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# *Marian Mariology*

## CHAPTER 22



The veneration of Mary, when properly understood, permeates the entire life of the Church; it is a dimension of dogma and of piety, of Christology and of ecclesiology. This dimension needs to be made explicit today in connection with the problems of humanity. Mariology expresses something fundamental to the Christian life itself, to the Christian experience of the world.

Sound Mariology has always been understood in Christological terms. If the Gospel revealed nothing more than the fact that Jesus Christ, God and man, was born of Mary, this alone would be sufficient for the Church to love her and to draw theological conclusions from pondering this relationship of Mother and Son. We need no other revelations. Mary is a self-evident and essential *datum* and dimension of the Gospel.

Chapter one centers on Catechesis flowing from Byzantine Marian spirituality with commentary by Brother John M. Samaha, S.M. Chapter 2 discusses Mariology today with commentary by Rev. Professor Michael Lapierre, S.J. The remaining chapters are commentaries on various Marian topics by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J. (1914– 2000).

## Chapter 22

### **Mary: Mediatrix in the Theology of Bellarmine**

*by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.*

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The first apparition of our Blessed Mother at Fatima occurred just thirty years ago on May 13, 1917. It may have been only a coincidence that a few years later the Holy Father should have chosen May 13 as the Feast of St. Robert Bellarmine, Confessor and Doctor of the Universal Church. The fact is that hardly another man in the history of Catholic thought has written more extensively on the glories of Mary or defended her interests more ardently against the attacks of the heretics than this humble scholar from Tuscany. In his private life he was no less devoted to the Mother of God. He fasted every Saturday in her honor. Every morning he used to rise an hour before the rest of the community to recite the Office of the Blessed Virgin on his knees. As a Cardinal in Rome, he organized a special commission to study and defend the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception—fully three centuries before its formal definition by the Church.

It is no wonder, then, that Mary should have rewarded his zeal by giving him an extraordinary insight into her personal prerogatives and a deep appreciation of the exalted dignity which raised her to “a pinnacle of sanctity that of all creation approaches nearest to the sanctity of the Creator.” He was especially penetrating, however, in his understanding of the Blessed Virgin’s position as Mediatrix between fallen man and Almighty God. And, in view of the current interest in this doctrine, we can profitably examine the basic principles of Bellarmine’s teaching on Mary’s

mediation, particularly since his writings have received the highest approval of the Holy See. Pope Pius XI has expressly declared: "St. Robert Bellarmine is to be numbered among the greatest men in the history of the Church, whom God in His providence has endowed with exceptional learning and sanctity to teach the truths of the Catholic Faith and defend its integrity against the attacks of the heretics."

### **Origin of Mary's Role**

According to Bellarmine's Mariology, the Blessed Virgin began her role of Mediatrix when the Angel Gabriel announced to her that she was to be the Mother of God, and she willingly accepted the tremendous responsibility which the Angel offered her. St. Robert looks upon this free acceptance by the Blessed Virgin as the first and most important condition for the validity of the marriage contract which the Son of God entered into with the human race. "It is only natural," he writes, "that before a matrimonial contract is sealed, and before the wedding takes place, the free consent of the bride-to-be is asked for. In the Old Testament, for example, we have the story of Abraham sending his servant to ask for the hand of Rebecca for his son Isaac. But before her parents felt free to give their daughter in marriage, they said: 'Let us first ask the girl whether she wants to marry Isaac.' So also on this occasion, when the human race was to be joined in marriage to the Word of God, God first sent His Angel to the Virgin Mary to inquire her will in the matter, and in a sense first obtain her consent before sealing the compact. Undoubtedly He could have concluded this mystic marriage without waiting for Mary's consent, but just as certainly it was more meritorious for the Blessed Virgin and more worthy of the dignity of God that her wishes were first consulted, and only then was the contract made."

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How perfectly free was Mary's choice to become the Mother of the Redeemer may be seen from the variety of virtues which she was called upon to exercise in answer to the Angel's invitation. "Her modesty in speech, her deep humility, her strong faith, her prompt obedience, her fervent charity—are all crystallized in that one short sentence, 'Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word.'"

In consequence of her fullness of grace and her willingness to cooperate with Christ for the Redemption of the world, Mary became the Vessel of Honor from whom proceeded the Son of God made Man. It was by way of anticipating this first kind of mediation that "the Angel Gabriel addressed her as 'full of grace,' because she was to carry in her womb, as in a blessed temple, Jesus Christ, who is the Source and Origin of all divine grace and the Author of all our good."

