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Mary's Knowledge of Her Son's Divinity at the Annunciation: The Papal Tradition

Dominic J. Unger, OMF. Cap.

Father Emil Neubert, S.M., eminent Mariologist that he was, had the highest esteem for the supreme dignity of God's Virgin Mother. For him Mary's motherhood was, of course, not merely physical, but most spiritual. Her becoming mother was an act of purest love. She was quite conscious of consenting to the angel's message and accepting this dignity.¹ In fact, she gave her consent to be the Mother of the Messiah *as God's Son*. Father Neubert gave a summary statement of his view in two paragraphs.²

It would not be strange if in those texts where Scripture mentions the Mother of Jesus, it did not allude to the divinity of her Son, but actually the divinity of Jesus is affirmed, or at least supposed, on several of the occasions when His Mother is named. Gabriel had said to Mary that she would become Mother while at the same time preserving her virginity, because that which was to be born of her would be called the Son of God (Luke 1, 35). Whatever may have been the meaning of the expression *Son of God* for the Jews of that time, it is beyond doubt that the Blessed Virgin saw something other than the equivalent of the word Messiah in the title. For the angel explained to her that the Messiah who would be born of her would respect her virginity precisely because He was the very Son of God. There is no doubt, either, that the first Christians who heard or read the story of the Annunciation gave to the expression *Son of God* the literal meaning, the full meaning of Second Person of the most Holy Trinity, and that, therefore, Mary was for them, in keeping with the announcement of the divine messenger, Mother of God.

And in the episode of the Visitation, they learned that Elizabeth had said to the young mother: "And how have I deserved that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Elizabeth clearly gave to this word *Lord* the meaning she had found for it in all the sacred texts which she had read or heard, namely that of God. In the very same chapter in which we find Elizabeth's question, the word *Lord* is used an additional fifteen times, and each time with the meaning of *God*. It is thus especially in the case of Elizabeth's salutation: "And how have I deserved that the Mother of my Lord should come to me? . . . And blessed is she who has believed, because the things promised her by the *Lord* shall be accomplished" (Luke 1, 43, 45). The first Christians themselves, in reading these texts, understood the word *Lord* in the sense of God, and again saw Mary honored as Mother of God.

For a few decades now some Catholic scholars have denied that Mary knew of her Son's divinity at the Annunciation, or at least, that one cannot prove from the Annunciation story that she did. It was E. F. Sutcliffe, S.J., who first revived this opinion

in recent years. His view was quickly refuted by several Scripture scholars. But he attempted to defend his opinion against the attacks. Numerous articles followed in defense of the traditional view that she did know. There were, however, those who sided with Father Sutcliffe, or at least watered down the traditional view considerably.³ For them “Son of God” (Luke 1, 35) as well as “Son of the Most High” (Luke 1, 32) are but synonyms of Messiah. Very briefly, what Mary gathered about the divinity of her Child she got from the allusions to the Old Testament, especially to God’s presence over the ark of the covenant (see Exodus 40, 35). Mary really did not learn here about the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity; only that her child was somehow to be identified with God. They appeal to the scene in the Temple, where Luke (2, 49) states that Mary and Joseph did not understand the words of Jesus about his Father, according to their interpretation.

I said this opinion was revived in recent years, because it was first presented by Erasmus and Luther some four centuries ago. At that time it was refuted quite ably by St. Peter Canisius and the Eminent Doctor Suarez, who attacked on the rather strong theological note that it is “impious and heretical and contrary to the mind and tradition of the universal Church.”⁴

Since Father Neubert did not develop the proofs in favor of his view, it would be a tribute to him to do so. However, in the space allotted me, I could not treat them adequately. Since, in the modern dispute, both sides appeal to a correct interpretation of the Annunciation message, and both think they have the true answer, I thought it advisable at this point to investigate the traditional mind of the popes. After all, Pope Pius XII stated categorically that the Teaching Office of the Church is the proximate and universal norm of revelation,⁵ and by this he meant not merely the infallible decisions of Councils and popes, but the teaching of the Ordinary Magisterium.⁶ In other words, the Teaching Office of the Church is the one and only authentic Exegete of the Scriptures as well as the Theologian.

There are those who object to starting with the popes in a problem of this sort, either because they presume the evidence of the popes is inconclusive or they fear their academic freedom is cramped. One’s academic freedom is not cramped by the papal interpretation of Scripture, even if that is a solemnly defined interpretation. As for inconclusive evidence, that cannot be established without investigating the evidence.

At this time I should like to make a few observations. First, it is self-evident that when we speak of Mary’s knowledge of her child as God’s Son, we do not mean to say that she had to have a clear concept of the hypostatic union, most of all not in scholastic terminology. We are merely saying that it sufficed for her to know that her child would somehow be more than a human person, that he was somehow God’s own Son in the strict sense. Secondly, we insist that she did not have to be ignorant of this truth in order that she could live by faith, as someone remarked. St. Thomas with his profound understanding of the hypostatic union still lived by faith.

