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William J. Finan

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IMPACT OF MARIOLOGY ON CHRISTIAN ETHICS

This study is divided into two major sections: (1) a discussion of what is meant by "Christian ethics" and why this name is preferred over "moral theology," and (2) a consideration of how Christian ethics, so understood, can feel the impact of Mariology. This second section is itself further sub-divided into: (1) the impact of Mariology on Christian ethics at its more general level, and (2) the impact of Mariology on the cluster of issues surrounding the more specific topic of the dignity of human life for the Christian.

I

"Christian ethics" is only recently becoming an acceptable combination of words for Roman Catholics. To understand the full connotation of "Christian ethics" (as opposed to "moral theology" or "ethics") will help us to see that it can indeed profit by contact with Mariology.

"Christian ethics" is not to be identified with the modern¹ sense of "moral theology." The latter, divorced from "spiritual" and "ascetical" theology, had become a highly-refined (and not deserving of too-easy ridicule) science directed to the preparation of priests in their task of judging whether or not penitents had sinned, and to what degree their guilt might reach. This "moral theology" focused upon specific types of activity, usually spending a disproportionate amount of time on evil activity in order clearly to understand all the possible nuances which might arise from the person's intention and

¹ I am using "modern" to indicate the time span which developed after Trent until Vatican II.

from other concrete circumstances which surround any human action. Contrary to some recent popular criticism, I think that this was essentially an errand of mercy: the moral theologian engaging himself in ingenious mental gymnastics in hopes of giving valid (i.e., consistent with ecclesial moral teaching), rationally defensible and rather easily understood (the priestly vocation, after all, is not grounded primarily on intellectual brilliance) guidelines whereby one could hold "absolute" moral principles while allowing for a gentle understanding of apparent failures in the penitent's attempts to pattern his life after such principles. There were many openings for this mercy: impediments to fully free and voluntary human activity had to be recognized; careful (and not necessarily hair-splitting) definitions could set the penitent on the "right" side of the scales of judgment (and this in not merely a legalistic way;) devices such as the principle of double effect removed any negative judgment from some activities which unhappily involved negative results.

I am claiming then that this modern moral theology was a necessary and truly helpful tool designed by incisive thought concerning real problems of real people. But it was also a tool of limited applicability. If fault is to be assigned (and it is), we should spare this "moral theology" and look rather to those who made too many claims for this very limited tool, who consigned other discussions of human behavior to the secondary or tertiary levels of what came to be known as spiritual or ascetical theology. The seminary classroom was the primary place to find moral theology; moral theologians were invariably priests, seminary professors.² The curriculum gave the spotlight to the study of "principles of morality," with "principles" referring primarily to moral absolutes, impediments, objective morality. The student did not always (if ever) learn that grace, the New Law, is the truly significant principle of

² The significance of this fact for the development of Roman Catholic sexual ethics needs to be studied.

morality; it was not always clear that the sacraments, as effective signs of grace, are in fact (not merely in theory) of great importance for the moral life. No doubt, much time was given to teaching about grace and the sacraments; indeed, a curriculum modeled after the theology of Aquinas explicitly listed the treatment of grace under the general heading of "moral." The point (and the problem) is that, in an effort to protect the significance and practical utility of an objective morality, undue emphasis was placed on the general principles buttressing moral judgments about right and wrong, rather than upon a principle such as grace which might enable (and command) the Christian to do God's will here and now.

Another way to make the same point: "moral theology" tended to mean the reflection upon prescriptive norms for human activity. This notion continues deeply to influence most Catholics and leads to attitudes and questions so common among persons looking for the return of a clear and "safe" moral teaching. Catholics want to know what is (and is not) a sin. What is a mortal sin? Ecclesial statements about morality are issued amidst this great concern of people to know precisely where things stand; unambiguous statements about what is wrong are thought to satisfy Catholics asking moral questions.³

Anyone coming from such a perspective will find very little help in Mariology. If moral theology is merely the search for and rational detailing of prescriptive norms (and I am arguing that this is precisely what the vast majority of Catholics

