

Pope Francis and the Coredemptive Role of Mary, the “Woman of Salvation”: What Does It Mean to Say the Mother of God is Co-Redemptrix?¹

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The homily of Pope Francis for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12, 2019 has generated renewed interest and controversy over the Marian title of Co-redemptrix. The Holy Father’s homily was given in Spanish in a spontaneous *ex tempore* manner. In the homily, he made one reference to the title of co-redemptrix: “Faithful to her Master, who is her Son, the unique Redeemer, she never wanted to take anything away from her Son. She never introduced herself as ‘co-redemptrix.’ No. “disciple” (*Fiel a su Maestro, que es su Hijo, el único Redentor, jamás quiso para sí tomar algo de su Hijo. Jamás se presentó como co-redentora. No, discípula.*).

Pope Francis is completely accurate in stating that Mary never “introduced herself” as “co-redemptrix,” neither in the context of the Annunciation nor in the historical events at Guadalupe, the subject of his homily. This, though, does not in itself deny the doctrinal legitimacy of the co-redemptrix title when it is used with its proper meaning in referring to the unique participation of Mary in the historical Redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, the only divine Redeemer.

The Holy Father is likewise entirely accurate when he states that “she never wanted to take away anything from her Son.” Fortunately, when Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Pius XI before him repeatedly used the title, “co-redemptrix” for Our Lady, they did not seek to take anything from Jesus and give it to Mary, but rather to identify Mary’s unique cooperation in the redemptive work accomplished by Christ.

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The co-redemptrix title seeks to represent, in one term, the Church's official doctrine of Mary's unrivaled participation in the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, the sole Divine Redeemer. The official and undeniable Marian doctrine of the Church is repeatedly taught at the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen gentium*, 56, 57, 58, 61) and by the papal magisterium of the last three centuries.

The Doctrine of Marian Coredemption

The doctrine of Marian coredemption teaches that the Blessed Virgin, by the will of God, cooperated in a unique and singular manner in the work of redemption with and under her divine Son. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, God, in his omnipotence, could have redeemed the human race in many ways, but He chose to become man by being conceived and born of a woman. He saw this as the most fitting or appropriate means for redeeming the human race.² Because God chose to redeem the human race by becoming man, He needed a Mother in order to assume a human nature and become like us in all things but sin (cf. Heb 4:15). The Church teaches that "God ineffable ... from the beginning and before the ages, chose and ordained a mother for his only begotten Son, from whom he would become incarnate and be born in the blessed fullness of time."³ The Blessed Virgin Mary, therefore, was "predestined from eternity by that decree of divine providence which determined the incarnation of the Word to be the Mother of God."⁴ The Blessed Virgin was in this way "above all others and in a singular way the generous associate and humble handmaid of the Lord."⁵

The early Christian Church faithfully handed on Mary's unique role in Redemption contained in Scripture and Apostolic Tradition. The post-apostolic Church of the second century conveyed Mary's coredemptive role within the primitive model of the "New Eve" revealed in Gen 3:15. Just as Eve had participated with Adam in the loss of grace for the human family (Gen 3:1–7) so Mary, the New Eve, participated with Christ, the New Adam in the restoration of grace for the human family. Vatican II, in *Lumen gentium*, 56, makes reference to this analogy by citing St. Irenaeus, who identifies Mary as the "cause of salvation for

² *Summa theologiae* [ST] III q. 1 a. 2.

³ Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, Dec. 8, 1854; D-H, 2800.

⁴ *Lumen gentium* [LG] 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*

herself and the whole human race.”⁶ St. Jerome (c. 347–420) also sums up the teaching succinctly by saying, “Death through Eve, life through Mary.”

The medieval Church highlights Our Lady’s role in the redemption. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) speaks of Mary’s compassion with Jesus at Calvary, and her “offering of her Son” for our redemption;⁷ while his disciple, Arnold of Chartres (d. 1160) refers to Mary’s “co-suffering” and “co-dying” with her Son at Calvary.⁸

The Church also teaches that Mary at the foot of the cross, suffering in a profound way with her only-begotten Son, “associated herself with a mother’s heart with Christ’s sacrifice,” and lovingly consented “to the immolation of this victim which she herself had brought forth.”⁹ Thus, although Christ is the one Savior of the human race, Mary, by God’s will, associated herself with his sacrificial offering in a unique and singular way.

The recognition of Mary’s maternal union with Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross developed during the Middle Ages and gradually came to be taught by the Church’s magisterium. St. Pius X, in his 1904 encyclical, *Ad diem illum*, taught that, because of Mary’s singular association with Christ in “the work of human salvation” (*humanae salutis opus*), “she merits for us *de congruo* ... what Christ merits for us *de condigno*.”¹⁰ Pius X’s successor, Benedict XV, in his 1918 letter, *Inter sodalicia*, wrote that Mary, renounced her maternal rights and, “as far as it depended on her, offered her Son to placate divine justice; so we may well say that she, with Christ, redeemed mankind.”¹¹ In his 1984 apostolic letter, *Salvifici doloris*, John Paul II says that “it was on Calvary that Mary’s suffering, beside the suffering of Jesus, reached an intensity which can hardly be imagined from a human point of view, but which was mysterious and supernaturally fruitful for the redemption of the world.”¹²

These popes do not mean that Christ, as the divine Savior, needed Mary’s offering in any absolute sense. They do, however, believe that

⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses*, III.22.4.

⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermo 3 de purificatione*.

⁸ Arnold of Chartres, *De Laud. BVM*.

⁹ *LG*, 58.

¹⁰ Pius X, *Ad diem illum*, D-H, 3370.

¹¹ Benedict XV, *Inter sodalicia*, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [AAS] 10 (1919), 182.

¹² John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 25.

God freely chose to associate Mary in the work of redemption in a way that transcends the cooperation of the rest of the faithful.¹³ In his 1954 encyclical, *Ad caeili Reginam*, Pius XII teaches that Mary assisted in our redemption “by giving of her own substance, by freely offering him for us, by her singular desire and petition for, and active interest in our salvation.”¹⁴ Pius XII goes on to describe Mary as “a partner in the redemption of the human race (*redimendi generis humani consors*).”¹⁵

Our Lady’s cooperative role with Jesus in the work of redemption is theologically based on the central Catholic principle of “participation” where we, as disciples of Jesus, truly share in his divine life of grace, but without adding or subtracting anything from Jesus himself. Our Lady’s role as co-redemptrix is the perfect human model for all Christians to follow by participating in Jesus’ great work of redemption. This is done when we properly respond to the words of St. Paul to “make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, which is the Church (Colossians 1:24),” or as Pope St. John Paul II instructs us, to be “co-redeemers in Christ.”¹⁶

Pope Francis and Marian Coredemption

There is nothing in Pope Francis’s homily of December 12 that rejects Marian coredemption. From prior statements of his, it’s clear that he affirms this doctrine. In his morning meditation for the Solemnity of the Annunciation in 2016, Pope Francis states: “Today is the celebration of the ‘yes’... Indeed, in Mary’s ‘yes’ there is the ‘yes’ of all of salvation history and there begins the ultimate ‘yes’ of man and of God: there God re-creates, as at the beginning, with a ‘yes’, God made the earth and man, that beautiful creation: with this ‘yes’ I come to do your will and more wonderfully he re-creates the world, he re-creates us all”. Pope Francis recognizes Mary’s “yes” as an expression of her active role in salvation history—a role that we can call coredemptive. During his January 26, 2019 vigil with young people in Panama, the Holy Father spoke of Mary as “the most influential woman in history.” He also referred to the Blessed Virgin as the “influencer of God.” Mary influenced God by saying yes to his invitation and by trusting in his promises.

¹³ Cf. Col 1:24, 2 Cor 4:9–12, and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2008.

¹⁴ Pius XII, *Ad caeili Reginam*, D-H, 3914.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3915.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Discourse to the personnel of the Fatebenefratelli Hospital*, April 5, 1981.

Pope Francis also affirms Mary's union with the salvific mission of Christ up to his death on Cross and in the life of the Church. 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.

Other statements of Pope Francis show that he recognizes Mary's central role in salvation history. In his November 21, 2013 address to some Camaldolese Benedictine Nuns he exclaims: "We owe so much to this Mother! She is present at every moment in the history of salvation, and in her we see a firm witness to hope. She, the mother of hope, sustains us in times of darkness, difficulty, discouragement, of seeming defeat or true human defeat." In an impromptu address given to the Servants of Mary on October 25, 2019, Pope Francis affirms Mary's central role in the work of redemption. He tells the Servants of Mary that their founders "left everything to become servants, servants of Our Lady, because they understood the role of Our Lady in redemption, a role that so often the so-called 'modern' theologies forget. But Our Lady brought us Jesus! And your Founders understood this, they understood and they became servants."

Pope Francis likewise affirms Mary's role in the mediation of grace. In his prayer of December 8, 2017, he refers to the Blessed Virgin as "Mother of grace and mercy" whose "open hands ... let the Lord's grace come down to the earth." He has also referred to Mary as "auxiliatrix" and as the "Queen of the Saints and the Gate of Heaven."

