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037 - Developing a Sound Marian Spirituality

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*Developing a Sound
Marian Spirituality*

WILLIAM G. MOST

Number 37

ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

A professor of Latin and Greek at Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa, Father William G. Most's study of Mariology has been something of a sideline, yet his first Marian book, *MARY IN OUR LIFE* (*Kenedy*, 1954) won the Marian Library Medal as the outstanding Marian work of the year. Reviewers have highly praised the book for coordinating and integrating the dogmatic truths underlying devotion to Mary with a solid, unsentimentalized and unbalanced application to the life of the soul.

Father Most earned his Ph.D. from Catholic University in 1946. Since that time he has been spiritual director of students, study club moderator, college professor, convent chaplain, and contributor to many Catholic periodicals. He is presently preparing for publication a series of Latin textbooks.

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DEVELOPING A SOUND MARIAN SPIRITUALITY

WILLIAM G. MOST

WE ARE PRIVILEGED TO LIVE IN AN AGE THAT CAN RIGHTLY be called an age of Mary. There are many reasons why our times can be so named: not the least of them is the fact that for many years now, over a century, to be precise, the Holy See has been giving us a specially rich outpouring of beautiful and important Marian documents, making ever clearer the stupendous role that God has given to Mary in His plan of all things.

If we wish to develop a deep and sound Marian spirituality, we need, as a prerequisite, to seek to understand and to meditate on this role that God has given to her. For if we have a deep and realized knowledge of Marian dogma, not only will our devotion be grounded on the solid rock of divine truth, but we shall also have before us the most perfect possible pattern to imitate. We cannot do better than to imitate the ways of God Himself; if we find that He has given her a certain place in His ways, we shall do well to imitate Him, and to give her a corresponding place in our personal lives.

We wish, then, to examine the papal teachings on Mary, in order to get some glimpse of the wonderful sweep of the divine plan which becomes apparent when we sum up all those various Marian teachings to form a complete picture.

Certain parts of the picture, such as the Divine Motherhood and the Assumption, are quite familiar to all Catholics; but yet, because many Catholics have little if any knowledge of certain other important phases of Mary's role, the complete picture remains invisible to them; they see, as it were, only apparently disconnected parts, which they do not know how to combine. They are like a person who has before him a jigsaw puzzle from which certain key pieces are missing; until he finds the missing pieces, he will hardly be able to suspect how the whole picture should look.

the works of the Fathers of the Church. For although they did not have the advantage of abundant light that the Holy Spirit has lavished on the

It is well to begin our search for the missing elements by turning to Church over so many intervening centuries, yet they did possess, in an undeveloped form, the bud whose flower we are privileged to see.

If we go back into the writings of the earliest Fathers, we find that one of their favorite ways of speaking about Mary is to call her the "New Eve"; that is, to compare and contrast Mary with the first Eve. This comparison, the "New Eve", is remarkably rich in possible meanings. In our search for them, however, we need to keep constantly in mind that the true meaning

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of both Scripture and the Fathers is not ultimately to be had by our own reasonings; rather, it is given to us in an authoritative way by the official interpretations of the Church.

We may comment in passing that some Catholics have made the strange and dangerous mistake of supposing that nothing less than a solemn definition carries any binding force. They have thought that Encyclical teachings are not strictly authoritative: that one may, as it were, take or leave an Encyclical teaching, as he pleases. This attitude is erroneous. As Pope Pius XII wrote: (1)

Nor must one think that the things which are taught in Encyclical letters do not of themselves demand assent, on the pretext that in them the Popes do not exercise the supreme power of their teaching authority. For these things are taught with the ordinary teaching authority, in regard to which it is also correct to say: "He who heareth you, heareth Me."

But let us return to our study of the Fathers.

Before attempting to find some of the missing parts of our picture in the teaching of the Fathers, let us, as it were, practice by deducing from the New Eve parallel some familiar teachings: thus we can become somewhat accustomed to the procedure that we shall need for the more difficult investigation to be made later.

THE FIRST EVE CAME INTO THIS LIFE FREE from all sin, for original sin did not yet exist. In other words, she was immaculate. Now, if Mary is the New Eve, we ask ourselves, should she not have had the same favor, the same start in life? In 1854, Pope Pius IX defined that Mary really was Immaculate, and added that the Fathers had frequently compared Mary with Eve, ". . . to prove the original innocence and justice of the Mother of God." (2)

Again, God had planned that the first Eve, if she had been victorious over sin, would also have been victorious over death, so that she would have been taken body and soul into Heaven at the end of her earthly course. In 1950, Pope Pius XII defined the Assumption, and said that Mary, ". . . the New Eve . . . was most closely associated" with Christ "in that most complete victory over sin and death" (3) and that therefore she had to share in the triumph of His Resurrection by means of her Assumption.

