

2007

# Mary's Virginity as "the Sign of Her Faith": A Study of the Nature-Grace Dynamic

Patricia A. Sullivan

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sullivan, Patricia A. (2007) "Mary's Virginity as "the Sign of Her Faith": A Study of the Nature-Grace Dynamic," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 58, Article 5.

Available at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies/vol58/iss1/5](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol58/iss1/5)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Studies by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

**MARY'S VIRGINITY AS "THE SIGN OF HER FAITH":  
A STUDY OF THE NATURE-GRACE DYNAMIC**

*Patricia A. Sullivan, Ph.D.\**

**Introduction**

On the topic of virginity, members of the contemporary Church would not seem to be in attunement with the Church of the Fathers either in concern for physical purity or in explicit consciousness of the symbolic dimension of the celibate life. Given the Second Vatican Council's focus upon the importance of the lay state, in which resides a mostly married Catholic population, it is perhaps understandable why the full significance of celibacy might occasionally elude today and why the very topic of celibacy does not draw the concerted reflection of past generations. Yet the *Theotokos* continues to receive great devotion even on the popular level for her status as "Ever Virgin." There is no contradiction here, although the logic of de-emphasizing virginity or celibacy in general while continuing to praise Mary's virginity in particular probably exists on an intuitive level for most Catholics. The logic can be articulated systematically, building upon a certain theological context of statements of the Fathers about the virginity of Mary.

While it is true that early Church thinkers extolled virginity in itself as a state of life of discipleship—a tradition that no contemporary Catholic should want to dismiss, their discussion of Mary's virginity also was cast, even if only implicitly, within the larger matter of the nature-grace dynamic. When the claim of many Christians of Mary's perpetual virginity is understood as

\*Dr. Patricia Sullivan is an Associate Professor in the Theology Department of St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire.

an emblem of her sanctified state rather than simply as a physical reality, in it is disclosed the most dramatic example of divine-human interaction involving a human person saved by the grace of Christ. Thereby countered is a perception of celibacy as an unnecessary anomaly based upon a faulty notion of purity. Purity is not so much about a lack (of sexual activity) as about a fullness (of the grace of Christ). Mary's submersion in the mission of Christ was complete; this is reflected in her state "purified" by grace, a sanctified state apparent in that which the early Church recognized as the virginal conception proving the divinity of Mary's Son. While Mary's virginity affirms celibacy in itself as a worthy state for disciples of Christ, it does not invalidate other states of life as befitting of Christians. Indeed, to understand Mary's virginity within the nature-grace dynamic is to expose most fully the meaning of her example of faith for all Christian states. It also is to grasp the relationship of the Church's Marian doctrines to theological anthropology and, hence, to discipleship.

To reflect upon Mary's virginity as "the sign of her faith," in the words of paragraph 506 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,<sup>1</sup> writings of key Church Fathers of East and West—Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo, respectively—that theologically link Mary's virginity to her total orientation toward God will be considered. Then, after a brief summary of a contemporary Catholic explanation of the relationship between nature and grace from Karl Rahner, reflection will turn to the Virgin Mary as model of a grace-filled existence in discipleship of Christ. Then a short commentary will be offered about the relevance of the Catholic Church's most recently promulgated Marian dogmas, for reflection upon the nature-grace dynamic in which Mary's faith, disclosed in her virginity, can be a guide for all Christians to an extent not always recognized. As a postscript of sorts, this final reflection will note the ecumenical value of consideration of Catholic Marian dogmas from the standpoint of nature and grace. The lens through

<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications from the Editio Typica* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 506. Citations are to paragraph numbers.

which this study will be made is the assertion, seemingly of Gregory and certainly of Augustine, that Mary took a vow of virginity before the Annunciation, a notion in which Catholics can find a very particular expression of the divine-human relationship but in which fellow Christians in other denominations may find meaning, too.<sup>2</sup> Gregory, after all, is venerated as a saint by both Catholic and Orthodox Christians. Augustine, dear to both Catholics and Protestants, is a saint in the Catholic Church and has been regarded as such by Orthodox Christians, too, even in the latter's reservations about his thought. Both Fathers saw the relevance of Mary's virginity for all Christians, not only because of its fittingness for the Incarnation but also for its instructiveness in faith. So, too, did other Church Fathers, but Gregory and Augustine's works offer pointed statements about Mary's spiritual disposition and therefore provide especial clarity for this study. It is this, as it is expressed in Mary's virginal state, that is the principle concern; whether or not Mary took a vow of virginity before the Annunciation is in some sense irrelevant to this reflection. That which is relevant is that the Fathers saw so powerfully in Mary the disciple's necessary absolute orientation toward God that belief in Mary's vow of virginity—drawn from apparent scriptural warrant—is emblematic of her exemplary and efficacious relationship with God.

### 1. Church Fathers on Mary's Virginity

As attestation to the divinity of Jesus, Church Fathers focused frequently upon the physical integrity of Mary before and after the birth of her Son, although some Fathers were less concerned about this than about Mary's absence of sexual relations. But another line of the Fathers' thought—one which

<sup>2</sup> J.-P. Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* 46, 1127-1150, includes *Oratio in diem natalem Christi*, wherein Mary's vow of virginity is discussed (see col. 1140), under the section of Gregory's works labeled "*Dubia*." Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 221, n. 11; orig. ed., *Maria nel pensiero dei padri della Chiesa* (Milan: Edizione Paoline, 1991), observed that "authenticity of this homily [*Oratio in diem natalem Christi*], . . . remains open to question, even if there is a strong presumption in its favor."



