

What's a Mother to Do? Mary's Role in Our Salvation

ISSUE: What is Mary's role in our salvation? Isn't Jesus Christ the one Mediator between God and man?

DISCUSSION: Mary's role can be summarized in the terms Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, and Advocate (cf. Catechism, no. 969). Mary's maternal role in our salvation, as summarized by these titles, is part of the constant teaching of the Church.

Saint Paul teaches us that "there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5). Mary's participation in salvation history as Mother of Christ and Mother of Christians does not diminish the unique mediation of Christ; rather, it points to Christ's unique mediation and reveals its power (*Lumen Gentium* [LG] 60).

In recent years there has been increased speculation as to whether the Church will dogmatically define Mary's role as Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, and Advocate. Whether the Church ultimately does so or not, we are called to "think with the Church" and understand the rock-solid doctrine behind the titles. Some people object to these titles, particularly to Mary's being considered "Coredemptrix" and "Mediatrix," because they think the titles somehow detract from Christ. Yet, just as human fathers participate in the one Fatherhood of God, and priests participate in the one priesthood of Christ, so also God has chosen to associate Mary in a unique way with Christ's one mediation.

Mary's pivotal role in salvation history did not end with her giving birth to the Son of God, but rather continues to the present time. If we were to take 1 Timothy 2:5 (above) in a sense that bars the participation of others in Christ's mediation, then we would have to admit that we should not ask anybody to pray for us, nor should we pray for others. But that is an unbiblical position! If we acknowledge that we can pray for each other as members of the Body of Christ (e.g., 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 1:11), then surely we would want the prayers of the woman whom all generations call blessed (Lk. 1:48). After all, not even death can separate the members of God's family (cf. Rom. 8:38-39).

Coredeptrix

The title "Coredeptrix" is a term that refers to Mary's unique and intimate cooperation with her divine Son in redeeming the human family. The title is rooted in Genesis 3:15, where Mary is "prophetically foreshadowed in the promise of victory over the serpent" (LG 55). This passage foreshadows the divine work of redemption brought about by Jesus as the Savior of the world, with the *Mother of the Redeemer's intimate cooperation*.

The prefix "co" in the title "Coredeptrix" does not imply an equality with the one Redeemer, Jesus Christ, who alone could reconcile humanity with the Father in His divinity and humanity. The prefix "co" is derived from the Latin word *cum*, which means "with," and not "equal to." Jesus as true God and true man redeems the human family, and Mary as "Coredeptrix" participates with the divine Redeemer in a completely subordinate and dependent way. Nonetheless, though subordinate and dependent, Mary's human participation remains a uniquely privileged and exalted one, one that was entirely contingent upon her free and meritorious "yes" in her words, "[L]et it be to me according to your word" (Lk. 1:38).

As explained by Pope John Paul II:

Crucified spiritually with her crucified Son (cf. Gal. 2:20), she contemplated with heroic love the death of her God, she "lovingly consented to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth" (LG 58) ... as she was in a special way close to the Cross of her Son, she also had to have a privileged experience of his Resurrection. In fact, Mary's role as co-redemptrix did not cease with the glorification of her Son.¹

Through faith and Baptism, we become God's children by adoption and participate in the divine life. As new creations in Christ, we cooperate in His redemptive work. While this is true of all Christians, it is most perfectly true of Mary, who was never wounded or enslaved by sin and therefore was perfectly free to give herself completely to Christ.

Mediatrice of All Graces

Mary is called “Mediatrice” (Catechism, no. 969) because all grace comes from Christ, and Christ comes only through Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Mary is also known as the “Mother of all Christians.” This title refers to Our Lord’s words from the Cross to Mary and John (Jn. 19:26-27). At the time of His death, Jesus gave Mary to John and John to Mary. “From that hour [John] took her to his own home” (Jn. 19:27). John represented the Church at the foot of the Cross. Therefore, all of us are invited to welcome Mary into our homes as our mother.

The Holy Spirit makes this point again through Saint John in Revelation 12:17, when “the woman,” the mother of the Redeemer, is also described as the mother of all who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. God chose to save us by becoming man and allowing the Blessed Virgin to be His mother. Our salvation comes by being grafted into the Family of God by faith and Baptism. In a family, the mother is necessary, and so Mary in this sense is necessary for salvation.

In Jesus’ one and perfect mediation (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5), subordinate and secondary mediators are able to participate. In the Old Testament, God used the patriarchs and prophets to mediate His reconciliation with the people of Israel. In the Old and New Testaments, God used angels to mediate His messages and His grace. Vatican II teaches that after Mary was taken up into heaven, “she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation” (LG 62).

Saint Paul says that all Christians are mediators or “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:18-20), sent and entrusted by Christ’s authority to mediate God’s message of reconciliation. Those who receive these ambassadors receive Christ Himself: “[H]e who receives any one whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me” (Jn. 13:20; cf. Lk. 10:16; Mt. 10:40).

