

## WOMAN OF MANY NAMES: MARY IN ORTHODOX AND CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

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*Catholic emphasis on Mary's role in the Christian story of salvation and on the unique privileges given her by God to accomplish that salvation for humanity continues to trouble some Protestants and seems to distract from the Church's central preaching. This article attempts to show the continuity between Catholic and Orthodox liturgical and theological traditions on Mary, despite apparent differences in terminology and image, and draws on the works of Sergei Bulgakov and Karl Rahner to reflect on the fundamental meaning of Mary for both Eastern and Western forms of Christian faith.*

WHEN I WAS A DOCTORAL STUDENT in England, each year I used to go with a group of students on a Holy Week pilgrimage to the medieval Marian shrine at Walsingham. Our group was composed of about 30 young people, half of them Catholic and half Anglican, with an Anglican priest and myself as chaplains. As we walked on our way, we were put up each night by a local parish; the night before we arrived at Walsingham we were usually guests of an Anglican community in a remote village in rural Norfolk, with a majestic 15th-century church standing alone in the fields. One year, as our straggling, footsore band of pilgrims neared the church, the vicar—a rather eccentric but enthusiastic high-churchman, radiating tousled white hair and expansive gestures—came out in surplice and cope with a delegation of his parishioners led by cross and candles to meet us. When he found out I was the Catholic chaplain, he greeted me with a warm embrace. “I’m so glad you’re here,” he assured me—expressing the hope (which unfortunately I could not fulfill) that I would, as he said, “confabulate” the Eucharist with him the following day. “Our Churches have grown

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so close over the past 20 years,” he gushed. “We really believe the same things, use the same lectionary, pray the same prayers. Why, the only difference, really, is that *we* don’t say the ‘Hail, Mary!’”

Having been involved in ecumenical conversations for many years since then as a Catholic theologian, I know that things are not quite so simple. I know, for instance, that the Anglican communion has a long tradition of Marian art and devotion—even of “saying the ‘Hail, Mary’”—that sets it somewhat apart from most other Churches of the Reformation. Still, the vicar had a point: for Protestants of many different traditions, and even for some Anglicans, the theory and practice of Catholic devotion to Mary raises serious questions about the Christian legitimacy of the Catholic Church itself. What account can we give of it? How is it grounded in the biblical witness to God’s work in the world, to God’s salvation of sinners in Christ and his call to follow Christ alone? Does not the focus on Mary in Catholic art, Catholic liturgy, and the prayer life of ordinary Catholics suggest that for them she shares a place parallel to that of Jesus in God’s plan to redeem the world? Does she not represent what is often seen as the Catholic Church’s historic tendency to forget that it is only the sheer grace of God, engaging the faith of individuals in and through Christ, and the Bible’s witness to him, that saves us from sin and destruction?

In a trenchant passage from his *Church Dogmatics*, volume 1, part 2, Karl Barth raises these questions powerfully. Agreeing—as Luther and Zwingli had done—that it is legitimate to apply to Mary the ancient church’s title *Theotokos*, “Mother of God,” as a striking, even provocative way of expressing the divine personal identity of her son, Jesus, Barth insists that the “privileges” ascribed to Mary by Catholics beyond this, since patristic times, all represent “an excrescence, i.e., a diseased construct of theological thought” that must simply be “excised” like a tumor. Barth explains:

We reject Mariology, (1) because it is an arbitrary innovation in the face of Scripture and the early church, and (2) because this innovation consists essentially in a falsification of Christian truth. . . . In the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest. The “mother of God” of Roman Catholic Marian dogma is quite simply the principle, type and essence of the human creature co-operating servantlike (*ministerialiter*) in its own redemption on the basis of convenient grace, and to that extent the principle, type and essence of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, trans. G. T. Thomson, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (New York: Scribner’s, 1956) 143; see 139–46. Even in his little narrative of his visit to Rome after Vatican II Barth writes of positive ecumenical conversations and acknowledges his “calm, brotherly hope” for a future in which all Christians could be both “evangelical” and “catholic” together. He also includes, as an appendix, a letter he wrote to a Catholic colleague, in which he kindly insisted that he was still “obliged as before to reject . . . the possibility, justification, and necessity of Mariology” (*Ad Limina Apostolorum: An Appraisal of Vatican II*,

What Marian doctrine and devotion reveals about Catholic Christianity, in Barth's view, is its fundamentally heretical notion that human receptivity and freedom play a decisive, if always simply a receptive, role in the saving activity of God in the world.

Barth's critique and the questions that Protestants still raise about the place of Mary in Catholic teaching and piety—in the whole Catholic experience of encountering the saving God in Jesus—only highlight the very different relationship between Catholic and Eastern Christianity on these same issues. Barth lists as questionable and even offensive to Protestant sensibilities the Western Mariology that reflects on Mary's lifelong virginity, even after the conception of her Son; on her God-given holiness and complete freedom from the disfiguring effects of human sin from the very beginning of her existence, which Roman Catholics speak of as her "Immaculate Conception"; on her entry into heaven as a complete human person after death—her full share, even before the end of human history, in Christ's resurrection; on her role even now as intercessor, patroness, mediatrix between a sinful, needy church and her glorified Son. Yet these major elements of classical Catholic Mariology are all, in their liturgical celebration and central role in the religious consciousness of the Christian community, originally Eastern, rather than Western themes: they emerge, for the most part, in the first several centuries of Christianity, in the religious language and imagination of Christians in Palestine and Jerusalem, and leave their mark on the developing theology of the classical Byzantine world, before being welcomed also into the world of the Carolingian and medieval Latin West, and so of modern Catholicism. Before I reflect on the Christian principles and instincts that seem to lie behind this sense of Mary's importance for Orthodox and Catholic faith, I will look briefly at the main stages of its development.

### MARY IN EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

Although the writings of the canonical New Testament have relatively little to say about Mary, what they do say is of great importance for the church's subsequent sense that her part in the story of Jesus was not simply an incidental or even a merely biographical one.<sup>2</sup> Matthew's Gospel stresses the contrast between Mary's human lineage as the daughter of

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trans. Keith R. Crim [Richmond: John Knox, 1968] 60; see 59–62). For Barth, Catholic Marian theology rested simply on a misapplication of the early church's language about Jesus Christ.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Raymond Brown et al., eds. *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), for a thorough consideration of the depiction of Mary in the Gospels; see also André Feuillet, *Jesus and His Mother*, trans. Leonard Maluf (Still River, Mass.: St. Bede's, 1985).

