

Coredeemption¹

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A. The Problem and the Church's Current Response

All we have said thus far regarding Mary has been intended to demonstrate her collaboration in the work of salvation. In attempting to better determine in what this collaboration consists, we are consequently seeking to clarify the very depths of the mystery of Mary.

While the divine motherhood has drawn the attention of theologians since the patristic era, following the Nestorian controversy and the definition of the council of Ephesus, Mary's cooperation in the sacrifice of redemption only became the subject of a deeper doctrinal development much later. This delay is particularly due to the fact that in Christology the first centuries were concerned to clarify the problems surrounding the personal makeup of Christ, while systematic work on the doctrinal interpretation of the redemptive sacrifice began only in the middle ages with St. Anselm.

Starting with the medieval era one finds the emergence of a theology which associates Mary with the redemptive work. In our age, this theology has become the object of various tentative hypotheses and of sometimes impassioned debates. Coredeemption is a theme of contemporary theological reflection.²

¹ The following translation is from the Italian, *Maria, La Donna Nell'Opera Della Salvezza*, 239–250.

² With regard to the doctrinal development of Coredeemption, for past sources, cf. C. Dillenschneider, *Marie au service de notre rédemption. Le mérite médiateur de la nouvelle Eve dans l'économie rédemptrice*, Haguenau 1947; J.B. Carol, *De Corredemptione B. V. Mariae. Disquisitio positiva*, Vaticano 1950. For contemporary teaching, cf. C. Dillenschneider, *Le mystère de la Corredemption mariale. Théories nouvelles, Exposé, appréciation critique, synthèse constructive*. Paris 1951; G. Baraúna, *De natura Corredemptionis marianae in theologia hodierna* (1921-1958), *Disquisitio expositivo-critica*, Rome 1960.

1. The term “Coredemption” and its significance

a. – *The title of Coredemptrix*

The doctrine of Mary’s cooperation in redemption presents above all else a difficulty of vocabulary. The title of Coredemptrix has prompted opposition. In the seventeenth century it was rejected by A. Widenfeld, who made the Virgin say, “Do not call me Salvatrix or Corredemptrix,” and depicted her as being anxious to “take away nothing from God.”³ In the nineteenth century it was discarded by Scheeben,⁴ and there are still at present those who refuse to employ it. The accusation is that the title implies an equality between Mary and the Redeemer.

The term was coined recently enough.⁵ One finds the first instance of it in a hymn of the fifteenth century,⁶ where it is explicated with the words, “having suffered with the Redeemer”; later on one finds it in Alain de Varennes (1515),⁷ and more importantly in Salmeron (+1585), a theologian at the Council of Trent.⁸ It is not used with much frequency in the successive centuries,⁹ but in our century, despite the criticisms already referenced, it has become more common.

It also appears in certain acts of the pontifical magisterium. Under the pontificate of Pius X, one finds it in degrees of the Congregation of Rites and of the Holy

³ “Cave ne quidquam Deo detraxeris ut me honores sicut collyridiani... Ne me vocaberis salvatricem et corredemptricem” (*Monita alutaria B.V. Mariae ad cultores suos indiscretos*, Gand 1673, 8-9).

⁴ Scheeben maintained that, without supplementary clarification, the term was ambiguous and potentially scandalous, suggesting a peer relationship between Mary and Christ, instead of a relationship of dependence; such was his reasoning for endorsing Monsignor Rudiger, bishop of Linz (1853-1884) when the latter forbade his clergy to use the term: *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, V, *Erlösungslehre*, n. 1776, ed. C. Feckes, Fribourg in Brisgovia 1954, VI, 2, 463-4.

⁵ On the origin and history of the title, cf. R. Laurentin, *Le titre de Coredemptrice, Etude historique*, Rome-Paris 1951, or in *Mar* 13 (1951) 395-452.

