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Title: **Marian Devotion as an Expression of the Self-Understanding and Public Face of the Church**

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Abstract

The Church's understanding of its relationship to Mary has altered since Vatican II, because of changes in the Church's understanding of its own identity. In the early and medieval periods, the Church had often understood itself as 'mother', as 'bride', and as 'virgin', and thus was typologically connected to the mother of Christ. In the twentieth century, theologians tried to recover a sense that the Church and Mary were intimately connected to one another, and the theme was taken up in Chapter Eight of *Lumen Gentium*. But *LG* also speaks of the Church as 'the People of God' and 'the pilgrim people', and this has had consequences for the Church's understanding of Mary, since the understanding of the Church as 'people' does not immediately carry any Mariological resonance and makes it difficult to articulate the theological connection between Mary and the Church. The major attempt to maintain the tradition that the Church is 'Virgin Mother', based upon the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-88), presents other difficulties. An examination of some of these developments concludes by suggesting that the Church might draw on an ancient tradition of 'cosmic' Christianity, which could show the common Christological ground underlying both ecclesiology and Mariology.

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Introduction

In an earlier generation, almost everyone was aware that there was a connection between the Blessed Virgin Mary and Catholic identity. Many Catholics knew the adage, 'As Mary goes, so goes the Church', and it has often been through Mary that the Church has expressed her own identity—not least, in the Tridentine period, when Marian devotion was widely seen as the hallmark of Catholicism, often in contrast to Protestantism.[1] But the association of Mary with the Church as both a mystical and a political organisation extends back to the Church's earliest centuries, and it has sometimes been through Marian doctrine and devotion that the Church has come to learn more about her own vocation in particular times and places. Indeed, the topic of Mary and Catholic identity is one on which history and tradition offer an embarrassment of riches.

This paper argues that the mainstream Church's understanding of its relationship to Mary has altered since Vatican II, and that this is because of changes in the Church's understanding of its own identity. In the early and medieval periods, the Church had often understood itself as 'mother', as 'bride', and as 'virgin', and, in these respects, it was understood to correspond to the mother of Christ. However, in the mid-twentieth century, many theologians felt that Mariology had lost its connection to ecclesiology, and they were trying to recover a sense that the Church and Mary are intimately connected to one another. This theme was taken up in Chapter Eight of the Vatican Council's constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. But *LG* also spoke of the Church as 'the People of God' and 'the pilgrim people', and it was these images—rather than those of the virgin, the bride, and the mother—which initially became dominant in the Church's public self-understanding after the Council. This has had consequences for the Church's understanding of Mary, for, unlike the motif of the Virgin Mother, the understanding of the Church as 'people' does not immediately carry any Mariological resonance, and consequently, over the past fifty years, it has sometimes been difficult to articulate the theological connection between Mary and the Church. The major attempt to maintain the tradition that the Church is 'Virgin Mother', based upon the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-88), presents other difficulties, especially its dependence upon a theological framework governed by notions of sexual difference.

This paper will examine some of the theological and devotional developments of the past fifty years, with a view to establishing a possible way forward that would be faithful both to the tradition, including popular devotion, and to the insights of contemporary theologians. A tentative conclusion will suggest that, if the Church would draw on an ancient tradition of

[1] Marina Warner observes that historical variations in the iconography of Mary seem to correspond to the changing status and mood of the Church (*Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Quartet Books, 1976), 103-104). Karl Barth disapproves of Catholic Mariology precisely because it expresses what he regards as faulty ecclesiology (*Church Dogmatics*, Vol.I.2, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 143 and 146).

'cosmic' Christianity—a Christianity that is concerned with the Church in relation to the whole created order—and on popular devotion associated with the natural world, then a deeper connection between the Church and Mary would be found to be present, one which would show the common Christological ground underlying both ecclesiology and Mariology.

Immaculate Conception

I begin with the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception, defined by Pope Pius IX in the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854). In the modern period, there are at least three respects in which this doctrine has been of cardinal importance in the development of the Church's understanding of its own character and mission. Firstly, it brought to the fore the principle of the *sensus fidei fidelium*; secondly, it necessitated the articulation and acceptance of the principle of the development of dogma; and thirdly—and, perhaps, most famously—it served to illustrate and confirm the dogma of papal infallibility. There is not the space in this paper to describe these in detail, so I am commenting only on the final of the three, since this is most closely connected to this paper's principal theme.[2]

The connection of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception to the principle of papal infallibility is well known, and even obvious. In 1858, four years after the promulgation of *Ineffabilis Deus*, Bernadette Soubirous, a thirteen-year-old girl in the French Pyrenean town of Lourdes, had a series of visions of a young woman, in which the apparition said that she herself was the Immaculate Conception. The site of the apparitions was a grotto, Massabielle, where Bernadette was guided by her vision to uncover a spring. Local people soon claimed that the water had healing properties, and Lourdes has gone on to become Europe's largest pilgrim shrine.[3] The definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was, in effect, an act of papal infallibility, and its confirmation at Lourdes added support to the defining of the doctrine of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council (1869-70).[4]

[2] For the first two, see Sarah Jane Boss, 'Deification: The Mariology of the Ordinary Faithful', *New Blackfriars* (March, 2017), 188-190; Wenceslaus Sebastian, 'The Controversy over the Immaculate Conception from after Duns Scotus to the end of the Eighteenth Century,' in Edward Dennis O'Connor (ed.), *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 213-70; Valfredo Maria Rossi, *Carlo Passaglia on Church and Virgin. New perspectives in systematic theology in light of nineteenth-century Catholic renewal* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2020); John E. Thiel, 'The Development of Doctrine', in James J. Buckley, Frederick Christian Banerschmidt, and Trent Pomplun (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 251-67; Nicholas L. Gregoris, *"The Daughter of Eve Unfallen": Mary in the Theology and Spirituality of John Henry Newman.* (Mount Pocono, PA: Newman House, 2003).

