

Mater Dei Ergo Gratia Plena: **On the Predestination of Mary to Divine Maternity as the Reason for Her Radical Plenitude of Grace**

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Introduction

Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, has the distinct honor among all men to have been approached by an angel of God and called *gratia plena*, “full of grace.” As such, the Church has regarded her as God’s most holy and beloved (mere) creature, the crown jewel of God’s created order. In the following brief article, I hope to outline the necessity of a Thomistic doctrine of Marian predestination for the *scientia* of Mariology and to place special emphasis upon Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP as a particular Thomistic theologian who shows us the way toward the proper understanding of that doctrine.

The Fullness of Mary’s Grace

The very word used by Gabriel at the Annunciation, according to Luke, is *κεχαριτωμένη*, a perfect passive participle which grammatically implies an action that is perfected in the classical sense, that is, a bestowal of grace which is complete and not something admitting of further continuation or greater accomplishment. In Mary, from the first instant of her creation, we see a fullness of grace which surpasses the grace bestowed by God upon all other creatures, be they angels or saints. Seventeenth-century French bishop and theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet goes so far as to say that in Mary we see God bestowing “a love going far beyond nature *even to the last reaches of grace*.”¹ Indeed, in Pope Pius IX’s apostolic constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* (wherein the Immaculate Conception of Mary is pronounced *ex cathedra*) it is stated that “Above all creatures did God so love her that truly in her was the Father well pleased with singular delight.”² The reason for Mary’s supremacy in grace, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, is found in her unique nearness to Jesus Christ. He says:

¹ Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Sermon on the Compassion of the Blessed Virgin*, §1. Emphasis is mine.

² Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, December 8, 1854.

I answer that, in every genus, the nearer a thing is to the principle, the greater the part which it has in the effect of that principle, whence Dionysius says that angels, being nearer to God, have a greater share than men, in the effects of the Divine goodness. Now Christ is the principle of grace, authoritatively as to His Godhead, instrumentally as to His humanity: whence (Jn. 1:17) it is written: "Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." But the Blessed Virgin Mary was nearest to Christ in His humanity: because He received His human nature from her. Therefore, it was due to her to receive a greater fulness of grace than others.³

In other words, the divine maternity of Mary places her in such close proximity to the Lord that He Himself is incarnated through her. Christ is the very principle of the grace bestowed upon all creatures.⁴ As such, the one through whom He comes, the one who participates in His very incarnation and mission coming into existence, is nearest the principle of grace and thus experiences its effects most powerfully. That which is closest to the fire is heated most. Indeed, Edouard Hugon, OP, has expressed this well.

The divine maternity is by its nature higher than adoptive sonship. This latter produces only a spiritual and mystic relationship, whereas the maternity of the Blessed Virgin establishes a relationship of nature, a relationship of consanguinity with Jesus Christ and one of affinity with the entire Trinity. Besides, adoptive sonship does not impose, as it were, such obligations on God: for the divine maternity imposed on Jesus those obligations of justice which ordinary children contract naturally in regard to their parents, and it confers on Mary that dominion and power over Him which are the natural right accompanying the dignity of motherhood.⁵

³ ST III, q. 27, a. 5: "Respondeo dicendum quod, quanto aliquid magis appropinquat principio in quolibet genere, tanto magis participat effectum illius principii, unde dicit Dionysius, IV cap. Cael. Hier., quod Angeli, qui sunt Deo propinquiore, magis participant de bonitatibus divinis quam homines. Christus autem est principium gratiae, secundum divinitatem quidem auctoritative, secundum humanitatem vero instrumentaliter, unde et Ioan. I dicitur, gratia et veritas per Iesum Christum facta est. Beata autem virgo Maria propinquissima Christo fuit secundum humanitatem, quia ex ea accepit humanam naturam. Et ideo prae ceteris maiorem debuit a Christo plenitudinem gratiae obtinere."

⁴ ST III, q. 24, a. 4; ST III, q. 49, a. 1.

⁵ Edouard Hugon, OP, *Marie, Plénie de Grâce*, 5th edition (1926), 63. Translation is that of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP.

Mary shares with the principle of grace an intimacy which surpasses the relationship between Christ and all other creatures. As such, it is fitting that she surpasses all other creatures in grace. The main source of this intimacy is born out of their natural relationship, that of mother and son. However, given the mystery of the hypostatic union wherein Christ's human and divine natures are intimately united, Mary can rightly be called the Theotokos, the mother not just of Jesus Christ as man, but the mother of the one Person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, she can rightly be called the Mother of God. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange says:

By her divine maternity Mary is related really to the Word made flesh. The relation so set up has the uncreated Person of the Incarnate Word as its term, for Mary is the Mother of Jesus, who is God. It is not precisely the humanity of Jesus which is the term of the relation, but rather Jesus Himself in Person: it is He and not His humanity that is Son of Mary. Hence Mary, reaching, as Cajetan says, even to the frontiers of the Divinity, belongs terminally to the hypostatic order, to the order of the personal union of the Humanity of Jesus to the Uncreated Word.⁶

We can see that the divine maternity of Mary is the cause of her being full of grace (and not the other way around).

