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Title: Mary as Mediatrix: Harmonizing Yves Congar's Caution and John Paul II's Enthusiasm

Abstract

The Jubilee Year of 2025 presents a unique opportunity to revisit Marian theology as the Church commemorates 60 years since the close of Vatican II, 30 years since the death of Yves Congar, and 25 years since the death of St. John Paul II. These milestones frame this paper which honors the theological contributions of Congar and St. John Paul II, reflecting on their relevance for contemporary theology while challenging the Church to reclaim Mary as Mediatrix in a way that leads all believers to her Son, Jesus Christ. Through a critical engagement with Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, St. John Paul II's *Redemptoris Mater* and *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, and Congar's theological writings, this paper explores how their seemingly divergent approaches to Marian theology can be harmonized. It argues that while Congar's cautious, ecclesial framework successfully integrated Mariology within the Church's Christological center, St. John Paul II's robust Marian spirituality was essential to completing the Council's 'unfinished' work by fully situating Mary within the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption.

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I. Introduction: Roots of Faith & Childhood Devotion

I attended St. Alice Catholic Elementary School in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, from Kindergarten through to the Eighth Grade. This parish school had, like every other Catholic school in America, statues of Jesus and various other holy men and women present in each of the hallways and corridors. Of all the statues within the school, there was one that stood out to me the most; I can recall it was located on the first floor, just near the main stairwell. It was a statue of a beautiful young woman with a crown on her head and a serpent under one of her feet. I suppose as a young boy I was interested in the serpent first, which drew my attention to the base of the statue. It was there that I recall seeing several folded pieces of paper, some frayed and yellowed, shoved underneath. For whom were these notes left? What did they say? As a curious young boy with a slight flair for the dramatic, I sought to uncover this mystery by sneaking over to take one of the papers and read it. This was the plan, at least until I was caught by the custodian, who took mercy on me by simply scolding me (in what I later found out was Vietnamese) as I scurried back to class. Left unsatisfied, I was forced to compromise and ask my teacher, Sister Lisa Ann, IHM, the papers' purpose. Her response was age appropriate and touched on the Catholic beliefs of intercessory prayer and veneration. It was then and there, in a second-grade classroom of a Catholic school that no longer exists, that I was unknowingly exposed to the Church's traditional belief in Mary as Mediatrix.

The concept of Mary as Mediatrix holds a significant place in Marian theology, emphasizing her role as an intermediary between Christ and humanity. The papers slipped under countless Mary statues around the world attest to this belief and are tangible expressions of it. Rooted in Sacred Scripture, one can begin to see extrabiblical evidence for this belief in Patristic authors like St. Irenaeus of Lyon,¹ St. Ephrem the Syrian,² and St. Cyril of Alexandria.³ Highly prominent among these early authoritative voices were Ss. Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom. It was Ambrose who said, 'Mary was alone when the Holy Spirit came upon her and overshadowed her. She was alone when she saved the world—operating the salvation of mankind and the unity of the Church.'⁴ And it was Chrysostom who inquired, 'If we honor the king's mother, shall we not honor more the mother of God, the most glorious queen and our perpetual intercessor?'⁵ Mary as Mediatrix was a theological concept which became more articulately developed by medieval theologians such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who described Mary's intercessory role beautifully when he said:

God has willed that we should have nothing which would not pass through the hands of Mary. She is indeed that glorious city, of which glorious things are said, 'And a river

¹ Cf. *Against Heresies*, 3.22.4.

² Cf. *Hymns on the Nativity*, 17.

³ Cf. *Homily 4*, at Ephesus.

⁴ *Commentary on Psalm 118*. 22, 30.

⁵ *Homily on John 19:25*.



of God, full of water, runs through it.¹ Indeed, a river flows through it and from it, full of grace. But where is it going, except to water the earth, to flood and make it fruitful? Let us, therefore, be her humble servants, so that she may graciously deign to grant us from her fullness.⁶

Likewise, St. Thomas Aquinas discussed Mary's involvement in the distribution of divine grace, albeit without clear use of the term.⁷ The concept (and subsequent doctrine) continued to gain prominence in the 19th and 20th centuries with the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII and Pope Pius XII, notably *Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum* and *Mystici Corporis Christi*, which reinforced the belief in Mary's special relationship with Christ and her active participation in obtaining divine graces for humanity.⁸