[3] The life of Bernadette Soubirous is told by Thérèse Taylor, *Bernadette of Lourdes: Her Life, Death and Visions*, 2nd ed'n (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2008). The origins and further development of the shrine, including the contributions of women in particular, are described in Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in a Secular Age* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1999).

[4] John W. O'Malley, *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 103.

According to the work of some later theologians, including Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), the connection between the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility flows from the very nature of the Church and its relationship to Mary. De Lubac refers to the work of Matthias Scheeben (1835-88):[5]

> In 1870, he drew attention to 'a rich and striking analogy between the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, [which signifies the] absolute purity of the *Sedes Sapientiae*, and the dogma of the infallibility of the Holy See, [which signifies the] absolute purity of the *Cathedra Sapientiae*'. In his view, the relationship between the two motherhoods is so intimate and so universal that the language of correspondence or analogy does not seem sufficient to account for it. Rather, he says, there is a 'perichoresis'.[6]

The Trinitarian term *perichoresis* implies a degree of identity between the participants: the Church and Mary, in certain respects, are one. Since it is specifically as the voice of the universal Church that the Pope speaks infallibly, papal infallibility and Mary's sinlessness emerge out of a deep resonance between the Church and the Virgin. The Church's infallibility is an integrity that is vouchsafed by Christ, and Mary's moral purity reflects and is reflected by it.

Amongst the devout laity, on the other hand, the cult of Mary may be related to the Church's hierarchical authority by way of contrast, rather than similarity. For European Catholics, Lourdes has held a place of special importance, and they sometimes talk about it by reference to the Church as a body composed of organs which perform different functions (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12; Col. 1:18). The anthropologist, Andrea Dahlberg, studied English pilgrims at Lourdes in the 1980s, and she says of them:

> There is a saying, 'Rome is the head of the church, but Lourdes is its heart'. This expresses the importance of the cult of Lourdes within the church in the eyes of its devotees, and also emphasizes the emotive nature of the cult. The force of the saying is derived from an implicit contrast between the urban maleness of Rome and the rural feminine nature of Lourdes. Rome is about leadership and authority, Lourdes is about 'the emotional side of Catholicism'.[7]

We shall see below that the notion that Mary is concerned with some essentially feminine aspect of the Church is one that has also been taken up by prominent theologians.

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[5] For Scheeben's Mariology, see M.J. Scheeben, *Mariology*, 2 vols., trans. T.L.M.J. Geukers (St Louis, MO: Herder, 1946 [vol.1] and 1948 [vol.2]); and Ivo Muser, *Das mariologische Prinzip "gottesbräutliche Mutterschaft" und das Verständnis der Kirche bei M.J. Scheeben* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1995).

[6] De Lubac, *Méditation sur l'Église*, 2ème éd., rev. (Paris: Aubier, 1953), 284-5. The quotation from the monastic founder, Blessed Serlon of Savigny (d.1158), is taken from a sermon on the Nativity of the Virgin.

[7] Andrea Dahlberg, 'The Body as a Principle of Holism: Three Pilgrimages', in John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (eds.), *Contesting the Sacred: The anthropology of Christian pilgrimage*, London: Routledge, 1991, 30-50 at 35.

Mary and the Church: The Claim to Identity

De Lubac's interest in the shared identity of Mary and the Church is perhaps the most eminent example of a strand of theological thought that had been blossoming in the work of authors such as John Henry Newman (1801-90) and Carlo Passaglia (1812-87), and which found its full flowering in scholars such as de Lubac, a hundred years later. In the mid-twentieth century, many Catholic theologians were excited about the theology of the Church, and especially the ecclesiology of the early Christian writers. The idea of the Church as a living, mystical entity reverberates through the work of the *ressourcement* theologians of this period. Concerning this new awareness of the Church, Romano Guardini wrote: 'The very fact of the Church has become a living power. We are beginning to understand that the Church is everything. … The philosopher will come to see in the Church the final and conclusive answer to his earnest search for the roots of all reality.'[8] Hugo Rahner, writing in 1961, observed that the previous half-century had seen a development of piety in relation both to the Church and to Our Lady, and he commented: '*Mater Ecclesia* and *Mater Christi*, Ecclesiology and Mariology: these are the two ways in which so many are today drawing closer to Christ.'[9] His well-known work on the relationship between Mary and the Church endeavours to show the internal connections between these two figures, and Yves Congar subsequently quoted him with approval: 'The Church, as Hugo Rahner magnificently says, is "the Mary of the history of the world".'[10]

Among the theologians of this period who have remained influential down to the present day, de Lubac deserves special mention as a *ressourcement* thinker who was centrally concerned with the nature of the Church, and who, as we have already seen, viewed the Church as inseparably tied to the Virgin Mary.[11] Both the Church and the Christian soul are associates in God's saving work, and de Lubac holds that Mary is central to this creaturely co-operation: 'The ties from the Church to the Virgin Mary are not only direct and numerous: they are essential. They are woven from within.'[12] Indeed, the mystery of Mary and that of the Church may be said to be a single mystery.[13]

