

## Mariology in the Fathers of the Second Century

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In the popular Marian literature of the last several decades it is common to see statements to the effect that the "way to Christ is through Mary." [1] and that she is the "cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race." [2] Reactions to statements like these can be anything from outright rejection, especially from non-catholic sources, to enthusiastic acceptance which is common among more conservative Catholics. Sincere as they may be, these responses usually come from an inadequate frame of reference.

What is said of Mary today has its foundation in the earliest period of the church, yet over the centuries the emphasis has radically changed, and when patristic teachings are mentioned today they are easily misunderstood. Modern writers speaking of Mary as the cause of our salvation are often tempted to exaggerate her role in the salvation of men to the detriment of the role of Christ, giving more prominence to the person of Mary in the life of a Christian and ignoring the necessity to understand more deeply who Christ is any what his advent means for the human race. [3] It is clear this is not the case in the earliest writings about Mary. As Jean Guittou states: "In this first period, what helped to develop knowledge of the Blessed Virgin, without any cult or specific imagery, was not, as in our time, any attachment to her person, but the need to discover some easy and precise formula for correcting initial errors concerning the nature of Christ." [4] One early formula was the Eve-Mary parallel [5] and the first writer to use it was Justin Martyr. [6]

Justin is a second century Greek Father best known for his background in Greek philosophy and his apologetic writings, especially his "Dialogue with Trypho." In the section of the "Dialogue" dealing with the Incarnation of Christ, Justin inserts his comparison of Eve and Mary:

. . . we know him as the First-Begotten of God before all creatures, and as the son of the patriarchs, since he became incarnate by a virgin of their race, and condescended to become a man without comeliness or honor, and subject to suffering . . . He is born of the Virgin, in order that the disobedience caused by the serpent might be destroyed in the same manner in which it had originated. For Eve, an undefiled virgin, conceived the word of the serpent and brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary, filled with faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced to her the good tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her and the power of the Highest would overshadow her, and therefore the Holy One would be the Son of God, answered: "Be it done unto me according to thy word." And, indeed, she gave birth to him . . . by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who have become like the serpent, but frees from death those who repent of their sins and believe in Christ. [7]

The particular chapter of the "Dialogue" these passages were taken from was intended to be commentary of Psalm 21:4: "But thou dwellest in the Holy Place, thou Praise of Israel," and although the logic in the entire passage is not easy to follow, [8] these excerpts are indicative of what Justin is trying to say in this section of his work, that Christ "really became a man." [9] It was important for Justin to make this reaching clear because of the prevailing errors of his day, such

as Marcionism, Docetism, and many forms of Gnosticism.

Justin's treatise "Against Marcion" cited by Irenaeus,[10] is lost, and although it is not the purpose of the "Dialogue" to contradict Marcion's teachings specifically, the errors were common and Justin dealt with them wherever he could. Marcion denied the fact that Jesus was born of a woman, or that he was made flesh in any real sense. Flesh was evil, and anything having to do with pregnancy or childbirth was repulsive to Marcion.[11] Docetism, like many forms of Gnosticism, was similar to Marcionism in that it denied the material reality of Christ's body. Christ was not made flesh, but only had a bodily appearance.[12]

The concept that good was completely transcendent made it difficult for Gnostics to accept the incarnation of Christ, and the fact that he died was a scandal. Justin makes no concession to idealism, stressing that the First-Begotten of God became flesh and that he was subject to suffering, an idea which was impossible for a Gnostic to fathom. Dualism is also common in Christian and non-Christian Gnostic sects, and Justin puts emphasis on the oneness and goodness of God, leaving no room for an equal evil god making clear that this "Holy One" was made flesh with only good as his purpose. In these sects it would have been acceptable to state that Eve, in "conceiving" the word of the serpent, gave birth to incarnate evil, and Mary, as a parallel, gave birth to incarnate good. Justin does not carry the parallel that far, as he treats Eve in an allegorical sense only, whereas Mary actually gave birth to Christ, the incarnate God who frees from evil and death to those who believe in him.[13]

Another writer to use the Eve-Mary parallel was Irenaeus of Lyons. Although he was writing in the same century, he came after Justin and was possibly influenced by him. He too is best known for his apologetic writings as is evidenced by the title of his most important work, "Against the Heresies." he had the same gnostic-oriented heresies to work against as Justin, so it will not be necessary to delve into what he was responding to. Suffice it to say that in the section where he discusses Mary, his purpose is the same as Justin's, to show that Christ was made flesh.