Israel, and the miraculous character of her virginal conception of Jesus, although it is Joseph's rather than Mary's faith that Matthew emphasizes as the model of human response to God's action in her life. Luke's Gospel, in contrast, makes it clear that Mary, the virgin called to be the mother of Jesus, is the embodiment of a new faith: like Zachary, the father of John the Baptist, she asks hard questions about what she is being called to do, but unlike Zachary she responds to the call with a confession of unqualified obedience: "Be it done unto me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). As a result, Mary—whom Luke portrays in his first two chapters as the one who listens, witnesses with wonder the remarkable, if obscure, events surrounding Jesus' birth, and "keeps them in her heart"—seems clearly to be included in Jesus' statement, following the parable of the sower, that those are blessed above all "who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8:21; see 11:27–28). In John's Gospel, Mary appears only twice, and both times is simply called "the mother of Jesus." But here, too, her motherhood seems, in John's heavily allusive language, to be more than simply a human relationship. In her first appearance (Jn 2:1–11), she mediates between an apparently hesitant Jesus and the worried servants at a wedding that has run out of wine, and leads him to "reveal his glory" to his disciples even before his "time had come"; and in the second, at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:25–27), Jesus commissions her and the Beloved Disciple to recognize each other now as Mother and son—as a result of his death and the revelation of his glory, it seems, Mary now takes on a maternal role in the life of the whole community that loves and believes in him.<sup>3</sup>

By the middle of the second century, the devotional eyes and theological minds of the Christian community, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean world, were already focused not simply on the Lord Jesus, who is clearly the center of the Good News preached, but also on his mother: wondering who she was, seeing in her person a deeper significance than simply her biological and historical connection with the Savior. At the start of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch, in a characteristically mysterious passage in one of his letters, lists three divinely important realities that "the prince of this world" has failed to notice, presumably because they each happened unobtrusively: "the virginity of Mary and her childbearing, and similarly also the death of the Lord—three mysteries that shout aloud, but that were accomplished in the silence of God."<sup>4</sup> Around the middle of the second century, the narrative we know as the *Protevangelium*,<sup>5</sup> or

<sup>3</sup> For the cross as Jesus' "hour," see also John 12:27–28, 44–46.

<sup>4</sup> Ignatius, Ephesians 19.1.

<sup>5</sup> The title "Protevangelium" is not ancient, but seems first to have been given to this second-century "pre-Gospel" by the Reformation-era scholar Guillaume Postel in his Latin translation of the work published in 1552.

*Book of James*, about Mary's origins and life up to the birth of Jesus, was composed probably in Palestine or Syria for a community of Christians clearly aware of their Jewish religious roots. Written in the style of many stories in the Jewish midrashim, this work is, in a way, an extended commentary in story form on the events and characters of the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke; it tells us of Mary's devout parents, Joachim and Anna, of the wonderful circumstances of her conception and childhood, of her espousal to Joseph, an elderly and pious widower, and of her miraculous childbirth. Although it was never accepted into the Christian biblical canon and was regarded with suspicion as apocryphal by church authorities through most of its history, the *Protevangelium* was widely read; it was translated into most of the languages of early Christian communities by the year 1000 and left a clear mark on Christian preaching and liturgy in both East and West, as well as on the Christian imagination. Its point is to remind the reader that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was from the beginning of her life a completely holy person; with her life centered on Israel's temple, she remained blameless in the eyes of the Law. From such beginnings the Word of God took flesh.

Apologetic writers, both Greek and Latin, of the second and third centuries, began to refer to Mary as "the new Eve," corresponding to Paul's description of Jesus as "new Adam."<sup>6</sup> They focused mainly on Luke's narrative of the annunciation, where Mary's consent to the angel Gabriel's daunting message suggests the start of a new human era of obedience and gratitude to God—a time for recognizing God's fidelity in doing "great things" for his people (Lk 1:49; see 50–55). Irenaeus, for instance, interprets Mary's acceptance of God's challenging promise as reversing the disobedience of Eve in the Garden, "untying the knots" Eve had tied in the thread of human history and replacing them with the new ties of commitment to God and his plans.<sup>7</sup> John Henry Newman, surveying the history and theological content of the long Catholic tradition of Mariology in the 19th century, sees in Mary's yes to Gabriel the clue to her unique holiness and uniquely privileged role in the history of salvation: her free choice to reverse Eve's primordial infidelity to God by making a new choice of primordial fidelity.<sup>8</sup> As Eve's willing disobedience played a central role in the fall of Adam, according to Genesis 3, so Mary's willing obedience made possible the new story of human restoration and transformation in the life,

<sup>6</sup> Romans 5:15–19; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45–49; see 2 Corinthians 5:17.

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3.22.4; see 3.21.10; 5.19.1. For this same conception of Mary's role, see also Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100; Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 17.

<sup>8</sup> John Henry Newman, *A Letter to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, D.D., on his Recent Eirenicon* (New York: Lawrence Kehoe, 1866) 18–36.

death, and resurrection of Jesus. His saving work begins, in a sense, with Mary's free consent.

Doubtless the most celebrated development in the history of Marian doctrine came as part of the fierce debate in the first half of the fifth century between Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, and Cyril, bishop of Alexandria.<sup>9</sup> Nestorius, a sophisticated preacher and a fierce opponent of all he regarded as "Arian" heresy, succeeded to the headship of the Church of Constantinople in 428, and promptly criticized the language used in praise of Mary by one of his suffragan bishops, Proclus: notably Proclus's use, in a sermon, of the Marian title "God-bearer" (*Theotokos*). The origins of this title are unknown, but it seems to have been current in various centers of Eastern Christianity, especially in Egypt, among preachers and ordinary Christians for at least a century before Nestorius's time. Quite clearly, the point of the title for early Christians was not so much to assert a privilege for Mary as to underline the real identity of the son she bore; it was a challenging, even confrontational, way of asserting that Jesus is himself, as a subject or agent, truly the Son of God as well as Mary's son. For Nestorius, however—trained in the restrained and prosaic approach to biblical interpretation practiced at Antioch—this title for Mary suggested mythological thinking and pagan genealogies; if one applied critical reasoning to biblical faith, one would see clearly that the eternal God, as God, does not have a mother. In the end the debate boiled down theologically to a dispute about the personal identity of Jesus, Mary's son: was he a human individual, in whom the transcendent Son of God dwelt as in a temple—or was he himself the Son of God in his own human nature and form?

The consensus of Greek-speaking bishops, formed in the aftermath of the abortive attempt to hold a council at Ephesus in 431, lay with Cyril and the appropriateness of the title *Theotokos* for Mary. Although the point of the consensus was, first of all, the strong affirmation of Jesus' divine identity, the effect of the debate was also to raise considerably the interest of Christians in the person and role of Jesus' mother, and to suggest, if only by implication, that she too, as Mother of God, played a central role in advancing God's work on earth. In Rome, the first church specifically dedicated to Mary, Mother of God—what we know today as the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore—was completed under Pope Sixtus III in 432, the year after the Council of Ephesus, on the site of a fourth-century church

<sup>9</sup> There is considerable literature on the controversy between Nestorius and Cyril over the person of Christ. See especially Pierre Thomas Camelot, *Éphèse et Chalcedoine* (Paris: L'Orante, 1962); Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 2 vols. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 1:443–87; John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994); Susan Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy: The Making of a Saint and a Heretic* (New York: Oxford University, 2004).

that did not have such a dedication; a basilica in Mary's honor at the foot of Jerusalem's Mount of Olives was apparently completed by the early 440s, another near Bethlehem in the 450s, and three major new churches were dedicated to her in Constantinople by about 475. At the same time, the Mother of God seems to have been invoked with new frequency in the liturgy and private devotion of Eastern and Western Christianity. In most Eastern Churches, since the late fourth century, Mary was especially commemorated in the liturgy on a day just before or just after December 25; the Armenian lectionary for Jerusalem from the first three decades of the next century is our first witness to a separate commemoration of Mary, Mother of God, on August 15.<sup>10</sup> After Ephesus, the fifth century suddenly became a Marian age.

