

## **Observations on Pope Francis' "March 24, 2021" Comments**

ROBERT FASTIGGI

Vatican II teaches that we must adhere to ordinary teachings of the Roman Pontiff according to his manifest mind and will, which may be known—among other indications—“from his manner of speaking” (*Lumen Gentium*, 25). In general audiences, discourses, and homilies, popes sometimes express personal opinions without intending to impose their views on the faithful.

On March 24, the day before the Solemnity of the Annunciation, Pope Francis dedicated his Wednesday General Audience to prayer in communion with Mary. In his audience, the Holy Father reminds us that Christian prayer is directed to God “through Christ, with Christ and in Christ.” Referring to the Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] no. 2674, he points out that “Christ is the Mediator; Christ is the bridge that we cross to turn to the Father.” He then states that Christ is the only Redeemer: there are no co-redeemers with Christ.”

As with any text, including Sacred Scripture, we must understand what is said within a context, taking into account “the manner of speaking” and the intention of the author. When the Holy Father says there are no co-redeemers with Christ, he is highlighting Christ’s unique status as the God-man, the one Mediator between God and the human race (1 Tim 2:5). His intention is made clear when he cites Acts 4:12: “there is no other name by which we can be saved.” He is certainly not denying the teaching of Vatican II 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” (*Lumen Gentium*, 62). It was in this sense that St. John Paul II, when speaking to the sick at the Fatebenefratelli Hospital on April 5, 1981, invited them to unite their sufferings to the passion of Christ as “co-redeemers of humanity” (*corredentori dell’umanità*). Along the same lines, Pope Benedict XVI, when blessing the sick at Fatima on May 13, 2010, reminded them that if their sufferings are united to Christ they can “become—according to his design—a means of redemption for the whole world.” He then told them: “You will be redeemers with the Redeemer, just as you are sons in the Son.”

When Pope Francis tells us, in his General Audience of March 24, that the Madonna covers us “as a Mother, not as a goddess, not as a co-redeemer,” he is emphasizing Mary’s maternal role, which is that of the *Odigitria*, “the one who ‘shows the way’ ... to her Son and in connection with Him” (see

CCC, 2674). The Holy Father is absolutely correct that Mary is not a goddess. If the Marian title, “co-redemptrix,” makes her into a goddess, we would need to reject it as a blasphemy. As is well-known, though, the title “co-redemptrix,” when properly used, never suggests that Mary is divine or equivalent to Christ as redeemer. In a similar way, Mary’s role as “co-redemptrix” never challenges the unique role of Christ, the God-man, who is the divine Redeemer of the human race. Following the logic of Vatican II, we must understand Mary’s co-redemptive role in such a way “that it neither takes away nor adds anything to the dignity and efficaciousness of Christ the one Mediator” (*Lumen Gentium*, 62).

The Marian title “co-redemptrix,” however, was never meant to take away from Christ, the one divine Redeemer. The prefix, “co,” comes from Latin *cum*, which means “with.” This means that Mary, as the co-redemptrix, contributes to the work of redemption with Christ, the Redeemer, in a way that is secondary, subordinate, and dependent—but still essential according to God’s chosen plan of redemption.

St. Thomas Aquinas taught that God could have chosen to redeem the human race in many ways because of his omnipotence (*Summa theologiae*, III, q. 1, a.2). God, though, freely chose to redeem us by becoming incarnate in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This, according to St. Thomas, was the most fitting or appropriate means of redemption for many reasons (see *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 1, a.2). God, however, did not wish to become human without the free assent of one representing the human race, and this representative was Mary, the New Eve, Just as the first Eve contributed to the fall of the human race, Mary, the New Eve, contributed to the redemption of the human race. Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical, *Octobri mense*: (Sept. 22, 1891), expressed this truth in vivid terms:

The Eternal Son of God, about to take upon Him our nature for the saving and ennobling of man, and about to consummate thus a mystical union ( *mysticum ... conubium*) between Himself and all mankind, did not accomplish His design without adding there the free consent of the elect Mother, who represented in some sort all human kind, according to the illustrious and just opinion of St. Thomas, who says that the Annunciation was effected with the consent of the Virgin standing in the place of humanity (*D-H 3274*; cf. *ST* q. 30 a. 1).

The actual text of St. Thomas Aquinas uses the term “quoddam spirituale matrimonium” to express the union between the Son of God and human nature, but the reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Leo XIII’s encyclical is directly from the text of the *Summa theologiae*: “Through the Annunciation the consent of the Virgin, in the place of all human nature (*loco totius humanae naturae*) was awaited.” Vatican II likewise affirmed Mary’s unique collaboration in the work of redemption, especially in *Lumen Gentium*, 56, where, citing St. Irenaeus, we are told that Mary “being obedient, became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race.”