What, then, is the substance of this essential connection between Mary and the Church? Put simply, we might say that the office and work of the Church on earth is the living

[8] Quoted in Hugo Rahner, SJ, *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. Sebastian Bullough, OP (Bethesda, MD: Zaccheus Press, 2004 [1961]), p.4. The reference Rahner gives is to 'Das Erwachen der Kirche in der Seele', *Hochland* 19 (1922), 257-67, but I was unable to find this article in the volume cited.
[9] Rahner, H., *Our Lady*, 3.
[10] Yves Congar, 'Église: Mon Foyer Maternel', in *Au Milieu des Orages: L'Eglise Affronte Aujourd'hui son Avenir* (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 115-120 at 117.
[11] De Lubac's concern with the character of the Church is clear from his most widely read monograph, *Catholicisme: Les Aspect Sociaux du Dogme*, first published in 1938. An English translation, made from a different edition of the original French, is available as *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).
[12] De Lubac, *Méditation*, 275.
[13] De Lubac, *Méditation*, 275, citing a quotation from Ruperto Maria de Manresa, OFM (1869-1939).

continuation of the office and work of the Mother of God, and that the Blessed Virgin remains present and active in the Church both in Heaven and on Earth. De Lubac quotes Isaac of Stella (1100-69), who writes of Mary and the Church: 'each gives a posterity to God the Father: Mary, without sin, furnishes the body with its head; the Church, in remitting all sins, gives to this Head its body. Each is thus mother of Christ; but neither gives birth entirely without the other.'[14] This understanding of Mary and the Church draws immediately upon St Paul's image of the Church as the body of Christ and Christ as its Head. The logic of Isaac's thought is that, because the Word of God took flesh and was born from Mary, so it is that men and women of flesh can be re-born from the Church: that the re-birth of the children of Adam through baptism makes them members of the body of Christ, and that this is possible because Mary gave birth to the second Adam, Christ, who is the Head.

It should be noted that, amongst the twentieth-century theologians who argued that Mary's role should be understood within the framework of ecclesiology, there were many—perhaps most—who contended that Mary's position was one that was in some respect distinct from, and superior to, that of the rest of the faithful, or even the Church as a whole. For example, the Swiss theologian, Charles Journet, presents Mariology as an aspect of ecclesiology, but sees Mary's role and status as unique. She is the Church's prototype. 'In the Virgin there flowers, in a unique manner, the christoconformant grace which enlivens and fashions the whole Church from within.'[15]

Vatican II

In the period leading up to the Second Vatican Council, it was sometimes said that theologians were divided between 'Christotypical' and 'ecclesiotypical' ways of thinking about Mariology. Christotypical Mariology saw Mary as cast principally in the likeness of Christ. Thus, where Christ is the Redeemer, Mary was seen as Co-Redemptrix; where Christ is King, Mary was Queen; where Christ is the Mediator, Mary was Mediatrix; and so on. By contrast, ecclesiotypical Mariology presented Mary as cast principally in the likeness of the Church. So, instead of being co-redeeming, she would be the first of the redeemed; instead of sharing in Christ's governance, she would typify the humility that fits a soul for God's kingdom; and instead of mediating God's graces, she would be their exemplary recipient. Writing at the time of the Vatican Council, René Laurentin pointed out that there were no Mariologists who

[14] De Lubac, *Méditation*, 284. Quotation from Isaac of Stella, *Sermo* 61 (*PL* 194, 1683). The passage is quoted more extensively in *Catholicisme*, troisième édition (Paris: Cerf, 1941), 362-364.

[15] Charles Journet, *L'Église du Verbe Incarné, II. Sa Structure Interne et son Unité Catholique* (Paris: Desclée, de Brouwer, 1951), Ch. 3, 'La Vierge est au cœur de l'Église', 382-453 at 393 and passim. Note that this chapter follows the one on Christ, who is 'Tête de l'Église', 97-381. See also Otto Semmelroth, *Urbild der Kirche: Organischer Aufbau des Mariengeheimnisses* (Wurzburg: Echter, 1950); English translation, *Mary, Archetype of the Church*, trans. Maria von Eroes and John Devlin (Dublin: Gill and Son, 1964); de Lubac, *Méditation*. Pope Paul VI's proclamation of Mary as 'Mother of the Church' seems to have been an attempt to establish clearly this Marian priority.

actually subscribed to either of these perspectives *in toto*.[16] We can also note that Karl Rahner, in the 1950's, undercut the supposed dichotomy altogether, arguing that to co-operate fully with God and to be the Mother of God are precisely what it means to be perfectly redeemed.[17] In any case, is the Church not cast in the image of the Redeemer? And are the baptized not *alteri Christi*? It would therefore be rather extraordinary if the mother of Christ, as type and first member of the Church, were not also formed as nearly as possible in his likeness, and if she did not co-operate with his saving work, in all respects, in a uniquely excellent manner.[18] Perhaps, rather than thinking in terms of the 'Christotypical' and 'ecclesiotypical', it may be better to recognise that Mary is always and everywhere associated with the Church's self-understanding, and this in turn may mean that the differences over Marian doctrine and devotion may, at root, be differences over ecclesiology.