³ Rhetoric reflecting this approach was used in defense of having the American bishops issue their statement on moral values in November of 1976 rather than at some later date; it was urged that people need to have some clear guidelines *now*. Similarly, the statement from Rome on sexual ethics (December 29, 1976) was a firm reminder about what sorts of things are wrong (premarital genital activity, masturbation, overt homosexual activity) rather than a well-rounded development beginning with an extended positive statement on the nature of sex, its goodness and beauty.

understand moral theology to be), then one will find limited insight, even from the most prayerful reflection on Mary. I will claim below that attitudes toward human life (especially the unborn, those who suffer but are innocent, and the elderly haunted by a sense of rejection and loneliness) can be influenced by Mariology; however, if we are honest, this is a very narrow path of influence when we realize how vastly significant Mary is for questions of grace and sincere obedience to God's will. These latter are truly general questions, often lacking in interest for the moral theologian bent on protecting absolutes and an objective morality, driven to make lucidly helpful statements about specific human problems, but they are in the long run of much greater significance (as I will show below); it should be clear that Mariology can say much within such a widened view of moral theology.

So we see that a corrective was needed to extend the embrace of "moral theology" in the modern sense. Anyone familiar with Aquinas' systematic consideration of man's return to God through Christ will insist that he has provided the sort of treatment for which I am calling. I agree totally. However, we remain trapped in a verbal bind, no less binding because it is truly a matter of words. One can apply to Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, II, the descriptive title "moral theology," but that is really to give far more content to "moral theology" than has customarily been done in recent decades; for that reason it is simply unfair and inaccurate to refer today to the second part of the *Summa Theologiae* as "moral theology." The name is now associated with (and limited to, if we are going to respect the popular use of words) an enterprise emasculated of any worthy consideration of some of Aquinas' key concepts embracing the reality of Christian activity.⁴ A different name is needed, and happily, one is at hand: "Christian ethics."

⁴ Surely some will argue that the more honest path would be to correct the meaning of "moral theology" by applying it to the appropriate sections of someone like Aquinas and then calmly announcing that we reject the

We should quickly note that Catholics had reserved the term "ethics" for philosophical reflections on human activity and its norms. This discipline was contrasted with the Faith-grounded endeavors of "moral theology." It should be evident that this science of "ethics," while not totally useless for the Christian, is surely of limited value. When one begins to give the moral principle of the New Law of grace its proper position, and when the teacher spends appropriately more time on this reality, then the concerns of what I am calling "modern" moral theology begin to fade. From the philosophical side, ethics runs parallel to this "moral theology." To the extent that "moral theology" in its primarily normative sense pales in significance as grace is given predominance, so does "ethics" pale. "Ethics" knows nothing of grace. The person of deep Faith cannot simply shrug and say that "ethics" considers human activity without regard for revelation; the person of deep Faith tends not to develop much interest in matters which expressly rule out a consideration of all that is truly important to him.

At any rate, "Christian ethics" is not merely philosophical ethics recast to include the gifts of God's revelation. It is rather the Faith-inspired study of the activity of the Christian person in its principles and in its norms, in general and in greater specificity, in theory and as unfolding into practice. The term grew up in Protestant circles where greater emphasis is placed upon the quality of the Christian moral agent than upon the extended rational principles found in modern moral theology. I believe that Catholics, imitating Paul and Aquinas, and prodded by thoughtful Protestants, must again place the emphasis where it belongs: upon the new man made in the image

more recently "inaccurate" uses of the words. I honestly judge that to be misplaced enthusiasm for revered terminology. Far better to borrow the words "Christian ethics" for the more inclusive view I am encouraging, and leave "moral theology" for the more narrowly-focused discipline we have been describing.

of the Second Adam. We must incorporate the massive and genuine wisdom of the modern moral theologians, but their narrow emphasis cannot be ours. We need a name for this reincarnation; let us call it "Christian ethics," knowing that we mean something more than many Protestants mean, and also something more than was meant by "moral theology."³ In this sense of the term, Christian ethics can feel the impact of Mariology.

II

Given this notion of Christian ethics, some finesse is needed when we search for the impact of Mariology. By now it should be evident that we cannot merely comb the Scriptures for concrete moral directives in any way associated with Mary and claim thereby to have identified the impact of Mariology; to do so would be to succumb to the narrow sense of moral theology as a rational consideration and development of prescriptive norms. We will want to look at the wider range, the far-reaching issues which severely affect Christian living but which most often are not terribly detailed and specifically normative. In this context we shall speak of grace, doing the will of God, the ethical significance of innocent suffering and asceticism. Subsequent to this more general consideration, we shall identify an area in which Mariology seems to offer more specific norms.

A

(i) Mary is full of grace; she was preserved from all sin, actual and original, from her very conception. The Christian ethicist is tempted to stop here; nothing at all can compare with the impact of grace on Christian living. We are reminded

³ A simplistic equation would hold this Catholic notion of "Christian ethics" on a par with a combination of modern "moral theology" and "spiritual theology" (provided that extended coverage of grace is presupposed in the latter).

that any good we do, *any good at all*, is God's gift, His grace. The Christian does not labor tirelessly by his human efforts to avoid sin in obedience to some law external to him; such tireless efforts are also futile. Every Christian is preserved from sin by cooperating with God's gracious gift of a New Law written on the human heart. Let me briefly develop two implications.

1. To have grace as a starting point emphasizes the positive character of Christian living. A commandment-morality, so popular among latter-day Catholics, easily leads to a minimalist morality; the Christian whose focus is on the commandments easily becomes content with himself when he has not broken the law, when he has not sinned. The Christian life becomes a matter of avoiding sin. Such is not the case when the New Law is central. Now the Christian life is ever new, each day brings a new expression of God's call to love, each day invites the Christian to deeper life with Christ, each day urges new growth into holiness; when the New Law of grace is central, the Christian knows he has not even begun to live when all he does is avoid sin. Mary was preserved from all sin so that she could hear God's Word, carry God's Word, live at home with God's Word; *that* is Christian living, and it is central to the task of Christian ethics.

Recall Thomas' teaching that no action is morally neutral when it is concretely performed: it is either part of our exciting hope-filled sweep toward an eternity with God, or it initiates or hardens us in a lifestyle divorced from God.⁶ So many (even 95%?) of our decisions do not involve choices involving sin, but are rather choices among several goods. Think of the wife lovingly contemplating how best to express her affection for her husband, or the young man choosing a vocation; an ethical stance centered on avoiding sin would likely miss the immense drama of these grace-filled decisions which search for the optimal expression of love

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 18, a. 9.

2. This does not mean that anything and everything is permitted; beginning with the New Law of grace does not yield a norm-less Christian ethic. Paul identifies the fruit of self-indulgence and the fruit of life in the Spirit.⁷ Any activity inconsistent with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control is not Christian activity.⁸ If we wish to describe Mary's life, is there any better place to begin than with this Pauline list? She is the grace-filled one; the New Law of grace is written always on her heart; we can be sure that she bore the fruit of such an inner life.

(ii) I have indicated that Mary, in her utter graciousness, was intimate with the Word of God; she could announce in all humility: "I am the handmaid of the Lord . . . let what you have said be done to me."⁹ Every Christian ethicist wrestles with the fact that God's will is to be done. How is it to be discerned? As the evangelist relates the event, Mary heard the message of an angel. In our day different ethicists offer different emphases: (1) some look for direct inspiration from the Scriptures;¹⁰ (2) some listen to authentic authority;¹¹ (3) some try to perceive "what God is doing in the world" so that we might appropriately respond;¹² (4) some look at creation and devise from their insights some appreciation of God's will.¹³ Our purpose here is not to evaluate the relative merits of each approach. Any theory of discernment will blend all these elements (and perhaps others as well) in a way which

⁷ *Gal.* 5:16-26.

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 108, a. 1, especially *ad* 1 and 2.

⁹ *Luke* 1:38.

¹⁰ Barth is more nuanced in his efforts to answer his question; "What ought we to do?" Cf., Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2/2, paragraph 38.

¹¹ The popular model of the Catholic could fit here.

¹² Paul Lehmann, in *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York, 1963) explicitly uses this language.

¹³ Again, an unnuanced caricature of some Roman Catholics.

reflects the fact that human decision-making defies any solely rational matrix of explanation; the spontaneous human element prevents decision-making from being neatly packaged.

Rather, I wish merely to note that Mary tells us something about Christian discernment. Living in God's grace, living with the Word, living in deep prayer, this living is for the Christian a key element for discerning God's will. The Spirit *does* speak to us, if only we will listen as Mary did. There is much open space here, we might hear almost anything (God will not command us to sin). Some will feel uncomfortable with such an ill-defined component in discernment; it is far safer, far clearer, to be content with careful obedience to the commands of legitimate authority. But the image of Mary speaking her *Fiat* to the angel of good news calls us to listen to God's very personal messages to us as we go about this Christian living. Christian ethics must give fair consideration to this hard-to-control element in our lives of Faith.

(iii) Jesus' disciples once put to Him a question which any human is tempted to ask: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?"¹⁴ The initial revelation of Genesis is that whatever comes from God is good; whenever we find evil in any form, it must be traced to man's perversity, his proud desire to be his own god, his refusal to submit in total obedience to the God who made him. The Old Testament never arrived at consistent clarity on the question of responsibility for evil: the tradition opens toward personal responsibility alone (voiding any notion of a more communal solidarity in sin and guilt and punishment), but there is also present the opposite theme that one suffers the results of his father's sins. In answering His disciples, Jesus introduced a new element: "Neither he nor his parents sinned; . . . he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in

¹⁴ *John* 9:2.

him."¹⁵ Suffering, pain and evil seem not to have a necessary connection with sin.

Surely Mary suffered. Her experience of Jesus' birth was not a convenient one. As a new mother, she learned that someone wanted to kill her infant boy. When He was only twelve, Jesus separated Himself from His parents in order to spend time teaching in the Temple; Mary, when she found her Son, maternally corrected Him: "My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you."¹⁶ How much pain for Mary is hidden in the words: "When his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, convinced he was out of his mind?"¹⁷ She saw Him mocked and jeered as He stumbled toward Calvary, weighed down by the instrument of His own death. She heard the same voice which called to her and Joseph for a night-time drink now call in agony "I thirst."¹⁸ She stood at His feet while His innocent blood mixed with the dirt beneath them both. Mary *did* suffer, and yet she was the sinless one, the innocent one, the one immaculately conceived thanks to her Son's grace-giving death.

Alas, we all know that innocent people still suffer. Children are born into hunger and war and hatred and disease. And with one voice we still ask: "Why?" I do not propose that Mariology will give a reason, an answer, an explanation; evil is inscrutable in its pervasiveness. But we Christians turn to Mary and to Jesus, the truly innocent ones. In our hearts is the anguished "Why?" They give no answers; they suffer too. "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?"¹⁹ The evil of suffering is not limited to those who have sinned; it stretches all the way into the Trinity, leaving the Word dead on the

¹⁵ *John* 9:3.

¹⁶ *Luke* 2:48.

¹⁷ *Mark* 3:21.

¹⁸ *John* 19:28.

¹⁹ *Matthew* 27:46.

tree of salvation. The Son became man, the sinless one took on our sinful nature, He suffered and He died, and He cried out "Why?" Mary teaches us that whoever does the will of the Father, whoever draws near to the Son, will surely share in His innocent suffering. We must emphasize that so identifying with Mary does not remove the pain; she *really* suffered as did her Son, and we will *really* suffer, even when we draw most closely to them. Suffering cuts out a place for the peace of Jesus to dwell; suffering throws us into the merciful arms of the Father. Innocent suffering is always pointless, stupid, irrational, "to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Gentiles foolishness."²⁰

Understand that this is not merely the rambling of an enthusiastic preacher. Christian ethics, as described earlier on, must attempt a coherent look at evil, something which is universally experienced by human beings as they live in response to the Father's revelation and invitation. Asceticism and prescriptive morality need to be linked; what I am calling Christian ethics accomplishes such an integration. There are at least two points:

