

Woman, Motherhood, the Family, and the Mother of All Peoples

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The quintessential role of woman and of motherhood in family and society is presently under extraordinary (some would say unprecedented) modes of cultural attack and contamination from much of contemporary western society—a global deconstruction of authentic feminine and maternal metaphysics which necessarily leads to pandemic moral and ethical defeats for the *ecclesia domestica*, the Church universal, and the very fiber of the global family we call human.

What can return us to the proper respect for woman’s sacred dignity and the cherishing, rather than the demeaning, of her sublime vocation within marriage, family, Church, and worldwide society? How could the public, and even solemn, recognition of woman, mother, and spiritual motherhood in its greatest human historical expression lead to both the proper restoration of the sublime feminine and maternal dignity and, at the same time, release a historic torrent of graces that could greatly assist the international human family towards a spiritual renaissance of fidelity to its Creator?

Let us begin with a brief examination of “first things” regarding woman and her ultimate vocation.

I. Woman and Mother: Intercessor of Life and Love for the Family

Who is woman, and what is at the heart of the vocation of motherhood?

Pope St. John Paul II captures both the nature and the vocation of woman when he writes that a woman is called to testify to the existence and the depth of the love “with which every human being—man and woman—is loved by God in Christ.”¹ The special mission of every woman is “to welcome and to care for the human person.”² Our time in particular “awaits the manifestation of that ‘genius’ which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance.”³

¹ St. John Paul II, *Mulieres Dignitatem*, 29.

² St. John Paul II, *General Audience*, November 24, 1999.

³ St. John Paul II, *Mulieres Dignitatem*, 30.

Woman, in a particular way, is orientated to the concrete love and nurturing of persons.⁴ St. Edith Stein (Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) articulates the essential nature and vocation of woman: “woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is living, personal, and whole. To cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth is her natural and maternal longing.”⁵ *A woman most fully embodies her feminine charism in her motherhood.* To be a “mother” means to “protect and safeguard true humanity and to bring it to full development.”⁶ In a Letter to the *Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women*, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta writes: “The special power of loving that belongs to a woman is seen most clearly when she becomes a mother. Motherhood is the gift of God to women.”⁷

A mother is a natural intercessor or “mediator” of life and love within the family, as one who intercedes or “acts as a means” of bringing greater unity between others.⁸ Is this not the essential and perennial task of a mother? A mother physically and morally intercedes between the Creator and her family in her unique role of bringing life to the world. After receiving the seed of life from the human father, the body of the mother gives form and nourishment to the developing embryo, and thus works intimately as a “co-creator” with the Creator to mediate the precious gift of human life to the family and to the world. The child is the transcendent gift that results from the extensive, all-encompassing, moral and physical intercession of the mother, coupled with the necessary contribution of the father. Mothers uniquely intercede, both physically and morally, to unite God and family through the gift of children.

A mother is not only the special *intercessor of life* for the family, but also a unique *intercessor of love* for the family. Through the particularly feminine gifts of receptivity, sensitivity, warmth, understanding, compassion, long suffering, intuition and personal insight, a mother becomes the principal means of unity between the father and the children, as well as between the children themselves. Interventions of communication and empathy, understanding and wisdom, forgiveness and reconciliation, sacrifice and love, are constant manifestations of maternal intercession between all other members of the family unit.

Authentic motherhood calls for at least three essential expressions of maternal intercession for her children. First, a mother suffers for her child. A mother’s suffering is not limited to the physical pain experienced during gestation and birth, but

⁴ St. Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (St. Edith Stein), R. Guardini, “*On the Education of Women*,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, March 6, 1969, English Edition, 9.

⁷ Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, *Letter to Fourth World Conference on Women*, Beijing, 1995.

⁸ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 26, a. 1.

also the profound “suffering of the heart” experienced throughout her child’s life, as the mother compassionately shares in the trials and tragedies that constitute a part of the life of every child. Secondly, a mother nourishes her child. The proper nourishing of a child extends far beyond the physical realm. A mother not only provides food and nutrition to her offspring from the moment of conception through gestation and birth, but far beyond this throughout the years of childhood and adolescence—offering the child the fundamental emotional, psychological, educational, and spiritual formation in the greatest and most complete manner of personal development possible. Thirdly, a mother “pleads” or intercedes for the well-being of her child. These maternal acts of advocacy first begin within the home, and then extend out into society as the child gradually enters the larger world. They are manifested in a variety of ways throughout the life of the child, which include interceding for the best needs of the child at school, in social settings, in the areas of music, sports, and other cultural activities. A mother’s advocacy for her child often includes aspects of protection and defense as the process of entrance into society can typically entail dangers and difficulties.

All these are expressions of the loving and sacrificial intercession of a mother. Is it any wonder that motherhood may be the most universally cherished vocation in the natural order, and that many a child, regardless of age, have ended their earthly life with the word, “mother” on their lips? It is for these reasons and more that the papal documents have referred to the mother as the “heart” of the family, and as such “she may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love.”⁹

II. Mary, Mother of the Holy Family

It is a wonderment of nature that “a creature should give birth to her Creator.”¹⁰ This liturgical antiphon reflects the mystery of Mary, who through her free consent to the sublime vocation of motherhood interceded in life and in love in order to bring forth the most exalted child, and thus most exalted family, in human history.

As is the case with every mother, Mary plays an irreplaceable role by consenting to bring life into what will become her family. Conceived “full of grace” through the foreseen merits of the future Redeemer and the sanctifying indwelling of the Holy Spirit,¹¹ the young virgin of Nazareth is providentially made ready to become the most important mother of the human race. Still, Mary’s “let it be done” constituted an entirely free, active, and feminine “yes” to the heavenly Father’s

⁹ Cf. for example, Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, December 31, 1930, 27.

¹⁰ Cf. Liturgical Antiphon, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*.