But there is a still more striking truth that seems to lie hidden in the New Eve teaching. It can be seen most clearly from a comparison made by St. Irenaeus, an early bishop in Gaul (died 202 A.D.) who had had the special privilege of listening to St. Polycarp recount his recollections of

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the preaching of St. John, the Apostle. St. Irenaeus compares Redemption to the untying of a complicated knot. To untie a knot, what do we do? We take the end of the rope, and pass it, in reverse, through every turn that was taken in tying the knot. So also, says St. Irenaeus, “. . . the knot of the disobedience of Eve was untied through the obedience of Mary”! (4) Here indeed is a remarkable thought! Eve certainly had much to do with original sin: by her disobedience to God, she really contributed to bringing down the anger of the Creator on our race, and plunging us into the ruin of original sin. Of course, Eve was not the head of our race: Adam was our head. But Eve did what she could: in her inferior way, she cooperated with Adam in this terrible sin. Now if the Redemption is to go through every step of the fall, but in reverse, as St. Irenaeus suggests, would it not seem that Mary, in an inferior way, must have shared with Christ in appeasing the anger of the Creator, in earning salvation for our race?

WE KNOW THAT MARY CERTAINLY DID HAVE SOME SHARE in this work of Redemption, from the very fact that she was the Mother of the Redeemer. As God, Christ could not suffer and die for us: for that, He needed a human body. It was through Mary that He was born as man and received that body. But can we understand the words of St. Irenaeus to include still more, so as to say that even on Calvary itself, Mary was a sharer with Christ? that by her sufferings with Christ, in union with and through Him, she really did contribute to paying the price of our Redemption? Or, in other words, can we say that even on Calvary, Mary served as the New Eve?

The comparison of St. Irenaeus certainly seems to suggest that much: for, if we really are to untie a knot completely, we cannot stop half way: we must take the rope, in reverse, through EVERY turn that was taken in tying the knot. Now, in tying the knot of original sin, Eve had cooperated with Adam, not just in some remote way, but in the very act by which original sin was brought upon us: it would seem that Mary could do no less, if the words of St. Irenaeus are true.

Of ourselves we might hesitate to affirm so wonderful a thought. We might doubt whether the New Eve parallel really did extend to Calvary itself. But fortunately we do not have to decide the matter by our own unaided reasonings. The official voice of the Church is to guide us. Let us see if the Popes will say that Mary was the New Eve, not only in a remote way, but even on Calvary itself.

In his Encyclical on the Mystical Body, Pope Pius XII said: “She it was who, free from all sin . . . always most intimately united with her Son, as

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the New Eve, offered Him on Golgotha, together with the holocaust of Her Mother's rights and love." (5) We note that the Holy Father tells us that Mary was "**always** most intimately united": these words imply that Mary's cooperation in the Redemption, begun at Nazareth and Bethlehem, would not break off before Calvary. But the Holy Father is not content merely to imply this truth: he insists on telling us as expressly as possible that Mary's sharing with Christ as the New Eve really did extend to Calvary itself, for he says that there, on Golgotha, "as the New Eve", she "offered Him", and included in that offering, the offering of herself, of her own Mother's rights and love.

Many other papal statements could be quoted that teach us the same truth in different ways. Let us look briefly at just a few. St. Pius X, in his Encyclical **Ad diem illum**, wrote of Mary on Calvary: ". . . from this common sharing of will and suffering between Christ and Mary, she merited to become most worthily the Reparatrix of the lost world . . ." (6) and a bit farther on the saintly Pope added: ". . . she merited for us congruously, as they say, what Christ merited condignly . . ." We note particularly this latter statement that Mary merited congruously what Christ merited condignly--these words tell us clearly that Mary merited the same thing as Christ merited, i.e., Redemption. Her merit, however, was not the same kind as His: she merited congruously what He merited condignly. To understand this distinction we need to recall that in merit there is, as it were, a price paid for a reward. In condign merit, the price is worth as much as the reward: hence it is a merit in strict justice. In congruous merit, the price paid is worth less: hence the reward cannot be claimed in strict justice. Rather, the one who merits depends on the generosity or friendship of another to make up for the insufficiency of the payment. In the Redemption, as St. Paul says, we were "bought with a great price". (7) The price that alone paid our ransom superabundantly in all justice is the blood of Christ. But St. Pius X tells us that the generosity of God willed to accept a lesser payment in union with that superabundant payment, so that both fused, as it were, into one price: for Mary paid congruously for that which Christ paid condignly!