Significantly, it was probably during this same fifth century that serious Christian reflection began on Mary's status after her death. Around 377, Epiphanius of Salamis remarks, in his antihetical collection called the *Panarion* ("medicine chest") that, despite the practices of various groups honoring places connected with Mary's life and death, the details of her death—or even whether she died and was buried at all—remain uncertain.<sup>11</sup> But by the end of the fifth century, the conviction seems to have been forming—probably first in communities that strongly affirmed Christ's divine identity and distanced themselves from the "two-nature" dogmatic formula of the Council of Chalcedon—that Mary had in fact died in peace in Jerusalem, surrounded by the apostles and other heroes of the faith, that she had been solemnly buried, and that her tomb was found empty three days later. These traditions confirmed the general sense of believers that Mary had been raised up to heaven to share fully in her divine Son's risen life.<sup>12</sup> This story, in its general outlines at least, is hinted at somewhat obscurely by the Pseudo-Dionysius in chapter 3 of his *On the Divine Names*, written probably around 500.<sup>13</sup> Although the various later

<sup>10</sup> For these references and further bibliography, see the introduction to my translation of Greek Dormition homilies: *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's, 1998) 3–4; hereinafter referred to as Daley. On the emergence of August 15 as a special Marian feast, see Walter D. Ray, "August 15 and the Development of the Jerusalem Calendar" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 78.11. For the texts of these passages, see Daley 5–6.

<sup>12</sup> For a brief narrative of the growth of this belief, see Daley 6–12. For a full discussion of the texts and sources involved, see Stephen Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (New York: Oxford University, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> *On the Divine Names* 3.2–3 is often cited as eye-witness evidence of Mary's wonderful "transformation" after death, by seventh- and eighth-century theologians who assumed that the Pseudo-Dionysian writings came from apostolic times.

forms of this narrative differ widely in detail, and although none ever became normative as narratives for the mainstream Christian churches, the Marian liturgical celebration on August 15 soon became focused on Mary's holy death and subsequent entry into glory, that is, on what the Byzantine tradition has called her "dormition" or falling asleep. This feast was apparently extended to the whole empire during the reign of the Emperor Maurice (582–602), and became for later Byzantine Christianity a central symbol of Christian hope for life after death and for the full redemption of the human person.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the eighth century, Mary's death was celebrated and preached as a mystery of faith in the Latin West as well.<sup>15</sup> With the general acceptance of this feast of Mary's redemption and glorification, in fact, Mary's theological position had shifted from being a necessary guarantor of the human reality of Jesus' flesh, personal proof of the genuineness of the Word's incarnation, to being a person with a continuing role in assuring Christians of their own salvation.

Our best guide to the significance of this new Marian feast in the late patristic period is not the narratives of her death and burial, and of the discovery of her empty tomb—narratives that, despite their wide distribution, were always regarded with scepticism by church authorities—but the formal, rhetorically elaborate homilies for the feast that have come down to us from Byzantine preachers of the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries: authors like Andrew of Crete, Germanus of Constantinople, and John of Damascus.<sup>16</sup> Andrew of Crete, for instance, acknowledges more than once in his trilogy of sermons for the feast that the "mystery" celebrated as Mary's dormition "has not, in the past, been celebrated by many people,"<sup>17</sup> and that there is no mention of it in the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> So Andrew and the other ancient homilists express their

<sup>14</sup> See Daley 9–12; also Brian E. Daley, "'At the Hour of our Death': Mary's Dormition and Christian Dying in Late Patristic and Early Byzantine Literature," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001) 71–90.

<sup>15</sup> Although Latin versions of the apocryphal narratives of Mary's death and glorification may have appeared earlier, the first Latin theological treatise on this event, which draws on the Greek homiletic tradition, is probably by the Carolingian abbot Paschasius Radbertus (d. 870); it appears in most manuscripts as a letter by Jerome to his spiritual daughters Paula and Eustochium, and is usually known by its opening words "Cogitis me" (Migne, PL 30.123–42).

<sup>16</sup> The main representatives of this genre of theological interpretation are collected and translated in Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew of Crete, *On the Dormition of our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God*, Homily 1.1 (Daley 103).

<sup>18</sup> Andrew of Crete, Homily 2.8 (Daley 126). Andrew points, however, to corroborating evidence for the story behind the feast in the allusion to Mary's death by the Pseudo-Dionysius (Hom. 1.6; Daley 110) and in the fact that the tomb venerated as Mary's is empty (Hom. 2.7, 9–10; Daley 124–29).



understanding of what actually happened at Mary's death with great caution: it is "a mystery that exceeds the power of speech,"<sup>19</sup> an event that "exceeds the bounds of our ignorance" and, like everything connected with the ultimate form of human salvation, is best "honored by silence."<sup>20</sup> Andrew of Crete expressly declines to speculate on the process by which Mary's body was "transformed" from its mortal state, its existence as a corpse, to its present "supernatural structure (*logos*) that lies beyond all words and all knowledge of ours."<sup>21</sup> His sense of the central message of the feast, however, is unmistakable: Mary has died in a spirit of utter faith and trust, has been laid reverently in a tomb by the Apostles and other "original" followers of her Son, and now shares, as a complete human person, in the state of eschatological fulfillment in which we all hope to share, as a result of the death and resurrection of Christ.

In taking up our vulnerability and openness to suffering, Andrew argues, Jesus laid aside the immortality that was his by right as Son of God and entered the realm of the dead, "so that we might escape the bonds that awaited us there and might pass over to the realm of incorruption, . . . created anew not in our nature, but by the gift of grace."<sup>22</sup> Jesus' death and resurrection has, in fact, totally changed the conditions of our own mortality:

It is death's tyranny, *real* death, when we who die are not to be allowed to return to life again. But if we die and then live again after death—indeed, live a better life—then clearly that is not so much a death as a dormition [*koimesis*: a falling-asleep], a passage into a second life. . . . What else can we understand death to be, but the separation of soul from body, which calls forth our hope for resurrection by so separating our bodily parts that they must be joined together again? . . . So the souls of the saints will go through the gates of the underworld, as we have explained, "for the disciple is not above his master" (Matt 10.24). But I do not believe they will be detained there, as souls once were. . . . They shall pass through those gates—listen carefully—not to be destroyed, but to be examined and to be initiated there into the strange mystery of God's plan of salvation.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 1.1 (Daley 103); see 2.5 (Daley 122).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 3.3 (Daley 138 and n. 1). For this phrase, see also Brian E. Daley, "Apocatasis and 'Honorable Silence' in the Eschatology of Maximus the Confessor," in *Maximus Confessor: Actes du Symposium sur Maxime le Confesseur, Fribourg, 2–5 septembre, 1980*, ed. Felix Heinzer and Christoph von Schönborn (Fribourg: Editions universitaires, 1982) 309–39.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew of Crete, Homily 1.6 (Daley 111). In another passage, Andrew has Mary herself refer to this renewal as being "changed and transformed" (*metallattomai kai morphoumai*) by participating in the divine nature of her son: Homily 2.6 (Migne, PG 97.1056 A; Daley 123).