¹¹ Bl. Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, Dec. 8, 1854; *Lumen Gentium* 56.

mission of motherhood: “Be it done to me according to your word”(Lk. 1:38).¹² With this free cooperation to the plan of God “as mother,” Mary brings the world its Redeemer and merits the title above all her other titles, “Mother of God,”¹³ which contains within it the essence and vocation of her supreme motherhood.

As well as consenting to become a motherly intercessor of life in giving birth to Jesus, Mary also performs her duty as an intercessor of love within the Holy Family. It is Mary that will intercede between Joseph, her chaste virginal husband, and Jesus, her child, within the natural familial flow of love between father and child. Mary will mediate in the fulfilling of the usual motherly acts as *heart of the Holy Family*. We see this, for example, at the finding of Jesus at the temple when, after three days of parental suffering and searching (cf. Lk. 2:46-51), it is Mary who intercedes by speaking to the young Jesus on behalf of herself and Joseph: “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously” (Lk 2:48).

Mary also fulfilled the innumerable acts of small, intercessory tasks in fidelity to her vocation as mother. Pope Francis describes here:

How did Mary live this faith? She lived it out in the simplicity of the thousand daily tasks and worries of every mother, such as providing food, clothing, caring for the house It was precisely Our Lady’s normal life which served as the basis for the unique relationship and profound dialogue which unfolded between her and God, between her and her Son.¹⁴

III. Our Lady, Spiritual Mother in the Family of God

In ways both sublime and ordinary, Mary fulfills her providential role as the motherly intercessor of life and love within the extraordinary designs of the Holy Family. Yet her motherhood within the Holy Family would extend, due to the universal redemptive mission of her Son, to include the entirety of God’s Family, and indeed to all peoples. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis refers to Mary’s motherhood both domestically and universally as a “mother of all”:

Mary was able to turn a stable into a home for Jesus, with poor swaddling clothes and an abundance of love. She is the handmaid of the Father who sings his praises. She is the friend who is ever concerned that wine not be lacking in our lives. She is the

¹² *Lumen Gentium*, 56.

¹³ Council of Ephesus, 431.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, October 23, 2013.

woman whose heart was pierced by a sword and who understands all our pain. As mother of all, she is a sign of hope for peoples suffering the birth pangs of justice. She is the missionary who draws near to us and accompanies us throughout life, opening our hearts to faith by her maternal love. As a true mother, she walks at our side, she shares our struggles and she constantly surrounds us with God's love (EG 286).

It is sometimes perceived that the traditional titles attributed to Mary's motherly intercession came solely as a result of speculative theology, rather than being founded in the Word of God.¹⁵ But in fact, the titles of maternal intercession used by the papal magisterium have their solid basis in both Scripture and apostolic Tradition, as properly interpreted by the Church's magisterium. *Dei Verbum* reminds us that Tradition makes progress in the Church through a legitimate development of doctrine under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ Let us therefore examine a synthesized New Testament chronology of the gradual revelation of the Mother of Jesus from the Annunciation just discussed, until the establishment of Mary by the crucified Jesus as "mother of us all,"¹⁷ and the legitimate Marian titles and roles that organically develop and come to light from their doctrinal seeds found in Scripture and apostolic Tradition. For Mary's consent to the mission of redemption at the Annunciation will remain unbroken, up to and including her historic participation in the sacrifice of Jesus at Calvary.¹⁸

The mother who gave physical birth to Jesus, also gave spiritual birth to his Body, the Church. Jesus Christ is the "head of the body, the Church" (Col 1:18). Therefore at the Annunciation, Mary's fiat led not only to the physical conception of Jesus, Head of the body, but also to the *spiritual conception of his mystical body*, to which belong all the followers of Christ, and through the Church, all believers. St. Augustine tells us: "She is really Mother of the members who we are, because she cooperated by charity so that there might be born in the Church believers, of whom he is the Head."¹⁹ St. John Paul II further explains: "Since she gave birth to Christ, the Head of the Mystical Body, she also had to have given birth to all the members of that one Body. Therefore, 'Mary embraces each and every one in the Church, and embraces each and every one *through* the Church'."²⁰

¹⁵ For example, titles already used by the papal magisterium for Our Lady's intercession, including "Queen," "Mediatrice of all graces," "Co-redemptrix," and "Reparatrix."

¹⁶ Cf. *Dei Verbum*, 9, 10.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, "Prayer of Entrustment to Mary," October 13, 2013.

¹⁸ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 58.

¹⁹ St. Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate*, 6, 6; cf. St. Pius X, *Ad Diem Iuum*, 1904.

²⁰ St. John Paul II, *Allocution at Fatima*, May 12, 1991; *Redemptoris Mater*, 47.

Within the profound mystery of the Word becoming flesh through her divine motherhood, Mary gave to Jesus the human “instrument” of redemption, which is his body, for “we have been sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all” (Heb 10:10). The Immaculate Virgin uniquely cooperated in the mystery of Redemption, not only by giving birth to the Redeemer and providing him with the bodily instrument of the redemption, but also in virtue of her unparalleled suffering with her Son throughout the entire mission of redemption.²¹ Insofar as Mary, as Mother of God, gave birth to the “Redeemer of man,”²² she is already legitimately referred to as the human “Co-redemptrix” (“the woman with the Redeemer”), as her consent gave the Redeemer his body and consequently his human nature through which he redeems the world—a contribution to the work of redemption unparalleled by any other creature.²³

Through her historic intercession at the Annunciation, Mary also mediates the “one Mediator” (cf. 1 Tim 2:5) into human history. She acts as a human “mediatrix,”²⁴ as she uniquely intercedes as a mother to bring Jesus Christ into the human race. Mary’s intercessory role as mother does not obscure or compete with the one mediation of Jesus Christ upon which Mary’s secondary mediation is entirely subordinate and dependent,²⁵ but her maternal cooperation with God’s plan of the Incarnation is precisely what made the redeeming mission of the one Mediator possible. Once again, it is *Mary, the Mediatrix who mediated the one Mediator to us*. Moreover, since Jesus is the source and author of all graces, Mary, in virtue of this first great act of motherly intercession, is already properly invoked in the Church and by at least ten modern popes as the *Mediatrix of all graces*.²⁶

The Fathers of the Church captured the doctrine of Spiritual Maternity in the patristic concept of the “New Eve.” As the first Eve or “Mother of the Living”²⁷ was instrumental with the first Adam in the loss of grace for the human family, so too Mary as the “New Eve” or “New Mother of the Living” was instrumental with Jesus, the “New Adam,”²⁸ in the restoration of grace for the humanity.²⁹ Within the

²¹ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 58.

