

The Contribution of Fr. Leonardo Maria Bello to Mariology¹

FR. STEFANO MARIA CECCHIN, OFM

Brief Biography

Fr. Leonardo was born on August 16, 1882, at Motta di Livenza, Italy, and received the name of Pietro Antonio Maria at his Baptism. His birth is connected to a vow made by his mother, who was still without child after six years of marriage.² He was so steeped in Franciscan and Marian spirituality from his infancy at the local shrine, Madonna dei Miracoli (Our Lady of Miracles) that, very early, he wanted to enter the Seraphic College of the Venetian Province [OFM] and, at the age of 15, began his novitiate. Ordained a priest when only 23 years old, he was outstanding for his devout life and for his missionary zeal. He became Master of novices and then, of major seminarians. Subsequently, he served as Guardian and Provincial. In 1933, he was elected Minister General, an office he held until his death on November 28, 1944.

I. Marian Life

Fr. Leonardo's spiritual life was sustained by three devotions in particular: the Eucharist, the Crucified Lord, and the Immaculate Virgin.³

He was convinced that it was necessary to love the Mother of Jesus, because all graces come from God by means of devotion to her. He entrusted all his resolutions to her:

Blessed Virgin, Mary, my Mother, I place my
resolutions into your hands. Help me to faithfully

¹ Cf. P. Prodomi, *Seminando Pace e Bene. P. Leonardo M. Bello*, Venezia 1959; E.M. De Rossi, *Cuore di padre. Profilo spirituale del Rev.mo P. Leonardo M. Bello*, Roma 1951.

² *Ibid.*, 15-16.

³ Cf. E. De Rossi, *Cuore di Padre. Profilo spirituale del rev.mo P. Leonardo M. Bello ministro generale dei Frati Minori*, Roma 1951, 20.

maintain them, and on the day of the great Judgment you will lead me to the Throne of your divine Son and obtain mercy for me.⁴

He wanted to entrust everything to God through Mary:

All of my spiritual and physical actions...will be offered to the Lord through the hands of Mary Most Holy...⁵

His resolutions included a commitment to recite the Franciscan Crown of Seven Joys and the Angelus daily.⁶ During recreation he resolved to speak “with devotion about the glories of Mary.”⁷ As the clock sounded each hour, he would recite the Hail Mary.⁸ After lunch he promised to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary,⁹ and in the morning and evening he recited the prayer, “O amabilissimo Cuore di M aria...” (O most lovable Heart of Mary).¹⁰

Bello also resolved to make a novena before each of the principal Marian feast days, to honor the Virgin in the month of May, to make some mortification every Saturday and on the vigils of Marian feast days, and to venerate Marian images, saluting them with a Hail Mary and kissing them if possible.¹¹ He wished to entrust all his studies to her:

Before studying each subject I will ask help of the Blessed Virgin and often repeat the usual ejaculations to her and to the Lord, raising my glance to the Crucified Lord (which I will often do during study as well).¹²

⁴ Ibid., 213.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 212.

⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁸ Ibid., 213.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 214.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 211.

He also entrusted his growth in Christian perfection to her, asking for her daily help in observing the Rule and the religious vows, for the grace against temptations and of final perseverance.¹³

When he became Novice Master, he invited the young candidates for Franciscan life to add the name “Mary” to their religious name, as a sign of entrustment to her, to help them to faithfully live a life consecrated to the Lord. He taught the novices to fix their gazes heavenward:

Do you see the first star in the tail of Ursa Minor (the little bear)? It is the pole star! It constantly points north and serves as a guide for navigators. It is a symbol of Our Lady’s role in our existence.¹⁴

In February 1912, at St. Pancratius, he instituted the feast of “Our Lady of the Novitiate,” still celebrated today. As Provincial, he composed a prayer for the consecration of priests as “Knights of Our Lady.”¹⁵ True

¹³ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁵ "O Mary, heavenly Lady and our Mother, powerful Mediatrix of graces, O Arbiter and Queen of miracles, turn thy kind gaze on us. From that happy place where Thou placest thy immaculate foot and made flourish the miracle, where our Fathers offered Thee their fervent, ingenuous services, where from age to age Thou received the homage of the sons of the Poverello; to us, the last of these, kindly listen. our only hope, we beseech Thee in the very words of Anthony of Padua: enlighten our souls with the light of thy grace, purify them with the heat of thy purity, inflame them with the fire of thy charity. We pray Thee, Mary, to make us worthy to praise thy divine Son, our Lord, every day, and to serve Him faithfully. Let us have the consolation of chanting every day thy sweet name, cause of our joy. And to obtain this, most sweet Mother, we today feel the need to renew to Thee the offer and consecration of all of us. Guard our minds and hearts, our wills, and our freedom. We entrust to Thee our spiritual gains, our studies and the countless needs which will accompany us to the holy Altar. Care for us, O caring Minister of divine Providence. We feel ourselves secure. Permit us, O Mother, to renew the ardent resolutions of our youth. We wish to honor and serve Thee every day as humble pages, as devout knights, living the love of thy divine Son and of thyself, O noblest Sovereign of our hearts. We will come every day to visit Thee and offer Thee the homage of our special services. Accept them, O our Lady, and deign to cover thy poor sons with graces and aids. Move the heart and hand of our dear