<sup>22</sup> Andrew of Crete, Homily 2.1 (Daley 118).

<sup>23</sup> Andrew of Crete, Homily 2.2–3 (Daley 118–20).

In raising Mary from the dead to share in the fullness of life, shortly after her own “falling asleep”—for that is the “mystery of salvation” Andrew cautiously but clearly hints at—God has done for her what he plans to do for all who believe in and follow Christ, namely, made her into a paradigm of Christian eschatological hope. So Andrew continues:

Indeed, if I must speak the truth, the death that is natural to the human race even reached as far as Mary: not that it held her captive, as it holds us, or that it overcame her—far from it! But it touched her enough to let her experience that sleep that is for us, if I may put it this way, a kind of ecstatic movement towards the things we only hope for during this life, a passage that leads us on towards transformation into a state like that of God.<sup>24</sup>

Why is this gift of full and endless life promised to all the faithful bestowed on Mary first of all? The reason, Andrew suggests, is simply that this is the first complete realization of the work of salvation that began in Mary’s womb, in the incarnation of the Word.<sup>25</sup>

In this plan of salvation, the Word who is the source of our life burst into our world and incomprehensibly entered her womb, took up our human nature, and supported it, for our sakes, in a supernatural way. Therefore what was once accomplished in her, what we now celebrate, even if it seems to be strange and far beyond the bounds of our nature, still has its ready and understandable explanation in her case, because of the supernatural character of her indescribable childbearing. For that child was, after all, the Word, who came to be with us, and who by his law put an end to the relentless law of death.<sup>26</sup>

If salvation, as the Church Fathers generally assumed, is not simply a new, extrinsic relationship between humanity and God, a new reconciliation and friendship, but is actually a share in God’s life through Christ for our bodies as well as our spirits,<sup>27</sup> then our faith that this salvation has already begun in Christ suggests that it may also have already begun to spread outward, may already be shared at least by the human person who, in the freedom and obedience of grace, gave the Word his flesh.

With the celebration of this mystery of Mary’s dormition, her position in Christian faith and religious practice had passed beyond simple argument about the propriety of the title “Theotokos.” She had become a kind of litmus test for salvation, an embodiment and exemplar of what the church understood with ever-increasing clarity as the triumph of God’s redeeming grace in human history. This new role, which becomes dramatically clear from the mid-fifth century on, expresses itself in a number of ways.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 2.4 (Daley 121).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 3.5 (Daley 140).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 1.5 (Daley 109–110).

<sup>27</sup> See Brian E. Daley, S.J., “‘He Himself Is Our Peace’ (Eph 2.14): Early Christian Views of Redemption in Christ,” in *The Redemption: An Interdisciplinary Symposium*, ed. Gerald O’Collins, S.J., Stephen Davis, and Daniel Kendall, S.J. (New York: Oxford University, 2004) 149–76.

(1) First, Mary suddenly comes to be spoken of with increasing frequency not only in philosophical arguments and midrashic narratives, but also in lyrical outpourings of images borrowed from the Old Testament, usually embedded in homilies or liturgical prayers and suggesting that she is herself the fulfillment of God's age-old efforts to save and form a people. A famous homily by Proclus of Constantinople, for instance—probably the one to which Nestorius so strongly objected—heaps up these metaphors in a way unparalleled even in other attempts at Christian typological interpretation:

Holy Mary has called us together: the immaculate treasure-room of virginity; the spiritual paradise of the second Adam; the workshop where natures were united; the celebration of our saving covenant; the chamber in which the Word made flesh his bride; the living thornbush of our nature, which the fires of a divine childbirth did not burn up; the truly light cloud, which bore him who thrones above the Cherubim in a body; the fleece made pure by heavenly dew, in which the Shepherd dressed as the sheep.<sup>28</sup>

Picked up quickly by other Greek homilists in the 430s and after—by Cyril of Alexandria, Hesychius of Jerusalem, and later by John of Damascus, for instance—this practice of multiplying images for Mary in an almost overwhelming array became a literary form of praise characteristically applied to her. The celebrated *Akathistos* hymn, probably composed in Constantinople around 500 to celebrate the feast of the Annunciation and Mary's role as the "place" and human agent of the incarnation, extends this technique; the hymn is an elaborate, alphabetically arranged poem of 24 metrically elaborate stanzas, each pair of them separated by 12 acclamations or *chairetismoi* addressed to Mary, in the form of startling images that assign her a central place in the drama of salvation. The later Western tradition of litanies in praise of Mary, the best-known of which is the Litany of Loreto, and also of the collocation of Marian symbolism in medieval paintings and tapestries, is heavily influenced by this fifth-century Greek innovation.<sup>29</sup> Such a rhetoric of symbols inevitably suggests that all these biblical and natural images are also types of salvation, personally fulfilled by Mary.

(2) Since the second century, Christian literature had emphasized the extraordinary holiness of the Mother of Jesus, as well as the miraculous chain of events by which she took on her providential role without losing

<sup>28</sup> Proclus of Constantinople, Homily 1; in Nicholas Conostas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1–5, Texts and Translations* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 136, my translation.

<sup>29</sup> See G. G. Meerseman, ed., *Der Hymnos Akathistos im Abendland*, 2 vols. (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1958); Brian E. Daley, "The 'Closed Garden' and the 'sealed Fountain': Song of Songs 4.12 in the Late Medieval Iconography of Mary," in *Medieval Gardens*, ed. Elisabeth B. MacDougall (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1986) 255–78.

the intentional virginity that expressed, in a bodily way, her commitment to God. In the Syriac tradition, a profusion of poems celebrating the “wonder” of Mary began with the hymns and verse homilies of Ephrem and continued both in the later poetry ascribed to him and in the works of poets like the sixth-century writer Jacob of Serug. For Ephrem, Mary’s holiness is a key part of the mystery of salvation in Christ, the beginning of the final coming of light into the world. Baptism, which immerses the believer into the life of Christ, is at once cleansing and an enlightenment for the Christian, and is the church’s way of coming to the light that first began to glow in Mary. In one of his *Hymns on the Church* Ephrem observes,

It is clear that Mary  
Is “the land” that receives the source of light;  
Through her it has illumined  
The whole world, which, with its inhabitants,  
Had grown dark through Eve.<sup>30</sup>

This sense that the divine plan of salvation really began in the person of Mary, eternally chosen by God to be the one who obediently received his Word into her own life and flesh, becomes a central theme in later Greek patristic poetry and homiletics. John of Damascus, for instance, in his “Homily for the Feast of Mary’s Birth,” boldly affirms, “Today is the beginning of salvation for the world.”<sup>31</sup> He goes on to explain that Mary has been predestined by God to reverse the damage caused for humanity by Adam and Eve:

Just as sin became a sinner in the extreme by working death in me through what is good, so the source of good restores our nature for us by the opposite of good [i.e., the death of Jesus]; “for there where sin multiplied, grace has overflowed” (Rom 5:20). . . . For this reason, a virgin is now born, the opponent of her ancestors’ prostitution; she is wedded to God himself, and gives birth to the mercy of God. And a people is established for God, where previously there was no people; the one who knew no mercy has received mercy, and the unloved one has come to be loved.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ephrem, *Hymns on the Church* 37.18–23, in *Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches*, trans. Sebastian P. Brock (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecu-  
menical Research Institute, 1994) 31. For a discussion of the images of light and  
enlightenment in Ephrem’s writings, see Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye:  
the Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1992).