²² Cf. St. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 1.

²³ Cf. Heb 10:10, which speaks of “the offering of the *body* of Jesus Christ once for all.”

²⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 62.

²⁵ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 60, 61.

²⁶ Cf. For example of most recent usage by a pope, cf. Pope Benedict XVI, use of “*Mediatrix omnium gratiarum*,” *Letter for World Day of the Sick at the Shrine of Our Lady of Altötting, Germany*, Feb. 11, 2013. For documentation of the popes of the last three centuries, cf. A. Apollonio, F.I., “Mary, Mediatrix of all Graces” in *Mariology: A Guide For Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons*, 444-464.

²⁷ Genesis 3:20.

²⁸ Cf. 1 Cor 15:22, 45; Rom 5:12, 21.

New Eve model, the Fathers captured the truth of Mary's spiritual maternity in a simple though essential formulation, which include dimensions of spiritual motherhood, mediation, and coredeemption. Early Church testimony to her intercession is exemplified in St. Irenaeus's second century teaching that Mary is the "cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race,"³⁰ as well as in the famous maxim of St. Jerome: "Death through Eve, Life through Mary."³¹

When Mary visits Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-56), she is the pregnant mother who physically "mediates" the unborn Christ into the presence of Elizabeth and the unborn Baptist—a physical intercession which in turn leads to two events of grace: the pre-sanctification of John in the womb and the prophesying of Elizabeth by the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1:41-42). At the Presentation of the infant Jesus (Lk 2:21-38), Simeon identifies Jesus as the "sign of contradiction," but also testifies to the coredeemptive role of Mary—the woman who will suffer with the Redeemer: "and a sword shall pierce through your own heart, too" (Lk 2:35) so that the "secret thoughts" of the redemption may laid bare.

The Wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-10) dynamically reveals the role of the motherly Mediatrix as Mary knowingly and willingly intercedes for the grace of the first public miracle. As St. John Paul II comments of the Cana event: "She acts as a mediatrix, not as an outsider, but in her position as mother."³² The Cana event further discloses Mary's motherly role as "Advocate," as one who speaks on behalf of humanity before the throne of her Son, Christ the King. At the wedding feast, Mary advocates for the newly married couple in what constitutes an unequivocal biblical example of Marian intercession. The fact that the wedding couple is not known to be disciples of Jesus indicates the universality of her role as humanity's advocate—that her maternal intercession reaches beyond the limits of Christianity, and extends to the universal needs of all mankind.³³

It is only at Calvary, at the summit of the historic event of redemption, that Mary's Spiritual motherhood is fully established and declared. Pope Francis expounds:

On the cross, when Jesus endured in his own flesh the dramatic encounter of the sin of the world and God's mercy, he could feel at his feet the consoling presence of his mother and his friend.

At that crucial moment, before fully accomplishing the work which his Father had entrusted to him, Jesus said to Mary:

²⁹ Cf. St. Irenaeus, *Ad Haer III*, 22, 4, PG 7, 959; LG 56.

³⁰ St. Irenaeus, *Ad Haer III*, 22, 4, PG 7, 959.

³¹ St. Jerome, *Epist. 22, 21*; PL 22, 408. Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 56.

³² St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 21

³³ Cf. St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 21.

“Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to his beloved friend: “Here is your mother” (Jn 19:26-27). These words of the dying Jesus are not chiefly the expression of his devotion and concern for his mother; rather, they are a revelatory formula which manifests the mystery of a special saving mission. Jesus left us his mother to be our mother. Only after doing so did Jesus know that “all was now finished” (Jn 19:28). At the foot of the cross, at the supreme hour of the new creation, Christ led us to Mary. He brought us to her because he did not want us to journey without a mother, and our people read in this maternal image all the mysteries of the Gospel (EG 285).

In union with the Redeemer at Golgotha, it is the Mother who uniquely shares in the work of redemption by “sharing the intensity of his suffering” in her mother’s heart. As *Lumen Gentium* expounds:

Thus the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, enduring with her only begotten Son the intensity of his suffering, associated herself with his sacrifices in her mother’s heart, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this victim born of her (LG 58).

Once again, the single term from the Church’s tradition that best encapsulates Mary’s role as Spiritual Mother within the work of redemption is the title, “Co-redemptrix.” The Marian title of Co-redemptrix, which was explicitly used six times by St. John Paul II, three times by Pius XI, and three times by Vatican congregations under the pontificate of St. Pius X,³⁴ never places Mary on a level of equality with Jesus Christ, the only divine Redeemer of humanity. It refers, rather, to the unique cooperation of this woman and mother “with Jesus” in the redemptive mission—the dimension of her spiritual maternity in the order of suffering.

