

Reflections on Mary: Understanding the Immaculate Conception and Mary's example for humanity as a Co-redeemer

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When discussing our human role as co-redeemers, meaning, those who *'make up for what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ'* (Col 1:24), we recognize that our relationship with Christ does not make us God. Neither does it make us perfect, nor divine, nor members of the Trinity. We, members of the human race, are offered opportunities to cooperate with God by helping each other and interceding for each other before God.

Our unique relationship with Christ does not make us equal to Christ, rather, it makes us servants to Christ, regardless of the scope of any sanctity we might possess or any contribution we might make. Jesus Christ does not become a lesser member of the Trinity because a human person is canonized, for example. A saint may possess considerable accomplishments, achievements or a high level of holiness. Jesus Christ remains the second person of the Trinity, distinct from each saint, but also working with and through each saint.

Our Lady is similar to the saints who possessed considerable accomplishments, achievements and a high level of holiness. Her unique relationship with God resulted in the birth of Christ. But Mary's relationship with her son does not reduce Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity. Neither does it elevate Mary to something like the fourth person of the Trinity. Jesus remains divine. Mary remains human. Jesus was fully human and fully divine. We must keep Jesus where he belongs, equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit.

So what or who does that make Mary?

Perhaps we can distinguish Mary from Jesus in our examination of who Mary was on earth and what she did. Perhaps we can advance a conversation about Mary's role in the Church by placing her firmly in the midst of that group of people, the saints, called to contribute with God in an extraordinary fashion.

The only observation that must be made in doing this is that Mary contributed in an extraordinary way that was unique among us as human

beings and Mary was created immaculate by God so that she would be equipped to accept the task that was hers. But that was more about Jesus Christ than Mary. Mary was created immaculate, not because she was God. She was created immaculate because Jesus Christ was and is God. She worshipped God and her relationship with the Father pre-dated her relationship with Jesus. She was created immaculate, she might say, not for her sake but because her Immaculate Conception ensured an immaculate space for the human development of Jesus Christ.

We accept that Mary was a member of the human race, despite the enormous promise that accompanied her Immaculate Conception, wherein she was created without original sin. The protection of Mary from original sin created conditions that were in keeping, not with some pre-existing sanctity, but with God's divinity and the plan he had for her collaboration with him in her life. Mary remained faithful to God, not only because of what God gave to her in the gift of being created immaculate. Mary remained faithful to God through ongoing choice and that is what ensured her place as the Queen of Saints, providing a fearless and powerful example of a woman moving into the depth and breadth of sanctity.

Mary was given the gift of free will. She used it repeatedly to choose God's highest plan for her and for her family. She used her free will to draw sinners back into a harmonious and loving relationship with God. She used her free will to forgive those who hurt her or her husband or son. Mary's humanity ensured that she was wounded, even traumatized by the pain endured by her son. Her relationship with the Father, though, as a daughter and servant, equipped her with supernatural graces required for strength to constantly subordinate herself to the needs of others, as in her service to Elizabeth in the Visitation (Lk 1:39-56).

How did Mary participate in the passion of Christ? She showed up for Jesus and remained in place. Mary showed up and stayed. Was she crucified with him? Not physically. Two convicted thieves were crucified at the same time as Jesus. What Mary did was again, unique. She witnessed the anguish, suffering separate, personal anguish herself. The consummate witness to the anguish, Mary experienced her Son's crucifixion as a human mother and as a child of the Father who loves (John 19:25-27). In a very real sense, Mary experienced her own form of the crucifixion in her maternal heart.

Hatred is an affront to God. Hatred is the opposite of love and presents the highest dissonance with God. Some of the people who crucified

Christ possibly did not hate him. They may not have known him well enough to hate him personally. They certainly did not accept his authority. Some of them hated the truth about themselves which the presence of Christ mirrored. Their actual rebellion, thus, was against the Father, whom they purported to serve, but in actual fact did not serve. They did not know the Father and they banked on the fact that most people were not confident enough about their own relationship with God to challenge them successfully. This enabled them to claim an identity that gave them material and human payoffs or that assuaged their thirst for power.

A thirst for power combined with a weak identity is a difficult state of affairs for a human being to manage. It is a pitiful state. Perhaps this is part of the reason why Mary was able to forgive the Pharisees and why each of us can understand how they behaved and search for those symptoms which periodically emerge in ourselves.

But we seek to better understand Mary, the Queen of all Saints and the mother of Jesus. Mary possessed a sublime, never repeated relationship with the Father. There would be no turning away from the plan she shared with God, a plan so important that she was created immaculate for it. The plan Mary shared with the Father was so intimate that she received it into her beautiful little body. In a true sense, Mary's body contained God's hope for all of mankind. She would have seen the power and force of his decisions played out in her life. A good mother allows separation from her children and Mary allowed that separation when she accepted her Son's Passion and gave way to it as a divine plan. We recall that this is not the first time she had to contend with what appeared to be a situation impossible to overcome. Perhaps it was the second time Mary had to negotiate an event of such magnitude and mystery.

