

Reaching Consensus on Mary's Role in Redemption: The Athanasian Solution

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Since the late 19th century, Catholic theologians have devoted much attention to the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the work of redemption. From the early 20th century, there have also been many petitions for a dogmatic definition on Mary's mediation of all graces and/or her coredemptive role with and under her divine Son. Prior to Vatican II, many bishops petitioned for such a dogmatic definition, but St. John XXIII made it clear that he did not want any new dogmatic definitions at the council. After Vatican II, some in the Church have tried to reduce the role of the Virgin Mary to that of an exemplary disciple who, like all of the faithful, is simply a member of the Church. Some Catholic theologians have likewise minimized Mary's active role in the work of redemption, and some have even resisted her status as universal spiritual Mother and Mediatrix of grace.

In light of the present confusion and controversy over Mary's coredemptive role, it might be helpful to consider the example of the Church Father, St. Athanasius (295–373), who sought a Catholic consensus on the divinity of Christ during the Arian controversy. Amidst the 4th century heretical Arian pandemic for which St. Jerome bemoaned his famous lamentation, “the whole world groaned, astonished to find itself Arian,” orthodoxy's champion, St. Athanasius, had an inspiration. By 360, the Christological battle reached a dire entrenchment. The varied positions regarding the relationship between the Son and the Father became essentially grounded upon a single term. The pro-Nicene Homoeuseans defended the term, *homoousios* (“of one substance”). The “moderate” Homoeuseans supported *homoiousios* (“of a similar substance”). The Arian Anomeans asserted *anomoios*, (“unlike” [the Father]). The Homoeans landed on the term, *homoios* (“like” [the Father]), for they maintained that since terms like “substance” and “essence” had not been explicitly revealed in Scripture, they should never be used by the Church.¹

In response to these seemingly irreconcilable Christological differences, St. Athanasius called a “peace conference” in Alexandria (362

¹ Leo Davis, S.J., *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils* (Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 1983) pp. 51-80.

A.D.). He invited representatives of the battling camps to set aside the specific terms and titles for the moment, and rather to focus instead on the *foundational doctrine behind the terms*.

Athanasius offered a series of theological propositions, for which a simple “yes” or “no” response sufficed. For example, the Nicene hero asked the assembled representatives the doctrinal meaning behind the term, one *hypostasis* in relation to Son and Father: did they mean one substance or *ousia* (essence), because the Son is of the one substance as the Father? If they answered in the affirmative (along with a negative response to Sabellian modalism), Athanasius accepted them into full communion with the Church.

After a series of such propositions, Athanasius objectively and charitably articulated what each camp theologically stood for, thus making clear that, despite the different title-camp associations that had developed, the Nicenes and most Moderates really believed the same doctrinal truth and had no essential ground for disagreement.² The Athanasian solution led to a historic unity between Nicene and Moderate bishops (and their respective theologians), a collegial union that consequently paved the way for the pro-Nicene Christological victory at the Council of Constantinople I.

Presently, similar theological entrenchments surround the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Redemption and their respective responses to the term, “Co-redemprix.” One contemporary position interprets 1 Tim. 2:5 to signify that Jesus Christ is the “one mediator” and the *only* mediator, thus excluding Mary’s subordinate mediation in Redemption.³ Another group holds that Mary was “receptive” at Calvary, but not actively participating in the Redemption accomplished by Christ.⁴ Yet another

² *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

³ While this position reflects most Protestant theologians, a few Catholic prelates and theologians have also voiced a variation of this fundamental position. This includes the notable Fr. René Laurentin, who in his final years quoted 1 Tim. 2:5 against any legitimate concept of Marian coredemption, cf. *Personal Correspondence with Author*, June 2014.

⁴ The “moderate” position of “receptive coredemption” first initiated by Heinrich Köster, *Die Magd des Herrn* (Limburg, Lahn-Verlag, 1947); cf. Manfred Hauke, *Introduction to Mariology*, trans. Richard Chonak (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021) p. 330.

group maintains that Mary actively and uniquely participated in the Redemption, from her fiat at the Annunciation, throughout her earthly life, and reached its culmination in her active participation with Jesus at Calvary.⁵

A further ecclesio-political difficulty exists regarding the “Co-redemptrix” title and its identification with an international Catholic movement seeking the solemn definition of Our Lady’s Spiritual Motherhood, inclusive of her co-redemptive role. For those not in favor of a proposed fifth Marian dogma, the public association of the Co-redemptrix title with this movement provides a further and potential doubt towards the term itself.

Perhaps the Athanasian solution could be fruitfully applied to the current controversy concerning Mary’s role in Redemption.