devotion to Mary cannot be separated from life or from theological study. His entire life was lived “for the glory of God and Mary.”¹⁶

II. Mariology

II.1. The Scotistic Foundation: The Absolute Primacy of Christ

On August 11, 1933, only two months after his election as Minister General, Fr. Leonard was a pilgrim at the tomb of Blessed John Duns Scotus in Cologne, Germany. On October 29th of the same year, he issued his first encyclical letter addressed to the entire Order¹⁷ on the absolute primacy and kingship of Christ in scotistic thought. The encyclical’s author wanted to reawaken within the Franciscan Order a desire to rediscover scotistic doctrine as key to the organization of philosophical and theological research. This was the approach to be adopted at the new Pontifical Atheneum “Antonianum” established shortly before.

On July 14, 1933, he initiated a movement whose aim was to make better known the figure of Scotus and to obtain universal recognition for his title of “Blessed.”¹⁸ This was the frame of reference for his wish, in 1936, to visit the Subtle Doctor’s town of birth in Scotland and, in 1938, for his transferring the Scotistic Commission from Quaracchi to the Antonianum in Rome, entrusting its presidency to Fr. Carlo Balić.

benefactors to support us. Make them efficacious instruments of thy Maternal care for us. On them, O munificent Dispensatrix of divine favors, pour out thy royal bounty. Help them, comfort them. Protect them, make them dear to thy divine Son, hasten the entry of their beloved deceased into Paradise. O Mary, to Thee and for Thee our youth of today, our apostolate of tomorrow, our life forever: this is the CONSECRATION OF THY KNIGHTS": De Rossi, *Cuore di Padre. Profilio spirituale del rev.mo P. Leonardo M. Bello ministro generale dei Frati Minori*, 23-25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁷ *Litterae encyclicae Hoc extraordinarii et maximi, in Enchiridion vitae franciscanae I* (Quaracchi 1957) 241-281; *Acta Ordinis* 52 (1933) 283-311.

¹⁸ Prodomi, *Seminando Pace e Bene. P. Leonardo M. Bello*, 121.

His encyclical letter is a veritable anthology of Franciscan authors who, beginning with St. Francis, have placed all their attention upon the centrality of Christ and Mary, His Mother. Among these authors, the figure of Blessed John Duns Scotus, the Subtle and Marian Doctor, stands out in particular. As a true son of St. Francis, he provided a solid, theological foundation for the doctrine of the Incarnation of the Word in the womb of the Virgin Mary. “First among the Scholastic Masters”, writes Bello, “at both Paris and Oxford, Scotus proved the immunity of Mary from original sin. With his great genius, he demonstrated the plausibility of ascribing to Mary what is most excellent, because the maximal excellence—an excellence which is none other than that of her Son as Redeemer, Reconciler and Mediator—pertains to her.”¹⁹

II.2. Mary, Mediatrix of All Graces

Bello’s first major Marian writing was the encyclical letter addressed to the whole Order, entitled *De Beata Maria Virgine omnium gratiarum Mediatrix*.²⁰ By means of this letter, the Minister General desired to promote the feast of the “Blessed Virgin Mary, Mediatrix of All Graces” (January 9, 1937), whose celebration Pope Pius XI had granted to the Franciscan Order, and to exhort the friars to celebrate the feast. This grant was in response to the request made at the General Chapter held at the Portiuncula in 1927.²¹

The letter, therefore, was an opportunity to explain the theological and devotional considerations underlying the Order’s request to celebrate the feast. Never had enough been done, contends the author of the letter, to publicize this doctrine of the Franciscan

¹⁹ Litterae encyclicae *Hoc extraordinarii et maximi*, 244-245.

²⁰ Litterae encyclicae *De 8. Maria Virgine omnium gratiarum mediatrix*, in *Enchiridion vitae franciscanae* I, 334-390. It also appeared in an Italian edition: *Maria mediatrix di tutte le grazie*, Milan 1939.

²¹ Cf. *Acta Capituli Generalis 1927* (Ad Claras Aquas 1927) 40.

