

The Blessed Virgin Mary as the Fruit of Redemption

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Introduction

In the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Church finds an image of what she herself will become in eternal glory. The movement from grace to glory cannot be brought about apart from the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ, by which He redeemed the world once and for all. His victory over sin and death wrought the *fruits of redemption* for mankind, namely the healing and elevation of our nature through grace, granting access to eternal life. As the exemplary member and *typus* of the Church, the Blessed Virgin Mary proceeds all of mankind in the redeemed life in a most sublime manner. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* articulates it in this way,

In celebrating this annual cycle of Christ's mysteries, holy Church honors with special love the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, who is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son. In her the Church holds up and admires the most excellent fruit of the redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be.¹

As noted in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the excellency of Mary includes the special unity she enjoys with her Son and his salvific work by being the Mother of God. Free from all stain of original sin, the work of redemption was completed in her by the merits of her Son as no other human being would experience before or thereafter. Dogmatically defined in 1854 with the Papal Decree *Ineffabilis Deus*, the Church holds as divinely revealed the sacred truth of Mary's sinless humanity, which enabled her to participate

¹ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4 December 1963: AAS 56 (1964), 102.

in the saving plan of God, being the most fitting instrument of grace for the Incarnation of Christ.²

In order to understand Mary as the *fruit of redemption*, we must first look at various aspects of the concept, beginning with its biblical origins. Used in his letter to the early Christian community in Rome, St. Paul links it to the work of the Holy Spirit,

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom. 8:22-25).

The ‘first fruits’ here refer to the fulfillment of Christ’s promise to send the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost. Having received the grace of baptism and thereby the life of grace, the nascent Church now prays in hope for the final redemption of the body. Through the Dogmatic declaration of Mary’s Assumption, the Church confirmed that the Blessed Virgin preceded the Church in having already attained this state of glory,

She, by an entirely unique privilege, completely overcame sin by her Immaculate Conception, and as a result she was not subject to the law of remaining in the corruption of the grave, and she did not have to wait until the end of time for the redemption of her body.³

² See Pius IX, Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854. At the Holy See, <https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-ix/it/documents/18541208-costituzione-apostolica-ineffabilis-deus.html>.

³ Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, 1950, 5, At the Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html

Mary therefore lives in the fulfillment of the hope for which the Church on earth prays. The particular phrase ‘fruit of redemption’ is also found in the liturgical prayers of the Church, within the rite of Eucharistic Benediction,

O God, who in this wonderful sacrament, has left us a memorial of your passion, grant us, we pray, so to revere the sacred mysteries of your Body and Blood, that we may ever experience in ourselves the fruits of your redemption, through Christ our Lord.

The sequence of this prayer follows a clear logic: by His passion and death, without which the Church would not have His Eucharistic presence, we recall the saving merits of the Savior who at once liberated and justified fallen man from the bondage of sin and death. Just as His redeeming merits are made manifest in the Blessed Virgin, so likewise does the Church pray to participate in them in its struggle against the world, the flesh, and the Devil. By consequence, our wounded nature necessitates a different mode of participation from that of Mary. In his commentary on the Angelic Salutation, Aquinas compares the ‘fruit of Eve’ to the ‘fruit of Mary’,

Eve looked for pleasure in the fruit of the tree because it was good to eat. But she did not find this pleasure in it, and, on the contrary, she at once discovered she was naked and stricken with sorrow. In the fruit of the Blessed Virgin, we find sweetness and salvation, ‘He who eats my flesh...has eternal life.’⁴

⁴ C.f., Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio Salutationis Angelicae* which outlines how the Blessed Virgin Mary exceeded the angels in dignity, “[...] in fructu suo Eva desideravit delectationem, quia bonus ad edendum; sed non invenit, quia statim cognovit se nudam, et habuit dolorem. Sed in fructu virginis suavitatem invenimus et salutem. Ioan. VI, 55: ‘*qui manducat meam carnem, habet vitam aeternam.*’”

By contrasting Eve and Mary, Aquinas touches on a key distinction: the fruit of Redemption is *first* Christ and the life of grace, then the effects being the fruits we experience or what we referred to earlier as the healing and elevation of our nature. With this distinction in mind, we come to the focus of this study which is to address the question: what does it mean to call Mary the fruit of redemption? We will proceed in four parts. First, we will address the meaning of redemption and man's need for it due to original sin. Next, a broader discussion on the fruits of the redemption will follow. This will then bring us to the final section and a more direct commentary on the principal question of inquiry: what it means to call Mary the fruit of redemption. With these foundations in mind, we may begin our inquiry.