At Golgotha, Mary is, in words of St. John Paul II, “spiritually crucified with her crucified son.”³⁵ Yet, as the *Totus Tuus* Pope continues, “her roles as Co-redemptrix did not cease with the glorification of her son.”³⁶ In virtue of her unparalleled role in the *obtaining* of the graces of redemption with Jesus, she is conse-

³⁴ For the pontificate of St. Pius X: Congregation of Rites, AAS, 1, 1908, Holy Office, 409; AAS 5, 1913, 364; Holy Office, AAS, 6, 1914, 108. For Pius XI: L.R., 1; *Audience*, Dec. 1, 1933, L.R., 1; *Audience*, March 25, 1934, L.R., 1; *Audience*, April 29, 1935. For St. John Paul II: *Audience*, Sept. 8, 1982; *Audience*, Nov. 4, 1984, L.R., 1; *Audience*, March 11, 1985, L.R., 7; *Homily*, Jan. 31, 1985; *Audience*, April 9, 1985, L.R., 12; *Audience*, March 24, 1990.

³⁵ St. John Paul II, *Homily at Guayaquil, Ecuador*, Jan. 31, 1985.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

quently proclaimed by the crucified Jesus as the spiritual Mother of all peoples, whose task it is now to *dispense* the graces of redemption as the Mediatrix of all graces.”³⁷

Mary’s spiritual maternity actively continues in the distribution of the graces of redemption, precisely as the Mediatrix of all graces and as Advocate for humanity. Mary’s role as the Mediatrix of all graces has been officially taught by most every pope of the last three centuries, from Benedict XIV in the 18th century to Pope Benedict XVI.³⁸ Her mediation of grace is, again, an outward expression and practice of her spiritual maternity, as St. John Paul II explicates this key point: “Recognition of her role as mediatrix is moreover implicit in the expression, ‘our Mother,’ which presents the doctrine of Marian mediation by putting the accent on her motherhood.”³⁹ The expression “our Mother,” contains within itself the truth and the role of Mary as Mediatrix of all graces obtained at Calvary.

In the days before Pentecost (Cf. Acts 1:14), Mary is there, interceding as a motherly advocate on behalf of the infant church for the Holy Spirit to descend. In the same way, for a New Evangelization to be fully effective, the Church must again utilize Mary as the human Advocate, to implore the Holy Spirit, the divine Advocate, *to descend in our time* in order to guide and sanctify our efforts to spread the Gospel of Jesus today. Pope Francis points out that Mary’s advocacy to the Spirit thus made possible the first evangelization: “With the Holy Spirit, Mary is always present in the midst of the people. She joined the disciples in praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14) and thus made possible the missionary outburst which took place at Pentecost (EG 284).”

Moreover, Pope Francis describes how Mary’s ongoing Advocacy for her earthly children is witnessed throughout the world’s Marian shrines, inclusive of her most tender and maternal self-identification as Our Lady of Guadalupe:

Through her many titles, often linked to her shrines, Mary shares the history of each people which has received the Gospel and she becomes a part of their historic identity. Many Christian parents ask that their children be baptized in a Marian shrine, as a sign of their faith in her motherhood which brings forth new children for God. There, in these many shrines, we can see how Mary brings together her children who with great effort come as pilgrims to see her and to be seen by her. Here they find strength

³⁷ Cf. St. Pius X, *Ad Diem Illum*, 1904. *Lumen Gentium*, 57; *Lumen Gentium*, 62.

³⁸ For a listing of papal references of “Mediatrix of all graces” from Pope Benedict XIV to Pope Benedict XVI, cf. , A. Apollonio, “Mary, Mediatrix of all Graces” in *Mariology: A Guide For Priests, Deacons, Seminarians and Consecrated Persons*, 444-464.

³⁹ St. John Paul II, “Mary, Mediatrix,” *General Audience*, October 1, 1997.

from God to bear the weariness and the suffering in their lives. As she did with Juan Diego, Mary offers them maternal comfort and love, and whispers in their ear: “Let your heart not be troubled . . . Am I not here, who am your Mother?” (EG 286).

Finally, the New Testament testimony to Spiritual Maternity exposes its spiritually protective character as the *Woman-Mother* in the Book of Revelation (Rev 12:17). Here the Woman “clothed with the sun” and ‘crowned with twelve stars’ courageously advocates for the Church, who makes up the “rest of her offspring” under attack by the Dragon. Again, Pope Francis confirms: “The Lord did not want to leave the Church without this icon of womanhood. Mary, who brought him into the world with great faith, also accompanies ‘the rest of her offspring,’ those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus (Rev 12:17) (EG 285).”

Throughout the New Testament, therefore, the spiritual maternity of Mary is gradually unveiled and dynamically put into practice on behalf of God’s people. We see the same spiritual battle for souls revealed in the Book of Revelation—the cosmic confrontation between the Queen-Advocate and the Dragon-Adversary—raging in full intensity today. It is a battle for families, for society, and for the Church, and it presently calls for the strongest possible advocacy by the world’s Spiritual Mother.

IV. The Signs of Our Time and the World’s Mother

Gaudium et Spes reminds us that “at all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task” (GS, 4). What, then, constitute the contemporary signs of the times, and what are their ramifications for the domestic family, the family of the Church, and the entire human family?

On the domestic spectrum of human society, the family seems to be facing some of its most severe threats, particularly in the areas of marriage stability; sexual and bio-ethical morality; and proper care for women, children, and the elderly.⁴⁰ Even from the pope who perennially exhorted the Church to “be not afraid,” St.

⁴⁰ For example, abortion (presently approximated at 42 million annually); unprecedented divorce, contraception, abuse of women and children, human trafficking of women and minors; large scale loss of Christian faith, particularly among youth; a decrease in respect for the elderly, and an increase in euthanasia. For the soaring increase of Euthanasia, particularly in the Netherlands and Belgium, cf. www.lifesitenews.com, June 27, 2011, September 24, 2013; also for current statistics, cf. www.euthanasia.com.