School,²² a doctrine which allows us to best understand the true nature of Marian mediation. One must note that the Franciscan family was born and grew under the protection of this heavenly Mother, so much so that Francis of Assisi named her “Advocate” of the Order. Thereafter, Franciscan saints and doctors dedicated themselves to expounding the most sublime truths that could be said about her, to the glory of Christ her Son.²³

Mary’s honor was defended, above all, by John Duns Scotus. Leonardo presents him as the banner waved by the friars during the centuries-long fight in which they were the protagonists, a fight ending with the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. To this must be added their noteworthy contribution, especially that of Anthony of Padua and Bernardine of Siena, regarding the truth of the Assumption. In addition, the Franciscan School was also renowned for its study of the link between the divine Maternity, the holiness of the Immaculate Heart, and the fruits of the Passion in which the Sorrowful Mother participated.

With regard to Mary’s universal mediation, the Minister General recalls that the doctors and saints of the Order have always most devoutly taught that the Virgin is our Advocate, Mother and

²² Fr. Bello notes that there has always been and always will be a lively participation of Franciscan scholars in the schools, academies, and congresses; and, hence, the erection of a chair of Mariology in the Athenaeum Antonianum by Fr. Carlo Balic has been a cause of great joy. He was convinced that the study of Franciscan Mariology had been, without doubt, the basis for the preaching and devotion which the friars spread in the midst of the people of God; cf. *Litterae encyclicae Hoc extraordinarii et maximi*, 337.

²³ On this point, he cites Bernardino de Bustis in a note where he says: "Our Order always studied how to magnify its good Advocate, the Blessed Mother of God, herself, seeing this placed her dowry in this world under the care and administration of our Order, namely, the shrines of the Holy Land. This means that she must be especially magnified by our Order, and her honor, and that of her Son, must be defended." (Bustis, *Mariale*, sermo 3, cit., f. 310b): *Litterae encyclicae Hoc extraordinarii et maximi*, 335, nota 3

Mediatrice, and that this doctrine is one of the chief truths of the faith of the Church.²⁴

Franciscan theology has Christ as its focal point, for whom the Father issued the divine decree of the Incarnation. In this decree the Mother is seen, together with her Son, jointly predestined with Him and, therefore, associated in His work of salvation.

Bello reminds his readers of the three fundamental points upon which Marian mediation is based in Franciscan theology:

1. Mary was “absolutely” predestined God to be the Mother of his Son and, therefore, also to be his first-born Daughter in Christ and subordinated to Christ. This joint predestination with Christ, in one and the same decree, establishes the Virgin as the “secondary head” of the entire mystical Body which is the Church.²⁵

The reason is evident precisely because of the “uniqueness” of her election. Mary is predestined in one and the same decree of predestination as her Son. Therefore, she is placed before all other creatures, precisely because she is conjoined with Christ.

This priority, with respect to all other creatures and her full “conformity” to Christ, means that Mary, “completely dependent upon the Mediator Christ,” receives from Him that fullness which makes her both “secondary head,” therefore, the motive and final goal of the economy of salvation, and with the Man Jesus, “Mediatrice” between God and created things. From His fullness she gives to all, for which reason she is regarded as the Neck through which all of the benefits of Christ the Head pass into the Body.²⁶

²⁴ Cf. *Litterae encyclicae De B. Maria Virgine omnium gratiarum mediatrice*, 338.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 340.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 342-344.

Sacred Scripture, the Church Fathers, and the great theologians testify to this doctrine. Making reference to Pope Pius X, Fr. Bello writes:

Whenever Sacred Scripture addresses the institution of the spiritual economy and of the sanctification of the elect, the Blessed Virgin Mary is ordinarily associated with Christ, Head and universal Mediator.²⁷

It is, therefore, in the Bible where the doctrine of mediation is, above all, found in these passages:

Revelations 12:1-2: The *great sign* appearing in Heaven is Mary, and was the cause of the war between the good and bad angels. The sanctification of the good angels is due to the merits of Christ and Mary. The Virgin, therefore, is shown to have been established in Christ and through Christ, the Mediatrix of grace and of glory for the angels.²⁸

Genesis 3:15: The *enmity between the woman and the serpent* is the prophecy of Mary as the “New Eve,” indissolubly united to Christ the Redeemer. In the order of regeneration, she plays a role in the Redemption exactly parallel to that played by Eve in the original transgression, but in view of the opposite outcome. Whereas sin came through Eve, salvation comes through Mary, who cooperated fully in the work of the Redemption. By reason of this cooperation in a manner subordinate to Christ, she enjoys the dignity of head and universal Mediatrix.²⁹

John 19:26: When he offered Himself up on the Cross, Christ entrusted the whole human race to the Sorrowful Mother. In

²⁷ Ibid., 346; Pius X, *Ad diem illum*, in *Pii X P.M. Acta I* (Roma 1905) 150.

