

Divine providence often furnishes Catholic converts with ironic stories about the twists and turns on their journeys home to the Catholic Church. In my case, as a former Protestant minister with deep anti-Catholic convictions, it was my Saul-like crusade against Mary that was wondrously transformed by God’s grace into a deep filial love for the Mother of God. As they say, the bigger they come, the harder they fall—in love.

“Over My Dead Calvinist Body!”

For many years, I considered Marian doctrine and devotion to be symptomatic of a mortal infection within Catholics; indeed, it represented what was most wrong with Catholicism. Paradoxically, my former anti-Marian views have resulted in an appreciation for the common objections frequently raised against the Church’s teachings about Mary.

When I was an Evangelical, the one overarching reason why I opposed Catholic teaching about Mary was that I believed that it undermined the perfect work of Christ and robbed Him of His glory. Today, the one overarching reason why I embrace the

Church's teaching is that I now see Mary as the perfect work of Christ and the greatest revelation of His glory. She no more steals the Son's glory than the moon steals the sun's.

In view of the potholes and detours I have encountered along the road to Rome, perhaps it would be useful to clarify how this Evangelical came to accept the Church's teachings.

Drawing a Bead

I recall the days when I was still in a sort of spiritual "no man's land" between my Evangelical past and my eventual home with Rome. I could no longer honestly preach as a Protestant minister, but I still had lingering doubts about Catholic doctrine. One by one, however, my doubts fell away as I studied Catholic theology and tradition until, finally, only the Marian doctrines remained.

These were substantial obstacles for me. Cradle Catholics often have no idea of the repugnance "Bible Christians" feel for Marian doctrines and devotions. It was then that someone mailed me a plastic rosary. As I opened the package, I felt I was facing the toughest obstacle of all. Yet, by that time, so many doctrines of the Catholic Church had proven to be biblically sound that I decided to step out in faith on this one. I began, hesitatingly, to pray my first Rosary, offering it for a specific intention, a situation that seemed hopeless by human standards.

Wonder of wonders, my prayers were answered. That seemingly impossible situation was completely reversed. This was success far beyond my expectations. I was astonished.

Still, a greater miracle was under way, one that was revealed to me by a conversation with an old friend from college. He knew me when I was most ardently anti-Catholic, and he had been watching my Romeward journey with increasing alarm. One day he called and cut right to the point: "So, Scott, are you worshipping Mary yet?"

"C'mon, Chris. You know that Catholics don't worship Mary. They simply venerate her."

"Really, Scott, what's the difference? There's no biblical basis

either way.”

I began fingering my rosary beads, and I was emboldened. I proceeded on biblical principles. First, I reminded Chris that, as a man, Christ fulfilled God’s law perfectly, including the commandment to honor one’s father and mother. The Hebrew word for honor, *kabbed*, literally means “to glorify.” So Christ didn’t just honor His Heavenly Father. He also perfectly honored His earthly mother, Mary, by bestowing His own divine glory upon her.

Our veneration of Mary, then, is an essential part of our imitation of Christ. We follow Him not just by honoring our own mothers, but also by honoring whomever He honors—and with the same honor that He bestows.

Here was the greater miracle I gained through the Rosary. From that moment, I sensed how praying the beads deepened my own theological penetration of Scripture. Mary was no longer an obstacle to faith; she was opening its mysteries to me.

The Gospel of Jesus Embodied in Mary

Jesus announced the Gospel, and then proceeded to fulfill it. But the Gospel did not change the Second Person of the Trinity. The eternal Son did not gain a single drop of glory for Himself—after living, dying, and rising as man—that He lacked beforehand. God did not create and redeem the world in order to *get* more glory, but rather to *give* it. There is no tug-of-war between the Creator and His creatures. The Father made and redeemed us through the Son and the Spirit, but They did it for us—starting with Mary, in whom it was accomplished not only first, but best.

Do we detract from Christ’s finished work by affirming its perfect realization in Mary? On the contrary, we celebrate His work precisely by focusing our attention on the human person who manifests it most perfectly.