might also be seen as a testament to the divinity of Jesus Christ but which additionally is instructive in the life of discipleship in a way in which Mary's bodily condition is not—is Mary's spiritual disposition whose possibility exists in and for the Incarnation. Her total orientation toward God is expressed in the thought of Gregory and Augustine perhaps most profoundly in the notion of a vow taken by Mary even before the Annunciation, a claim that some scholars see at least implicitly in the works of other Fathers such as Ambrose and Jerome and one that appears explicitly in the writings of many to most medieval Christian thinkers and of many modern theologians.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, the claim of Mary's bodily integrity is not divorced from notions of her sanctified state. In his book *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, Luigi Gambero noted that Gregory of Nyssa provided "a moral explanation to the mystery of the Lord's virginal birth" that implies spiritual and bodily purity of Mary because of her role in the Incarnation. In Gambero's assessment, in this regard Gregory's thought is not unlike that of other Fathers: "He who came to free men from the corruption of evil was born, appropriately, through an incorruptible generation. Consequently, Mary's virginity, which connotes physical integrity, was for the Fathers a sign of moral integrity and,

<sup>3</sup> Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 157. While admitting that there is some ambiguity in Gregory's contentions about Mary's vow (in that, variously, Gregory seems to attribute her consecration of virginity to her mother and to herself), Gambero read the evidence as suggesting that Gregory believed that it is Mary's own vow. Gambero noted that if Gregory's claim is to a vow made by Mary herself, "Gregory would be the first author to propose that Mary took a vow of virginity." Gambero, on 221, expressed the common opinion that Augustine was the first of the Western Fathers to make the claim of a vow of virginity taken by Mary before the Annunciation; cf. *De sancta virginitate* 2, 4; PL 40, 398; CSEL 41, 238 and *Sermo* 225; GL 38, 1096-97; NBA 32/1, 378, cf. *Sermo* 291, 5; PL 38, 1318. Roy J. Deferrari (ed.), in his introduction to Augustine of Hippo, "Holy Virginity," *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, trans. Charles T. Wilcox et al. (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1955), 139, asserted that the claim is "found implicitly in Jerome and Ambrose." See Neal M. Flanagan, "Our Lady's Vow of Virginity," *Marian Studies* 7 (1956): 103-121, for a listing of ancient and modern authors who have understood Lk. 1:34 as indication of a vow of virginity by Mary.

therefore, a sign of holiness."<sup>4</sup> Yet the notion of a vow of virginity taken by Mary shows a still deeper consciousness that virginity as a sign of holiness is, in fact, a sign of faith. For faith, while gift, does not from a Catholic perspective undermine human free will, and therefore it necessarily involves both divine and human commitment leading to holiness or sanctification of the human person. A vow to God is a profound manifestation of such commitment. This dimension of Gregory and Augustine's thought pertaining to Mary's virginity can be glimpsed particularly in their respective treatises on virginity, but also in other of their documents where the state is shown not to be merely a physical condition of Mary but an "existentiell" orientation (using language of contemporary theology that will be considered in the next segment of this reflection). And this, Mary's spiritual virginity, is exemplary for all.

In his treatise *On Virginity*, Gregory spoke both literally and metaphorically in his use of the term "virginity."<sup>5</sup> He maintained that, in the concrete order, the life of celibacy rather than marriage would seem to provide optimal conditions for "union of the soul with the incorruptible Diety" which "can be accomplished in no other way but by herself attaining by her virgin state to the utmost purity possible—a state which, being like God, will enable her to grasp that to which it is like, while she places herself like a mirror beneath the purity of God, and molds her own beauty at the touch and the sight of the Archetype of all beauty."<sup>6</sup> He recommended: "It would be well . . . for the weaker brethren to fly to virginity [the celibate state] as into an impregnable fortress, rather than to descend into the career of life's consequences and invite temptations to do their worst upon them, . . ."<sup>7</sup> But he wrote also: "Let no one think

<sup>4</sup> Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 156.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "On Virginity," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, 2nd series, vol. 5, *Gregory of Nyssa* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark and Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994). The Preface to this treatise, on 342, provides helpful contextualization for Gregory's assertions about "virginity." For the Greek, see PG 46, 317-416.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Citations are to chapter numbers.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

however that herein we depreciate marriage as an institution. We are well aware that it is not a stranger to God's blessing."<sup>8</sup> Whatever one's state of life, Gregory asserted: "It is perfectly clear that no one can come near the purity of the Divine Being who has not first himself become such [as married "to the undying Bridegroom" in a "spiritual union" of love of the soul for God<sup>9</sup>]; he must therefore place between himself and the pleasures of the senses a high strong wall of separation, so that in this his approach to the Deity the purity of his own heart may not become soiled again. Such an impregnable wall will be found in a complete estrangement from everything wherein passion operates."<sup>10</sup> He explained:

... To look with a free devoted gaze upon heavenly delights, the soul will turn itself from earth; it will not even partake of the recognized indulgences of the secular life; it will transfer all its powers of affection from material objects to the intellectual contemplation of immaterial beauty. Virginity of the body is devised to further such a disposition of the soul; it aims at creating in it a complete forgetfulness of natural emotions; it would prevent the necessity of ever descending to the call of fleshly needs. Once freed from such, the soul runs no risk of becoming, through a growing habit of indulging in that which seems to a certain extent conceded by nature's law, inattentive and ignorant of Divine and undefiled delights....<sup>11</sup>

Gregory's comments are grounded in his reflections upon that which the Western church terms "nature" and "grace," a fact made clear in chapter XII of this treatise where he provided an account of the Fall. The Fall is the reason that the soul must now ascend to reach its source and goal:

Being the image and the likeness ... of the Power which rules all things, man kept also in the matter of a Free-Will this likeness to Him whose Will is over all. ... [H]e was a free agent, though circumvented with cunning, when he drew upon himself that disaster which now overwhelms humanity. He became himself the discoverer of evil, but he did not therein

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 5.