However the disagreement is conceived, the conflict between the opposing sides at the Vatican Council was intense, and was bound up with other disputes within the Church. These included the struggle between, on the one hand, theologians who believed the Church should continue to favour neo-scholastic methods of theological enquiry, and, on the other, those who sought a more historical approach, giving greater attention to Scripture and to early Christian writers—the principle known by its French name of *ressourcement*.[19] It is well known that some of the Council fathers desired that the Council should accord Marian doctrine a discrete constitution of its own, whilst others argued that the topic should be addressed within the decree on the Church.[20] The history of the changes that were made to the Marian schema during the course of the Council's progress have been well documented, and the narrow vote in favour of including the Blessed Virgin Mary within the decree on the Church has been frequently noted.[21] In the end, the eighth and final chapter of the Constitution on the Church was dedicated to the subject of Mary, although it was formulated in such a way as to indicate her relationship both to the Church and to Christ.

[16] René Laurentin, *Mary's Place in the Church*, trans. I.G. Pidoux (London: Burns and Oates, 1965). The whole book is concerned with the 'two tendencies' within the Church, and with finding a way of restoring Mariology to a properly integrated position within Christian theology as a whole. Peter De Mey uses the more helpful language of 'Church-centred' and 'Christ-centred' Mariology ('The sacramental nature and mission of the Church in *Lumen Gentium*', *International journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 14:4 (2014), 348-361, at 358. A conciliatory approach to the topic is given in Eduardo P. Hontiveros, 'The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Second Vatican Council', *Philippine Studies* 13:3 (1965), 652-669.

[17] Karl Rahner, 'Le principe fondamental de la théologie mariale', *Recherches de Science Religieuse* (1954) 42:4, 481-522.

[18] Charles Journet refers to Mary and the Church as 'Christoconformante', but presents this as being accomplished in Mary in a most excellent degree. See n.15, above.

[19] Brian E. Daley, SJ, 'Sign and Source of the Church: Mary in the *Ressourcement* and at Vatican II', in John C. Cavadini and Danielle M. Peters (eds.), *Mary on the Eve of the Second Vatican Council* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 31-54.

[20] René Laurentin, *La Vierge au Concile* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1965), 8-50.

[21] Ibid; Michael O'Carroll, *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1983), 351-6.

The century preceding the Council had been so abundant in Marian theology, liturgy and devotion that it had become known as the Marian Age.[22] Immediately following the Council, it seemed that a wind of change blew through the Church, at least in Western Europe and North America, and a turning away from Mary was one symptom of this. Liturgy, theology and much devotion cast Mary to the margins. This caused concern not only amongst supporters of what might be called the *ancien régime*, but also some of the Council's enthusiastic supporters, such as Karl Rahner.[23] The reason for this is clear. If Mary is intrinsically connected to the Church, then a decline in Marian theology, devotion and identity will likely signify, or lead to, a decline in a proper awareness of the Church as a mystical body.

However, since the 1970's, Catholicism has witnessed a gradual Marian revival. And since Vatican II, almost all Catholic theology of Mary has been either ecclesiological or biblical, the latter trend having emerged out of the success of the so-called 'Biblical movement' at Vatican II and the promulgation of *Dei Verbum*.

The Current Situation

Since the 1970's, two strands of Marian theology and devotion have become dominant, and both of them are novel. The first is that which presents Mary as 'first disciple'—a designation that was not previously part of Catholic tradition—and the second is a romantic Marian ecclesiology that is influenced by the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. This latter theological trend appears to be in the mould of *ressourcement*, but in fact diverges significantly from the ecclesiology of authors such as Hugo Rahner or de Lubac.

First Disciple

At present, the understanding of Mary that often seems most prominent is that which holds that she is the first, or exemplary, disciple.[24] Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (1972), refers to the Blessed Virgin in precisely this way. When explaining why it is good to imitate her, and what this means, he says: 'She is worthy of imitation because she was the first and the most perfect of Christ's disciples' (para. 35). This understanding of Mary reflects the exegesis of Catholic biblical scholars such as Raymond Brown and Joseph

[22] E.g., Zimdars-Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 250-59; Sr Mary Vincentine, S.C.L., 'The Controversial Issue of Mary's Merit', *The Thomist*, 19:4 (1956), 415-45 at 444.

[23] Karl Rahner, 'Courage for Devotion to Mary' [1983], trans. Joseph Donceel, SJ, in *Theological Investigations*, 23 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), 129-39.

[24] E.g. Elizabeth Johnson, 'Mary and the Female Face of God', *Theological Studies*, 50:3 (1989), 500-526; Joseph Paredes, *Mary and the Kingdom of God: A Synthesis of Mariology*, trans. Joseph Daries and Josefina Martinez (Slough: St Paul's, 1991). A quick search of the internet and of YouTube videos reveals that this motif enjoys considerable popularity. In my experience of teaching seminarians and discussing Mariology with educated lay people in England, the idea of Mary as 'first disciple' is one to which they often give prominence.