It is not strange, then, that the successor of St. Pius X, Pope Benedict XV wrote: "With her suffering and dying Son, Mary endured suffering and almost death. . . she, as much as she could, immolated her Son, so that one can truly affirm that together with Christ she has redeemed the human race" (8)--striking word indeed; words we would not dare to say were they not given to us by the Vicar of Christ Himself!

HIS EXCELLENCY, ARCHBISHOP CICOGNANI, THE APOSTOLIC DELEGATE to the United States, at the Marian Convocation held on November 16, 1954, at the Catholic University of America, gave a beautiful interpretation of the thought of the Popes on this subject: "Christ loved us and delivered Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice, and Mary shared in this love . . . She . . . accompanied Him along the sorrowful way, was present at the crucifixion . . . and, for the salvation of humanity, offered her Divine Son and herself as an oblation to God. The Lord accepted the offering, and considered His Mother His Helper in the work of Redemption. Theologians say Christ with His merits paid our ransom 'de condigno', condignly, and Mary 'de congruo', congruously . . ." (9) These last words of His Excellency need no comment: they are obviously an echo of the words of St. Pius X which we have already examined. In the earlier part of his statement, however, Archbishop Cicognani is explaining the sacrificial aspect of Mary's role: he tells us that on Calvary, Mary joined in offering the great sacrifice: "for the salvation of humanity (She) offered her Divine Son and herself", and the Lord in His infinite generosity "accepted the offering, and considered His Mother His Helper in the work of Redemption." Therefore, when God the Father looked down on that dread Good Friday scene, He saw **one** sacrifice, in which **two** were cooperating, though in different ways. One was Christ, the New Adam, the new Head of our race--only He had the power to pay an adequate price for our Redemption. But along with Him was Mary, the New Eve--of herself, she could not pay the price of Redemption, but yet, in a lesser way, she did what she could, offering her Son, and herself with and through Him. God, in His incomprehensible goodness, though He had no need whatever of Mary, yet willed to accept this offering of hers as forming part of **one great joint sacrifice**. Thus the knot once tied by two, the old Adam and the old Eve, was untied by two: Mary, as the New Eve, joined with the New Adam on Golgotha, "so that one can truly affirm that together with Christ she has redeemed the human race." (10)

Having shared with her Divine Son in earning all grace, Mary became the Mediatrix of all graces. Here, too, she surpasses and compensates for the faithless first Eve. For Eve, since she was disobedient, was not able to fulfill her intended role of an instrument in the transmission of the initial grace to all her descendants; but Mary, in her perfect obedience, received the greater prerogative of dispensing absolutely **all** grace to all mankind. As Pope Pius XII expressed it in his recent Encyclical on the Queenship of Mary: ". . . Mary . . . as the Mother of Christ . . . the associate in the work of the Divine Redeemer, and in His struggle with the enemy, and in His

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victory gained over all, shares in the royal dignity . . . from this association with Christ arises her royal power, by which she is able to dispense the treasures of the Kingdom of the Divine Redeemer . . ." (11)

We see, then, that Mary has a triple share in the work of our Redemption: she is the Mother of the Redeemer, she is His associate in paying the dread price on Calvary, and His Queen and treasurer in the distribution of all graces.

We need to meditate much on these great truths of Mary's role in the Redemption. The eminent Marianist Mariologist, Father Emil Neubert, S.M., wrote well:

Because they have misunderstood Mary's Co-redemptive mission, certain Catholics still manifest only a sentimental, intermittent, and almost fruitless devotion toward her. But those who understand the role that God has confided to His Mother in the work of our redemption give her an essential place in their lives. The more they meditate upon it, the more they strive to bring the Blessed Virgin Mary into all their spiritual and apostolic activities, and the more they see marvelous results as a recompense to their faith. (12)

Father Neubert does not, of course, say that all who lack the knowledge of Mary's Co-redemptive role are necessarily involved in a merely sentimental or relatively fruitless devotion to her. No, for grace can overcome such a handicap. But he very properly wants to stress for us the great help to sound devotion that we can obtain from a deep and loving understanding of Mary's tremendous place. For he says: "The more they meditate upon it, the more they strive to bring the Blessed Virgin Mary into all their spiritual and apostolic activities . . ."