<sup>31</sup> John of Damascus, *Homily on the Birth of Mary* 6 (Sources chrétiennes [here-  
after SC] 80.60), my translation here and throughout.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 8 (SC 80.66). The Damascene is alluding here to Hosea 2:23. For further  
references on Mary as the first of the redeemed, see John Meyendorff, *Byzantine  
Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham Univer-  
sity, 1979) 147–48.

So too the sixth-century Greek poet Romanos the Melodist, who introduced the genres of Syriac liturgical poetry into the Hellenistic world, regularly uses adjectives such as “spotless” (*amōmos*),<sup>33</sup> “radiant” (*phaeinē*),<sup>34</sup> or “made beautiful by God” (*theokosmētos*)<sup>35</sup> in referring to Mary, or when allowing characters in his biblical scenes to address her. He represents the newborn Jesus, for example, as saying to her: “My mother, it is for your sake and through you that I save them (i.e., the human race); if I had not chosen to save them, I would not have dwelt in you; I would not have shone out from you, you would not be called my mother.”<sup>36</sup> In another passage, Gabriel assures her: “God has willed that the corrupted human person be formed completely anew from you.”<sup>37</sup> Mary’s holiness is part of the story of salvation, part of God’s historical strategy to make humanity holy, to reshape a world free from the slavery of sin. She is the beginning of God’s transformation of humanity.<sup>38</sup>

(3) A by-product of this late patristic emphasis on Mary’s holiness as the beginning of God’s work of redemption is the increasing tendency in fifth-century Greek poetry and homiletics to view her as head of renewed humanity: a spokesperson for the church, an intercessor with Jesus and the Father for those still needing to be renewed or rescued. The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, for instance, normally ends all its litanies of intercession by explicitly “remembering our most holy, pure, blessed, and glorious Lady, the Theotokos and ever virgin Mary, with all the saints,” as companions in the people’s prayer of petition. Appended to the beginning of the fifth- or sixth-century Akathistos hymn is a dedicatory prologue commemorating the deliverance of Constantinople from the siege of the nomadic Avars in 626; this added verse calls on Mary, in the name of the city, as “protectress, leader of my army” and adds: “Since you have an unconquerable power, free me [i.e., Constantinople] from all danger.”<sup>39</sup> In his first homily for the feast of the Dormition, the eighth-century patriarch Germanos of Constantinople puts Mary’s role as intercessor with God and

<sup>33</sup> Romanos, Hymn 11.13 (SC 110.104).

<sup>34</sup> Romanos, Hymn 9.4 (SC 110.24).

<sup>35</sup> Romanos, Hymn 9.13 (SC 110.34).

<sup>36</sup> Romanos, Hymn 11.13 (SC 110.104).

<sup>37</sup> Romanos, Hymn 12.12 (SC 110.128).

<sup>38</sup> For a useful history of this theme of the divinely graced holiness of Mary in Eastern Christian literature from patristic times until the 20th century, see Martin Jugie, *L’Immaculée Conception dans l’Écriture Sainte et dans la tradition orientale* (Rome: Academia Mariana, 1952). Jugie intended his work as historical background for the later Western affirmation of Mary’s Immaculate Conception—a continuity that most modern Orthodox scholars would be reluctant to accept without further qualification.

<sup>39</sup> G. G. Meersseman, trans., intro., *The Acatistos Hymn: Hymn of Praise to the Mother of God* (Fribourg, Switzerland: University, 1958) 25.

mediator for humanity in terms that seem to anticipate later Western forms of Marian theology that would seem questionable to Protestant critics:

Your help is powerful to save us, O Mother of God, and you need no one else to bring our prayers to God. You are the mother of the life that is real and true. You are the yeast of Adam's remaking; you are the one who liberates Eve from all shame. . . . For if you had not gone before us, no one would even become perfectly spiritual, no one would 'worship God in the Spirit' (John 4.24). No one is filled with the knowledge of God except through, you, all-holy One; no one is saved but through you, Mother of God; no one is free of danger but through you, Virgin Mother; no one is redeemed but through you; no one ever receives mercy gratuitously except through you, who have received God. Who fights on behalf of sinners as much as you do? Who pleads on behalf of those who need correction, and takes their part, as much as you do?<sup>40</sup>

As the one providentially enabled by God to accept his saving will on behalf of fallen humanity, and so to mark the beginning of a new age in which the Word is present to renew his creation, Mary inevitably becomes—even for the later Greek Fathers—the one who continues to speak on humanity's behalf. Requests for her intercession, praise for what God has done for her and in her, become an inseparable part of Christian devotion, Eastern and Western, at the start of the Middle Ages.

My point here is that what many—including Karl Barth—think of as characteristically Western, Catholic ways of conceiving and approaching Mary are as much Orthodox as Catholic, as much Eastern as Western; they emerged in Catholic liturgy and devotion, in the calendar of feasts, and in spiritual and homiletic writings beginning in the Carolingian era and coming to full flower in the high Middle Ages. There are, of course, important differences between Orthodox and Catholic ways of conceiving Mary, in terminology and rhetoric, style and image. The *Theotokos* presented for veneration in Eastern icons undoubtedly touches different esthetic sensibilities and different assumptions about the role of sacred art than does a painted Madonna by Jan van Eyck or Michaelangelo's *Pietà*. Beginning in twelfth-century England, too, Latin theologians recast the familiar Byzantine theme of Mary's lifelong purity and holiness in terms of her being sanctified in advance through the grace that her Son would later bestow on all of elect humanity: either a liberation from inherited sin, a union with the elevating life of God, at some time shortly *after* she was conceived as a daughter of Adam, as Thomas Aquinas suggested; or a sanctification that *prevented* her from ever being touched by sin's influence, as Duns Scotus

<sup>40</sup> Germanus, *Homily 1 on the Dormition* (Daley 160–61). Andrew of Crete, too, at the end of his triad of homilies for the feast, strongly emphasizes Mary's mediatory role, calling her "the place where our sins are expiated through the mystery of Jesus' own initiation" and "provider of life, life of the living, part of the cause of our life" (Homily 3.13,15; Daley 148–49).

held, and as would eventually become the Western church's doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Orthodox theology has avoided this kind of theological language, just as it is generally reluctant to speak of an inherited human need for redemption as "original sin."<sup>41</sup> Yet what the West has come to call Mary's immaculate conception certainly seems to have been in the minds, if not in the vocabulary, of the late patristic preachers and poets of Byzantium. For them as for the Latin Scholastics with their different way of conceiving the effects of the Fall, God, by his gracious intervention, began a new form of humanity in Mary, carrying on what he had begun in calling Abraham but now bringing Abraham's election to its fullness. This new humanity of Mary was the context and condition for what would be its cause and final realization in the person, teaching, death, and resurrection of Mary's Son.