Fitzmyer, and is found clearly in their influential study, *Mary in the New Testament*, which is the product of an ecumenical collaboration.[25] *Mary in the New Testament* argues that the three synoptic gospels vary in their presentation of the character of Mary, and especially in their narration of the incident in which Jesus' mother and brothers come looking for him. When told of this, Jesus responds, 'Who are my mother and my brothers? They are those who hear the word of God and keep it' (Matt. 12: 46-9; Mark 3: 31-4; Lk 8: 19-22). Through an analysis of each evangelist's wording, and the way in which the incident is set within each gospel, Brown et al. hold that Mark and Matthew draw a contrast between Jesus's kin group and the disciples sitting around him—perhaps excluding Jesus' mother and brothers from the category of 'those who hear the word of God and keep it', or perhaps not—but that Luke, on the other hand, implicitly includes the mother and brothers amongst those who obey God's word.[26] One reason for this is that, according to Luke, Mary became Christ's mother precisely by saying to God's messenger, 'Let it be to me according to your word' (Lk 1: 38). Thus, she did God's will and so became Jesus' disciple *par excellence* (though it is only Matthew who actually uses the word 'disciple' in his telling of this incident).

The argument that Luke presents Mary as the first disciple is further supported, according to Brown et al., by Luke 11: 27-8. In these verses, a woman in the crowd cries out, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that gave you suck!' And Jesus replies, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it.' Brown et al. contend that this beatitude signifies that Mary's blessedness resides not primarily in her physical motherhood, as Jesus' interlocutor had suggested, but in her having done God's will, that is, in the act of faith by which her motherhood came about.[27] Thus, in her obedience to God's will, Mary sets the pattern for all Christian discipleship.

As it stands, this commentary on Mary and discipleship is not evidently connected to the Church; the concept of Mary as first disciple is not clearly an ecclesial one. However, at the hands of a theologian (as distinct from a biblical scholar), it may take on a more ecclesial dimension. For example, the American theologian, Elizabeth Johnson, has argued that many of the popular attributes accorded to Mary, such as compassion, belong more properly to God, and that it is important to see these attributes as divine, for two reasons: firstly, because these maternal and merciful attributes give us a truer picture of who God is, and secondly, so that we clearly see Mary not as divine, but as a disciple.[28] On the basis of detailed biblical study, Johnson portrays Mary as a real human being within the communion of saints, a woman who is not primarily a 'model', 'type', or 'principle', but who, because of her real

[25] Raymond E. Brown, Karl Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann (eds.), *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Philadelphia, PA, and Mahwah, NJ: Fortress and Paulist, 1978); Bertrand Buby, S.M., *Mary, the Faithful Disciple* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985); Edward Sri, *Rethinking Mary in the New Testament* (San Francisco and Greenwood Village, CO: Ignatius Press and Augustine Institute, 2018), 221.
[26] Brown et al., *Mary*, 126.
[27] Brown et al., *Mary*, 170-172.
[28] Elizabeth Johnson, 'Mary and the Female Face of God', *Theological Studies*, 50:3 (1989), 500-526.

humanity, can become a model for every Christian, male and female. For this reason, Mary plays a key role in the Church as communion of saints, both in the narrative of Scripture and in the Church's continuing life over time.[29] She shows what it means to belong to the People of God.

The Birth of Christ in the Soul

The motif of Mary as first disciple has emerged only since the Second Vatican Council. Although Mary has long been regarded as a figure for imitation, *Lumen Gentium* 8 does not refer to her as a disciple, and the motif is not found in the Marian writings of earlier periods. In fact, the idea that Mary is the first disciple is a subtle inversion of a more ancient and continuous tradition—a tradition that was described by Hugo Rahner and then highlighted in the work of de Lubac—namely, the teaching that Christ should be born in the hearts of the faithful.[30]

One motif that is strong in de Lubac's ecclesiology is the understanding that the character of the Church is present in each of its members, and this applies in the case of the motherhood of the Church, which is bound to the motherhood of Mary.[31] He draws attention to the tradition from the earliest centuries which holds that Christ must be born in the soul of each believer, and this theme is the subject of the culminating section of his magisterial work, *Exégèse Médiévale*.[32] De Lubac announces that he will end his work on the exegesis of Scripture with what he calls 'a very banal text'.[33] This text shows the continuity of the Christian tradition, and also recalls the fact that the tradition's practice of spiritual interpretation is concerned with Christian reality as a whole, and is not divorced from the interpretation of the Bible. The text in question is from the *Vita Jesu Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony (*c*. 1295-1378). In his comments on the celebration of Christmas, he writes:

> And know that the birth of Christ is threefold, namely, divine, human, and by grace. The first is from the Father, eternally. The second, from the mother, in time. The third, in the mind, spiritually. And these three births are taken up according to the three substances of Christ, which are deity, flesh, and spirit.
>
> (The Church) represents the third of these in the mass that is sung in the day; for the gracious birth is manifest in the soul, in which Christ is conceived through love, born through action, nourished through growth … ' (*Vita Christi*, Pars I, c. 9).[34]

[29] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003).
[30] Hugo Rahner, 'Die Gottesgeburt: Die Lehre der Kirchenväter von der Geburt Christi im Herzen des Gläubigen', *Zeitschrift für Katholisch-Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Innsbruck*, 59:3 (1935), 333-418.
[31] De Lubac, *Méditation*, 310 and 312, citing St Peter Damian.
[32] De Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale: Les Quatre Sens de l'Ecriture.* Seconde partie, Tome 2 (Paris: Aubier, 1964), 505-13.
[33] *Exégèse Médiévale*, II.2, 505.
[34] *Exégèse Médiévale,* II.2, 506.

