

The Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary

MICHAEL SCHERSCHLIGT, S.T.D.

Introduction

Pope St. Paul VI in 1974 wrote that:

It is sometimes said that many spiritual writings today do not sufficiently reflect the whole doctrine concerning the Holy Spirit. It is the task of specialists to verify and weigh the truth of this assertion, but it is our task to exhort everyone, especially those in the pastoral ministry and also theologians, to meditate more deeply on the working of the Holy Spirit in the history of salvation, and to ensure that Christian spiritual writings give due prominence to His life-giving action. Such a study will bring out in particular the hidden relationship between the Spirit of God and the Virgin of Nazareth and show the influence they exert on the Church.¹

Paul VI was pointing out that the pneumatological dimension of how the Blessed Virgin Mary mediates grace has not been sufficiently presented. Therefore, in this article I will suggest one way to understand the mediation of the Holy Spirit and then clarify the “hidden relationship” between the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Virgin Mary in order to demonstrate her essential role in the economy of salvation.

What is Mediation? St. Thomas explained that a mediator carries out two functions: a mediator unites or reconciles separated parties; and a mediator distributes or communicates to one that which belongs to the other.²

¹ Pope St. Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, 1974, a. 27.

² ST. III, q. 26, a. 2

Mediation in the Trinity

To understand the mediation of the Holy Spirit we must begin with the Trinity. The Father is the source and origin of the whole divinity. He is the giver. And he has only one gift to give, that of his divine being. The Father generates the Son, giving divine being to him. The Son is begotten from the Father, receiving divinity from the Father and giving divinity to the Holy Spirit. In this sense the Son is both a receiver and giver of divinity. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son.³ The Spirit receives divinity from both the Father and the Son. We can say the Holy Spirit is a pure capacity to receive divine being. In this way each person in the Trinity acts as a mediator. The Father acts as a mediator by giving; the Son by receiving and by giving; and the Holy Spirit acts as a mediator by receiving the gift of the Father and the Son, uniting the Father and the Son as the bond of love in person.⁴ For this reason Cardinal Ratzinger called the Holy Spirit the “absolute mediator.”⁵

Mediation in the World

As we move from the immanent to the economic Trinity, Scripture reveals and the Church teaches that the Son and the Spirit have a joint mission in the world, in which the two are distinct but inseparable.⁶ St. Irenaeus described this poetically saying God does everything in the world with his own hands, that is, the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁷ The Catechism states that “When the Father sends his

³ Cf. John 15:26; CCC 246-248

⁴ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *S.Th* 1, Q 39, a. 8, cons 2; Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, Herder Book Co. 1951, p. 183.

⁵ “Satan is the absolute destroyer, undermining every relationship: man’s relationship with himself and man’s relationship to one another. Thus, he is the exact opposite of the Holy Spirit, who is the absolute “mediator” who guarantees the relationships in which all the others are rooted and whence they spring: the trinitarian relationship by which the Father and Son are One, one God in the unity of the Spirit.” Messori, Vittorio, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, Ignatius Press, 1985, p. 151.

⁶ CCC 743.

⁷ St. Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching 11* (cited in CCC 704).

Word he always sends his Breath.”⁸ And John Paul II called it a “Double Rhythm” of the Son and Spirit.⁹ This is a vital point, from the beginning to the end of time, whenever God sends his Son, he always sends his Spirit: their mission is conjoined and inseparable.¹⁰

The Mission of the Son

The mission of the Son in the world is manifest in Jesus and it reflects his procession in eternity. Jesus receives from the Father and he gives his life to save the world. He stated this saying, “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hands” and “The Son came to give his life as a ransom for many.”¹¹

There are three key aspects of his mission. The Son reveals the Father,¹² he expresses the Father,¹³ and he gives his life to save the world.¹⁴ Therefore, the Son mediates, he unites God and man by receiving from the Father and giving his life for the world.

The Mission of the Spirit

Like the Son, there are three key aspects to the mission of the Spirit, each of which count as mediation, since every aspect of the Spirit’s mission in the World, like that of the Son, is geared towards uniting humanity with God.

First, the Holy Spirit Reveals the Son. Again, at the Last Supper Jesus tells the disciples the Spirit of Truth will bear witness to him¹⁵ and that the Spirit will take what belongs to the Son and declare it to the

⁸ CCC 689.

