

Luther's Revolution and the Contemporary Denial of Mary Co-redemptrix

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Christian Unity must be a committed goal for every Catholic.¹ How can a member of Christ's Church rest content when the Heart of Christ remains wounded by the scandal of Christian division?² And yet, unity of faith presupposes unity of doctrine,² hence divergences in doctrine must be honestly discussed. Compromise of truth is the enemy of authentic ecumenism, not its friend.

In the spirit of authentic intra-Christian dialogue, one would never consider it anti-ecumenical for a Protestant theologian to voice his critique of the Catholic doctrine of the papacy, for example, for such is an essential notion of his denominational stance. In the same way, it should not be deemed against authentic ecumenism for a Catholic theologian to critique Protestant doctrine which runs contrary to an essential Catholic truth. Moreover, when a Protestant error begins to creep into contemporary Catholic thought and seems to find its expression, even if unconsciously, within statements of Catholic theology or even hierarchy, then the error itself must be identified and remedied.

It is within this context of authentic Catholic ecumenism and contemporary Catholic clarity that we must examine anew the theological and anthropological doctrines of Martin Luther. We do so without of any judgment of heart, but rather to examine historically and theologically how Luther's ecclesiastical revolution regarding the nature of the human person, grace, God, and redemption could, a half-millennium later, contribute to the present misunderstanding of Mary's unique role with Jesus in human redemption.

¹ Cf. St. John Paul II, encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, 1995, nn.7-8; Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 2-4, 7-8, 11.

² Cf. St. John Paul II, encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, 1987, n. 30; *Ut Unum Sint*, 18; Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 11.

Protestant biographers commonly grant that Martin Luther as a young Augustinian monk experienced severe struggles of extreme scrupulosity.³ His confessor, Fr. Staupitz, conveyed the fact of Luther's excessively long and detailed confessions, which, once finished, only began again with the same content.⁴ Whether his scrupulosity led to his image of God, or whether his image of God led to his scrupulosity, we cannot be certain. In either case, the young Augustinian's crushing concept of God's woeful wrath, coupled with his own subjective disposition towards despair, eventually led Luther to change Church doctrine in order to correspond to his own feelings, rather than vice versa. A tragic historical and theological chain reaction would result.

According to Luther, the human person is no longer basically good though fallen, but essentially corrupt. Grace can no longer transform the human recipient due to his total anthropological depravity, but can only "cover." Even though the often-quoted Lutheran analogy for grace and the human person as "snow falling on a dung heap" still lacks a definitive source, certainly his extended writings on man's total corruption conveys the same thought; for example:

Conceived in sorrow and corruption, the child sins in his mother's womb. As he grows older, the innate element of corruption develops. Man has said to sin: 'Thou art my father'—and every act he performs is an offense against God; and to the worms: 'You are my brothers'—and he crawls like them in mire and corruption. He is a bad tree and cannot produce good fruit; a **dunghill** and can only exhale foul odors. He is so thoroughly corrupted that it is absolutely impossible for him to produce good actions. Sin is his nature; he cannot help committing it. Man may do his best to be

³ Cf. for example, "Martin Luther: Passionate Reformer", *Christian History, Christianity Today*,

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/martin-luther.html>, October 11, 2022.

⁴ *Ibid.*

good, still his every action is unavoidably bad; he commits a sin as often as he draws his breath.⁵

The Lutheran God, moreover, is incompatibly other, in ways far beyond the proper Dionysian distinctions of greater “dissimilitude” than similitude between Creator and creature confirmed at IV Lateran.⁶ For Luther, God is so essentially and existentially removed from the corrupt creature who is man that no sharing or participation between Creator and creature is possible. Thus, the analogy of being between the Divine and human is rejected and human participation in divine nature or activity is rendered impossible.

Voluntarism becomes another foundational pillar of Luther’s philosophy-theology, where God’s volitional whim, rather than a divine or natural law and order found within his creatures, becomes the providential determinant of right and wrong. Nominalism joins Volunterism in Lutheran “metaphysics,” where universal essences do not exist, and hence neither is it feasible for an inferior being to share in the essence-nature of a superior being.

In short, one bad human self-image would lead to a metaphysical-revelational deconstruction, and the consequent elimination of a Christian’s ability to cooperate with his God. This ontological divide between God and man would tragically lead to Luther’s litany of “alones”: *solus Christus, sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura*, etc. Navarre metaphysician, Fr. Joachim Ferrer Arellano, well articulates the essential divergence between Lutheran assertions and authentic Catholic doctrine:

According to Protestantism, *the only possible mediation is that of Christ*, only one limited to his Person, according to St. Paul’s dictum: For there is one God and one

⁵ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther*, #8: “*Werke (Wittenberg Edition)*, Vol. III, p. 518.” This refers to the edition of Luther’s works, published in Wittenberg: 12 volumes in German (1539-1559) and seven volumes in Latin (1545-1558).