This tradition of papal pronouncements related to Mary continued into my own lifetime with the papacy of John Paul II, whose apostolic motto, *Totus Tuus*,⁹ very deliberately put the Blessed Mother front and center. Additionally, John Paul II's crest bore a golden 'M' on a field of blue, as a not-so-subtle reference to the mother of Jesus; Mary was therefore unavoidable within the context of the Catholicism of my youth in the 1990's. However, I did not yet realize that John Paul II's intentionality arose from a very particular theological development within the Church's recent history - the Second Vatican Council. It was at Vatican II that the greatest minds in Christendom gathered together to discuss and debate how the Church would engage with the modern world, foster a renewal within the Church, and promote ecumenism. It was at Vatican II that the future pontiff would participate in rigorous conversations with some of the most brilliant churchmen of the age; Yves Congar was one such figure.¹⁰ Congar, a French Dominican friar, was one of the *ressourcement* theologians who came to prominence just before the Council and heavily influenced the subsequent documents it produced. Representing a shift in the Church's theological and historical focus back to the Scriptures and the early Christians, these thinkers saw the Mariology of their time as requiring a renewal, one that re-centered it within a Christological and Ecclesial framework. While Congar was instrumental during the Council in his role as *peritus*, it was John Paul II who would later help complete their recalibration of Mariology in his role as *pontifex maximus*. Therefore, the development of any post Vatican II Marian theology, popular devotional practices, as well as the emergence of lay groups and associations related to Mary, are heavily indebted to these two men.

This paper argues that while Vatican II successfully integrated Mariology into ecclesiology, as advocated by *ressourcement* theologians in general, and by Yves Congar in particular, it

⁶ *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 12.3.

⁷ See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 27, Art. 1.

⁸ See Leo XIII, *Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum*, 1904; Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, 1943.

⁹ The motto *Totus Tuus* is inspired by the teaching of St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort. These two words express total belonging to Jesus through Mary, with St Louis Marie writing: '*Tuus totus ego sum, et omnia mea tua sunt*' ('I am all yours, and all that I have is yours').

¹⁰ Cf. James T. Keane, 'Yves Congar, Vatican II's Greatest Theologian', *America Magazine*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2023/12/05/cbc-column-yves-congar-246645>.

inadequately addressed the Christological dimension of Marian theology, leading to an incomplete post-conciliar theological vision. While affirming Mary's role in salvation history (e.g., her *fiat* as a model of discipleship), the Council did not sufficiently emphasize her relationship to Christ's salvific work as a theological bridge to understanding the Incarnation and humanity's ultimate justification. The language of Mary as Mediatrix, for example, was affirmed but heavily qualified, further diluting the Christocentric focus that her role could have embodied.¹¹ Through a brief analysis of John Paul II's advocacy of Mary as Mediatrix, focusing on both his 1987 Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Mater*,¹² as well as the 2002 Apostolic Letter, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*,¹³ this research will demonstrate that his papacy represents a deliberate effort to rectify some imbalance by fully situating Mariology within a Christocentric context. This exploration will therefore examine how Congar's more cautious approach to Mariology and John Paul II's more robust approach can be harmonized to provide a comprehensive understanding of Marian theology for the Church in the twenty-first century, thus fulfilling the Council's original (dual) objective of integrating Mariology within a Christological and Ecclesial tapestry.

II. Congar's Caution at Vatican II

As mentioned, Yves Congar's approach to Mariology was marked by a desire to integrate Marian doctrine into a Christocentric framework, emphasizing that while Mary plays a significant role in salvation history, her Son alone is *the Savior*. Congar's general approach to Mariology aimed to moderate any excessive or disproportionate Marian devotions that could detract from Christ's primary role in the Church. Likewise, Congar was concerned that a 'galloping Mariology'¹⁴ risked a distortion of the hierarchical understanding of Mary as a creature, and therefore he did not want the Council Fathers to articulate any clear dogmatic definitions related to Mary as Mediatrix.¹⁵ Such exaggerations were particularly on the rise

¹¹ The language in *Lumen Gentium* §58 is the closest the Council comes to articulating her connection to Christ's Passion: 'Thus the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, enduring with her only begotten Son the intensity of his suffering, associating herself with his sacrifice in her mother's heart, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim, which was born of her.' Even this passage frames her role in a secondary, supportive light and avoids directly addressing her unique participation in the act of Redemption.

¹² Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* (On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church), Encyclical Letter, March 25, 1987, no. 25.

¹³ Pope John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (Apostolic Letter on the Rosary), October 16, 2002, no. 10.

¹⁴ Examples include pilgrim sites to locations such as the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem and devotional practices such as the 'Jumping Madonna' in Spain and the Snake Procession of Cocullo, Italy. These can lend themselves to massive confusion for the faithful and can distract from the primacy of Christ. Cf. Yves Congar, *Fifty years of Catholic Theology: Conversations with Yves Congar*, ed. B. Lauret, London: SCM Press, 2012, 62.