⁶ The anonymous hymn *Planctus orationis cuiusdam pauperis ad B. Virginem Filium de cruce depositum quasi in sinu tenentem* (Orat. Ms. S. Petri Salisburgensis, fifteenth century, Codex Petrin. a, III, 20 and *Orat. Ms. S. Petri*, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Codex Petrin. a, I, 20), stanza 20: “Pia, dulcis et benigna, nullo prorsus luctu digna, si fletum hinc eligeres ut compassa redemptory, captivato transgressori Tu corredemptrix fieres.” Stanza 21 reads: “Tibi meae redemptrici”; thus the hymn signals the transition from “redemptrix” to “corredemptrix” (cf. Serapio de Iraqui, *La mediación de la Virgen en la himnografía Latina de la Edad Media*, Buenos Aires 1939, 173; Carol, *De Corredemptione*, 177; Laurentin, *Le titre de Coredemptrice*, 39).

⁷ Untitled Work, contained in *In supersanciam Dei Genitricem Mariam panegyrici*, reproduced in P. Alva Y Astorga, *Bibliotheca Virginis Mariae*, Madrid 1648, III, 525.

⁸ *Commentarii in Evangelicam historiam et in Act. Ap.*, Cologne 1602, t. III, tr. 5, 38a; t. X, tr. 41, 339b; t. XI, tr. 38, 313a.

⁹ Laurentin lists 27 authors who employ the term in the seventeenth century and 24 who use it in the eighteenth (*op. cit.*, 19).

Office.¹⁰ Pius XI reemploys in two discourses and in a radiobroadcast allocution for the close of the holy year of the Redemption in Lourdes.¹¹ It would be an over-estimation of the weight of these declarations, which are of secondary importance, to conclude that they involve an official sanction of the title *Coredemptrix*; but at least this use, albeit occasional, shows that the term is legitimate and is beginning to establish itself.

To better justify the legitimacy of this use, it must be observed that the word *Coredemption* and *Coredemptrix* have made their entrance in the wake of a doctrinal development which has expressed its meaning with precision, a development in which the attention is fixed on Mary's cooperation with the redeemer. As has been well documented by Laurentin,¹² the term "*Coredemptrix*" was the substitute for the term "*Redemptrix*," which evoked the global role Mary fulfilled in the work of salvation as the Mother of the Redeemer. For as long as Mary has been seen as she who, through her maternity, gave the Savior to the world, there has been a title applied to her which causes us to recognize her as being, through of her maternal status, the origin of Redemption. When the advances of the theology of the Redemption facilitated the realization that Mary not only brought the Savior into the world, but was united to his sacrifice for the salvation of humanity, a new term was needed to designate this collaboration. The word *Coredemptrix* responds to this change in perspective. Since it supplants the title "*Redemptrix*," it is not intended to exalt Mary as much as possible; on the contrary, it underscores that Mary has only a cooperative role. The phasing out of the title "*Redemptrix*" emphasizes that only Christ, strictly speaking, merits the title of Redeemer. Mary is simply the one who has suffered with the Redeemer, and in this way cooperates in his work.

Given that in its historical origin the term *Coredemptrix* tends to signify Mary's cooperation in the work of redemption proper, as distinct from her cooperation in the mystery of the Incarnation, it seems suitable, in itself, for expressing the idea it was intended to express. It enjoys the advantage of brevity and dispenses with the need for more complex expressions, like "*Associate of the Redeemer*" or "*Cooperatrix in Redemption*."¹³

It cannot be maintained that the title of *Coredemptrix* implies or suggests an equality between Mary and the Savior. This would be the case for the previously

¹⁰ Congregation of Rites, decree of May 13, 1908, on the feast of the Seven Sorrows, *ASS* 41 (1908) 409; Holy Office, decree on indulgences, March 27, 1913 and January 22, 1914, *ASS* 5 (1913) 364 c 6 (1914) 108.

¹¹ *Osservatore Romano*, December 1, 1933; March 25, 1934; April 29/30, 1935.

¹² *Il titolo di Corredentrica*, especially 16.

¹³ Expressions proposed by P. Congar as alternatives to *Coredemptrix*: (*Bulletin de Théologie*, *RSPT* 27 (1938) 648 n. 1).

used but now abandoned title of Redemptrix, as we have seen. Coredemptrix signals the difference between Mary and her Son: Christ is not coredeemer, but Redeemer. Coredemption implies a collaboration, a secondary contribution to a work in which the Savior is the principle craftsman and, in a certain sense, also the unique craftsman, since he alone bears the title of Redeemer.