Let us speculatively place to the side, for the moment, the Co-redemptrix title, and *focus* rather on *what constitutes the authentic doctrinal role of Mary in historic act of Redemption*.

We are bereft of a St. Athanasius in our day. Yet we have, in his stead, something greater—an ecumenical council. How does the Second Vatican Council denote the true doctrinal role of Mary in Redemption?

A priori, the Council defends the critical principle that creatures, i.e., human beings, can in fact participate in the unique work of the one divine Redeemer and Mediator:

No creature could ever be counted along with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer; but just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by his ministers and the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is radiated in different ways among his creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifest *cooperation* which is but a sharing in this one source.⁶

⁵ This group would be identified as maintaining the traditional doctrine on Mary’s role in the Redemption, oftentimes referred to as “Marian coredemption.”

⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 62 (emphasis author’s).

Vatican II confirms that Christians indeed *must cooperate* and *share* in the one, unique, all-sustaining, and all-necessary mediation of Jesus Christ, which takes nothing away from the mediation of divine Redeemer, but rather “manifests its power.”⁷

Lumen Gentium 62 goes on to apply this principle of subordinate Christian mediation specifically to Mary:

The Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary, which it constantly experiences and recommends to the heartfelt attention of the faithful, so that encouraged by this maternal help, they may the more closely adhere to the Mediator and Redeemer.⁸

Mary’s subordinate role with Christ the Mediator and Redeemer, the Council states, is a truth which the Church “does not hesitate to profess.” Is this Vatican II teaching being implemented today by its followers? Are otherwise faithful disciples of the Council “hesitating” to profess Mary’s subordinate role with the Redeemer in contemporary theological and pastoral discourse?

Mary’s free and active cooperation in the mystery of Redemption is explicitly taught in *Lumen Gentium* 56, based here on the testimony of the Fathers of the Church:

Thus, the daughter of Adam, Mary, consenting to the word of God, became the Mother of Jesus. Committing herself wholeheartedly 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 the Redemption, by the grace of Almighty God. 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. For as St. Irenaeus says, she “being obedient, became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race.”⁹

The Council’s confirmation of St. Irenaeus’ teaching of Mary as

⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 60

⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 62.

⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 56; St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III, 22, 4: PG 7, 959 A, Harvey, 2, 123.

“cause of salvation” (*causa salutis*) for all humanity, even if secondary, instrumental, and incarnational, remains a clear Patristic and magisterial testimony to the unique Marian cooperation in Redemption.

Lumen Gentium 57 refers to the Mother of Jesus’ unique salvific role with the Redeemer for his entire earthly life: “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.”¹⁰

The Council culminates its extraordinary magisterial teaching on Marian cooperation in Redemption in *Lumen Gentium* 58, where the Council Fathers testify to Mary’s endurance of suffering in union with Christ’s redemptive sacrifice, as well her active “consent” to the immolation of her Victim-Son:

Thus the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, enduring with her only begotten Son the intensity of his suffering, associated herself with his 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 with the words: “Woman, behold thy son (Jn. 19:26-27).”¹¹

In providing post-conciliar papal commentary on the nature and efficacy of Mary’s role with Jesus at Calvary as testified by the Council, John Paul II underscores the objective historic contribution of Mary’s suffering with Christ which was supernaturally and universally fruitful for all humanity:

In her, the many and intense sufferings, were amassed in such an interconnected way, that they were not only a proof of her unshakable faith, but also a contribution to the Redemption of all...It was on Calvary that Mary’s suffering, beside the suffering of Jesus, reached an intensity which can hardly be imagined from a human

¹⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 57.

¹¹ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 58.

point of view, but which was mysteriously and supernaturally fruitful for the Redemption of the world.¹²

Uniquely prepared by the Father through her Immaculate Conception¹³ and in free, obedient consent to his plan, Mary faithfully persevered with the unparalleled suffering of her maternal heart—an immaculate heart completely united with the sacrifice of the heart and body of her Son, like a New Eve with a New Adam—for the one single goal of redeeming the world.

From this substantive teaching of the Second Vatican Council, let us, in Athanasian format and intent, derive a few essential propositions that capture the essence of the Church's teaching on the role of the Virgin Mary in the Redemption, which can in turn be considered amidst today's theological discussion:

1. Do you believe that Christians can subordinately cooperate in the unique mediation of Jesus Christ, the one and only divine Redeemer?

If yes...

2. Do you believe that Mary uniquely cooperated with and under Jesus Christ in the work of Redemption by giving birth to the Redeemer?

If yes...

3. Do you believe that Mary uniquely cooperated with and under Jesus Christ, from the event of Christ's virginal birth, throughout her life, and culminating with her suffering with Jesus at Calvary for the redemption of the world?