Irenaeus takes the Eve-Mary analogy much further than Justin, lining it up more closely with the Adam-Christ analogy and placing it at the heart of his exposition of the Pauline doctrine of the "re-establishment of all things in Christ." [14] His starting point is the analogy itself:

For as by one man's disobedience sin entered, and death obtained (a place) through sin; so also by the obedience of one man, righteousness having been introduced, shall cause life to fructify in those persons who in times past were dead.[15]

Irenaeus is constantly speaking of those who reject this analogy, explaining why and how it is to be preserved. The analogy is given divine imperative as he explains that God accomplished this, that, and everything else because God had to preserve the analogy. If Adam had a man for his father, it would have been reasonable for Christ to have a man for his father also, but it was imperative, to preserve the analogy, that both Adam and Christ be formed by the hand of God, Adam from the virgin earth and Christ from the Virgin Mary. Mary is important in his analogy because God could not have again taken dust from the earth and Christ from the Virgin Mary. Mary is important in this analogy because God could not have again taken dust from the earth to form Christ. That would have been a completely new formation bearing no

relationship to the first formation of man and thus incapable of being a sacrifice for the salvation of this first formation:

Those, therefore, who allege that he took nothing from the Virgin do greatly err, (since,) in order that they may cast away the inheritance of the flesh, they also reject the analogy . . . (if so,) he must seem an inconsistent piece of work, not having wherewith he may show his wisdom. But this is to say that he appeared putatively as man when he was not man, and that he was made man while taking nothing from man. For if he did not receive the substance of flesh from a human being, he neither was made man nor the Son of Man; and if he was not made what we were, he did no great thing in what he suffered and endured.[16]

If Christ were not the same as Adam, he was not himself a means, and he could have no means by which to instruct us, and nothing would have been accomplished through his death.

This is all connected to the Pauline doctrine of the re-establishment of all things in Christ, with the stress again on the fact that this is God's analogy:

. . . if the former (Adam,) was taken from the dust, and God was his maker, it was incumbent that the latter, (Christ,) making a recapitulation in himself, should be formed as man by God, to have an analogy with the former as respects his origin.[17]

It was because of the fact that the Redeemer had associated himself so closely with Adam, that he was able, in himself, to re-establish or re-create all things. This is true as much from his divinity as it is from his human origins and so this analogy, in Irenaeus, recognizes both the divinity and the humanity of Christ.

The death of the human race is transformed into salvation, and this is explained in increasing clarity in the writings of Irenaeus as he accentuates the Adam-Christ analogy with the paralegal of Eve and Mary:

In accordance with this design, Mary the Virgin is found obedient, saying, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word" But Eve was disobedient; for she did not obey when as yet she was a virgin . . . , having become disobedient, was made the cause of death, both to herself and to the entire human race; so also did Mary, having a man betrothed to her, and being nevertheless a virgin, by yielding obedience, became the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race. And on this account does the law term a woman betrothed to a man, the wife of him who had betrothed her, although she was as yet a virgin; thus indicating the back-reference from Mary to Eve, because what is joined together could not otherwise be put asunder than by an inversion of the process by which these bonds of union had arisen; so that the former ties be canceled by the latter, that the latter may set the former again at liberty.[18]

Note again the importance Irenaeus places on the analogy itself. He states that it was for the sake of the parallelism between Mary and Eve that the law calls a woman betrothed to a man his wife,

even though she is still a virgin. This fact is indicative of the divine imperative in the parallel. Every point in the parallel counts and Irenaeus is strict about it. The bonds of death could not be broken unless there is an inversion of the original process.