De Lubac comments: 'Nothing is at once more ancient and more modern, nothing more widely diffused, than this theme of the "mystical coming", the "mystical conception", the "mystical birth", and the "mystical progress" of Christ, or the Word, in the believer's soul.'[35]

De Lubac writes that the foundation of this theme lies at the very heart of the Christian mystery, and he then goes on to give many illustrations of it, starting with Origen, and continuing throughout the Middle Ages.[36] He describes it as 'one of the commonplaces of preaching'.[37] He took up this theme again, some years later, in the essay, 'The Motherhood of the Church', which gives instances of the motif's continued use into the modern era.[38] It should be noted that several of the texts to which de Lubac refers were concerned specifically with one of the Gospel passages in which Jesus asks, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?', and responds by saying that they are 'those who hear the word of God and keep it'. That is to say, this teaching is interpreted as meaning not that Mary is conformed to the pattern of the disciple, or faithful soul, but rather, the converse: the disciple, or the faithful soul, is he or she who is conformed to the pattern established by Mary. The Christian should aspire to be Christ's spiritual mother.

However, de Lubac says it is of the utmost importance that the birth of Christ in the soul should be associated with the bodily birth of Christ in Bethlehem, for if we think of the birth in the soul as a purely spiritual event, then it may come to be seen as a merely psychological phenomenon, and its supernatural character will be forgotten.[39] The connection with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem also helps to ensure that the birth in the soul is not understood in an individualistic manner, as if it is of consequence only to the soul who experiences it. For the Church continues Mary's role as mother of Christ: indeed, Mary and the Church share an identity;[40] and it is because the Christian shares in the life of the Church that Christ may be born in the soul of the believer.[41] De Lubac sees Origen as a key figure in the inception of this tradition: 'With … Origen arises the great theme in Christian thought, resumed indefinitely ever since, of the structural analogy between the Church and the Christian soul.'[42]

Thus, the tradition that de Lubac describes is one in which there is a close correspondence between Mary and the Christian soul, or the disciple. But, as indicated above, it is subtly different from the modern idea of Mary as first disciple; for the latter gives

[35] Ibid.
[36] *Exégèse Médiévale*, 506, and 506-13.
[37] *Exégèse Médiévale*, 507.
[38] Henri de Lubac, 'The Motherhood of the Church,' in *The Motherhood of the Church*, trans. Sr Sergia Englund, O.C.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 37-168, at 75-84. (French original: 'La Maternité de l'Eglise,' in *Les Eglises Particulières dans l'Eglise Universelle* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1971), 139-229, at 167-73.)
[39] *Exégèse Médiévale,* II.2, 510.
[40] De Lubac, *Méditation sur l'Eglise*, 284-5.
[41] See, for example, *Catholicisme*, 166.
[42] De Lubac, *Motherhood*, 79.

priority to the notion of the disciple as the one who 'hears the word of God and keeps it', and says that Mary's motherhood arises in conformity with this pattern. By contrast, the tradition described by de Lubac gives priority to Mary's motherhood, and presents the true follower of Christ as one who is conformed to her likeness by becoming Christ's spiritual mother.

Furthermore, de Lubac understands the tradition as claiming that there is a relationship of participation between Mary, the soul, and the Church. Thus, the Church's identity is Marian, and the Christian participates in that identity. By contrast, the motif of Mary as first disciple entails only an injunction to imitate her in her obedience to the word of God. It does not imply that there is a shared identity between Mary, the Church and the disciple, and it omits the ecclesial vocation to be a mother of Christ.

The Marian Church

Although the motif of Mary as first disciple is widespread in contemporary Catholicism, not all theologians or members of the hierarchy have warmed to it. Pope St John Paul II's encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), shows a certain hesitation over using the term 'disciple' for Mary. Referring to her *fiat*, he writes, 'Thus in a sense Mary the Mother became the first "disciple" of her Son [*Fiebat ita certo quodam sensu prima Filii sui «discipula» mater Maria*], the first to whom he seemed to say: "Follow me" [*cui primae is mandare videbatur: «Sequere me»*], even before he addressed this call to the Apostles or to anyone else (cf. Jn. 1:43)' (para. 20). So Mary is a disciple 'in a certain sense', and Christ 'seemed' to call her. Since the mother precedes and the disciple follows, this caution seems well judged.

The encyclical makes extremely frequent use of quotation marks, and this frequency sometimes makes it difficult to know what the quotation marks signify. However, we can observe that, if the word 'disciple' (*discipula*) is placed in quotation marks for the purpose of showing that it should not be taken exactly at face value, then there is another word that is treated similarly. This is the verb *precede*, as it is applied to Mary in relation to the Church. For example, paragraph 27 says:

> At the basis of what the Church has been from the beginning, and of what she must continually become from generation to generation, in the midst of all the nations of the earth, we find the one 'who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord' (Lk. 1:45). It is precisely Mary's faith which marks the beginning of the new and eternal Covenant of God with man in Jesus Christ; this heroic faith of hers 'precedes' the apostolic witness of the Church, and ever remains in the Church's heart hidden like a special heritage of God's revelation. All those who from generation to generation accept the apostolic witness of the Church share in that mysterious inheritance, and in a sense share in Mary's faith.

Again, in paragraph 28 we find:

> In the faith which Mary professed at the Annunciation as the 'handmaid of the Lord' and in which she constantly 'precedes' the pilgrim People of God throughout the earth, the Church 'strives energetically and constantly to bring all humanity ... back to Christ its Head in the unity of his Spirit' (*LG* 13).