## Mary's Collaboration in Redemption

But Bellarmine insists that Mary is our Mediatrix not only because she carried the Author of our grace in her womb and give Him birth at Bethlehem, but also because she collaborated with Him in His redemptive work down to the smallest detail—all through His infancy, His years at Nazareth, His public ministry, and especially in His final oblation on the Cross. Commenting on the third word of Christ on the Cross, St. Robert says: "This word of Christ indicates to us how desirous He was to make His sufferings contribute as fully as possible to our eternal welfare. When other men are dying, particularly a violent or disgraceful death, they are most anxious to avoid having their loved ones near them, because they wish to spare them the sorrow of witnessing their agony and duplicating it in themselves. Not so Our Savior. He wanted His Mother to see His agony on the Cross so as to unite her sufferings together with His. When I think of Christ hanging on the Cross and His Mother there before Him, I can imagine His saying: 'The sword which Simeon predicted would pierce My Mother's heart, has pierced Mine too.' Why? Because the same death that wrenched the soul of Christ from His Sacred Body also separated a most loving Mother from her most Beloved Son."

We can better appreciate how deeply Mary must have suffered in thus offering the life of her Son on the Cross, if we realize that her love for Him was immeasurably deeper than that of ordinary mothers for their children. "The measure of sorrow," Bellarmine explains, "is the intensity of one's love. That is why the Blessed Mother suffered so intensely. She loved Jesus as no other mother could even love her son. If we may be permitted to rationalize in this delicate matter, we can say that there are two reasons ultimately why mothers love their children: because they have personally given birth to them, and because they see in their children some quality or other which is worthy of their attention and devotion. Both of these motives of maternal love were elevated in the Blessed Virgin beyond anything ever found in other human mothers. Other women are not alone in begetting their children; they share this happy privilege with their husbands. But Mary was simply and uniquely the Mother of Jesus, since she was a virgin in conceiving Him and a virgin in giving Him birth. And just as Christ the Lord in His divine generation was born of a Father without a mother, so in His human generation He came into the world of a Mother but without a father." No less inspiring of the purest love for Christ in the heart of His Virgin Mother was the Lord's transcendent excellence. The Son of Mary was not only the most beautiful of the sons of men, He was more amiably appealing and more magnetically attractive than all the blessed in heaven and all the angelic hosts with God. Consequently, the Blessed Virgin must have loved Jesus more than any earthly mother has ever loved her son. By the same token, her grief over His sufferings must have been incomparably greater. So much so that St. Bernard does not hesitate to call Mary's sorrow on Calvary a 'martyrdom of the heart,' which is more grievous to bear than a martyrdom of the body."

He answered: "I am Innocent III who should have been condemned to eternal hell-fire for several grievous sins had not the Mother of God interceded for me in my agony and obtained for me the grace of repentance. Now I am destined to suffer in Purgatory till the end of the world unless you help me. Once again the Mother of Mercy has allowed me to come to ask for your prayers." Lutgardis immediately called together her Sisters in religion to tell them what she had seen. In company with them she made an oblation of all her sufferings and trials for the speedy liberation of the Sovereign Pontiff from the flames of Purgatory. "From this we may gather," Bellarmine concludes, "that there is not one of us who is so exalted in dignity or advanced in virtue that he does not need the maternal care of his Blessed Mother. Christ in His agony on the Cross had said to her: 'Behold thy son.' For centuries now she has been faithful to this commission, never allowing anyone finally to perish—provided he also has been mindful of those other words spoken to him by the Saviour: 'Behold *thy Mother*.'"

End

Shortly before his death in 1546, Martin Luther delivered himself of an impious diatribe against the sanctity of the Blessed Virgin, loudly protesting that she was no more holy than any other son or daughter of Adam, no more holy than Luther himself. On this basis, Mary's intercession through her merits was a pure fiction, excogitated by Scholastic theologians. For once, Bellarmine seems to have lost his temper. Preaching in the Cathedral of Louvain, on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, he calls out to his audience: "If I only had the burning eloquence and deadly satire that this dastardly charge deserves! Do you, Martin Luther, dare to compare yourself to the Virgin Mother of God; you who once vowed perpetual chastity and then ran off to pollute yourself with a sacrilegious marriage; you who vowed voluntary poverty and then proceeded to despoil the very temples and altars of the Most High; you who pledged yourself to a life of humility under the yoke of obedience and then broke these solemn vows by flouting your proud disobedience in the face of all the Saints of antiquity, the Vicars of Christ and God Himself in His Holy Catholic Church!"

