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MARY'S SPIRITUAL MATERNITY IN RELATION TO NON-CHRISTIANS

Rene Laurentin

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About the article and the author ...

Members of the Church sometimes express their wonder and concern about the salvation of those who have never heard of Christ. Father Laurentin, one of today's leading Mariologists, works towards a solution to this problem in a letter that first appeared in an October, 1953 issue of the *Union Missionaire du Clergé de France*. He is here answering a question concerning Mary's role as Mother of non-Christians. Three series of texts from early theological writers are first presented bearing on the notion of Mary's universal motherhood of all men. After putting these in proper perspective, the author states briefly some general principles that must guide any discussion of Mary's position with respect to those not yet united to her Son.

Father Laurentin's numerous books and articles, some of them widely translated, have of set purpose dealt with many different aspects of Mariology. One of his most notable works to date is his Marie, l'Englise et le Sacerdoce, which studies quite exhaustively the history of the Church's tradition regarding Mary and the priesthood. He has contributed to the study of Mary in Scripture with his treatment of the first two chapters of St. Luke's Gospel in his Structure et Théologie de Luc I & II. Father Laurentin is no doubt most widely known as the world's expert on Lourdes. He has a number of works on this shrine, the most important so far being the six volumes of source materials finished in 1961, Lourdes. Documents authentiques. At the present time he is working on a history of Lourdes, three of whose six volumes are now in print.

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MARY'S SPIRITUAL MATERNITY IN RELATION TO NON-CHRISTIANS

Rev. Rene Laurentin

Letter on the Problem of Mary's Maternity with respect to Unbelievers

René Laurentin

Grand Bourg, à Evry Petit Bourg (S.-et-O.)

M. l'abbé J. Blanc Union Missionaire du Clergé Paris

Dear Reverend Father:

Your letter of April 30 poses an interesting and delicate question for me:

Theology knows Mary only as the Mother of the faithful. Nothing, of course, is more true. But what about the infidels? Have they been without a mother since Calvary? Why has theology — I mean theologians — formed a conspiracy of silence about the invocation which Pius XI wrote at the end of *Rerum Ecclesiae*?

I have looked up the encyclical of February 28, 1926 (AAS, 18 (1926), 83) where I found the following:

The most holy Queen of Apostles, Mary, whose maternal heart was, on Calvary, given responsibility over all men, sustains and loves those who do not know that they have been redeemed by Christ no less than those who have the happiness to enjoy the benefits of the Redemption.

This text clearly states that Mary's maternal love extends even to those who do not have the Christian faith. It would be impossible for me at the present time to study thoroughly this problem of Mary's spiritual maternity with respect to unbelievers. I might add that this is one of those questions with which the theologian feels ill at ease: he is deprived of firm bases, and he knows that he will disappoint those who have already resolved the matter according to the intuitions of their heart. All that I can do is set up some guideposts for you from the double point of view of both positive and speculative theology.

1. The Teachings of Tradition

1. First of all, we must recognize that the ancient texts which speak of the spiritual maternity almost always refer it exclusively to Christians — or, even more restrictedly, to the elect.

Origin (In Ev. Jo., PG 14, 32) and more clearly George of Nicomedia (9th century, Orat. 8, PG 100, 1476-1477) consider Mary as Mother of the disciples of Christ.

According to St. Augustine, (De S. Virg., PL 40, 399) Mary is "Mother of the members" of Christ, that is, (as the text further specifies) of the faithful.

According to St. Nilus (\dagger c.430), she is "Mother of all those who live according to the Gospel" (Epistol., Lib. I, 266, PG 77, 179 D).

According to Ambrose Autpert († 784), she is "Mother of the believers" (In Purif., PL 89, 1297 BC) and also "Mother of the elect." Cf. Anselm (Orat. 47, PL 158, 945): "Mother of all those who believe in Him."

According to Geoffrey of Vendome († 1132), (Sermo 7 de Purif., PL 157, 266 A), followed by Pseudo-Albert the Great (end of the 13th century, Mariale, 9, 43, ed. Borgnet 37, 87 a), she is "Mother of Christians."