In our analysis, therefore, of the papal testimonies we shall always ask ourselves these questions: 1) Does the pope state expressly or equivalently that the angel’s message, particularly in Luke 1, 35, revealed God’s Son in the strict sense? 2) Does the pope state

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expressly or equivalently, or at least imply clearly, that Mary understood that message about her becoming mother of God's Son? 3) Or perhaps, does the pope state or imply that Mary understood her child would be God's Son, without any reference to the Lucan account?

St. Leo I (440-461)

The first papal witness to our question is St. Leo the Great. In his first sermon *On the Lord's Nativity*, which is read as the second Nocturn in the Office for Christmas, he has this:

For God's Son, according to the fullness of time, which the Highness of the inscrutable divine counsel planned, assumed the nature of the human race that was to be reconciled with its Author . . . The royal Virgin from the Davidic line is chosen, in order that she who was to become pregnant with a holy child, would conceive the divine and human child mentally before doing so bodily. And she is instructed by conversation with an angel, that what is to be wrought in her is from the Holy Spirit, so that she would not be frightened by the extraordinary effects, if she had been ignorant of the heavenly plan. Nor did she who was soon to be God's Mother believe that her purity would suffer.⁷

Pope St. Leo states expressly that Mary was chosen (by God), in order that she might conceive the divine and human child first mentally and only then spiritually. That is equivalent to saying that God chose Mary to announce to her his plan, so that she could consent to being mother (that is the mental conception). And so she consented to being mother of the divine and human child. But whence did Mary know that the child was to be divine as well as human? She was instructed by the angel, the pope tells us, in regard to the virginal conception through the Holy Spirit. This the angel disclosed in Luke 1, 35. But that same verse speaks of Mary's child as God's Son. Leo obviously held that the angel disclosed the divinity of Mary's child in this expression of Luke 1, 35; and for that reason he can speak of Mary being God's Mother when he states that she did not fear for her purity. Both points – the virginal conception and the divinity of the child – are in the same verse. God did not wish Mary to be ignorant of the heavenly plan not merely in regard to the virginal conception but also in regard to the divinity of the child, which she therefore conceived mentally before doing so bodily.

In his second sermon *On the Lord's Nativity*, St. Leo has this pertinent remark: "Such an origin (namely, virginal) was proper to the future Savior of men, who would at the same time possess the nature of human substance and would be immune from the sins of human flesh. For God is the Author to God who is to be born in the flesh, according to the testimony of the Archangel to the Virgin Mary."⁸

According to the Pope the archangel's testimony, in Luke 1, 35, spoke of "God-to-be-born-in-the-flesh." This expression is the equivalent of "God's Son" who was to be conceived virginally of Mary's flesh, that is, God himself is the Author of this conception.

Again, Leo the Great sees the divinity of the Child, as *God's Son*, disclosed in Luke 1, 35. And this, be it noted carefully, was revealed to Mary herself, according to the Pope. She was therefore cognizant of the fact that her child would be God, according to Leo, which is the same as "God's Son," according to the wording of the archangel.

Also in his sixth sermon *On the Lord's Nativity*, having spoken about the Incarnation of God's Son, the same Pope remarked: "The conversation of the Angel Gabriel with the surprised Mary, as also the conception from the Holy Spirit, wonderfully promised and believed, brings Our Lord's nativity not merely into our memory, but also presents it to our eyes."⁹ The virginal conception promised, of which he speaks, is in Luke 1, 35; and it is the conception of God's Son, it is the Incarnation of God's Son, of which he had just spoken. The Pope sees this revealed in Luke 1, 35. What is more, it was revealed to Mary and she understood it, because she "believed" in the virginal conception of God's Son.

In his sermon 35, *On the Solemnity of the Epiphany* the Supreme Pontiff begins by stating that this feast honors the day on which a star went ahead and guided the three Magi to know and *adore God's Son*. If the Magi recognized Mary's Son as God's Son and adored him, then with greater reason did Mary. In fact, the Pope adds immediately, concisely and precisely: "The Blessed Virgin Mary heard (namely, from the angel) that she was to become pregnant through the Holy Spirit and that she was to give birth to God's Son, and she believed."¹⁰ This is an obvious use of Luke 1, 35. From the angel's message Mary knew, because she believed and gave consent, that her child would be God's Son. She believed that her child would be not a mere man, not even just identified with God somehow, but God's own Son.

To sum up, in the witness of Leo the Great there is no doubt, no hesitance, no arguing. He states and testifies quite simply and firmly and repeatedly that the angel revealed that Mary's child would be God's Son and that Mary believed this and gave consent to it. His faith is that of the Roman Church, of the universal Church. He reflects the common belief of Catholics in his day which was in quiet possession.