Not satisfied with crushing Luther's brazen denial of Mary's sanctity and corresponding merit in the sight of God, Bellarmine points out that it is precisely in virtue of her "ineffable merits that the Blessed Virgin stands as intermediary between Christ and His Mystical Body. The Head of the Catholic Church," he keeps repeating, "is Christ, and Mary is the neck which joins the Head to its Body." Having merited so well of God by her transcendent holiness, "God has decreed that all the gifts, all the graces, and all the heavenly blessings which proceed from Christ as the Head, should pass through Mary to the Body of the Church. Even the physical body has several members in its other parts—hands, arms, shoulders and feet—but only one head and one neck. So also the Church has many Apostles, martyrs, confessors and virgins, but only one Head, the Son of God, and one bond between the Head and members, the Mother of God."

### **St. Lutgardis on Mary's Intercession**

Towards the end of his life, Cardinal Bellarmine wrote a short treatise on the mystical life, entitled "De Gemitu Columbæ." It is eminently a practical work, copiously illustrated with historical allusions from Sacred Scripture and the Lives of the Saints. Among the latter is a story that perfectly exemplifies St. Robert's doctrine on the mediation of the Mother of God. The incident centers about an authenticated vision from the life of the Cistercian ecstatic, St. Lutgardis, as recorded by her contemporary, Thomas of Chantimpré. Lutgardis, who was blind for eleven years before her death in 1246, is one of the most sympathetic figures among the woman mystics of the Middle Ages. Her feast is celebrated on June 16.

Pope Innocent III died in 1216, shortly after bringing to a successful conclusion the famous Fourth Council of the Lateran which condemned the resuscitated Manicheism of the Albigenses. A few weeks after his death, he appeared to Lutgardis clothed in flames and his body writhing with terrible pains. The saintly nun asked him who he was and what he wanted.

This martyrdom of her affections which the Blessed Mother suffered beneath the Cross is to be regarded as an integral part of Christ's redemptive death upon the Cross. Bellarmine is at great pains to point out that Christ not only permitted but expressly desired His Immaculate Mother to share with Him His final agony on Golgotha. And on Mary's part, her cooperation in this last oblation was nothing less deliberate and free than the first oblation at Nazareth when she freely consented to becoming His Mother. "Have no doubts about it," Bellarmine cautions, "the Blessed Virgin suffered extremely when she beheld her Son hanging on the gibbet of the Cross; but she loved the honor and glory of God more than the human flesh of her Son. She stood there under the Cross as the Valiant Woman who showed not the trace of impatience over the exquisite pains to which Christ was unjustly condemned. She did not fall to the earth, faint with grief, as some artists would have us believe; she did not tear her hair or scream and bewail as other women might, but bore her sorrow courageously because she knew that the spectacle before her had been justly willed by God. As much as she loved the human form of Christ, she loved the honor of His Father and our Redemption more. Thus did she blend her own affections with those of Christ, who also preferred His Father's glory and our salvation to the temporal safety and security of His human body."

Even if the Blessed Virgin had done nothing else than participate as intimately as she did in her Divine Son's life on earth, she would still deserve to be called in the truest sense our Mediatrix with Almighty God. But Robert Bellarmine is not satisfied with this. He would have the Mother of God actively interceding for struggling humanity from the first moment that she entered Paradise until the last moment on Judgment Day. In one of his panegyrics for the Feast of the Assumption, he describes Mary as "the cervix which unites Christ the Head with the rest of His Body. She is the nexus between Christ and His Church." So that, in virtue of her intermediary position, "she is the outstanding advocate and patron that sinners have before the throne of God."

### **How Mary Exercises Her Privilege of Mediation**

The question arises: "How does Mary exercise this singular privilege of interpellator between Christ and His Mystical Body?" Bellarmine answers that she intercedes for us in two ways: by her explicit prayers to God on our behalf and by the incomparable merits with which her soul is adorned, which plead as a kind of silent prayer of petition that God may be merciful to us. "During her life on earth," he explains, "Mary shared with Christ all the trials and labors that He underwent. She was His constant companion in poverty and persecution, in sorrows and tribulations. In this way the Lord prepared her by the actual experience of human misery to become the Mother of Mercy and Consolation which He destined for her." But even the

deepest sympathy on Mary's part would be unavailing unless she also had the means at hand of coming to our aid. The Mother of God has these means: "As Queen of heaven and earth, she has only to ask the King for anything she wants and it is already given to her. If, therefore, in spite of Our Mother's power and willingness to help us, we sink beneath the waves of sinful desperation, we have only ourselves to blame for not having called upon Mary."