The Predestination of Mary to Divine Motherhood

Ineffabilis Deus asserts that, “from the very beginning, and before time began, the eternal Father chose and prepared for his only-begotten Son a Mother in whom the Son of God would become incarnate and from whom, in the blessed fullness of time, he would be born into this world.”⁷ Moreover, *Lumen Gentium* affirms that Mary was, “predestined from eternity by that decree of divine providence which determined the incarnation of the Word to be the Mother of God...”⁸ The predestination of Mary to divine motherhood is but itself one aspect of the larger providential plan of the Incarnation and the salvation of humanity, which is the source and *ratio* of Mary's own predestination to divine motherhood (and ultimately, pleni-

⁶ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP, *The Mother of the Saviour*, trans. Bernard J. Kelly, CSSp (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2012), 15.

⁷ *Ineffabilis Deus*. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §488: “God sent forth his Son,” but to prepare a body for him, he wanted the free co-operation of a creature. For this, from all eternity God chose for the mother of his Son a daughter of Israel, a young Jewish woman of Nazareth in Galilee, “a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.”

⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, §61.

tude in grace). God's plan for creation and man's relation to Him is centered around the gratuitous gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. As *Ineffabilis Deus* states:

God Ineffable...having foreseen from all eternity the lamentable wretchedness of the entire human race which would result from the sin of Adam, decreed, by a plan hidden from the centuries, to complete the first work of his goodness by a mystery yet more wondrously sublime through the Incarnation of the Word. This he decreed in order that man who, contrary to the plan of Divine Mercy had been led into sin by the cunning malice of Satan, should not perish; and in order that what had been lost in the first Adam would be gloriously restored in the Second Adam.⁹

It is evident that God willed Mary to be a necessary piece of this divine plan. It is in and through this ark that the Savior would come to redeem mankind. Garrigou-Lagrange states:

The eternal predestination of Jesus included not only the Incarnation itself as object but also *all the circumstances of time and place in which it would be realized*, and especially the one expressed by the Nicene Creed in the words: "Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine." By the same eternal decree, therefore, Jesus was predestined to be Son of the Most High and Mary to be Mother of God."¹⁰

This is the role for which God first predestines Mary. As we shall see, all of her plenitude of grace and holiness, gifts from God, are bestowed *because of* that title which is most proper and formal to her, Theotokos. Indeed, Mary possesses many titles of great dignity: Queen of Heaven, Mother of the Church, Seat of Wisdom, etc., however, none of these titles surpasses in dignity that title which allows her to reach "even to the frontiers of the Divinity" by a relation to the very Person of the Son. Indeed, all Marian titles are intelligible only insofar as Mary is first the Theotokos. As such, Garrigou-Lagrange rightly states, "the divine maternity is therefore, as is commonly taught, the foundation, source, and root of all Mary's graces privileges, both those that preceded it as preparation, and those that accompanied it or followed from it as consequence."¹¹

⁹ *Ineffabilis Deus*.

¹⁰ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Savior*, 6–7.

¹¹ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Savior*, 24.

A Short Note on the Nature of Predestination

It is beyond the scope of this short work to delve into the details and controversies surrounding the tradition of predestination within Christianity. However, given the ease with which the doctrine may be misunderstood and also its fundamental importance in the doctrine of Mary's plenitude of grace, a few words ought to be stated.

Generally speaking, the relation between divine causality and human freedom admits of two basic approaches: incompatibilism and compatibilism. These two theories diverge precisely in their definition of human freedom, resulting in the former rendering divine causality of human acts incompatible with human freedom and the latter seeing divine causality and human freedom as entirely compatible. For the incompatibilist the human will is seen, as Steven Long puts, as a "no fly zone" for divine causality.¹² Free choices, it is said, require a lack of external influence, even from God. Were God to directly move a creature to a particular act, it would be impossible that such an act could be freely executed by the creature. Historically, within Catholicism this view has been associated most prominently with Luis de Molina, SJ, and his adherents.¹³

St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine (as well as, I would argue the majority of the Catholic tradition) hold to the compatibilist doctrine. While it may sometimes be true that an external influence which moves one to a particular act would mitigate human liberty, God is able to work upon the will in a way which effects and preserves human liberty rather than doing violence to it. Unlike a fellow creature, God is the very creator, architect, and sustainer of the human will. As such, He can move the creature not just to particular act X, but He can move that the creature freely co-will particular act X with God. God can work interiorly on the will to preserve free choice and cooperation with God's motion on the will. This is why St. Thomas states:

For an act to be violent it is not enough that its principle be extrinsic, but we must add "without the concurrence of him that suffers violence." This does not happen when the will is moved by an exterior principle: for it is the will that wills, though moved by another. But this movement would be violent, if it were coun-

¹² Steven A. Long, "St. Thomas Aquinas, Divine Causality, and the Mystery of Predestination," in *Thomism and Predestination: Principles and Disputations*, ed. Steven A. Long, Roger W. Nutt, and Thomas Joseph White, OP (Ave Maria FL: Sapientia Press, 2016), 75 – 76.

¹³ See Luis de Molina, SJ, *On Divine Foreknowledge: (Part IV of the Concordia)*, trans by Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988) and Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

ter to the movement of the will: which in the present case is impossible, since then the will would will and not will the same thing.¹⁴

How is this possible? In short, God can move a contingent thing contingently. In other words, God may preserve the contingent character of the human action. The human will is inclined toward Goodness Itself *by necessity*. If the human will were to “be offered an object which is good universally and from every point of view, the will tends to it of necessity, if it wills anything at all, since it cannot will the opposite”¹⁵ says St. Thomas precisely because the very nature of the will is to tend toward that which is good.¹⁶ Thus, when God moves the creature to perform particular action X via grace, this movement does not remove the potency for the creature to do otherwise precisely because action X is a particular good and not *universaliter bonum*. The free creature retains the real potency to reject the movement, and therefore God does not move the creature by necessity. If the creature is not moved by necessity then it retains true freedom of choice. It could will or not will.

