

Pope Francis, the Humility of Mary, and the role of “Co-Redemptrix”²³

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As is well known, Pope Francis has a deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. One of the qualities of Mary that he repeatedly emphasizes is her humility. In his homily on Friday, April 3, 2020, the Holy Father spoke about Our Lady of Sorrows, and he noted the importance of meditating on the seven sorrows of Mary. In a special way, he pointed to Our Lady’s humility: “The Madonna never asked anything for herself, never. Yes, for others: we think of Cana when she goes to speak to Jesus. She never said: “I am the Mother, look at me: I will be the Queen Mother.” She never said it. She doesn’t ask something of importance for herself in the apostolic college. She only accepts being Mother. She accompanied Jesus as a disciple because the Gospel shows that she followed Jesus: with friends, with pious women, she followed Jesus, she listened to Jesus.”

These words of Pope Francis harmonized providentially with the reflections of the Preacher of the Papal Household, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap., who in his fourth and final Lenten Sermon—given also on April 3—applied the words of St. Paul in Phil 1:5–11 to the Virgin Mary:

Mary, though she was the Mother of God, did not count her privilege as something to hold on to, but emptied herself, calling herself a servant, and living in the likeness of all other women. She humbled herself and stayed hidden, obedient to God, till the death of her Son, and a death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted her and bestowed on her the name, which, after Jesus, is above every name, that at the name of Mary every head should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Mary is the Mother of the Lord to the glory of God the Father. Amen!

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The humility of Mary is rooted in Scripture. In Mary's great prayer, the Magnificat, she recognizes that everything she possesses is a gift from God: "the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." In *Canto* 33 of the *Paradiso*, Dante speaks of Mary as "humble and more exalted than any creature." The humble status of the Blessed Virgin as a creature is testified to by St. Louis de Montfort (1673–1716) who confesses "that Mary, being a mere creature fashioned by the hands of God is, compared to his infinite majesty, less than an atom, or rather is simply nothing since He alone can say: 'I am who am.'"²⁴

In his April 3 homily, Pope Francis also points out that that Mary never sought titles for herself. The most important title for the Blessed Virgin is "Mother," which she received from Jesus himself: "To honor the Madonna is to say: "This is my Mother" because she is the Mother. And this is the title she received from Jesus, precisely there, in the moment of the Cross (cf. Jn 19:26–27). To your children you are Mother. He didn't make her Prime Minister or give her titles of "functionality." Only "Mother." And then the Acts of the Apostles show us her in prayer with the Apostles as Mother."

For Pope Francis, Mary, above all else, is "Mother." She is the Mother of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, and the spiritual Mother of all the faithful. The Holy Father goes on to say that Mary never wished to take any title from her Son, who is the one Redeemer:

The Madonna did not wish to take any title from Jesus; she received the gift of being his Mother and the duty to accompany us as Mother, to be our Mother. She did not ask for herself to be a quasi-redemptrix or a co-redemptrix: no. The Redeemer is only one and this title does not duplicate itself. She is only disciple and Mother. And thus, as Mother we must think of her, we must seek her, we must pray to her. She is the Mother; in the Mother Church. In the maternity of the Madonna we see the maternity of the Church who receives all, the good and the bad: all.

Pope Francis is absolutely correct. The Blessed Mother never asked to be a quasi-redemptrix or a co-redemptrix. He's also correct that in the strict, univocal sense the title Redeemer cannot be duplicated. Jesus is

²⁴ St. Louis de Montfort, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, 14.

the divine Redeemer, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). In an analogical sense, however, human beings can participate in the work of redemption by uniting their sufferings to that of Christ. This is why Pope Benedict XVI in speaking to the sick at Fatima on May 13, 2010 invited them to be “redeemers in the Redeemer.”

Jesus is the one Redeemer and also the one Mediator between God and the human race (1 Tim 2:5). Vatican II, however, teaches that “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.”²⁵ The title co-redemptrix when applied to Mary must never take anything away from Jesus the one divine Redeemer of the human race. Jesus is the God-man, and Mary is a human creature. Mary’s role in the work of redemption must always be understood as secondary, subordinate, and totally dependent on her divine Son. As St. Louis de Montfort explains, God “never had and does not now have any absolute need of the Blessed Virgin for the accomplishment of his will and the manifestation of his glory.”²⁶ The saving work of Jesus was all-sufficient, but God willed Mary’s collaboration in the redemption in a unique and singular way.