I. The Need for Redemption

In Chapter three of the book of Genesis, we read of the primeval event in which Adam and Eve lost friendship with God through their disobedience. Before this moment, they enjoyed the state of *original justice* by which they lived in harmony with God, themselves, and all of creation. Indeed, through this original sin, death and disorder entered the world.⁵ Sin ruptured this relationship of grace by which Adam and Eve enjoyed with God the harmonious ordering of their passions, inclination to virtue, and a share in the preternatural gifts. While this certainly does not mean that man's nature is not corrupt or evil, it is indeed wounded as a result. Effects of the woundedness in human nature can be plainly seen through the weakened will in its ability to choose the good, ignorance of the mind, death, and our inclination to evil. This fallen nature makes choosing the good difficult, as St. Paul exclaims,

⁵ See Augustine's commentary in *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* "the deliberate sin of the First man is the cause of original sin" (PL II, XXVI, 43).

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me (Rom. 7:15-30).

St. Paul's account in the letter to the Romans vividly expresses the consequences of sin and death by which man stood in need of a redeemer. Pursuing virtue and living according to God's law would require more than what our fallen nature could accomplish on its own.⁶ In God's love for man whom He created in His image and likeness, He would send His Son to respond to this need for grace whereby man would be able to once more live in harmony with God. Simply stated, man's sin incurred a debt he could not pay, which Jesus Christ would take upon Himself (though He Himself was sinless) and thereby give the definitive response to sin and all of its detrimental effects through His Paschal mystery.

Aquinas called the merits of Christ's suffering death his *superabundant atonement*⁷, meaning that the debt owed to God because of sin was canceled and *more than enough* to make reparation for man. This is because of the excellence and innocence of Christ in his suffering,

[...] though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied

⁶ Condemning the heresy of Pelagianism, the Council of Orange declared in 529: "Man can by only forces of nature, without the enlightenment and inspiration of the Holy Spirit conceive as it is fitting, a good thought concerning eternal salvation or choose it, that is, to give his assent to the Gospel message. (C.f. DH 180, 1791, 104, 797.)

⁷ *ST*, III, q. 48, a. 2.

himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8).

It is therefore clearly Christ's perfect atonement which wrought redemption. The faithful may thus rejoice with St. Paul, since 'while sin increased, grace abounded all the more' (Rom. 5:20), sin and death do not have the final word. Though always called to repentance and reparation, the tradition of the Church's liturgy at Easter recalls original sin the *felix culpa*, the happy fault which brought the grace of Christ to man, "O truly necessary sin of Adam, which the death of Christ has blotted out! O happy fault that merited such and so great a Redeemer!"⁸

As the one mediator between God and man, Christ obtained for us access to His own Divine life. Christians may therefore recall their need for redemption, already obtained through Jesus Christ, and respond to the grace to experience its effects. As the famous Augustinian maxim expresses it, "God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us."⁹ While the redemption of man is thus objectively complete in Christ, it is held out to each man and requires a response of active acceptance and cooperation with grace. In this regard, the Blessed Virgin Mary is the exemplar.

Before proceeding, it is important to note here that while Mary was preserved by God from all stain of original sin, she was not exempt from the need for redemption. Indeed, to say this would make her co-equal to God and super-human. This would be a great error. Between the Redeemer and the redeemed there is always a great distance, since as the

⁸ From the *Praeconium Paschale* (or *Exultet*) on the Liturgy of Holy Saturday. See also Aquinas' commentary on the greater good which came about through sin, *ST III*, q. 1, a. 3.

⁹ Augustine, *Sermo 169*, 11, 13: PL 38, 923.

Word-made-flesh Jesus Christ alone enjoys the grace of the hypostatic union, himself the *origin of all grace* in the human soul.¹⁰ This distinction must be clear: Christ's human nature, perfectly united yet distinct from His Divine nature, is the only example of human nature which was *never* in need of redemption. The Church is able to hold Mary up as a model precisely because of her exceptional and exemplary redeemed state¹¹, the uniqueness of which will be further discussed in the following sections.