The Divine will extends not only to the doing of something by the thing which He moves, but also to its being done in a way which is fitting to the nature of that thing. And therefore it would be more repugnant to the Divine motion, for the will to be moved of necessity, which is not fitting to its nature; than for it to be moved freely, which is becoming to its nature.¹⁷

However, God’s providential plan is always executed infallibly, not because God moves the creature necessarily (against its freedom of choice) but because God is simple and omnipotent. Therefore, whatever God wills will certainly come about, otherwise we would be required to state that God is frustrated by the wills of creatures and that He does not really have control over the world and what hap-

¹⁴ ST I-II, q. 9, a. 4, ad 2: “Ad secundum dicendum quod hoc non sufficit ad rationem violenti, quod principium sit extra, sed oportet addere quod nil conferat vim patiens. Quod non contingit, dum voluntas ab exteriori movetur, nam ipsa est quae vult, ab alio tamen mota. Esset autem motus iste violentus, si esset contrarius motui voluntatis. Quod in proposito esse non potest, quia sic idem vellet et non vellet.”

See also ScG, Book III, ch. 88.

¹⁵ ST I-II, q. 10, a. 2: “Unde si proponatur aliquod obiectum voluntati quod sit universaliter bonum et secundum omnem considerationem, ex necessitate voluntas in illud tendet, si aliquid velit, non enim poterit velle oppositum.”

¹⁶ ST I-II, q. 8, a. 1.

¹⁷ ST I-II, q. 10, a. 4, ad 1: “Ad primum ergo dicendum quod voluntas divina non solum se extendit ut aliquid fiat per rem quam movet, sed ut etiam eo modo fiat quo congruit naturae ipsius. Et ideo magis repugnaret divinae motioni, si voluntas ex necessitate moveretur, quod suae naturae non competit; quam si moveretur libere, prout competit suae naturae.”

pens in it.¹⁸ It would be the world which dictated to God what would happen, and not the other way around. Such a notion would destroy the basic conception of classical theism itself. As such, St. Thomas says that, “If God moves the will to

¹⁸ Of course, here we must make a brief note regarding the divine will. On the one hand, we know that God *in a certain way* wills many goods to creatures which do not actually result, for instance, the good of salvation is willed for all men though it would appear that not all men are saved. On the other hand, we know that what God wills *simpliciter* must follow, given the simplicity and omnipotence of the one willing. In order to make sense of this, we ought to employ the distinction of the antecedent and consequent will, a distinction used by St. Thomas (and drawn from St. John Damascene). ST I, q. 19, a. 6, ad 1: “To understand this we must consider that everything, in so far as it is good, is willed by God. A thing taken in its primary sense, and absolutely considered, may be good or evil, and yet when some additional circumstances are taken into account, by a consequent consideration may be changed into the contrary. Thus that a man should live is good; and that a man should be killed is evil, absolutely considered. But if in a particular case we add that a man is a murderer or dangerous to society, to kill him is a good; that he live is an evil. Hence it may be said of a just judge, that antecedently he wills all men to live; but consequently wills the murderer to be hanged. In the same way God antecedently wills all men to be saved, but consequently wills some to be damned, as His justice exacts. Nor do we will simply, what we will antecedently, but rather we will it in a qualified manner; for the will is directed to things as they are in themselves, and in themselves they exist under particular qualifications. Hence we will a thing simply inasmuch as we will it when all particular circumstances are considered; and this is what is meant by willing consequentially. Thus it may be said that a just judge wills simply the hanging of a murderer, but in a qualified manner he would will him to live, to wit, inasmuch as he is a man. Such a qualified will may be called a willingness rather than an absolute will. Thus it is clear that whatever God simply wills takes place; although what He wills antecedently may not take place.”

“Ad cuius intellectum, considerandum est quod unumquodque, secundum quod bonum est, sic est volitum a Deo. Aliquid autem potest esse in prima sui consideratione, secundum quod absolute consideratur, bonum vel malum, quod tamen, prout cum aliquo adiuncto consideratur, quae est consequens consideratio eius, e contrario se habet. Sicut hominem vivere est bonum, et hominem occidi est malum, secundum absolutam considerationem, sed si addatur circa aliquem hominem, quod sit homicida, vel vivens in periculum multitudinis, sic bonum est eum occidi, et malum est eum vivere. Unde potest dici quod iudex iustus antecederet vult omnem hominem vivere; sed consequenter vult homicidam suspendi. Similiter Deus antecederet vult omnem hominem salvari; sed consequenter vult quosdam damnari, secundum exigentiam suae iustitiae. Neque tamen id quod antecederet volumus, simpliciter volumus, sed secundum quid. Quia voluntas comparatur ad res, secundum quod in seipsis sunt, in seipsis autem sunt in particulari, unde simpliciter volumus aliquid, secundum quod volumus illud consideratis omnibus circumstantiis particularibus, quod est consequenter velle. Unde potest dici quod iudex iustus simpliciter vult homicidam suspendi, sed secundum quid vellet eum vivere, scilicet in quantum est homo. Unde magis potest dici velleitas, quam absoluta voluntas. Et sic patet quod quidquid Deus simpliciter vult, fit; licet illud quod antecederet vult, non fiat.”

See also Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The One God: A Commentary on the First Part of St. Thomas' Theological Summa*, trans. Dom Bede Rose, O.S.B. (Ex Fontibus Press, 2015), Ch. 19 and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought*, trans. Patrick Cummins, O.S.B. (Ex Fontibus Press, 2009), 341 – 342.

anything, it is incompatible with this supposition, that the will be not moved thereto. But it is not impossible simply. Consequently it does not follow that the will is moved by God necessarily.”¹⁹ As such, creaturely freedom is not mitigated by divine causality but truly caused by it. When we are moved by grace to some holy action, we are made to be more and not less free.

This applies to the predestination of Mary to divine motherhood. This is how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* can state both that “from all eternity God chose [Mary] for the mother of his Son” and that “he wanted [her] free co-operation.”²⁰ The infallible nature of divine providence and the execution of God’s plan in the world are entirely compatible with the liberty which he desires for his free creatures.

If this were not the case then we would have to posit one of two absurd consequences: either 1) Mary is inhuman or 2) God’s primordial plan of Incarnation and salvation was fallible, rendering its completion to be effectively a stroke of good luck. If man is by nature a rational and thus free creature, and if divine causality obliterated human freedom, then Mary, who was so eminently moved by God to good works and holiness, upheld from all defect and sin, would be not only not human, but she would be less than human precisely because she was perpetually moved by God to the utmost of holiness. Or, Mary would retain her holiness and the merit of her good actions, but only at the expense of the infallibility of the divine plan. We would be forced to maintain that the central moment of the entire created order hung precariously on the words of a small, scared girl in Nazareth two millennia ago. God waited with passive anticipation to see whether He would be able to execute His own divine will which was subject to being frustrated and overcome by Mary. Moreover, when she responded well to God’s grace, that she responded well could be attributed to her *apart from God and grace* (the grace being given by God, but that it be accepted and would have been due to Mary alone). The very consideration of these two options should suffice to show to the Christian their absurdity and thus the necessity of the compatibility between God’s causality and Mary’s free choice in her actions.

Indeed, God is not only the primary cause of our predestination to glory, God is the primary source of every last drop of good which emanates from our will. All good actions come from God as first cause. Indeed, St. Thomas tells us that “God

¹⁹ ST I-II, q. 10, a. 4, ad 3: “Ad tertium dicendum quod, si Deus movet voluntatem ad aliquid, impossibile est huic positioni quod voluntas ad illud non moveatur. Non tamen est impossibile simpliciter. Unde non sequitur quod voluntas a Deo ex necessitate moveatur.”

²⁰ CCC, §488.

is the cause of every action and He operates in every agent.”²¹ Moreover, St. Thomas also states that, “Of course, acts of choice and movements of the will are governed immediately by God,”²² and that “God alone directly works on the choice of man...”²³

Since all good comes primarily from He who is Goodness itself, the sole source of goodness, St. Thomas famously states that predestination is *ante praevisa merita*, which means that predestination is the cause of our goodness, not the effect. St. Thomas says, “Thus, it is impossible that the whole of the effect of predestination in general should have any cause as coming from us; because whatsoever is in man disposing him towards salvation, is all included under the effect of predestination; even the preparation for grace.”²⁴ In other words, if God is truly the source of all good, then it is impossible for us to be first good without God, such that God might foresee who will act well in life and predestine them accordingly. God does not foresee who will be good and who will be wicked, doling out grace to fit categories of holiness which escape and pre-exist His influence. Instead, predestination and the grace of God are first, causing whatever good habits and works we accomplish. It is impossible that one could be foreseen as good if one is not made to be good via the gift of grace. This is why St. Paul reminds us, “Who confers distinction upon you? What do you possess that you have not received? But if you have received it, why are you boasting as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor 4:7). Our Lord has spoken similarly: “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Indeed, this is why St. Augustine has written:

[God] promised not from the power of our will but from His own predestination. For He promised what He Himself would do, not what men would do. Because, although men do those good things which pertain to God’s worship, He Himself makes them to do what He has commanded; it is not they that cause Him to do what He has promised. Otherwise the fulfilment of God’s promises would not be in the power of God, but in that

²¹ ScG, III, Chapter 89, §7: “...Deus est causa omnis actionis, et operatur in omni agente. Est igitur causa motuum voluntatis.”

²² ScG III, Chap. 91, §2: “Nam electiones et voluntatum motus *immediate* a Deo disponuntur.” Emphasis is mine.

²³ ScG, III, Chap. 92, §2: “...Deus solus directe ad electionem hominis operetur...”