All of these references—which can be multiplied— show that Pope Francis accepts and affirms Catholic teaching on Marian coredemption and the mediation of grace. He clearly sees Mary's "yes" as a central moment in salvation history and he recognizes her union with Christ's

sacrifice on the Cross as spiritually fruitful. In his August 13, 2019 letter to the people of Genoa on the first anniversary of the terrible collapse of the Morandi Bridge he points them to Mary under the Cross suffering with her Son: “But I would also like to tell you that Jesus on the Cross was not alone. Under that scaffold, there was his mother, Maria. *Stabat Mater*, Mary was under the Cross, to share the suffering of the Son. We are not alone; we have a Mother who from Heaven looks at us with love and is close to us. Let us cling to her and say to her: ‘Mother!’ as a child does when he is afraid and wants to be comforted and reassured.”

The Title Co-redemptrix

During the Middle Ages Mary began to be referred to as the “redemptrix.” In the 10th century, a French hymnal included these words addressed to Mary: “Holy redemptrix of the world pray for us.” The term “redemptrix” was understood in subordination to Christ, the Redeemer just as mediatrix was understood in subordination to Christ, the one mediator (cf. 1 Tim 2:5). St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) spoke of Mary as “the redemptrix of the human race” because the Blessed Virgin provided flesh to the Word of God who redeemed us with his passion while she shared in his passion with her “sorrow of body and mind.”¹⁷ During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, the prefix “co” from the Latin *cum* (with) was added to make it clear that Mary’s role in redemption was with and under Christ, the Redeemer. The Jesuit, Alfonso Salmeron (1515–1585), for example, believed that Jesus—although he had no need of his mother’s help—nevertheless wanted her to share in his work of redemption as the “Co-redemptrix.”¹⁸

From the mid-1700s to the mid-1900s, the Catholic Magisterium began to provide increasing support for Marian coredemption and her mediation of grace. During the pontificate of Pius X (1903–1914) the Marian title, co-redemptrix, received official magisterial approval. In 1908 the Sacred Congregation for Rites referred to Mary as “the merciful Co-redemptrix of the human race.”¹⁹ In 1913, the Holy Office approved a prayer invoking Mary as “our Co-redemptrix.”²⁰ In 1914 the same Holy Office gave approval to a prayer appealing to Mary as “the Co-redemptrix

¹⁷ Catherine of Siena, *Oratio* XI.

¹⁸ Alfonso Salmeron, *Commentarii*, vol. 10, tr. 41.

¹⁹ *Acta Sanctae Sedis* [ASS] 41 (1908), 409.

²⁰ AAS 5 [1913], 364.

of the human race.”²¹ Pope Pius XI publicly referred to Mary as co-redemptrix on three separate occasions and John Paul II used the title at least six times. For example, in his General Audience of December 10, 1980, he invited the sick to transform their pain into a “loving offering in imitation of the Virgin Mary, the Co-redemptrix.” Other references to Mary as “co-redemptrix” by Pius XI and John Paul II can be found here.

Although Pius XI and John Paul II referred to Mary as “co-redemptrix” in public settings, other recent popes have not. Pope Pius XII, as Cardinal Pacelli, referred to Mary as “co-redemptrix” during a Holy Hour at Lourdes in 1935, but he never used the title publicly during his pontificate. There is a difference, though, between not using the title and rejecting the title. The co-redemptrix title for Our Lady has been part of the Church’s tradition since the 14th century, and has been used correctly to identify Our Lady’s unequalled cooperation in the redemption by popes, saints, mystics, bishops, clergy, theologians, and the faithful people of God, including recent saints such as St. Pio of Pietrelcina, St. Maximilian Kolbe, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, St. Josemaría Escrivá, St. Teresa of Calcutta, St. John Henry Newman, and Pope St. John Paul II. The great Fatima seer, Sister Lúcia, uses and sublimely explains the co-redemptrix title for Mary on seven occasions in her final writing, *Calls from the Message of Fatima*.

There have also been approved religious communities that are dedicated to Mary as co-redemptrix. Mention can be made of the Congregazione Figlie Maria SS. Corredentrice, founded in Catania, Italy in 1953 and approved in 1964; the Pia Associazione di Maria SS. Corredentrice, approved by the Archbishop of Reggio Calabria, Italy in 1984; the Hijas de Maria Immaculada y Corredentora (Lima, Peru), founded in 1978 and approved in 1980; the Instituto de Misioneras de Maria Corredentora (Ecuador), founded in 1964 and approved in 1969; and the Asociación de Fieles al Servicio de María Corredentora y Reina de la Paz (Venezuela), which was founded and approved in 1992 by the Archbishop of Barquisimeto, Venezuela. It should also be noted that the seminary of the Society of St. Pius X [SSPX] located in Moreno, Buenos Aires, Argentina is named Seminario Nuestra Señora Corredentora (Seminary of Our Lady Co-redemptrix). As is known, Pope Francis always maintained a cordial relationship with the Society of St. Pius X in

²¹ AAS 6 [1914], 108.

his native Argentina, and he is committed to integrating the Society officially into the life of the Catholic Church. To my knowledge, he has never objected to the name of this SSPX seminary.

