THE GRACE OF CHRIST IN MARY

By EDWARD YARNOLD

IF THIS paper stood alone, it would be necessary to examine the New Testament in some detail before attempting to formulate a theology of the grace of Mary. As it is, I am fortunate that much of the work has been done for me already, and more competently than I could, by Dr Isaacs. However, since it would be surprising if we were to give equal emphasis to exactly the same points, I would like to set out very briefly what the gospels (and that means in practice St Luke) have to say that is relevant to my subject.

1. The first chapter of St Luke is so arranged as to point the contrast between the lack of faith of Zechariah — 'you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time' (1, 20) — and the faith of Mary — 'blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord' (1, 45). This faith Mary expressed in her saying: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word' (1, 38). This obedient response of faith comes *before* the conception of Jesus. The angel says, in the future tense, 'you *will* conceive' (1, 31); and St Luke underlines the sequence of events when he says in the following chapter that the child was given the name Jesus 'by the angel *before* he was conceived in the womb' (2, 21). Many have gone further and said that the incarnation did not only take place *after* Mary's consent, but was conditional upon it. This may be true, but it does not seem to be St Luke's understanding of the situation. Zechariah like Mary was told of a future birth — 'your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son' (1, 13) — and this took place even though Zechariah doubted. There is nothing *in the gospel* to suggest that the incarnation could not have similarly taken place if Mary had likewise doubted. On the contrary, the parallel is stressed. Both Zechariah and Mary are told of God's intention, which is already absolute, although in both cases God, with breath-taking respect for his creatures, seeks their free co-operation. Mary, in her faith and obedience, gave the assent that was required of her.

2. Mary's faith must be seen in a wider context: she is the embodiment of the faithful remnant of the people of Israel. St Luke indicates that this idea is at the centre of his vision by systematically applying to Mary

echoes of Old Testament passages concerning God's people. (a) He sees Mary as the fulfilment of the prophecies which speak of the people of the covenant as the 'daughter of Zion' (see especially Zeph 3, 14-17). (b) Israel is described in the *Magnificat* as the Lord's servant (*pais*), as in Isai 41, 8; Mary describes herself as 'the Lord's servant-girl' (*doulē*). (c) The faithful remnant of God's people is described in the chapter of Zephaniah which we have already considered as 'humble and lowly', seeking refuge in the Lord (3, 12); in the *Magnificat* Mary describes herself as one of the lowly for whom God has done great things. Mary embodies Israel's vocation in these ways, not simply by conforming to an external pattern or role, but in her own inner life — 'blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord'.[1]

3. Mary's lowliness and her dedication to God's will are summed up in her virginity.[2] On the one hand virginity, like sterility, was something to be bewailed (Jg 11, 37); on the other, the voluntary renunciation of sexual relations was thought to be the natural expression of dedication to God. The New Testament passages which contain this teaching are well known; but it is also contained in the Qumran writings and rabbinic tradition and, in germ, in such Old Testament incidents as the priest's refusal to let David's army eat the holy bread unless 'the young men have kept themselves from women' (1 Sam 21, 4).

Just as the *Magnificat* declares that lowliness is the occasion for God to show strength with his arm, so Mary's declaration of her virginity ('I have no knowledge of man') is the occasion for the promise that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High overshadow her, making her fruitful (Lk 1, 34-35).

4. St Luke, then, sees Mary as the embodiment of God's faithful people in her faith, her dedication to God's will and in her underprivileged status, exemplified by her virginity. These qualities are not mere external circumstances, but belong to an inner quality of life which makes her open to the creative presence of the Holy Spirit as the Mother of the Messiah. All of this is summed up in Gabriel's words of address: 'O favoured one, endowed with grace' (1, 28). Both phrases perhaps are needed to express the meaning. Mary is favoured by being *chosen* to perform a unique role, and for this she receives unique

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[1] Lk 1, 45. Cf Lk 11, 28, which suggests that Mary is blessed in her faith and obedience more than in the fact that she is Jesus's mother.

[2] Cf Thurian, M.: *Mary, Mother of the Lord, Figure of the Church* (London, 1963), ch 3. Also McHugh, J.: *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (London, 1975), p 173-99.

spiritual gifts. God's favour, in other words, like a shaft of sunlight turns what it touches to gold; Mary, the favoured one, is therefore Mary, full of grace.