In various writings, Pope Francis has also affirmed Mary’s role in the work of redemption. In his general audience of October 23, 2013, he notes that every action of the Blessed Virgin “was carried out in perfect union with Jesus. This union finds its culmination on Calvary: here Mary is united to the Son in the martyrdom of her heart and in the offering of his life to the Father for the salvation of humanity. Our Lady shared in the pain of the Son and accepted with him the will of the Father, in that obedience that bears fruit, that grants the true victory over evil and death.” The Holy Father also points out that “Mary’s ‘yes’, already perfect from the start, grew until the hour of the Cross. There her motherhood opened to embrace every one of us, our lives, so as to guide us to her Son.” Here we see Pope Francis affirming not only Mary’s fruitful participation in Christ’s suffering and sacrifice on the Cross but also her universal spiritual motherhood that embraces every one of us. . In his homily of January 1, 2020, Pope Francis stated: “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 a woman.”

Unfortunately, some have reacted to Pope Francis’s March 24 General Audience without proper awareness of the use of the Marian title, *co-redemptrix*, by the Magisterium. For example, the article in *Crux*, states that the title is absent from papal teaching, with the exception of Pope Leo XIII’s 1894 encyclical, *Iucunda Semper Expectatione*. The title, *co-redemptrix*,” however does not appear in the Latin text of this encyclical of Leo XIII. It appears, though, in one English translation as a means of rendering the phrase, “*in quo partes quae fuerunt Virginis ad salutem hominum procurandam.*”

There are, though, magisterial texts, that do use the Marian title, co-redemptrix. During the pontificate of Pius X, the Holy See three times gave approval to prayers invoking Mary as co-redemptrix (cf. *Acta Sanctae Sedis* [ASS] 41 [1908], p. 409; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [AAS] 5 [1913], p. 364; AAS 6 [1914], pp. 108–109). Pius XI was the first pope to publicly use the title: once on November 30, 1933 (*Discorsi di Pio XI*, 2, p. 1013); again on March 23, 1934 (*L'Osservatore Romano* [OR] 25 March 1934, p. 1); and once again on April 28, 1935 (OR 29–30 April 1935 p. 1). John Paul II publicly used the title, Co-redemptrix, at least six times: General Audience, 10 December 1980 (*Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo* [Inseg] II, III/2 [1980], p. 1646); General Audience 8 September 1982 (Inseg V/3 [1982], p. 404); Angelus Address 4 November, 1984 (Inseg VII/2 [1984], p. 1151); Discourse at World Youth Day 31 March 1985 (Inseg VIII/1 [1985], p. 889–890); Address to the Sick 24 March, 1990 (Inseg XIII/1 [1990], p. 743); Discourse of 6 October, 1991 (Inseg XIV/2 [1991], p. 756). Moreover, in a homily in Guayaquil, Ecuador on January 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” (Inseg VIII [1985], p. 319).

Some people believe we should avoid the title, co-redemptrix, because Vatican II did not use the term. It is true that Vatican II decided to omit the term from what would become chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium*. The term, however was not rejected because it was false. In the *praenotanda* or explanatory note that accompanied the first Marian schema of 1962, we are told that: “Certain terms and expressions used by Roman Pontiffs have been omitted, which, although most true in themselves (in se verissima), may be difficult for the separated brethren (as in the case of the Protestants) to understand. Among such words the following may be enumerated: ‘Coredemptrix of the human race’ [St. Pius X, Pius XI]; ‘Reparatrix of the whole world’ [Leo XIII] ... etc.” (*Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II, Volumen I, Periodus Prima, Pars IV* [Vatican City, 1971], p. 99).

The title co-redemptrix, however, appears in two footnotes of the 1962 schema. Footnote 11 states that ‘the compassion of Mary has a connection with the redemption in such a way that she may rightly be called co-redemptrix’ (*Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II, Volumen I, Periodus Prima, Pars IV, 1971: 104*). Footnote 16 provides a lengthy explanation of the meaning of terms such as *Meditatrix* and *Coredemptrix* as applied to Mary.

While Vatican II chose not to use the term, Coredemptrix,, a number of theologians, including Jean Galot, S.J and Georges Cottier, O.P. (the former theologian of the papal household), believe Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* affirms the doctrine of Mary as Coredemptrix without using the term (cf. Galot in *La Civiltà Cattolica* [1994] III: 236-237 and Cottier, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 4, 2002).

Many saints and spiritual writers have spoken of Mary as “co-redemptrix,” especially since the sixteenth century (see Mark Miravalle, “With Jesus” *The Story of Mary Co-Redemptrix*, Queenship Publishing, 2003). I don't believe we should see Pope Francis cancelling out all these references to Mary as “co-redemptrix” in his March 24 General Audience. In fact, he speaks of many “beautiful things” said about Mary by the Church and saints, but these “subtract nothing from Christ's sole Redemption.” Understood properly, what the Holy Father says is correct. The beautiful things said about Mary—including recognizing her as ‘co-redemptrix—subtract nothing from Christ as the only divine Redeemer. He is the God-man, the Redeemer of the human race, He, though, chose to redeem us with our cooperation and in a special way through the cooperation of his Mother, the New Eve. The Marian title “co-redemptrix” can never mean placing Mary on equal footing with Christ, the Redeemer, and it certainly can never make her into a goddess. I think it's best to understand the March 24th General Audience of Pope Francis as a warning against these false understandings of Mary as co-redemptrix.

*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.*