According to Berengaud (of very uncertain though no doubt late date sometime between the 9th and 12th centuries), she is "Mother of the Church." Prior to this text, we find in an inscription already in the 5th century:

MATER ECCLESIAE

(Dict. archeol. et Lit. 8, 2236-2238). But one may ask whether this isolated text, quite surprising for the period, is not due to an error on the part of the carver who inscribed "Mater Ecclesiae" (Mother of the Church) instead of "Mater Ecclesia" (Mother Church). There are many other mistakes in the inscription.

According to Rupert of Deutz († 1135), (In Cant. IV, PL 168, 898 B), she is "Mother of churches," mater ecclesiarum.

According to St. Bonaventure († 1274), she is "Mother of all the saints" ($S.4\ de\ Ann.$, ed. Quaracchi, V. 9, 672 b).

According to Bernardine of Sienna († 1444), she is "Mother of all those who love Christ," (*Opera*, ed. 1595, V.I., p. 440 G), as opposed to Eve, who is the mother of all.

I cite only the foremost writers (as far as possible). After each of the witnesses quoted, I could add a list more or less fully supplied with other texts.

This first series, which refers Mary's spiritual maternity explicitly to those who adhere to the Church and to Christ by faith, represents the great majority of the ancient texts that we now have.

2. Another series of texts would seem to allow for a maternity on Mary's part in relation to those who do not explicitly belong to the Church.

These speak of a maternity not with regard to those who believe in or love Christ or who have become brothers of Christ by baptism, but with regard to those who have the life of Christ and His grace. Here some will think of justified pagans. But, in the mind of the ancient writers, this series would be equivalent to the first one, for they did not envisage the distinction between a visible and an invisible Church. Here are the texts:

According to St. Epiphanius († 403), in the East, (Adv. haer., PG 42, 727) and St. Peter Chrysologus († c.450), in the West, (Sermones, PL 52, 576 B, 580 A, 409 AB, 418 AB), she is "Mother of all the living." According to John of Thessalonica († c.649), she is "Mother of all those who are saved" (S. in Dorm., PO, V. 19, 388, lines 20-21).

According to John of Salerno, disciple and biographer of Odo of Cluny († 942), (*PL* 133, 72 AB), followed by many authors, she is "Mother of mercy."

According to Aelred († 1167), she is "our Mother, Mother of our life, Mother of our incorruption ... for she who is the Mother of Christ, is Mother of our wisdom, Mother of our justice, Mother of our sanctification, Mother of redemption" (S. 20, in Nativ. 2, PL 195, 323 B). From this text we can see how we are to interpret the most ancient testimony cited: There is question of Mary's role at the beginning of salvation, at the time of the Incarnation, and not of her present role. A more detailed exposition would have to give much more information on this point.

3. A third series, even shorter than the second, seems to leave a somewhat larger opening:

According to Fulbert of Chartres († 1029), $(S.\ 6,\ PL\ 141,\ 329\ D)$, Pseudo-Peter of Sicily (end of the 11th century, beginning of the 12th century), $(PG\ 104,\ 1284)$ and Rupert of Deutz († 1135), $(PL\ 6,\ 789-790)$ Mary is "Mother of all." (Cf. Pseudo-Ephraem, date uncertain and undoubtedly somewhat late, Ephremi Opera, graece, ed. Assemani, V. 3, p. 576).

According to Eadmer († 1124), (De excell., c. II, PL 159, 578 B): Mary in atoning for all by her merits is "Mother and Mistress of all things" (mater et domina rerum).

In the same vein, St. Bonaventure: "Owing to the fact that the Virgin Mary became the Mother of God, she became "Mother of all creatures" (III Sent., d.9, a.1, Q.3; ed. Quaracchi 3, 205). This sentence constitutes the beginning of an objection. But it seems that the Seraphic Doctor takes up this principle only in order to discuss its consequences.

Finally, according to a hymn prior to the 15th century (edited by G. Dreves, Analecta hymnica medii aevi, V.34, no.113, p.195), Mary is Mother of the world, "Mundi Mater."

But we must guard against making these medieval texts say more than their authors intended. The latter, once again, had scarcely any preoccupation with the salvation of pagans who do not know of the Gospel: this concern will appear only with the era of great explorations, at the time of the Renaissance. When the older authors say without any further qualification that Mary is *Mother of all*, they are doubtless thinking only of all the believers. Their orientation is ecclesiastical more than it is cosmic; it is cosmic only indirectly, in so far as Mary cooperates in the Incarnation, which brings salvation to the entire world: a potential salvation which will be accomplished on Calvary, then diffused in the Church through faith and the sacraments.