It is try that this is much stricter than the parallel found in Justin's writings. Justin's can only be called a loose comparison when set up against the point by point parallel found in Irenaeus:

EVE	MARY
still a virgin	the Virgin
the spouse of Adam	already betrothed
was disobedient	through her obedience
became both for herself	became both for herself
and all the human race	and all the human race
the cause of death	the cause of salvation
what the virgin Eve	The Virgin Mary
had bound	unbound
by her unbelief . . .	by her faith . . .[19]

This is where we find the statement that Mary is the "cause of our salvation," and Irenaeus can only make such a bold remark because of the very strict parallel in which it is placed. Mary really is the cause of our salvation. This thought, which is astounding especially in the light of modern non-catholic reaction to it, must be interpreted in a very limited sense. Mary is certainly not the cause of our salvation in the same sense that Christ is. She caused our salvation only in the same sense that Eve caused our death. The actions of Mary do nothing to destroy the prerogatives of Christ, who is the Redeemer, just as the actions of Eve do not diminish the responsibility of Adam for sin. Nevertheless, just as Eve played a major role in the first sin, so does Mary play an active part in the salvation of mankind.

Another writer in the late second century to use the Eve-Mary parallel is Tertullian, and although he is not considered a Father of the Church because of his Montanist teachings, his writings are still an indication of what was being said and was widely accepted during this period.

Tertullian is an interesting person; a survey of historical works gives a picture of a man with a fiery temperament and a rigorist attitude toward church practices.[20] The tendency is to associate him primarily with Montanism, a rigorist, elitist sect, and only secondarily with Christian orthodoxy, when in fact he made a major contribution to Latin theology and had a influence on people such as Cyprian and Jerome.[21]

Tertullian was a polemicist like Justin and Irenaeus, contradicting the same contemporary errors as they did. he wrote several works against Marcion, whom we have described above, and Valentius, a gnostic who taught that matter was alien to the deity and thus rejected the incarnation of Christ.[22] Tertullian's work "On the Flesh of Christ" was directed to four specific heresies, those of Marcion, Apelles, Basilides, and Valentius.

Tertullian included the Eve-Mary parallel in chapter seventeen of "On the Flesh of Christ" where he addressed the specific question of the Incarnation:

. . . let us confine our inquire to a single point--whether Christ received flesh from the

Virgin?--that we may thus arrive at a certain proof that his flesh was human, if he derived its substance from his mother's womb, although we are at once furnished with clear evidences of the human character of his flesh, from its name and description as that of a man and from the nature of its constitution, and from the system of its sensations, and from its suffering of death.[23]

After establishing this question, Tertullian proceeds to discuss the suitability for the Son of God to be born of a Virgin. He states that the Redeemer was to consecrate a new order of birth: he declares that this new order of birth was to be prefigured in ancient type, and he then proceeds with the parallel:

For it was while Eve was yet a virgin, that the ensnaring word had crept into her ear which was to build the edifice of death. Into a virgin's soul in like manner, must be introduced that Word of God which was to raise the fabric of life; so that what had been reduced to ruin by this sex might by the selfsame sex be recovered to salvation. As Eve had believed the serpent, so Mary believed the angel. The delinquency which one occasioned by disbelieving, the other by believing effaced.[24]

Tertullian then comes to the same conclusion as Irenaeus, stating that the Son of God had to come forth in the same condition as man or salvation would not have meant anything to the human race as Christ would have been saving the something that man was not.

It is true that Tertullian does not improve on the parallel as we receive it from Irenaeus, but it is interesting to note his contribution because of his geographical location. The fact that all three of these men were writing at the same time is an indication of this formula's universality. Justin is from Palestine, Irenaeus is from Asia Minor and later was bishop at Lyons, and Tertullian is from Northern Africa. None of these writers tries to support the Eve-Mary parallel with other proofs, but uses it as a proof all by itself, which indicates that this was a widely accepted concept without any further need of proof. It was an accepted instrument to be used in the Christological writings of the late second century.