But why does Father Neubert say that a soul that meditates upon these truths is led to give Mary an "essential place" in "all their spiritual . . . activities"? To understand this statement, we need to do what we proposed to do at the start of this study: we must add up, as it were, and fit together all the parts that go to form the complete picture of God's plans for Mary.

THE CHURCH IN HER LITURGY FREQUENTLY APPLIES TO MARY THE beautiful words of Sacred Scripture: "The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways before he made anything from the beginning. I was set up from eternity, and of old before the earth was made". (13) It is very fitting to apply these words to Mary, for God, from all eternity, had lovingly planned for her: He thought with pleasure of the tremendous graces He would lavish on her, and of her faultlessly generous response to His love.

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Scarcely had our first parents started our race on its long and heartless course of rejecting the generous designs of God, when He began to speak to us of Mary. For He promised a Redeemer, and, in that very promise, gave us the first hint of a mysterious "Woman" (14) who would be the Mother and associate of that Redeemer in crushing the head of the infernal serpent. This "Woman" was, of course, ". . . the New Eve, who, although subject to the New Adam, was most closely associated with Him in that struggle against the infernal enemy, which, as foretold in the proto-evangelium, was to result in that most complete victory over sin and death . . ." (15)

When the fulness of time had come, so that the Expectation of the Nations should appear, God sent His great archangel Gabriel to Nazareth, to ask Mary to consent, as St. Thomas says, "in the name of the whole human race", (16) to be the Mother of the Savior. By this consent, she became not only the Mother of Christ, but also our Spiritual Mother, for, as Pope Pius XII told the Marian Congress of Ottawa in 1947: ". . . when the little maid of Nazareth uttered her **fiat** to the message of the angel . . . she became not only the Mother of God in the physical order of nature, but also in the supernatural order of grace she became the Mother of all who . . . would be made one under the Headship of her divine Son." (17)

Even before the birth of the Son of the Most High, on the occasion of the Visitation, we see a divine hint of Mary's future role in the dispensation of all graces, when St. John the Baptist, though still in the womb of his mother, was sanctified through Mary's presence. The hint was repeated later at Cana, when, at Mary's word, her Divine Son performed His first miracle, advancing the divinely set hour. On that occasion He addressed her by the honorable but mysterious title of "Woman". Did He perhaps mean to say: "This is the 'Woman' of which the divine utterance spoke on the day of ruin in paradise"!

DURING HIS PUBLIC LIFE, WHEN HER SON RECEIVED acclaim, Mary kept to the obscurity of retirement. Yet, though not always physical with Him, her spiritual association with Him was never interrupted. As Pope Pius XII says, she was ". . . **always** most intimately united with her Son", (18) or, as St. Pius X expressed it, between Christ and Mary there was a "**never** dissociated manner of life and labors of the Son and the Mother . . ." (19) Hence, since He merited for us throughout **all** His life, and not only on Calvary, so also she: for the words of St. Pius X on Mary's merit need not be restricted: ". . . she merited for us congruously . . . what Christ merited condignly . . ." (20)

But when the crowds no longer sought to make Him their king, but

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rather to crucify Him, and when all the Apostles, save only John, though they had shared His successes, now fled in fear, then Mary emerged from the shadows into the dark cloud that hung over Calvary. There she was present, not just as a mere onlooker, not just as an ordinary grieving Mother: as St. Pius X wrote, she was “. . . not merely occupied in looking at the dreadful sight, but (was) even rejoicing that ‘her only Son was being offered for the salvation of the human race; and so did she suffer with Him, that, if it had been possible, she would have much more gladly suffered herself all the torments that her Son underwent.’” (21) Amid such torments she “. . . as the New Eve, offered Him on Golgotha”, (22) “. . . so that one can truly affirm that together with Christ she has redeemed the human race”. (23) There, “Jesus Himself, from the height of His Cross, wished to ratify by a symbolic and efficacious gift the spiritual motherhood of Mary towards mankind, when He pronounced the memorable words: ‘Woman, behold thy Son’. Thus, in the person of the beloved disciple, He confided all Christians to the most Holy Virgin”. (24) And just as at Cana, when she first publicly exercised her mediation with Him, He addressed her as “Woman”, so also now, when the supreme exercise of her mediation was taking place, amid the stabbing pain of her sharpest dolor, He again called her “Woman”: for it was truly then that she, with Him, “carried on eternal enmity against the poisonous serpent, and, . . . crushed his head with her immaculate foot.” (25)