II. The Fruits of Redemption

In the previous section, we discussed the consequences of original sin by which all of mankind share in the effects of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Just as man experienced consequences of a wounded nature after original sin because of Adam, so likewise does he have access to the remedy in experiencing the fruit of redemption obtained by Jesus Christ. We therefore turn to address the topic of the fruits of redemption in two ways: first, in the life of grace and second in the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Since the sacred humanity of Christ is the instrument of man's salvation, it is fitting to first consider Christ's grace as the first and primary fruit of the redemption.¹² We also find a helpful explanation in St. Paul's use of the phrase,

¹⁰ *ST I*, q. 112, a. 1.

¹¹ See *Lumen Gentium* 52-54 for further explanation, i.e., "Because of this gift of sublime grace she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth. At the same time, however, because she belongs to the offspring of Adam she is one with all those who are to be saved. She is 'the mother of the members of Christ . . . having cooperated by charity that faithful might be born in the Church, who are members of that Head.' Wherefore she is hailed as a pre-eminent and singular member of the Church, and as its type and excellent exemplar in faith and charity."

¹² In this essay, the distinctions between uncreated grace and created grace will not be considered. Grace will instead be spoken of more generally as man's participation in God's life.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. (1 Cor. 15:20-25).

The patristic development of Christ as the “new Adam” develops precisely from this and other Pauline passages. Where Adam broke friendship with God through sin, the one sinless man grants access to the human race to be once more restored to right relationship with God. As St. Paul notes, Christ’s own resurrection precedes the Church in glory. Indeed, it is precisely in reference to His resurrection that He Himself may be called the first fruit of redemption; in that it is the fullness of *His life* which is now lies open to man. Later in the aforementioned passage of 1 Corinthians 15:23, St. Paul says regarding the faithful, “but each one in his own order: Christ the first fruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming.” The coming of the Holy Spirit which followed Christ’s resurrection and ascension brought the fruit of the gifts, enabling the faithful to live according to grace, particularly through the sacramental life of the Church which Christ initiated. The purpose of grace is to restore man’s nature to what he lost by original sin. Garrigou-Lagrange points out the grace-glory connection through his commentary on Aquinas, *De Gratia*, relating that glory is grace consummated. This means that by grace, man may begin to live the life of glory here-and-now.¹³ In order to

¹³ See Réginald Marie Garrigou-Lagrange, *Grace: A Commentary on the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas, Ia IIae, Q. 109-14* (South Bend: Ex Fontibus Company, Cop, 2015). Taken from Article IV, Whether Habitual Grace is the Essence of the Soul in a Subject? First Corollary: “Glory, taken as the root of the light of glory and of charity, is likewise in the essence of the

allow man to be divinized (*gratia elevans*), he must first be healed (*gratia sanans*) and restored to friendship with God which is charity.

In Mary, the Church finds its most sublime creaturely witness as a result of Christ's redemptive act. Just as some saints are more revered in the Church, Aquinas says,

Greater dignity was preordained by God to some saints, and hence he infused grace more abundantly into them. For example, he imparted a unique grace to Christ as man when he assumed [the humanity] into the unity of the [Second] Person. He endowed with special graces in both her body and soul, the glorious Virgin Mary whom he chose to be his mother. Similarly, those God called to a unique dignity, the Apostles, were gifted with a corresponding favor of grace. Thus the Apostle states in Romans 8:23: 'ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit.' And a Gloss comments: 'their share is first in time and more copious than others.'

Since Mary is queen of all saints, it can be said that by her dignity and fullness of grace, her share in the 'first fruits of the Spirit' exceeds all others. Through her heavenly intercession, Mary continues to obtain grace for us on earth. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas asks whether one man can merit for another.¹⁴ He explains that because God is always acting in the movement of grace that occurs within us, we can merit by cooperating with Him freely to choose the virtuous response in a given circumstance, such as praying for the needs of another, or sacrificing a good and thereby practicing temperance. When we live virtuously, this is ultimately the

soul; for it is grace consummated. It is also an entitative habit, for St. Thomas says in several places that habitual grace, the seed of glory, is a certain beginning of eternal life, for it is the same habit. On the contrary, infused faith, which is obscure, is not a certain beginning of the beatific vision."

¹⁴ *ST*, Ia IIae, q. 114, a. 6.

mystery of Jesus Christ who lives in His members on earth, enabling us to merit, which though mysterious, is our real participation in the economy of grace. The Church, therefore, looks to Mary who freely cooperated with her Son in the work of salvation.