John Paul II openly acknowledges his concern regarding the present state of family life:

A similar need for commitment and prayer arises in relation to another critical contemporary issue: *the family*, the primary cell of society, increasingly menaced by forces of disintegration on both the ideological and practical planes, so to make us fear for the future of this fundamental institution, and with it, the future of society as a whole.⁴¹

On the global front, the present nuclear capacity of several countries, along with its exponential power for the destructions of entire regions and even nations, stands as a most serious global challenge unique to our times. As Cardinal Ratzinger remarked: “Today the prospect that the world might be reduced to ashes by a sea of fire no longer seems pure fantasy: man himself, with his inventions, has forged the flaming sword.”⁴²

Violent geo-political conflicts are ongoing in Palestine, Israel, Russia, the Ukraine, Crimea, Syria, Iraq, and Libya. World hunger is increasing, with one out of every seven persons going to bed hungry.⁴³ The false ideologies of “new atheism,” western materialism, and secular humanism, are all on the rise. A dramatic increase of Christian persecution is taking worldwide particularly in Iraq, Syria, Sudan, and Nigeria. Singularly concerning is the newly assembled terrorist group “ISIS” (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) which is initiating extreme forms of Christian persecution (as well as to other ethnic minorities) in shocking forms which manifest its clearly diabolical origin.⁴⁴

What can the Church do in the midst of these seemingly unprecedented global attacks upon the family, society, and the Church herself?

Throughout its tradition and history, the Church as the Family of God has shown the wisdom to turn to Mary during its most dangerous and critical moments. In the early Church, Christians fled to the Mother of God for deliverance and protection during times of Christian persecution as seen in the ancient prayer, *Sub Tuum Praesidium*: “We fly to your protection, O Holy Mother of God, despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us from all danger, O glorious and blessed Virgin.”⁴⁵ At times of crisis during the late middle ages and early modern period, the Church again sought the powerful intercession of the Mother, as seen at

⁴¹ St. John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 6.

⁴² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Commentary on the Third Part of the Secret of Fatima*, June 26, 2000.

⁴³ *World Health Organization Statistics on Hunger and Starvation*, 2012.

⁴⁴ ISIS (or ISIL) forms of persecution include murder, sexual assault, crucifixion, beheading, and slavery—inclusive of women and children.

⁴⁵ *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, 3rd century.

the battle of Lepanto (1571) through “Our Lady of the Rosary,” and the Battle of Vienna through the “Holy Name of Mary”(1683). More recently, many have acknowledged the relatively bloodless fall of the Communism in Eastern Europe and connected it to the consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary by Pope St. John Paul II on March 25, 1984, in fulfillment of the request issued by Our Lady of Fatima.⁴⁶

Again, at the times of its greatest historical crises, *the Church turns to Mary*.

Is it not, once again *time now*, to follow the perennial wisdom of the Church and to definitively call upon the greatest possible intercession of the world’s Spiritual Mother?

V. The Solemn Definition of Mary’s Spiritual Motherhood

One hundred years ago, the renowned Belgian prelate, Desire-Joseph Cardinal Mercier, initiated a movement within the Church to support and petition for a solemn definition of Mary’s Spiritual Maternity.⁴⁷ The previous Marian definitions of *Mother of God* (431), *Threefold Virginity* (649), *Immaculate Conception* (1854), and *Assumption* (1950), have solemnly proclaimed Mary’s relationship with Jesus and her unique gifts of grace in soul and body. A fifth Marian definition would infallibly declare *Mary’s relationship with us, her children*—both within God’s family of the Church, and to the entire human family. From its outset, the motivation for this Marian dogma, beyond the appropriate recognition of the unparalleled role of the Mother of God as our Mother, was the firm conviction that this papal definition would bring with it *historic graces for the Church and for the world*.⁴⁸

Why would a dogma proclamation of Spiritual Maternity result in a new abundance of grace for humanity? For the pope to solemnly declare our Lady’s roles is to offer God the greatest possible human acknowledgement of the truth and acceptance of Mary’s Spiritual Motherhood on the part of humanity, and at the same time, to request in full freedom for the maximum possible actuation of her maternal roles of intercession. While it can be said that every previous Maria dogma has led to great graces for the Church, the papal definition of Spiritual Motherhood appears particularly disposed to such an outpouring of grace. The more we freely acknowledge the providentially designed roles of our Spiritual Mother, the more she is “*free*” and *welcomed by us* – in conformity with God’s respect for our free will—

⁴⁶ Cf. July 13, 1917 Message of Our Lady of Fatima.

⁴⁷ Initiation of the Movement for the Solemn Definition of Our Lady’s Spiritual Maternity by Cardinal Mercier in April, 1915, cf. M. Hauke, *Mary, Mediatrix of Grace: Mary’s Mediation of Grace in the Theological and Pastoral Works of Cardinal Mercier*, Ch. I.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

to bring to full activation and power her roles of motherly intercession on our behalf. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta refers to this historic outpouring of grace as a result of this papal definition in her letter of petition for this fifth Marian dogma: “*The papal definition of Mary as Coredemptrix, Mediatrix of all graces and Advocate will bring great graces to the Church.*”⁴⁹

In sum, the solemn papal definition of Mary’s spiritual maternity will permit and utilize *the fullest possible exercise of Mary’s motherly functions of intercession for the world.* Since 1915, over eight hundred bishops⁵⁰ and over seven million faithful⁵¹ have petitioned the popes of the last hundred years for this dogmatic crown for Mary, as was the Catholic precedence for the last two Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.⁵² This should not be overlooked, especially in light of the legitimate consideration of the *sensus fidelium* in the examination of appropriate conditions for a dogmatic definition.⁵³

In light of the foregoing, what reasonable spiritual fruit could we expect from the definition of Spiritual Maternity as a dogma? The following benefits for the family, the Church, and the world benefits could certainly be foreseen:

1) A renewal of family life and the mother’s role in the family as its quintessential “heart.” A definition of Spiritual Motherhood cannot but redound into a new championing of the sublime role of the motherhood in every family. A new solemn recognition of motherhood in the person of Mary would immediately result in restoring the proper reverence for the role of mother as the heart of every family, which would further result in a domestic transfusion of love and grace into the domestic church.