Mary is not God, but she is the Mother of God. She is only a creature, but she is God’s greatest creation. Just as artists long to paint one masterpiece among their many works, so Jesus

made His mother to be His greatest masterpiece. To continue the metaphor: No artist is offended when we praise his greatest work. In fact, he might be offended if we don't. To affirm the truth about Mary does not detract from Jesus, although *not* to affirm it could.

Mary is directly related to God by a natural bond of covenant kinship, as the Mother of Jesus, to whom she gave her own flesh and blood. This bond is what enables us to share the New Covenant grace of Christ by adoption. Furthermore, Jesus is legally bound by His Father's law ("Honor your father and mother") to share His honor with Mary, as her Son. Indeed, He fulfilled this law more perfectly than any son has ever done, by bestowing the gift of His divine glory upon her. And we are simply called to imitate Him.

We Are Family

Pope John Paul II has stated: "God in His deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family, since He has in Himself fatherhood, sonship, and the essence of the family, which is love."¹ The work of salvation is the work of all three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Our redemption thus assumes Trinitarian and family proportions.

The First Person of the Trinity is now Our Father (cf. Jn. 20:17) because of the saving work of the Son, who is the "the first-born among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29), and so the Holy Spirit is "the spirit of sonship," who causes us to cry "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15). This is what is so distinctive about the Christian religion: It is the Gospel of God's sharing His family life and love with mankind.

The story of our redemption, then, unfolds precisely as a family history, with a Father, an older Brother, and many siblings, united in a bond of love. Only one more person remains to make

¹ *Puebla: A Pilgrimage of Faith* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1979), 86.

the correspondence perfect: a mother. No family is complete without a loving mother, and every motherless family feels this absence as an aching need. Our need for a mother is implicit even in the word Saint Paul uses to describe our relationship with one another. We are “brethren”—in Greek, *adelphoi*, meaning “from the womb.” As brothers in Jesus Christ, we share a common mother, and she is His own mother.

Thus the correspondence is complete. God’s family is perfect, lacking nothing. In His tender mercy, God gave us a mother. And it all began with the gift of Mary as mother: She obeyed the Father by bearing His Son in the power of the Holy Spirit—for us.

Christmas’ Eve

Mary’s role is not merely incidental to Jesus’ life. We find it foreshadowed in the first pages of the Old Testament, in the life of Eve, the mother of all the living. We find it, too, in the last pages of the New Testament, in the Book of Revelation, where Mary is depicted symbolically as the Ark of the New Covenant, the vessel chosen to bear the baby who was our Redeemer (Rev. 11:19 *et seq.*). By her “yes” to God, Mary cooperated in the redemption of Eve’s children, through the reversal of Eve’s sin.

With stunning clarity, Saint Irenaeus, in the second century, described Mary’s role in God’s overarching plan:

By disobeying, [Eve] became the cause of death for herself and for the whole human race. In the same way, Mary, though she also had a husband, was still a virgin, and by obeying, she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race. . . . The knot of Eve’s disobedience was untied by Mary’s obedience. What Eve bound through her unbelief, Mary loosed by her faith.²

² Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies)*, 3, 22, as quoted in Luigi Gambero, S.M., *Mary and the Fathers of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 54. See also Catechism, no. 494.

A Mother's Work Is Never Done

The history of redemption is a story that involves human participation. The Apostle Paul spoke of this mystery when he stated, "We are God's co-workers" (1 Cor. 3:9, New American Bible). How is this? Can't God get the job done Himself? Of course He can. But since He is a Father, His job is to raise up mature sons and daughters by making us co-workers. And His work is our redemption, which He shared in an unparalleled way with Mary—to whom God entrusted such tasks as feeding His Son with her own milk, singing Him to sleep, and accompanying Him all the way to the Cross where she gave her sorrowful yes to His self-offering. In short, the Father willed that His Son's entire existence as a man would hinge, so to speak, upon the ongoing *fiat* of Mary. Can there be a more intimate "co-worker"?

