

## **Mary Co-Redemptrix as a Help in the Pursuit of Inter-religious Dialogue**

TELESPHORE P. CARDINAL TOPPO

Your Eminences,  
Your Excellencies,

Last year I attended in Rome the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (May 2004) and also the Study Days on Vatican II's Decree *Ad Gentes* (October 2004). At both these events it was emphasized that the Church's commitment to Evangelization and to Dialogue go hand in hand. This eventually led me to dedicate this short reflection on "Mary Co-redemptrix as a help in Dialogue."

In inter-religious dialogue it is of the utmost importance that both sides come to know each other's faith position as accurately as possible. Now it is my contention that a Catholic's presentation and explanation of Mary's title and role as Co-Redemptrix would greatly help his/her dialogue-partner to understand correctly some basics of the Church's teaching.

The title "Co-Redemptrix" would naturally provide the occasion to present our doctrine concerning the Redeemer. This would be preceded by the explanation of the mystery of Redemption. This would presuppose a catechesis on God, even the triune God, and on Creation, including the creation of free human beings, who abused their freedom, with nefarious consequences for the entire human race, including its state of original sin and fall from grace.

These basic facts would lead one on to the history of salvation, of divinely initiated preservation from sin, of infinitely meritorious expiation for sin, of forgiveness of sin, of redemption, of reconciliation and restoration of communion with God. All this would show the primacy of God's divine initiative and the absolutely uncontestable uniqueness of the Redeemer.

That being the true position, the question will surely be raised as to how then we can speak of Mary as "Co-Redemptrix". The gender differentiation is not the issue. But the "Co" is. In fact, the Catholic faith uncompromisingly affirms one, divine, unique, universal Redeemer/Saviour.

And yet this truth concerning Redemption is to be complemented with the indispensable need for the co-operation of the human beneficiary. Humans can sin by themselves, but they cannot save themselves by themselves. Even God will not save them without their free consent. Popular preachers explain this with reference to the “monkey way” versus the “cat way”.

In other words, co-operation is required, from each one according to the freely designed and chosen plan of God. And it is our understanding and traditional Catholic teaching, revealed by God as defined by His Holiness Pope Pius IX on 8 December 1854, that: “The Most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of almighty God and in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin.”

This having been the case, we can help our partners-in-dialogue understand many other things about Mary: her perpetual virginity, her co-operation with and submission to, the plan of God that she become the mother of Jesus, her closeness to Jesus, her nearness to him at the crucifixion, her intercessory advocacy and influence with Jesus, her assumption into heaven, her being Mother of the Church, Queen of Heaven and Mediatrix of all graces.

The title “Co” clarifies it all. She is in no way the Redemptrix of humanity and yet by the will of God and by her humble co-operation, she truly is, and deserves to be called/designated/honoured as “Co-Redemptrix”. I have no doubt that non-catholic Christians, participating in ecumenical dialogue, find this presentation acceptable, or at least have no valid/convincing argument against it. This is what happened to a Lutheran tribal girl of Ranchi in 1890 when she discovered that Catholics actually do not worship Mary, though they honour her because of her being the mother of Jesus. She (Ruth Kispotta) joined the Catholic Church and founded our first indigenous Congregation: the Daughters of St. Anne, Ranchi.

Adherents and followers of non-Christian faiths readily understand our position in the matter. This would also explain how it is that so many non-Christians flock to shrines of Our Lady all over the world, including the vast continent of Asia. They feel drawn to Mary because of her proximity to Jesus.

Some fifty years ago, a group of Hindu coalminers at Dhori near Jarangdih in the Dt. of Bokaro, Jharkhand, India, dug up a wooden statue of a Lady with a child in her arms. They at once proclaimed her a goddess. So the statue was taken in procession to the office of the manager where it was temporarily installed and worshipped. But soon people began to wonder. They could not recall having seen a statue of a goddess with a child in her arms. When the local catholic priest was called to look at it, he at once recognized it as a statue of Our Lady with the Child Jesus. It was gladly handed over to him. To day there is a shrine in honour of “Dhori Ma” also known as “Lady of the mines”. She is visited by tens of thousands: Christians, Hindus, and Muslims. All appreciate the Mother who takes care of the child and is entirely at its service. Pilgrims are correctly evangelized and, while they venerate Mary, no one considers her a goddess. The truth about Jesus can thus be made clear. Mary very effectively leads devotees to Jesus, the one true universal saviour of humanity. [Historical research has come to the conclusion that the Statue of Mary had been left at Dhori in 1632. In that year, on June 24, the Portuguese settlement at Hooghli (Bandel) was attacked by order of Emperor Shah Jahan. After a siege of 3 months the town surrendered. Some 4000 people - Portuguese and Indian- were taken prisoners and were marched along the Grand Trunk Road to Agra, 1400 Km. away, where the four priests among them were trampled to death by elephants. Among the prisoners some must have brought with them the Statue of Our Lady. For some unknown reason it was left behind at Dhori, where it was found back in 1956, three and a quarter centuries later.] At Dhori Mary today continues her work, not as goddess but as Co-redemptrix, Co-mediatrix and Advocate by the side of Jesus.

A presentation of “Mary Co-redemptrix” would be especially appreciated in dialogues with Muslims, for the simple reason that Mary is already well known to them from the Qur’an itself. The word used for her is “Maryam”. It occurs 34 times in the Holy Book of the Muslims. Only in 3 cases could it possibly refer to Miriam, the Sister of Moses and Aaron (Qur’an 19/29, 3/31, 66/12). In all the 31 other cases it clearly indicates the Mother of Jesus. It occurs in 12 Surahs, usually in the designation of Jesus as “Isa ibn Maryam”. This expression is extraordinary and hints at the virgin motherhood of Mary.

Muslims revere Mary as “the greatest of women”, sinless and ever virgin. They readily accept her as the Mother of Christ. She is a woman of

great dignity and her role and significance is acknowledged in the Qur'an, in the Hadith and in the piety of Muslim daily life.

Fr. Victor Courtois S.J., a mid-twentieth century missionary in India, noted for his dialogue with Muslims, wrote in his short book on "Mary in Islam" (p. 62): "Mary has exercised a strange fascination on certain souls. She has been the object of the meditation of ascetics, who found a new ideal of sanctity in her extraordinary surrender to God's holy will. She has inspired the poets and the artists of Islam whenever they sought a personification of whatever is bright and pure. She has been the comfort of many a mother in pain and the secret refuge of many a weeping heart. She is the patroness of numerous other Maryams who pride themselves in bearing her name. How welcome was the Statue of Fatima when it passed through Muslim lands from Algeria to Egypt and Persia and Pakistan! And who will speak of the furtive visits of praying souls, of suffering hearts, to the many shrines of Mary in every land?"

One can say, without hesitation, that Mary has been, is and remains a true role-model for both Muslims and Christians. She is of wonderful help in their inter-religious dialogue.

The correct presentation of "Mary Co-Redemptrix" provides a smooth path to the discovery of the Catholic truth and encourages all sincere persons to co-operate with the initiatives of the loving and attractive God whose mercy is from age to age.

With Mary let us say: "My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior."