illustrates a basic fact about the life of the Church, which shows up elsewhere as well. The act of one member can benefit another, not simply as the intended *result* of the act (as when one Christian gives another something to eat), but because one member's act is *itself* shared with another, and so can rightly count as belonging to both. This is the Holy Spirit's doing, naturally. Since it is the Holy Spirit who unites in Christ all who belong to him, it is the Holy Spirit who determines what constitutes, or counts as, a single agent, an acting unit, when it comes to the members of Christ's body. Thus, with regard to the baptism of infants and others incapable of the act of faith, "The faith of others, indeed of the whole Church, benefits the infant through the action of the Holy Spirit, the one who unites the Church and shares the goods of one [member] with another."¹⁴

In the case of Mary and the Church the relationship is, of course, reversed. Here the faith of one is for the good of all, rather than the faith of the whole Church being for the good of one. But the underlying pneumatological principle is the same. The Holy Spirit unites the Church, makes the Church one, in such a way that the whole Church has a share in Mary's faith. Her faith, while utterly her own act, belongs to the whole Church. For just this reason, the Church's sinful members

¹⁴ "Fides autem unius, immo totius Ecclesiae, parvulo prodest per operationem spiritus sancti, qui unit Ecclesiam et bona unius alteri communicat." *Summa theologiae* (ST) III, q. 68, a. 9, ad 2.

can always pray together, “Look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church,” and be confident that the Lord will hear our prayer.

The idea that the Church’s *act* of faith is identical with Mary’s is, to be sure, a strong claim, which goes beyond the notion that *what* the Church believes explicitly Mary already believes implicitly (such that, e.g., were she to be confronted with the Nicene Creed and to understand it she would immediately and fully assent to it). This strong claim suggests a parallel with Eucharistic sacrifice, alongside the one with baptism already sketched out. Not only is *what* the Church offers on the altar of sacrifice the very same as what Christ himself offered once for all in the upper room and on the cross (his own body and blood); the Church’s *act* of offering is identical with Christ’s unique sacrificial act. This identity of the Church’s present offering with Christ’s unrepeatable oblation comes about because the Church’s Eucharist is itself a sharing in the eternal high priesthood of Christ. Apart from this ecclesial participation in Christ’s own priesthood, there is no Eucharist. Thus the Church’s act of offering is identical with Christ’s once for all sacrificial act because Christ’s own act both takes place once for all in the past, and continues, by way of his eternal priesthood, into the present.¹⁵

How best to understand this teaching is a knotty and much-debated problem.¹⁵ For the moment, though, we can simply note a twofold parallel between the Church’s sacrifice and the Church’s faith.

¹⁵ See Trent’s Decree on Eucharistic Sacrifice, ch. 2: “In the divine sacrifice which is carried out in the Mass, one and the same Christ is contained and bloodlessly sacrificed (*immolatur*), who on the altar of the cross ‘once for all bloodily offered (*obtulit*) himself’ (Heb 9:14, 27) . . . The victim is one and the same, now *offering* [*offerens*; not just: “offered”] by the ministry of the priests who then offered himself on the cross, with only the manner of offering being different” (DH 1743, my emphasis). DH = Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of the Catholic Church*, 43rd ed., ed. Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012). See also Leo XIII, *Caritatis Studium* §10 (1898): after Christ’s ascension, “the very same sacrifice is continued in the Eucharistic sacrifice . . . the sacrifice once for all completed on the cross takes place perpetually and perennially” (DH 3339). Cf. Aquinas, expressing a medieval commonplace: “The sacrifice which is daily offered in the Church is not another from the sacrifice which Christ himself offered, but its commemoration” (*ST* III, q. 22, a. 3, ad 2).

¹⁶ These debates began in earnest in the late Middle Ages, gathered considerable momentum in the wake of Protestant criticisms of the Mass, and continued with vigor up to the eve of Vatican II. They presuppose the correctness of Catholic teaching on Eucharistic sacrifice, especially that of the Council of Trent, and seek to understand

First of all, in both cases the very same act that takes place in the past (*semel*, just once) also takes place in the present: the cross, Mary's *fiat*. Second, it does so by way of a present act of the Church herself: the Eucharistic offering, believing submission in love to what God teaches. In each of these respects the Eucharistic sacrifice is actually a closer parallel to the Church's faith than the baptism of infants, since the Church's faith, like her offering, can be understood as a present act that participates in an entirely sufficient act in the past, while the infant undertakes no act, yet can be said to share the Church's faith.