Anastasius II (496-498)

In his Third Letter this Pope has the following:

We confess one Christ, the same Son of God and of man, the Only-begotten of the Father and the Firstborn from the dead. We do so, knowing that he is co-eternal with his Father according to his divinity, according to which he is the Creator of all things; and that he deigned (to become man) after the consent of the most holy Virgin, when she said to the angel: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word." (Luke 1, 38) "Blessed is she who believed, because all things were accomplished for her." (Cf. Luke 1, 45) For the Author of faith could not have been conceived of an unbelieving woman. And so it was proper that the first way, the Virgin's consent, be prepared.¹¹

The Pope states expressly that Mary consented, namely, to the angel's message, of

which he had spoken. She consented, in fact, under divine inspiration; and she was blessed because of her faith in the angel's message. Since the Pope presents this consent as the first preparation for "the Incarnation," that is, for God's becoming man, Mary, according to him, certainly grasped the angel's message that her Son would be God's Son, as told her in Luke 1, 35. The same must be said of the following: "But in the Incarnation, Charity (the Holy Spirit) obviously enfleshed his (God's) Only-begotten Son, but also because the Virgin out of an extraordinary ardor of charity conceived God's Word, when she said, 'Behold, the handmaid.'"¹²

He wishes to say that "the Incarnation," that is, God's Son becoming man, was the result of charity. First, because it was the work of the Holy Spirit who is charity itself; secondly, because it resulted from Mary's consent, which was inspired by an "extraordinary ardor of charity." Now, the Pope could scarcely stress Mary's most ardent charity for conceiving "God's Word," if her desire did not suppose the knowledge that "God's Word" would be her child, and that she desired to be mother specifically of "God's Word." In other words, Mary's consent is a "conceiving of God's Word," not merely because conception followed her consent, but because by her consent she first conceived God's Word mentally. Innocent is stating, merely in different words, what Leo I had already stated.

That interpretation is confirmed in sermon 28, *On the Assumption*, where the Pope accommodates a passage from The Canticle to explain that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary in order to give her the affection of charity for conceiving in body, and the power of the Most High overshadowed her in order to give her the understanding of wisdom that she might conceive in her heart. Then he adds: "For that reason we read: 'Blessed are you who have believed, because all things have been accomplished for you by the Lord.' (Cf. Luke 1, 45) She conceived in her body 'the Word', which 'was made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1, 14); she conceived in her heart 'the Word,' which 'was in the beginning with God, and the Word was God.'" (John 1, 1-2)¹³

Mary was, therefore, given a special understanding of the mystery so that she would be able to conceive in her heart God's Word, who would be her child. Of this Son of God there was mention in the verse of Luke 1, 35, which the Pope used in the first quotation above.

Innocent III, too, is witness, then, that Mary gave consent to the angel's message, precisely inasmuch as it informed her that her child would be God's Son, God's Word.¹⁴

Boniface IX (1389-1404)

Pope Urban VI had decreed the feast of the Visitation, but Pope Boniface IX promulgated the feast by the Bull *Superni benignitas Conditoris*, November 9, 1390. In it he asserts that at Nazareth through the words of the angel's salutation the mysteries of the Incarnate Word itself, and other wonderful solemnities, are celebrated. It was at Nazareth that our redemption began; there the Virgin conceived the Redeemer. He explains further: "Certainly the Queen of heaven herself, in whose womb God's Son-become-man cloistered himself, did not become proud at all at the height of so great

an honor announced to her by the angel; instead as the humble handmaid, though she had become the Lord's Mother . . . she went into the hill country."¹⁵

This is an express statement that Mary bore God's Son Incarnate in her womb, and that this great honor had been announced to her by the angel, obviously in Luke 1, 35. The Pope's mind is that if the angel announced this honor to Mary, she was aware of it, because it was not the occasion for her to become proud, but rather for performing a service of humility for Elizabeth. Again, Mary is aware not merely that she would have a child who would somehow be identified with God, but who would be God's own Son, which she learned from the angel's message.

If confirmation for that is needed, we have it in the following:

Elizabeth, however, when she heard the greeting of the glorious Virgin, being filled with the Holy Spirit and being aware of the mystery of the Incarnate Word in the virginal womb (of Mary), cried out in a loud voice and said: "Blessed are you among women . . . And how have I deserved that the Mother of my Lord should come to me? . . . And blessed are you who have believed, because the things promised you by the Lord shall be accomplished." (Luke 1, 42.43.45) . . . O great mystery . . . that the mothers should know beforehand, through the Spirit, of the pledges they bore in their wombs, and also prophesy.¹⁶

Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and consequently knows of the mystery of the Incarnate Word in Mary's womb. This knowledge Elizabeth discloses to Mary by calling her "the Mother of my Lord," which title, according to the Pope, is equivalent to "mystery of the Incarnate Word." Mary, too, according to the Pope was inspired by the Holy Spirit about the mystery in her womb. She, we must conclude, knew at least as much as Elizabeth. Besides, she heard the greeting of Elizabeth, that she was "Mother of the Lord." So, at least from this time on she would have known as much as Elizabeth. Now, if Mary knew of the mystery of the Incarnation of God's Son at the Visitation, she had learned that nowhere else than at the Annunciation, as the Pope stated in the previous quotation.