Being a disciple, a co-worker with Jesus, takes effort. At times, it takes suffering. One passage that seemed to have escaped my attention as a Protestant was Saint Paul's rather curious line, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col. 1:24). Cradle Catholics may remember with some fondness being told (in the event of an unsuccessful team tryout, a skinned knee, or a broken heart) to "offer it up." This simple phrase holds the key that unlocks the mystery of our co-redemption. By consciously uniting our sufferings to Our Lord's redemptive sufferings, we become co-workers. By uniting her heart to His, especially at Calvary, the Blessed Mother became the co-worker *par excellence*.

This understanding was summarized at Vatican II (1962-65):

This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect (LG 62; cf. Catechism, no. 969).

However, Mary's divine maternity did not end with her Son's Resurrection and Ascension, nor even after her Assumption, as *Lumen Gentium* continues:

Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. . . . Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix (*ibid.*).

It is significant that Vatican II and the Catechism describe Mary's divine motherhood as a "saving office," which provides the basis for her rather remarkable titles. But what is meant by the phrase "saving office"?

Mother in the Middle

A well-trained theologian, Pope John Paul II has introduced the compact phrase "maternal mediation" into the Church's theological vocabulary. And it seems to capture the very heart of Marian doctrine and devotion.

As an Evangelical, I used to rush to the one verse that seemed to snuff out this seemingly heretical spark: Saint Paul's categorical assertion that Christ is the only "mediator between God and men" (1 Tim. 2:5). How dare we refer to Mary's maternal mediation!

First, the Greek word used here for "one" is *eis*, which means "first" or "primary," not *monos*, which means "only" or "sole." Just as there is one mediator, there is also one divine sonship, which we all share—by way of participation—with Christ (*fili in Filio*, sons in the Son). Christ's mediation does not exclude Mary's, but rather establishes it, by way of her participation.

Furthermore, the Epistle to the Hebrews explains Christ's high priesthood in terms of His being the first-born Son of God (Heb. 1:5–2:17), which serves as the basis for our divine sonship (Heb. 2:10–17), as well as our priestly sanctity and service (cf. Heb. 13:10–16; 1 Pet. 2:5). Once again, there is no tug-of-war between Christ's one priesthood and our participation in it.

As first-born Son in God’s family, Jesus mediates as the High Priest between the Father and His children, whereas Mary mediates as Queen Mother (cf. 1 Kings 2:19; Rev. 12:1-17). This is what her maternal mediation is all about. For the Father, Mary mothers the Son. For us sinners, she mothers our Savior. And for her Son, she mothers His siblings. When it comes to Mary’s role in God’s saving plan, “mother” is not only a noun, but a verb, and hence an office.

As the Mother of God and His children, Mary shows us how to glorify the Father, not by groveling, but by receiving the gift of His Son in the fullness of the Spirit. That is how God’s sovereign grace enables us to share in His glory, and so become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). So if you want to judge how well a person grasps the Gospel in its essence, find out how much they make of having God as their Father—and Mary as their mother.

Christ Won Her Winning Ways

The theological concept of *merit* is frequently misunderstood by Catholics and Protestants alike. If merit is understood as a purely economic term, it’s untrue and offensive; but if it is understood in a familial sense, it is as natural as an inheritance, or an allowance. In other words, as children in God’s family, we merit as a child earns dessert—by eating everything on his plate. What father begrudges his kids the gifts he gives them, or resents those whom he rewards? As Saint Augustine wrote: “[I]n crowning their merits you are crowning your own gifts” (as quoted in Catechism, no. 2006).

According to the Catechism, “God’s fatherly action” enables us to merit:

Filial adoption, in making us partakers by grace in the divine nature, can bestow *true merit* on us as a result of God’s gratuitous justice. This is our right by grace, the full right of love, making us “co-heirs” with Christ (Catechism, no. 2009, original emphasis).