Infant baptism no doubt remains the more accessible parallel to the Church's participation in Mary's faith, not only because faith is the specific act in play, but because the faith in which the infant (presently) shares is primarily the present act of the Church at his baptism. Infant baptism, in other words, does not yet raise the difficult speculative problem of how a past act and a present act can be the same. Concern with this problem has been central to the long tradition of theological reflection on Eucharistic sacrifice, especially as it sought to understand how the Church's offering in the Mass (her act) does not add to or repeat, but makes present, Jesus's once for all offering (his act) in the Upper Room

how what is thus taught, can be. By contrast, recent theological discussions of sacrifice sometimes oppose not only the idea that the Church offers a sacrifice to God in the Eucharist—specifically what Trent calls a propitiatory sacrifice, a sacrifice for sins (see DH 1743, 1753)—but that Christ offered one on the Cross. Thus, for example, Louis-Marie Chauvet's suggestion that to believe in a God who will accept, let alone demand, such sacrifice manifests a psychic derangement that only Freud can set right. *Symbole et sacrement: Une relecture sacramentelle de l'existence chrétienne* (Paris: Cerf, 1987), 322; *Symbol and Sacrament*, trans. Patrick Madigan & Madeline Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 315. If suggestions of this sort were correct, they would eliminate the parallel I am suggesting, viz., the Church's act of faith : Mary's act of faith :: the Church's Eucharistic act of sacrifice : Christ's act of sacrifice. But they would not eliminate the need to understand how the Church's act in the Eucharist and Christ's act for our salvation (however characterized) are in some way the same, and thus that a pertinent parallel obtains between Christ's act and Mary's. For a penetrating criticism of recent suggestions that we need to play off what we receive from God as gift in the Eucharist against what we there offer to God in sacrifice, see Michon M. Matthiesen, *Sacrifice as Gift: Eucharist, Grace, and Contemplative Prayer in Maurice de la Taille* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013); see also my essay, "Debt, Punishment, and Payment: A Meditation on the Cross, in Light of St. Anselm," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 9, no. 1 (2011): 163–81.

and on the cross.¹⁷ Making good the strong claim that the Church's faith is always a participation in Mary's own means coming to grips with a cognate speculative difficulty.

In some respects the relation of Mary's faith to the Church's faith seems, in fact, even more difficult to understand than the relation of Christ's sacrifice to the Church's sacrifice. Both are, I have suggested, relationships of identity by participation, and both pose an especially acute problem of identity across time: how can a past act be participated in at any present moment? When it comes to the Eucharistic sacrifice this problem can be addressed, in part, by reference to the eternal (and thus supra-temporal) priesthood of Christ.¹⁸ Since Mary is a pure creature and not a divine person (albeit a person identical with the flesh he has become), it may not be possible to make the same sort of appeal to supra-temporality in her case. Even if we can, however, it remains the case that Christ is eternally a priest, as he was on the cross, and so can undertake his priestly act even now, whereas Mary once believed, but now, in glory, presumably no longer does—faith has given way to sight.¹⁹ We cannot, therefore, participate in a present act of faith on Mary's part, as we do (at least in a sense) in a present act offering on Christ's part. The problem of the identity of past and present act thus seems even more perplexing in Mary's case than in that of Christ himself.

St. Louis Marie de Montfort makes a suggestion about how to approach this puzzling speculative problem, joined to a strong statement of the conviction that our faith here and now is a participation in Mary's own act of faith, indeed a gift, in its own way, from Mary herself. "Mary will share her faith with you. Her faith on earth was stronger than that of

¹⁷ DH 1740: The Mass is that act of the Church "by which the bloody sacrifice enacted once for all on the cross is made present, and the memory of it abides until the end of time" (*sacrificium, quo cruentum illud semel in cruce peragendum repraesentaretur eiusque memoria in finem usque saeculi permaneret*).

¹⁸ See DH 1740, 1743, and note 15 above.