¹⁵ It should be noted here that some 2,000 suggestions were collected from the bishops during the planning phase of the Council. Roughly 600 requests for topics on Mary were catalogued, with 382 requesting specific clarification on her role as 'mediator.' Cf. T. A. Thompson, 'Recovering Mary's Faith and Her Role in the Church', in J. C. Cavadini and D. M. Peters, *Mary on the Eve of the Second Vatican Council*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 55-78, 69-70.



within Catholic theology a century or so before the Council, yet they were the fruit of various seeds scattered over time. One can look to Pope St. Pius V's attributing to Mary the title, 'Destroyer of Heresies',¹⁶ and his confirmation of the power of the Rosary to protect the faithful from all error. Scholastic theology also increased the number of attributes and titles for Mary,¹⁷ and very dangerously blurred the lines between ancient distinctions of reverence. *Latria* was the term used for the adoration and worship of God alone, while *Dulia* had been used for the veneration of the holy men and women of the Church (i.e. the saints). However, Mary's unique position within salvation history did afford her veneration with the particular title: *Hyperdulia*. While there is nothing inherently wrong with the Mother of God being afforded such a title, it does more easily lend itself to the possibility of corruption and/or confusion. Even with formal distinctions and definitions by theological giants like Aquinas,¹⁸ as well as the Council Fathers at Trent,¹⁹ these terms resulted in exaggerated Marian devotions and personal acts of piety. Fast forward several centuries and we find Belgian Cardinal, Leo Joseph Suenens, in the lead up to the Council, quoted as saying the Church was living in 'an Age of Mary'.²⁰ While such a statement sounds in-line with orthodox Catholicism, the quote betrays a growing Marian preoccupation which had not existed within the documents of the New Testament or the Church Fathers. For the earliest Christians, Mary's role was to be a prototype of the human person in full cooperation with God's grace. By extension, Mary was also the principle prototype of the Church as a whole. The nineteenth-century neo-scholastic movement had become a shallow and dry well, having failed to be as biblically and patristically deep and nourishing as Aquinas himself. Therefore, it fell to *ressourcement* theology to reign in this galloping Mariology. Congar therefore believed, consistent with the desire to reconnect with the earliest sources of the faith, that it was not prudent for the Council to produce a standalone Marian document or proclamation. He instead advocated a more balanced approach that recognized Mary's importance without elevating her role to a level that could imply a dual mediation alongside Christ. Congar's perspective was rooted in his broader theological vision, which sought to harmonize Marian devotion with a robust Christological focus.²¹

Specifically regarding Mary as Mediatrix, Congar maintained that her mediatorial role should be understood within the context of Christ's sole mediatorship. He affirmed that while Mary is indeed an important intercessor who cooperates in the distribution of divine grace, this role is entirely subordinate to and dependent upon Christ's unique position as the mediator between God and humanity. Congar viewed Mary's mediation not as a parallel to Christ's but as a participation in His singular mediation, reflecting his commitment to

¹⁶ See Pope Pius V, *Consueverunt Romani (Papal Bull on the Rosary)*, 1569, <https://www.vatican.va>

¹⁷ Examples can range here from 'Queen of the Universe', to 'Destroyer of Heresies', and 'Co-Redemptrix'.

¹⁸ See *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q. 103, Art. 4.

¹⁹ *Decree on the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints, and on Sacred Images*, Session 25 (December 3-4, 1563).

²⁰ Léon Joseph Suenens, *Mary, the Mother of God*, New York: Hawthorn, 1959, 126.

²¹ Cf. Brian McDermott, *Yves Congar: A Theologian of the Church*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018.

preserving the theological balance between Christ and Mary.²² This approach to Mariology significantly influenced Vatican II's teachings by guiding the Council to a more nuanced presentation of Mary's role within the broader context of Christology and Ecclesiology. In this way Congar was echoing early Fathers like St. Augustine of Hippo, who was far from a maximalist when it came to Mary and her role in salvation history. Indeed, 'never did Augustine address Mary as coredemptrix nor did he attribute to her a corredemptive function'.²³ Furthermore, within the Augustinian worldview, Mary was situated at the point of intersection between the created order and the salvific order; her position is thus inferior to the Church but superior to Eve. Yes, Mary is indeed great, but the Church is greater, for she is but a member within the Church.²⁴ Augustine himself makes the point:

Holy is Mary, blessed is Mary, but the Church is better than the Virgin Mary. Why? Because Mary is a portion of the Church, a holy member, a supereminent member, yet a member of the entire body. If she belongs to the entire body, indeed the body is higher than a member.²⁵

Therefore, in this Augustinian and Patristic spirit, Congar emphasized avoiding a Mariology that could potentially diminish Christ's most essential role. This was instrumental in shaping the Council's deliberations and did much in the way of making ecumenical overtures to other Christian denominations, specifically towards Protestants. His ecumenical influence is particularly evident in the Council's treatment of Mary in *Lumen Gentium*, where the document acknowledges Mary's essential role as the Mother of the Church and an important intercessor, while carefully (and in the spirit of St. Augustine) situating her role within the framework of Christ's unique mediatorship.²⁶

This clarification of Mary's place and role in salvation history, in addition to lending itself to ecumenical dialogue, was of additional importance as it also worked to help the laity avoid both scandal and potential heresy, since dual mediation was contrary to both the Magisterial teaching of the Church²⁷ and Sacred Scripture.²⁸ This approach aligns with Congar's view that while Mary is a crucial participant in the distribution of grace, her

²² Cf. Yves Congar, *Marian Doctrine and Devotion*, trans. A. N. Duggan, London: Sheed and Ward, 1965.