⁹ DeV 63.

¹⁰ CCC 743.

¹¹ John 3:35; Mark 10:45

¹² John 17:25-26

¹³ John 14:9

¹⁴ For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Mark 10:45

¹⁵ John 15:26

world.¹⁶ Moreover, both Tradition and the Magisterium teach that it is precisely the mission of the Spirit to reveal to men who Jesus is.

Second, the Holy Spirit Disposes us to welcome or to receive the Son.¹⁷ As the Spirit receives the Son in the Trinity, in a similar way, the Spirit dwells in Mary at her Immaculate Conception, disposing her, that is, giving her the capacity to receive the Son at the Annunciation. Likewise, the Spirit dwells in the souls of believers disposing or giving them the capacity to receive the Son at Pentecost and in Baptism.¹⁸

Third, the Holy Spirit Mediates in a Maternal Way. Jesus himself testifies that the Christian “must be born of water and the Spirit.”¹⁹ Jesus is speaking of the divine generation in which we become children of God through Baptism. The parallelism between a divine generation and a human procreative one is not exact. However, one is born from both a father and a mother, and since the Holy Spirit is not God the Father, the Spirit must take the role of the feminine parent.

St. Paul in Romans says, “The spirit you received...is the spirit of adoption, and it makes us cry out, 'Abba, Father!’”²⁰ Again, adoption is the work of a Father and a mother. God is our Father. Christ is the Son in whom we share the life of “sons” of the Father. The Spirit then must take the role of the mother.

Paul, in I Corinthians 12, ascribes to the Holy Spirit the mission to form Christ in Christians and so build up the Body of Christ. This too is a maternal mission. Forming and cultivating the body, mind and soul of those who are young are precisely (though not exclusively) what mothers do in pregnancy and the rearing of a child.

¹⁶ John 16:14; see also CCC 152

¹⁷ CCC 687.

¹⁸ Pope Leo XIII *Divinum Illud Munus* 9-10.

¹⁹ John 3:5-16

²⁰ Romans 8:16

Yves Congar, toward the end of his three-volume work on the Holy Spirit in Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium describes the Holy Spirit as the repository of God's maternal and feminine characteristics:

The part played in our upbringing by the Holy Spirit is that of mother – a mother who enables us to know our Father, God, and our brother, Jesus. The Spirit also enables us to invoke God as our Father and he reveals to us Jesus our Lord, introducing us gradually to his inheritance of grace and truth. Finally, the Spirit teaches us how to practice the virtues and how to use the gifts of a son of God by grace. All this is part of a mother's functions...The Spirit...completes the contribution made by the Word by making it interior and present here and now in the course of time. The Spirit does this by an intimate educative activity and a kind of impregnation and, so that the seal may be set on this work, the Spirit's maternal and feminine part is combined with the function of the Father and that of the Son.²¹

Let me make a point that should be obvious, but unfortunately may not be, the Holy Spirit is not a woman. God is pure spirit - neither man nor woman. God transcends the human distinctions between the sexes.²² However, we can attribute specific characteristics to the mission of the Son and the Spirit. The Son became man and the Bridegroom. Likewise, we can attribute certain feminine and maternal characteristics to the mission of the Holy Spirit.

What is the Relationship of the Holy Spirit and Mary?

The Catechism, especially in paragraphs 721-726, teaches that the Holy Spirit carries out the three aspects of His mediation through Mary. First, the Holy Spirit reveals the Son through Mary. The

²¹ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Vol. 3, p. 161-162.

²² Cf. CCC 239; 370.

Catechism states: “Theophanies (manifestations of God) light up the way in salvation history. God’s Word allowed himself to be seen and heard in these theophanies, in which the cloud of the Holy Spirit both revealed and concealed him in its shadow.”²³ An example of this would be the Burning Bush in the Exodus. Then in paragraph 724 the Catechism says, “In Mary, the Holy Spirit manifests the Son of the Father, now become the Son of the Virgin. She is the burning bush of the definitive theophany. Filled with the Holy Spirit she makes the Word visible...she makes him known.”²⁴ A theophany means the Holy Spirit revealing the Word. The Catechism says Mary is the definitive theophany. She is the definitive way the Holy Spirit reveals the Word.’