¹⁹ Presumably, that is, in light of 1 Cor 13:9–12, 2 Cor 5:6–7, and Catholic doctrine on the beatific vision, especially the Constitution *Benedictus Deus* of Benedict XII (1336): "the vision and enjoyment of the divine essence do away with the acts of faith and hope in [the blessed], insofar as faith and hope are theological virtues" (*visio huiusmodi divinae essentiae eiusque fruitio actus fidei et spei in eis evacuant, prout fides et spes proprie theologicae sunt virtutes*; DH 1001). This was common theological teaching well before Benedict XII; see *ST* I-II, q. 67, a. 3; II-II, q. 4, a. 4, ad 1.

all the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and saints. Now that she is reigning in heaven she no longer has this faith, since she sees everything clearly in God by the light of glory. However, with the consent of almighty God she did not lose it when entering heaven. She has preserved it for her faithful servants in the Church Militant.”²⁰ St. Louis Marie’s remark could reasonably be taken to mean that while the beatific vision is incompatible with faith in the normal order of things, Mary, enjoying the *visio*, nonetheless retains her “invincible faith” by a special privilege of almighty God.²¹ We could then understand ourselves as sharing Mary’s past faith in a manner genuinely resembling our participation in Christ’s once-for-all high priestly sacrifice, namely by way of its present, glorified, reality. As often happens, this suggestion eases one speculative problem but raises another, namely to understand how faith could be at all compatible with the immediate vision of God and the cognitive perfection that vision brings about.²² For present purposes, though, we can leave the speculative questions where they are, and return to the issue with which we began.

III

What does any of this have to do with the question of what theology is and how we should go about it? How, in other words, does it give substance to the idea with which we began, that Mary is the model for the theologian and for all theology?

If what I have said so far is on the right track, then we believe, the whole Church believes, only because Mary has believed. Our faith is

²⁰ St. Louis Marie de Montfort, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, no. 214, following the translation in *God Alone: The Collected Writings of St. Louis Marie de Montfort* (Bay Shore, NY: Montfort, 1988), 358. I am grateful to Gloria Dodd for pointing out this passage to me.

²¹ As she was conceived without sin “by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God” (DH 2803). The phrase “invincible faith” is from St. Louis Marie de Montfort, *True Devotion*, no. 34 (*God Alone*, 299).

²² Perhaps motivated by this worry, the English editors of *True Devotion* seem a bit scandalized by what St. Louis Marie says here (*God Alone*, 391n361) and urge that it be taken to mean simply that the Holy Spirit, delighting in Mary’s earthly faith, fashions our faith (and other virtues) in the present after the pattern of her own in the past. Should we go this route (whether in the interpretation of St. Louis Marie or in our treatment of the speculative matter) we return to the question of how Mary’s past act of faith can be our act in the present.

not only like hers, but dependent on hers. It is, in other words, a participation in hers. The deeper our faith gets, the stronger it gets—the more like hers it gets—the more, not the less, dependent does it become upon her faith.

Now theology is faith seeking understanding. This idea, typically (and rightly) associated with Anselm, is already explicit in Augustine. More precisely, Augustine insists on the necessity of faith for understanding, and to the extent that theology is a quest for understanding, it presupposes faith regarding what one seeks to understand. In just this way he approaches Jesus's seemingly brusque words to Mary, "Woman, what do you have to do with me? My hour is not yet come" (Jn 2:4). Puzzled by this, we may think it unfitting, even impossible, that Jesus would speak to his mother in this way. But this is to make faith depend on understanding, by treating our own puzzlement or even offense at the passage as a barrier to trust in the Gospel narratives. Augustine comments: "If you ask why he responded to his mother in this way, let him explain it who understands it. However let the one who does not yet understand nonetheless believe with all firmness that he did respond in this way, precisely to his mother. By this reverence one will also merit to understand why he responded thus, if in prayer he knocks at the door of truth and does not approach in an argumentative spirit (*non rixando accedat*)."²³

"Faith seeking understanding" is not the only way to think about what theology is. But whatever else theology may be, it is at least this. According to this ancient Christian idea, the act and disposition of faith are required in order to understand the content of faith. Faith is needed in order to search out, however inadequately, the fathomless mysteries God has made known to those who believe. Especially instructive on this point is 1 Corinthians 2:6–16. God has genuinely opened up to us the mysteries of his own life—"the deep things of God" (as the KJV nicely renders 2:10) are, in Christ, no longer hidden from us. So we can-

²³ Augustine, *Tractatus in Iohannis Evangelio* VIII, 7, in *Bibliothèque Augustinienne* 71, ed. M.-F. Berrouard (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1969), 484. Translated into English as *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1–40: The Works of St. Augustine III/12*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. Allen Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009), 175. Or, more generally, *Tractatus* XL, 9: "We believe in order that we may know; we do not know in order that we may believe" (BA 73a, 320; *Homilies* 1–40, 602). For further texts, see BA 71, 895, no. 60. Augustine gives his solution to this interpretive problem in *Tractatus* VIII, 9 (BA 71, 490–94; *Homilies* 1–40, 177–79).