²³ J. G. Roten, 'Mary & Women in Augustine', *University of Dayton Review* 22.3, 1994, 31-51, 42.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ St. Augustine, Sermon 72/A, 7. See also Augustine, *De sancta virginitate*, 25,7 (*Virgo sancta Ecclesia, quae in membris suis omnibus incorrupta permanet et in quibusdam ex membris suis virgo corpore et mente, in quibusdam virgo mente, non corpore, omnibus tamen mater.*)

https://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20001208_agostino_en.html.

²⁶ The impact of Congar's work in ecumenism is still visible today with the 'Congar School for Ecumenics', a Postdoctoral Research Programme for Advanced Studies in Ecumenism of the Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Rome (*Angelicum*). Additionally, Congar is often cited within theological circles as one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, Catholic ecclesiologists in history. Cf. C. Ruddy, 'A Very Considerable Place in the Mystery of Christ and the Church? Yves Congar on Mary', in J. C. Cavadini and D. M. Peters (eds), *Mary on the Eve of the Second Vatican Council*, 113-132, 127-128.

²⁷ Cf. *Mystici Corporis Christi*, 110.

²⁸ Cf. 1 Timothy 2:5.

mediatorial role is always subordinate to Christ's singular and central mediation. Congar's influence can be seen in the document in many places, but very notably in *Lumen Gentium* Chapter VIII, sections III and IV:²⁹

For no creature could ever be counted as equal with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer. Just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by his ministers and the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is radiated in different ways among 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.³⁰

This most Holy Synod...exhorts theologians and preachers of the divine word to abstain zealously both from all gross exaggerations as well as from petty narrow-mindedness in considering the singular dignity of the Mother of God. Following the study of Sacred Scripture, the Holy Fathers, the doctors and liturgy of the Church, and under the guidance of the Church's magisterium, let them rightly illustrate the duties and privileges of the Blessed Virgin which always look to Christ, the source of all truth, sanctity and piety. Let them assiduously keep away from whatever, either by word or deed, could lead separated brethren or any other into error regarding the true doctrine of the Church. Let the faithful remember moreover that true devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity, but proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to know the excellence of the Mother of God, and we are moved to a filial love toward our mother and to the imitation of her virtues.³¹

The Mariology on display here again reflects Congar's theological vision, ensuring that Marian devotion complements rather than competes with the focus on Christ. This more cautious approach was by no means universally hailed. Yet, the *ressourcement* movement did carry the day, which is why Congar's position won out in the end. By promoting this moderate view, Congar sought to halt the excessive and unbalanced Marian devotions which had been gaining speed in the last several centuries, and were distracting the faithful from a proper Christocentric focus.³² His approach facilitated a more nuanced and theologically sound presentation of Mary, aligning with the broader goals of Vatican II, to reform and update Church teachings in a way that resonated with contemporary understandings while remaining rooted in Sacred Tradition.³³

However, in the decades following the Council's conclusion, Congar's approach began to face increased criticism. An excellent synthesis of the criticisms were presented by Cardinal Avery Dulles in a 2002 publication where he writes:

²⁹ Section III is entitled, 'On the Blessed Virgin and the Church'; Section IV is entitled, 'The Cult of the Blessed Virgin in the Church'.

³⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, 62.

³¹ *Ibid*, 67.

³² This is an essential concern of Congar and therefore must be reiterated.

³³ Cf. Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998.

Mary as Mediatrix

The achievements of Vatican II have been called a watershed. The chapter on Mary in the Constitution on the Church seemed to mark the end of an isolated, maximalizing Mariology, and the inclusion of Mary in the theology of the Church. But the period immediately following the Council did not confirm the fruitfulness of this approach. It has been called “a decade without Mary.” One theologian wrote in 1978: “It is surprising that the conciliar innovation found no answering echo in the Church. Mariology and Marian devotion are disturbingly close to nil. The choral praise of the Mother of God in the days of Pius XII has been succeeded by a deep silence.”³⁴

The moderations encouraged by the Council were therefore starting to be seen as limiting the full expression of sincere piety, which had been considered a crucial aspect of Marian spirituality and identity. Critics argued that post-Vatican II Mariology underplayed the richness of Marian theology and the depth of her role as a mediator and intercessor. Despite the best of intentions,³⁵ Congar’s cautious stance seemed restrictive and inadequate in the decades after the close of the Council and the trickle-down impact was felt across the Church.³⁶ Indeed, it was touted as a positive by increasingly fewer theologians, with the exception of controversial figures like Hans Küng.³⁷ As Avery Dulles recounts:

Küng applauded and abetted this Marian recession. After censuring the recent popes for having promoted Marian devotion by every means, he praised Vatican II for having integrated Mariology into the last chapter of its document on the Church and for having unmistakably condemned the excesses of Marianism. Since the Council, he declared, this exaggerated Marian cult had completely lost its force both in theology and in the life of the Church.³⁸

Seemingly secured within the framework of the Church, Mariology was now safe from morphing into its own a ‘Marianity’ apart from Christ, and this was certainly preferred to the ‘galloping Mariology’ preceding the Council. Yet, detractors felt the reform went too far and disagreed with Küng’s assessment, seeing a Marian devotional culture that failed to capture the full scope and historical significance of the Mother of God. During an interview given in

³⁴ A. Dulles, ‘Mary Since Vatican II: Decline and Recovery’, *Marian Studies* 53, 2002, 9-22, 12. Dulles is quoting Wilhelm Beinert, as found in S. de Fiores, ‘Mary in Post Conciliar Theology’, in R. Latourelle (ed.), *Vatican II Assessment and Perspectives, Volume 1*, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, 469-539, 474.

³⁵ A good example of this can be found in *Lumen Gentium*, § 60 which states: ‘Mary’s maternal duty towards men in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power. For all the salvific influence of the Blessed Virgin on men originates, not from some inner necessity, but from the divine pleasure. It flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on His mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it.’

³⁶ Scholars have pointed to what has become known as ‘Marian Silence’ in homiletics at this time. While this may seem anecdotal, priests I have solicited who were in seminary and religious formation at this time have attested to this experience as well; this includes both diocesan and religious priests.

³⁷ Cf. Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976, 461-62.

³⁸ Dulles, ‘Mary Since Vatican II: Decline and Recovery’, 12-13.

1985, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, a fellow *peritus* and *ressourcement* figure at the Council with Congar,³⁹ admitted:

As a young theologian in the time before (and also during) the Council, I had, as many did then and still do today, some reservations in regard to certain formulas ... (they) seemed exaggerated to me. Now—in this confused period where truly every type of heretical aberration seems to be pressing upon the doors of the authentic faith—now I understand that it was not a matter of pious exaggerations, but of truths that today are more valid than ever. Yes, it is necessary to go back to Mary if we want to return to that ‘truth about Jesus Christ,’ ‘truth about the Church’ and the ‘truth about man ...’⁴⁰

Thus, while Congar’s approach balanced the theological framework, it also sparked debate about the extent and nature of post-conciliar Marian veneration and piety. It increasingly seemed as though the Mariological pendulum had swung too far,⁴¹ and that in the face of the growing ‘Marian silence’, secular political ideologies began to fill the space the Blessed Mother was evicted from.⁴² Joseph Ratzinger saw this as the loss of ‘the pedagogy’ of an evangelical Church - a Church that, having lost its Mother, was losing its way.⁴³

III. John Paul II: Mary as the Compass to Christ (Christ as the Anchor to Mary)

In the ancient world, when sailors were lost, they used the sun, the moon, and even the stars to aid them in reorienting themselves and getting back on course. It is no wonder then, that the Patristic Church came to understand Christ as the sun, and the Church as the moon. We find this in St Ambrose, St Augustine, Eusebius of Caesarea and Origen. Ambrose writes, ‘Just as the moon is illuminated by the light of the sun so that it can light up the night, so too is the Church illuminated by the light of Christ to dispel the darkness of the world.’⁴⁴ Augustine, echoing his mentor, adds, ‘This visible sun signifies Christ; the moon signifies the Church.’⁴⁵

³⁹ Ratzinger can be considered a ‘second generation’ *ressourcement* figure in the same way Karl Adam and Romano Guardini can be considered ‘forerunners’ with their calls for intellectual renewal.

⁴⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, interview by Vittorio Messori, trans. S. Attanasio and G. Harrison, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985, 104-106.

⁴¹ I am making the claim that this ‘swing’ was a movement ‘away’ from Christ.

⁴² Hans Urs von Balthasar, another *ressourcement* theologian present at the Council, admitted that ‘No approved spirituality in the Church can afford to seek God while bypassing this model (Mary) of Christian perfection; none can afford not to be Marian as well.’ Cf. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. A. Walker, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005, 120.

⁴³ Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, 106.

⁴⁴ *Expositio in Psalmum CXVIII* (Exposition of Psalm 118), 14,30 (*Sicut luna suo lumine illustratur a sole, ut noctem possit illuminare, ita et Ecclesia lumine Christi illustratur, ut tenebras saeculi depellat*).

⁴⁵ Sermon 136, 1 (*Sol iste visibilis significat Christum, luna significat Ecclesiam*).