²⁸ Litterae encyclicae *De B. Maria Virgine omnium gratiarum mediatrix*, 346-347.

²⁹ Ibid., 347-349.

that solemn hour, the Son of God proclaimed the spiritual Maternity of Mary.³⁰

These three scriptural passages show us how the Mother is always associated with her Son at the most important moments in the work of the Redemption. Thus, they realize that this “firstborn Daughter,” by reason of an absolutely first divine decree, has been made the secondary head of the mystical Body and that her mediation extends to all the Church.³¹

This truth is supported by three theological considerations:

a) Mary participates in the nature of *secondary headship of the Mystical Body*, because she enjoys priority with respect to the other members, the fullness of grace and of merit, and exercises on them an efficacious moral influence on the other members.

b) Her *union with Christ* was so intimate that she was “preordained by divine decrees” to be, with Christ and for Him, the diabolical serpent’s eternal enemy. United to her Son in the battle against the enemy, she is also strictly united to Him in the office of mediation on behalf of other creatures.

c) An act of faith in this mediation gives *praise and glory to Christ and to the Virgin*. If they are united in everything, what pertains to the Son also pertains to the Mother. Because, according to the golden principle of Blessed John Duns Scotus, it is necessary to attribute that which is most excellent to the Virgin Mary, therefore, it follows that, in the absolutely first divine decree of the Trinity regarding the Word Incarnate, the Virgin Mary has been preordained, in union with Christ, to be the secondary head of the whole Church and, thus, the glorious Mediatrix of all graces and of every single grace.³²

³⁰ Ibid., 349.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 357-358.

2. Associated from the beginning in the whole work of the Redemption by divine decree, Mary's mediation is revealed in the Coredemption:

Chosen and predestined to be the head of our race and to be our Advocate, the Blessed Virgin Mary is rightly proclaimed the universal Mediatrix because, from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, she truly acquired, as Coredemptrix, every single grace flowing into the Mystical Body of Christ, this, both by reason of her cooperation in the Incarnation of the Word and of her association with the whole work of Christ our Savior.³³

This association implies that Mary,

...by her most ardent desires, not only merited *de congruo* the hastening of the Incarnation and, after the Annunciation, merited the title of Mother of Christ, but she also gave her free consent to the supreme decree of the Trinity by which she was foreordained to be the Mother and Associate of Christ the Redeemer.³⁴

Citing St. Bernardine of Siena, Bello shows that the Virgin, receiving the Word into her womb, became conformed to Him and to His mission and, therefore, to His mediation.³⁵ She welcomed her vocation, "fully aware" of her role and aware also that her whole life would be an offering, united to that of her Son, for our salvation.

³³ Ibid., 358-359.

³⁴ Ibid., 359.

³⁵ Ibid., 359-360.

“Conceiving and giving birth to the Truth, she merited the reconciliation of the whole human race”³⁶ and became “the effective instrument for the distribution of the gifts of sanctification,” as St. Bonaventure teaches.³⁷

By her close union with the Redeemer, the Virgin, *directly and positively acquired the graces* of the supernatural economy. In the Temple of God [of Jerusalem] and on the Altar of the Cross, she offered the Savior to the Most Holy Trinity, from which depends, by reason of merit and of the bloody Passion, the conferral of all graces and glory. Moreover, she participated in a most eminent way in His sufferings and in His offering *in which consisted the principal offering to God* (Duns Scotus).³⁸

At the Presentation in the Temple,

She commenced her offering of Christ; therefore, the sacramental offering finds its origin and foundation in the Virgin’s offering.³⁹

The Minister General interprets this Gospel passage [of the Presentation], in the light of the Franciscan masters, as an offering made at the hands of the Virgin who, at that very moment, acts as the Mother of the Savior and of the elect on behalf of the human race and of the Church. In Mary, therefore, both mankind and the Church received the gift of Christ, the Savior and Redeemer.

³⁶ Bonaventure, III *Sent*, d 4, a 3, q 3, in *Opera Omnia* III, 1156.

³⁷ Cf. *Litterae encyclicae De B. Maria Virgine omnium gratiarum mediatrice*, 351; Bonaventure, *Sermo 2 de Purificatione*, in *Opera Omnia* IX, 642.

³⁸ Cf. *Litterae encyclicae De B. Maria Virgine omnium gratiarum mediatrice*, 362; Scotus, *Ox.* IV, d. 2 q. 1 n. 10.

³⁹ Bello cites a homily attributed to Bonaventure: *Sermo V de Purificatione*, *Opera Omnia* IX, 654-655.

