

Explaining Mary to an Evangelical, Part One

By Jim Penrice

Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is the subject of some of the more egregious myths about the Catholic faith: that Catholics consider her another mediator between God and man, another redeemer, equal to the Holy Trinity, etc. Evangelical Christians, believing these myths to be true, often react by preaching the other extreme which is just as false—that Mary holds no significance in the life of a Christian.

As always when faced with two extremes, the truth is found somewhere in the middle. Let's begin to sort this out by taking a look at what the Catholic Church really teaches about Mary, and how Evangelical critics miss the mark.

We'll begin with the myth that Catholics believe Mary is another mediator between God and man, another redeemer, or has a divine nature equal with the Holy Trinity. These excerpts from The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church ("Lumen Gentium") issued at the Second Vatican Council in 1964 dispel these notions fairly simply (emphasis added):

"There is but one Mediator as we know from the words of the apostle, 'for there is one God and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a redemption for all'. (1 Timothy 2:5-6) The maternal duty of Mary toward men in no wise obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows His power... In no way does it impede, but rather does it foster the immediate union of the faithful with Christ... For no creature could ever be counted as equal with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer... The Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary." (Lumen Gentium #60, 62)

With Mary's subordinate role to Jesus clearly spelled out in Catholic Church documentation, as well as the denial of her as a mediator between God and men or another redeemer, let's examine the role that Mary does play in the life of a Christian, notably how she assists in the work of her Son.

Let's first address that very idea—how can anyone assist Jesus in his work, since his work as the mediator and redeemer is something only Jesus can do? Let's look to St. Paul for an answer, who wrote this to the Colossians (emphasis added):

“I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church...” (Colossians 1:24)

On the surface this may seem like an outrageously arrogant statement—that not only is there something “lacking” in the afflictions of Christ, but that Paul presumes to fill up this alleged deficiency in his own flesh, completing something Christ cannot finish by himself.

Of course that’s not what Paul is saying. He means that while only Jesus could win salvation—and that work is finished once and for all—Jesus purposefully left the work of bringing his salvation to all the world unfinished, and he calls others to participate in that work. That’s why Paul is traveling and writing and, in the midst of it all, suffering, because Jesus sent him to carry on the unfinished work of bringing the saving Word (which the Gospel of John tells us is Jesus himself) to all nations.

Evangelical Christians will readily let Paul off the hook, understanding what he means by “I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ,” and will not accuse him of claiming to be another mediator or redeemer equal to or even better than Christ. But they are unwilling to extend the same treatment to Mary, who filled up in her flesh the actual, literal body and blood of Jesus Christ that would be sacrificed for the forgiveness of sins and released him to the world, playing an even more critical and intimate role than Paul in bringing the salvation of Christ to mankind.

Lumen Gentium puts it this way (emphasis added):

“Just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by the ministers and by the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is really communicated in different ways to His creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source. The Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary, which it constantly experiences and recommends to the heartfelt attention of the faithful, so that encouraged by this maternal help they

may the more closely adhere to the Mediator and Redeemer.” (Lumen Gentium, 62)

Also:

[Mary] conceived, brought forth and nourished Christ. She presented Him to the Father in the temple, and was united with Him by compassion as He died on the Cross. In this singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior in giving back supernatural life to souls. Wherefore she is our mother in the order of grace. (61)

The unique role of Mary in bringing Christ to the world needs to be examined closely, and from a proper perspective.

No Bible-believing Christian can deny that Mary is the only woman in history to conceive a child with the Holy Spirit instead of with a man. Nor would a Bible-believing Christian belittle or diminish the sacred relationship between any two persons who conceive a child in a covenant of love, or deny that this most intimate interaction between persons involves a permanent commitment of love and trust, and a distinct role to play in and for the duration the lives of each other and the child.

The conception of Jesus established Mary in a spousal relationship with the Holy Spirit, an exclusive relationship to which no other woman has ever been privileged. To deny that Mary enjoys this uniquely intimate relationship with the Holy Trinity—that the Holy Spirit conceived the Father’s only Son with and within her, and through her consent—is first of all to deny a basic Christian truth. To deny this also reduces Mary to merely the “ovum donor” for the Son of God; yet this is what the Evangelical treatment of Mary implies.

For example, they often point to Matthew 12:47-50 and Luke 8:19-21, claiming these passages deny any motherly role for Mary or fraternal role for the so-called “brothers,” that Jesus dismisses his actual family by saying that anyone who does the will of God is mother and brother to him. (The irony here is interesting. Mary accomplished the will of God by giving flesh and blood to the Word, so she certainly retains her motherhood according to this definition. Any evangelical who

calls himself a follower of the Word thus claims brotherhood with Jesus, and as such necessarily claims Mary for his mother.)