Having retrodden this path through St Luke's Gospel of the Infancy, we must now put some questions of our own concerning the nature of this grace. We shall ask four questions: (i) Why did God's destiny for Mary require that she should be uniquely endowed with grace? (ii) What is grace? (iii) Could Mary receive grace through her Son? (iv) Did Mary's grace include the forgiveness of sin?

Mary's destiny and her holiness

As St Paul saw, the gifts of the Spirit are never conferred just for the recipient; they are always for the sake of the Church, 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ' (Eph 4, 12). This is above all true of Mary: she was endowed with grace for the sake of the destiny she had to fulfil.

First, she was to be the Mother of the Messiah. We have heard from Dr Dominian of the deep and lasting influence which a mother has on the plastic and receptive medium of the infant mind; she forms the child, not quite like a mother-bear, literally, as the ancients thought, licking her cubs into shape, but by getting the child to feel himself as a person, above all by his relationship with her. Now our relations with others go deeper than our words and actions; they are based on what we are. Consequently, the child's relationship with his mother is based on her character.

The Messiah was a true man. He was not born with an established character; like any child his personality was formed by his mother, by *her* personality, a personality which was the flowering of God's grace given to her.

But her educative work did not end when Jesus ceased to be a baby. As he was a real human being he needed to learn in a human way God's purposes for him. He learned them in his converse with his Father in prayer; from his growing familiarity with the Old Testament, which he gradually learned to apply uniquely to himself; and, most homely source, from what he could discover of his origins from his mother, who 'kept all these things, pondering them in her heart' (Lk 2, 19; cf 2, 51). Holiness in Mary, as in all others, embraced not only a fidelity to practical duties, but also an inner, reflective solitude; and this was needed so that she could pass on her reflections to her Son.

Secondly, Mary was the Mother, not only of a human Messiah, but of God; she became a mother when, with unparalleled condescension,

the power of the Most High co-operated with her natural biological processes. It was no surprise that the one who was to fulfil this unique destiny as God's bride and God's mother should be endowed with unique holiness, so that in her personal qualities as well as in her role she was highly favoured.

Thirdly, Mary was called upon to speak the *Fiat* to God's plan for the incarnation of his Son. It is a characteristic of God to treat his creatures with respect, and to seek their free co-operation instead of using them as unwitting instruments. Mary's consent at the pivotal moment of history was to be made with all the weight and freedom that a mature personality utterly devoted to God's will was capable of. (Not that the *Fiat* required an exact knowledge of the divinity and mission of her Son; if he had to go through the process of discovery, all the more had she).

Moreover, Mary spoke her *Fiat* not only as an individual, but as the daughter of Zion, the representative of the Old Israel welcoming in the new. Karl Rahner has accordingly argued that Mary's holiness is demanded by her function at the beginning of the Church's history, because, although all too often those who hold office in the Church are less than holy, 'office . . . and personal holiness coincide at the decisive points of saving history'.

> At this point [the Annunciation] if at all there clearly coincide office and person, position in the Church and situation before God, dignity and holiness. Mary is the holy Mother of God, as necessarily as the Church is the holy Church, as necessarily as God's grace is stronger than man's power to deny him. Her life is the free act . . . through which she received God's Word in faith and in her womb, for her own salvation and the salvation of all men.[3]

There is a fourth way in which Mary's holiness is required by her function: she is the Church's model (or, as other writers say, its archetype, or figure, or symbol).[4] In St Luke's narrative she stands for the old Israel at the moment of its transformation to the new. In Revelation the woman crowned with the stars is mother both of the Messiah and of 'those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus' (12, 17), i.e. of the Church. In Jn 19, Jesus's mother again has a representative meaning as at the foot of the cross she is

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[3] *Theological Investigations*, 1 (London, 2nd ed., 1965), p 205; Rahner expresses his theology of Mary more simply in *Mary, Mother of the Lord* (London, 2nd ed., 1974).

[4] Cf Thurian, M.: *op. cit.*: Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 53; Semmelroth, O.: *Mary, Archetype of the Church* (Dublin, 1964); Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, 16 (*To Honour Mary*, Catholic Truth Society, London, 1974).

welcomed by the beloved disciple as his own mother. Many theologians see this symbolic function as the key to the understanding of Mary. It applies not only to her role of mother but to her personal holiness. In what she is, she is the supreme example of the destiny of all christians. The grace that flowered so richly in Mary can produce in us blossoms that are doubtless less spectacular, but are of the same kind.

What is grace?

We have considered at length God's design to endow Mary uniquely with grace for the unique part she had to play in the history of salvation. However, as grace is one of the most used and least understood terms in theology, preaching and prayer, it seems desirable to spend a little time in the attempt to elucidate it.[5]

One can begin with the biblical use of the term. The english word 'grace' is the standard translation of *hēn* and cognates in hebrew, and *charis* and cognates in greek, to express God's favour or saving will. It is different in emphasis from God's righteousness or justice (*ṣedek, dikaiosunē*), his faithfulness (*émet, alētheia*), or his mercy (*ḥesed, eleos*). But the word 'grace' came to be used by theologians more widely than *hēn* and *charis* to denote the *effect* of God's liberality, in particular the effect of his free choice of individuals to become members of his people of the new covenant, and to enter into a privileged relationship with himself. Accordingly, the word 'grace' might be used to describe God's liberality in giving, though this is not a common usage of the term, which is normally referred rather to the gift itself. Basically what God gives is himself. To use the word favoured by the greek Fathers, man is *divinized*. It is here above all that the doctrine of the Trinity impinges on our lives. God is wholly other, yet we receive God's Spirit and share in the life of his Son, so that we can call God our Father. This is not to be understood in a pantheistic sense, as if we ceased to be human and were absorbed into the divine. By receiving God's gift, we become not less but more human.

God's gift of himself, therefore, is not a gift which leaves us unchanged, like the presence of the king which failed to affect the cat in any way. It is a transforming gift: 'from his fulness have we all received' (Jn 1, 16). We become a 'new creation' (2 Cor 5, 17). It is a personal presence of the divine entering into a relationship with us, the Father shaping the characters of the sons and daughters with whom he lives.

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[5] I have expressed these views more fully in my book *The Second Gift* (St Paul's Publications, Slough, 1974). For the biblical terminology, cf McKenzie, J. L.: *Dictionary of the Bible* (London and Milwaukee, 1966), under the words 'grace', 'righteousness', 'truth' and 'mercy'.

This metaphor is too weak, however, as there does not remain an organic link between the father and his children. But there is an organic link between ourselves and God, namely the Holy Spirit and God the Son made man.

There are accordingly two ways in which the gift of grace can be considered: as God's communication of himself (this is called *uncreated* grace); and as the transformation which this self-communication brings about in our own personalities (this is called *created* or *habitual* or *sanctifying grace*).

Unfortunately we do not provide God's grace with a clean canvas on which to paint. The personalities which receive his grace have always been distorted to a greater or lesser extent by sin. God's gift therefore is not just an *elevating* grace, which communicates to us a share in the divine life; it is also a *healing* or *redeeming* grace, which repairs the harm done by sin.

This brief outline of a theology of grace is made in catholic categories, but the points could be made also in the language of the Reformation. God's grace is not only *justifying*, attributing to us, on the strength of Christ's merits, a freedom from sin which does not belong to us; it is also *sanctifying*, making our lives holy in reality.

Created grace, as I suggested earlier, transforms us by making us more human. For grace is not a divine quality, imperceptible to us, which is mysteriously attached to our human personalities. It is life and light (cf Jn 1, 4). It is an ability to relate to God in knowledge and love, which impinges upon our ordinary human faculties, not as explicit intimations of the numinous, but within our ordinary human experience. To love one's neighbour, to be a devoted mother, to be reconciled with an enemy, to make sacrifices for a good cause, to act upon one's belief in God, is to experience grace just as truly as the gift of mystical prayer is.

All grace is the grace of Christ, and that in two senses. First, it is won for us by the death and resurrection of Christ. Secondly, it is a share in the life of Christ — 'I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing' (Jn 15, 5). It is, as we have seen, a share in the divine life of Christ; but, I suggest, we share the divine life only through sharing in his human life, for it is God made man who is the way and the truth and the life (Jn 14, 6), who is the Christ who lives in us (Gal 2, 20).[6]

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[6] Cf Yarnold, *op. cit.*, ch 4.