*Mary's Virginity as "the Sign of Her Faith"*

discover what God had made; for God did not make death. Man became, in fact, himself the fabricator, to a certain extent, and the craftsman of evil.<sup>12</sup>

Considering the remedy for human beings' misaction, in chapter XI Gregory provided an account of the effects of Christ's redemptive action:

... [T]he mind of man leaves this murky miry world, and under the stress of the spirit becomes pure and luminous in contact with the true and supernal Purity; in such an atmosphere it even itself emits light, and is so filled with radiance, that it becomes itself a Light, according to the promise of our Lord that "the righteous should shine forth as the sun." ... We shall become then as the light, in our nearness to Christ's true light, if we leave this dark atmosphere of the earth and dwell above; and we shall be light, as our Lord says somewhere to His disciples, if the true Light that shineth in the dark comes down even to us; ... [W]e can be changed into something better than ourselves; ...<sup>13</sup>

Mary is the preeminent example of the radiance of Christ in the redeemed. Wrote Gregory: "What happened in the stainless Mary when the fullness of the Godhead which was in Christ shone out through her, that happens in every soul that leads by rule the virgin life. No longer indeed does the Master come with bodily presence; . . . ; but, spiritually, He dwells in us and brings His Father with Him. . . ." <sup>14</sup> Christ's dwelling within the soul of the Virgin Mary inaugurates a new time; in Gregory's words: "Just as, in the age of Mary the mother of God, he who had reigned from Adam to her time found, when he came to her and dashed his forces against the fruit of her virginity as against a rock, that he was shattered to pieces upon her, so in every soul which passes through this life in the flesh under the protection of virginity, the strength of death is in a manner broken and annulled, for he does not find the places upon which he may fix his string."<sup>15</sup> This symbolic disclosure of Christ in

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 11. Gregory's scriptural quotations are noted to be from "S. Matt. xiii. 43" and from "S. John ix. 5; i.9."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 2. Gregory's assertions regarding Christ's presence to us are noted to be scripturally warranted by "1 Cor. v. 16" and "S. John xiv. 23."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 13.



Mary that allows a new time in Christ was the case with Mary not simply because of her virginity in the sense of her celibate state, however—although that virginity is essential for her, but because of the virginity of the state of her soul, so-to-speak, her radiance in Christ. "[T]he womb of the Holy Virgin, which ministered to an Immaculate Birth, is pronounced blessed in the Gospel; for that birth did not annul the Virginity, nor did the Virginity impede so great a birth," wrote Gregory. Following St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:16, Gregory suggested a "double marriage,"<sup>16</sup> "one effected in the flesh, the other in the spirit."<sup>17</sup> In Mary, "the body's virginity was the co-operator and the agent of the inward marriage."<sup>18</sup> Herein is the import of the vow of virginity that has been attributed to Mary.

Although *On the Holy Generation of Christ* is uncertain as Gregory's, its content is consistent with that in *On Virginity* with regard to Mary's total orientation to God, an orientation which is presented emphatically in the later written work featuring the notion of a vow. In reflection upon Luke 1:34, wherein Mary reacts to the announcement of the angel Gabriel, the Cappadocian Father apparently contended that Mary "is concerned with virginity and holds that her integrity should come before the angelic message. She does not refuse to believe the angel; neither does she move away from her convictions. She says: I have given up any contact with man." Gregory explained that "it was necessary [for Mary] to guard the body consecrated to God as an untouched and holy offering. . . ."<sup>19</sup> Mary had consecrated herself

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 19. Scriptural warrant for Gregory's assertion of the blessedness of Mary's womb in the Incarnation is noted to be "S. Luke xi. 27."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>19</sup> Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 157; cf. *On the Holy Generation of Christ* 5, PG 46, 1140 C-1141 A. Gregory further explained the situation: "[I]f Joseph had taken her to be his wife, for the purpose of having children, why would she have wondered at the announcement of maternity, since she herself would have accepted becoming a mother according to the law of nature?" Because of the vow, "she states, even if you are an angel come down from heaven and even if this phenomenon is beyond man's abilities, yet it is impossible for me to know man. How shall I become a mother without [knowing] man? For though I consider Joseph to be my husband, still I do not know man."

to God even before the Annunciation. It could be said that her fiat is not strictly confined only to her assent to be the vehicle of the Incarnation, then. For the vow surmised by Gregory shows not only that Mary committed to what God asked of her at the Annunciation but that, at the time of the Annunciation, she already had committed herself to whatever God would ask of her. Her fiat at the Incarnation is a moment—albeit the one to which her life was directed—of her total commitment of her life to God. The supposed vow attests to this.

Augustine's belief in a vow of virginity taken by Mary before the Annunciation also is expressed in reflection upon the Lukan scene. In *Holy Virginity*, he wrote:

Her virginity is also all the more pleasing and acceptable, because it was not that Christ withdrew her from any further male defilement after he was conceived, but he chose to be born from her when she was already dedicated to God, before he was conceived. This is implied by the words of Mary's answer to the angel who brought her the message that she would bear a child. *How is that to be*, she said, *since I know not man?* (Lk 1:34). She surely would not have said this, if she had not already made a vow consecrating herself to God as a virgin. Since, however, the customs of the Jews still did not allow for this, she was betrothed to an upright man, one who would not take away by force what she had already vowed to God, but would protect it against any assailant. . . . [S]he who would be the model for consecrated virgins dedicated her virginity to God at a time when she still did not know she was going to conceive. The imitation of heavenly life in a mortal earthly body arose from a vow rather than a command, chosen from love rather than imposed by obedience. In this way, by being born from a virgin who had decided to remain a virgin before she knew who would be born from her, Christ chose to approve of holy virginity rather than command it. Even in the woman in whom he took the form of a slave, he wanted virginity to be voluntary.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "Holy Virginity," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. David G. Hunter and John E. Rotelle, part 1, vol. 9, *Marriage and Virginity*, trans. Ray Kearney (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 4/4. Citations are to paragraph numbers. For the Latin, see PL 40, 395-427.

Augustine's *Sermon 225* made the same assertion of a vow.