And Simeon, on behalf of the world as its authentic, legitimate representative,⁴⁰ prophesied that Mary would be associated with the sufferings of Christ:

He announced that martyrdom of Maternal compassion, to which the Virgin Mary gave her consent, offering herself with her Son as the Coredeмпtrix of all.⁴¹

Her compassion at the foot of the Cross makes her an active Associate in the Redemption worked by her Son, just as it had made her Mediatrix at the Incarnation. Her assent at the Incarnation was repeated at the hour of Sacrifice, an assent in which she offered up her Son:

This offering, without doubt, was a work without parallel and meritorious in the highest degree. Therefore, God willed the Blessed Virgin, jointly with her Crucified Son, to be Reparatrix of the angelic nature and the Salvatrix and Redemptrix of the whole human race.⁴²

The Franciscan masters pause to contemplate how Christ, on the Altar of the Cross, conferred the primacy of “compassion” on His Mother,⁴³ a compassion by which she experienced in herself the same sorrows that Christ underwent. She became “co-martyr beside the Martyr,” the “wounded beside the Wounded,” the “con-crucified with the Crucified,” the “transpierced beside the One who was pierced.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid., 362.

⁴¹ Ibid., 363.

⁴² Ibid., 365. Cf. Carlo del Moral, *Fons illimis theologiae Scotisticae*, n. 41, p. 372-373. [Ed. note: Fr. Bello consistently used the title *Redemptrix* without the “co.”]

⁴³ Litterae encyclicae *De B. Maria Virgine omnium gratiarum mediatrice*, 365.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 366. Cf. Bonaventure: *Sermo in dominica oct. Epiph*, in *Opera Omnia IX*, 172.

The immensity of this sorrow, together with that of her Son, was not an end in itself, but is offered by the Mother, in union with the offering of her Son, for the salvation of all. For this reason the Virgin is “fittingly called the Coredemptrix of all.”⁴⁵

At this point Bello provides the reasons given by the pontifical Magisterium in support of his conclusion:

- In the Apostolic Letter, *Inter sodalicia*, Pope Benedict XV clearly affirms that Mary “redeemed the human race” with Christ.⁴⁶
 - In the Letter *Explorata res est*, Pope Pius XI affirms that the Virgin was chosen as Mother of God “to participate in the Redemption of the human race.”⁴⁷
 - In the Encyclical, *Ad diem illum*, Pope Pius X taught that, by the communion of sorrow and of wills between Mother and Son, the Virgin merited all graces and favors for the Mystical Body,⁴⁹ in such wise that if Christ merited these graces *de condigno*, Mary merited them *de congruo*. Therefore, one may conclude that the Mother of God is, without doubt, recognized by the Church as “universal Mediatrix.”⁴⁸
3. In the third part of the letter, Fr. Leonardo demonstrates, by means of Gospel texts and the Franciscan tradition, that the Virgin fulfills her mission as *Dispensatrix of all graces* because, in the mission of the Holy Spirit, she has been made responsible for the distribution of graces.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Litterae encyclicae *De B. Maria Virgine omnium gratiarum mediatrice*, 367.

⁴⁶ Cf. Benedict XV, Litterae apostolicae *Inter sodalicia*, in *Acta Ordinis* 37 (1918) 102.

⁴⁷ Pius XI, Litterae *Explorata res est*, in *Acta Ordinis* 42 (1923) 98.

⁴⁸ Cf. Pius X, Litterae encyclicae *Ad diem illum*, Feb. 2, 1904, in *Enchiridion delle encicliche* 4, Bologna 1998, 51.

⁴⁹ **Litterae encyclicae *De B. Maria Virgine omnium gratiarum mediatrice*, 370.**

He demonstrates the acceptance of this doctrine by the pontifical Magisterium, which has drawn upon the masters of the Franciscan Order.⁵⁰

The Minister General concludes by recalling that the title of “Mary Mediatrix” is part of Church doctrine and is especially supported by the whole Franciscan tradition. For this reason, he entrusts the entire Franciscan family to Mary Mediatrix.⁵¹

II.3. The Immaculate Heart of Mary

Laying the cornerstone for the new church of the General Curia, Santa Maria Mediatrix (St. Mary Mediatrix, May 31, 1943), provided the occasion for promulgating another letter to the Order on the *Immaculate Heart of the Virgin Mary*.⁵²

This letter was preceded by the consecration of the entire Franciscan Order to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on the part of Fr. Leonardo on December 6, 1942, at the conclusion of the spiritual exercises he preached at the Antonianum. Two days later, on December 8th, he renewed the consecration with the faithful who were present in the basilica church of St. Anthony, Rome.