Benedict XIV (1740-1758)

The scholarly Benedict XIV wrote briefly in his Golden Bull, *Gloriosae Dominae*, September 27, 1748: "For just as the omnipotent God had chosen this Virgin out of thousands and elevated her to the unspeakable dignity of the divine motherhood, by the message of the angel, and just as he filled her more plentifully than all other pure creatures with the gifts of his grace."¹⁷

If Mary was elevated (objectively) to the dignity of divine motherhood "by the message of the angel," as the Pope states expressly, then that message must have spoken of this dignity. But that, traditionally, was in Luke 1, 35, where Mary's child is said to be God's Son. The purpose too, traditionally, in God's "choosing" Mary was to announce to her that dignity so that she could consent to it freely. That is the implication of this

Pope's statement. Implicitly he too holds that Mary was aware of this dignity through the message of the angel. To use scholastic terms, Mary was elevated to the dignity of divine motherhood by the message of the angel not merely ontologically but also psychologically.

Pius IX (1846-1878)

The Pope of the Immaculate Conception, when presenting the argument from the angel's greeting to Mary, wrote: "When the Fathers and Writers of the Church reflected in their hearts and minds that the Most Blessed Virgin was, in the name and by the order of God himself, proclaimed "full of grace" by the Angel Gabriel when he announced her sublime dignity of Mother of God, they taught that this singular and solemn salutation which had never been heard elsewhere shows that the Mother of God is the seat of all divine graces."¹⁸

Expressly the Pope asserts that the angel announced to Mary the sublime dignity of being God's Mother. That the angel did in Luke 1, 35, stating that Mary's child would be God's Son. But, we can certainly conclude, since that message was meant for Mary primarily and alone at that moment, she had to be aware of its meaning, or else it was purposeless for God to reveal it there. This inference is scarcely foreign to the Pope's mind.

Leo XIII (1878-1903)

In his Rosary Encyclical *Octobri mense* (September 22, 1891), Pope Leo XIII, quoting St. Thomas, speaks about the mystical marriage that God's Son willed to contract with the human race. For that reason God awaited the free consent of Mary to a marriage with his Son.¹⁹ Now, as the Pope knows quite well, the revelation of this is contained in Luke 1, 35, 38. But, in the Pope's mind, Mary must have realized that her child would be God's Son, else she actually did not give consent to a mystical marriage of God's Son with the human race.

In a second Rosary Encyclical, *Magnae Dei Matris*, September 8, 1892, the same Pope writes:

The Lord is with her; he fills her and makes her joyous with his grace. And she is designated by the heavenly message as the one from whom, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the long expected Savior of the nations is to come forth in our humanity. (Cf. Luke 1, 28-38) The more she wonders at this highest degree of dignity and ascribes it as a gift to the powerful and merciful God, the more she humbles herself, unconscious of any virtue of her own, and she promptly calls herself and dedicates herself as God's handmaid while she becomes his mother.²⁰

"The Savior" of whom Mary is to be mother, according to the angel's message, is not merely the Messiah whom Mary believed to be human, but God's Son, because the Pope alludes to Luke 1, 35 with the phrases "heavenly message" and "through the power of

the Holy Spirit.” And this “God’s Son” is strictly divine, because Mary’s dignity is “becoming his (God’s) mother.” She is, moreover, aware precisely of this aspect of her “highest degree of dignity,” because she humbles herself the more, the more she wonders at it. “She calls herself God’s handmaid while she becomes his mother,” would be a meaningless comparison if she did not know she would be God’s mother.

Of the first joyful mystery of the Rosary, Pope Leo states in his Encyclical *Iucunda semper*, September 8, 1894, that God’s eternal Son bows down to men, having become man, through the consent of Mary, who conceived through the Holy Spirit.²¹

The Pope is certainly referring to Luke 1, 35, where the angel revealed this to Mary. Mary, so the Pope states, gave consent to God’s Son becoming man through her, by the power of the Holy Spirit. She consented not merely to someone’s becoming man, but to God’s Son becoming man. She was, obviously, aware of what she was consenting to.

In the Rosary Encyclical *Fidentem piumque*, September 20, Pope Leo tells of the wonderful consent of Mary to the message brought to earth by the angel – a message about the peace-bearing mystery. She gave her consent in place of the entire human race, according to St. Thomas.²² In other words, though the Pope does not state expressly that Mary consented to being God’s Mother, he is stating the same truth that he presented earlier about the mystical marriage of God’s Son with the human race through Mary his Mother, not merely in the physical sense, but also in the moral sense that she gave consent to it, and was therefore conscious of his divine nature.

In the very beautiful Rosary Encyclical *Augustissimae Virginis* (September 12, 1897), Pope Leo describes how the angels were messengers of Christ’s various mysteries. Then he asserts as clearly and concisely: “Gabriel is sent to the Virgin to announce the Incarnation of the eternal Word.”²³ If that was the angel’s message to Mary, then Mary had to understand it. But the Word’s Incarnation cannot be the conception of a mere human person; it was the conception of God’s Son.

In his last Rosary Encyclical, *Parta humano generis*, September 8, 1901, this great Pope exclaimed: “For, whenever we salute Mary with the angel’s praise as ‘full of grace’ . . . the exalted dignity of Mary comes to mind . . . Oh, how sweet, then, how pleasing was the angelic greeting to the Blessed Virgin who at that time when Gabriel greeted her, perceived that she conceived God’s Word through the Holy Spirit.”²⁴

By “when Gabriel greeted her” the Pope refers to the whole message of the Annunciation, not merely to the greeting of Luke 1, 28. Now, according to the Pope, Mary “perceived” at that time that she “conceived God’s Word.” That was her “exalted dignity” of which she learned through the angel’s message, in Luke 1, 35.