She had decided upon virginity, which her husband was to preserve, not to take away (or rather, not to preserve it, because God was going to do that; but her husband was the witness of her virginal chastity, in case she should be thought to be pregnant in consequence of adultery); so when the angel brought her the message, she said, *How did this happen, since I do not know a man?* If she had had it in mind to know one, she would not have been astonished. That astonishment of hers testifies to her purpose: *How will this happen, since I do not know a man?*<sup>21</sup>

Consideration of Augustine's theological program as a whole helps draw out the spiritual dimension of Mary's vow of physical purity—her alignment with and absolute commitment to God that elicited her vow made even before her knowledge of the plan for her in the Incarnation. In *The Excellence of Marriage*, Augustine insisted that "[c]elibacy, to be sure, is a virtue of the mind, not of the body. Virtues of the mind, however, sometimes manifest themselves in deeds, . . ." <sup>22</sup> The presence of both dimensions of Mary's virginal state render her the appropriate, indeed, pre-ordained, vehicle of the Incarnation. "For the Virgin did not conceive him [Christ] by lust, but by faith," wrote Augustine in *Sermon 69*.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, so important is Mary's unshakeable orientation toward God—or any human person's orientation toward God, our end, for that matter—that Augustine asserted in *Holy Virginity*: "It was a greater blessing for Mary, . . . to receive Christ's faith than to conceive his flesh. . . . So even the close relationship of being his mother would have

<sup>21</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "Sermon 225," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, part 3, vol. 6, *Sermons*, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 2. Citations are to paragraph numbers. For the Latin, see PL 38, 1095-1098.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "The Excellence of Marriage," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. David G. Hunter and John E. Rotelle, part 1, vol. 9, *Marriage and Virginity*, trans. Ray Kearney (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 21/25. Citations are to paragraph numbers. For the Latin, see PL 40, 374-395.

<sup>23</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "Sermon 69," in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, part 3, vol. 3, *Sermons*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 4. Citations are to paragraph numbers. For the Latin, see PL 38, 440-442.



been no benefit to Mary, if she had not carried Christ in her heart, a greater privilege than doing so in her body."<sup>24</sup> The implication of this claim for discipleship, that spiritual relationships supersede physical relationships, is immense. Mary is the model for discipleship because of her faith in Christ, a faith possible only in Christ, who is offered to all but incarnated physically only through one. Augustine's reflection upon Matthew 12:48-50 leads to the obvious conclusion: "What was he [Jesus] teaching us other than to value our spiritual family more highly than relationship by birth, and that what makes people blessed is not being close to upright and holy persons by blood relationship, but being united with them by obeying and imitating their doctrine and way of life."<sup>25</sup> This is expressed nowhere as emphatically, Augustine seems to have suggested, than in the case of the Virgin Mother of God, whose unsurpassable faith issued in her vow of celibacy; her fiat at the Annunciation ratified the surrender to God that she already had made as God prepared her for execution of his salvific plan. Such faith would be precisely that which Jesus preached. Augustine remarked: "So it was fitting that by a unique miracle our head was born physically from a virgin, to signify that his members would be born spiritually from the virgin Church. Only Mary, then, is mother and virgin both spiritually and physically, both Christ's mother and Christ's virgin."<sup>26</sup>

Eminent theologian on the subject of grace that he is, Augustine's reflections upon Mary and virginity are cast within his larger concern about the divine-human dynamic, a concern that will issue in his writing against Pelagianism.<sup>27</sup> Already in *Holy Virginity*, Augustine made it clear that the life of celibacy

<sup>24</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "Holy Virginity," in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, part 1, vol. 9, *Marriage and Virginity*, 3/3.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 6/6.

<sup>27</sup> Even a quick review of the scope of Augustine's works, such as is available in Agostino Trapè, "Saint Augustine," in *Patrology*, ed. Angelo Di Berardino and Johannes Quasten, trans. Placid Solari (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, n.d.), 4:342-462, shows that, long before the Pelagian controversy, by the early 390s, Augustine was writing about issues of nature and grace such as freedom, morality, and evil.



can only be adopted and maintained by grace.<sup>28</sup> This life is objectively superior to that of marriage, but it is possible for the married person to live his or her state more perfectly (e.g., more obediently) than the celibate<sup>29</sup> and marriage, too, has its goods.<sup>30</sup> Either state of life can be lived properly only by faith. Mary's faith is expressed profoundly in her vow of virginity, even though she marries, and yet the vow is itself only possible in God. As an aside, but an intriguing one, the supposed pre-Annunciation vow of virginity of Mary is especially remarkable when considered within the Old Testament tradition in which a woman's vow could be annulled by her father if she was single, and by her husband if she was married, if the man concerned acted as soon as he learned of the vow.<sup>31</sup> This perhaps further demonstrates the unusually dramatic character of Mary's vow of virginity as consecration to God and therefore the exceptional exemplarity of her faith.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "Holy Virginity," in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, part 1, vol. 9, *Marriage and Virginity*, 40/41, 41/42-43.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "The Excellence of Marriage," in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, part 1, vol. 9, *Marriage and Virginity*, 23/28-30.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 9/9.

<sup>31</sup> Conrad E. L'Heureux, "Numbers," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 5:58; in his study of Num. 30:2-17, L'Heureux provides an explanation of "vows made by women" in the Old Testament:

The section on vows made by women is generally recognized as a relatively late component of the Priestly material. The general principle is that vows are binding. An unmarried woman's vow can be annulled by her father if he acts on the day he first hears of it. If a woman made a vow before marriage, even if her father let it stand, it can still be annulled later by her husband if he acts on the day he hears of it. A widow or divorced woman has the same rights and obligations concerning vows a man does. The husband has right of annulment over vows made by his wife after their marriage, but a husband who annuls his wife's vows at a time later than the day he hears of it bears the guilt for the default.

