

The Biblical Basis and Doctrinal Clarification of Mary's Title as “Mediatrice of All”

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Abstract

Aside the patronage and incorporation of the title “Mediatrice of All Graces” in the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, many Papal Encyclicals / Apostolic Exhortations, Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents are awash with references to Mary as a “Mediatrice”. These have unremittingly attracted certain disconcerting reactions. Some express shock while others question because they are of the strong belief that the title is Christ's prerogative. These are marks of unease and alarm as the emphasis is interchangeably either on the exclamation or the question, which is not circumscribed to Protestants, but Catholics as well. This could be due to lack of understanding or ill-informed restriction of honour to the person and place of Mary in the entire scope of salvation history. Some of the responses to this knotty doctrinal polemic offer little or no support to the faithful because they are purely parochial theological opinions and mind-sets, which are at odds with the Church's position. Thus, this article explains both what is at stake and what is not at stake gleaned from the Sacred Scripture, Living Tradition and the Magisterium for according to John Henry Newman, “The Catholic Church has its constitution and its theological laws in spite of the excesses of individuals” (Dessain and Gornall, 1875, p. 212).

Key Words: Christ, Mary, Mediation, Intercession, Mediatrice of All Graces

1.0 Introduction

Mariological controversies down the centuries have almost always related to Mary's role in the economy of salvation and in the life and ministry of the Church. The unease about the association of Mary with the mediation of “all graces” is either an exclamation borne out of shock and cautious fear of eschewing heretical statements or an honest search for clarity and understanding. The exclamation or question that succeeds the designation depends on one's inward disposition and intention for the deepest reality is not

peripheral. Similarly, the response(s) to either of the two will depend on the profundity of one's theological understanding and maturity sequel to a good and all-inclusive grasp. This does not preclude the degrees of awareness of the terms "Mediation" and "Grace" in reference to the Incarnation and the pride of place of Mary in the contemporary Church. The explication of "Grace" in alignment with the Incarnation and her predominant role in the Church as well as the nexus between "Mary" and "Grace" are the preoccupation of this article aimed at making their theological physiognomy perceptible.

2.0 Theological Delineation of the Concepts of Mediation and Grace

Concepts have been central to the sparking off and successful resolution of major theological or doctrinal controversies in the history of the Church; a good grasp and suitable contextual application of them cannot be underestimated in all theological discourses and doctrinal enunciations. It is, then, necessary if not inevitable to proceed with greater caution in delimiting the concepts of "mediation" and "grace" for a better and broader theological understanding of the theme under consideration.

2.1 *Mediation*

God's self-communication and relationship with His chosen people down through the ages have been replete with intermediaries (cf. *Gen.* 18: 22- 32; *Gen.* 20: 7; *Ex.* 3: 7- 10; *Ex.* 20: 18- 21; *Ex.* 32: 11- 14 etc.). This underlines the necessity of the life and ministry of prophets and priests in both the old and new alliances for "God wishes to approach man only through man" (Ratzinger, 2004, p. 94). The designated persons act as go between God and His chosen people. Accordingly, it must be noted that no revelation has ever taken place without mediation. Avery Dulles (1980, p. 55) confirms this, thus: "revelation never occurs in a purely internal experience or as an unmediated encounter."

The concomitant upshot of mediation is the recognition of distinctive, but complementary religious roles as Jewish practices and Christian doctrines are not in the form of discrete propositions, but in the unity of the creed that points to the other person. It is, then, within this context that the age long relationship between God and man assumes its proper place. As Joseph Ratzinger (2004, p. 95) strikingly puts it, "The difference in religious gifts that divides men into 'prophets' and hearers forces them into speaking to and for one another." Hence, the Church's Magisterium in her unsurpassed wisdom declares that "A special rite consecrated the beginnings of the priesthood of the Old Covenant. The priests are 'appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God ...'" (CCC, n. 1539). It is, also, against this backdrop that Hope Marie Hirshorn (2012) understands mediation as "God using material world to convey divine presence to embodied human beings- an activity that can be explained without deviating from the natural order God created." Prompted by this divine

presence, John the Baptist rejoices in his mother's womb, Elizabeth adjudges Mary as the most blessed among women and proclaims the blessedness of the fruit of her womb (cf. *Lk* 1: 40- 42).