To sum up for Leo XIII, he teaches expressly in four encyclicals that Mary was aware of her having conceived God’s Son; he does so equivalently in two others. He is presenting this truth repeatedly, not as something doubtful, but as something pertaining to the common Catholic faith, which all peoples throughout the Catholic world will accept.

Pius X (1903-1914)

In his well-known letter for the jubilee of the Immaculate Conception, *Ad diem illum*,

February 2, 1904, the sainted Pope Pius X wrote: "By all means, if to Mary it was truly said: 'Blessed are you because you have believed that the things promised to you by the Lord will be fulfilled' (Luke 1, 45), namely, that she would conceive and give birth to God's Son; if in consequence, she received him in her womb who is by nature Truth, since God's Son-become-man is the Author of our faith, then it is necessary."²⁵

The Pope here states that the object of Mary's belief, for which she was pronounced blessed by Elizabeth, was the angel's message that she would conceive God's Son and give birth to him. He could not have been plainer. Later he writes again about Mary's conceiving God's eternal Son that he might not only become man but the Savior of men through the nature he assumed from her.²⁶ Though here the Pope does not assert that Mary gave her consent to this, he obviously has that in mind, since he stated it earlier.

Pius XI (1922-1939)

In his centennial Encyclical, *Lux Veritatis* (December 25, 1931), Pius XI wrote of the hypostatic union as the basis for the divine motherhood. He stated that the same Christ who was conceived in the Virgin's womb by the power of the Holy Spirit, is the beloved Son of the Father.²⁷ Later he explained: "Really, if the Virgin Mary's Son is God, it is certain that she who begot him must be rightly and deservedly called God's Mother . . . Therefore, let all of us venerate her as God's loving Parent who was greeted by her cousin Elizabeth as 'Mother of my Lord.'"²⁸

As is clear, the Pope does not say outright that Mary was aware of her becoming God's Mother, because he is here interested in Mary's physical motherhood of God's Son. But he refers to the fact that Elizabeth knew at the visitation that Mary's child was Lord, that is God. Consequently, the Pope would hold, *a fortiori*, that Mary herself was conscious of becoming God's Mother at the moment when she conceived Christ, God's Son.

Pius XII (1939-1958)

Pius XII, the great Marian Pope in a superb passage on Mary's role in the Mystical Body, in the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, June 29, 1943, repeats the teaching of his predecessor Leo XIII, that Mary in the name of the human race contracted a spiritual marriage between God's Son and human nature: "Her sinless soul was filled with the divine Spirit of Jesus Christ more than all other created souls; and in 'the name of the whole human race,' she gave her consent 'for a kind of spiritual marriage between God's Son and human nature'" (St. Thomas, *Summa theologica*, pars 3, q. 30, art. 1).²⁹

In other words, the Pope is saying that Mary gave consent to the Incarnation of God's Son; otherwise he could not speak of a spiritual marriage, which is the Incarnation; and the Incarnation cannot be the conception of a mere human person, but of a divine Person. A little later the Pope indicates clearly that he believes Mary knew of Christ's divinity during his infancy, because he asserts that Mary presented Christ, new-born, as Prophet, King and Priest to those who were the first to come of Jews and Gentiles to adore him.³⁰ These people should have adored Christ as God, and Mary presented him to them for that purpose, but she remained ignorant of his divine dignity?

In a *Radio Message to Ottawa* (June 19, 1947) the same Pope said: “But when the little maid of Nazareth uttered her *fiat* to the message of the angel, and the Word was made flesh in her womb, 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.”³¹

Though the Supreme Pontiff does not state expressly, he certainly implies, because of his reference to Mary’s consent, that Mary was aware of the Word’s becoming flesh in her womb. According to his predecessors – and he is fully aware of this – “the message of the angel” told Mary of this, and her consent was given precisely to this.

Again, in his discourse to the Cardinals on the occasion of the definition of the Assumption, *Commissi* (November 1, 1950), he said: “[Mary] will strengthen the souls to contemplate to what goal and to what functions she was elevated, who, elected by God to be the Mother of the Incarnate Word, listened readily to the Lord’s word.”³²

Obviously, the Pope has in mind the first and most important occasion when Mary listened most readily to the Lord’s word, at the Annunciation (Luke 1, 38), when she consented to become “the Mother of the Incarnate Word.” Traditionally the idea of being “elected by God,” meant to be given the announcement of the Incarnation, in order to be able to consent to it. So, here too, the Pope implicitly agrees with papal tradition that Mary knew she was consenting to the Incarnation of God’s Word.