2) A new respect for the dignity of the human person based on the radical respect that God placed on the free cooperation of one human person, Mary, to participate in the saving work of Christ. All human persons are raised in dignity

⁴⁹ *Petition Letter of Bl. Teresa of Calcutta for the Fifth Marian Dogma*, August 14, 1993, cf. www.fifthmariandogma.com.

⁵⁰ Cardinal Mercier submitted several hundreds of bishop petitions within the first few years of the movement from 1915 to 1920. The more recent *Vox Populi Marie Mediatrix* movement records 522 bishops and 57 cardinals from 1993 to 2010, cf. www.fifthmariandogma.com.

⁵¹ Over 7 million petitions from over 180 countries for this fifth Marian dogma have been submitted to the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, since 1995, cf. www.fifthmariandogma.com.

⁵² Both B. Pius IX and Pius XII thanked the Christian faithful for the outpouring of the petitions for these respective Marian dogmas as a legitimate manifestation of the *sensus fidelium*, cf. *Ineffabilis Deus*, Dec. 8, 1854 and *Munificentissimus Deus*, November 1, 1950.

⁵³ Cf. John H. Newman, *The Rambler*, 1859; Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman. A Biography*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, 463-489.

through the victorious role given by God to one woman, which likewise effects the restoration of family life as a sacred communion of persons instituted by God.

3) A new celebration of women in the Church, and a concrete feminine model that properly encourages the Church to integrate women more profoundly into the work of the New Evangelization, as well as into the overall life of the Church. This new recognition of women should include legitimate leadership positions in the Church which do not require ordination, nor conflict with the primary responsibility of Christian motherhood, but rather make use of it for the fullest extent for all God's children. A definition of spiritual maternity would underscore that it was a woman who was predestined by God to accompany the one divine Redeemer and Mediator in his salvific work, and as such provide the authentic foundation for a true Christian feminism. *A proclamation of Mary is at the same time a proclamation of woman.* As Pope Francis underscored: "the Lord did not want to leave the Church without this icon of womanhood" (EG 285).

4) A supernatural infusion of grace into the New Evangelization by its Mother and "Star." As Christian history testifies at places like Guadalupe, when Mary leads the way in spreading the Gospel of Christ, whole regions or even continents can quickly be converted to or renewed in the Church. As Pope Francis reminds us: "She is the Mother of the Church which evangelizes, and without her we could never truly understand the spirit of the new evangelization" (EG 284).

In light of a new papal "fiat" to her titles and functions of intercession, Our Lady could profoundly fulfill the prayer of Pope Francis to "obtain a new ardor born of the resurrection, that we may bring to all the Gospel of life, which triumphs over death," and thereby grant the Church "a holy courage to seek new paths, that the gift of unfading beauty may reach every man and woman) (EG 288). It is because Mary, beyond all other creatures, gave herself "*completely to the Eternal One*" that she can best "help us to say our own 'yes' to the urgent call, as pressing as ever, to proclaim the good news of Jesus"(EG 288).

It is moreover essential to the process of the New Evangelization that we fully incorporate a "Marian style" to our methods of spreading the Gospel. Pope Francis expounds:

There is a Marian "style" to the Church's work of evangelization. Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness. In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong who need not treat others poorly in order to feel important themselves (EG 288).

Mary is, moreover, our model of service and evangelization for the poor and marginalized, and the solemn highlighting of her motherly example will only aid the Church to better imitate its evangelizing exemplar: "She is the woman of prayer

and work in Nazareth, and she is also Our Lady of Help, who sets out from her town “with haste” (Lk 1:39) to be of service to others. This interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others, is what makes the ecclesial community look to Mary as a model of evangelization” (EG 288). A definition of maternity would certainly highlight the Church’s imperative to become more maternal in its methods of spreading the Gospel.

Additionally, Pope Francis has offered a new ecclesiological model of the Church as “*home*” (cf. EG 288). If the Church is truly to become “home” for all peoples, we have all the more the imperative for the Mother of the Church to be more intimately involved— that the “heart” of the Family of God may utilize her unique maternal gifts in transforming the Church evermore into a community where new inquirers and new believers will authentically see and experience the *Church as home*.

5) The renewal and “marianization” of the Church through the solemn recognition of its perfect model and member. Pope Francis reminds us that “Mary is the woman of faith, who lives and advances in faith, and “her exceptional pilgrimage of faith represents a constant point of reference for the Church” (EG 287). The dogmatic crowning of the Mother would accentuate the sacred role of the Church as “mother” (LG 63, 64), in the mission of bringing supernatural life to souls. The declaration of Mary as Mother of all peoples would underscore the Church also as a “mother for all peoples,” which is incorporated into this prayer of Pope Francis to the Mother: “We implore her maternal intercession that the Church may become a home for many peoples, *a mother for all peoples*, and that the way may be opened to the birth of a new world (E.V 288).”⁵⁴

The proclamation of her role as Co-redemptrix as the foundational and inseparable suffering aspect of her spiritual maternity reminds the Church of its need to likewise be “co-redeemers in Christ,”⁵⁵ to use the expression of St. John Paul II, in making up “what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, which is the Church” (Col 1:24). Pope Benedict likewise called the Church to become “redeemers in the Redeemer.”⁵⁶

6) A new outpouring of grace for the world’s poor, suffering, hungry, elderly, and marginalized. The *Magnificat* reveals the special place in Our Lady’s heart for “the lowly” and the “hungry” (Lk 1:52, 53). This definition would bring generous graces to the world’s most needy peoples, the poor and those on the “fringes” of the human family, and as such hold a preferential place in the Immaculate Heart of

⁵⁴ Emphasis mine.