Jesus is, again, human but also divine. Mary is separate to the Trinity, even while she is a servant to the Trinity. Perhaps we can think of Mary as the servant to the Trinity, the actual handmaid of the Lord, as she stated in her own words (Lk 1:46-55).

What is it then? We all know there has never been and will never be anyone like Mary ever created. We know she is our heavenly mother. We know she was created differently, without the stain of original sin transmitted down the line by the sin of Adam in the garden. Mary stands out from us, just as she stands out to God, as evidenced in so many ways, including her Assumption into Heaven.

Jesus Christ walked the earth both humanly and divinely. Mary walked the earth humanly. She negotiated the redemption of mankind humanly. But she also received and negotiated a great deal of supernatural intervention in her humanity. We must understand that a small amount of supernatural intervention, in what we believe is possible and normal, is difficult to conceive of and to live with. At the very least, one's love for God, when one recognizes God through supernatural and direct actions, could mean that remaining time on earth feels tedious and lonely. One exists in the midst of painful limitation which can only be recognized as limitation when one understands the lack of limitation in the next world. One would gain great detachment, though, when exposed to God's power, meaning that suffering is mysteriously part of God's plan, therefore we accept it without understanding it fully.

It is worth contemplating the degree of Mary's wisdom and understanding, given the extent of the supernatural interventions in her life. One could surmise that for Mary, detachment, wisdom, watchfulness... these things were keenly developed and present in a way that makes studying her vitally important for understanding ourselves as God's children. So, while we accept Mary as Mother of God and as a member of the human race, we also elevate her amongst ourselves as the greatest member of the human race, after Jesus Christ. We do this precisely because she was human, and like us, a creation of the Trinity rather than a member of the Trinity.

Why is this so crucial?

It is crucial because in order to understand how Mary intercedes for us so effectively and confidently, we must grasp her position as the person who lived closest to the Trinity, while remaining a human being on earth.

On earth we sometimes say that one must wrap one's head around a concept, meaning, one must learn to accept something that is either unknown or un- encountered. Mary would not have had to do that with the concept of God. She simply remained subordinated to God and thus always adapted herself most fully into the will of the Father.

Indeed, we might say that nobody served with more consistency than Mary. She seeks to help us become more like God in love. Mary is the best formation director, the highest shaper of Christian thinking and thought, after the founder of Christianity, himself, Jesus Christ. While she would remain intimately connected to her reality as a created being of God, we can look to her as the highest example of servant to God.

Mary loves us most like God loves us because she loves God so fully and completely. As stated, God assumed Mary into himself at the Assumption, rather than let the first tabernacle decay. That alone should prompt us to study Mary as the highest example to follow, after Christ, rather than as a person to adore.

With regard to the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, body and soul, why might God do this?

God's action of assuming Mary into Heaven, rather than allowing her body to decay, is logical. There was nothing in her body to prevent instant harmony with the next life, nothing that had to die off. She was thus brought into eternity at the end of her life. From that eternal position, Mary fulfils her greatest joy in mothering us and offering to us the highest example of how to serve on earth. She cooperated with God in creating, she cooperated with God in detaching from that which he created in her and through her, and she remained faithful to the end of the mysterious plan for God's redemption of mankind.³⁴ Thus she cooperated with God in the redemption of mankind, much like John the apostle and Mary Magdalene, amongst other women, but in a more distinct fashion because she lacked original sin. She knew God in a way the others did not. Mary recognized God. She participated more fully than any other human being.

In further consideration, can we say that the fidelity of John and the women at the cross was important? Did they cooperate with Jesus in the plan for redemption by their faithfulness to him and to his mother? Did they co-redeem each time they suffered for the Gospel message? The answer must be yes to these questions and we accept that the answer is yes.

Then should we not identify Mary as the person who did this to the highest degree? She certainly did not participate in a lesser way than the others present that day. Jesus Christ is the only divine Redeemer. We

³⁴ Mary's co-creating with the Father refers to her cooperation in creating the Incarnate Word since Our Lord's human nature comes from her. All human parents are co-creators with God, but Mary is the co-creator with the Father in a special way because of her cooperation in conceiving and giving birth to the Incarnate Word who was predestined "from eternity" (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 61 and Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, Denz.-H., 2800).

agree that Jesus Christ redeemed humanity through his death on the cross. Mary remained present with him and participated in that action. But perhaps if we are known as co-redeemers and co-redemptrices, or simply in the collective term co-redeemers, '*making up for what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ*' (Col 1: 24), then Mary should be known as the Co-Redeemer or the Co-Redemptrix, because of her unique participation, given who she is and was in God.

Possibly the problem with the title is as simple as time. The Latin suffix of trix is not used as commonly now as in times past. This leads to a misunderstanding that the feminine trix somehow indicates equality when in fact it simply refers to gender. A woman who participates in the redemption poses no threat to the divinity of Christ. Further, if we celebrate Mary as co-creating with the Father, can we fail to celebrate her as co-redeeming with the Son?