⁶ IV Lateran, chapter II; Denzinger-Hünermann, 806.

mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus...(1 Tim 2:5-6). Assuming that to be so, *neither Mary, nor the Church, nor the priesthood can participate in any mediatory action....*In his writing and preaching, Luther intends to place in relief the absolute sovereignty of God and the gratuitousness of grace. Problems arise when one falsely thinks that the gratuitousness of grace entails the impossibility of man's collaboration. A more heartfelt sense of the sovereignty of God, of his omnipotence, reveals quite a different solution: Grace is gratuitous and, at the same time, efficacious, that is to say, capable of regenerating man so as to cause him to become truly good and, consequently, capable of collaborating with God's grace in his own salvation.⁷

The contemporary continuation of the Lutheran rejection of the analogy of being and its consequent rejection of human participation in theandric acts is manifest, for example, by the renowned Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, who identified Marian doctrine to be the "one great heresy" of the Catholic Church from which all other Catholic heresies followed, and singles out Marian coredemption as its worst manifestation:

In the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest."⁸ "The 'mother of God' of Roman Catholic Marian dogma is quite simply the principle, type and essence of the human creature co-operating servant-like in its own redemption on the basis of

⁷ Fr. Joachim Ferrer Arellano, "Marian Coredemption in Light of Christian Philosophy" *Mary at the Foot of the Cross*, Vol II, Academy of the Immaculate, 2001, pp. 132-133.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 2*, edited by G.W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004) p.143.

prevenient grace, and to that extent the principle, type and essence of the Church.”⁹

That a contemporary Protestant theologian rejects Catholic teaching on Mary and her human cooperation in Redemption based upon the Lutheran *solus Christus* premise should be of little surprise. But when contemporary Catholic theological or even hierarchical circles present statements that explicitly or implicitly reject Our Lady’s unique role with Jesus in Redemption and/or the legitimacy of overall Christian participation in Christ’s saving work, this requires identification, correction, and an immediate theological conversion to fundamental Catholic truth.

This is why the understanding and defense of Mary Co-redemptrix goes well beyond Mariological importance. Ultimately, the rejection of human participation, with its erroneous basis in man’s radical incompatibility with God due to the former’s absolute corruption, coupled with philosophical nominalism and theological voluntarism, dismisses the very possibility, of a salvific, sacerdotal and sacramental Church. If Luther is right and human participation is wrong, then the Church becomes nothing more than a communal agent for preparing potential members to make a one-time act of faith, after which human acts lose their free and salvific meaning. It is no wonder that Luther, soon after his Catholic departure, eliminated five sacraments, reducing the sacraments to only Baptism and “the Lord’s Supper” albeit, bereft of any necessity for ministerial priesthood.¹⁰

Authentic Christian participation must, therefore, not only be safeguarded but *championed both philosophically and theologically*, not only for the proper understanding of Marian coredemption, but also as an *essential dogmatic foundation*¹¹ *which is absolutely necessary for the Church to*

⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁰ Cf. Martin Luther, *The Address to the Christian Nobility, 1520; The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520; On the Freedom of a Christian, 1520.*

¹¹ Cf. for example, the necessity of human cooperation with grace in adult baptism, Council of Trent, *On Justification*, Decree 1, Chapter 5.

uphold its divinely instituted identity and to fulfill its divinely ordained mission in human redemption.

Ferrer identifies two essential philosophical principles required for a proper understanding of participation:

1. That every perfection found in the being that participates in that perfection proceeds from the being which is the source of its participation.
2. That the perfection of the being which participates taken together with the perfection of the being which is the source of participation is not superior to the perfection of the latter considered alone or in itself. To participate does not mean *to be part of* (as quantitative or qualitative part of a whole or predicamental participation), but *to take part in its being* (metaphysically or qualitative participation in reflecting partially the full perfection of its source).¹²

Participation takes place when an inferior being sharing in the qualities of a superior being, but without the inferior being taking anything away, adding to, or competing in equality with the qualities of the superior being. Dr. John-Mark Miravalle offers the example of a college freshman attending a lecture on Astrophysics by a world expert. As a result of the lecture, the college freshman will hopefully share in a greater knowledge of Astrophysics, but has taken nothing away from the world expert, added nothing to the expert, nor is now on a level of competing equality with the expert.¹³ Moreover, participation is an immaterial, spiritual process of sharing or cooperation by the participant, which does not lead to a lessening of

¹² Ferrer, op cit., p. 136. On the metaphysics of participation, see seminal work of C. Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo San Tommaso d'Aquino* 3rd ed. (Torino: SEI, 1963).