Evangelicals like to point out that Mary isn't mentioned very often in the New Testament—not at all in the epistles—and that the Scriptures do not show Jesus giving his mother a role in the Church.

(Of course part of the problem is the reliance on Sola Scriptura, whose many weaknesses are explored in other articles here.)

Evangelicals imply that despite the Scriptures' declarations of Mary as "favored one" and her exclusive spousal union with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:28, 30, 35), that she is blessed among women (Luke 1:42), that all ages will call her blessed (Luke 1:48), that Mary shares in Jesus' suffering [which the Scriptures tell us is for the redemption of the world] (Luke 2:34-35), that Jesus was obedient to her as he grew in wisdom and age and favor (Luke 2:51-52) and responded to her intercession (John 2:1-5), that Mary's role was simply to provide the ovum and the womb, because anyone who does God's will is Jesus' mother—there is nothing unique or efficacious about the motherhood of Mary.

In fact, to reduce Mary to merely an "ovum donor," one must still acknowledge that the Savior of the world came to the world through her. To then claim that her role in giving to Jesus to the world stopped there, that God just used her body parts and had no use for her from there on, is to put God in the same place as a man who uses a woman for a temporary purpose and then lets her go.

Evangelicals also object to Mary being referred to as the "Mother of God." To refuse her this title is to either deny that she is the mother of Jesus or to deny that Jesus is God, or to claim that certain things can be said of Jesus' human nature that can't be said of his divine nature, that these are separate entities without unity, none of which complies with basic Christian theology.

The quality, if not quantity, of Scripture passages about Mary show her unique relationship with the Trinity, as well as the many practical implications of that.

Most notable among these is what we read in John 2:1-5, when Jesus performs his first miracle after the intercession of his mother. John, to whom Jesus gave his

mother upon the cross, lists Mary first when speaking of the wedding guests. This is not to indicate she is more important than Jesus, but that she has a prominent role.

John shows us in this episode that Mary is an advocate, which leads us to another Catholic teaching about her. We read in Lumen Gentium (emphasis added):

“The Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix. This, however, is so understood that it neither takes away anything from nor adds anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator.” (Lumen Gentium 62)

The titles of Advocate, Helper, and Benefactress should be self-evident to anyone with knowledge of the Bible. The Bible says repeatedly that God’s people should pray for one another. It also tells us that the Body of Christ is not divided, so we are still connected with the members of the body that have gone to heaven, that they are aware of what happens on earth, and so it is proper to ask them to pray for us as our advocates, helpers and benefactors.

What may not be so self-evident is the term “Mediatrix,” which is different from “Mediator.” As noted above Mary, like Paul and others, shares in the work of Christ. Since she cooperated in a unique way with the Holy Spirit to conceive and bear the Father’s only Son, she cooperates in a unique way in helping to dispense the graces won only by the Son. (This is also why Mary is sometimes called “co-redeemer.” It does not mean she is another redeemer, but is called—like Paul—to a special role of helping to spread the redemption won by her Son. Since she is the one the Holy Spirit engaged to bring the Father’s only Son to the world, she shares uniquely in this mission.)

There is a classic traditional three-fold argument against Mary as “Mediatrix,” and a classic response to it, and here it is.

Objections:

- 1) There is only one mediator who is such by nature, being both truly God and truly human.

- 2) There is only one mediator whose work is necessary, without whom there could be no salvation.
- 3) There is only one mediator who depends on no one else for power.

Mary as Mediatix differs on all three counts:

- 1) Mary is human, not God. But it is appropriate for God to choose her as Mediatix because he made her Mother of the Redeemer. Since Mary was intimately associated with her Son's acquiring grace for us, she also shares with him in distributing that grace to us. It was she who on behalf of the whole human race consented to God's plan of salvation by proclaiming herself "the handmaid of the Lord."
- 2) Her role as Mediatix is not necessary, since Christ was and is the perfect Redeemer and the perfect Mediator. God did not need Mary at all, except that if he decreed the incarnation, he necessarily decreed a Mother. But everything else in which God has employed her is not needed. He wants to.

God wants everything in our life to be as rich as possible, so that he will not stop with something lesser if there is more than can be done. (Why be satisfied with what is good when you can have what is great?) Even though God did not need Mary, he willed to employ her to enrich us. Even though there is no need of any other saints, God wills to add them—all to make everything as rich as possible.

- 3) Her ability to do anything comes entirely from her Son.