²⁴ ST I, q. 23, a. 5: “Et sic impossibile est quod totus praedestinationis effectus in communi habeat aliquam causam ex parte nostra. Quia quidquid est in homine ordinans ipsum in salutem, comprehenditur totum sub effectu praedestinationis, etiam ipsa praeparatio ad gratiam...”

of men; and thus what was promised by God to Abraham would be given to Abraham by men themselves.²⁵

Let us recall that none of this excludes our human free will. It is the wondrous nature of grace and divine motion to good actions that it makes us to act freely and not as robots. Such is the glory of the saints, that they cooperate with God's grace and are themselves co-causes with God of their good actions (God as the primary cause and man as the secondary cause). Thus, the wise Christian finds the golden mean between two extremes: spiritual pride in one's good actions, on the one hand, and rejection of the importance of good works, on the other. In the middle lies the recognition of the need for faith to inform every possible movement of our will *and* a recognition and reverence for the fact that the perfecting of our will is something which can only be done by God. We are, indeed, radically contingent upon God for all that we have, and thus we implore Him to, "Turn away your face from my sins; blot out all my iniquities. A clean heart create for me, God; renew within me a steadfast spirit," (Ps 51: 11 – 12).

If God is the primary cause of even our smallest inclinations toward the good then how much more must this be true of Mary's fiat, that blessed choice of abandonment whereby God's entire plan of Incarnation and salvation was made possible? Indeed, in this moment we see God's free choice of Mary to bear the Son of Man. God is not forced to choose Mary, but chooses her out of gratuitous love. He has not passively responded to her foreseen holiness, but has chosen her to become holy through His divine love. Moreover, Mary responds to this calling with complete freedom as well, choosing to abandon herself, however terrifying the implications, to God's providential plan. Garrigou says well: "Hence her liberty, following the example of that of Jesus, was a faithful and most pure image of God's liberty, which is at once sovereign and incapable of sin."²⁶ Truly Mary's fiat stands out as a model for the moral and spiritual life, a picture of the great love story between God and man.

The Fittingness of Mary's Plenitude of Grace

It is the call for Mary to become the Mother of God which is the source of the greatness of her dignity and grace. As Garrigou-Lagrange has put it, "...the divine maternity, considered in isolation from Mary's other dignities, is the end and reason of her fullness of grace, and is therefore higher than it."²⁷ Given that she would become not just the Queen of the Church or the Queen of Heaven, but that she

²⁵ Saint Augustine, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, Chap. 19.

²⁶ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Saviour*, 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

should have a *real relation* to the Second Person of the Trinity itself, that she should become the very Mother of God, it is, of course, fitting that God would decorate, ornament, and perfume her with an abundance of graces, graces which transcend those of any other creature, including the angels. She is closest to the principle of being and goodness, and thus she is showered with being and goodness, as the one who sits closest to the fire is warmed most. Garrigou-Lagrange says:

If, finally, she was predestined from all eternity to the highest degree of glory after Jesus, the reason is that she was predestined first of all to be His most worthy mother, and to retain that title during eternity after having enjoyed it in time. The saints who contemplate in Heaven the sublime degree of glory, so far surpassing that of the angels, in which Mary is enthroned, know that the reason why she was predestined to it is that she might be and might remain for eternity the most worthy Mother of God: *Mater Creatoris, Mater Salvatoris, Virgo Dei Genetrix*.²⁸

Garrigou-Lagrange even contemplates how deep the reverence of the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation must have been. Though he was indeed an angel of God, enjoying the very vision of God known only to the blessed in heaven, even he must recognize the eminence of Mary's grace. "And it is of this grace, germ and promise of glory, that the angel spoke when he said to Mary: 'Hail, full of grace.' Gazing at Mary's soul, he saw that, though he himself was in possession of the beatific vision, Mary's grace and charity far surpassed his for she possessed them in the degree required to become at that instant the Mother of God."²⁹ Continuing his musings on the thoughts of Gabriel, Garrigou-Lagrange says, "You are more intimate with God than I. He is about to become your Son, whereas I am but His servant."³⁰

The Many and Pre-Eminent Graces of Mary: The Immaculate Conception and Sanctifying Grace

Chief among the graces bestowed upon Mary as flowing from her divine maternity is the Immaculate Conception whereby Mary's nature was preserved from every defect attributable to sin and the fallen nature of the rest of mankind. All men are born into a state of divorce from God which demands that the healing salve of grace be applied by the hands of the Savior, Physician for the soul. And

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁹ Ibid., 29.

³⁰ Ibid., 56.

yet, Mary is unique in her having been conceived, from the very first moment of her existence, in friendship with God.³¹ As such, we may state that Mary was conceived already in habitual or sanctifying grace.³²

From this truth flows a number of implications for Mary's natural virtue and perfection. The results of original sin are manifold: a removal of original justice and thus the loss of immortality, the clouding of the intellect, and the perversion of the subordinated relation between the intellect and our emotions/passions. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, we can address many of these defects under the title of *concupiscence* which now makes it easy to fall into error and sin. "As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin (this inclination is called 'concupiscence')." ³³ But since Mary was not subject to this fall, she was not subject to its moral effects. As Garrigou-Lagrange says, "Since she had been preserved from original sin and its baneful effects, concupiscence and darkness of understanding, her body did not weigh down her mind but rather served it." ³⁴ In short, Mary is an exemplar for what a non-divine humanity looks like (apart from death, as we shall see) as preserved in the state of human nature which God had antecedently intended for man. In Mary, we see a mind always unclouded in apprehension and judgment, emotions which are always inclined toward the good and brought under the governance of reason, and a pure, simple love for that which is good and beautiful.