Moreover, the title of Coredemptrix allows one to better perceive the similarity between the role of Mary and that of Christians in the work of salvation. Coredemption is on display in Mary in an exceptional, privileged manner, but the fundamental fact contained within it – cooperation in the redemptive sacrifice of Christ – characterizes every Christian life. All men are called to become “coredeemers.” The greatness and the nobility of Mary’s mission helps us discern the greatness and nobility of the Church’s mission and the Christian’s mission. It must be affirmed that the Church is wholly and entirely a coredemptrix, as she follows the path of the Coredemption of Jesus’s Mother.¹⁴

In a certain way, the term Coredemptrix can, after all, claim a biblical basis. In effect, in order to define the status of the Christian, St. Paul devised certain words with an analogous structure: with baptism, we are “co-buried” with Christ (Rom 6:4); by faith we are already “co-risen” with him (Col 2:13; 3:1; Eph 2:6). It is true that this communion of destiny with Christ acknowledges a state brought about in us by God, rather than by any action on our part; thus the co-resurrection is accomplished by the Father, as was, after all, Jesus’s own resurrection. But Paul also affirms our communion in the activity of Christ and in God’s activity in light of the salvation of humanity. He does not hesitate to declare, in reference to his own apostolic activity, “We are coworkers with God” (1 Cor 3:9).

In itself, the expression is audacious. Paul had a profound awareness of the infinite distance that separates God from man, and nonetheless he affirms a true cooperation of the apostle with God. Add to this the principle that every Christian is called to an apostolic mission, and we are bound to recognize that every Christian must cooperate with God in the work of redemption. The word “coredeemer” is no more daring than “coworkers with God”; it is more or less equivalent.

It is from within this outlook that the qualifier Coredemptrix is applied to Mary. While specifying that in her the title has a unique and superior worth, it is further attributed to the Church and to Christians, keeping before one’s eyes the vision of a coredemptive Church and Christians totally committed to the task of coredemption.

¹⁴ Mons. Journet speaks of the “collective, coredemptive compassion of the whole Church” concentrated in Mary’s heart on Calvary (*L’Eglise du Verbe incarné*, II, *Sa structure interne et son unité catholique*, Paris, 1951, 444).

b. – The unique character of coredeemption in Mary

In order to understand the unique character of coredeemption in Mary, it is necessary to note the theologically established distinction between objective redemption and subjective redemption.¹⁵

Objective redemption designates the global acquisition of salvation for humanity; it is consummated with Christ's death and glorification. Subjective redemption concerns the application of redemption to individual subjects; it continues at present with the development of the Church and her sanctity, with the reception of redemptive graces in every human existence, and with the sacramental life. This application comes about with the free consent of persons, and is realizable insofar as each person's dispositions are found favorable.

When one speaks of the coredeemption of Christians, one is dealing with cooperation in subjective redemption: Christians are called to assist in the diffusion of the life of grace in themselves and in others, with the strength of their personal holiness and their apostolic mission. This form of cooperation occurred in Mary's case; she accepted the grace with the subjective dispositions that allowed her complete development; furthermore, through her relationships and her witness she encouraged in others a docile conduct towards the divine will. She acted with goodness towards a number of persons who found themselves in her path.

But what is singular in Mary is that in her coredeemption implies a cooperation in objective redemption. While within the realm of subjective redemption Mary's earthly life had only a limited effect on a limited number of persons, this same life, in virtue of her cooperation in objective redemption, has exercised an influence on the whole of humanity. Indeed, Mary collaborated with Christ in the general work of redemption and in the acquisition of salvation for all men, of all times and all places. The scope of coredeemption in Jesus's Mother is therefore incomparable to that of the coredeemption of Christians. It coincides with the whole extension of Christ's redemptive work.

Mary's cooperation in objective redemption is not subject to doubt, since the divine maternity expresses a fundamental aspect of this cooperation: bringing the Redeemer into the world, Mary contributed in an essential way to the global work of salvation. Nevertheless the problem concerns the nature of this cooperation.