Second, the Holy Spirit disposes us to receive the Son through Mary. Paragraph 723 of the Catechism tells us the Holy Spirit disposed or gave humanity the capacity to receive the Son through Mary in the Incarnation.²⁵ Likewise, the Catechism states that the Holy Spirit disposes or gives us the capacity to receive the Son through Mary: “Through Mary, the Holy Spirit begins to bring men...into communion with Christ...shepherds, magi, Simeon and Anna, the bride and groom at Cana, and the first disciples.”²⁶ Here, the Catechism illuminates the Biblical pattern in which the Spirit disposes people to welcome the Son through Mary.

At the Visitation, Elizabeth and John the Baptist receive Jesus from the Spirit and through Mary. At the Nativity the shepherds and the Magi receive Jesus from the Holy Spirit through Mary. At the Presentation Simeon and Anna receive the Son from the Spirit through the hands of Mary. And at Cana, the Holy Spirit launched the public ministry of the Son and disposed the disciples to believe for the first time. Again, this takes place through Mary.

²³ CCC 707.

²⁴ CCC 724.

²⁵ CCC 723 “With and through the Holy Spirit, the Virgin conceives and gives birth to the Son of God.”

²⁶ CCC 725.

Third, the Spirit acts in a maternal way through Mary. Following Tradition,²⁷ the Catechism in paragraph 726 draws a correlation between the Annunciation and Pentecost to teach us the Holy Spirit acts in a maternal way through Mary to form Jesus in her womb and to form Jesus in the souls of his disciples.

To give a greater understanding, the Catechism with the cross-reference directs the reader to 2617 which states: “Before the Incarnation of the Son of God, and before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, her (Mary’s) prayer cooperates in a unique way with the Father’s plan of loving kindness: at the Annunciation, for Christ’s conception; at Pentecost, for the formation of the Church, his Body.”²⁸ The Annunciation and Pentecost indicate that the Holy Spirit mediates in a maternal way to form Christ in the womb of Mary and in the souls of believers through the presence and prayer of Mary.

Pope St. John Paul II confirms this when he writes:

In the redemptive economy of grace, brought about through the action of the Holy Spirit, there is a unique correspondence between the moment of the Incarnation of the Word and the moment of the birth of the Church. The person who links these two moments is Mary: Mary at Nazareth and Mary in the Upper Room at Jerusalem. In both cases her discreet yet essential presence indicates the path of "birth from the Holy Spirit."²⁹

Who gives birth to Christians? The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit acts as a Mother. Through whom? Mary! The Annunciation and Pentecost show us that the maternal mission of the Spirit to engender Christ in us is carried out through Mary. It was the Holy Spirit and

²⁷ Cf. Leo XIII *Divinum Illud Munus* 8; to *Lumen Gentium* 59 and *Ad Gentes* 4, to *Redemptoris Mater* 24.

²⁸ CCC 2617

²⁹ *Redemptoris Mater* 24.

Mary who formed Jesus in her womb; and it is the Holy Spirit and Mary who form Jesus in the souls of his disciples.

Pope St. Paul VI remarks in *Marialis Cultus* that the early Church turned to Mary to receive Jesus from the Holy Spirit. He writes that they “had recourse to the Virgin’s intercession in order to obtain from the Spirit the capacity for engendering Christ in their own soul.”³⁰ This was attested to by St. Ildephonsus in the seventh century in the prayer: “I beg you Holy Virgin that I may have Jesus from the Holy Spirit, by whom you brought Jesus forth. May my soul receive Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, by whom your flesh conceived Jesus.”

Through the Catechism the Church is teaching that in the joint mission of the Son and Spirit, the mission of the Son is manifest in Jesus; and the mission of the Spirit is manifest in Mary. And since Mary is not the incarnation of the Spirit, we can conclude Mary is the perfect human expression of the Spirit.