Even though Mary is not in her own right and privilege a priest, the Fathers regarded her as “Go-between” (Ludwig, p. 211) based on the inner logic of her vocation with the corresponding plenitude of grace and her sole maternal relationship with Christ. Furthermore, since God's self-communication requires mediation and reception, the content of the communication must be in accordance with the state of the mediator. Therefore, the “fullness of grace” becomes the *sine qua non* for God's expression and communication in Christ through her. In alignment with this, Avery Dulles (1980, p. 70) insists that every mediation is “necessarily a real union between human spirit and the God who bestows Himself in Grace.” And in furtherance of this, Pope John Paul II (1987, n. 40) maintains that “In Mary's case, we have a special and exceptional mediation, based upon her 'fullness of grace,' which was expressed in the complete willingness of the 'handmaid of the Lord.'”

2.2 Grace

“Grace” is the theological counterpart of “Mercy” in relation to God's eternal and saving acts. The former refers to the reception of unmerited favours or unexpected divine privilege whereas the latter is the reservation and remission of merited penalties. For Richard McBrien (2008, p. 170), “grace refers to the favour God bestows upon us: the gift of divine life itself.” Consequent upon the fall of Adam and Eve and the transmission of the consequences of the original sin to successive generations through procreation, God's grace and mercy eclipsed His justice; He withdraws the penalty corresponding to the sin and bestows grace on humanity. The bestowal of this “grace” was not without human instrumentality. This brings to the glare the categorisation of grace into sanctifying and actual grace. Sanctifying grace is received at baptism and increased by other sacraments while actual grace denotes God's intervention in specific material situations either through an unexplainable miracles or unexpected active human agent. In view of this, Pope Benedict XVI (2012, p. 7) asserts that Mary's “child does not originate from any man, but is a new creation, conceived through the Holy Spirit.” It is now unarguably crystal clear that God's bestowal of divine Grace in the Person of Jesus Christ, whose conception defies scientific cognitive, is through the corporation of an active human agent, the Blessed Virgin Mary, who did not expect this divine privilege.

It is also worthwhile to understand that the accomplishments of specific divine missions are not feasible without the indispensable conferral of grace either directly or indirectly. This grace is essentially conferred on us in order “to associate us with his work, to enable us to collaborate in the salvation of others

and in the growth of the Body of Christ, the Church" (CCC, n. 2003). This is a lucid explanation of the importance and necessity of the infusion of the "fullness of grace" into Mary, which is a complement to her vocation. Subsequently, Ludwig Ott (1977, p. 198) stresses that "the fullness of grace of the Mother of God as much transcends the fullness of grace of even the highest angels and saints as the dignity of the Mother of God surpasses the supernatural excellences of the angels and the saints." Herein, grace is nothing, but Christ. He is the embodiment of grace. Etymologically, grace, which is charity, is the same as joy. Hence, the source of her joy is grace, that is, being in invisible communion with God and the abode of the Holy Spirit (Pope Benedict XVI, 2012).

3.0 Biblical Roots of Mary's Mediation

It is expedient to preface this treatise with a few biblical truths about the origin and nature of Mary's mediation, which will at the same time throw some light on its legitimacy. The Sacred Scripture explicitly records the mediatory role of the Blessed Virgin on two accounts. The first is in reference to the Incarnation and the second is at the wedding in Cana, which are a clear and theologically significant structure of her mediatory role. Even so, Jesus, while on the Cross, affirms and perpetuates this role. Accordingly, the Church upholds that:

"This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterrupted from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfilment of all the elect. Therefore, the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrice" (CCC, n. 969).