(1) A secular ethics always risks implying that man's happiness, peace, integrity and well-being are directly proportional to the goodness or rightness of his activity; Christianity cannot abide such a view. Christian ethics always works from the datum that salvation is gift, it is never earned; of course, Mary is the outstanding instance. Innocent suffering, it seems to me, is an unpleasant check against any tendency toward Pelagianism in Christian ethics. If the ethicist spends too much time discussing the norms for human activity and the imperative that humans obey the norms, attention is subtly shifted away from the primacy of God's gracious interventions in our human histories; the disciple of such an ethicist easily becomes self-righteous, self-justifying. But if the same ethicist must

²⁰ 1 *Cor.* 7:23.

make room for suffering within his view of Christian living, he cannot long forget that man's goodness affords nothing apart from God's generosity; when man is apparently at his very best, evil still intrudes and man knows the futility of his own goodness apart from the Cross of the Savior. We Christians daily need this reminder; any Christian ethicist worthy of the name must treat of innocent suffering if his work is to have any integrity at all.

(2) Asceticism is a necessary part of the Christian life. There may have been a recent time when Christians placed too much emphasis on this, giving rise to a self-righteousness grounded in self-denial. Surely, that is an inappropriate expression of asceticism, but we must honestly admit that most Christians are not excessively ascetical these days. When a finely-detailed code for fast and abstinence was removed in favor of fasting and abstinence more personally organized and inconspicuously practised, most Catholics swung quickly to the opposite extreme where having no ascetical practises became the norm. If we wish to be alert to God's revelation to us, if we are to be prepared to imitate Mary's *Fiat*, then self-discipline is essential. Prayer and fasting go together for the Christian. Fasting develops a hunger; prayer turns us to the Bread of Life. Fasting apart from prayer is often indistinguishable from self-conscious dieting; prayer apart from fasting is often the monologue of a comfortable human being. God speaks to us in prayer, revealing how we can live and act in Him; this obvious concern of Christian ethics is fostered by Christian asceticism.

Having seen how Mariology can affect Christian ethics in these quite general ways, we should turn to more concrete issues to see if any prescriptive norms are suggested. We noted earlier the need for finesse. Merely because a command appears clearly in the New Testament does not guarantee that obedience to the command will yield precisely Christian behavior.²²

²²In recent years much has been written about the relationship be-

There are at least two reasons for this: (1) The Christian can never be motivated by the letter of the law, even when the letters form Gospel sentences; Christian activity *always* is rooted in the New Law of grace.²² (2) Many New Testament ethical precepts are shared with non-Christian ethical codes; in their *content* they offer nothing distinctively Christian.²³

This does not mean that Christian ethics finds nothing distinctive in New Testament directives. The content may not be unique, but the motivation might be quite specifically Christian; for example, Paul notes that the sinful Christian (performing actions likewise wrong for the non-Christian) "grieves the Holy Spirit of God."²⁴ The reality of grace energizes the Christian in a way not experienced by the non-Christian facing the materially-identical imperative. When the Christian is told to "do the loving thing," the word "love" carries distinctive connotations: (a) the primary example of love is in the Trinity, (b) true love is diffusive, creative and forgiving, (c) we are good, not because of our actions, but because God first loved us, and (d) love embraces suffering, even death on a cross—it is not merely "feeling good" or doing "nice things."

Furthermore, the Judaeo-Christian revelation sometimes sets human realities in a quite new perspective, thereby leading us to draw out concrete norms not shared with all non-Christians. For example, the revelation that the love of husband for wife is a sacrament of the love of Christ for His Church seems to make Christian norms about marital chastity, as well as about extra-marital and pre-marital sexuality, distinctively Christian. In this essay, I shall look at the dignity of human life. Surely it is easy to discover non-Christian ethical codes

tween Scripture and ethics. A new entry, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* by Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen (Minneapolis, 1976) contains a bibliography adequate for the beginner.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 106, a. 2.