In imitation of St. Francis, who had chosen Mary as “Advocate of the Order,” Fr. Bello wanted to place the Order under the care of her mediation.

In this second letter dedicated to the Virgin, the Minister General seeks to explain the nature of devotion to the Heart of hearts in the light of the Franciscan masters.

He writes:

⁵⁰ **Ibid., 386-389.**

⁵¹ **Ibid., 389.**

⁵² Litterae encyclicae *Cor Immaculatum*, in *Enchiridion vitae franciscanae* I, 422-466. A year after Fr. Bello's death Fr. Agostino Gemelli published an Italian version of the letter: L. Bello, *Il Cuore Immacolato di Maria*, Milan 1945.

The devotion we practice toward the Immaculate Heart of Mary is addressed in the first place to her human Heart as worthy of veneration in itself because, from the first instant of its formation, it was the Tabernacle of the Holy Spirit and because, by its beating for nine months, by its beating, it dispensed—so to speak—life itself to the Word Incarnate. Moreover, we venerate this human Heart because we believe that it was formed directly by God in the image of the Heart of Jesus.⁵³

This argument of the image is founded in Colossians, 1:15-16, where the Apostle affirms that all creatures are created in Christ, who is the image of the invisible God.

If, therefore, all things were created in Him, that is, according to this model, how much more was the Blessed Virgin Mary [created in Him] who, together with Him, was predestined in one and the same decree.⁵⁴

The Mother whom God chose was made in the image of her Son so as to have a Heart similar to His and to be able to love God and man as He does. The Heart, in fact, is the seat and symbol by which,

Our devotion to the Heart of Mary goes well beyond her human Heart: it is directed principally to those virtues of which it is a living symbol and of which it is regarded as the seat—to the undying love with which the Mother of Christ was aflame.⁵⁵

This devotion, therefore, is directed to the Heart of that Woman who was intimately united to the Word Incarnate in holiness and purity, in

⁵³ **Litterae encyclicae** *Cor Immaculatum*, 425.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 425-426.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 426-427.

her profound humility by which she found grace with God, in her proximity to Jesus in all the joyful and sorrowful events in His life, culminating with the anxieties of the Passion. The Heart of Mary is perfectly conformed to that of her Son. Therefore, devotion to this Heart is an honor paid to her virtues and, therefore, to her person. But the honor paid to Mary does not stop at her; it is indirectly addressed to that God who has filled her with his graces.

1. Marys love for God

According to Fr. Leonardo, God has placed three loves in human nature:

- The love of children toward their parents,
- The love of parents for their children,
- The mutual love between husband and wife.⁵⁶

These three forms of love can be found,

...united and elevated, by the providence of God, to the highest degree in the Virgin Mary, where they express the relation between the Mother of God and the Three Divine Persons.⁵⁷

She is the Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son, and Spouse of the Holy Spirit.

a. *Mary, beloved Daughter of the Father*

By her election— before all other creatures— in one and the same decree with the Word Incarnate, Mary is the Daughter of the Father to such an eminent degree that she can be called “only Daughter of God” and “first-born

⁵⁶ Ibid., 427.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Daughter of the Father.”⁵⁸ Conceived in the divine mind inseparably from the Word of God who is the origin of all things, she, herself, participates in his fullness to such a degree that she becomes a second origin of all things. All creatures thus find their origin in Christ and Mary, the model after which they have been created by God. This is why the heavenly Father willed the Virgin to be the “Lady” and “Queen of all creatures.”⁵⁹

As for Mary, she renders more thanks to the Lord than allover creatures together possibly can. There is no creature like Mary who can offer the Creator something not already received from Him, from whom all things come. Therefore, if the Virgin is the Mother of God, it is because the Father freely willed to associate her with himself, granting her the privilege to become, in time, the “Mother” of Him whom he begets eternally:

On the other hand, when she gave her totally free consent, she performed a completely human act, by which she merited and accepted the consequent obligations...Therefore, through the unique and free cooperation of the Virgin, that eternal generation, by which the Father communicates his entire self to the Son is, in a certain way, renewed in time.⁶⁰

When she welcomed the divine Word, the Immaculate Virgin could offer the Father,

...the Servant chosen by the Father himself and the perfect worshipper of the divine Majesty. We can, therefore, rightly say that

⁵⁸ Ibid., 429.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 431.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 433.

the Incarnation was also a gift of the Virgin Mary to God the Father.⁶¹

There is a relation of mutual giving between the Father and Mary. Here is found the essence of Trinitarian love itself, in which each divine Person lives in the total giving of himself to the other. Therefore:

No other love can be compared to the one in which Mary has blessed and loved God the Father, because, as our own Bernardine of Siena teaches, gratuitous love is measured according to the measure of grace. But [Mary] was full of grace, surpassing all creatures; therefore, she superabounded in love.⁶²

b. Mary, the Most Loving Mother of Her Son

Fr. Leonardo calls attention to the fact that, beginning with St. Bonaventure and Blessed John Duns Scotus, the Franciscan School has defended Mary's actual Maternity as a "true Maternity" against the opinions of other eminent doctors. For the Franciscan masters, divine grace did not alter the Virgin's nature in any way and, when she conceived, she gave the entirety of her humanity to her Son. For this reason, only to Mary and to no other woman can so real a Maternity be ascribed (given that the humanity of her Son found its origin entirely in her). This is why Mary is said to have possessed a "truly Maternal love" so immense that no other Mother has ever loved her child as much as Mary loved hers.⁶³

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 434.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 434. Bernardine of Siena, *De glorioso nomine Virginis Mariae, sermo 1, in Opera Omnia IV, 72.*

⁶³ *Litterae encyclicae Cor Immaculatum, 435.*

Franciscan anthropology has always been careful to point out that, because He had no biological father, Christ took his human nature solely from Mary:

What a marvel! The Creator of all things, who formed man in His image, has deigned to be made in time in the image of one of His creatures.⁶⁴

Drawing upon the consideration of this event rather than relying upon the theories of philosophers, the Franciscan masters concluded that what happened in Christ must be duplicated in all other men, created on the model of Christ. Hence, if, in Christ, animation is simultaneous with conception, one must believe it to be so for Mary and for all other men. It is the mystery of Christ that sheds light on the mystery of man.

c. Mary, Faithful Spouse of the Holy Spirit

The Church has always believed that Christ was “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is also given the mission of filling the hearts of the faithful with grace (Rom 5:5), according to the invocation found in the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*. Clearly, the human heart that received the greatest outpouring of this grace was that of the man Jesus, to which is added the Heart of Mary, the Full of Grace. Therefore,

The love of the Holy Spirit was aflame in a particular way in the Heart of Mary, so that the power of the Holy Spirit worked wonders in her flesh.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid., 436.

⁶⁵ Bonaventure, *De Assumptione*, Sermo 3, in *Opera Omnia* IX, 661 .

Basing himself on Bernardine of Siena, Fr. Bello writes,

*When the Virgin Mary conceived the Word of God, she obtained such responsibility or authority in every temporal action of the Holy Spirit that no other creature could obtain grace from God except through the Mother of God.*⁶⁶ By this double association with the work of the Holy Spirit—the conception of the Word of God and the regeneration of the elect to grace and glory—the Virgin Mary is rightly called the Spouse of the Holy Spirit, who wished to bestow upon her such fruitfulness.⁶⁷

Mary's love of the Paraclete is evidenced by her prompt obedience and by her docility in receiving his inspirations. Her dispositions are verified by the Gospel events in which she is described as “keeping these things in her Heart.” Nothing escaped her; she missed nothing concerning the preciousness of her Child.

The Spirit consoled and guided her in the path of wisdom, allowing her to receive her Son's word and put it into practice throughout her life.

2. Mary's Love of Neighbor

⁶⁶ Bernardine of Siena, *De nativitate B. Mariae Virginis*, sermo 6, in *Opera Omnia* IV, 92.

⁶⁷ *Litterae encyclicae Cor Immaculatum*, 440.

Transfigured entirely by Trinitarian love, Mary became the form of perfect love to which one must become conformed in order to live fully in Christ Jesus.⁶⁸

a. *Mary's Spiritual Children*

Mary's spiritual Maternity extends to all who are part of the Mystical Body of Christ, as well as to the angels.⁶⁹ Her Mother's love does not reject anyone, and it reveals itself in an even greater measure in her most unworthy children, who become the object of greater attention on her part in order that they may return to the right way.⁷⁰

b. *The Love of Mary for Her Children*

Mary demonstrated her love for her spiritual children throughout her whole life. All of her labors and her sorrows were borne for the good of her children:

First of all, she is the Teacher of salvation for each one of us. She invites us to imitate her diligence and her example... Her words and her examples comprise a perennial source of life and holiness for everyone who piously meditates upon them.⁷¹

When she set out in haste to Elizabeth, what drove her to go in haste to fulfill an office of charity other than the love burning in her heart?⁷²

But her love reached its apex when, she generously took upon herself, together with her Son, the dolours of

⁶⁸ Ibid., 442-444.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 445.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 448.

⁷¹ Ibid., 449.

⁷² Ibid., 450.

the Passion and the Cross in order to blot out and expiate our sins, making propitiation and obtaining blessing. This action commenced when she gave her virginal consent to become the Mother of God.