3.1 The Incarnation

The Incarnation is the apt and appropriate biblical basis for establishing Mary's mediatory role, most especially in reference to "All Graces." Sequel to this, a comprehensive and comprehensible interpretation of Mary as the vehicle of God's definitive self-communication in Christ is possible and proper only when the angel's greeting and Mary's response are considered *pari passu*. This is largely owing to the fact that God's redemptive, reconciliatory and restorative plan for mankind was effected in and through the Blessed Virgin Mary. For Pope Benedict XVI (2012, p. 7), "she truly marks a new beginning." She is a beginning when juxtaposed with Eve, who was somewhat active in the fall of man just as Mary was instrumental to man's redemption whose son is Grace *per se* as St Irenaeus of Lyons (120- 200) affirms that "As by a virgin the human race had been bound to death, by a virgin it is saved, the balance being preserved, a virgin's disobedience by a virgin's obedience" (*Against Heresies*, 3, 22, 19). In the words of Pope Benedict XVI (2012), "Mary is the creature who opened the door to her Creator in a special way, placing herself in his hands without reserve."

Based on the *Proto-evangelium*, divine initiative and plan, the nativity of Jesus without Mary would not have been possible. Though truly conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is a firm statement of a biblical fact and faith that Jesus' historical nativity was through the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was through her that Jesus entered into the annal of human history. She is the substratum of the hypostatic union. According to Pope Paul II (1987, n. 9), "Mary is 'full of grace,' because it is precisely in her that the Incarnation of the Word, the hypostatic union of the Son of God with human nature, is accomplished and fulfilled."

Mary is able to mediate and transmit all graces to humanity basically because, first and foremost, she possesses them in fullness for she is a rare species of humanity that is highly favoured and preordained for God's mission in such a way that transcends human comprehension. In declaring the Dogma on the Immaculate Conception, Pope Pius IX (1854) proclaims: "Therefore, far above all the angels and all the saints so wondrously did God endow her with the abundance of all heavily gifts poured from the treasury of his divinity ..."

Pope John Paul II (1987) considers Mary's response, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let be done to me according to your word" (cf. *Lk.* 1: 38), as the "first moment of submission to the one mediation 'between God and men' –the mediation of Jesus Christ– is the Virgin of Nazareth's acceptance of motherhood." Her response was necessary because, according to Bernard P. Prusak (2004, p. 13), "Grace, or a relationship with God, was a gift always offered and always inviting response since the very moment of creation." Invariably, it was ensuing Christ's nativity that grace began to bear its fruits.

Though chosen by God, her unreserved submission to God's election has a layer of theological import; she acknowledges her creatureliness and submits herself to be the conduit of God's grace. God allows salvation of the human race to depend on her free-will. Her yes or no would determine the humanity's future. Thus, St Irenaeus declares that Mary is the "cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race" (*Adversus Haereses*, V.III, Ch. 22, n. 4, PG7, 959A, Harvey 2, 123.). However, her instrumentality in transmitting the grace of the Incarnation does not preclude the choice and consent of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. It is within this framework that Hans Urs Von Balthasar (1990, p. 109) claims that Jesus "permits in full consciousness and with full consent to the divine plan for redemption (for) himself to be used as the Father wishes."

3.2 *The Wedding at Cana*

The relationship between God and the people of Israel is well understood and brilliantly described as that of marriage in the Old Testament. God is viewed as the husband/ groom and Israel the wife/ bride. Thus, according to John Varghese (2009, p. 73), "The Cana miracle set within the context of wedding

echoes the Old Testament image of marriage as an expression of God's relationship to Israel. The creator is her husband and redeemer (cf. Is 54:4-8). This image is further developed in Isaiah's poem on the glorious future of Jerusalem." Though it is reminiscent of the description of the relationship between God and the Israelites, it foreshadows an eschatological union between God and His people that is described in Revelation 19: 6-9 as the "Wedding Feast of the Lamb."

Furthermore, the miracle gradually begins to reveal the relationship between Jesus and the Church that would be fully realised on the Cross and the intercessory role of the Church personified in his mother. Herein, Jesus is circuitously identified "as the real bridegroom.... Since Jesus is the bridegroom, then, his mother the 'mother of the bridegroom'" (Mary L. Coloe, 2013, p. 207). Rightly so, it is the responsibility of the bridegroom to provide wine. As earlier stated, Jesus is synonymous with Grace and he is the prime dispenser of Graces. He dispenses Graces at the prompting of his mother and in and through the Church, which John the beloved represents at the foot of the Cross.