The OT laws concerning vows fail to satisfy modern standards of equal rights for men and women. These laws do, of course, recognize that a woman can make binding vows. They even guard against completely arbitrary interference by limiting the man's right of annulment to the day on which he becomes cognizant of the vow. In the final analysis, however, women are patronizingly treated as subordinates who must be protected against their own lack of responsible judgment.

As stated, the notion of Mary's vow begs the very question of the relationship of nature and grace reflected in her state of virginitly. The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* reminds that "[a] vow is a deliberate and free promise made to God, concerning some good which is possible and better. The virtue of religion requires that it be fulfilled."<sup>32</sup> Yet, certainly from the point of view of Augustine, as well as from a contemporary Catholic Christian perspective, no aspect of our lives, especially a promise made to and kept for God, is outside of the influence of grace.

## 2. Nature and Grace and Mary's Virginitly

It is beyond the scope of this work to deal exhaustively with issues of the nature-grace relationship. For the purposes of analyzing the character of the vow of virginitly that has been attributed to Mary, it is only necessary to provide working concepts and language for expressing the basic Catholic conviction that grace perfects nature. A broad outline of Karl Rahner's description of this relationship will suffice.<sup>33</sup>

According to Rahner, human beings live within the influence of an offer of divine self-communication, for and to which

In the New Testament, temporary vows are taken in by Paul in Acts 18:18 and 21:23f. The note for Acts 21:23-24 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, RSV, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), explains that featured in these passages is "[t]he temporary Nazirite vow [that] was a later development out of Num. 6.1-21." It appears to be a question among biblical scholars as to whether or not 1 Cor. 7:8 constitutes an attestation by Paul of a permanent vow of his celibacy.

<sup>32</sup> Can. 1191, par. 1, *Code of Canon Law Annotated*, Latin-English ed., ed. E. Caparros, M. Thériault, J. Thorn (Montréal: Wilson & Lafleur Limitée, 1993). The Latin is rendered: "Votum, idest promissio deliberata ac libera Deo facta de bono possibili et meliore, ex virtute religionis impleri debet." According to par. 2 of this canon, "[u]nless they are prohibited by law, all who have an appropriate use of reason are capable of making a vow." The Latin is rendered: "Votum metu graviet iniusto vel dolo emissum ipso iure nullum est."

<sup>33</sup> Rahner's theology of nature and grace and that of symbol have been summarized in other contexts in my articles "A Reinterpretation of Invocation and Intercession of the Saints," *Theological Studies* 66, no. 2 (2005): 381-400, and "The Unity of Individual and Ecclesial Graces in the Roles of the Saints," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (2007): 371-390.

they have been gifted by God with the capacity to respond.<sup>34</sup> A "supernatural existential" exists in God's self-bestowal in the Christ event, through the power of the Holy Spirit present to creation from its beginning.<sup>35</sup> This "grace" ever present in each individual makes its own acceptance possible.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, each individual can and must make an "existentiell" decision<sup>37</sup>—a free decision—toward the supernatural reality to which nature is directed. This results either in progressive conversion during a lifetime, in the case of acceptance of the offer of divine self-communication,<sup>38</sup> or "moral guilt," in the case of

<sup>34</sup> According to Rahner, human beings have naturally an "obediential potency" for God, which God in his sovereignty and freedom chose to orient to grace by sublating our natural end proper to "pure nature" with a supernatural one not due to our nature. Originally, Rahner called this a "supernatural existential." (See Karl Rahner, "Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace," in his *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst [London: Darton, Longman & Todd; New York: Seabury Press, 1974], 297-317; original ed., *Schriften zur Theologie*, I, [Einsiedeln—Zürich—Köln: Benziger, 1954]). But, especially in later writings, Rahner also used the term "supernatural existential" to refer to God's offer of self-communication that is a constant dimension of our concrete human existence.

<sup>35</sup> For discussion, see, e.g., Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad Publ., 1995), 193-203; original ed., *Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1976).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>37</sup> Offered in Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 16, trans. note is an explanation: "'Existentiell,' as in Rahner's phrase 'existentiell Christology,' refers to the free, personal and subjective appropriation and actualization of something which can also be spoken of in abstract theory or objective concepts without such a subjective and personal realization." A distinction is drawn: "'Existential,' as in Rahner's phrase 'supernatural existential,' refers to an element in man's ontological constitution precisely as human being, an element which is constitutive of his existence as man prior to his exercise of freedom. It is an aspect of concrete human nature precisely as human."

<sup>38</sup> Karl Rahner, "Questions of Controversial Theology on Justification," in his *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd; New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 217; original ed., *Schriften zur Theologie* 4 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, [1960]). Rahner accepted a version of scholastic theology's notion of a "graded grace." He explained (*ibid.*, 215-216): "A subject whose being or nature was grace in such a way as grace is just grace, would be, even as a subject, the pure affirmation of God, and could do nothing else but ratify the affirmation of God in Christ: it would have to believe." There are "grades of 'being in Christ.'"



refusal of the offer.<sup>39</sup> Each individual lives the human existential reality either in mode of sanctification or in mode of negative judgment, then,<sup>40</sup> via the decision that is revisable until death when one's "fundamental option" is fully executed.<sup>41</sup> Because of the self-bestowal of God upon human beings, even merely in the form of the offer and the capacity to respond to the offer, there is a universal human experience of God as the transcendental horizon of our existence which may or may not be associated with any particular worldly object.<sup>42</sup> Yet God's self-communication to human beings occurs in the temporal order,<sup>43</sup> necessarily mediated through worldly categories, so our response involves worldly categories.