It is very significant that the expressions current today: "Mother of men," "Mother of the human race" are relatively new. Terrien, seeking to justify the title of his second volume, Marie, Mère des Hommes (Mary, Mother of Men) found no precedent earlier than Leo XIII. Yet the Pope of the Rosary does not use this term explicitly. He does, at all events, speak clearly of Mary's maternity with respect to all men. In the encyclical Octobri mense of September 22, 1891 (ASS, 24 (1890-1891), 195-196), he affirms that "in the person of the disciple John," Jesus, "from the height of the Cross, confided to her care and to her affection the entire human race" (universitatem humani generis, in Joanne discipulo, curandam ei fovendamque commisit) and that "her maternal office" is exercised "towards all" (ib.); it seems to attain to those who "deprived of divine faith, do not salute her and do not consider her to be their mother." (Negue salutant negue habent matrem). There is the same perspective in an indulgenced prayer for unity where we find: "Virgin Immaculate ... look affectionately upon our separated brothers who are still your sons" (ASS, 28 (1895-1896), 501).

Pius X is the first pope who uses the expression brought into honor by Terrien. In the encyclical Ad diem illum of February 2, 1904 (Acta Pii X, I, 78), he calls Mary Dei simul atque hominum parens: Mother, at one and the same time, both of God and of men. But the context restricts this maternity to the Church, the body of Christ. The title is found once again in Benedict XV (Letter Inter sodalicia, AAS, 10 (1918), 182): "she has been established by Jesus Christ Mother of all men." Then, both Pius XI (AAS, 15 (1923), 104) and Pius XII (radio message, AAS, 38 (1946), 326) call Mary "the Mother of humanity." These last three texts refer to Mary's maternal mission towards all men and to her maternal love for them. From the point of view of love and solicitous care for mankind, Mary's maternity appears fully universal. It is concerned with

all those who are *called* to participate in the universal redemption of Christ.

By searching more thoroughly, Terrien would have been able to find the title Mother of men in the Middle Ages, but at a rather late date; not before the 13th century it seems. It is used by St. Bonaventure: "Mary is not only the Mother of God, according to the flesh, but also the spiritual Mother of men. As Eve engendered all of us, so Our Lady has engendered us all for heaven" (S. 6 in Ass., ed. Quaracchi, 9, 706 b). Later on came Pseudo-Albert the Great (end of the 13th century), who calls Mary "Mother of all men" omnium hominum mater (Mariale q. 145, ed. Borgnet 37, 206 a) and again Mother "of one man by generation, Mother of all men by regeneration": and here the word regeneration tells us that there is question of a maternity with respect to the baptised more than of a cosmic maternity. St. Antoninus of Florence († 1459) takes up this text and adds a nuance of his own: "Mother of all men by generation and by her solicitude, for she engendered one man by whom she recreated and regenerated all" the others (Summa Theol., P. 4, Tit. 15, c. 20, XI, ed. Verona 1740, p. 1059 E). The context of these three passages refers principally to the Incarnation. It would seem to call for a distinction between two aspects of Mary's maternity: the affection and maternal solicitude (cura) which is exercised towards all men called to salvation, and generation (genitura) which concerns the baptised, who are incorporated into Christ and become brothers of Christ.

But in the texts prior to the Renaissance, even in those where Mary is called Mother of all men, the universality of her maternity is specified with regard to the spiritual race of the redeemed and not with respect to the entire human race as such.

4. Among the ancient texts only one can be interpreted as referring to Mary's maternity with regard to the pagans: The Blessed Virgin is called "Mother of nations" (mater gentium). The expression is used by Ambrose Autpert († 784) (PL 39, 2131=Pseudo-Augustine; cf. PL 30, 144D=Pseudo-Jerome), who perhaps borrowed it from Pseudo-Ildephonse, of uncertain date, (PL 96, 217 A). The title "Mother of nations" appears to have been applied first to the Church (Pseudo-Augustine, Sermo 121, 5, PL 39, 1989). It seems to refer to the apostolic expansion of the Church, which assimilates nations to itself when converting them. This expression could well date from the Carolingian era (conversion of the Saxons). In this perspective Mary would be Mother of nations, not because she brings about their salvation in the midst of their very incredulity, but inasmuch as she leads them to the Church. The question would have to be studied more closely.