not take refuge in the thought, true as far as it goes (thus Job), that the mysteries of God are too deep for us. God has revealed them to us, and we are summoned to search them out. "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God" (2:12). We can aspire to this understanding only in the faith the Holy Spirit gives. Only the Spirit of God, who is naturally at home among the deep things of God, can lead us into those depths. And so, by faith, he does, even if we cannot yet, under the epistemic conditions of this life, see clearly in the luminous deep where the Spirit leads us (cf. 1 Cor 13:12). The stronger and deeper our faith, then, the more deeply we will be able to understand.

Our act and attitude of faith, we have suggested, are always a share in Mary's own, and thus are dependent on her. Since theology is, at minimum, faith seeking understanding, we need this act and attitude to be theologians. So we can understand the Christian mysteries at all—we can be theologians at all—only by having a share in Mary's faith. And the more like Mary we become, the more we depend on her, the more we will understand. We can be theologians at all only *in fide Mariae*, and we will be better theologians, more serviceable to Christ and his Church, just to the extent that we think, speak, and write *in Maria*.

What then *is* Mary's faith? Not, for the present, what does she believe *in*, but what is her attitude, her act and disposition? If the forgoing is right, we will need to answer this question in order to say, or at least begin to say, what we ought to be doing when we try to theologize. Here the gospel of the annunciation is quite instructive.

Luke's Gospel juxtaposes the annunciation to Mary with an annunciation to Zechariah. The stories are strikingly similar. The angel Gabriel appears to each and makes a startling and awesome announcement, in song. Each is troubled by the announcement, and asks a question. The questions seem quite similar: "How can I know this?" (Zechariah, Lk 1:18), and "How can this be?" (Mary, Lk 1:34). Each of them, moreover, gives a reason for the question. Zechariah: I am old. Mary: I am a virgin. Yet Zechariah's question is met with rebuke and punishment, Mary's with an answer, and praise. Zechariah's question, as the angel explicitly tells him, signals unbelief, while Mary's prepares the way for the perfect act of faith. What is the difference between Zechariah's question and Mary's, such that the one stems from unbelief, the other from faith?

The only apparent difference between the two is that Zechariah asks how he can know whether what the angel has said is really true, while Mary never doubts the truth of his announcement, extraordinary though it is, but simply wants to understand it. Zechariah is evidently unwilling to believe God's Word until he receives an explanation of how it fits with a state of affairs that seems to render it impossible. For this he is struck dumb.

This difference between Zechariah's question and Mary's has often been noticed. "The angel," St. Augustine observes, "saw that in the words of Zechariah there was no faith, but doubt and despair, and he condemned his unbelief by taking away his voice."²⁴ Mary, he goes on to say, "did not doubt the power of God" by which the great thing the angel announced to her would be accomplished, "but sought the manner of it, how it would come to pass... Because the angel saw that she asked, but did not doubt, he did not refuse to instruct her."²⁵

Similarly, and with characteristic eloquence, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in a letter repudiating what he sees as the rationalistic excesses of Abelard: "Mary is praised because she forestalled reason by faith, Zechariah is punished because he tempted faith by reason."²⁶ And Bl. John Henry Newman, a little less than three years before he became a Catholic: "there is one grace of which the Evangelists make [the Blessed Virgin] the pattern, in a few simple sentences,—of Faith. Zacharias questioned the Angel's message, but 'Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.'" Elizabeth later praises Mary's faith, Newman suggests ("Blessed is she that believed . . . those things which were told her from the Lord"), "with an apparent allusion to the contrast thus exhibited between her own highly-favoured husband, righteous Zacharias, and the still more highly-favoured Mary."²⁷

²⁴ Augustine, *Sermo* 291.5; PL 38, 1318. English: *Sermons 273–305A: The Works of St. Augustine III/8*, 134.

²⁵ PL 38, 1318–19.

²⁶ "Laudatur Maria, quod rationem praevenit fide, et punitur Zacharias quod fidem ratione tentavit." *Epistola* 190.1; *Sancti Bernardi opera VIII*, ed. J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1977), 18. For an English version, see *Life and Works of Saint Bernard*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, ed. Jean Mabillon, trans. Samuel J. Eales (London: John Hodges, 1889), 566. Bruno Scott James's *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux* is more recent, but does not include this letter.