Aside the above stated hermeneutics, the embarrassing expression, "They have no wine", has yet another exegetical allusion over and beyond the sensitivity of Mary to the Church's needs and her intercessory role. Even though the miracle was performed in response to Mary's intercession, it has a profound and pronounced impact on Jesus's messianic mission. The wine that is figurative of the Eucharist accentuates Jesus' presence. Thus, the water would also represent the law and the prophets for the "two greatest of the law and of the prophets-significantly the first and the last- are identified with the word 'water'" (Estrada, 2018). In other words, they had the law and prophets that solely heralded the advent of Jesus, who is their antitype. Despite the law and the prophets, there was a palpable lack. The situation, therefore, vividly describes the spiritual hunger of the Jews which neither the laws nor the prophets could slake. The recourse of his mother to him, "They have no wine", and her instruction to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you", confirm his ability to resolve the situation (Farely, 2010, p. 29). The *Pulpit Commentary* has it that "she exhibits the most entire confidence in her Son and Lord." She was the first to express faith in Jesus, which was rewarding. For Avery Dulles (2002, p. 17), "Her mediation takes the form of intercession. In directing the servants at the banquet to obey her Son, Mary presents herself as the spokeswoman of his will."

Without a doubt, her role in resolving the disconcerting situation cannot be underestimated. As Nicolas Farely (2010, p. 29) mentions, "Jesus' mother plays an important role in the plot. After having set the scene (2: 1- 12), the narrator presents a problem or complication: 'the wine ran out (2:3), which pushes Jesus' mother to turn to her son: 'They have no wine' (2:3)."

On two instances, Jesus figuratively addresses his mother as “woman” that evoke the creation narrative in Genesis 2:23; firstly at the wedding in Cana and secondly, on the Cross where her spiritual maternity of the Church began. Both are in reference to the hour of the fall of man and the redemption of humanity. Mary L. Coloe (2013, p. 206) interprets the title “woman” in the context of the theology of creation and recreation. She writes: “At both Cana and the cross, only two titles are given to this woman, known in the synoptics as 'Mary.'” Garnered from this, John attempts to establish the inevitable synergy between creation and redemption, which is a continuance of the new creation story. It is against this background that the hermeneutic tension caused by the appellation “Woman” is doused by Mary L. Coloe (2013, p. 213) since she sheds more light on it: “This discomfort is not resolved until the cross, where in conjunction with other aspects of the Johannine crucifixion recalling the garden and tree of life (Gen 2) the titles 'Mother' and 'Woman' are part of the narrative strategy where the Johannine crucifixion is portrayed as an act of re-creation”. It is a strong reminder of the role of Eve in the fall of man and the irreplaceable role of Mary in the economy of salvation. Hence, the “hour” in this context refers to his glorification (A. Niccacci, 2013, p. 226). This, as well, coherently resonates in the Nicolas Farelly's (2010, p. 32) perspective. He writes: “But 2: 11 also points implied readers forward to the hour of Jesus' death and exaltation.” This evinces that his death is pivotal in the actualisation of the plan of salvation.

Even though Jesus maintains that his hour has not come, the fact that he eventually performs the miracle marks the beginning of the manifestation of his glory. According to Sherri Brown (2009, p. 397), “the arrival of 'the hour' of Jesus, an hour that was first introduced at the wedding feast in Cana (2:4) and that underscored the entirety of his public ministry ...”. This manifestation has incessantly continued in and through his public life and ministry and will attain its fullness when Christ returns in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Interestingly, his mother is prominently present at both the commencement and culmination of his public ministry. For Jean Zumstein (2009, p. 644), “She functions as a textual signal which marks the beginning and end of the public ministry of Jesus. She alludes in both cases to a future, a future in which she herself will be involved.” With the performance of this miracle, Jesus began to traverse the royal road to the Cross.