What may we conclude from this rapid look at the teachings of tradition?

- 1. Patristic tradition considers Mary's maternity to be universal, but universal radically and potentially. Mary is universal Mother in so far as she is Mother of *Christ by whom salvation came to the entire universe*. Quite typical in this respect are the magnificent expressions of Theodotus of Ancyra (shortly before 446): Mary "Mother of the Economy" (Hom. 4 PG 77, 1393 C; cf. 1351-1352) and of Proclus of Constantinople († 446): "Mother of the mystery" (Orat. 13, PG 65, 792 B). There is no question of a real maternity here.
- 2. When the authors envisage the *real* maternity of Mary (which begins tentatively in the Carolingian era and finally becomes widespread in the 12th century), they generally see the universality of this maternity in function of faith and baptism: with respect to those who have become "brothers of Christ." And if Mary is called "Mother of all the living," it is not in the same sense as Eve. The latter is mother of the human race: according to natural life; and the most Blessed Virgin is Mother of the race of the reborn: according to the supernatural life. Eve is considered as mother of mankind and Mary as Mother of the redeemed.

The ensemble of the texts cited does not constitute a decisive argument against the notion of a universal maternity extending even to the infidels, since this problem was never posed — and since the authors cited do not explicitly mention any exclusion, any restriction limiting the universality of this maternity. Nor do these ancient texts contain any argument favoring an extension of Mary's maternity to unbelievers. In short, they leave the question "open." But the openings are narrow, and one must avoid forcing them. We can see that the thesis of Mary's maternity with regard to the infidels cannot be integrated with tradition save by many nuances and reservations. Mary, in any case, is not the Mother of pagans by the same title and in the same degree as she is of Christians.

2. Theological Principles

In order to clarify the problem before us, we will set forth the following principles:

1. Mary's maternal function is closely linked to the capital function of Christ. Her grace as mother is completely subordinate to the grace which makes the Savior the head of the mystical body. It appears that

the maternal grace has the same *extension* as the capital grace of Christ: a *universal extension*. More concretely, Our Lady is Mother of all those whose head is Christ: therefore, Mother of *all* men.

- 2. Christ is the universal head of humanity, but in various degrees and by divers titles. In a correlative and proportionate way, the universal motherhood of humanity also implies different degrees and titles.
- a) By right and potentially, Christ is head of *all men* by a double title: because He is the God-Man through the Incarnation, and because He merited redemption for them. He has an ardent love for all men: a love which extends to the infidels and to sinners in so far as they are called to salvation.

In a parallel way, Mary is by right and potentially Mother of all men because, by her cooperation in the mystery of the Incarnation, she is Mother of Christ the Head, and because, by her participation in the redemptive sacrifice, she merited all graces with Him in a secondary and subordinate way. There she officially received her mission as mother; and her maternal love extends to all men.

In brief, no man living on earth is a stranger to the mission of Christ the Head and to the mission of His Mother. No one is excluded from their love. And it will be noted that the text of Pius XI on the maternity of Mary with regard to the infidels bases itself on love.

b) Mary, who is, morally speaking, the Mother of all by virtue of her mission and her love, is in a more special way the Mother of believers, Mother of the baptised, and Mother of the elect.

The (baptismal) character creates a permanent bond with Christ. It incorporates us into the Church and causes us to contract a relationship with the Savior: He becomes our brother. And tradition, very forcefully and very consistently, affirms that we are sons of Mary because we are brothers of Christ. Briefly, by baptism, the pagan, who was a member of Christ and a son of Mary potentially and morally, becomes a member of Christ (and thereby son of Mary) really and ontologically.

c) Here it will be necessary to distinguish many nuances and degrees. Normally, the character is accompanied by grace. But certain Christians, through their own fault, do not have the life of grace. They are dead members of Christ, unworthy sons of Mary; their connection with the head and with the universal Mother is very tenuous.

On the other hand, fervent catechumens already live in faith and charity. The life of grace is in them before they have contracted that indestructible family relationship which the character bestows.