Some people reject the title “co-redemptrix” because they believe it suggests equality between Jesus and Mary in the work of redemption. Nothing, though, could be further from the truth. Jesus is never spoken of as the “Co-redeemer” with Mary, but only as “the Redeemer.” The prefix “co” comes the Latin, “cum” (with) and, in this context, it does not suggest equivalence. Parents are called “co-creators” with God, but their cooperation in bringing forth new life does not make them “creators” equal to God. In a similar way, St. Paul says that we a God’s “co-workers” in 1 Cor 3:9, but this does not mean that our work is in anyway equivalent to that of God.

Some people believe Pope Francis rejected the Marian title co-redemptrix as foolishness in his December 12, 2019 homily. This, though, was not the case. In the text of the homily, the reference to foolishness comes six paragraphs after the reference to “co-redemptrix.” The Holy Father says: “When they come to us with stories about having to declare this, or make this or that other dogma, let’s not get lost in foolishness. Mary is woman, she is Our Lady, Mary is the Mother of her Son and of the Holy Mother hierarchical Church...” (*Quando nos vengan con historias de que había que declararla esto, o hacer este otro dogma o esto, no nos perdamos en tonteras: María es mujer, es Nuestra Señora, María es Madre de su Hijo y de la Santa Madre Iglesia jerárquica...*). Pope Francis wishes to warn us not to lose ourselves in foolishness by being so concerned with new Marian dogmas that we forget what is essential about Mary as woman, mother, and Mother of the Church. Pope Francis wants to highlight Mary as our Mother and the Mother of the Church. This is manifested by a book entitled *She is My Mother: Pope Francis Encounters Mary*, based on some interviews of the Holy Father by Fr. Alexandre Awi Mello, now secretary of the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life.

Although the Holy Father currently holds a certain position on new Marian dogmas, there is nothing to prevent a further development in his attitude. This was clearly the case regarding his position on the Medjugorje apparitions. From his earlier somewhat negative attitude, Pope Francis has recently decided to grant unprecedented permission

for official pilgrimages to Medjugorje, even before final word on the apparitions' authenticity has been determined.

The Marian Devotion of Pope Francis

In his December 12 homily, Pope Francis affirms the legitimacy of the title, "mother of all," which has been proposed over the last century (starting in 1915) as the overall title and doctrine for a potential Marian definition, as presently none of the existing four dogmas (Mother of God, Perpetual Virginity, Immaculate Conception, Assumption) refer to Mary's direct and maternal relationship with humanity as our Spiritual Mother.

The authentic Marian character of Pope Francis's pontificate is evident, for example: in his approval of the obligatory memorial of Mary, "Mother of the Church," with its profound pneumatological significance on the Monday after Pentecost; his spreading of the powerful devotion of Our Lady, Undoer of Knots globally; his elevation of the liturgical celebration of Our Lady of Loreto to the universal calendar; his repeated teaching on the importance of the Rosary; his Marian devotional witness by beginning and ending every international journey by bringing flowers and praying before Our Lady's renowned *Salus Populi Romani* icon at St. Mary Major in Rome; his fervent devotion and pilgrimage to Our Lady of Fatima; his repeated (and potentially ecumenically threatening) motto that "A Christian without Mary is an orphan"; his recent repeated references to Our Lady as the "Mother of All Peoples,"²² which is the overall Marian doctrine requested to be solemnly defined as dogma.

The heart of Pope Francis is open to the Mother. This is why groups like Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici will continue to pray and petition for the solemn definition of Our Lady's Spiritual Motherhood, inclusive of her three motherly functions as Co-redemptrix, Mediatrix of all graces and Advocate, but always in complete obedience, fidelity and respect for the present Roman Pontiff, who is the supreme Vicar of Christ on earth.

In his recent homily for the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, Pope Francis explains how the motherhood of the Blessed Virgin is also linked to her role as "the woman of salvation." He notes that on "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

²² Oct. 20, 2019; Dec. 8, 2019.

forth and thus there is no salvation without a 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.”

In his homily for the vespers for the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God, the Holy Father also recognizes the role of Mary under the Cross as the Sorrowful Mother (*Addolorata*) whose maternal tenderness reaches out to all people when he says: “And also the Mother of God, who under the Cross is the Sorrowful Mother, about to extend her maternity to all people. The Mother of God is the Mother of the Church and her maternal tenderness reaches all people” (*tutti gli uomini*). For Pope Francis, Mary is the Mother of God and the Mother of the Church who under the Cross was revealed as the Sorrowful Mother, the “Woman of salvation” (*Donna della salvezza*), the Lady of all peoples.