In the beautiful Encyclical Letter on Mary’s Queenship, *Ad Caeli Reginam* (October 11, 1954), this Vicar of Christ, while giving the traditional and Scriptural basis for Mary’s Queenship, asserted that the ancient writers of the Church called Mary “Mother of the King and Mother of the Lord,” because of Gabriel’s message that her Son would reign forever, and because of Elizabeth’s title to Mary, “Mother of my Lord.”³³ The Pope here recognizes the traditional idea that Elizabeth knew of the divinity of Mary’s Son. The Pope can scarcely be thought to exclude that knowledge from Mary herself! He is not basing Mary’s queenship on Christ’s dignity as Messiah King in the sense of a mere human Messiah, but in the sense of a Messiah King who was announced as God’s Son, and whom Elizabeth recognized as Lord. This is confirmed by the Pontiff’s quotation from Prudentius, who asserted that “God’s Mother wondered that she had begotten the God Man and the sovereign King.”³⁴ From a work ascribed to Origen, the Pope notes that the author not only realizes that Elizabeth called Mary “Mother of my Lord,” but in view of that calls her “my sovereign Lady.”³⁵

So, once more, though not all the citations from Pius XII are expressly to the point, a few are clear and express beyond doubt that the Pope followed the traditional papal teaching that Mary knew of the divinity of her Son, as God’s Son, and she knew it through the message of the angel.

John XXIII (1958-1963)

Our late Holy Father made two versions of meditations on the Rosary, which he allowed to be published for use by all the faithful. Pertinent to our matter is this thought:

Mary Immaculate, the most beautiful and fragrant flower of creation, with her exclamation: “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1, 38), given in response

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to the message of the angel, accepts the honor of the divine Motherhood at the very moment that it was being accomplished in her.³⁶

This statement is not, of course, a document of the Ordinary Teaching Office. But one can say that it is an expression of the common belief of the faithful, of the *sensus fidelium* or *fidei*. The meditative thought of the Pope is as complete and concise as it is beautiful. Mary accepts the dignity of the divine motherhood upon the message of the angel. She accepts it, so she is conscious of that dignity. And it is the dignity of *divine* motherhood that she accepts. Her child will be God's Son, in fact, is God's Son who will become man through her, of which the Pope wrote in the paragraph preceding the one quoted. She accepts this dignity upon the message of the angel. The Pope is meditating on the first joyful mystery, the Annunciation. That is the message of the angel which disclosed to Mary her dignity as God's Mother. And that is precisely in Luke 1, 35.

Pope John's meditation, though not an authoritative statement of his Teaching Office, is, actually, a concise and complete summation of the entire Teaching Office from Leo the Great on to the present day.

Paul VI (1963-)

While on his epoch-making pilgrimage to Palestine, our Holy Father gave a speech at Bethlehem. In it he said: "To Christ we bear, as once the Magi did in this place, symbolic gifts in acknowledgement of His being the Word of God made flesh, the son of the Blessed Virgin Mary."³⁷

The Pope expresses a traditional idea: the Magi paid homage to Christ as God's Son and Word. According to the Holy Father, they did this "in acknowledgement . . ." They were, in other words, conscious of his being God's Word made flesh, and they worshipped him as such. Who would dare say that the Pope would not concede to Mary at least that much knowledge and adoration of her Son?

Conclusion

Beginning with Leo the Great, therefore, in the fifth century, to our own day, there has been an express and unwavering tradition in papal preaching and writing that Mary was aware of Christ's divine Sonship, not only in his infancy, but at the Annunciation, because she gave consent to being God's Mother, of which dignity she learned through the message of the angel disclosing to her that her child would be God's Son (Luke 1, 35). Not all of the documents analyzed state this truth expressly; but enough do so that there is no doubt about the meaning of those that do so either equivalently or implicitly. Eight Popes teach this truth expressly in twelve documents, and equivalently in six documents. Three Popes seem to hold it implicitly. We do not, of course, have a testimony from every Pope; in fact, there are at times gaps of centuries. But for the constant mind of the Popes it suffices that once a clear teaching has been voiced it is never retracted but confirmed every once in a while.

Besides, for a complete picture of the testimony of the Popes in this matter, we must

take into count the many prayers approved by them some even for the Divine Liturgy, which express or imply this fact of Mary's knowledge. Let us note only that Leo I's first testimony has been part of the Christmas Office for centuries.

Further, to have a still more adequate picture of the papal tradition in this matter, it is necessary to take into consideration the fact that the Popes were aware of and never reprehended the very clear and constant and frequent teaching of the preachers and writers of the Church through all the centuries, which agrees with that of the Popes who expressed themselves on this.

But, even abstracting from the liturgical and patristic tradition, the papal tradition is not merely a suggestion, as someone has stated. The Popes manifest the mind of the Ordinary Teaching Office of the Church, which has been the same for fifteen centuries on this point. If ever the Church makes an authoritative statement on this truth, she can assert, as she has done for other Marian truths: "Sicut semper sensit ac docuit Ecclesia: As the mind of the Church has always been and as the Church has always taught."

A Catholic is, therefore, not free to deny that Mary knew of the divinity of her Son through and at the Annunciation. He is free only to discuss the degree of certitude today and to investigate still further all the proofs that might be marshalled in its favor.