Finally, there are degrees of grace and charity according to which one is more or less closely attached to the universal head and to the universal Mother. These bonds find their perfection in heaven at that birth to eternal life - dies natalis - which consummates our union with Christ.

In short, our relation to Christ the Head and to His Mother admits of three principal aspects that give rise to various degrees and modes of dependence:

- a) The universal mission and love of Christ and of His Mother towards all men (a moral link).
- b) An ontological connection by reason of the baptismal character, which definitively makes us brothers of Christ and sons of Mary.
- c) Both an ontological and a moral union based on grace, which establishes a common life, a family life, a life of love with Christ our head and Mary our Mother.

The infidels belong to Christ the Head and are sons of Mary in the first sense and even then in a very restricted sense. They have nevertheless a special title to the love of Christ, who came "to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10) and who rejoices more over "one sinner who is converted than over ninety-nine just who have no need of repentance" (Luke 15:7 and 10). Mary, the Mother of mercy, fully shares this sentiment of Christ with regard to sinners.

3. We can discover a very special nuance in Mary's maternity with regard to those who do not know Christ.

She has always been the one who prepares, the one who precedes and the one who introduces. She draws and welcomes Christ at the Incarnation: She takes Him to the Temple. She intercedes in order to ask of Him His first miracle (John 2: 1-4). She is in the Cenacle, where the nucleus of the future Church is preparing to receive the initial grace of the Holy Spirit. This role seems to remain her own: she prepares, she disposes souls for the grace of Christ; she opens them to this grace. If such is the characteristic note of the maternal role that has been confided to her, she is by special title the Mother of the infidels. But we must be careful to note two things.

In this role of disposing and preparing, Mary is definitely not independent of Christ the Head. She is even here associated with and subordinate to Him. It is the Savior who has confided to His Mother, the woman full of grace, this role of opening the way by her maternal action. These preparations do not escape Him in any way.

In the second place, this role is not static but dynamic; it is not a sterile compassion towards pagans, but a desire to lead them to Christ, a desire which certainly implies intercession and seems to me to imply also an action subordinate to that of Christ.

4. In what does this dynamic role of Christ the Head and of the Mother of men, His associate, consist?

Certainly its principal object is to lead the infidels to the faith, the pagans to the Church, and for this reason to raise up missionary vocations in the Church. This first point can never be insisted on sufficiently.

5. But there is perhaps something else. Since the Renaissance, the case of the pagans who could not have known Christ poses a problem for theologians. "God wills that all men be saved" (I Tim. 2:4); it seems then that He has given all men the means to work out their salvation. Hence, people generally conclude that pagans in good faith have received under somewhat less favorable conditions than believers the means to obtain eternal life, notably through respect for the moral law, the practice of charity, and the valid elements in their worship of a Supreme Being. Those who are saved under these conditions do not do so apart from Christ, but through Him and in an analagous, related and totally subordinate way through Mary. Invisible members of the Church, they are in the same way members of Christ and sons of His Mother. They are then sons of Mary not only in the first sense that we just spoke of (sons of her love and of her solicitude), but in the third sense (sons of grace). They are not sons in the second sense (which is that in the order of sign): they do not have visible and conscious membership in the Church, nor the mark of sonship given by baptism. They are thus lacking two important things.

Those members who are unaware that they are such do not have that fruitful contact with Christ and His Mother which comes from the knowledge of faith. They do not have access to those essential means (of holiness) which are the sacraments. Their salvation is then more difficult: it is more a rescue than it is a salvation. They make the journey from earth to heaven not on the bark of the Church, but on a life preserver, lacking both sails and provisions. They may have the great energy which we all admired this past year in Dr. Bombard. It is the same admiration which we have for a Ghandi, for example, and, more reservedly perhaps for a Péguy or for a Simone Weil — those voluntary castaways. Like Dr. Bombard they met a ship on their way: Holy

^{1.} Editor's note: Dr. Alain Bombard in the autumn of 1953 sailed alone across the Atlantic on a kind of life raft from the Canary Islands to Barbados in the West Indies. His purpose was to demonstrate that a person shipwrecked could survive for weeks at a time on water and food taken directly from the sea.