The Virgin received her dignity and noble vocation from God. In a most fitting manner, at the hour of the Church's atonement, she offered everything she received back to God. She united herself with that most sublime charity of co-suffering when she stood beneath the Cross. She watched her Son give His life for the ransom of the world. Jesus exemplifies the perfect love that suffers as God, and Mary participates in this perfect love as creature and as His most perfect mother. The primitive Church understood the exceeding value of the redemption, and early Christians embraced their own call to freely participate in the work of redemption by taking up their Cross and following the Lord. Indeed, Mary became the *Mater Ecclesiae*, beginning with Christ's entrustment of John to her and her to John. Just before Christ uttered *Consummatum est* and redeemed mankind through His suffering and death, His dying words were the entrustment of His mother to the representative of the Church and His priest, John the Beloved. In her proximity to the mystery of Christ's Paschal Mystery under the Cross, the Church continues to see in Mary the heavenly model of redeemed life while also accompanying the Church on earth which continues to struggle against temptation and sin. Indeed, the Church finds in the Spouse of the Holy Spirit the response to Christ's promise that He will not leave the disciples desolate, but through Mary console and ever strengthen them in their expectation of the coming of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:18).

III. Mary as the First Among the Redeemed

Having already addressed man's need for redemption and the fruits that came about through the salvific work of Christ, we may more closely address what it means to call Mary the fruit of redemption. In the Papal bull *Aperite Portas Redentori*, Pope John Paul II recalls both the words of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the tradition of referring to Mary as the first among the redeemed,

Never as in this new season of her history, in Mary the Church "admires and exalts the most sublime fruit of the Redemption, and in her she contemplates with joy, as in a most pure image, what she desires and hopes to be" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 103); in Mary he recognizes, venerates and invokes the "first redeemed" and, at the same time, the first to have been most closely associated with the work of redemption.¹⁵

In His Mother, Christ gave us an exemplar in the life of grace who never experienced the effects of original sin. As the New Eve, she is obedient to the will of God and "full of grace" (Luke 1:28), becoming the model of holiness for each Christian, worthy of admiration and exaltation, as noted above. God's mercy bestowed on Mary the singular privilege of the Immaculate Conception, meaning that she was never subject to the evil of sin and therefore redeemed most sublimely of all creatures. Through her, God fulfills His "promise of mercy" (Luke 1:54) given after the fall of Adam and Eve in the *protoevangelium* (Gen. 3:15). "God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law..." (Gal 4:4). Four years later,

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Papal Bull Aperite Portas Redemptori*, 1983, 9., At the Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/jubilee/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_19830106_bolla-redenzione.html, Emphasis added.

in his Encyclical letter *Redemptoris Mater*, John Paul II reaffirms,

If he has eternally willed to call man to share in the divine nature (cf. 2 Pt. 1:4), it can be said that he has matched the "divinization" of man to humanity's historical conditions, so that even after sin he is ready to restore at a great price the eternal plan of his love through the "humanization" of his Son, who is of the same being as himself. The whole of creation, and more directly man himself, cannot fail to be amazed at this gift in which he has become a sharer, in the Holy Spirit: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn. 3:16). At the center of this mystery, in the midst of this wonderment of faith, stands Mary. As the loving Mother of the Redeemer, she was the first to experience it [...]¹⁶

While man's divinization can only come about through grace, Mary's sanctification was carried out when she was conceived purely in the womb of St. Anne, marking not only a unique experience of redemption but likewise an exemplary one. God's salvific intervention in human history therefore had two extraordinary moments: first in the immaculate conception of Mary, which historically precedes his death on the Cross, and second in the Incarnation whereby the redemption of mankind is completed through the paschal mystery.

Understanding Mary as a fruit of the redemption likewise serves to underscore her subordinate role in the work of salvation with her Son. Indeed, many have attempted to criticize Mary's title of Co-Redemptrix precisely for misunderstanding this point. *Sacrosanctum Concilium's* rendering of Mary as *the most sublime fruit of the redemption* and John Paul

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Mater*, 1987, 52, At the Holy See
https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html.