²⁷ John Henry Newman, *University Sermons* XV.1, ed. James David Earnest and Gerard Tracey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 211 (p. 312 of the 1871 edition).

We who hope to be theologians ought to follow these three great Christian teachers in weighing the difference between Zechariah's question and Mary's, and what then happens to each of them. I am tempted to say that any theologian should be struck dumb who thinks he needs to offer an epistemological justification for talking about the Christian mysteries before he is actually willing to do so. But that would not be quite right. There can surely be an epistemology that stems from faith rather than being a precondition for it.²⁸

Zechariah's problem is that he asks his question in order to believe, not because he believes. What St. Thomas says of faith in general—in particular of faith's relationship to reason—applies paradigmatically to Zechariah: "Human reason brought into relationship with the truths of faith can be related to the will of the believer in two ways. It can come first, as when someone does not have a will, or a *ready will*, to believe, unless human reason is brought in. When human reason is introduced in this way, it diminishes the value [*meritum*] of faith."²⁹ Zechariah clearly wants to believe the angel's mysterious announcement, but he wants to believe it on his own terms, in terms of what he already knows (or thinks he knows). He wants to master the mystery proclaimed to him by the angel, to control it, to take it by force. *Rixando accedat*: he approaches the divine mystery presented to him in a quarrelsome and argumentative spirit. So does much of our theologizing. That sort of attempt at theology—into which all of us fall—does not spring from faith. It does not spring from a share in Mary's assent, her faith in God's Word.

Two features of Mary's assent to the annunciation of the Lord call for our particular attention if we wish to do theology *in Maria*, and not in the spirit of Zechariah. She listens to the announcement, and she ponders what is said to her.

Mary listens to the words of the angel, not simply in the sense that she pays attention (Zechariah did the same), but in the sense that she trusts the angel and believes that what he says, is true. Her question makes it clear that she listens with assent, and not, like Zechariah, with

²⁸ See, for example, the massive "theological theory of knowledge" (*theologische Erkenntnislehre*) with which Matthias Joseph Scheeben begins his *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*.

²⁹ ST II-II, q. 2, a. 10, c (my emphasis).

skeptical hesitation. The Greek underlines this point. Πῶς ἔσται τοῦτο, Mary asks the angel (Lk 1:34). Not “How *can* this be?” as the standard American Catholic translation (the NAB) has it, but “How *will* this be?” Or, in the Vulgate’s (correct) rendering, “How will this happen?” (*quomodo fiet istud*). Mary embraces the announcement that she will bear a son, never doubting that what God’s angel has told her will come to pass. Troubling, indeed incomprehensible, though it may be, she presumes that the announcement is true. Otherwise it would be senseless to ask how it will happen.

For theology, the correlate to Mary’s assent is what Paul Griffiths has recently called “doctrinal discovery.”³⁰ Catholic theology aims at nothing less than a speculative apprehension, to the extent that it can have one, of the deep things of God. But it does not begin with speculation. It begins by accepting what the deep things of God actually are. Before the theologian can ask the distinguishing question of all theology—how can this be?—he must know of “this.” He must know what *is*, when it comes to nothing less than the deep things of God and God’s works. By no amount of speculative ingenuity will he find this out on his own. He needs to be told what the deep things of God are, and the sign and instrument God has designed for this purpose is the Church, the Church that not only believes, but teaches. Theology begins, as Mary began, by listening with attentive assent to what God says on the lips of his appointed messenger. It begins by discovering what Catholic doctrine is, and how it bears on the subject at hand.

Practiced *in Maria* and not *in Zaccharia* theology is, as Griffiths puts it, “a discourse responsive to authority.”³¹ It can only work with what God gives it, with the gift—the *donum*, the *given*—of an announcement that comes to it from without concerning God’s depths and his deeds. Theology must begin with this given, a gift the theologian does not give but can only receive. This gift has been given, and continues to be given anew. The theologian may therefore discover it, indeed it daily lies ready to hand, all about him in the Church. The gift may thrust itself upon him, unbidden and perhaps unwelcome. Whether discovered or

³⁰ Paul J. Griffiths, “Theological Disagreement: What It Is and How to Do It,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 69 (2014): 23–36; here: 26, 31.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

imposed, the Church's authoritative teaching may be troubling, and it will surely, at least to begin with, exceed our understanding. In any case it is beyond the power of theology and theologians to determine what the gift will be. We can begin only by listening with faith, and not in an argumentative spirit.