3.3 *At the Foot of the Cross*

The crucifixion and death of Jesus did not bring to an end Mary's mediation, but inaugurated a novel phase in her mediatory part. Consequent upon his crucifixion, prior to his death and the hour of his glorification, Jesus made two

scriptural hand overs that underscore the uninterrupted role of Mary in the scope of redemption. He entrusted his mother to John and vice versa. So, "After her son's departure, her motherhood remains in the Church as maternal mediation: interceding for all her children, the Mother cooperates in the saving work of her son, the Redeemer of the world" (Pope John Paul II, 1987, n. 40).

The dramatic event that marks a turning point at the foot of the Cross not only clarifies and confirms her complementary part and participation in the work of redemption, but perpetuates her mediation in the continuous existence of the Church, which is a universal sacrament of salvation. Fulton J. Sheen (1977, p. 375) says: "To indicate the role that you play in Redemption, I now bestow upon you that title of universal motherhood; I call you -woman. It was to you that I referred when I said that I put enmity between him and the woman, between his brood of evil and your seed, which I am." This is suggestive of the theme of the Incarnation since grace and not merit runs through the thread of God's benevolent acts.

Biblical symbols, postures and gestures are overwhelmingly evocative. Mary, alongside other disciples, is depicted as standing at the foot of the Cross. As for Joseph Ratzinger (2000, p. 194), "standing is a classic posture of prayer." She and others offer their helplessness, excruciating pains and frustrations to God in prayers for Jesus as the sword truly pierces her soul. Previously and until now, she mediates between her Son and others. Inversely, she mediates for only son. Hence, the integration and explication of the last part of the "Hail Mary" that says "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death." In pursuant of this theological perspective, a poignant Marian hymn, *Stabat Mater* was ostensibly composed by Jacopone da Todi in the fourteenth century. The song was an emotional reminiscence of Mary's grief at the foot of the Cross as well as a prayer for her to stand with them and be their advocate or defender on judgment day (Connelly, 1957).

4.0 The Doctrinal Nexus between Mary and All Graces

Although the Church Fathers' designation of Mary as Mediatrice of All Graces dates back to the fourth century, Angel Gabriel was the first to associate God's Mother and the Mother of the Church with the catchphrase "fullness of Grace" (cf. *Lk.* 1: 28) which accords a sound and solid theological basis to all Marian Dogmas. The reference to the "fullness of grace" is not in isolation from the son she was to beget. Thus, the angel continues, "The Lord is with you" (cf. *Lk.* 1:). The intrinsic interrelatedness of the binary is explicated by Pope Benedict in association with prophecy of Zephaniah (cf. 3: 14- 17) for he maintains that the dialogue between the Angel and Mary is the fulfilment of God's promise. She is the espousal of God and the personification of Zion. She is the dwelling place of God (Pope Benedict XVI, 2012). It is irrefutable that Christ is the one Mediator

between God and men. However, even the one Mediator, the sources of all graces, is the fruit of Mary's mediation; she conceives, gives birth to and presents him to the world. Ludwig Ott (1974, p. 212) sheds more light on this: "The Incarnation of the Son of God and redemption of mankind by the vicarious atonement of Christ were dependent on her assent."

The appellation "Mediatrice of All Graces" is not unconnected, but is intrinsically related with the efficacy of her intercessions, which is evident in the seminal role she plays at the wedding in Cana. Ludwig Ott (1974, p. 213) does not agree any less with this even as he stresses it further. In his view, "Since her assumption into heaven, Mary cooperates in the application of the grace of redemption to man. She participates in the distribution of grace by her maternal intercession, which is inferior in efficacy to that of the intercessory prayer of Christ, the High Priest, but surpasses far the intercessory prayer of all the other saints." Ludwig Ott's standpoint is symphonic with the art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that depicted the Virgin Mary as the splendid Queen of Heaven endowed with distinctive power of mediation through her influence with her Son (Bernard P. Prusak, 2004, p. 200). In furtherance of this, Pope Benedict XVI (2007, n. 5) insightfully states that "There is no fruit of grace in the history of salvation that does not have as its necessary instrument the mediation of Our Lady." It is, then, not surprising that John Paul II (1978) hitherto and at the beginning of his pontificate while addressing the Congregation of St Joseph refers to her as the "Universal Mediatrix of all grace."