What then are we saying when we speak of the grace of Christ in Mary? Certainly that God communicated himself to her through his Spirit, making her human personality flower. There remain, however, two problematic areas, already indicated, which require special treatment: the way in which Mary received grace from Christ, and the existence of healing grace in her.

The grace of Christ in Mary

How could Mary receive grace through the passion and death of her Son which had not yet taken place? How could she receive a share in the incarnate life of her Son before the incarnation had come about?

It is not only in Mary's case, however, that these paradoxes appear. If good people who lived before Christ were saved, and if they were saved through Christ, the one mediator between God and man, the same paradoxes apply to them. The grace by which they, like Mary, were saved and sanctified, comes to them as an anticipated effect of the future saving work of Christ, and as an anticipated share in his future incarnate life. They, like Mary, were branches of the vine, before it had become a temporal reality in human history.

To say all this is not to explain the relationship of the grace of Mary to the grace and merits of her Son; it is simply to locate it as a particular instance of a more general mystery.

Grace and forgiveness in Mary

As I have indicated, grace is never God's creative love bestowed on innocent but helpless creatures. 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'. 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Rom 3, 23; 5, 8). Elevating grace is always also redeeming grace.

Mary too was redeemed, but in a unique way. She was redeemed in anticipation — not only because, as we have already considered, she shared in the fruits of Christ's death and resurrection before they took place, but because she was preserved from sin rather than healed from sin already incurred. She received, so to speak, a prophylactic rather than a cure. Just as medicine is more successful when disease is kept away than when it is cured, so redemption was most completely effected in her. She is, in the phrase of Karl Rahner, the most perfectly redeemed.[7] (However, let us remind ourselves that Mary's sinlessness is misunderstood if it is seen merely as a personal privilege, a jewel in her crown; Mary's sinlessness is one aspect of the grace with which

[7] *Theological Investigations*, 1, p 206.

she was endowed for the sake of her role in the history of salvation, and is the paradigm of the redemption which is available for us all.)

Most people, I suggest, first receive grace before they have any sins which require forgiveness. Nevertheless even grace received in such circumstances of personal innocence is still redemption, because we are all members of a fallen race before we are members of the Body of Christ; we have all been in a state of original sin before grace dawns upon us — all, that is, except Mary.

If grace is one term much used without understanding, original sin is another.[8] The doctrine does not demand the belief that all mankind descended from a single couple; nor does it imply that we inherit the guilt of others; or that our ancestors' sins infect us with a congenital physical, psychological and moral defect. Doctrines must be ultimately about the salvation God has given us in Christ; we must therefore seek the 'saving truth' of this doctrine, or, with that most honest thinker C. S. Lewis, we must look for its 'function'.[9]

In Genesis the function of what we may call the doctrine of original sin (though the term itself is of patristic origin) is to show that the evils in life come neither from the supreme God, who is good, nor from a rival evil god, but from man himself. In St Paul, however, the doctrine is brought in to help to explain how the achievement of one man, Christ, redeems the world: 'as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men' (Rom 5, 18).

We should take our cue more from St Paul than from Genesis. Mankind is created as a natural unity 'in Christ', i.e. for the purpose of becoming his Body. But because of the collective sinfulness of the human race we enter this world not united with Christ, but separated from him; not personally guilty, though already needing redemption. The unity which gives us the potentiality of union in Christ's body is first a unity in isolation from Christ, until — normally at baptism — redemption comes to us.

Mary, the most perfectly redeemed, was never isolated from God — not because she is not a member of the fallen race, but because she was redeemed from the very beginning, and so was always a member of Christ's body.

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[8] For a fuller statement of these views the reader is referred to my book, *The Theology of Original Sin* (Cork, 1971).

[9] Lewis, C. S.: *The Problem of Pain* (London, 1957), p 57. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 7, uses the term 'saving truth'.