¹⁵ This distinction, proposed by Scheeben with respect to Christ's expiatory merit (*Katholische Dogmatik*, V, 2, 1330, ed. Feckes, 198a), takes on its full significance in the debate over Coredeemption. It was emphasized by H. Lennerz (*De Beata Virgine*, Rome 1935, n. 219, 163), and frequently plays a role in mariological thought.

Theology distinguishes between mediate and immediate cooperation. Mediate, or indirect, cooperation, consists simply in the divine maternity, and in the act of giving, through this maternity, a Savior to humanity. If this cooperation had expressed the whole of Mary's coredemption, her role would have been similar to that of the mothers of numerous great men in history; Caesar's mother, for example, or Alexander's, gave important men to humanity, but were not particularly associated with their sons and were not destined to cooperate with them. These women had no direct part in the greatness of the work achieved.

We must ask whether Mary's cooperation does not go beyond this. Immediate, or direct, cooperation in objective redemption concerns the redemptive work itself; here we are not dealing merely with giving a Savior, but with cooperating with him in humanity's salvation. This cooperation implies that Mary supplied her personal cooperation to the redemptive sacrifice in view of the acquisition of all the graces of salvation. It requires not only that Mary shared in the sufferings of the Redeemer, nor that her compassion had meritorious worth, but that unlike other men and women, she also contributed with this compassion to meriting the liberation and sanctification of all humanity.

In Mary coredemption takes on its full significance and its full worth once it admitted as immediate cooperation by meritorious association in the redemptive sacrifice.

2. Mary's coredemption in the current thought of the Church

The discussions which arose among theologians, especially before Vatican II, regarding the nature of Mary's cooperation in redemption showed that the Church is inclined to take the importance of this cooperation ever more seriously, but that an effort of theological reflection was particularly necessary in order to determine more exactly in what marian coredemption consists. Vatican II consolidated, to an appreciable extent, the fruit of this research, even though it did not wish to pronounce upon controversial points.

We will first consider the voice of the pre-council magisterium, and then the teaching proposed by the council itself.

a. – Teaching of the pontifical encyclicals

Since Leo XIII a great number of pontifical documents have expressed the doctrine of Coredemption, but without presuming to impose it as a doctrine to be followed by theologians or the faithful.¹⁶

In many encyclicals on the rosary, Leo XIII affirms Mary's active involvement in the mysteries of redemption, her association in the sacrifice with the oblation of her son, and her participation in redemptive merit.¹⁷ In these doctrinal developments one finds the starting point for marian piety; we have already observed the existing link between cult and doctrine, which shows how marian theology seeks to express the sense of the Christian people's attitude toward Mary.

Pius X declared that Mary had merited, through her compassion, to be "reparatrix of the fallen world."¹⁸

According to Benedict XV, Mary was present at the death of Christ in virtue of the divine design; she offered up her son in such a manner that it can be said that she, with Christ, ransomed the human race.¹⁹

According to Pius XI, Mary is the reparatrix of humanity together with Christ; from her compassion is derived her role as distributrix of the fruits of redemption.²⁰

In the encyclical on the mystical Body, Pius XII declares that Mary, united to her Son, offered him up to the eternal Father as a new Eve, for all the sons of Adam, in such a manner that she became mother of all Christ's members.²¹ In this

¹⁶ J.B. Carol, *De Corredemptione*, 509-539. This author cites firstly Pius IX, who in the bull *Ineffabilis* calls Mary "parentum Reparatricem, posterorum vivificatricem" (511). Cf. also J. Bittremieux, *Adnotationes circa doctrinam B. Marie Virginis Corredemptricis in documentis Romanum Pontificum*, ETL 16 (1939) 745-788.

¹⁷ *AAS* 27 (1894-1895) 178; 28 (1895-1896) 130-131; 34 (1901-1902) 130-131.

¹⁸ *Ad diem illum*, *AAS* 36 (1903-1904) 453-454; DS 3370.