In a conference given February 5, 1941, St. Maximilian Kolbe writes:

The Third Person of the Blessed Trinity never took flesh; still our human word "spouse" is far too weak to express the reality of the relationship between the Immaculata and the Holy Spirit. We can affirm that she is, in a certain sense, the "incarnation" of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that we love in her; and through her we love the Son. The Holy Spirit is far too little known.³¹

In a personal conversation with the prior director of the Kolbianum, Fr. Gregorz Bartosik, one of the greatest living scholars on the pneumatological thought of St. Maximilian Kolbe said:

According to Kolbe, “Mary and the Holy Spirit are two separate persons, but their union is so close, that though Kolbe called Mary the “Spouse of the Spirit” it was not

³⁰ *Marialis Cultus* 26.

³¹ Manteau-Bonamy, H.M., O.P., *Immaculate Conception and the Holy Spirit*, Franciscan Marytown Press, 1975, p. 50.

adequate. In fact, Kolbe preferred to call Mary the “Quasi-Incarnation” of the Holy Spirit. Kolbe said the Son became manifest in Jesus and the Holy Spirit became manifest in Mary.

Fr. René Laurentin, after more than 50 years of theological reflection summed up his thoughts on the relationship of the Holy Spirit and Mary saying: “What the Holy Spirit does as God, Mary does with Him: she participates with Him as His visible sign. Mary is the sensible visible presence of the Holy Spirit.”³² And “Mary is, precisely, the most perfect visible image or expression of the Holy Spirit in this world, illuminated as she is by the Spirit from within.”³³

Pope St. John Paul II, during a General Audience Address of December 9, 1998 as he reflected on Mary's co-operation with the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation suggested that in Mary we see the face of the Holy Spirit: “From the Cross the Savior wished to pour out upon humanity rivers of living water, that is, the abundance of the Holy Spirit. But he wanted this outpouring of grace to be linked to a mother's face, his Mother's.”³⁴

Mary is the Sacrament of the Spirit

We have seen how the Annunciation and Pentecost suggested a correlation between the divine activity of the Holy Spirit and the human activity of Mary, indicating that the Holy Spirit is the chief protagonist who works through Mary to give birth and form Christ and Christians. Since Mary participates in and expresses the economic activity of the Spirit, and activity tells us something about the person, then Mary gives us an insight to the intrinsic character of the Holy Spirit.³⁵

³² Personal conversation with this author in July of 2003.

³³ Laurentin, *The Meaning of Consecration Today*, p. 151.

³⁴ Wednesday Audience December 9, 1998, L'Osservatore Romano, publisher date December 16, 1998, p. 19.

³⁵ See CCC 267

If the activity of Mary expresses the action of the Holy Spirit, then by watching Mary we may see who the Holy Spirit is because we know a thing by the way it acts. The activity of Mary is maternal; and Mary is maternal because she is feminine, bride and virgin.

This tells us something about the Holy Spirit. The mission of the Holy Spirit has characteristics that are feminine, maternal, bridal and virginal. In this sense, Mary is the perfect human expression of the person and activity of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, I would like to suggest that Mary is the sacrament of the Holy Spirit. The Catechism 1131 defines the sacrament as having three essential parts: sacraments are efficacious signs, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.³⁶ Sacraments as efficacious signs do two things: first, they make present what they signify. Mary is the sign of the Holy Spirit. By her presence she makes the Holy Spirit present to us. Second, efficacious signs make happen what they signify. Mary makes the maternal mission of the Holy Spirit happen in us. Therefore, when we turn to Mary, the Holy Spirit enables us to receive Jesus and forms Him within us. Mary is the sign that signifies the Holy Spirit and makes the maternal mission of the Spirit take place in us.

Second, sacraments are instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church. Mary as our spiritual mother was instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church when from the Cross Jesus looked down at the beloved disciple and proclaimed, “Behold, your mother.” Jesus said, “Behold, your mother” and Mary receives the mission to make the maternal action of the Holy Spirit present in our lives.

Third, a sacrament is a sign that dispenses divine life to us. The Son *gives* his life through the Liturgy and sacraments. The Holy Spirit disposes us to *receive* the divine life of Jesus. The Spirit does this through Mary. On her own, Mary cannot do this. Only the Spirit can give us the capacity to receive the Son. But the Spirit disposes us to

³⁶ CCC 1131

receive with and in and through Mary. This is how Mary distributes all grace. Therefore, if a sacrament is a sign that signifies and makes present the grace proper to it, Mary signifies and makes present the maternal mission of the Spirit to form Jesus within us.