The title co-redemptrix, which has been used by theologians, saints, and mystics since the 15th century, must be understood as Mary’s unique collaboration with and under her divine Son, the Redeemer of the human race. The prefix, “co,” comes from the Latin *cum* (with) so the Blessed Virgin, as the co-redemptrix, collaborates in the work of redemption but only with Christ, the Redeemer, whose death on the Cross is the meritorious cause of our salvation.²⁷

Fr. Salvatore Maria Perrella, O.S.M., professor of dogmatics and Mariology at the Theological Faculty Marianum in Rome, points out that “the expression ... co-redemptrix, is not wrong in itself but taken in isolation it could convey the idea of the necessity of Mary being the associate of the Redeemer.”²⁸ Fr. Perrella is correct. As St. Louis de Montfort says, God has no absolute need of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary’s co-redemptive role, like her role as Mediatrix of grace, flows from the will of God, who willed to associate her in the work of redemption. The Blessed Virgin was “predestined from eternity to be the Mother of

²⁵ *Lumen gentium*, 62.

²⁶ *True Devotion*, 14.

²⁷ Cf. Council of Trent, D-H, 1529.

²⁸ Interview with Manuela Petrini, *In Terris*, Aug. 15, 2019.

God by that decree of divine providence which determined the Incarnation of the Word.”²⁹

Pope John Paul II believed we can all be “co-redeemers of humanity.”³⁰ Mary’s co-redemptive role, however, is altogether unique. As the Mother of the Word Incarnate, she said yes on behalf of all human nature to be the Mother of the Redeemer.³¹ She cared for the Savior as his Mother and accompanied Him all the way to Calvary, “where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, grieving exceedingly with her only begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart with His sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of the Victim which she herself had brought forth.”³² The great Mariologist, Fr. René Laurentin (1917–2017), notes that Mary “cooperated with the unique Redemption on a supreme level and with a unique intimacy.”³³

It was not until the 20th century that the Magisterium gave official approval to the title co-redemptrix. During the pontificate of Pius X, the Holy See three times gave approval to prayers invoking Mary as co-redemptrix; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*. Pius XI was the first pope to publicly use the title: once on Nov. 30, 1933; again, on March 23, 1934; and once again on April 28, 1935. John Paul II publicly used the title Co-redemptrix at least six times: General Audience, Dec. 10, 1980; General Audience, Sept. 8, 1982; Angelus Address, Nov. 4, 1984; Discourse at World Youth Day, March 31, 1985; Address to the Sick, March 24, 1990; Discourse of Oct. 6, 1991. Moreover, in a homily in Guayaquil, Ecuador on Jan. 31, 1985, John Paul II spoke of the “co-redemptive role of Mary (*el papel corredentor de María*), which can be translated as “the role of Mary as co-redemptrix.”

These papal uses of co-redemptrix abide by the principle set forth by Pope Francis in his April 3, 2020 homily. They never take anything away from Jesus Christ, the one Redeemer and they don’t correspond to any title asked for by the Blessed Virgin herself. They do, however, recognize like Fr. Laurentin that Mary’s cooperation with the work of redemption is “on a supreme level and with a unique intimacy.” The

²⁹ *LG*, 61.

³⁰ John Paul II, Discourse, April 5, 1981.

³¹ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 30, a. 1.

³² *LG*, 58.

³³ *Traité sur la Vierge Marie, édition sixième Court traité sur la Vierge Marie, sixième édition* - Paris: François-Xavier de Guibert, 2009.

Blessed Virgin cooperated with the work of redemption precisely as Mother, and she did so in perfect humility and obedience to the will of God.

Pope Francis is correct to emphasize the humility of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It's absolutely true that Mary never requested any titles or privileges for herself. She never asked to be called the Mother of God or the Queen of Heaven, but the Church honors her with these titles in her teaching and in her prayers. Such titles are found in the Litany of Loreto, which is connected to the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Loreto, approved by Pope Francis in 2019 as an optional memorial for December 10 in the General Roman Calendar. The Church honors Mary with many titles out of love and devotion. These titles are also an expression of gratitude to God who humbled Himself to share our humanity by becoming incarnate of the Virgin Mary. Not only should we thank God for the gift of his Mother, but we should also thank Mary herself for saying yes and becoming the Mother of Christ, our Redeemer. In his April 3 homily, Pope Francis invites us all to pause to thank our Mother Mary:

Today we do well to pause a little and think of the suffering and the sorrows of the Madonna. She is our Mother. And how she brought herself there, how she brought good there, with strength, with weeping; it wasn't a feigned weeping; it was really a heart destroyed with sorrow. We do well to pause a little and say to the Madonna: "Thank you for accepting to be Mother when the Angel announced it to you and thank you for accepting to be Mother when Jesus spoke it to you."

The Virgin Mary is the perfect model of humility. In the words of Dante, she is "humble and exalted more than any creature." We need to thank Pope Francis for reminding us that Mary never sought any titles for herself. It is only because God chose to associate her with his work of redemption that the Blessed Virgin has been honored with many titles like Queen of Heaven and co-redemptrix. These titles, though, do not come from her but from the recognition of her unique and intimate association with God's plan of salvation. The Blessed Mother knows that she owes everything to God. This is why she exclaims: "the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name."