¹⁹ *Inter Sodalicia*, *AAS* 10 (1918) 181-182: "Beatam Mariam Virginem, quae a vita Iesu Christi publica veluti abesse visa est, si Ipsi mortem oppetenti et cruci affixo adfuit, non sine divino consilio aduisse, ut cum Filio patiente et moriente passa est et pene commortua, sic maternal in Filium iura pro hominum salute abdicavit placandaeque Dei iustitiae, quantum ad se pertinebat, Filium immolavit, ut didi merito queat ipsam cum Christo humanum genus redemisse."

²⁰ *Osservator Romano*, 20-30 April 1935: "O Mater pietatis et misericordiae, quae dulcissimo Filio tuo humani generis Redemptionem in ara crucis consummanti copatiens et Corredemptrix adstitisti..., conserva in nobis, quaesumus, atque adauge in dies pretiosos Redemptionis et tuae compassionis fructus." To the restrictive interpretation given to this passage by W. Goossens, Carol (*De corredemptione*, 528-530) rightly responds that these words can be understood only in terms of immediate cooperation in objective redemption.

²¹ *Mystici Corporis*, *AAS* 35 (1943) 247-248.

passage one is bound to recognize the explicit intention of referring to cooperation in objective redemption.²²

Also in the encyclical on the Queen of heaven (1954), Mary is called the associate, in the acquisition of salvation, of Jesus Christ, principle of that salvation.²³

These pontifical documents therefore articulate what the theologians call Mary's immediate cooperation in objective redemption. They do not make use of that expression, but they affirm that truth in equivalent terms and often very strongly. Mary offers her son, offers him up to the Father; she is the restoratrix or reparatrix of humanity; she has ransomed the human race with Christ, she participated in redemptive merit, she was associated with the acquisition of salvation.

b. – The teaching of Vatican II

It was not the will of the council to make any definition of faith in any field. As far as concerns marian doctrine, the constitution *Lumen gentium* explicitly affirmed the desire to not restrict the freedom given to theologians in debated questions: the council did not intend "to give a complete doctrine on Mary, nor does it wish to decide those questions which the work of theologians has not yet fully clarified. Those opinions therefore may be lawfully retained which are propounded in Catholic schools concerning her, who occupies a place in the Church which is the highest after Christ and also closest to us" (54).²⁴ Nonetheless, the council articulates a very clear doctrine of coredeemption.

With respect to the Annunciation, it underscores the active cooperation of Mary: "Rightly, therefore, the Fathers see Mary not merely as passively engaged by God, but as freely cooperating in the work of man's salvation through faith and obedience" (56). Recall, as we have already pointed out, the interpretation of St. Irenaeus which contrasts Eve's disobedience and unbelief with the faith and obedience of Mary, and the influence of both on humanity's destiny. The council reproduces the principle articulated repeatedly by the Fathers: "death through Eve, life through Mary,"²⁵ and also the title "Mother of the living."²⁶

²² Cf. S. Tromp's commentary, *Periodica de re morali* 32 (1943) 401.

²³ *Ad caeli Reginam*, *AAS* 46 (1954) 633-634; DS 3914. Cf. J. Galot, *Reine de l'univers*, NRT 77 (1955) 492-498.

²⁴ Translator's note: all *Lumen gentium* English translations are taken from Austin Flannery English edition of the documents of Vatican II (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992).

²⁵ Jerome, *Epist.* 22:21, PL 22, 408. Cf. Augustine, *Serm.* 51, 2:3 PL 38, 335; *Serm.* 232, 2 PL 38, 1108; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech.* 12:15, PG 33, 741 AB; John Chrysostom, *In Ps.* 44:7 PG 55, 193; John Damascene, *Hom. 2 in dorm. B.M.V.*, 3, PG 96, 728.

²⁶ Epiphanius, *Panarion Haer.* 78:18, PG 42, 728 CD – 729 AB.