However, sanctifying grace is not merely the return to a healed nature and the state of original justice found in Eden. It is not simply a return to our natural end of happiness in limited communication and understanding of God. No, God responds to our sin with the gift of gratuitous elevation to participation in His divine life, where we are made perfect such that we can partake not just in communication

³¹ And yet, this should not be taken to mean that Mary is in no need of Christ *as Savior*. The Savior may save in two ways: 1) to prevent harm from being done to the creature to which it is subject by nature, and 2) to heal that harm which it has permitted to be done. While it is true that Mary was in no need of healing, her very fullness of grace is marked by salvation from the threat of human defect and sin, from which she has indeed been saved. As such, Garrigou-Lagrange says, "Hence it was most becoming that the perfect Redeemer should, by His merits, preserve His Mother from original sin and all actual sin," (*The Mother of the Saviour*, 43).

³² See Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Saviour*, 33: "It follows therefore that Mary was not preserved free from every stain of original sin otherwise than by receiving sanctifying grace into her soul from the first instant of her conception. Thus she was conceived in that state of justice and holiness which is the effect of the divine friendship as opposed to the divine malediction, and in consequence she was withdrawn from the slavery of the devil and subjection to the law of concupiscence."

³³ CCC, §418.

³⁴ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Saviour*, 30.

with God (as Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden) but entrance into the divine life of God itself, a direct intimacy with God *in His Essence*, an end which is completely transcendent from man's natural end.³⁵ This gratuitous calling toward a *supernatural* end requires supernatural gifts, especially those of faith, hope, and love, the theological virtues. St. Thomas tells us that, "That which is above man's nature is distinct from that which is according to his nature. But the theological virtues are above man's nature,"³⁶ and thus "man needed to receive in addition something supernatural to direct him to a supernatural end."³⁷ And as Mary received the highest plenitude of grace among all mere creatures, she possessed the highest degree of faith, hope, and love, graces elevating her above the natural order into the supernatural. Garrigou-Lagrange says, "Thus Mary enjoyed a special assistance of Divine Providence. This assistance – more effective than even that which belonged to the state of innocence – preserved all her faculties from faults, and kept her soul in a state of the most complete generosity."³⁸

Moreover, this sanctifying grace would include the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and all other infused virtues.³⁹ Since, "all seven [gifts] exist in every soul in the state of grace in a degree proportionate to its charity,"⁴⁰ and Mary, as we have already stated, possesses in a most efficacious way the theological virtues, we may conclude that Mary also possesses the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a superabundant way.

The Many and Pre-Eminent Graces of Mary: Her Growth in Holiness

However, unlike Jesus Christ, Mary's perfection increased and multiplied throughout her life. Garrigou-Lagrange says, "Of Our Blessed Lord alone can it be said that He never grew in grace or charity, for He alone received the complete fullness of them both at His conception in consequence of the hypostatic union," to which Mary is closest related but in which she does not directly participate as a

³⁵ See Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004) and Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

³⁶ ST I-II, q. 62, a. 2: "Sed contra, id quod est supra naturam hominis, distinguitur ab eo quod est secundum naturam hominis. Sed virtutes theologicae sunt super naturam hominis..."

³⁷ ST I-II, q. 62, a. 3: "...aliquid homini supernaturaliter adderetur, ad ordinandum ipsum in finem supernaturalem."

³⁸ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Saviour*, 52.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

mere creature.⁴¹ In this, Mary is like us, always reaching out toward a fuller apprehension, appreciation, and assimilation of the divine nature in ourselves. And even in this, she acts as a model and exemplar insofar as she grew in holiness without the hindrances of a clouded intellect, raging passions, and other distractions which beguile fallen man. Garrigou-Lagrance says, “Mary’s progress was the most continuous of all. It encountered no obstacle, was not halted nor delayed by attachment to self or to the things of this world. It was the most rapid of all, because the rate at which it commenced was determined by Mary’s fullness of grace and therefore surpassed that of all the saints.”⁴²

The Many and Pre-Eminent Graces of Mary: Her Perpetual Virginity

As Mary’s fullness of grace follows from her divine maternity, so too is her perpetual virginity fitting given her divine maternity (which, as we have said, is a part of the predestination of the Incarnation). It is beyond the scope of this present work to consider all of the reasons why St. Thomas affirms the fittingness of the virginal birth of Christ, especially since these wade into the question of St. Thomas’ treatment of the Immaculate Conception which is complex and admits of some disagreement among the Thomistic commentators.⁴³ Needless to say, one of the reasons given by St. Thomas for the fittingness of Mary’s virginity is that it would be most proper for Christ to have no earthly, biological father, and that his only father be the First Person of the Trinity.⁴⁴ Moreover, Christ’s virginal birth might “appear as an exemplar” for the rebirth required from all of those who follow Christ. The rebirth of the Christian comes about through a virginal and spiritual

⁴¹ Ibid., 74.

⁴² Ibid., 76.

⁴³ See Garrigou-Lagrance, *The Mother of the Saviour*, 45–49 wherein Garrigou-Lagrance argues that Thomas’ teaching underwent development on this issue, and that there is good reason to believe that St. Thomas had embraced the teaching essentially as defined in *Ineffabilis Deus* by the end of his life. Moreover, Fr. Garrigou-Lagrance explains the proper intention behind St. Thomas’ most famous words on this matter while also maintaining that Thomas “did not distinguish sufficiently the debt [of original sin] from actually incurring the stain,” (47). Moreover, to Fr. Garrigou-Lagrance’s credit, he praises Duns Scotus for his correct teaching regarding this doctrine: “It is Scotus’s flory (Thomists should consider it a point of honour to admit that their adversary was right in this matter) to have shown the supreme becomingness of this privilege [of the Immaculate Conception]...” (42).