I suggest that the reason why Pope John Paul indicates a certain reserve with regard to the idea of Mary as disciple, and also to the idea that she precedes the Church, is that he wants us to understand her primarily as the Church's 'exemplar and type' (para. 44), as well as its 'most noble member' (para. 2)—terms which are not placed in quotation marks. Thus, although Mary's actions are exemplary for the disciple, discipleship is not her vocation. Likewise, although, as Christ's mother, Mary precedes his Church, her virginity and motherhood continue to be living realities in the Church over time: her virginity as an inspiration to the Church's unwavering faith, and her motherhood as a mediation in which Mary continues to co-operate on behalf of the Church's sons and daughters (para. 44, commenting on John 19:26-7).

Now, the notion of Mary as 'exemplary disciple' seems to go hand-in-hand with an understanding of the Church as 'pilgrim people', whilst the notion of Mary as the Church's 'type' seems to be associated with an understanding of the Church as Virgin Mother. With regard to wider theological tendencies, we might say that the understanding of Mary as first disciple belongs primarily to the *Concilium* movement within the Church, whilst the emphasis on Mary as type of the Church is associated with the *Communio* group. One particular member of the *Communio* group, Hans Urs von Balthasar, has been especially influential in the development of a certain strand of Marian theology in recent decades, and von Balthasar's Marian focus is strongly ecclesial. However, there are key respects in which this ecclesial theology of Mary diverges from the main tradition that is outlined by Hugo Rahner and de Lubac.

We have seen above that de Lubac draws out a correspondence between Mary, the Church and the soul, in that all are virgins who give birth to Christ. However, a correspondence between these figures is found at least as strongly in medieval commentaries on the Song of Songs, where the bridegroom is always identified with Christ, but the bride may be interpreted as the Church, the soul or the Blessed Virgin.[43] So Mary, the Church and the soul share an identity as virgin, mother and bride. In the work of von Balthasar and his followers, the spousal motif becomes dominant and spills over into a gendered and sexual understanding of all creaturely relationship with the Creator.

Von Balthasar refers to what he calls the Marian principle, or dimension, of the

[43] Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 244-404; De Lubac, *Méditation*, 306-15; Troy A. Stefano, '*Catholica Mater*: The Marian Insights of Henri de Lubac', in Cavadini and Peters, *Mary on the Eve*, 179-203.

Church. He traces how this arose historically, as follows.[44] Following the intimations of Scripture, in the Shepherd of Hermas and the Second Letter of Clement, 'the Church appears as Virgin, Mother and immaculate Bride'.[45] Over the centuries, the understanding of the Church as a personal figure gradually became weaker, but, at the same time, the understanding of Mary's connection with the Church became stronger. In the Middle Ages, 'the person of Mary took over the theological place formerly occupied by the (unreflectedly) "hypostasized", pure Church'.[46] This relationship of Mary to the Church is taken up in *Lumen Gentium* 8, and this is important, because it was this Marian identity which saved the Church from coming to be seen as just an impersonal institution.[47]

This Marian identity is the Church in its universality, including all its members, lay and clerical.[48] The Church, like Mary, is feminine, and this is seen in its relationship to God, who is 'analogically masculine'. The significant point here is that the 'masculine' is that which initiates, and the 'feminine' is that which responds. At the Annunciation, God initiates the work of the Incarnation, and Mary, in perfect docility, responds by giving her assent. This relationship continues as the underlying principle and reality of the life of the Church. Within the Church itself, the clergy are conformed to what von Balthasar calls the Petrine principle, that is, the principle of St Peter. This is the principle of hierarchy and is intrinsically masculine, but is always dependent upon the Marian Church. This means that, in relation to the Church as a whole, the clergy perform a masculine role of initiating; but in relation to God, they are part of the Church as feminine and Marian. Moreover, since Mary's assent to God's will is undertaken on behalf of the whole world, and since all creatures depend absolutely upon the action of God's grace, the relationship of God to creation is likewise understood as being analogously that of male to female. So it is not by chance that, at the Annunciation, creation is represented by a woman, for creation is analogically feminine in relation to God.

Now, this might all sound rather similar to the relationship of a pagan deity, such as Zeus, to a mortal woman, in the begetting of a god or hero. However, von Balthasar tries to get around this difficulty by claiming that, within the Blessed Trinity, there are already actions that can be called 'supra-masculine' and 'supra-feminine'. For example, the Father's begetting of the Son is 'supra-masculine', whilst the Son's being begotten is 'supra-feminine'.[49] In this

[44] 'The All-Embracing Motherhood of the Church', in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, trans. Andrée Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), pp.183-225 at 196-204.
[45] Balthasar, 'All-Embracing', 197.
[46] Balthasar, 'All-Embracing', 201.
[47] Balthasar, 'All-Embracing', 202-203.
[48] This paragraph is drawn from several sources, including Brendan Leahy, *The Marian Profile in the Ecclesiology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (London: New City, 2000); Lucy Gardner, 'Balthasar and the Figure of Mary', in Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 64-78; and James Heft, 'Marian Themes in the Writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar', *Marian Studies*, 31 (1980), 40-65. The concern of the present article has more to do with the reception of von Balthasar in the Church than with the details of his own theology.
[49] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Vol.V, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 85-91.

way, created masculinity and femininity are supposed to be created images of something that is divine.