The constant dimension of our existence that is God's presence requesting and enabling our assent to his love means that there is nothing that we do that is not in some manner a response to God's offer of self-communication. This must be true for Mary as for all other human beings, despite the unique status she is believed by Catholics to have from the moment of her conception. A vow on her part, then, must be a conscious, deliberate, and particularly committed response to God's offer elicited by God's own initiative, even while it is a human stance toward God adopted freely. Indeed, it is an explicitly religious act, demonstrative of her "fundamental option" for God. Mary's supposed vow of virginity is illustrative, then, both of her free decision to surrender herself to God and God's prior, never-ending love for her and for all. Within this grand acceptance of God's love is Mary's acceptance of the role of *Theotokos*. Mary

<sup>39</sup> Karl Rahner, "Existence: 'The Existential,' Theological, Supernatural Existential," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Karl Rahner et al. (New York: Herder and Herder; London: Burns & Oates, 1968), 306.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Rahner, "Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?," in his *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 18; original ed., *Schriften zur Theologie* 7, part 2 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, [1966]).

<sup>41</sup> Karl Rahner, in "Salvation: Theology, Redemption," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol. 5, ed. Karl Rahner et al. (New York: Herder and Herder; London: Burns & Oates, 1970), 431.

<sup>42</sup> Rahner, "Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?," 19.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.



is the model of discipleship for all because she is the one who most profoundly gave assent to the initiative of God through her profound trust. This allows her role in the event of the Incarnation. And, through our recognition of God's activity in the life of Mary, vehicle of the Incarnation, we respond to God's offer in freedom. We respond in discipleship of Christ who, as Gregory said, shines through her pure life.

### 3. Mary's Virginity as Vowed Discipleship

Following the long tradition of the Church, the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen gentium* asserted that

[c]ommitting herself whole-heartedly to God's saving will and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally, as a handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son, under and with him, serving the mystery of redemption, by the grace of Almighty God. Rightly, therefore, the holy Fathers see Mary not merely as a passive instrument in the hands of God, but as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience.<sup>44</sup>

As established by the Catholic understanding of the workings of nature and grace, Mary's orientation toward God is an acceptance of his love without reservation, an act of trust that can only be made from freedom. Indeed her trust is evident in the Incarnation, but, more broadly, as shown, it is evident throughout her life—in her disposition of spiritual virginity, that "virtue of the mind," in the words of Augustine, that manifested itself in her physical virginity.<sup>45</sup>

Through her free acceptance of the grace of Christ, his saving work is manifest in her and is efficacious for others who behold it. To explain using the established terminology of Rahner, the risen Christ is known especially in neighbors who love

<sup>44</sup> *Lumen gentium*, in *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery, rev. trans. (Northport, NY: Costello Publ., 1996), chap. 8 on Our Lady, 56. Citations are to paragraph numbers.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, "The Excellence of Marriage," in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, part 1, vol. 9, *Marriage and Virginity*, 21/25.

greatly, who have a positive "existentiell" orientation.<sup>46</sup> These transformed individuals are symbolic of Christ in the Catholic sense of serving as special "mediators" of the Mediator who is ever-present to creation.<sup>47</sup> Mary's unsurpassable love for her Son has resulted in her preeminent symbolic status as disciple of Christ, indeed, the first member of the Church. She is Mediatrix,<sup>48</sup> a locus of God's saving activity, through Christ, her Son, in her unique historical and theological connection to his person and work. But, as is evident from the description given of the nature-grace dynamic, that this exemplary relationship with Christ and with all in Christ is an act from Mary's freedom is only one of the essential affirmations to be underscored with regard to Mary's cooperation in God's redemptive activity. The other is that, while the grace of Christ is offered and given to Mary and to all who accept salvation, it is not *a* given.

God also is free in the divine-human relationship that exists at all only because he so wills it. This is the indispensable antecedent theological assumption that precedes all other reflection, and the theological articulation that must be made to uphold the Catholic understanding that grace perfects nature. Yet, oddly, this theological point's centrality in Catholicism often is not seen by some in other Christian denominations. In the mysterious workings of divine-human interaction, God is sovereign. The critical role of divine freedom was underscored during the Catholic controversy of the middle of the

<sup>46</sup> Karl Rahner, "Experience of the Spirit and Existential Commitment," in his *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, trans. David Morland (New York: Crossroad Publ., 1983), 28; original ed., *Schriften zur Theologie* 12, part 1 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, [1975]). Here Rahner explained: "Like any other experience, the transcendent experience of the radical nature of the Spirit is mediated through categorial objects, for the finite, spiritual essence of man only comes to self-expression in relationship to what is other."

According to Rahner, in "Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?" (p. 21), love of Jesus Christ—who is the preeminent categorial mediator of God's personal communication—is "the unique and the highest act of love of neighbour." But, Rahner explained (on p. 18), "the exercise of love of neighbour (as charity) is *ipso facto* and in itself the love of God. But as true love it is a love that is supported by grace. In other words it is a love that is made open by God to attain to God."

<sup>47</sup> Rahner, "Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?," and elsewhere.

<sup>48</sup> *Lumen gentium*, no. 62.

last century about the relationship between nature and grace—to which Rahner's theological reflections about nature and grace meant to give answer, culminating in the condemnation delivered by Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Humani Generis*, directed at those who "destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order, since God, they say, cannot create intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision."<sup>49</sup> God did not have to offer us a supernatural destiny. God did not have to love us, enabling us to respond in love and to be saved by love,<sup>50</sup> although his salvific work has revealed him as Love (1 Jn. 4:8). Our true freedom is realized only from acceptance of, alignment with, that freedom within which we exist and that, as the image and likeness of God, we reflect.