We may find a certain confirmation in this idea when Cardinal Ratzinger defines the role of Mary as “moral mediation by intercession ... [and] ... physical: Mary is ontologically the place of passage of all graces, that is therefore supra-sacrament [Übersakrament]... . Between the function of Mary and all other Christians, there is no essential difference, but only a gradual one, which can also be great! ... Every Christian is a mediator of all grace! Especially Mary.”³⁷ And when I suggested to Fr. Bartosik this idea of Mary as the sacrament of the Holy Spirit, he responded, “That is exactly how Kolbe understood it.”

Is Mary the Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of All Graces, and the Advocate?

Lumen Gentium stated that Mary’s “spiritual motherhood extends to all men...in whose generation and formation she cooperates with a mother’s love.”³⁸ It also declared, “She cooperated...in the Savior’s work of restoring supernatural life to souls. For this reason, she is a mother to us in the order of grace.”³⁹ Therefore, “the Blessed Virgin Mary is invoked under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress and Mediatrix.”⁴⁰

As we have said, the Holy Spirit and the Son are joint, inseparable agents in the mission of bringing humanity into union with God. One cannot assert that any part of Christ's work, however small, is done

³⁷ Emery de Gaál, “Mariology as Christology and Ecclesiology: Professor Joseph Ratzinger’s Only Mariology Course,” in *Joseph Ratzinger and the Healing of Reformation-Era Divisions*, eds. Emery de Gaál and Matthew Levering (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), p. 109.

³⁸ *Lumen Gentium* 63

³⁹ *Lumen Gentium* 61

⁴⁰ *Lumen Gentium* 62

without the Holy Spirit's active involvement. If, therefore, Jesus is the Redeemer, Mediator, and Advocate, then the Holy Spirit is His divine partner in all this. Furthermore, we have established that the mission of the Spirit is a maternal mediation. The Spirit acts as a mother, which means the Holy Spirit is, so to speak, the first Mother and the *divine* Co-redeemer, Co-mediator, and Co-Advocate. However, since Mary is the human expression of the Holy Spirit's mission, she must be the spiritual mother of all people and the Co-redemptrix, Mediatrix, and Advocate.

Conclusion: Three Mothers

It is commonly asked: "Why do we need Mary when we have Jesus?" But in fact, a more fundamental question would be this: "Why do we need the Holy Spirit when we have Jesus?" In the one joint mission of the Son and the Spirit, the Son *gives* his divine life through His death and resurrection, which is made present in the liturgy and the Sacraments. The Holy Spirit *receives* the Son in, with, and, through Mary in the Incarnation and in souls. The Holy Spirit and Mary come to dwell within the souls of believers to dispose them to receive Jesus by means of consecration to Mary. This consecration enables the faithful to live in union with her and with Jesus. This union is sustained by prayer, especially the Rosary, which John Paul II has called the School of Mary.

One final question exists: where does the Church fit in? The joint mission of the Son and the Spirit continues in the Church as the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ.⁴¹ In fact, "The Church's mission is not in addition to that of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but is its sacrament in her whole being and in all her members..."⁴²

We could express the continuation of the joint mission of the Son and the Spirit in the Church in this way: in each liturgical and

⁴¹ CCC 789; 808.

⁴² CCC 738.

Sacramental action of the Church, the Church is both Bridegroom and Bride, giver and receiver. The Church is a continuation of the mission of the Son giving his life through the ministerial priesthood; and the Church is a continuation of the Spirit disposing the faithful to receive the Son.

However, neither the Spirit, nor Mary, nor the faithful are simply receivers. We receive in order to bear fruit by giving to others. Therefore, the Spirit, Mary and believers receive the Son and share him with others. This is precisely why St. Paul stated in his letter to the Galatians, “My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you.”⁴³ And that is why the essential mission of the Church is to go and make disciples of all nations.

So, there are three mothers who work together: the Holy Spirit, Mary and the Church. The Holy Spirit on the divine level, Mary on the human, and the members of the Church who receive the Son, bear him in their souls and lives and work to bring him to birth in others.

⁴³ Galatians 4:19