After this period, which Lucien Deiss calls the springtime of Marian theology, this formula is to be used in theological and devotional literature right up to our own day. St. Ephrem, a theologian-poet in the early church, calls Mary the gate of life and Eve the gate of death.[26] The Second Vatican Council, in our own day, quotes Irenaeus, calling Mary the cause of salvation for the whole human race and including the assertions of other Fathers that she undid the wrong of Eve and that she is the source of life.[27]

In the documents of the modern church, the context in which these statements are made has not changed; Mary is still the handmaid of the Lord as is indicated by the Vatican Council:

In subordination to Him, and along with Him, by the grace of Almighty God she served the mystery of Redemption.[28]

This did not mean, however, that she had a passive role to play; she freely chose to cooperate in the plan of salvation.

The problem with the modern understanding of Mary is that in everyday terminology, apart from official documents, it is described in the language of the second century without much reference to the context in which that language was used. The Fathers spoke in very specific ways and we, in very general ways. In modern writings, especially in devotional literature which does not always pay attention to the details of theology, statements to the effect that Mary is the source of life and the cause of derision among fundamentalist non-catholics and a source of embarrassment to Catholics. It is necessary to have a specific understanding of what the church says about Mary and her role in the church, especially in this pluralistic age where confusion is often the order of the day.

It is clear there can be no Mariology without Christology; it is the servant of Christology just as Mary is the handmaid of the Lord. It has been said that the most fundamental point of Mariology is the definition of the dogma "theotokos," the definition of Mary as "Mother of God" that took place in the fourth century.[29] But even this, which is the logical conclusion to the Marian theology of the second century, has as its basis the Incarnation of God.[30] It is reasonable to say that a good Christology can be developed without any reference to Mary, yet it certainly would not be complete. There would be at least an implicit reference to Mary's role in the divine plane every time any mention was made of the Body of Christ, and everything the church says about the Body of Christ, even when it is referring to itself, is the basis for what it will say about Mary.

#### NOTES

[1] E. Schillebeeckx, O.P. Mary, Mother of the Redemption, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), p. 140.

[2] Dogmatic constitution on the Church, The Documents of Vatican II, ed. Walter M. abbot, S.J. (n.p.: The American Press, 1966), p. 88.

[3] Jean Guitton, The Virgin Mary, trans. A. Gordan Smith (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1952), p.1.

[4] Guitton, p. 77.

[5] Lucien Deiss, C.S.Sp., Mary, Daughter of Sion, trans. Barbara T. Blair (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1972), p. 199.

[6] Johannes Quasten, Patrology, (Weastminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1949), I, p. 211.

[7] St. Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho" in Saint Justin Martyr, trans. Thomas B. Falls, D.D., Ph.D. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1965). pp. 304-305.

- [8] Deiss, p. 200.
- [9] Justin, p. 303.
- [10] Justin, p. 15.
- [11] Henry Chadwick, The Early Church, (New York, Penguin Books, 1976), p. 39.
- [12] A. Humbert, "Docetism," New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967 ed.
- [13] R.M. Grant, Gnosticism and Early Christianity, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 104.
- [14] Hilda Graef, Mary, A history of Doctrine and Devotion, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 39.
- [15] St. Irenaeus, "Against the Heresies" in The Writings of Irenaeus, trans. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and W. H. Rambaut, A.B., (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924). p. 358.
- [16] Irenaeus, p. 359.
- [17] Irenaeus, p. 358.
- [18] Irenaeus, p. 361.
- [19] Deiss, p. 204.
- [20] Graef, p. 41.
- [21] Tertullian, "On the Flesh of Christ" in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, trans. Dr. Holmes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), p. 4.
- [22] Chadwick, p 37.
- [23] Tertullian, p. 536.
- [24] Tertullian, p. 536.
- [25] Deiss, p. 202.
- [26] Thomas Livius, M.A., The Blessed Virgin in the Fathers of the First Six Centuries, (London: Burns & Oates, 1893), p. 48.

[27] Vatican II, p. 88.

[28] Vatican II, p. 88.

[29] E.R. Carroll, "Mariology," New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967 ed.

[30] Edward Rochie Hardy, "General Introduction: Faith in Christ, Theology, Creeds" in Christology of the Later Fathers, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 31.