### MARY FOR ORTHODOX AND CATHOLIC THEOLOGIANS

Surely the deepest and most serious difference between the doctrine of the Orthodox and Catholic families of churches on Mary is the form in which that doctrine is expressed as part of the central faith and practice of the church. For the Catholic Church, this fundamental, articulated body of beliefs or dogmas includes not only the fifth-century agreement that it is right to call Mary "Mother of God" but also the biblical doctrine of her virginal conception and the lifelong continuity of her virginity. In the last century and a half, it also has come to include the papally proclaimed dogmas expressing faith in her election and full redemption: her Immaculate Conception (1854) and her bodily assumption into eternal life (1950). John Meyendorff suggests that to consider these traditional aspects of ecclesial piety as dogma is to upset the careful balance of priorities that the church must maintain among the articles of faith: "so the Byzantine Church, wisely preserving a scale of theological values which always gave

<sup>41</sup> So, for instance, Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* 148; see also *ibid.* 145, where Meyendorff argues that "there is indeed a consensus in Greek patristic and Byzantine traditions in identifying the inheritance of the Fall as an inheritance essentially of mortality rather than of sinfulness, sinfulness being merely a consequence of mortality." Sergei Bulgakov affirms the sinlessness of Mary in more positive terms: "This express glorification of the Mother of God in heaven (i.e., after her death) completes the series of gifts of grace She receives from the Holy Spirit, beginning with her conception"; he adds in a footnote: "It goes without saying that, even if we do not accept the Catholic dogma of the 'immaculate' conception, we must confess that the Mother of God is entirely full of grace" (Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002] 411 and n. 23). It is hard to see how Bulgakov's position here differs in substance from the Catholic doctrine, if that doctrine is properly understood.

precedence to the *basic* fundamental truths of the Gospel, abstained from enforcing any dogmatic formulations concerning Mary, except that she was truly and really the *Theotokos*, ‘Mother of God.’”<sup>42</sup>

The Russian émigré theologian Vladimir Lossky, who is somewhat more willing than Meyendorff to affirm, as part of the whole gospel of human salvation, the truth of Mary’s holiness and glorification beyond death, nevertheless also rejects the Western church’s instinct that these truths must be formally declared church dogma. Echoing the early church’s sense of reticence before a great and divine mystery, which we have encountered already in the early homilies on Mary’s dormition, Lossky writes:

The Mother of God was never a theme of the public preaching of the apostles. While Christ was preached on the housetops and proclaimed for all to know in a catechesis addressed to the whole universe, the mystery of the Mother of God was revealed only to those within the Church, to the faithful who had received the message and were pressing towards ‘the upward call of God in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 3.1). More than an object of faith, this mystery is a foundation of our hope, a fruit of faith, ripened in Tradition. Let us therefore keep silence, and let us not try to dogmatize about the supreme glory of the Mother of God.<sup>43</sup>

For postmedieval Catholic Christians, on the other hand, part of the role of a unified Christian church—as a universal union of local communities held together by communion with the bishop of Rome in faith, sacraments, and mutual recognition—is to declare explicitly, when it appears necessary to do so, what constitutes the permanent, central substance of the gospel preached by the apostles. So these Marian dogmas, articulated only in the last two centuries, have been presented to the Christian world precisely as part of this abiding message that humanity—scarred by the French Revolution and World War II—has been definitively redeemed and transformed by Christ, even if their articulation in this Marian form developed only in the course of time.

Surely it is in their respective understanding of the status of the two modern Marian dogmas that one recognizes examples of the real differences that still divide Orthodox and Catholic Churches, as well as the substantial bonds of spirituality and faith that unite them. In fact, both branches of Christianity affirm much the same understanding of the uniquely privileged relation of Mary to Christ and to the rest of redeemed humanity. Both families of churches celebrate the same central cycle of

<sup>42</sup> Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* 148–49.

<sup>43</sup> Vladimir Lossky, “Panagia,” in his *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s, 1974) 195–211, at 209. Lossky is alluding here especially to Basil of Caesarea’s reflections on “kerygma” and “dogma” as public and private, in *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66 (SC 17bis, ed. Benoît Pruche [Paris: Cerf, 1968] 478–86).



major Marian feasts as part of the liturgical year—the celebration in time of the historical reality of our redemption—even though both also observe other, more local feasts of their own. Like much in the core beliefs that articulate the Christian gospel, the direction in which these doctrines and celebrations have been handed on has largely been a movement from East to West: from ancient Jerusalem and Syria, through the officially monitored ecclesial unity of the Byzantine Empire, to the monasteries and schools of medieval Western Europe. What differences there are, besides the more or less accidental ones of tone and idiom, are really differences in ecclesiology: what one expects of the church, how the church communicates the gospel, where one looks for the church in its fullness.

The irony of this ecclesiological disparity is that for both theological traditions Mary herself represents in personal form—as Barth himself recognized—the full reality of what the church sees as its own destiny. This becomes clearer if one compares the treatments of the final glorification of Mary—what the churches celebrate on August 15, whether they call it her Dormition or her Assumption—by two important, if sometimes controversial, systematic theologians of the mid-20th century, the Orthodox Russian émigré Sergei Bulgakov and the German Catholic Karl Rahner.

In his posthumously published work, *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945), Bulgakov speculates on the Christian eschatological hope: how God plans to transform all creation into the perfection and beauty he has already sketched out in the church, in which the interaction of creation with the archetypal divine Sophia or Wisdom—the combined undertaking of the incarnate Logos and the poured-out Holy Spirit—will be brought to full realization. In the final revelation of creation's destiny, when humanity stands face to face with the risen Christ in his second coming, Mary—already resurrected after her dormition—will precede the rest of the human race in embodying the transforming effect of God's grace.<sup>44</sup> As a human being wholly sanctified by the Spirit,<sup>45</sup> who has accepted this grace with wholly human freedom, Mary becomes, in Bulgakov's view, the symbol and embodiment of saved humanity:

The presence of the Mother of God in heaven corresponds to her perfect sanctification and deification, in which She will be followed by humankind in the glorified Church. "The kingdom of God will come" into the world, and not the reverse; it will not be ravished from the world "to heaven." In other words, the world will become

<sup>44</sup> Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb* 411. For a helpful recent summary of Bulgakov's thought on Mary, see Andrew Louth, "Father Sergii [sic] Bulgakov on the Mother of God," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49 (2005) 145–64.

<sup>45</sup> Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb* 411. For this same point, see the excerpt from Bulgakov's earlier book, *The Burning Bush*, in *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. James Pain and Nicholas Zernov (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 92.

the place of the kingdom of God. . . . And the center of the kingdom of God on earth, the throne of the Lamb, will be the Most Holy Mother of God.<sup>46</sup>

In an earlier work, *The Burning Bush* (1927), Bulgakov developed still more fully his understanding of the long Christian conviction that Mary's role in the gospel message is more than simply an individual one; that she represents and even personally incorporates the reality of the church itself, in its relation to God and to humanity:

Mary as the personal habitation of the Holy Spirit is in truth the true personal expression of the Church, the heart of the Church of which Christ is the Head. Overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, she becomes the Mother of God, brings forth the Logos, and in and through her this divine motherhood belongs to the whole Church; the Logos born of the Virgin is also born in the souls of the faithful, for every Christian soul has a part in the divine motherhood of the Mother-Church, *Theotokos*. The Church and Mary each bear the same relation alike to Christ and Christians. It would be impossible to say in so many words that Mary is the Church, and yet it may be said that the Church is represented by Mary, in so far as in her person all the attributes of the Church find their personal, final, and most perfect embodiment.<sup>47</sup>