With emphasis on divine freedom and sovereignty, as well as upon human freedom, two important points come to the fore when considering Mary and her virginity. First, God chose to enter human history in the radical way of the Incarnation, and he chose to do this contingent upon the free response of a mere human being. This means that, in Mary, we see both the depth of God's love for us and the depth of Mary's faith in her fiat (a fiat that, in the sense noted, is not confined only to assent to the Incarnation), through the power of God's love in persuading her positive "graceful" response to his plan for human salvation. Her physical virginity was required for her to be the vehicle of the Incarnation, but this virginity rested upon the strength of her spiritual virginity. Second, of human persons, Mary is the perfect example of discipleship because she opened herself to God fully, allowing him to transform her, a process which began before, yet in view of, the unique event of the Incarnation and which was empowered by it. In Mary we see powerfully the drama of human-divine interaction as it results in that for which we all hope—sanctification for salvation of human persons (in the language of Catholics). And we see this profoundly in her physical virginity disclosing the gift

<sup>49</sup> Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 12 August 1950, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_12081950\\_humani-generis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis_en.html), 26; accessed 15 May 2007. Citations are to paragraph numbers.

<sup>50</sup> See 1 Jn. 4:19, "We love, because he first loved us."



of her faith, her spiritual virginitly. "Ever-Virgin," Mary is completely submersed in the salvific mission of Christ, a submersion possible only through the grace of Christ, whom she bears. She is honored as *Theotokos* according to the "order of grace,"<sup>51</sup> in the words of *Lumen gentium*, because of her unique status vis-à-vis God who enters human history to redeem all. According to this Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, "[a]ll the Blessed Virgin's salutary influence on men and women originates not in any inner necessity but in the disposition of God. It flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on his mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it. It does not hinder in any way the immediate union of the faithful with Christ but on the contrary fosters it."<sup>52</sup> This point about the operation of human freedom actualized by divine freedom, a point made clear through the notion of a vow of virginitly taken by Mary, might be emphasized to foster ecumenical understanding of Marian dogmas—and the notions about the divine-human relationship that they represent—even where there cannot be agreement.

#### **4. Marian Dogmas in Light of Vowed Discipleship**

Because of the differing understandings among Christian traditions of divine-human interaction, the Catholic Marian dogmas will be divisive in their description of Mary's status. Yet, because they illustrate so pointedly central Catholic convictions about both divine and human freedom that sometimes elude detection in other Christians' study of Catholic statements, which contain theological assumptions that are not always made explicit, these dogmas might, if used as an ecumenical tool rather than viewed as a potential barrier to Christian ecumenism, provide a clear lens to Catholic theological anthropology. In Mary, Catholics see emphatically the triumph of Christ over sin through God's initiative. In Mary, Catholics also see the sanctification or holiness to which all, as disciples of Christ, are called—a state resting upon the sovereignty and

<sup>51</sup> *Lumen gentium*, no. 62.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 60.



initiative of God which empowers free acceptance of his love revealed profoundly in Mary. In the words of *Lumen gentium*:

... [W]hile in the most Blessed Virgin the church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (see Eph 5:27), the faithful still strive to conquer sin and grow in holiness. And so they turn their eyes to Mary who shines out to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues. Devoutly meditating on her and contemplating her in the light of the Word made man, the church reverently penetrates more deeply into the great mystery of the Incarnation and becomes more and more like its spouse. . . . [W]hen she is subject of preaching and honor she prompts the faithful to come to her Son, to his sacrifice and to the love of the Father.<sup>53</sup>

There is a curious way, then, in which the relatively lately promulgated Marian dogmas of the Catholic Church—the Immaculate Conception<sup>54</sup> and the Assumption<sup>55</sup>—affirm truths held by one or the other of the other two major Christian traditions, despite the fact that this is not always or even usually mutually recognized. For, improperly understood, these dogmas seem to promote Mary beyond her companions in faith *in nature*; they seem to some who are not Catholic to claim her to be more than human. Properly understood, though, they underscore precisely the Catholic emphasis heretofore noted: Mary was conceived immaculately—without the stain of original sin—*because of the divine prerogative* to which she later assented under its loving influence. Grace, at least as offer, precedes nature. *Lumen gentium* explained: "Because of this gift of sublime grace she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth. But, being of the race of Adam, she is at the same time also united to all those who are to be saved; . . ." <sup>56</sup> Mary, as

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., no. 65.

<sup>54</sup> Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8 December 1854, [http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs\\_pi09id.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_pi09id.htm); accessed 15 May 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, 1 November 1950, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xii/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_apc\\_19501101\\_munificentissimus-deus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus_en.html); accessed 15 May 2007.

<sup>56</sup> *Lumen gentium*, no. 53; cf. St. Augustine, *De S. Virginitate*, 6: PL 40, 399.

all others who are saved, was saved by Christ, albeit in a unique way in view of the special role that she would play in the economy of redemption. In the words of the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, "the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race [emphasis mine], was preserved free from all stain of original sin, . . ." This condition was given to her of God's freedom, before any exercise of her own freedom; it therefore rests entirely upon the gratuitousness of God. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception is, then, a testament to the very sovereignty of God that Catholics are sometimes misperceived by Protestant brothers and sisters not to recognize. At the same time, it is also a testament to the human possibilities for true freedom under the influence of God's love that is stressed by Orthodox brothers and sisters, irrespective of the evident "legalism" noted by Eastern Christians in many Western Christian notions of sin. Mary did not give into temptation, but, as *Ineffabilis Deus* states, she "ever increased her original gift, and not only never lent an ear to the serpent, but also by divinely given power she utterly destroyed the force and dominion of the evil one."<sup>57</sup> While, to the mind of Christians other than Catholic, Mary's "original gift" is not different than that of other human beings, it should aid to explain that Catholics make the distinction to emphasize that—from the Catholic understanding of the divine-human relationship—through the workings of nature and grace, Mary enjoys the communion with God that is proper to all human beings but available only as gift. The dogma of the Assumption logically—theologically—follows from recognition of Mary's immaculate condition gifted by God. As *Munificentissimus Deus* states, Mary, "by an entirely unique privilege, completely overcame sin by her Immaculate Conception, and as a result she was not subject to the law of remaining in the corruption of the grave, and she did not have to wait until the end of time for the

<sup>57</sup> Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*.

redemption of her body."<sup>58</sup> Because of her radical conformity to her Son, a condition to which she gave her free assent and to which she was predestined<sup>59</sup> (in the Catholic sense of the supernatural end God offers us persuasively to accept), Mary Immaculate enjoys now the fullness of the eschatological reality for which all Christians hope.