Mary not only listens, she ponders what she hears. Her question itself already makes this plain, though Luke goes on to speak explicitly of Mary "pondering" what she hears and sees concerning her son (Lk 2:19; cf. 2:51). By moving from believing what she hears to wondering about it, Mary becomes the model not only for all who have faith, but for theologians in particular. Mary asks her question *because* she believes what the angel says, and wants to understand it. She questions the angel not in order to master the mystery God opens up to her, but to search it out, to *appreciate* it more. Mary thus embodies the other half of what Thomas says about faith's relationship to reason: "Human reason can be related to the will of the believer in another way, namely when it comes after [the will to believe]. For when a human being has a will ready to believe, she loves the truth she believes, embraces it, and thinks about it to see if any reasons can be found for it. Related to the will in this way, human reason does not exclude the value [*meritum*] of faith, but is a sign of greater value [*meriti*]." ³²

Mary's question is born of her ready will to believe, from the very receiving of the truth that is spoken to her, and from the love of it. Faith and reason, believing and questioning, no doubt belong together. But the reasoning that springs from faith is of a different order from the reasoning that wants to set its own conditions for what can be believed. Mary asks her question not in order to shape the mystery according to her own judgment, but to be shaped more deeply by it. Her faith, Newman points out, "did not end in a mere acquiescence in Divine providences and revelations: as the text inform us, she 'pondered' them . . . Thus St. Mary is our pattern of Faith, both in the reception and in the study of Divine Truth. She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells upon it . . . not enough to submit the Reason, she reasons upon it; not indeed reasoning first, and believing afterwards, with Zacharias, yet first believing without reasoning, next from love and reverence, reasoning

³² ST II-II, q. 2, a. 10, c.

after believing. And thus she symbolizes to us, not only the faith of the unlearned, but of the doctors of the Church also.”³³

Strikingly, Mary not only believes what is proclaimed to her by God’s messenger, she is troubled by it. We need not be troubled by what we believe in order to question it. We may question what we believe simply because we believe it, in the hope of understanding it better (questioning is thus the breath of life for the traditional enterprise of faith seeking understanding—scholastic theology—even when, as often happens, the fact of the matter is not in dispute). But being troubled is a particular incentive to question, and so it is with Mary.

Mary is troubled by what she hears from the angel; it poses a great difficulty for her. More than one, in fact. She is a virgin; she has given herself wholly over to the God of Israel in this way. How will she have a son, as God’s angel announces that she will? Before that, though, she is troubled by the very fact that the angel makes this announcement to her at all. The angel tells her that *she* is full of grace, that God is with her, that she has found favor with God, that she will conceive in her womb and herself give birth to “the Son of the Most High” (Lk 1:32) in fulfillment of all God’s promises to Israel. St. Thomas comments: “The Blessed Virgin had explicit faith that the incarnation would come to pass. But since she was humble, she did not think that she would be the one called to something so high (*non tam alta de se sapiebat*). So she had to be instructed about it.”³⁴ And the instruction was greatly troubling.

Mary is troubled, but she does not take the difficulty the angel’s message creates for her as a pretext for approaching the angel in an argumentative spirit. *Non rixando accedat*. Instead of arguing she ponders, turning over in her heart the truth she believes, troubling though it is, and asking the angel just the question that will lead to understanding. Mary surely questions so that she may cease being troubled, but not in order to believe what troubles her. She does not ponder instead of being troubled, turning over in her heart and seeking to understand only what fails to cause her any trouble. She ponders while being troubled, indeed because she is troubled, wholly confident that the one who announced the great difficulty to her can also clear it up. In this way Mary realizes

³³ Newman, *University Sermons* XV.2–3, 211–12 (pp. 312–13 in the 1871 edition).

³⁴ *ST* III, q. 30, a. 1, ad 2.

what Newman calls “that loving inquisitiveness which is the life of the *Schola* . . . her words to the Archangel, ‘How shall this be?’ show that there is a questioning in matters revealed to us compatible with the fullest and most absolute faith.”³⁵

Mary is greatly troubled by what God teaches her with unbidden authority. Even so, she has no desire at all to take this fathomless mystery—the mystery of the incarnation—by force. She desires only to receive it, to wait upon it, to ponder it in her heart, to be conformed to it. Whatever else theology is and does, the theologian must be one with Mary at just this point. Our theology must spring from her faith, and in just this way from the faith of the Church—that faith upon which alone we can ask the Lord to look. 

³⁵ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Pickering, 1878; reprint, Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1968), 337.