In 1949, three years after *The Bride of the Lamb* was published, Karl Rahner—then a junior professor of theology at Innsbruck—began working on a treatise of his own, to explain and defend the plausibility of Pius XII's anticipated definition of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven at death as a central truth of Christian faith. Rahner sensed a general skepticism among German Catholic theologians on the subject, even a resistance to any new papal definition as something bound to widen still further the gulf between Catholics and Protestants in the West. As Rahner labored to include in his essay all the considerations he felt necessary to a proper understanding of this expected teaching, the work came to include substantial discussions of subjects as diverse as the nature and development of dogma, the role of official definitions in the church, the theology of death, the relation of the human soul to the body both before and after death, the nature of bodily resurrection, the pervasive role of eschatology in the articulation of Christian faith, the function of Mariology within that faith, and the full implications of salvation in Christ. He also included a detailed survey of the historical development of belief in Mary's assumption, and the coherence of this belief with the rest of the church's understanding of Mary. In the end, the treatise became a typescript of over 400 dense,

<sup>46</sup> Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb* 412.

<sup>47</sup> Cited from *A Bulgakov Anthology* 95. This same idea that Mary's role is chiefly to be the archetype and personal realization of the redeemed church found its way into Vatican II's *Lumen gentium*, chap. 8. For a development of this idea, see Otto Semmelroth, *Mary, Archetype of the Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963).

circuitously argued pages. Jesuit censors both in Austria and in Rome forbade its publication in its original form, and Rahner seems to have lacked both the time and the desire to revise it to the satisfaction of his superiors and bring the book to press. Although substantial parts of the treatise later appeared in somewhat revised versions as articles and a monograph, the whole work on the Assumption was published only in 2004 as part of his complete German writings.

Rahner argues here for the central importance of the dogma of Mary's assumption, and, when it is properly understood, for the reason the Catholic Church considers the doctrine to be part of divine revelation in Christ, on the basis of several premises:

- (1) What is revealed in Christ is the final and complete salvation of all humanity, by God's gift.
- (2) The complete salvation of a human being must include, in some transformed state, a material as well as a spiritual or intellectual component: we are not simply minds imprisoned in matter, but our material bodies express, in what they are and in what they do, the identities and desires of our souls, at the same time as they make sensation, experience in the world, and communication with others possible.<sup>48</sup>
- (3) Death is not simply the separation of the spiritual soul from matter, in such a way that a powerless corpse is left behind by the animating core of the person's self, but is—in more personal terms—the loss of a person's autonomy, of one's ability to act and express oneself as an independent agent in the world.<sup>49</sup>
- (4) Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, a new age in human history has already begun: an age in which the salvation of full human persons has become—in him, as its “first-fruits”—a reality; this salvation is endless life, received gratuitously from God, in a transformed body.<sup>50</sup>
- (5) We can speak of the fullness of salvation in Christ only by using images,<sup>51</sup> yet our faith assures us that it will involve our full personal transformation, including our bodily resurrection.<sup>52</sup> But because, in our present history, the bodies of the dead quickly disintegrate into their elements, we assume that the spiritual element of each person exists in some “interim state” until the time when the body will be raised and the world in which it lives transfigured; even in this interim state, though, we also must assume that souls continue to have some

<sup>48</sup> Karl Rahner, “Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis,” in *Sämtliche Werke* 9 (Freiburg: Herder, 2004) 193–96, my translation.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 196–201; see also 168–73.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 182–87.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 178–79.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 193–96.

relationship to the realm of matter, to time and space, although we cannot normally sense their presence.<sup>53</sup>

- (6) Some passages in the New Testament, Rahner argues—especially Matthew 27:52–53—which reports that after Jesus’ resurrection, a number of the saints of old were raised from the dead, “entered the Holy City,” and appeared to many people—should be taken more seriously than they usually are; they witness to an ancient scriptural belief that at least some holy people from Israel’s history have already entered into this “new creation” begun with Jesus’ resurrection.<sup>54</sup>

Against the background of these and other assumptions about creation, salvation, and eschatology, Rahner makes the point that the Catholic Church’s central belief concerning Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the conviction that she is “the perfectly redeemed person.” Her assent, in full obedience, to God’s choice of her to be the Mother of the incarnate Word, was a fully human, free act, yet one totally supported by the grace of God. Her faith belongs both to the story of her personal holiness—her “subjective redemption,” in traditional Scholastic language—and to the story of God’s “objective redemption” of the world, traced back in the Bible to the salvation of Noah and the call of Abraham, even to God’s promise to fallen Eve of victory over the serpent.<sup>55</sup> This presence of God’s grace in its fullness throughout Mary’s life, given so that her Son might redeem the world—her “redemption from day one”—implies that Mary must, at the end of her life, reach the eschatologically full expression of that redemption. So Rahner writes:

This blessed completion must be there, in Mary, in the most perfect way possible. This is what we must conclude if we apply clearly the general principle that the blessed destiny of a person after death is nothing else than the finalization of what the person has become in this life, through the grace of God, to what we have said about the basic structure of our faith concerning Mary. As the point at which the final, eschatological event of God’s mercy towards the world has come to reality, through her spirit (in the obedience of faith) and through her body (by motherhood), in a way that involves the absolute correspondence and coincidence of both the “private,” “personal” side and her official mission, Mary is in the most perfect way possible redeemed and graced. She is the full representation of what a redeemed person is and can be.<sup>56</sup>

And this means she must be already a sharer in the full material and spiritual life of the risen and transfigured Christ. Whether she is the only person who has yet been so redeemed, Rahner suggests—whether she

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 200–201, 225–40. Gregory of Nyssa developed a strikingly similar position on the relation of the souls of the dead to their decomposed bodies, in his treatise *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.

<sup>54</sup> Rahner, “Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis” 202–14.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 256–61.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 285.

stands, for the moment, alone in human history as saved in body as well as in soul—is not clarified one way or another by the definition of 1950. All that it does assert is that because Mary is what the Bible and the church's tradition have constantly affirmed her to be—woman of faith, new Eve, Mother of God in human terms, the person humanly closest to Christ—she, at least, must have experienced, at the end of her life, the fullness of the life promised all of us for the age to come. As Rahner puts it later in the treatise, “the dogma of the Assumption is the whole dogma about Mary, expressed with an eye to the finality of what is being said.”<sup>57</sup>

In a shorter, more popular essay published as a pamphlet on the “new dogma” in 1951, Rahner sums up his understanding of the Assumption of Mary this way:

The most central truths of the Christian message are not abstract, timeless principles and rules; they are a way of knowing the concrete acts of God to save us, acts that reveal to us where salvation has its roots. The great feasts that Christians celebrate proclaim these deeds of God in human history in a way that makes them present to us. . . . When we confess the complete salvation of the Mother of the Lord, then we are praising God by saying: the Kingdom of God is here; God has already triumphed in this history, which can seem only to be an empty tale of darkness and evil. . . . But this confession is more than that. It is a confession of eternal hope, whose goal is already here, though hidden; it is a confession—concrete and real, not just as a theoretical postulate and ideal—that all earthly reality is eternally valid. In the midst of the anxiety and neediness of our race, the Church lifts up her head—the Church, which is so often criticized for meddling too easily and too decisively in the things of the world, for being simply political and dedicated to earthly power—and looks towards the one and only future that she really trusts in: God's future, which is so truly under way that it has already begun to be fully realized. The Church looks up and greets in Mary, her own model, that eternal future which in Mary has already become a present reality.<sup>58</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

This comparison of the way two major 20th-century theologians, one Orthodox, the other Catholic, have approached our Churches' varied, sometimes puzzling traditions about Mary, the Mother of God, suggests at least that the thought of our two communions on her role in the whole constellation of faith and worship is much closer in detail and in its sense of her deeper significance for the church than our other, very real theological and ecclesial differences may lead us to believe. A late Greek homily on the Annunciation, mistakenly ascribed to John of Damascus, refers to

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 334.