²³ Examples can be found in Paul: *Gal.* 5:19-21; *Col.* 3:8; *Eph.* 4:17ff.

²⁴ *Eph.* 4:30.

which take a strictly conservative attitude toward human life.²⁵ The fact that the Second Person of the Trinity, God Himself, became fully human adds an element of dignity, indeed of divinity, to all human existence, thereby eliciting the deep respect of the Christian. Christian and non-Christian will strongly condemn genocide; only the Christian invokes the fact that humanity has been elevated by its unforgettable contact with the divine. And, of course, it is Mary's body which carried and nurtured the God-man; she shares intimately in the dignity-conferring process.

Let us not be content with such a general, though not thereby less significant, assertion of the dignity of human life. I believe that Mariology contributes to any consideration of (i) unwed mothers as well as (ii) the elderly.

(i) Luke's narrative, after the angel has announced to Mary the good news that she is to bear a son whom she is to name Jesus and who will be called Son of the Most High, expresses Mary's concern: "But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?"²⁶ And the angel explains that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her in this moment of conceiving the very Word of God. Mary was an unwed mother! She was afraid at the angel's message, but allowed herself to be comforted, believing that God was intervening in her life.²⁷ She also had reason to be afraid of the reaction of others to her condition. What

²⁵ Even the Hippocratic Oath explicitly disavows abortion and euthanasia

²⁶ *Luke* 1:34.

²⁷ The careful exegete might resist such emphasis on Mary's reference to her virginity. Form criticism indicates that angelic visitations were usually related according to an identifiable form, one item of which is having the one being visited indicate an apparent obstacle to the fulfillment of the message (cf. Zechariah in *Luke* 1:18); this sets the stage so that the angel might announce a sign (cf. Zechariah's loss of speech in *Luke* 1:20; Elizabeth's pregnancy in *Luke* 1:36). I am unwilling to dismiss totally what would be an obvious concern for any woman at any time; however, I respect the exegete and will refrain from eisegeting out of the Lucan text a prohibition of abortion.

woman is not ashamed to face family and friends who will be totally surprised to find her pregnant? Matthew reports Joseph's reaction: "Her husband Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally."²⁸ Of course, we recall that Joseph was moved by an angelic message in his dream to take Mary home with him; he had never known her sexually, but he cared for her and she bore a Son.

In recent years abortion has become the easy solution to unexpected and undesired pregnancies. I am ever more deeply convinced of the horror of abortion; the gentle innocence of developing human life must be protected, given the opportunity to flower into a novel human person, another child of the Father. We are too easily being lulled into a softened stand on the abortion issue. If it is true that we Catholics appear to be a one-issue constituency, then we do not resolve the ambiguity by abandoning the one issue; we must maintain opposition to abortion while simultaneously highlighting our involvement for social justice for all peoples, our commitment to basic foods for the world's starving masses, as well as our opposition to nuclear proliferation which could easily lead to an unquestionably immoral war. Granted all this, I think we must also grant that Mariology has little explicit to say about abortion, beyond the fact that all human life was raised to a new dignity by reason of the Word becoming flesh in Mary. This is not insignificant, to be sure, but we must beware of reading too much into the Scriptures in an effort to find new arguments for communicating our deep moral convictions.

If I am accurate in not over-extending the influence of Mariology on the issue of abortion, I also think I am accurate in claiming that we can learn much about Christian attitudes toward unwed mothers. Mary, in Faith, accepted her condition even with its potential shame. Joseph, the just and hon-

²⁸ *Matthew* 1:19.