If you can faithfully answer in the affirmative to these 3 questions, then you believe, in essence, what the Church positively teaches on Mary's unique cooperation in Redemption. For the greater part of the last 100 years, this position has been referred to as the doctrine of Marian coredemption.

¹² John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Salvifici Doloris*, n. 25.

¹³ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 53.

As German Mariologist, Fr. Manfred Hauke states: “Coredemption is nothing other than cooperation with the Redemption.”¹⁴ Fr. Gabriele Roschini, founder of the *Marianum* Theological Faculty in Rome and one of the 20th Century’s most renowned Mariologists, denotes what specifically constitutes Marian “cooperation” in Redemption:

To “cooperate” means to unite one’s own action to that of another, so as to produce, with him, a common work which is the result of two causes, distinct in principle, but associated in their activity and in effect, the end of their action. The work in which the Virgin united her action to that of Christ is the Redemption of the human race.¹⁵

The Belgian theologian Fr. Jean Galot, S.J. (1919–2008)—who was a consultant to the Holy See —articulates the legitimacy of Christian coredemption doctrine as a universal Christian call based on St. Paul’s teaching on participation in Christ (as published in the semi-official *La Civiltà Cattolica*):

The coredemption assumes a unique form in Mary, by virtue of her role as mother. Nevertheless, we must speak of coredemption in a much broader context in order to include all who are called to unite themselves to the work of Redemption. In this context, all are destined to live as “co-redeemers,” and the Church herself is a co-redemptrix. In this regard we cannot forget the affirmations of Paul in our participation in the Redemptive path of Christ: in baptism, we are “buried with Christ” (Rom. 6:4); in faith we are already “raised up with” him (Col. 2:13;3:1); “God made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:5-6).” This participation results from the sovereign action of the Father, but it implies equally on our part a personal involvement. Having been made participants in the new

¹⁴ Manfred Hauke, *Introduction to Mariology*, p. 329.

¹⁵ Gabriele Roschini, *Maria Santissima Nella Storia Della Salvezza*, Isola Del Liri, Pisani, 1969, Vol 2, p. 120; Hauke, *Introduction to Mariology*, p. 329.

life of Christ, we are capable of cooperating in the work of salvation. St. Paul has a consciousness of his declaring: “We are God’s co-workers (1 Cor. 3:9).”¹⁶

It is indeed remarkable, and rarely noted, how comfortable and recurrent St. Paul is with the concept of “co-workers” (*synergoi*) as applied to Christian ministry, a term he uses at least five times in five different epistles¹⁷, including “co-workers in the Kingdom of God” (Col. 4:11); and “co-workers in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 16:3). He is in good New Testament company: St. John likewise refers to fellow Christians as “co-workers in the Truth” (3 John 1:8).

When Pope Pius XI made the first public papal reference to Mary as “Co-redemptrix” in a 1933 allocution, his explanation of the Co-redemptrix title focused on two essential elements: 1) giving birth to the Redeemer; and 2) Mary’s suffering with Jesus in the sorrow and sacrifice which led to the Redemption of humanity:

By necessity, the Redeemer could not but associate (*non poteva, per necessità di cose, non associare*) his Mother in his work. For this reason, we invoke her under the title of Co-redemptrix. She gave us the Savior, she accompanied him in the work of Redemption as far as the cross itself, sharing with him the sorrows of the agony and of the death in which Jesus consummated the Redemption of all mankind. And truly under the Cross, in the final moments of his life, the Redeemer proclaimed her our mother and the universal mother.¹⁸

Entirely human yet entirely unique due to her unparalleled fullness of grace, Mary’s free and active cooperation in giving flesh to the Redeemer, and her continuous free and active cooperation with Jesus in the mission of Redemption, culminating in her sorrow united with his sacrifice

¹⁶ Jean Galot, S.J., “Maria Corredentrice: Controversie e problemi dottrinali”, *La Civiltà Cattolica* 145 (1994, quaderno 3459-3460) p. 215 (translation, Msgr. Arthur Calkins).

¹⁷ Cf. 1 Cor. 3:9; Romans 16:3; 2 Cor. 1:24; Col. 4:11; Philemon 1:24.