What then of the rather open statements of experts to the effect that the term "Son of God" in the Lucan account is merely a synonym for Messiah, and that Mary could not have gotten such information from the angelic message, and that we cannot assume any kind of special revelation or inspiration for Mary which is not recorded in Scripture? As to the last part, the Popes have expressly, as has also tradition time and again, granted Mary the same privilege that Elizabeth had, namely, of realizing the mystery of God's becoming man by a special inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There was no need for Scripture to state that specifically for Mary since she was greeted as "full of grace," and was told that "the Holy Spirit would overshadow her."

As for the first part of the question, in the light of the papal tradition and the rest of the Catholic tradition, we must simply reject completely the view that the term "Son of God" is merely a Messianic title in Luke 1, 35. To do so is not to go counter to scientific exegesis. To hold that the term "Son of God" has in this case the strict meaning of natural divine sonship, even though in all literature prior to this it meant merely adopted sonship or was a synonym for the Messiah, is in keeping with a most elementary principle of language. An old term can take on a stricter meaning when a "new" object is presented under it and is recognized as such. When we get the new supersonic airplanes, we will not have to coin a new name for them, though they will be "infinitely" superior to the first attempts at flying. When God's Son became man, there was no better term possible to describe him even in his human nature than "God's Son." If up to that time the term had not been used for so perfect a divine sonship, it certainly could have been used for so perfect a divine sonship, it certainly would have been used at the Annunciation in that sense, and papal tradition tells us that it was. The fact that this perfect sonship was not recognizable externally, is not an argument against its use at the Annunciation to designate Christ as the perfect Son of God. Mary could have been informed of this by a

special grace, if that was necessary, and tradition says that she was so informed, just as Elizabeth was. That is why tradition from the very beginning understood St. Luke's term of natural divine sonship, by which Mary and the Early Christians recognized that she was God's Mother.

There is, consequently, no conflict here between tradition and sound exegesis, or between theology and exegesis. Nor does the view of the Popes mean that we have to reject the excellent insights of those scholars who see the divinity of the Messiah indicated in the Annunciation story by the literary allusions to passages of the Old Testament, perhaps by a kind of Midrash. If Midrash is proved for a passage of the New Testament, the meaning need not be exactly the same as in the parallel passage of the Old Testament. In Midrash a fuller meaning can be given to an old term. And for Luke 1, 35, papal tradition is constant in holding that "God's Son" in the Lucan account is to be taken in the strict sense.

To disregard this in trying to exegetize the message of the angel in Luke 1, 35, is not scientific exegesis. The full meaning of Luke 1, 35 cannot be gotten by an exegesis that limits itself to philology and Scriptural parallels. As Pope Pius XII stated for Mariology in general, one must consult the documents of tradition, the liturgical life of the Church and the faith and piety of the faithful, which is also supported and guided by the Teaching Office and is under the direction and protection of the Holy Spirit.³⁸

We had time to write up only the teaching of the Popes; but their testimony of the liturgy, of patristic and theologic tradition agrees substantially with that papal teaching. We can, therefore, endorse the summary statement, quoted in the beginning, of Father Neubert on this problem.

¹ Emil Neubert, S.M., *Mary in Doctrine*. Milwaukee, The Bruce Publishing Co., 1954, pp. 38ff.

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³ E. F. Sutcliffe, S.J., "Our Lady and the Divinity of Christ," in *The Month*, 1944, pp. 347-350. For refutation, see:

H. Pope, O.P., "Our Lady and the Divinity of Christ," in *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* (Hereafter *IER*), vol. 66, 1945, pp. 100-105. Father Peter (Dempsey), O.F.M. Cap., "When Did Our Lady Know She Was the Mother of God?" in *IER*, vol. 67, 1946, pp. 145-163; *idem*, "Mariology and Exegesis," in *IER*, vol. 69, 1947, 113-124. Dominic Unger, O.F.M. Cap., "When Did Mary First Know of Her Divine Maternity?" in *American Ecclesiastical Review* (Hereafter *AER*), vol. 114, 1946, pp. 360-366. For defense, see: Sutcliffe, "Our Lady's Knowledge of the Divinity of Christ," in *IER*, vol. 66, 1945, pp. 427-434; *idem*, "Again Our Lady's Knowledge of Christ's Divinity," in *IER*, vol. 68, 1946, pp. 123-128; *idem*, "Scripture, Tradition and Mariology," in *IER*, vol. 69, 1947, 807-814. For further refutation of Sutcliffe, see: For example: J. A. de Aldama, S.J., "Una opinion mariologica reciente, censurada por teologos antiguos," in *Divinitas*, 1960, pp. 123-140, Francis J. Connell, C.S.S.R., "Our Lady's Knowledge," in *Mariology*, edited by Juniper B. Carol, O.F.M. (Milwaukee, Bruce Publishing Co.), vol. 2, 1957, pp. 320-321; N.G.G. (N. Garcias Garces, C.M.F.), "Temas Mariologicas en la Prensa Diaria," in *Ephemerides Mariologicae*, 1961, pp. 343-352; Michael O'Carroll, C.S.Sp., "Our Lady's Faith," in *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (Hereafter *HPR*), 1947, pp. 614-619; Maximo Peinador, C.M.F., "Conocimiento que de Jesus tuvo la Virgen," in *Ephemerides Mariologicae*, 1959, pp. 283-304; F. X. Peirce, S.J., "Our Lady and the Divinity of Christ," in *AER*, vol. 112, 1945, pp. 441-444; Paul Strater, S.J., "Quomodo Maria Iesum infantem tanquam Salvatorem et Victorem agnovit?", in *Verbum Domini*, 1948, 44-48. For further defense of Sutcliffe, see: See F. Ceuppens,