⁴⁴ ST III, q. 28, a. 1: “Primo, propter mittentis patris dignitatem conservandam. Cum enim Christus sit verus et naturalis Dei filius, non fuit conveniens quod alium patrem haberet quam Deum, ne Dei dignitas transferretur ad alium.”

(rather than carnal) spouse in the Church.⁴⁵ St. Thomas here cites St. Augustine, who says, “It behooved that our Head, by a notable miracle, should be born, after the flesh, of a virgin, that He might thereby signify that His members would be born, after the Spirit, of a virgin Church.”⁴⁶

Of course, Mary’s virginity is perpetual for she remains a virgin even after the conception and birth of Our Lord. Here St. Thomas gives four arguments of fittingness for Mary’s perpetual virginity: 1) as Christ is the only Son of the Father, so ought he to be the only son of his mother; 2) Mary’s participation in procreation through the conjugal act would be opposed to the dignity of the Holy Spirit who finds special sanctuary in the womb of Mary as that place wherein He “had formed the flesh of Christ;” 3) that this would imply a certain ungratefulness on the part of Mary regarding that Son which she already has and that miracle whereby she conceived without intercourse; 4) that it would have been an “extreme presumption” (*maximam praesumptionem*) for Joseph to have taken away that special grace of virginity given to her by God.⁴⁷ As we can see, all of the reasons for Mary’s virginity, not only at the time of Christ’s conception, but throughout the entirety of her life, are rooted in God effecting a fitting mother for Christ.

The Many and Pre-Eminent Graces of Mary: Her Suffering and Death

After considering just some of the many and pre-eminent graces of Mary, we are left with one particular question: if Mary was truly free from original sin, free from personal sin, and filled to the brim with holiness unlike any other mere creature, why did she suffer so? Any parent can only imagine the horror of having a child ripped from them, falsely accused, spat upon, stripped, mocked, and brutally killed. Moreover, perhaps harder for us to understand, Mary certainly grieved, like her son, for the mass of sin of which made Christ’s self-sacrifice necessary. Garrigou-Lagrange says:

But to know just how far grief for sin can go, one must turn to the heart of Mary. Her grief sprang from an unequalled love for God, for Jesus crucified, and for souls – a love which surpassed that of the greatest saints, and even of all the saints united, a love which had never ceased to grow, a love which had never been

⁴⁵ ST III, q. 28, a. 1: “Quarto, propter ipsum finem incarnationis Christi, qui ad hoc fuit ut homines renascerentur in filios Dei, non ex voluntate carnis, neque ex voluntate viri, sed ex Deo, idest ex Dei virtute. Cuius rei exemplar apparere debuit in ipsa conceptione Christi.”

⁴⁶ St. Augustine, *De Sanct. Virg.*

⁴⁷ ST III, q. 28, a. 3.

restrained by the slightest fault or imperfection. If such was Mary's love, what must her grief have been!⁴⁸

This sentiment is rendered beautifully in the prayerful words of the *Stabat Mater*:

Quis non posset contristari
Matrem Christi contemplari
dolentum cum filio?

Pro peccatis suae gentis
vidit Iesum in tormentis
et flagellis subditum.

Vidit suum dulcem natum
moriendo desolatum
dum emisit spiritum.

Who would be unable to feel compassion on beholding Christ's
Mother suffering with her Son?

She saw Jesus in torment and subjected to lashing for the sins of
His people

She saw her sweet child dying, forsaken, as He gave up his spir-
it.⁴⁹

The same mystery of suffering in holiness arises when one contemplates the death of Mary. Of course, for the Mother of God, death was not a punishment for sin, since she was sinless. It is noteworthy that there is disagreement among the tradition whether Mary did indeed die. St. Thomas holds that she did die,⁵⁰ as did many of the Church Fathers, such as St. John Damascene.⁵¹ However, it is beyond the scope of this brief work to consider the arguments of those who held otherwise. However, if she did indeed die, why?

⁴⁸ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Saviour*, 104.

⁴⁹ Diversely attributed to Jacopone da Todi, Pope Innocent III, and St. Bonaventure. Translation is mine, though based on the literal translation derived from www.stabatmater.info.

⁵⁰ *Expositio Salutationis angelicae*, a. 1: "The Blessed Virgin was spared this penalty [that the body turn to dust], for her body was raised up into heaven, and so we believe that after her death she was revived and transported into heaven."

"Et ab hac immunis fuit beata virgo, quia cum corpore assumpta est in caelum. Credimus enim quod post mortem resuscitata fuerit, et portata in caelum."

⁵¹ See *Three Sermons on the Dormition of the Virgin*.