Von Balthasar thus casts Mary and the Church, along with God and creation, within a scheme that frames all things, created and uncreated, within the categories of sexual difference. Theologically, von Balthasar's scheme effectively attributes creaturely characteristics to God, not by way of metaphor or as a description of human experience, but as a claim concerning God's very nature. From the point of view of the human sciences, this gendered interpretation of God and creation uses cultural conventions of masculinity and femininity (the conventions of German romanticism) and elevates them to the status of divinity. If one took this seriously, it would have the effect of denying legitimacy to any claim that these cultural conventions may be false or unjust.[50] Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly the case that this way of thinking about the Marian Church has acquired considerable popularity within the Catholic Church today. In *Redemptoris Mater*, Pope St. John Paul, who was a great admirer of von Balthasar's, writes of Mary's *fiat* that she responded 'with all her human and feminine "I"' (para. 13).[51]

Conclusion

It is clear that the Virgin Mary has always been associated with the figure of the Church, either implicitly or consciously. Exactly how this association should be articulated is a question that has come to the fore in modern Catholic theology, and is still unresolved. Attempts have been made to bridge the gap between the two theological strands that I have outlined above, but the disparity remains.[52] I suggest that the whole matter might be approached from a different angle—and one that does not involve introducing theological novelties.

In 2015, Pope Francis published the encyclical, *Laudato Si*, in which he draws attention to human responsibility towards the whole creation; and the foundations of this ethical vision, although seldom noted, are already present in Mariology and Ecclesiology. At the beginning of *Catholicisme*, de Lubac says that, in writing about the Church as a social body, he will restrict the scope of the work to 'the society of believers': 'We have deliberately restricted our horizon, regrettably leaving to one side the very rich teachings of Scripture and the great Doctors on the solidarity of humanity with the universe or on our relations with the world of pure spirits.'[53] This theological study of the Church, humanity and the universe has yet to be accomplished, but we can understand that the Church's vocation is to bring the whole creation to its proper end in God. The solidarity of humanity in Christ entails precisely the

[50] For a feminist critique of von Balthasar, see Tina Beattie, 'Sex, Death and Melodrama', *The Way*, 44:4 (2005), 160-176.
[51] See also Mary Frances McKenna, *Innovation within Tradition: Joseph Ratzinger and Reading the Women of Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).
[52] *Redemptoris Mater* can be read as an attempt to reconcile the different approaches to Marian theology. See also, Tina Beattie, 'Mary, Eve and the Church', *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies*, 2 (2001), 7-20.
[53] De Lubac, *Catholicisme*, XI.

unity of all human flesh, assumed by the Word of God, and not only the unity of the human spirit; and just as we have our spiritual nature in common with the angels, so we have our fleshly nature in common with other bodily beings—indeed, we depend upon them for our survival, and are constituted of their own matter. Human history does not exist except in relation to this physical world. When Luke recounts the angel's Annunciation to Mary, the language in which he narrates the story evokes the creation of the world as it is told in the first verses of Genesis: like the primal waters, Mary is a virgin from whom God will form the New Creation, and it is by God's word that this creation comes about.[54] In the Incarnation, God goes to the world's very foundations and binds himself to the whole created order, and when God unites himself to creation in Jesus Christ, it is in Mary that the bond occurs.

We have seen that the motif of giving birth to Christ has been widely applied to the Church and the Christian soul, as well as to Mary. But it is not only the human world, but all creation, that is Christbearing, and therefore worthy of reverence.[55] In later Catholic tradition, Mary also became associated with the figure of Holy Wisdom, who is present with God from before the creation of the world, rejoicing with him in its goodness.[56]

Marian shrines, such as Lourdes, are often centred on an aspect of the material world, such as a spring or a cave. These sacred places express the holiness of all creatures and humanity's kinship with them; and thus the shrines and their associated devotions provide excellent opportunities for preaching, teaching and praying on the subject of care for our common home.[57]

If the Church will recognise her identity as extending throughout the Christbearing cosmos, then we might discover how Mary, the Church and the Christian soul constitute a unity with the whole creation, so that Christians seek to live with compassion and reverence towards all things.

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[54] References in Sarah Jane Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Cassell, 2000), 80-85.

[55] The poem *Aulae Sidereae*, by John Scotus Eriugena, describes a church that is constructed as a microcosm, and it includes the words,

> Si quis corde pio mentis leuauerit alas
> Ac sensum tranet tenero theoremata lapsu,
> Intrans armoniam rerum ducente sophia,
> Omnia perspiciet rationis acumine claro
> Intus farta deo uerbo loca, tempora, totum
> Mundum gestantem nascentis symbola Christi. (Lines 16-21)

In translation:

> If, with a devout heart, you raise the wings of the mind and pierce through the suppositions of sense with a gentle flight, entering into the harmony of things as you are led by Sophia, then, with the clear keenness of reason, you perceive all places and times enfolded by the word of God: the world gestating symbols of Christ being born.

[56] Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary*, New Century Theology series (London: Continuum, 2003), 105-118.

[57] For examples in India, see Nepolean James Raj, 'Glorified Virgin Mary and Disfigured Mother Earth: The Significance of Mary for Fostering Harmony between Humanity and Earth', *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies* NS 2.2 (2022), DOI: https://doi.org/10.53162/CMS/MARIA02202 .