

Pope Francis affirms Mary as Advocate and Mediatrix of All Graces

ROBERT FASTIGGI, PHD

In a message¹ dated May 13, 2023, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima, Pope Francis sent words of encouragement to Archbishop Gian Franco Saba, the Archbishop of Sassari in Sardinia. The Holy Father's message commemorated the 80th anniversary of a 1943 vow made by Archbishop Arcangelo Mazzotti, together with the clergy and faithful of Sassari, to Our Lady of Graces (*la Madonna delle Grazie*). In this vow, the faithful of Sassari promised to have an annual feast of thanksgiving if the Madonna intervened to spare their region from the bombings of World War II. Our Lady heard these prayers, and since 1943 the faithful of Sassari have diligently observed the Feast of the Vow (*la Festa del Voto*) every May in honor of Our Lady who intervened to protect them. The Feast culminates with a procession and a Mass in the Sanctuary of the Blessed Virgin of Graces in Sassari (*il santuario Beata Vergine delle Grazie*).

The message of Pope Francis highlights the great intercessory power of the Virgin Mary for the promotion of peace. What is of special significance is the Holy Father's affirmation of two important Marian titles—Advocate and Mediatrix of All Graces. In his message, Pope Francis writes:

The war events that have sadly marked the history of the twentieth century have been a cause of enormous suffering for humanity. The Marian tradition reminds us of the devotion of the Catholic people who, in difficult moments of life, have not hesitated to entrust themselves to the Virgin Mary as "Advocate" close to Jesus (*Avvocata presso Gesù*).

¹ Paolo Frulio, Michele Spanu. "Festa Del Voto, Il Messaggio Del Santo Padre." *Arcidiocesi Di Sassari - Sito Ufficiale*, 3 June 2023, www.arcidiocesisassari.it/2023/05/28/festa-del-voto-il-messaggio-del-santo-padre/.

The Italian preposition “*presso*” can mean “close to,” “next to,” “in the presence of,” or “with.” Pope Francis reminds us of how we should turn to Mary as our Advocate during difficult times of life. Just as the Blessed Mother was an advocate for the wedding guests at Cana (John 2), so she is our Advocate close to and with Jesus, her divine Son. St. Ireneus (c. 130–200) referred to Mary as “the advocate of the Virgin Eve” (*Adversus haereses* 5, 19), and she has been invoked as Advocate by numerous Church Fathers, saints, and popes. In the great Marian hymn, the *Salve Regina*, she is hailed as “our Advocate” (*Advocata nostra*) because we recognize her as our Mother who defends us and gives us strength, comfort, and motherly care.

Pope Francis affirms another important title in his May 13, 2023 message when he writes:

One of the ancient titles with which Christians have invoked the Virgin Mary is precisely “Mediatrice of all graces” (*Uno degli antichi titoli con cui i cristiani hanno invocato la Vergine Maria è appunto “Mediatrice di tutte le grazie”*). Entrust to her your aspirations and intentions for good kept deep within your heart; may she infect you with the joy of following Christ and serving him with humble and docile style in the Church; ask her to dispel the dullness of fear and tiredness, the spiritual lukewarmness that slows down the pace towards the goal, along with the turbulences of life.

The Holy Father recognizes and affirms the Marian title, Mediatrice of all graces, as “one of the ancient titles with which Christians have invoked the Virgin Mary.” Pope Francis is correct. The recognition of Mary as the Mediatrice of grace is ancient. St. Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376–444) extolled Mary as the one through whom “every faithful soul achieves salvation” (Homily 11). The Byzantine Akathist Hymn, which dates back to the sixth century, praises Mary as “the bridge leading those on earth to heaven.” Church fathers such as St. Basil of Seleucia (fifth century), St. Andrew of Crete (c. 660–740) and St. John of Damascus (c. 657–749) referred to the Blessed Virgin as Mediatrice

(*mesitis*). In the Middle Ages, St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), spoke of Mary as “the aqueduct” of grace, and he believed that God has “willed that we have everything through Mary” (*Sermon on the Aqueduct*, 7).

Popes since the eighteenth century have affirmed Mary as the Mediatrix of all graces. In 1748, Pope Benedict XIV spoke of Mary as ‘the heavenly stream which brings to the hearts of wretched mortals all God’s gifts and graces’ (Benedict XIV’s bull, *Gloriosae Dominae* [1748]). In an 1806 message to the Servites, Pius VII (r. 1800–23) referred to the Blessed Virgin as the “Dispensatrix of all graces.” In his 1854 bull defining the Immaculate Conception, Pius IX extolled Mary as “the most powerful Mediatrix and Conciliatrix in the whole world.” In his 1891 encyclical, *Octobri mense*, Leo XIII stated “that absolutely nothing from this immense treasury of all the graces brought forth by the Lord ... is imparted to us by the will of God, except through Mary” (Denz.-H 3274). Support for Mary as Mediatrix of all graces can likewise be found in St. Pius X, Pius XI, Pius XII, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. On January 12, 1921, Benedict XV, at the request of Cardinal Mercier of Brussels, approved a Feast of Mary, Mediatrix of All Graces, for all the dioceses of Belgium and any other dioceses that would request it.

Why is Pope Francis’s affirmation of Mary as Advocate and Mediatrix of all graces significant? It is well-known that since the 1990s, the international movement known as *Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici*, has been asking the Roman Pontiff to consider dogmatically proclaiming the Blessed Virgin as Coredemptrix, Mediatrix of all grace, and Advocate for the People of God. In 2005 six cardinals—Telesphore Toppo, Luis Aponte Martínez, Varkey Vithayathil, C.S.S.R., Edouard Gagnon, P.S.S., Ricardo Vidal, and Ernesto Corripio Ahumada participated in a May 3–7, 2005 symposium held in Fatima, Portugal on “Mary Unique Cooperator in the Redemption” These cardinals then petitioned Benedict XVI to proclaim Mary as “the Spiritual Mother of All Humanity; the Coredemptrix with Jesus the Redeemer; the Mediatrix of all graces with Jesus, the one Mediator; and Advocate with Jesus Christ on behalf of the human race.”

In his May 13, 2023 message to Archbishop Gian Franco Saba, Pope Francis affirmed the validity of two of the Marian titles in these petitions for a new Marian dogma. The only Marian title he has not affirmed is that of Coredemptrix. I have argued², though, that Pope Francis has affirmed Mary's coredemptive role even though he, like his predecessor Benedict XVI, has distanced himself from the title of Coredemptrix. Pope Francis, of course, is correct that Jesus is the only divine Redeemer. We need to pray for the Holy Father to understand that the title, co-redemptrix, is an affirmation of Mary's unique cooperation and participation in the work of redemption. This title neither takes away nor adds anything to Christ, who is the one and only divine Redeemer (cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 62). We know that Pope Francis loves the Blessed Virgin Mary. Perhaps she will touch his heart to see that she is not only the Advocate close to Jesus and the Mediatrix of all graces, but she is also the New Eve who collaborated with and under the New Adam as the Co-redemptrix of the human race.

Robert Fastiggi, Ph.D., is professor of Dogmatic Theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, Michigan USA and former president (2014–2016) of the Mariological Society of America.

² Fastiggi, Robert. "Pope Francis Affirms the Essence of Marian Co-Redemption and Mediation." *Ecce Mater Tua*, vol. 4, 12 June 2021, pp. 7–10.