¹³ Dr. John-Mark Miravalle, "Reasonability of Mary in the Redemption" International Marian Association Symposium, *Mary in the Redemption*, 2017, Dr. John-Mark Miravalle, Youtube Conference 444, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Btaa80p1mvc>.

the material possession by the superior being. We must further guard against any type of “pizza pie” participation mentality, whereby if one participant takes a piece, the result is a lessening for all other participants, let alone for the host.¹⁴

The New Testament teaches that all Christians are to be “partakers in the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4); to be “co-workers with God” (1 Cor. 3:9); and are called through St. Paul’s example to “make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, which is the Church”(Col. 1:24).” The very fact that Jesus Christ established a saving Church founded on humans and angels, upon whose free creaturely actions of subordinate mediation depend an infinity of souls, this should make unambiguously clear the desire of the divine Founder for human participation in his ongoing work of Redemption.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church testifies to the reality of human cooperation in God’s providential plan, not as an indication of weakness, but of God’s goodness:

God is the sovereign master of his plan. But to carry it out, he also makes use of his creatures’ co-operation. This use is not a sign of weakness, but rather a token of Almighty God’s greatness and goodness. For God grants his creatures not only their existence, but also the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, and thus co-operating in the accomplishment of his plan.¹⁵

“God created us without us, but he did not will to save us without us.”¹⁶ From St. Augustine to Vatican II, human participation in Christ’s one mediation is not an option for members of Christ’s Church. This mandate for human cooperation in the one Mediation of the Redeemer is uniquely and most profoundly manifest in the coredemptive mission of the Mother of Christ. Let us revisit the full treatment by the Council on the legitimacy of human participation in the work of the one

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 306.

¹⁶ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 169, 11, 13: PL 38, 923.

Mediator, and its unparalleled realization in the salvific office of Mary Mediatrix:

There is but one Mediator as we know from the words of the apostle, "for there is one God and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a redemption for all"(1 Tim. 2:5). The maternal duty of Mary toward men in no wise obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows His power. For all the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on men originates, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. 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. In no way does it impede, but rather does it foster the immediate union of the faithful with Christ.

Predestined from eternity by that decree of divine providence which determined the incarnation of the Word to be the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin was on this earth the virgin Mother of the Redeemer, 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, and was united with Him by compassion as He died on the Cross. In this singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior in giving back supernatural life to souls. Wherefore she is our mother in the order of grace.

This maternity of Mary in the order of grace began with the consent which she gave in faith at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, and lasts until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did

not lay aside this salvific duty, but by her manifold intercession continued to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led into the happiness of their true home. Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix. This, however, is to be so understood that it neither takes away from nor adds anything to the dignity and efficaciousness of Christ the one Mediator.

For no creature could ever be counted as equal with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer. Just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by the ministers and by the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is really communicated in different ways to His creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source.

The Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary. It knows it through unfailing experience of it and commends it to the hearts of the faithful, so that encouraged by this maternal help they may the more intimately adhere to the Mediator and Redeemer. [LG 60-62].

Note that the Latin text of *Lumen Gentium* 62 twice uses forms of the verb, *participare* (“to participate”) to denote the various modes of participation by both clergy and faithful in the one Priesthood of Christ (*participatur*), and to indicate the diverse cooperation in which creatures participate (*participatam*) in the unique mediation of the Redeemer. While the official Vatican Italian and Spanish translations use participation terminology (*partecipato*, *partecipata* and *participado*,

participada, respectively), unfortunately the Vatican English translation does not.¹⁷

In the final analysis, it is God himself who wanted a human woman to participate in the greatest divine act of human history.¹⁸ The Heavenly Father always prefers, in his perfect providence, to include his free human creatures wherever possible in his greatest activities, which includes human redemption. God does so because it leads to more glory for Him, and more sanctification for us.

We cannot deprive the Immaculate Virgin Mother of the coredemptive role assigned to her by Father of all mankind, and sublimely fulfilled by her with perfect human participation. We must avoid historical and theological aberrations founded upon false concepts of God, man, and grace that would lead anyone in the Church to do so.

Yes, participation must be defended for the validity of the Church, the sacraments, the priesthood, the intercession of the saints, the mediation of the angels, and beyond. But even if only for the Mother herself, participation merits our absolute and spirited defense. To do so is to manifest our personal filial gratitude for the heroic and efficacious co-suffering of the Mother of all peoples for each one of us and for all humanity.

¹⁷ An accurate alternative English translation from the Latin of Lumen Gentium 62 would read:

“For no creature could ever be counted as equal with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer. But just as both the ministers and the faithful **participate** in the priesthood of Christ in various ways, and as the one goodness of God is really spread out in different ways in His creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a **diverse cooperation participated** by creatures from this one source.” Special thanks to Dr. Robert Fastiggi for translations and commentary.

¹⁸ For an extended treatment of the doctrine of Marian Coredemption, see *The Role of Mary in Redemption: Document of the Theological Commission* of the International Marian Association, *Ecce Mater Tua* Journal, Vol. 1, eccematertua.com, January 1, 2018.

May the Immaculate Co-redemptrix soon be solemnly acknowledged for her heroic participation with the divine Redeemer, the New Eve with the New Adam, in human redemption—a cooperation recognized, in its essential seed form, by second century Church Doctor, St. Irenaeus, who rightly declared her the “cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race.”¹⁹

¹⁹ St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*. III, 22, 4: PG 7, 9S9 A; Harvey, 2, 123.