II's subsequent theological commentary provides a response to the concern that "Co-Redemptrix" implies Mary co-equally redeeming the world with Christ. In reality, the theological explanations explaining the title have done so in light of Tradition and what is already known of Mary from Sacred Scripture, as well as doctrines which have been dogmatically defined. For example, tradition has ascribed the "woman" who crushes the head of the evil one in Genesis 3:15 to be the Mother of God. As mentioned previously, this remains the first announcement, *protoevangelium*, of the Savior who will defeat Satan through the seed of a woman. We find types of Mary in the feminine figures of Esther and Judith, who each advocate on behalf of their people.¹⁷ In the New Testament, the full type of the *woman* is revealed in Mary, completely unique in holiness, who becomes a *cause of salvation*¹⁸ through the Incarnation of Christ. These brief Scriptural references and their interpretation by the Church in her doctrine and liturgy are among a multitude of examples. Thus, through God's Divine initiative, Mary plays a singular, subordinate, and cooperative role in the story of salvation, being in this sense *the first fruit of her Son's redemptive work*. Pius XII affirmed this when he dogmatically defined the Assumption in 1950:

Christ's faithful, through the teaching and the leadership of their pastors, ... have contemplated in an ever clearer light the wonderful harmony and order of those privileges which the most provident God has lavished upon this loving associate of our Redeemer, privileges which reach such an exalted plane that,

¹⁷ See Esth. 7 and Jud. 13.

¹⁸ This comes from the Irenaean axiom and must be understood as a kind of secondary or instrumental causality with respect to Christ's first and efficient causality. It is only through Mary's obedience to God that she becomes a cause of salvation. Thus, Mary's role clearly cannot be understood as equal to Christ, and such explanations have never been accepted or articulated by magisterial authorities.

except for her, nothing created by God other than the human nature of Jesus Christ has ever reached this level.¹⁹

This 'exalted plane' is essentially Mary's 'fullness of grace' through which she was able to share with her Son the mystery of His rejection through the sword that pierces her soul, as prophesied by Simeon in the temple (Lk 2:34). Calling Mary an *associate* further serves the theological explanation of her being called a fruit of redemption, the first creature to be redeemed, though most exalted; the one at once receptively subservient and perfectly cooperative with God. Once these aspects are understood within the larger context of Scripture and tradition, the title of Co-Redemptrix cannot be said to obscure the role of Christ as the one mediator, but instead highlights the primacy of God's action through grace and man's calling to participate through grace, just as Mary did. Therefore, through her participation, Mary may be called not only the fruit of redemption but also mother of the faithful in the order of grace and the Co-Redemptrix. The Catechism reiterates *Lumen Gentium's* teaching on her participatory role in salvation by affirming,

This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation [...].²⁰

Here one clearly sees the singular choice of God who predestined Mary (the new Eve) to be full of grace in her Divine maternity, inviting her free cooperation and making

¹⁹ Pius XII, *Apostolic Constitution Munificentissimus Deus* (November 1, 1950), no. 14.

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 969; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 62.

her a model unprecedented and unrepeatable privileges in the story of salvation. Mary's spiritual maternity of the elect reveals that her privilege as the first to be redeemed is not an isolated and solitary experience, but a gift which accompanies the Church through the end of time.

Conclusion

In this brief study, our aim was to answer the question of what it means to call Mary the fruit of redemption which we preceded to answer in three parts. First, we looked at the effects of original sin and man's need for redemption. We saw how this state had ramifications for the rupture of our relationship with God, ourselves, and others. The victory of Christ's death on the cross ultimately atoned above and beyond what was merely necessary, having restored us to grace and friendship with Him. As the one mediator between God and man, some essential distinctions were also made regarding Christ as the source of all grace and Mary as the chosen instrument of God. We then proceeded to discuss the fruits of the redemption wrought by Christ in a twofold way: primarily through God's grace and secondarily in Mary. Finally we shifted to focus more specifically on the meaning of Mary as a fruit of the redemption and why she is called the first among the redeemed. Her singular privilege of the Immaculate Conception rendered her the perfect dwelling for the Lord, who redeemed her in view of the saving merits of her Son. Counted among the creatures Christ came to save, she forever holds her place as the exemplar and perfect model of what the Church seeks to become in glory through grace. Journet summarized it pointedly, "the entire Church is Marian."²¹ In this preliminary analysis on the question of what it means to call Mary the fruit of redemption, it is hoped that clarity may be given to how she is the image of what the

²¹ Charles Journet, *The Apostolic Hierarchy: The Church of the Word Incarnate*, First Edition (London: Sheed & Ward, 1955), 428.

Church hopes to be, since Mary ultimately exemplifies the redeemed state each human being is called to attain through the grace and merits of her Son. Since she enjoys the splendor of the beatific vision, she ever intercedes for the Church in loving subordination to her Son, the One Redeemer.