Mary participates in the mediation of Christ in a way unlike any other creature. In John 2, her mediation at the wedding of Cana led to the first public miracle and the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. In Luke 1:41, her physical mediation brings the unborn Jesus to His unborn cousin, John the Baptist, who is sanctified in Elizabeth’s womb. So through Mary’s mediation, and her active participation with God’s grace, Christ is brought to others. The Fathers of the Church recognized her role as Mediatrice. For example, Saint Ephrem in the fourth century referred to her as “the Mediatrice of the whole world.”²

Although the teaching on Mary’s role as Mediatrice is not dogmatically defined, it is nevertheless part of the Church’s constant teaching. The following popes speak of Mary as Mediatrice of all graces: Pope Pius VII, Pope Pius IX, Pope Leo XIII, Pope St. Pius X, Pope Benedict XV, Pope Pius XI, Pope Pius XII, Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, and Pope John Paul II.³

The very first verse of the New Testament introduces Jesus to the world as “Son of Abraham, Son of David” (Mt. 1:1). As Son of David, Jesus is the King of Israel. All the kings in Jerusalem had a queen, but she was not their wife. Rather, the queen was their mother. Scripture tells us that King Solomon, for example, had 700 wives and 300 concubines. The queen was shown devotion by all—even the king (1 Kings 2:19)—and sat in the king’s presence to make intercession for the people. Since Mary is alive in Christ, she lives to intercede for her children.⁴

Mary, Our Advocate

This leads to the third title of Mary, that of “Advocate for the People of God.” The early Church manifested her heartfelt belief in the intercessory power of Mary, to whom she called for help and protection in the midst of dangers and trials. The *Salve Regina* (Hail Holy Queen), composed in the eleventh century, includes this venerable title. Vatican II continues this ancient practice of invoking Mary under the title that conveys her role as intercessory helper for the People of God in times of peril: “Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the [title] of Advocate[.]” (LG 62).

We can therefore say that the Coredemptrice, who uniquely participated with the one Redeemer in obtaining the graces of redemption, continues her participation by distributing the graces of redemption with the one Mediator, Jesus Christ, and the Sanctifier, the Holy Spirit. Part of this mediating role of Mary in God’s plan of salvation includes the providential task of being the Advocate for the People of God, that is, a mother pleading on behalf of her children. Thus Mary not only mediates the graces of God to humanity as Mediatrice, but she also mediates the petitions of the human family back to God as our Advocate.

Church Teaching

In his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (The Coming Third Millennium), Pope John Paul II tells us that “Mary in fact constantly points to her Divine Son and she is proposed to all believers as the *model of faith* which is put into practice” (no. 43, original emphasis). The role of Mary as Coredemptrix offers us the rich ecclesial model of our becoming coworkers (cf. 1 Cor. 3:9) or *coredeemers in Christ*. Since she is the preeminent model of the Church, every revealed truth about Mary provides the Church inspiration and wisdom in her quest to “conquer sin and increase in holiness” (LG 65).

The Marian model of Coredemptrix offers a particular richness to the Church regarding the Christian call to be coredeemers in Christ, based on Saint Paul’s exhortation to every Christian to “make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, for the sake of the body, which is the Church” (Col. 1:24). The preeminent example of this scriptural call of cooperation in the work of redemption is most certainly Mary Coredemptrix. “Coredeemers in Christ” as a description of the Family of God echoes the compelling Vatican II theme that calls every Christian to bring Christ to the world and to collaborate with the Redeemer in bringing the graces of salvation to all peoples today.

Mary’s coredemptive example is a constant reminder to the faithful that we must all work alongside the Redeemer in bringing the saving Gospel of Christ into the world; to offer our meritorious sufferings for the glory of God and the salvation of souls in the order of the priesthood of the laity, as well as in the ministerial priesthood; to participate through acts of charity and Christian works of mercy in the application of the graces of Calvary to the world today, a world that remains in such grave need of the Redeemer’s spiritual and social liberation; to realize the sublime ecclesial dignity of freely and personally cooperating with grace for our own salvation and the salvation of all humanity; and to be incarnate witnesses after the model of Mary Coredemptrix to the fundamental truth that human suffering can be redemptive.

Our role as “coredeemers in Christ” provides a concrete reminder to today’s faithful that the Cross of the Redeemer must again be implanted in the midst of the world and carried by *every beloved disciple* for the salvation and sanctification of contemporary society.

Mary is the “dawn” before Christ the “Day,” for the Father willed that the mother precede the incarnate Son in the history of salvation. And, as the announcement of the motherhood of Mary by the angel Gabriel preceded and prepared for the Incarnation, so one can see the profound significance of deepening our understanding of Mary’s maternal mediation as we celebrate the third millennium of Christ’s Incarnation.

May the Holy Spirit guide the Church in her reflection on Mary’s role in our salvation, and enable the People of God to listen attentively to what the Spirit is “saying to the Churches” (cf. Rev. 2:7) today about our common mother (*Redemptoris Mater* 30). May we do our part in fulfilling the great Marian prophecy inspired by the same Spirit that “all generations will call [Mary] blessed” (Lk. 1:48).

¹ Pope John Paul II, “Allocution at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Alborada in Quayaquil” (January 31, 1985), as reported in *L’Osservatore Romano* (English ed., March 11, 1985), 7.

² Saint Ephrem, *Ad Deiparam*, Oratio IV, as quoted in Mark Miravalle, *Introduction to Mary* (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing Co., 1993), 67.

³ See Miravalle, 74-80.

⁴ For further discussion of Mary’s role as Queen Mother, see Timothy Gray, “Scripture’s Revelation of Mary,” published in Hahn and Suprenant, eds., *Catholic for a Reason: Scripture and the Mystery of the Family of God* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 1998), 193-99.

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. How would I explain Mary’s role as “Coredemptrix” to a Christian who doesn’t accept the teaching authority of the Church? What pitfalls must be avoided?
2. Read Catechism, no. 970. How does the concept of “participation” help me to understand Mary’s mediation?
3. Do I understand Mary to be my Advocate? Do I entrust my cares and petitions to her? How can I deepen my relationship with the Blessed Mother?

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