The perhaps unusual suggestion that Catholic Marian dogmas might promote rather than hinder ecumenical conversation is not a recommendation that such conversation begin with Catholic doctrine or a suggestion that theological disagreements are solved through reflection upon Mary. It is simply recognition that each tradition is its own best judge of which of its theological articulations best express its theological convictions in a manner which might promote understanding even if not full agreement among Christians. The notion, found in the Fathers and other theologians of East and West, of a vow of virginity taken by Mary before the Annunciation pushes to explicit consciousness the questions of divine-human interaction—workings of nature and grace, in the language of Western Christians, especially—articulated in the Catholic Marian dogmas. And the possibility of such a vow is affirmed by these dogmas, which, as shown, bring into focus the belief in the freedom of God and the freedom of human persons in God which, if not universally, is often held by each of the three traditions to varying degrees. The Virgin Mary is a symbol of purity of soul, of a faith that is trusting commitment to and communion with God, possible only in God's prior commitment to us.

<sup>58</sup> Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, 5. The apostolic constitution explains that, while "Christ overcame sin and death by his own death, and one who through Baptism has been born again in a supernatural way has conquered sin and death through the same Christ. . . . according to the general rule, God does not will to grant to the just the full effect of the victory over death until the end of time has come. And so it is that the bodies of even the just are corrupted after death, and only on the last day will they be joined, each to its own glorious soul" (Ibid., 4). "Now God has willed that the Blessed Virgin Mary should be exempted from this general rule" (ibid., 5). Citations are to paragraph numbers.

<sup>59</sup> *Lumen gentium*, nos. 56 and 59.



## Conclusion

Admittedly, the vow of virginitly supposed of Mary may seem a small matter on which to base a reflection aiming for a theological point about divine and human freedom. And there are other Marian notions of the Fathers, such as her sinlessness, that also are expressive of the divine-human drama. Yet, to summarize, the idea of a vow of virginitly would seem to be particularly emblematic of Gregory and Augustine's understanding of Mary's relationship to God, especially when taken along with their statements about virginitly generally. Through the notion of a vow, Mary, in whom grace was transformative of nature to a superlative degree, is seen as model for all in discipleship of Christ because of her radical commitment to God that allowed Christ to enter her life—and ours—in the Incarnation. Mary's virginitly, "the sign of her faith 'unadulterated by any doubt,' and of her undivided gift of herself to God's will,"<sup>60</sup> in the words of paragraph 506 of the *Catechism*, includes the physical manifestation of her more important consuming spiritual orientation to God to which all are bidden. As this paragraph of the *Catechism* quotes, from a passage of Augustine already noted but which deserves repetition: "It is her faith that enables her to become the mother of the Savior: 'Mary is more blessed because she embraces faith in Christ than because she conceives the flesh of Christ.'"<sup>61</sup>

To conclude, Mary's virginitly is "the sign of her faith" precisely because it is a free human choice responding to and enabled by the sovereign divine offer made definitively in Christ; this is expressed fittingly in the early concept of Mary's vow of virginitly. When virginitly is not understood only narrowly, as physical integrity or sexual abstinence, but broadly and deeply, as an orientation in fullness toward God that may or may not be expressed in celibacy, depending upon one's particular vocational calling, the concept of "virginitly" is applicable to all Christians. As disciples of Christ, all must accept without reservation his/her own grace, however this is manifested in our

<sup>60</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 506, according to note 168; cf. *Lumen gentium*, no. 63; cf. 1 Cor. 7:34-35.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, according to note 169; cf. St. Augustine, *De virg.*, 3: PL 40, 398.

lives. In some way, members of the Church, even in this age wherein the great value of celibacy is not always grasped, respond to this truth by attesting to Mary's physical virginity not just as proof of Jesus' divinity but as evidence of her holiness. This suggests that, implicitly, subconsciously, many if not all do see Mary's virginity as the sign of her faith—a sign for us of Christ's grace shining through her in her complete orientation toward him. Yet all may not explicitly, consciously, make the connection between Mary's physical virginity and her spiritual virginity—between the sign of her faith and her faith itself and its sanctifying effects upon her. Could this truth of Mary's virginity be emphasized more for the benefit of all in the pews today?

In the Church of the Fathers, celibacy often was promoted as the superior Christian life, whereas since Vatican II there has been the attempt to promote the various vocations equally, in recognition of the importance for the Church both of the diversity of God's callings and, for individuals within the Church, of the various ways of legitimate discipleship. Without promoting consciousness of the relevance of Mary's virginity for all, Christians often connect to Mary either in her role as virgin or in her role as mother, as the Catholic tradition certainly and obviously appropriately directs. Paragraph 507 of the *Catechism* states: "At once virgin and mother, Mary is the symbol and the most perfect realization of the Church: 'the Church indeed . . . by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By preaching and Baptism she brings forth sons, who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life. She herself is a virgin, who keeps in its entirety and purity the faith she pledged to her spouse.'<sup>62</sup> Increasingly Christians are connecting to Mary as sister, too. But Mary's status as virgin, understood not only in the physical sense but also in the spiritual sense, transcends divisions of states of life or of gender, and it therefore is instructive for all in the life of discipleship. Her status as virgin in the spiritual sense conveys every

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 507, according to note 170; cf. *Lumen gentium*, no. 64, no. 63.

Christian's proper attitude toward God in Christ, our goal—the attitude of grateful surrender to love, indeed to love itself which precedes all. This sense of Mary's virginitv communicates, in the words of Gregory of Nyssa, the call to all to "[p]urify of the heart, that master of our lives."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "On Virginitv," 5. For the words leading to this final quotation from Gregory, see the passage from Gregory reproduced in this article corresponding to footnote 10.