Christ has merited our capacity to merit—which He confers on us with the grace of His divine sonship and the life of His Spirit. Indeed, Jesus did not merit a single thing for Himself, since there was nothing He needed. Thus, He only merits according to our need.

Where does God the Father show the world just how much His Son really merited? In each one of us, to be sure, but most of all in Mary. Unlike the rest of us—in whom there is often a yawning gap between what we want and what God wants—with Mary there is no gap. By the gift of an unsurpassed grace, Mary attained the goal of the covenant: a perfect interpersonal union of divine and human wills. With Mary, the ideal and real are one and the same.

Bad for Ecumenism?

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, for “Bible Christians,” Marian doctrines are perhaps the most frightening aspect of Catholicism. Some Catholics recognize this and respond by downplaying all things Marian—at least when they’re dealing with Protestants—for fear that they’ll offend or scare away a friend who’s drawing near. Yet, as we have seen, the Marian doctrines are not something incidental to our faith; they touch upon the central truths. They affect our relationship with God, with the Church, and with one another. Moreover, two of these Marian teachings have, in recent times, been solemnly defined as dogmas: the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950). By these extraordinary actions, the Church seems to be saying, quite clearly, that today is no time to hide our mother away.

Throughout the history of the Church, the definition of dogmas has stimulated the apostolic and theological energies of some of the best minds, especially when a definition becomes the subject of controversy. More recently, many Protestants—including the late Max Thurian of the ecumenical community in Taizé, France—objected strenuously after hearing rumors that Pope Pius XII was about to define the dogma of Mary’s bodily

Assumption into heaven at the end of her earthly life. After all, where does the Assumption appear in the Bible? Yet Pope Pius XII would indeed define the dogma, and Max Thurian would himself, eventually, enter the Catholic Church, be ordained a priest, and pass from this life on August 15, 1996, the Solemnity of the Assumption.

Authentic ecumenical progress is not simply the result of our own human energies. Nor is it advanced by compromise on either side. Pope John Paul II wrote:

Here it is not a question of altering the deposit of faith, changing the meaning of dogmas, eliminating essential words from them, accommodating truth to the preferences of a particular age. . . . The unity willed by God can be attained only by the adherence of all to the content of revealed faith in its entirety.³

Ecumenical unity thus requires a special grace and the work of God, who acts for the sake of His family. Accordingly, we should not expect Him to work *apart from* but *through* the mother He gave us to serve as the symbol and source of family unity.

It may be significant, in this connection, that experts often trace the rise of Catholic ecumenism back to the early 1950s. This immediately followed the definition of the Assumption and the celebration of a Marian Year in 1954 as the centenary of the definition of the Immaculate Conception. If there ever was a time when Catholic ecumenism could have been expected to go into a deep-freeze, it would have been that decade. But instead of a chill, Catholics and Protestants experienced the start of a great thaw.

As we begin the third millennium, I believe that God wants to use Mary to bring a deep grace of conversion to all Christendom, not only Protestant and Orthodox, but Catholic as well. This fits with the Holy Father's call for authentic ecumenism to be based

³ Encyclical Letter On Commitment to Ecumenism *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), no. 18.

on a “dialogue of conversion.”⁴ Such conversion might seem improbable by human standards, but it’s one that I know can take place, because I have known it myself as a singular grace from God, mediated by His mother.

We can begin this dialogue now, if only we speak with the courage of our convictions. As we celebrate the jubilee of Christ’s birth from Mary, how fitting that we turn to her, who gave the Word flesh.

Scott Hahn is an internationally known Catholic lecturer and apologist. He received his doctorate in Theology from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and is a professor of Theology at Franciscan University of Steubenville. In addition to the Catholic for a Reason series, his books include The Lamb’s Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth (Doubleday), A Father Who Keeps His Promises: God’s Covenant Love in Scripture (Servant Books), Understanding ‘Our Father’: Biblical Reflections on the Lord’s Prayer (Emmaus Road), and Scripture Matters: Reading the Bible from the Heart of the Church (Emmaus Road).

⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 82.