5.0 Juxtaposition between Christ and Mary's Mediations

The literal and more than literal approaches to the interpretation of Paul's letter to Timothy constitute the mariological polemic of Mary's mediation vis-à-vis Christ'. This is as a result of the palpable presumption that her mediation beclouds and even usurps Jesus' essential mediatory role in the economy of salvation. St Paul contends that "there is one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave his life for the redemption of all" (cf. 1 *Tim.* 2:5- 6). This Pauline pastoral epistle is neither a negation nor a repudiation of Mary's participatory role in Christ's vicarious sufferings and sacrifice, which she was in tranquil possession of as was prophetically affirmed by Simeon at Jesus' presentation in the temple (cf. *Lk.* 2: 35). The Vatican II Council acknowledges and reaffirms her in the limelight involvement in the Paschal Mystery through her endurance of Christ's excruciating suffering and her unwavering association with his sacrifice in her heart (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 58). It further decisively declares that "But Mary's function as mother of men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 60), which is the merit of her maternal relationship with him.

In spite of the misreading and hermeneutical slip-up of 1 Timothy 2:5-6, it is textually intelligible that the mediations of the duo suggest diversity of internal and distinctive, connected and still not identical mediatory roles, which are devoid of neither exegetical tension nor doctrinal obscurity. Anyhow, a good grasp of and knowledgeable differentiation between initiative and role would have made it abundantly luminous that there is nothing essentially amiss for Christ's mediation is primary, self-sufficient and absolutely necessary for salvation whereas hers is secondary and contingent on Christ'. She is neither the origin nor the primary mediator, but an advocate and a secondary conduit in as much as mediation reaches its goal only in Christ. This fits well with Pope John Paul II's (1987, n. 38) extensive explanation of Mary's role as a Mediatrice. He says, "In effect, Mary's mediation is intimately linked with her motherhood." He argues further:

"If she was the first to experience within herself the supernatural consequences of this one mediation-in the Annunciation she had been greeted as 'full of grace' -then we must say that through this fullness of grace and supernatural life she was especially predisposed to cooperation with Christ, the one Mediator of human salvation. And such cooperation is precisely this mediation subordinated to the mediation of Christ" (Pope John Paul II. 1987, n. 39).

Her mediation presupposes her positive contribution to salvation history, which does not overshadow or overlook the other side of the pictures. In affirmation of this, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that "Mary's role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows directly from it" (CCC, 1992, n. 964). The effectiveness of her mediation has its foundational emergence in Christ and is orientated towards him thereby attaining its final validity. After all, the efficacy of the graces is not derived from her, but it issues from Christ since the initiation and perpetuation of her mediation is at all times retrospective and in reference to him.

6.0 Conclusion

The title does not put the Blessed Virgin Mary at par with Jesus on the divine and theological pedestals; it does not reduce the divinity of Christ or his unique role in the recreation and redemption of humanity. Rather, it is an acknowledgment and affirmation of the intercessory recourse to the important role the Blessed Virgin Mary continuously plays in the salvation of humankind. Similarly, the invocation of Mary's intercession under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress and Mediatrice neither adds nor contracts the dignity or efficacy of Christ the one Mediator (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 62). Christ's unique mediation upholds and does not undermine Mary's.

For the Church, the mediatory role of Mary is essential and vital. It will, however, be eccentric to view this role as an end in itself; she is a Mediatrix of Christ's graces. Her mediation is to be understood in the context of and in reference to Christ. One will lapse into a fundamental error if one insulates Mary's mediation from her cooperation with Christ in the continuous work of redemption; her mediation should always be linked to Christ's.

Any aspersion on or negation of appellation "Mediatrix" is not without domino effect that is ominous to other popular devotional consciousness that have Marian trajectory. In view of this, the disregard and disruption of Mary's key mediatory role in the economy of salvation are tantamount to turning back the clock on a direction already divinely initiated.

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