But at the hour of the Cross

Seeing her Son abandoned by nearly everyone, Mary had to undertake their sorrows upon herself and, thus, in a certain way, she shared more intensely in her Son's sorrows. "There can be no doubt whatsoever," states the Seraphic Doctor, "that she, with intrepid soul and unshakeable reason, never hesitated in offering up her Son for the salvation of the human race, because the Mother had to be completely assimilated to the Father, who loved the world so much that he gave his Only-Begotten Son (Jn 3: 16). It is, therefore, necessary to praise and love her precisely because she consented to the Sacrifice of her Son for the salvation of the human race. After the Most High Trinity and her most blessed Son, Jesus Christ Our Lord, Mary must be loved and venerated above all others."⁷³ This is the love Christ Himself recommended to us when, turning to the Apostle John at the Foot of the Cross, He said to him, "Behold your mother." It is the love of a Mother who gave us a new birth to supernatural life by such great suffering. At that moment Christ announced her spiritual maternity, mystically signified by her entrustment to the Apostle and, with His supreme authority, He commanded the children of so wonderful a Mother in the order of grace to love and venerate her. Let us, therefore, with the greatest confidence, draw close to the Maternal Heart of Mary, the merciful help of us pilgrims.⁷⁴

⁷³ Bonaventure, *I Sent.*, in *Opera Omnia* I, 861.

⁷⁴ Litterae encyclicae *Cor Immaculatum*, 453.

c. *Mary Our Help*

The duty of any mother not only consists in having children but in raising and educating them. Similarly, Mary, our spiritual Mother, constantly cares for our spiritual formation and growth. Therefore, if

“...all fatherhood in Heaven and on earth takes its name from the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, then every maternity on earth must be considered a vestige of the kindly, supernatural motherhood of the Virgin Mary who, by her intercession provides actual grace to her spiritual children and sustains them in every good thing.”⁷⁵

“God, the sole Dispenser of graces, has willed to entrust this distribution to His Son Incarnate. For His part, Jesus has willed that His Mother participate in this distribution, to such an extent that, according to St. Bernardine of Siena, Mary administers grace “to whom she wants, when she wants, how she wants, and in the measure she wants.”⁷⁶

The Seraphic Doctor bases this power of Mary on an intimate bond between the Hearts of Jesus and Mary.⁷⁷

Fr. Bello cites the example of King Solomon, who had a throne for his mother placed besides his. Likewise, Christ, the true Solomon, shows His love as a Child to His Mother when, at her Assumption, He leads her

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Bernardine of Siena, *De Nativitate B. Mariae Virginis*, **sermo 5**, in *Opera Omnia IV*, 93.

⁷⁷ Cf. Bonaventure, *De Assumptione B. V. Mariae*, **sermo 3**, in *Opera Omnia IX*, 695.

into Heaven and places her beside Him as Queen and Dispensatrix of all graces.⁷⁸ Therefore, Mary continues her mission of spiritual Mother in Heaven.

The last part of the letter is dedicated to devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the Franciscan Order.

Conclusion

Fr. Leonardo Bello lived a life entirely dedicated to Jesus and Mary. It was neither simply a life of devotion nor solely of intellectual erudition.

According to the will of the Seraphic Patriarch, he lived a life of prayer and devotion illuminated by a wisdom which came to him by way of a culture rooted in the Franciscan masters. All of his writings are a compendium of Franciscan doctrine and indicate a vast knowledge of the great minds of the Order. It is difficult today to find a Franciscan like Fr. Bello who can support any theme with an abundance of citations from Franciscan authors.

Therefore, he still remains an example today for every Franciscan and for the Ministers General of how to fully live the Marian-Christocentric charism proper to the theological, spiritual, and evangelical tradition of the followers of the Poverello of Assisi.

The doctrine contained in his writings reminds us that, according to the centuries-old Tradition of the Church and of the Franciscan Order, Mary is the true Mother of God, predestined to be the Cooperatrix of the Son of God Made-Man for the salvation and Redemption of the human race. For the Franciscan school, there is no doubt that Mary has been elected, in union with Jesus, as “universal Mediatrix” of all grace and, therefore, the “Coredemptrix” of mankind. In Franciscan anthropology there is no separating the Woman, Mary, from the Man,

⁷⁸ Cf. *Litterae encyclicae Cor Immaculatum*, 454.

Jesus, intimately united in the divine plan of creation and, therefore also of the re-creation of fallen man.

As Minister General, Fr. Bello invited the Franciscan Order not to neglect this doctrine, because he beheld in it the very essence of the Franciscan vocation— the vocation by which Francis was called by God to “repair his Church.”