orable man, extended her explicit care and hospitality when the customs of the day permitted divorce. What attitudes have become customary in our culture, even among Catholics? How do we treat unwed mothers? Are they public sinners? Are they a scandal, properly kept out of sight in some quiet place? Have unwed mothers been forced to withdraw from Catholic colleges during their pregnancies? Is it a deeply shameful event for parents to learn that their daughter is with child outside wedlock? A study of Mary and Joseph would lead us to refashion our attitudes. Mary was not scorned and cast out by the one who loved her; she was accepted more dearly. We must treat our women in 1977 in the same way. Christians who are worth the name should warmly welcome the unwed mother, graciously maintaining past friendships and familial ties. Abortion becomes an attractive option when a young lady's "friends" let her feel their shame because of her condition; in such instances, the blame for the abortion properly extends to those who had encouraged the building up of a sense of shame, rejection and isolation. Sincere love and affective care for the unwed mother is not an approval of her "sin" (if indeed there is a sin in the particular case at issue); it is merely the Christian response to one often looked upon as a public sinner. If there is need for judgment, that is in the hands of the Lord, not in ours. We need only ask ourselves whether Mary in her pregnancy would have found herself warmly and openly welcomed in our American Catholic parishes.

(ii) As the evangelist John builds toward the dramatic moment of the death of Jesus, he preserves one story for the very end, for the moment when Jesus was about to surrender His life.

Seeing his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother, 'Woman, this is your son.' Then to the

disciple he said, 'This is your mother.' And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home.²⁹

Joseph, her genuinely loving husband, disappears from the Gospel narrative without so much as a nod from the evangelists. Jesus, her Son through whom she had been protected from the poison of sin, dies and is taken back to the Father whose work He had so fully accomplished. Mary remains, a mother and widow, separated from those she loved most. It is not difficult to imagine her loneliness; once we accept the deep reality of Mary's suffering during the lifetime of her Son, we will not antiseptically avoid the loneliness and dependency of her later years.

In our time the sad plight of the elderly is obvious to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear; only those who turn away blind and deaf will deny the evil of old age. Medicine and technology allow people to be kept alive far longer. Decaying family structures remove the upbuilding environment in which parents and grandparents might live out their last years with at least a minimum of dignity. Elderly people must trust in things, in money saved over the years, in the government; too often there are no beloved persons whom they can trust to be caring and vigilant.

Mary and Jesus and John acted otherwise than we do. The Son provided for His mother, not by investing in insurance policies or by purchasing a condominium in Florida, but by giving her into the care of a friend. And John, the friend whom Jesus loved, made a place for His mother in his own home. Anyone can spin out for us implications of what Jesus and John said and did. Our interest here, however, is in Mary; what can we learn from her?

Mary's Faith-filled abandonment to the will of the Father was evident during her pregnancy and during her Son's early years; this radical dependency is evident still in her later years.

²⁹ *John* 19:26-27.

All of us need to be dependent totally upon the Father, ready to obey His will as did Jesus and Mary. It is not enough to wait until the desolate moments of old age weigh us down, and then to pray for a spiritual detachment and poverty, the grace to trust in God's providence alone; we cannot coolly urge the old folks to trust that God will take care of them when they have been trained to think that Social Security will be their salvation. If we are to depend solely on God in our old age, we must begin as Mary did in the early years; even when we have strength and health and friends and family, God alone must be our final refuge. Mary first appears on the scene of our salvation humbly proclaiming: "I am the handmaid of the Lord . . . let what you have said be done to me;"³⁰ the deep implications of her radical obedience are freshly revealed even until she dies.

Do not misunderstand me; I am not urging that discouraged elderly people today should suddenly be confronted by the example of Mary and chided to imitate her. The customs and attitudes of post-Depression Americans (some of whom are Christians) have encouraged persons to trust Social Security and other retirement programs in their old age; the preacher in recent years has failed to lead Americans to depend solely on God. Hence, those of us who are a bit younger must be John and Jesus and Mary. Like John and Jesus we must be actively and effectively solicitous for the elderly in our midst; we must take them into our homes and sooth the ache of loneliness. Like Mary, however, we must grow in total trust in the Lord so that our later years might prove less threatening to us than have the advanced years of our parents been to them.

* * *

This essay has been deliberately far-ranging. Those who give their talents to Mariology should learn two things: (1) We Catholics must continue the renewal of theology in all

³⁰ *Luke* 1:38.

its aspects, especially in what I have called "Christian ethics," and (2) Mariology can make a not insignificant contribution to this difficult process.

REV. WILLIAM J. FINAN, O.P.
Dominican House of Studies
Washington, D.C. 20017