The Immaculate Conception

Belief in Mary's redemption in anticipation from original sin is commonly expressed in terms of immaculate conception. It is to our purpose, then, to consider summarily the development of the doctrine.[10]

It may seem strange that christians are not content to celebrate the birthday of Christ's Mother, but wish to celebrate her conception too. The reason was sometimes given that Mary's birth was an event of such importance that it was good to have some way of celebrating it twice; but the original reason seems to have been the story contained in the second-century apocryphal gospel (*Protoevangelium*) of James. There we read that Mary was born to a childless couple, Joachim and Anne, in their old age. Each prayed for a child, Joachim fasting in solitude for forty days. At the end of that time an angel appeared separately to each, telling Anne that she would conceive and Joachim that she had conceived. The story incorporates elements from the Old Testament account of the birth of Samuel to the childless Hannah, as well as from St Luke's account of the annunciation and the birth of Jesus.[11] Gradually, however, the conception of Mary lost its reference to the apocryphal story of a miraculous physical conception and became connected instead with Mary's total sinlessness.

The sinlessness of Mary was taught by the Fathers of the early Church in both east and west; it was perhaps implicit in their understanding of her as the new Eve. Sometimes they speak of the power of the Holy Spirit purifying her as she became the Mother of the Word at the incarnation. Sometimes they suggest that her sinlessness and sanctity were present from the beginning of her life. Sometimes, like the syrian poet Ephrem in the fourth century, they use both forms of speech. Surprisingly, some of the earliest and least ambiguous evidence for the belief that Mary was sinless from the beginning comes from Islam. In the Koran, the angels who make the annunciation to Mary greet her with the words: 'Mary, God has chosen thee and purified thee; he has chosen thee above all women'; and there was a tradition that Mohammed had said that 'every new born child of Adam is touched by Satan, except the son of Mary and his mother; at this contact the child utters its first cry'.[12] In the eighth century Andrew of Crete links Mary's sinlessness explicitly

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[10] The development of the doctrine may be traced more fully in Graef, H.: *Mary, a History of Doctrine and Devotion* (London, 1963), vol 1.

[11] Cf James, M. R.: *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1924), pp 39-40.

[12] Cf McCarthy, R. J.: *Mary in Islam*, a lecture reprinted by the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin, pp 5 and 15.

with her conception; he is the first to speak of a feast of the conception, and perhaps the first to use the phrase 'immaculate conception'. In the next century in France, Abbot Radbert could state that it is agreed teaching that Mary was free from original sin.

However Radbert was too optimistic. Such great medieval theologians as Anselm, Bernard, Thomas and Bonaventure all opposed the teaching, for a variety of reasons: to be born of the union of man and woman inevitably implies original sin; human life does not begin at the moment of conception, but rather at a later infusion of the soul; it was impossible to be redeemed from sin before the coming of the Redeemer. There is no time to go into the arguments that led the Church to reject these difficulties; it must suffice to say that the decisive thinking was done in England by men like the twelfth-century Canterbury monk Eadmer, and about the end of the same century by two Oxford men, William of Ware and his more famous pupil Duns Scotus. It was not, however, till 1854 that the Roman Catholic Church erected the teaching of the Immaculate Conception (i.e. Mary's freedom from original sin) into an article of faith. A century and a half earlier, however, something very similar to it had been expressed by the Anglican Bishop Thomas Ken, who taught that Mary was freed while still in the womb from original, or as he called it, 'congenial' sin:

> The Holy Ghost his Temple in her built
> Cleans'd from congenial, Kept from mortal Guilt;
> And from the Moment that her Blood was fired
> Into her heart celestial Love inspir'd.[13]

Conclusion

I trust that most of what I have had to say will not appear controversial. The nub of it is that God endowed Mary uniquely with grace for the unique task she had to perform, made her the sort of person she needed to be. As such a person, she is the supreme example of the creative power of God's love at work in each of his people.

Some will find more controversial the attempt to locate the action of grace as early as the beginning of her existence. The suggestion is not, of course, that she was a fully mature saint already in the womb. Grace is dynamic, for it is a principle of life. To say that Mary was free from all sin is not to deny her spiritual growth. If her son was able to increase 'in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man' (Lk 2, 52), so was she.

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[13] Quoted in John E. Barnes, 'The Mariology of Bishop Ken and *Lumen Gentium*', in the *Heythrop Journal* 13 (1972), p 304.