To be clear, we contribute our afflictions and sufferings to the overall effort of the Church, the Body of Christ, hoping that through our offering God will choose to send graces to others. In a sense, God redeems our offered sufferings through benefits and graces for those around us. The death of Christ on the cross was sufficient to redeem mankind. Nothing further can be needed. Yet, we, his followers, do well to offer our hardships in a spirit of intercession for the effort of the Gospel message. In a sense, we offer our afflictions as a service. Jesus Christ offered the one unique total sacrifice. Our contribution indicates our discipleship, as opposed to Christ's divine Kingship. Our contribution recognizes our unity with his body, the Church. Perhaps, too, we may think of 'what is lacking' as a reference to time, as in, what is both possible and needed now, today, through the cooperation of us who follow, wherever we find ourselves.

As human beings, we elevate Mary, not to the level of the divine, but to the level of the highest action of co-redeeming that is possible for humanity. This does two things. It places Mary in a proper, truthful perspective and also recognizes a feminine highest contribution, something that is real and something we urgently need as a faith community.

Mary's relationship with the Father was sublime. She was human mother to his Son and also servant to the Lord's every need and to God's plan. Additionally, Mary could be considered the first and best disciple of Jesus Christ. The comparisons of Mary to her son can be a bit like the role of discussions about women in the Church. They can be safely consigned

to a negative outcome as long as the initial premise remains faulty, for example, that Mary was somehow part of the Trinity or that women should be ordained to the priesthood. Those are the distractions and those block urgently needed progress. We must resolve these issues.

With regard to Mary, we continue to ponder. Is it fair to state that Mary is the highest example of a human being co-creating with God? It must be so. Given this, would it also be logical that Mary is the highest example of a human being co-redeeming with God?

The Immaculate Conception of Mary, that is, her creation without original sin, meant that she could be happy and unencumbered by anything that would make carrying the perfect one within her body difficult. If Mary had not been created immaculate, she would have been distracted by the contrast of that which was developing within and the reality and periodic dissonance of her own humanity. She could have 'crumpled' with the burden of her sinfulness compared to God's perfection resting inside her body.

As it stood, given the Immaculate Conception, the second person of the Trinity developing within her resonated divinely and Mary remained untroubled by this resonance. The resonance of God could simply pass through her because she, too, resonated with God.

The Immaculate Conception ensured that she was able to receive the pregnancy while remaining undisturbed by the presence of God within her being and body. If Mary was not prepared as a space, any woman, regardless of her relationship with God, would have experienced the pregnancy to some degree as a trauma, or at least she would be unable to hold ongoing peace with the supernatural reality. But any distress was unnecessary. God, himself was acting in the development of Jesus. Mary simply pondered the words and her condition in her heart (Lk 2:19).

Mary's innocence, combined with wisdom, possibly prepared Mary to play her part as the human mother of Jesus. Mary's early experience as a mother would also have prepared her to be the spiritual mother to all of God's children. How would Mary, a woman created without original sin, have dealt with injustice, we might wonder. Would she have contemplated it in her heart and recognized that any suffering inflicted on her family was also inflicted on others, as well? Would she have rejoiced that she could become familiar with it in her heart, given that she, in her maternity, sought to understand people fully and wholly as children of God?

There would have been other sufferings for Mary, given her relationship with the Father. The sufferings of others and the inconsistency of actions against God would have been difficult for her to bear in her life. Mary's actions demonstrated enormous virtue. She possessed virtue, advanced into it and continued to acquire it. People assume that Mary's greatest pain took place in the Crucifixion. It would be difficult to imagine any worse suffering. But we cannot discount that the separation from Joseph and Jesus Christ after the Resurrection also brought enormous human loneliness for her, despite her commitment to the early Church.

One can be busy and still lonely, as many know.

Any true contemplation of Mary must conclude that for all of her humanity, Mary was not an ordinary person, but an extraordinary person, the most extraordinary person. With Joseph and Jesus, her little family, Mary was placed by God in a loving situation, and was cherished in a way that had to provide her with a sense of fulfillment and emotional safety. She longed for final union with the Father, no doubt. That could not have changed during her lifetime given her relationship with the Creator.

Many people leap to an objection of any suggestion that Mary responded to life perfectly, or that she never sinned. We must resist the instinct which emerges from our limited human thinking to negatively scrutinize our Mother, our Queen, for evidence of flaws. Perhaps we can agree that the greatest journey for us is the one that results in the fullest understanding of our heavenly mother's virtue.

Why study Mary, the mother of God? Why clarify her contribution to God's plan, to her son, and to humanity? Is it about history, the past? Or is it more likely that our future requires this clarity? Will the study of Mary and her relationship with God reveal what is possible and desirable, (albeit differently) between God and each person? Will the study of Mary clarify the unrepeatable extent of her influence? It must be so.

But certainly, if we are all called to *'make up for what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ'* (Col 1:24), then there should be no doubt that Mary did that best.