¹⁸ Pius XI, *Allocution to a group of pilgrims from Vicenza, November 30, 1933*, *Insegnamenti Pontifici* – 7. *Maria SS.*, 2a edizione aggiornata, Edizioni Paoline, Roma 1964, p. 242; *L’Osservatore Romano*, December 1, 1933, p. 1.

at Calvary—these two biblical events, made entirely unique — constitute the essence of Marian coredemption. It is precisely these two unique and inseparable aspects of the life of the Immaculate Mother, as confirmed by Pius XI, *which have always traditionally and faithfully been denoted and embodied in the single Marian title, Co-redemptrix, the doctrinal basis of which is evidenced in the teachings of Vatican II.*

Certainly, there are other related questions regarding Marian coredemption, for example, the question of Mary’s merit in relation to that of Christ. But even here, theological consensus can be reached through, for example, Pius X’s “*de congruo*” designation of Marian merit in the order of fittingness.¹⁹ It is of paramount importance to recall that *not every related question to a given doctrine must be settled in order to confirm that doctrine as an essential Christian truth revealed by God.* The *debitum peccati* issue in relation to the Immaculate Conception dogma, and the “death” of Mary issue in relation to the Assumption dogma, prove this true.

In the final analysis, titles like Co-redemptrix truly serve the mystery which they embody, as do other ecclesial titles such as Mother of God, Transubstantiation, and Papal Infallibility. They only lead to confusion when the doctrine they denote experiences a lack of faith. These titles fulfill a dynamic purpose in the proper safeguarding and understanding of the saving doctrines of faith behind them. Titles defend truth.

As 4th century Christological battles raged on, the feuding parties were shocked with a dramatic and unforeseen event: the newly elected Emperor, Julian, now sought to return the newly Christianized Roman Empire to former pagan, worldly ways. It was neither charity nor justice that led Julian the Apostate to return the exiled Athanasius to Alexandria. It was rather Julian’s notion—scandalous but at times true—that “no wild beasts were so hostile to men than were the Christians to one another.”²⁰

Catholic theologians should strive for greater unity rather than greater hostility. Regarding Mary’s coredemptive role and her mediation of grace, there is more consensus than many realize. For example, the Roman

¹⁹ Pius X, Encyclical, *Ad diem illum*, 1904.

²⁰ Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, p. 101.

Mariologist, Fr. Salvatore Perrella, SM, has affirmed the essential link between Marian coredemption and mediation in her spiritual maternity:

Coredeemption (historical-messianic cooperation) and Mediation (celestial cooperation) are always relative and successive one to the other, and together they express the two significant and supportive moments of Mary's spiritual maternity towards humanity, namely—to express it in the classical language—the *action of the acquisition of Grace* and that of its *application* to individual men and women redeemed by Christ.²¹

Pope Francis has also affirmed the unique role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the work of redemption. In his January 1, 2020 homily for the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, he states that “there is no salvation without the woman”:

The first day of the year, we celebrate this nuptial union between God and mankind, inaugurated in the womb of a woman. In God, there will forever be our humanity and Mary will forever be the Mother of God. She is both woman and mother: this is what is essential. From her, a woman, salvation came forth and thus there is no salvation without the woman. In her, God was united to us, and if we want to unite ourselves to him, we must take the same path: through Mary, woman and mother.²²

In his September 15, 2021 homily for the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, Pope Francis referred to Mary as “the Mother of Compassion” who “shared in her Son's mission of salvation, even to the foot of the Cross.” This is the essential doctrine of Marian coredemption.²³

²¹ Salvatore M. Perrella, “La Controversa Questione delle ‘Apparizioni di Amsterdam’ e il Tema della Mediazione e della Reiterata Richiesta del V Dogma Mariano,” *Marianum* 83 (2021) 321

²² Pope Francis, homily, January 1, 2020:

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200101_omelia-madredidio-pace.html (accessed January 28, 2022).

²³ Pope Francis, homily, September 15, 2021:

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20210915-omelia-sastin.html> (accessed January 28, 2022).

Pope Francis has likewise spoken of Our Lady's unique role as the bridge between us and God, which is another way of affirming her role as Mediatrix. In his January 1, 2021 homily for the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, the Holy Father said:

The heart of the Lord began to beat within Mary; the God of life drew oxygen from her. Ever since then, Mary has united us to God because in her God bound himself to our flesh, and he has never left it. Saint Francis loved to say that Mary “made the Lord of Majesty our brother” (Saint Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior*, 9, 3). She is not only the bridge joining us to God; she is more. She is the road that God travelled in order to reach us, and the road that we must travel in order to reach him. Through Mary, we encounter God the way he wants us to: in tender love, in intimacy, in the flesh.²⁴

When we consider the teachings of Vatican II and these statements of Pope Francis, there are signs of a fundamental consensus on Mary's unique role in redemption. At our present historical moment, when the Church and the world so gravely need the full and powerful intercession of Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, let us seek the greatest unity of faith and charity possible within magisterial and theological circles regarding Our Lady's unparalleled role in our Redemption and her consequent role as the Spiritual Mother of all people. We may have more formidable worldly opponents to face than each other.

²⁴ Pope Francis, homily, January 1, 2021: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210101_omelia-madredidio-pace.html (accessed January 28, 2022).