^{2.} There is no disparaging connotation to be attributed to this expression designating the exceptional experience of Péguy or Simone Weil. Between these two cases there is certainly a marked difference. The purity of Péguy's faith and

Church where nourishment and safety were offered. They agreed to take some nourishment but refused to get on board.... Let us have no doubt that today, just as Dr. Bombard, who strongly advises against anyone else using the means by which he crossed the Atlantic, they would dissuade adventurous souls from following their example. Let us not forget in considering these men of good will, these men of noble will, that in whatever concerns salvation "it is grace which operates in us both to will and to accomplish" (Phil. 2:13). Without grace, most human lives are spoiled even on the natural plane, while the perfect orientation of the will, the fulness of its power are normally the fruit of faith and of the sacraments. This efficacy brings the saints much further along than the greatest heroes.

What is the number of those in whom grace works by ways unknown to us? We do not know; and it is not our concern. What we know with certainty is that the proportion of those who are saved in the Church and the quality of the salvation to which they can attain is incomparably greater than that of men who are saved outside the visible Church.

Then too it is the universal maternal love of Mary with regard to the infidels (first sense), a love which leads them to salvation through the visible Church, more than the problematical filiation of grace (third sense), which ought to draw our attention when we speak of Mary's maternity with regard to the infidels.

As always, when we talk about this problem of the salvation of the infidels, it is necessary to insist on an important point: Christ has taught us nothing concerning it, and what we may say about it will always be based on fragile deductions. The Savior, in effect, wanted to instruct us on what is our concern and not on that which is exclusively His (as are "the day and the hour" of judgment). He told us only that we are responsible for the salvation of the infidels, that the means of salvation are preaching and baptism: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved. He who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

Any theory which would come to the conclusion that the pagans are well taken care of by Christ and by their heavenly Mother, and that there is no reason for being too concerned about them, would therefore be contrary to the spirit of Christ and harmful to the spread of salvation. Let us beware of such quietism!

In short, whenever we speak of Mary's maternity leading nations to the visible Church through the apostolic ministry, we are on sure and

his interior convictions were of a very superior quality. We find ourselves wondering about the mystical depths which the sacramental life would have developed in such an elevated soul. solid ground. We must insist on that. How Mary together with Christ assures the salvation of those who do not know the true faith is a speculative question concerning which we must be moderate and cautious.

It is in conformity with these principles that we are to interpret, as His Grace Mgr. Chappoulie has done (Maria, I, 899-902), the words of Pius XI on Mary's maternity as regards "those who do not know that they were redeemed by Christ." The maternal role of Mary with respect to the infidels consists essentially in getting the means of salvation to reach them (especially in attracting generous souls towards the missionary vocation) and in preparing their souls to receive the Word.

Grandbourg, May 15, 1953 R. Laurentin

P.S. The principal studies to be consulted on the spiritual maternity are (in chronological order):

J.B. TERRIEN: La mère de Dieu et la mère des hommes, Paris, Letheilleux, 1902, V.3.

G.M. ROSCHINI: Mariologia, Rome, Belardetti, 1947, V.2, pp. 199-230.

A. BAUMANN: Maria, Mater nostra spiritualis. Eine theologische Untersuchung ... in der Aeusserungen der Papste von Tridentinum bis heute, Brixen, Weger, 1948.

Estudios Marianos, V.7 (1948).

T. KOEHLER, S.M.: Maternité spirituelle de Marie, in du Manoir, Maria, Paris, Beauchesne, 1949, V.I, pp. 573-600.

A. PIOLANTI: Mater unitatis. De spirituali Virginis maternitate secundum nonnullos saec. XII scriptores, in Marianum 4(1949) pp. 423-439.

H. BARRE, C.S.Sp.: Marie et l'Eglise, du Vénérable Bède à saint Albert, i, 2. Mater, in Bulletin de la Société Française d'Etudes Mariales 9(1951), pp. 77-80. New and important documentation is given here.

T.M. BARTOLOMEI, O.S.M.: La maternita spirituale di Maria. Sua realtà e sviluppo, sua natura ed estensione, in Divus Thomas, PL. 55 (1952), no. 3-4, pp. 289-357.

Marian Studies, Washington, Holy Name College, 3(1952).

Besides these technical studies, let us single out the remarkable suggestions of Father Daniélou, S.M., in *Advent* and *The Salvation of the Nations*.

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