### Is the "Salve Regina" Mariolatric?

Pietro Vermigli, one of Luther's disciples and an avowed enemy of devotion to the Mother of God which he called Mariolatry, took special issue with the traditional Catholic prayer, the *Salve Regina*. To his mind, "this antiphon is a tissue of blasphemies, attributing to Mary's qualities which are proper to God alone." Bellarmine challenges the heretic first on personal grounds, noting that this prayer has been in use in the Church for centuries, and approved by Saints and scholars with whom apostate monks like Vermigli have no right to be compared. Moreover, he charges the Reformers with allowing their inveterate hatred of Catholicism to darken their saner judgment in matters of this kind. All that an unbiased observer has to do is to analyze the *Salve Regina*, phrase by phrase, to be convinced that it neither deifies the Blessed Virgin nor yet detracts one iota from the orthodox teaching of the Church that Mary is the most influential arbitrator we have with Jesus Christ, Our Lord. The sectarians object to our addressing Mary: "Hail, Holy Queen." "However, Christ Himself has told us that all the blessed in heaven will be nothing less than kings: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...Come, ye blessed of My Father, and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you.' If the blessed in heaven are to be princes and kings, how much more the Mother of the King of kings deserves to be called the Holy Queen!"

Neither do we scruple about calling Mary the "Mother of Mercy." "She is exactly that, because she is the Mother of Christ, through whom we have obtained mercy from God; because she intercedes for us without ceasing that God may be merciful to us, and as the Mother of God she does not plead in vain; and finally because she is in the profoundest sense our merciful and compassionate Mother."

Calvin and his followers accuse us of divinizing the Blessed Mother when we speak of her as "Our Life." But they misjudge our motives. "We do not mean to say that Mary is Life Itself, as God is Life by His very essence; nor that she is the principal cause of supernatural life as Christ is 'the Author of life.' We mean both that she has given birth to Christ, and that He has appointed her to be the Mother of the spiritual life of all the living."

So also in addressing Mary as "Our Sweetness," we are only giving testimony to the innumerable blessings with which she has consoled the afflicted down the centuries. "If Paul could honestly write to Philemon that 'I have had great consolation and joy in thy charity,' how much more truly can we apply this quality of sweetness to the

Mother of Jesus, through whom not one or another person is consoled, as in the case of Philemon, but in whom all the sorrows of all mankind find their lasting solace and commiseration!"

We call upon Mary as "Our Hope," because "after the Man-God Himself, there is nothing in which we have more reason to confide than the intercessory power of Mary. Underlying this trustfulness in the Mother God is the principle of our Faith which bids us repose our confidence not only in the Author of grace but also in those who can plead with Him in our behalf."

Finally, the Church tells us to say to the Mother of Christ: "And after this our exile show us the blessed Fruit of thy womb, Jesus." The enemies of the Church accuse us of making Christ depend upon Mary, and His saving us contingent upon her caprice. "Nothing could be further from the truth. To show the Saviour to sinful men is really the same as to obtain their salvation. Accordingly, even the Apostles like St. Paul could truly declare: 'I have become all things to all men, that I might save all.' And if the Apostles did not hesitate to claim that men were saved by them and through their words, example and prayer, why should the Church be afraid to say that after this our exile the Blessed Virgin will lead us into heaven and bring us to Christ, the Fruit of her womb? Every Catholic understands, of course, that Mary will finally accomplish our eternal salvation because during our stay on earth she was our constant intercessor with her Divine Son."

During the Pontificate of Clement VIII, Bellarmine was ordered to compose a small but thorough-going Catechism of Christian Doctrine. The result was his "Dottrina Cristiana," a masterpiece of concise theological formulæ. In treating of the Angelic Salutation, he asks the question: "What is the meaning of the words: 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners'?" His answer is characteristic: "In the last part of the Hail Mary, the Church wishes to impress upon our minds what is the greatest glory of the Madonna—that she is the Mother of God; and also to show us that the Blessed Virgin can obtain for us from God whatsoever she wishes, by merely asking for it."

### Mary's Sanctity and Merits

However, it is not only by her explicit prayers that the Mother of Christ mediates between God and ourselves. Her consummate sanctity and the merits which she has gained serve as perennial, albeit unspoken, petitions for mercy from the hand of God.