Similarly, Origen describes how ‘Christ is called the Sun of Righteousness, and the Church is the moon because it does not have its light from itself, but from the sun’ (Homilies on Numbers, 23, 5), and Eusebius that the Church ‘is like the moon, shining not with its own light, but with the light of Christ, the true Sun.’ (Commentary on the Psalms, Ps.89:37)

Mary as Mediatrix

The moon, with no illuminative powers of its own, offers only that light which it is able to reflect from the sun. Likewise, the Church possesses no grace in and of Herself. She offers only that which has been shone by God through Christ. Proper orientation of the moon allows, on the darkest of nights, for the moon to light the way for sailors traveling the most vast oceans. So too, the Church, properly oriented to the Lord, offers abundant graces and allows us to shine forth in a perpetually dark and sinful world. This Patristic-era image was the motivation for the opening lines of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, more commonly known as *Lumen Gentium*, promulgated on November 21, 1964, and reiterating the Church's responsibility to be properly oriented to Christ so as to allow His light to shine forth.⁴⁶ The Archbishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła, who would be elevated to the cardinalate three years later, was present on the day of this promulgation. The Polish prelate participated in both of the 1978 conclaves,⁴⁷ eventually emerging as the 264th Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church. Appearing on the Loggia of the Blessings over St. Peter's Square, the Holy Father made it clear that the Mother of God would once again be *the* evangelical 'pedagogy' of the Church, starting with the execution of his own Petrine ministry. With a smile on his face, the newly named John Paul II stated the following:

... now the most eminent Cardinals have called a new Bishop of Rome. They have called him from a far country—far, but always near through the communion in faith and in the Christian tradition. I was afraid to accept this responsibility, yet I do so in a spirit of obedience to our Lord and in total confidence in His Mother, the most holy Madonna.⁴⁸

Mary had returned as the Mediatrix of all graces and the pope sought to make her restoration the key to his papal agenda. John Paul was returning the Church to its proper orientation and saw Mary's reintroduction as essential.

From the start of his papacy, Pope John Paul II's teachings on Mary as Mediatrix are a testament to his profound personal devotion and theological emphasis on her crucial role in the Church's spiritual life. His encyclicals and writings reveal a deep commitment to the belief that Mary plays an integral part in the distribution of divine graces and in interceding for humanity. In his 1987 encyclical dedicated to the Blessed Mother, *Redemptoris Mater*,⁴⁹ John Paul II outlines Mary's role as Mediatrix within the broader context of her participation in Christ's redemptive work. He emphasizes that Mary's mediation is entirely rooted in Christ's unique mediatorship, and her intercessory role is a reflection of her close union with her Son.

⁴⁶ The introductory clause in Latin reads: '*Lumen gentium cum sit Christus ...*' ('Since Christ is the Light of the Nations ...').

⁴⁷ August 25–26, 1978 (resulting in the election of Cardinal Albino Luciani as Pope John Paul I); October 14–16, 1978 (resulting in the election of Cardinal Karol Józef Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II).

⁴⁸ Pope John Paul II, 'Opening Remarks upon Election as Pope', October 16, 1978, Vatican Radio.

⁴⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* (On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church), Encyclical Letter, March 25, 1987, no. 22.



Additionally, in his 2002 apostolic letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, John Paul II further develops his Marian theology by highlighting the significance of the Rosary as a means to contemplate Mary's mediation and her maternal care for the Church.⁵⁰ He underscores that Mary, as Mediatrix, not only intercedes for the faithful but also accompanies them in their journey of faith, guiding and supporting them through her prayers and maternal presence.⁵¹ John Paul II's deep personal devotion to Mary as Mediatrix reflects his belief in her crucial role in the Church's spiritual life.⁵² His teachings underscore a robust and active understanding of Marian mediation, emphasizing that while Mary's role is subordinate to Christ's, it is nonetheless vital to the spiritual well-being and mission of the Church.

Additionally, 2002-2003 was declared the 'Year of the Rosary' by John Paul II, further reinforcing his devotion both to Mary and the Rosary as an essential form of prayer. In fact, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* goes even further by stating that the Rosary is not only a beautiful meditative prayer that 'marks the rhythm of human life',⁵³ but that reciting the Rosary is, 'nothing other than to contemplate with Mary the face of Christ'.⁵⁴ Indeed, this call to commune with Christ through Mary is exactly the point of her role as Mediatrix and the point of John Paul's deliberate efforts to return Mary to the foreground for the faithful. Ever mindful of the Congarian concerns of ecumenism, the letter clearly reiterates the spiritual logic of *Lumen Gentium*⁵⁵ by asserting:

The Rosary mystically transports us to Mary's side as she is busy watching over the human growth of Christ in the home of Nazareth. This enables her to train us and mold us with the same care, until Christ is 'fully formed' in us (cf. *Gal* 4:19). This role of Mary, totally grounded in that of Christ and radically subordinated to it, 'in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power'.⁵⁶

Later in the letter we also find the following statement which further reiterates the Church's belief in Marian devotion being the quintessential pathway to her Son. To convey his point, John Paul uses the work of St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort:⁵⁷

Our entire perfection consists in being conformed to Jesus Christ. Now, since Mary is of all creatures the one most conformed to Jesus Christ, it follows that among all devotions that which most consecrates and conforms a soul to our Lord is devotion to Mary, His Holy Mother, and that the more a soul is consecrated to her the more

⁵⁰ It should be noted that this apostolic letter also deliberately connects itself to the fortieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council (Oct. 1962). See Pope John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (Apostolic Letter on the Rosary), October 16, 2002, no. 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, no. 15.