<sup>58</sup> Karl Rahner, “Das ‘neue’ Dogma” (Vienna, 1951) 25–27, in *Sämtliche Werke* 9:487–88.

Mary as *hē polyōnymos ontōs*: “truly a woman of many names.”<sup>59</sup> This epithet, borrowed from pre-Christian cults and theological writings<sup>60</sup> and used by earlier Christian writers for the indefinable God,<sup>61</sup> reflects the consciousness, widely shared even in the early church, that Mary, like God himself, cannot be characterized in any single, simple way by the Christian believer. The importance she plays among those who call Jesus “Lord,” the passionate affection and interest she continues to summon forth, has led to a distinctive style of language in which the church speaks of her and honors her by many titles: a new, ecstatic rhetoric of praise.

The danger, of course, in this style of religious communication is that enthusiasm and devotion can take the place of substance, and that the connection of Mary with the central message of the gospel—the coming of God’s Word into the world as Jesus of Nazareth, and his death and resurrection for our sakes—can be blurred or minimized. In the Catholic Church especially, the danger of strong Marian devotion, focused as it often is on modern apparitions and messages reported by young, simple, enthusiastic believers rather than on the Scriptures and the teaching of Jesus, is that this devotion can become a new religion, with a new, Marian gospel, new moral appeals and warnings, and new, charismatic sources of authority. When visionaries serve as a new magisterium for the devotee, when Mary becomes, even implicitly, the central focus of a person’s religious faith and practice, she distracts from Christianity rather than reinforces it. In this respect, Barth’s criticisms and warnings are on target. Mary’s role is to be the “Mother of God,” who enthrones and holds out to us the person of the Savior.

The other point that this Marian epithet, “woman of many names,” recalls is that the distinctive rhetoric in which Orthodox and Catholic Christians speak of her reveals to us something profound about our life as a church. We live in a world of symbols: of real things and real people laden with a meaning that points us, by God’s grace, beyond themselves—points us to a Mystery, a Reality, we can only reach for and hint at but never completely conceptualize or define. To say that a person such as Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, or a thing such as water or bread or scented oil are “symbols” is not to say that we talk about them simply as code-words for ideas that matter; rather, it is to say that their abiding historical reality, their concreteness, draws us through and beyond the level

<sup>59</sup> John of Damascus (?), Homily 5, on the Annunciation 1 (Migne, PG 96.648 C1).

<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, the Homeric *Hymn to Ceres* 18; Sophocles, *Antigone* 1115; Aristotle, *De mundo* 401a12.

<sup>61</sup> E.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 10 (*Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, 10 vols., ed. Werner Wilhelm Jaeger [Leiden: Brill, 1952– ] 1:230.7); Ps.-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names* 1.6.

of concrete things to let us experience what God has done for us, and what he continues to do day by day. In this sense, Mary is clearly a symbolic person for the believing disciple of Jesus—a sacrament, who makes present and active for us the saving power and love of God, just as the historical church is a sacrament that expresses its own inner reality in sacramental signs such as baptism and the Eucharist and Christian marriage, and in acts of Christian sacrifice and love. As a person of typological significance, a figure of icons, Mary is better encountered by vision than by the analytical mind. She offers us, in her own person, a glimpse of where God is and what God does. But we cannot understand her, or even speak appropriately of her except in typological terms—in icons and art, in the “many names” of poetry and liturgy and biblical metaphor, and in the theological language that feeds on them.

In the last of his *Catechetical Discourses*, which is also the second discourse expressing his thanks to God for his mystical graces, the tenth-to-eleventh-century Greek writer Symeon the New Theologian briefly relates an experience he once had of personally encountering God while venerating an icon of the Theotokos. He had previously been blessed with visions of the divine light, he says, and with an interior sense of God’s voice, speaking directly words of gentle encouragement. Then, however, God seemed to fall silent and to distance himself once again. Though Symeon continued to find joy and solace in the memory of his earlier experience, he tells the Lord:

Yet, on the other hand, I was sad, as well, and longed to see you in this way once more. And one day, as I went to kiss the immaculate icon of her who gave birth to you, and bowed down to the ground before it, before I stood up I sensed for myself within my wretched heart that you had completely filled it with light, and had appeared before me; then I knew that I have you within myself as one who knows you. From that moment on, I no longer just remember you and the things that surround you, loving you because of the memory of these things; I believe that I truly have you within me, Love in person. For Love, O God, is truly what you are!<sup>62</sup>

In paying affectionate homage to Mary, “the God-bearer,” not in ideas but in an icon, Symeon had encountered the love that God is and that became flesh in her, and had realized that he too already bore that love within himself as a permanent gift, dwelling within his own heart. He, too, had become a *Theotokos*.

Western Christians have only recently discovered the power of icons. In Mary, however, and especially in her apparitions to simple people, the

<sup>62</sup> Symeon the New Theologian, *Catechetical Discourse* 36 (= *Discourse of Thanksgiving* 2) (SC 113:350–52). I was directed to this passage by reading Charles Barber, “Icons, Prayer, and Vision in the Eleventh Century,” in *Byzantine Christianity*, ed. Derek Krueger (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 149–63, at 155

Latin Church has also discerned the shape of a Love that is both human and divine, a Love that reaches inside us, totally reshapes our human existence, and teaches us to hope for its perfection. In her great novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Willa Cather recounts the profound effect left on the newly-arrived Bishop of Santa Fe, the fictionalized French missionary Jean Latour, and his friend and companion, Father Joseph Vaillant, by the story of Mary's appearance at Guadalupe to the native Mexican Juan Diego, three centuries before.

"What a priceless thing for the poor converts of a savage country!" [Joseph] exclaimed, wiping his glasses, which were clouded by his strong feeling. "All these poor Catholics who have been so long without instruction have at least the reassurance of that visitation. It is a household word with them that their Blessed mother revealed Herself in their own country, to a poor convert. Doctrine is well enough for the wise, Jean; but the miracle is something we can hold in our hands and love."

Father Vaillant began pacing restlessly up and down as he spoke, and the bishop watched him, musing. It was just this in his friend that was dear to him. "Where there is great love there are always miracles," he said at length. "One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love. I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you. The miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always."<sup>63</sup>

To glimpse Mary with the eyes of faith—to see her in the context of the human history that reveals the grace of God in space and time and that comes to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, her Son—is, for Christians of both East and West, to see the love of God.

<sup>63</sup> Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: Random House, 1927) 49–50.