O.P., *De Mariologia Biblica*, vol. 4 of *Theologia Biblica* (Turin-Rome, first edition), pp. 72 and 80. He retracted this in the second edition of 1951, pp. 67f. and 76f. Jean Isaac, *La revelation progressive des personnes divines* (Paris, 1960), who is praised for his stand on this by John L. McKenzie, S.J., in *Theological Studies*, 1961, p. 331. In addition, see for instance, Rene Laurentin, *Structure et theologie de Luc I-II*, in *Etudes Bibliques* (Paris, 1957), especially pp. 164-175; *idem* Courte Traite de Theologie Mariale (Paris, 1959, 4th edition), pp. 27-29; Stanislas Lyonnet, S.J., "Il racconto dell'Annunciazione e la maternita divina della Madonna," in *Scuola Cattolica*, 1954, 411-446; *idem*, "Le recit de l'Annonciation et la Maternite divine de la Sainte Vierge," in *L'Ami du Clerge*, 1956, pp. 33-48; *idem*, "Virginite et maternite divine d'apres le recit de l'annonciation," in *Virgo Immaculata, Acta Congressus Mariologici-Mariani Romae anno MCMLIV celebrati* (Rome, 1957), vol. 17, pp. 125-156; Richard Kugelman, C.P., "The Object of Mary's Consent in the Annunciation," in *Marian Studies*, 1960, pp. 60-84.

⁴ See Aldama, fn. 6.

⁵ Pius XII, *Inter complures*, Radio Address to the International Marian Congress of Rome, Oct. 24, 1954, in *Documentos Marianos* (Hereafter *Doc. Mar.*), edited by Hilario Marin, S.J. (Biblioteca de Autores Catolicos, 1954), n. 918.

⁶ Cf Pius XII, *Humani generis*, Aug. 12, 1950, in Denziger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 1953, n. 3013.

⁷ Leo I, Migne's *Patrologia Latina* (Hereafter *ML*), 54, 190f; also in *Doc. Mar.*, n. 24.

⁸ *Idem*, *ML* 54, 193; *Doc. Mar.*, n. 25.

⁹ *Idem*, *ML* 54, 212f.

¹⁰ *Idem*, *ML* 54, 249f.

¹¹ Anastasius II, *ML* 59, 20; *Doc. Mar.*, n. 30. This has incorrectly been attributed to Pope Gelasius I. Cf. Eligius Dekkers, *Clavis Patrum Latinorum*, 2d edition (Steenbrugis, 1961), n. 1677.

¹² Innocent III, *ML* 217, 506f.

¹³ *Idem*, *ML* 217, 508.

¹⁴ *Idem*, *ML* 217, 583; *Doc. Mar.*, n. 115.

¹⁵ Boniface IX, *Bullarium Romanum* (Turin), tom. 4, p. 602; *Doc. Mar.*, n. 133.

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷ Benedict XIV, *Doc. Mar.*, n. 211.

¹⁸ Pius IX, *Doc. Mar.*, n. 288.

¹⁹ Leo XIII, *Doc. Mar.*, n. 376.

²⁰ *Idem*, *Doc. Mar.*, n. 395.

²¹ *Idem*, *Doc. Mar.*, n. 411.

²² *Idem*, *Doc. Mar.*, n. 444.

²³ *Idem*, *Doc. Mar.*, n. 454.

²⁴ *Idem, Doc. Mar.*, n. 471.

²⁵ *Pius X, Doc. Mar.*, n. 485.

²⁶ *Idem, Doc. Mar.*, n. 487.

²⁷ *Pius XI, Doc. Mar.*, n. 627.

²⁸ *Idem, Doc. Mar.*, n. 632.

²⁹ *Pius XII, Doc. Mar.*, n. 713.

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*

³¹ *Idem, Doc. Mar.*, n. 754.

³² *Idem, Doc. Mar.*, n. 814.

³³ *Idem, Doc. Mar.*, n. 900.

³⁴ *Loc. cit.*

³⁵ *Loc. cit.*

³⁶ John XXIII, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Feb. 10, 1962. These meditations on the Rosary were published on the occasion of the Pope's *Adhortatio ad Clerum universum*. They had been published in a slightly smaller form on the occasion of the Pope's "Il religioso Convegno," Sept. 29, 1961, when he asked all to pray the Rosary for the success of the Council. Cf *L'Osservatore Romano*, Oct. 1, 1961. The text for both is also in *Marianum*, 1962, p. 249 and 391.

³⁷ Paul VI, N.C.W.C. News Service, Jan. 6, 1964.

³⁸ Pius XII, "Inter complures," *Doc. Mar.*, n. 918.