⁵² Cf. Arthur Burton Calkins, *Totus Tuus: John Paul II's Program of Marian Consecration and Entrustment*, New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate 2017, 265-270.

⁵³ *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 2.

⁵⁴ *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 3.

⁵⁵ In particular *Lumen Gentium*, 53 & 60.

⁵⁶ *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, 15, quoting *Lumen Gentium*, 60.

⁵⁷ St. Louis de Montfort, *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. F. W. Faber, New York: Tan Books, 1992.

Mary as Mediatrix

will it be consecrated to Jesus Christ. Never as in the Rosary do the life of Jesus and that of Mary appear so deeply joined. Mary lives only in Christ and for Christ!⁵⁸

It was from this Marian spirituality that John Paul II also shocked the Church with his announcement of a new set of mysteries of the Rosary, known as the Luminous Mysteries.⁵⁹ In *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, the Holy Father clarified that these additions were not designed to supplant the existing structure but to function as a supplement for those desiring a more profound meditation on the life of Christ. He stressed that the Rosary is a 'Christocentric prayer' and that these new mysteries enrich its Gospel-based meditation, going so far as to refer to them as a 'compendium of the Gospel'.⁶⁰ The Luminous Mysteries were therefore presented as a way to revitalize the prayer life of the faithful, especially in a post-Vatican II Church (as well as in a modern world) in need of a renewed focus on the life of Christ. By adding these mysteries, John Paul II hoped to renew interest in the Rosary and make it more accessible and meaningful for contemporary Catholics. This motivation was consistent with the *ressourcement* school, particularly the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who was also present at Vatican II with Congar. It was Balthasar who pointed out that the very best Marian prayers are always Christocentric and move the Christian ultimately to the Trinity. Balthasar saw the Rosary as being introduced by the Creed itself, stating:

The Rosary is a way of making present the mysteries of Jesus' life—His youth, the conclusion of His public life in the Passion, and His Resurrection and consummation, into which he also draws Mary as the archetype of the Church. It also makes present Christ's prayer to the Father and, finally, the ever-new glorification of the Trinity.⁶¹

In addition to tying the Rosary to the Creed, Balthasar believed that the Hail Mary, being rooted entirely in Sacred Scripture (up to the concluding petition), could be a vehicle for ecumenical dialogue as well. Furthermore, Balthasar reminds us that it is Mary alone who accompanied the incarnate God from womb to tomb (as well as beyond into his transfigured life), and she alone is therefore in the unique position to act as a compass for us. The alignment of John Paul II's and Balthasar's Marian themes – such as Mary's *fiat* and her role in salvation history – suggests a shared theological vision rooted in *ressourcement* principles.⁶²

John Paul II's introduction of the Luminous Mysteries was both a bold innovation and a reaffirmation of the Rosary's Christocentric focus. These Mysteries were intended to fill a perceived gap in the traditional Rosary by emphasizing key moments in Christ's public ministry. John Paul II argued that the Rosary offered a more complete meditation on the life

⁵⁸ John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (Apostolic Letter on the Rosary), October 16, 2002, no. 15.

⁵⁹ The Luminous Mysteries are: The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan; The Wedding at Cana; The Proclamation of the Kingdom of God; The Transfiguration; The Institution of the Eucharist.

⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (Apostolic Letter on the Rosary), October 16, 2002, no. 19.

⁶¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. A. Walker, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005, 118.

⁶² It is worth noting that Balthasar was named a cardinal by John Paul II in 1988.



of Christ.⁶³ By re-centering the Rosary around pivotal events in Jesus' life, John Paul II not only revitalized a beloved Catholic prayer but also offered a concrete example of how Mariology can serve as a gateway to a deeper encounter with Christ. Thus, his efforts represent a thoughtful effort to fulfill Vatican II's dual objectives of integrating Mariology within both a Christological and Ecclesial tapestry.

When Pope John Paul II introduced the *Luminous Mysteries* in *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, I was still young and not yet fully tuned into the theological conversations unfolding around me. Yet I can remember hearing adults (teachers, parishioners, even family members) express some initial confusion or resistance. For some, the Rosary felt untouchable, and the idea of adding new mysteries was unsettling. Over time, though, I watched that hesitation give way to appreciation. As I grew in my own spiritual life, the *Luminous Mysteries* became not just familiar, but deeply meaningful. They offered a new way to encounter Christ - through His baptism, His preaching, His miracles - all the moments that revealed Him as the Light of the World. Today, they're a regular and beloved part of how many Catholics pray, including me.