The first Eve, having failed in the struggle against sin, rightly descended into the decay of the grave. Mary, however, who “. . . was most closely associated with Him (the New Adam) in that struggle against the infernal enemy, which . . . was to result in that most complete victory over sin and death”, (26) did not see corruption. For “. . . just as the glorious resurrection of Christ was an essential part and final sign of this victory, so also that struggle which was common to the Blessed Virgin and her Son had to be closed by the ‘glorification’ of her virginal body . . .” (27) Now, being taken up into the everlasting glory of Heaven, Mary “. . . as the Mother of Christ . . . the associate in the work of the Divine Redeemer, and in His struggle with the enemy and in His victory gained over all, shares in the royal dignity . . . from this association with Christ arises her royal power, by which she is able to dispense the treasures of the Kingdom of the Divine Redeemer . . .” (28) Now that she has been crowned Queen of the Universe, “. . . her kingdom is as vast as that of her Son and God, since nothing is excluded from her dominion”. (29)

WE SEE, THEN, THAT MARY’S ASSOCIATION WITH HER DIVINE Son is something unbroken, constant, ever-enduring. From all eternity she was in God’s plans, she was promised at the very moment of the fall of our first

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parents, she was and is both the Mother and the inseparable associate of her Divine Son in all His works, sharing with Him in earning all grace and forgiveness for us, sharing with Him in dispensing all graces, and in His reign over all things forever. If, then, we would imitate the plans of God as fully as possible, it is obvious that we would need, as Father Neubert says, to give Mary "an essential place" in our lives, bringing her into all our spiritual and apostolic activities. We are never withdrawn from her influence and Motherly care: let us try to realize that fact, so that we will not consider devotion to Mary merely as a sort of sweet appendix, but as an integral part of our whole spiritual life. God Himself, though He did not need her, has yet delighted to integrate her cooperation into **all** the work of His Son: let us imitate His ways.

Our loving association will never end. It is not confined to the present life, for even in eternity, she will always be our good Mother. And in the dazzling glory of Heaven, although the vision of the Divine Essence is the chief and all important source of beatitude, yet all souls present there will draw a lesser but very great happiness from the constant vision of Mary. As Pope Pius XII expressed it:

Surely, in the face of His own Mother, God has gathered together all the splendors of His divine artistry . . . You know, beloved sons and daughters, how easily human beauty enraptures and exalts a kind heart. What would it ever do before the beauty of Mary . . . ! That is why Alighieri saw in Paradise in the midst of "more than a million rejoicing Angels . . . a beauty smiling--what joy!--it was in the eyes of all the other saints"--Mary! (30)

1. Pius XII, *Humani generis*, August 12, 1950: AAS 42.568. Citing Luke 10:10.
2. Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, Dec. 8, 1854.
3. Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, Nov. 1, 1950: AAS 42.768.
4. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III.22.4.
5. Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, June 29, 1943: AAS 35.247.
6. St. Pius X, *Ad Diem Illum*, Feb. 2, 1904: AAS 36.453-54.
7. I Cor. 6:20.
8. Benedict XV, *Inter Sodalicia*, March 22, 1918: AAS 10.182.
9. In: *Catholic University of America Bulletin*, January, 1955. p1.
10. Benedict XV, *Inter Sodalicia*: AAS 10.182.
11. Pius XII, *Ad Caeli Reginam*, Oct. 11, 1954: AAS 46.635.
12. Emil Neubert, S.M., *Mary in Doctrine*, Bruce, Milwaukee, 1954, p. 90.
13. Proverbs 8:22-23.
14. Genesis 3:15.
15. Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, AAS 42.768.
16. St. Thomas, *Summa Theol.* III, q. 30, a.1.
17. Pius XII, *To Marian Congress at Ottawa, Canada*, June 19, 1947: AAS 39.271.
18. Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, AAS 35.247.
19. St. Pius X, *Ad Diem Illum*, AAS 36.453.
20. *Ibid.* p. 454.
21. *Ibid.* p. 453: citing St. Bonaventure.
22. Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, AAS 35.247..
23. Benedict XV, *Inter Sodalicia*, AAS 10.182.
24. Pius XII, *To International Congress of Children of Mary Immaculate*, July 17, 1954: AAS 46.494.
25. Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*.
26. Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*: AAS 42.768.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Pius XII, *Ad Caeli Reginam*, AAS 46.635.
29. Pius XII, *Bendito Seja*, May 13, 1946: AAS 38.266. Quoted from *American Ecl. Review*, Nov., 1949, p. 358.
30. Pius XII to Italian Catholic Action Youth, Dec. 8, 1953. Quoted from *The Pope Speaks*, 1954, 1. p. 38 (internal quotation from Dante, *Paradiso* 31, v. 130-35).

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