In describing the consent Mary gives to the angel's message, the council manifests her task in the work of salvation: "Thus the daughter of Adam, Mary, consenting to the word of God, became the Mother of Jesus. Committing herself whole-heartedly and impeded by no sin to God's saving will, she devoted herself totally, as a handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son, under and with him, serving the mystery of redemption, by the grace of Almighty God" (56). The council speaks of a dedication not just to the person, but to the work of Christ; this signifies quite plainly not merely that Mary cooperated in salvation by her maternal dedication towards her Son, but that she dedicated herself also to his work.²⁷ In this work she served the divine designs, the mystery of redemption, through an association with Jesus that involves both subordination ("*sub ipsa*," under him), and cooperation ("*cum ipsa*," with him). With this the council discards the objection according to which cooperation in redemption would elevate Mary to a level of equality with Christ – that is, it would threaten the principle of the uniqueness of the Redeemer. Mary acted in dependence on the Redeemer.

After commenting on the Annunciation, the council shows the continuity of cooperation: "This union of the mother with the Son in the work of salvation is made manifest from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to his death" (57). Consequently, it does not suffice to recognize this union only in certain characteristic moments; the entire maternal life of Mary develops in the sense of cooperation, and the evangelical episodes are only the signs of a constant dispositions.

The council enumerates the different episodes of the hidden life: the visitation, the nativity, the presentation of the child to the temple, Jesus lost and found. Then, it underscores insistently the role revealed at Cana: "In the public life of Jesus Mary appears prominently; at the very beginning when at the marriage feast of Cana, moved with pity, she brought about by her intercession the beginning of the miracles of Jesus the Messiah (cf. Jn 2:1-11)" (58). The influence which Mary exercised on the accomplishment of the first miracle is clearly affirmed: it demonstrates a cooperation in which there is an element of initiative which produces an effect on the very activity of Jesus. This influence is significant: it makes a difference from the beginning, and it will continue throughout the course of the public life.

Recalling Jesus's preaching, the council sees in Mary an attitude of receptivity that consists in listening and in putting the divine word into practice, progressing in a pilgrimage of faith. But it adds that she "faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood (cf. Jn 19:25), in keeping with the divine

²⁷ G. Baraúna has pointed out that the importance, recognized by the council, of the "fiat" at the Incarnation, is intended to correct a perspective that is too exclusively centered on the marian participation at Christ's passion and death (*La Très Sainte Vierge au service de l'économie du salut, L'Eglise de Vatican II*, III, Paris 1966, 1233).

plan,²⁸ enduring with her only begotten Son the intensity of his suffering, associated herself with his sacrifice in her mother's heart, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this victim which was born of her. Finally, she was given by the same Christ Jesus dying on the cross as a mother to his disciple, with these words: 'Woman, behold thy son' (Jn 19:26-27)" (58). One notices the emphasis placed on Mary's active role: she maintains her union with her Son; she does not only suffer with him, but associates herself with his sacrifice; she consents to the immolation.²⁹

Taking up the theme again in order to better clarify the relationship between Mary and the Church, the council declares that Mary "was the gracious mother of the divine Redeemer here on earth, and above all others and in a singular way the generous associate and humble handmaid of the Lord She conceived, brought forth, and nourished Christ, she presented him to the Father in the temple, shared her Son's sufferings as he died on the cross. Thus, in a wholly singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior in restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason she is a mother to us in the order of grace" (61).

Thus the council shows very clearly the unique character of Mary's cooperation; this unique character does not derive only from the excellence of Mary's inner dispositions, but from a maternal cooperation in the life and work of the Savior, cooperation which contributed to the acquisition of regenerative grace.

In no prior document of the magisterium was the doctrine of marian coredemption expounded with such fullness. All the episodes in which Mary involves herself are interpreted in the light of the principle of a cooperation in the redemptive work, according to the higher design of God. The goal of the council was above all to expound Mary's role in the Church, but the foundation of this role is largely articulated in terms of the association which, from the beginning, united the destinies and activities of the mother and her son.

²⁸ The expression "non sine divino consilio" reprises what was said by Benedict XV (cf. *Inter Sodalicia*, *AA* 10 (1918) 181-182) which underscored the value given to Mary's action by the will of the Father, who required her cooperation for the work of salvation.

²⁹ D. Bertetto points out that while not employing the terminology of immediate cooperation in the Redemption, the Council affirms it when it characterizes Mary's association in all the mysteries of Redemption unto Calvary (*Maria S.S. nel Concilio*, *Sal* 1966, 288).