IV. Conclusion: Integrating Congar's Reserve and John Paul II's Reverence

John Paul II's Christocentric Marian devotion was not a departure from the conciliar vision of Vatican II but a necessary complement to its ecclesial focus. While Yves Congar's reserve sought to temper the excesses of pre-conciliar Mariology, particularly though his concern for avoiding a 'galloping Mariology', John Paul II's papacy aimed to reintroduce a balanced and reverent approach, drawing believers closer to Christ through Mary. This was especially evident in the addition of the Luminous Mysteries to the Rosary, which served as a tangible expression of this Christocentric recalibration, inviting the faithful to contemplate the Gospel more fully.⁶⁴

Congar's ecclesial Mariology emphasized Mary's role within the Church and the People of God, ensuring that Marian devotion did not overshadow Christ or ecclesiology. His influence on *Lumen Gentium* tempered excessive Marian devotion, placing Mary in proper relation to the Church rather than elevating her to an independent figure of devotion. However, as summarized in Robert Fastiggi's review of Dr. Laurie Olsen's *Mary and the Church at Vatican II: The Untold Story of Lumen Gentium VIII*, the Marian section of *Lumen Gentium* reflects a compromise, often steering clear of explicitly affirming Mary's role as Mediatrix and Co-Redemptrix in order to maintain ecumenical sensitivity. According to Fastiggi's reading, Olsen argues that the Council's language on Mary was intentionally

⁶³ John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (Apostolic Letter on the Rosary), October 16, 2002, no. 19.

⁶⁴ John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (Apostolic Letter on the Rosary), October 16, 2002, no. 21.

reserved, limiting the development of a fuller Mariology in favor of broader ecclesial unity – a position strongly influenced by Congar’s ecumenical priorities.⁶⁵

John Paul II, however, sought to build upon this framework, affirming Mary’s unique position in salvation history, particularly through her titles as *Mediatrix* and *Co-Redemptrix*, with unwavering devotion to these aspects of her identity.⁶⁶ By doing so, he acknowledged that Marian devotion, when properly understood, does not obscure Christ’s central mediating role but enriches the faithful’s understanding of salvation, as Mary always directs them toward her Son.⁶⁷

In harmonizing Congar’s caution with John Paul II’s enthusiasm, the Church can reclaim a Marian theology that is both deeply Christological and firmly rooted in ecclesial life. Congar’s concerns about ecumenism are important to recognize, yet they ought not restrict full acknowledgement of Mary’s role. John Paul II knew this and emphasized the point particularly well in a Wednesday General Audience when he said:

We recall that Mary’s mediation is essentially defined by her divine motherhood. Recognition of her role as *Mediatrix* is moreover implicit in the expression ‘our Mother’, which presents the doctrine of Marian mediation by putting the accent on her motherhood. Lastly, the title ‘Mother in the order of grace’ explains that the Blessed Virgin co-operates with Christ in humanity’s spiritual rebirth.⁶⁸

Such an integrated approach offers a renewed path for the Church to engage with the modern world, fulfilling Vatican II’s original vision. In many ways John Paul II’s papacy was a natural extension of the ecclesial Mariology promoted at Vatican II, yet with a deliberate effort to bring Mariology into sharper focus within the context of Christology. This approach emphasizes that Marian devotion, when properly understood, leads us ever closer to Christ. As John Paul II himself affirmed, ‘Mary’s maternal role toward people in no way obscures or diminishes the unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power.’⁶⁹ This vision challenges the Church today to embrace Marian devotion, not as an end in itself, but as a profound means of encountering Christ, who remains at the heart of the Church’s mission in the twenty-first century.

As I reflect on the Marian devotion that first captivated my young imagination in the corridors of St. Alice Elementary School, I realize that those frayed notes tucked beneath Mary’s statue were more than just childhood curiosities; they were humble expressions of a profound truth. They spoke of a faith that instinctively turns to Mary, the Mediatrix, in moments of need, always leading the faithful closer to her Son. This childlike trust, which I

⁶⁵ Cf. R. Fastiggi, ‘Review of *Mary and the Church at Vatican II: The Untold Story of Lumen Gentium VIII*, by Laurie Olsen’, *Ecce Mater Tua* 10, 2024, 157–159, https://eccematertua.com/sites/ecce/files/review_olsen.pdf

⁶⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 1987, 21.

⁶⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1988, 23.

⁶⁸ John Paul II, General Audience. October 1, 1997.

⁶⁹ John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (Apostolic Letter on the Rosary), October 16, 2002, no. 22.



encountered as a young boy, is precisely what John Paul II sought to renew within the Church's Marian devotion that does not overshadow Christ but brings us more deeply into the mystery of His life. Just as my second-grade encounter with Mary pointed me towards something greater, so too does a fully realized Mariology guide the Church towards a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. In reclaiming this balanced vision, we return to the heart of what it means to be both Marian and truly Christian: to say, as Mary did, 'Do whatever He tells you' (Jn 2:5).