First, while Mary was not guilty of sin, she did not receive that special grace given to Adam and Eve in the Garden whereby their bodies would not corrupt and fall into death. For St. Thomas, death is *natural* for animals, including man (as rational animal), insofar as the body is composed of matter, and matter naturally corrupts.⁵² As such, Garrigou-Lagrange states, “Thus the deaths of Jesus and Mary were consequences of the inherent weakness of human nature left to itself and unsustained by any preternatural gift.”⁵³

But as with Mary’s suffering at the foot of the Crucified Lord, her death is fitting given her radical communion with her son. As strange as it may seem, we may list even Mary’s suffering and death among the plenitude of her graces. In her dying, Mary possesses radical “participation in the Cross of Jesus,”⁵⁴ handing herself over to the same death as her son, bearing the burdens of that death which, like her son, she did not warrant. Such an embrace of death consummates her communion with Jesus Christ. Garrigou-Lagrange points to the words of St. Francis de Sales:

The Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, died of love for her Son....
If the early Christians were said to have but one heart and one soul because of their perfect mutual love, if St. Paul lived no longer for himself but Christ lived in him because of the intense union of his heart with the heart of his Master... how much more true is it that the Blessed Virgin and her Son had but one soul, one heart, and one life... so that her Son lived in her.”⁵⁵

We return again to the contemplative words of the *Stabat Mater*, as theological-ly robust as they are spiritually edifying. In the prayer below, the penitent soul calls out to the Blessed Mother to help him unite himself with the Crucified Lord. Mary is called upon precisely because it is she who has most perfectly exemplified how to do the following.

Fac ut portem Christi mortem
Passionis fac consortem
Et plagas recolere.

Fac me plagis vulnerari,
Fac me cruce inebriari,
Et cruore Filii.

⁵² ST I-II, q. 85, aa. 5 & 6; *De malo*, q. 5, a. 5.

⁵³ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Saviour*, 125.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁵ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Saviour*, 126. Cited from St. Francis de Sales, *Homiliae duae de dormitione Virginis Mariae*.

Grant that I may bear the death of Christ,
 the fate of his Passion,
 and contemplate His wounds.

Grant that I may be wounded with His wounds,
 inebriated by the cross
 and by His Blood.

In a mysterious way, it is precisely Mary's holiness and plenitude of grace which makes her suffering and death fitting, not because she had merited the suffering of a grieving mother or the rending of soul from body, but because she, in all things, is but a window of clarity into the life of her son. As he suffered and died, so did she. As the members of Christ's Body suffer and die in him, so does she. Her anguish in life, unstained by sin, is all that much more meritorious insofar it embraces that which is undeserved, all *for the sake of* God's love for men, even those men who spit upon and mock God. Garrigou-Lagrange says so well:

There is one wonderful thing, one delight of contemplatives, which we should not overlook. It is that the privilege of the Immaculate Conception and the fullness of grace did not withdraw Mary from pain, but rather made her all the more sensitive to suffer from contact with sin, the greatest of evils. Precisely because she was so pure, precisely because her heart was consumed by the Love of God, Mary suffered pains to which our imperfection makes us insensible.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Though much more can be said regarding the plenitude of the grace of Mary, it should be clear that her holiness, her very being, is more radically connected with God than any other mere creature in creation. All of her honorific names, her myriad of perfections, her adornment in an abundance of graces, etc. all flow directly from that which most properly describes her, *Mother of God*. This title far surpasses the dignity of Christ's bishops, popes, and saints. Recall that at Pentecost, it is Mary who is present, uniting the Apostles at the birth of the Church, acting as their (and now our) mother. Mary herself did not receive the office of priest or bishop, but as Garrigou-Lagrange reminds us, "had Mary received the priestly ordination... she would have received something *less* than what is implied in her title of Mother of God."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Saviour*, 45.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

God did not wait upon Mary to see if she would be a worthy mother for Him. God did not risk a mother who would be unfitting as an ark of the new covenant. These notions would imply that God waits upon man to be good apart from Him, rather than being for us the source of our every good, just as He is the source for our very being *hic et nunc*. Moreover, these notions would imply a separation between God and His mother, a potency for division, tension, and even the thwarting of the divine plan of the Incarnation. It is God Himself who, in the most proper sense of the word, *predestined* Mary to *freely be* that luminous gate through which Christ entered the world and through which the world can enter Christ. The predestination of Mary to be the Mother of God made her supremely fitting for her plenitude of grace. This showering of graces upon Mary effected her *free participation* in the mystery of the Incarnation. As such, this doctrine of Mary's predestination admits of no distance between God and his Mother, but instead causes their profound unity. For this reason, Garrigou-Lagrange places his finger directly upon the centrality of this doctrine for our every understanding of who Mary is.

For the divine maternity, being but a real relation to the Incarnate Word, is not enough of itself to sanctify Mary. But it called out for, or demanded, the fullness of grace which was granted her to raise her to the level of her singular mission. She could not have been predestined to be any other kind of mother to the Saviour than a worthy one. Everything follows from that certain truth. All Mariology is dominated by it...⁵⁸

All Mariology ought to, therefore, incorporate and contemplate the indispensable character of this doctrine. The simple and sweet power of God to work on and with humans for the sake of truth and goodness reached an apex in His own mother. Like the sun, God is the sole source of that heat which warms the world and causes life to be. God is the sole source of being. And as being is convertible with goodness, God is the sole source of goodness. Can it be a surprise, then, that He predestined, that is, prepared, such a lovely creature as his mother to be as she was? Is it a surprise that she was so full of goodness, the perfections of being, withheld from mixing in any way with defect and non-being? Is it a surprise that that which is nearest the sun is so enveloped in its warmth? This woman "clothed in the sun" (Rev 12:1) is indeed clothed in divinity.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 23.

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