⁵⁵ Cf. for example, St. John Paul II, *General Audience*, Jan 13, 1982.

⁵⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily during Eucharistic Benediction at Fatima*, May 12, 2011.

Mary: “Star of the new evangelization, help us to bear radiant witness to communion, service, ardent and generous faith, justice and love of the poor, that the joy of the Gospel may reach to the ends of the earth, illuminating even the fringes of our world” (EG 288).

7) A contribution to authentic Christian ecumenism. True motherhood unites rather than divides children. So too, does the sublime spiritual maternity of the perfect Mother among her Christian children. Despite advancements in Christian unity through prayer and dialogue, ecumenism is still in need of new and profound graces to reach its goal of full unity in Christ’s Body. A new surge of grace into our present ecumenical efforts could first *unite the hearts of her children*, which could then subsequently lead to a *new unity of minds* amidst the Christian family—an ecumenical breakthrough through the intercession of the *Mother of Christian unity*.⁵⁷

A definition of Spiritual Maternity would also articulate in the clearest possible biblical and theological terms that Catholic Christians do not “adore” Mary, but properly acknowledge her secondary and subordinate role with Jesus in salvation as “a mother in the order of grace.”⁵⁸ It would offer the ecumenical dialogue an invaluable tool as an accurate biblical and theological formulation of what the Church believes about Mary. Christian truth in itself unites.

8) Peace among nations. The Mother of all humanity is also the Queen of Peace, who seeks to bring the Prince of Peace to all lands, especially those most torn by war, hatred, and destruction. The definition would offer a new release of supernatural grace and wisdom towards the resolving of the most complex regional, national, and international geo-political conflicts, which at this point might appear beyond human or diplomatic remedy. Such is the special charism of the maternal “Undoer of Knots.”⁵⁹

Potential Objections to a Marian Definition

Some might object that a dogma of Spiritual Maternity would not be appropriate in light of the scriptural teachings of 1 Tim 2:5 that “there is only one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” Yet it must again be emphasized that Mary’s Spiritual Motherhood is only a subordinate sharing in the one mediation of Christ, as are the prayers and intercession of every Christian. *Lumen Gentium* reminds us:

But Mary’s function as mother of men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its

⁵⁷ Cf. St. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 21, 28.

⁵⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 61.

⁵⁹ Cf. Pope Francis, *Allocution on the Eve of Consecration to Mary*, October 12, 2013.

power ... it flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on his mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it. It does not hinder in any way the immediate union of the faithful with Christ but on the contrary fosters it (*LG* 60).

Mary intercedes, the Church intercedes, the saint intercedes, the angel intercedes, the priest intercedes, the lay faithful intercedes, each in their diverse and proportionate degrees, yet all as secondary and subordinate participants in the one mediation of Jesus Christ.⁶⁰ Mary shares in the one mediation of Jesus like no other,⁶¹ due to her unique role with Jesus in the work of redemption, and in light of her unparalleled role in the distribution of grace to humanity. But her motherly mediation is neither “parallel” nor does it “compete” with the one mediation of Christ. St. John Paul II offers this exceptionally clear teaching on 1 Tim 2:5 and its authentic Catholic interpretation:

In proclaiming Christ the one mediator (cf. 1 Tim 2:5-6), the text of St. Paul’s letter to Timothy excludes any other parallel mediation, but not subordinate mediation. In fact, before emphasizing the one exclusive mediation of Christ, the author urges “that supplications, prayers, intercession, and thanksgivings be made for all men” (2:1). Are not prayers a form of mediation? By proclaiming the uniqueness of Christ’s mediation, the Apostle intends only to exclude any autonomous or rival mediation, and not other forms compatible the infinite value of the Savior’s work.⁶²

Just as the Pauline teaching that “all have fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23) did not, despite first impressions, run contrary to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, so too the Pauline teaching of 1 Tim 2:5 does not run contrary to the present doctrine and the potential definition of Mary as Spiritual Mother and Mediatrix of all graces.

Still others might contend this Marian definition would impede ecumenical progress with other Christian ecclesial bodies, and thereby run counter to the conciliar call for Christian unity. Authentic ecumenical activity within the Church identifies prayer as its soul and dialogue as its body in the true seeking of unity within the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ.⁶³ True ecumenical efforts,

⁶⁰ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, ST III, Q. 26, a. 1; *Lumen Gentium* 60-61.

⁶¹ Cf. St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 21, 39.

⁶² St. John Paul II, *General Audience*, October 1, 1997.

⁶³Cf. St. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 21, 28.

however, can neither compromise authentic doctrinal teachings which include those concerning the Mother of God, nor should they be an obstacle to legitimate doctrinal development,⁶⁴ and this proposed Marian dogma would, in fact, constitute a legitimate development of the perennial doctrine regarding Mary's Spiritual Maternity. Marian truth properly articulated does not put up walls, but rather builds bridges. All Christians need to know, with the same clarity of profession made by the Redeemer on Calvary, that they too have Mary as *their mother* (cf. Jn 19:26). Pope Francis has recently commented: "A Christian without the Virgin is an orphan."⁶⁵

Another potential objection is that the Marian titles which comprise the specific expressions and functions of Spiritual Maternity such as "Co-redemptrix" and "Mediatrix" should not be used in a potential definition since their etymological base is too close to those of the divine "Redeemer" and "Mediator," which are properly attributed to Jesus alone. Yet, Christian Tradition often uses the same root titles for Mary as for Christ, but with the clear understanding that Mary is participating on a distinctly human dimension in a divine reality completely dependent upon Jesus Christ. Is this not fully consistent with the Church's theological tradition and its perennial use of the principle of analogy? Entirely different root titles would not fully express the intimacy, beauty and coherency of the one plan of Salvation which God has specifically willed between the Son and the Mother, and ultimately between God and humanity in the work of human salvation, as all members of the Church are called to participate in the divine actions of redemption and grace. As married couples "co-create" with the Father in bringing children into the world; and priests "co-sanctify" with the Spirit in ministering the sacraments of the Church, all Christians are called to "co-redeem" with Jesus in fulfillment of St. Paul's call to "make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, for the sake of his body, which is the Church" (Col 1:24). Mary's title as Co-redemptrix not only illustrates the union of humanity with divinity that God desires in the work of salvation, but also beckons the Church to follow her example as "co-redeemers in Christ,"⁶⁶ and as well proclaims in itself the quintessential Christian message that *suffering is redemptive*.⁶⁷

Still others may object that the Marian doctrine in question is not properly mature for a definition, and that elements associated with the doctrine remain "ambiguous." Yet, Spiritual Maternity, as well as its three essential maternal expressions in coredemption, mediation and advocacy, has been consistently taught by the or-

⁶⁴ Cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 11; *Ut Unum Sint*, 36, 18.

⁶⁵ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, September 3, 2014.

⁶⁶ Cf. for example, St. John Paul II, *General Audience*, Jan 13, 1982.

⁶⁷ Cf. St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Sabivici Doloris*; Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*.

dinary papal magisterium for over three centuries. Surely, this provides us a magisterial guarantee that all essential aspects of the doctrine are intrinsically true and free from error.

In regards to ancillary questions that may remain in relation to Spiritual Maternity, a distinction must be made between essential questions *intrinsic* to the doctrine and secondary questions *associated* with the doctrine. Spiritual Motherhood is unquestionably a truth contained within the body of Catholic doctrine, with a biblical, patristic, traditional and magisterial foundation that has led pope after pope in the last several centuries to officially and confidently teach the doctrine. Questions closely related but nonetheless secondary to the doctrine in question need not be fully answered before its definition. For example, the “death of Mary” issue which is closely related to the Assumption was not included in the eventual definition of the Assumption by Ven. Pius XII, as it did not constitute an essential aspect intrinsic to the Assumption doctrine, not matter how closely related.

While a solemn definition indeed demands the verification of revealed truth at its essence, it does not require that all secondary questions related to the doctrine must be explained prior to its solemn proclamation, nor that further understanding will not develop after its promulgation. This is evidenced by the profound insights on the deeper meanings of the Immaculate Conception offered by St. Maximilian Kolbe over fifty years after the doctrine’s dogmatization.⁶⁸

Spiritual Maternity, furthermore, possesses stronger implicit biblical support than either the previous two Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption, particularly in light of the scriptural testimonies found its Old Testament foreshadowing in Genesis 3:15; at the Annunciation (Lk 1:38); the Visitation, (Lk 1:39), the Prophecy of Simeon (Lk 2:35); the Wedding of Cana (Jn 2:1-10); the Woman of Revelation 12:1; and, most of all, the direct words of Jesus at Calvary (Jn 19:25-27).

In sum, the clear doctrine of Spiritual Maternity, based on its implicit scriptural presence, explicit traditional development, and official magisterial articulation, contains a foundation in the sources of divine revelation and theology that positively sustains its supports its immediate consideration for a solemn definition.

Conclusion

Could *now* be the appropriate time to define solemnly the following Christian doctrine: that ***Mary, the Immaculate, ever-virgin Mother of God, gloriously***

⁶⁸ Cf. For example, Manteau-Bonamy, ed., *The Immaculate Conception and the Holy Spirit: The Marian Teachings of Fr. Kolbe*, Chapters I, II, IV.

assumed into heaven, is the Spiritual Mother of all humanity as Co-redemptrix, Mediatrix of all graces, and Advocate?

Are we not bound by Christian conscience to utilize all the means at the Church's disposal to bring a supernatural remedy into today's exceedingly grave signs of the times? Far from some type of sterile, abstract theological procedure, the defining of a Marian dogma would allow for the release of supernatural power—a momentous spiritual outpouring of grace, peace, and healing that our present world drama urgently needs. As it was Mary who implored the Spirit to descent at the first Pentecost (cf. Acts 1:14), so now, once again, *we must implore Mary as Advocate for a New Pentecost*—for a new descent of the Holy Spirit—in order to infuse the Church's efforts towards family restoration and a new evangelization with heavenly aid that can only come from the divine Sanctifier.

Should we, on the other hand, hesitate to define the Mother's roles and thereby inhibit the full power of her motherly intercession, due to secondary theological questions regarding a doctrine which has already been officially taught by the papal magisterium for centuries? Should we wait to definitively invoke the Mother due to an incomplete understanding of 1 Timothy 2:5? Should we resist the perennial practice of the Church to “turn to Mary” in our presently grave historical moment due to the lack of support from other brother and sister Christian ecclesial bodies, the majority of whom deny *a priori* the office of the papacy from which a Marian definition would necessarily come?

Pope Francis reminds us that we need not be afraid of the struggle of our contemporary journey when we do so with the “help of the Mother”:

Jesus from the Cross says to Mary, indicating John: “Woman, behold your son!” and to John: “Here is your mother!” (cf. Jn 19:26-27). In that disciple, we are all represented: the Lord entrusts us to the loving and tender hands of the Mother, that we might feel her support in facing and overcoming the difficulties of our human and Christian journey; to never be afraid of the struggle, to face it with the help of the mother.⁶⁹

When Jesus first proclaimed Mary “Mother,” from the cross (Jn 19:27), grace, evangelization, and peace was brought into the world. *May a second solemn proclamation of Mary as “Mother” by the Vicar of Jesus advance the Church into a new grace, a new evangelization, and a new peace for the family, for the Church, and for the world.*

⁶⁹ Pope Francis, *Allocution at St. Mary Major's Basilica*, May 4, 2013.