

THE CONCRETE MEANING OF MARY'S MOTHERHOOD

By FREDERICK M. JELLY

THIS VERY year of our Lord 1981 marks the fifteen hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) which solemnly declared Mary to be the *Theotokos*. As early as the first part of the third century, the roman theologian Hippolytus was already calling her by this name.¹ After Ephesus there was a significant development of christological dogma and marian doctrine but the Council declaration also inspired a spread of devotion to our Lady. Henceforth many churches throughout Christendom would be named in her honour. My calling attention to this historical fact, however, is not to reflect upon the detailed circumstances that led up to the conciliar definition and that followed it. This is primarily the task of the biblical and historical theologian. My task is rather that of the systematic theologian.

In my opinion we have yet to come up with a better title for Mary which would express more aptly and with such succinctness the revealing word of God about Mary's predestined place in salvation history. In fact Mary has been called *Theotokos* for more than fifteen-and-a-half centuries. The very early testimony to the title bears witness to its deep roots in the biblical revelation and faith-consciousness of the ancient Church. Building upon this testimony of the Fathers of the Church and upon the great post-apostolic tradition that they set in motion, I propose to explore the meaning of *Theotokos* today, that is, its concrete meaning as the main marian idea for our times. Indeed I shall attempt to do this in the light of what has been handed on to us in the living tradition of faith, and of any particular theological tradition which each of us might share.

It is difficult to find a word other than 'concrete' to convey my meaning in the title of this article. Although not an attractive or sonorous term, it communicates what I have in mind in my quest for the precise meaning of Mary's motherhood. It signifies etymologically (from the latin *concrecere*) a growing together, and, more precisely, the *concretum*, or what has grown together into a

solid, stable unit. At the same time, a concrete expression of reality does not unify or solidify several elements at the expense of individuality and uniqueness, as does an abstraction. This is not to deny the validity of, and even the necessity for, abstract concepts and terms in our reflections upon reality, including the revealed realities of our faith. This is an essential component in any realistic theory of knowledge. Rather it is a gentle reminder of the temptation to indulge in abstraction, that is, the confusion of our concepts with the real order of things. It is reminiscent of the reply given by the great theologian of our time, Karl Rahner, when asked why he thought a decline had taken place in marian devotion: ' . . . the special temptation that affects Christians today, Catholics and Protestants alike, is the temptation to turn the central truths of the faith into abstractions, and abstractions have no need of mothers'.²

The holy and learned genius behind the use of the concrete term *Theotokos* to express the mystery of Mary's motherhood, has indeed come to us through the direction of her Son's Holy Spirit. In the living tradition of the Church, that of faith, worship, and christian experience in general, it developed dynamically as a *concretum*, or growing together of trajectories from the plurality of New Testament christologies which formed the foundation in revelation for the solemn teaching at Ephesus:³

For it was not that he was first born of the holy Virgin as an ordinary man and then the Word descended on this man: on the contrary, united from the womb itself he is said to have undergone birth according to the flesh, thus appropriating for himself the birth of his own flesh. . . . And so (the holy Fathers) have not hesitated to call the holy Virgin *Theotokos*. . . .⁴

Thus the conciliar fathers were able to concretize the conception and pre-existence christologies from the New Testament revelation, and to express in a marvellous manner — in *one* word — the mystery of the Incarnation, of the Word made flesh *ab initio* (from the very first instant of his conception) in the womb of the Virgin Mary. *Theotokos*, therefore, truly brings together or makes concrete the paradox of the mystery of Christ — of the wedding without admixture of divinity and humanity in the person of the Word within the virginal womb of Mary. This in no wise is intended to disparage the good abstractions, which have arisen in the tradition to express the mystery, such as the divine maternity or the motherhood of God. Our reflection

upon the term *Theotokos* (God-bearer or Bringer-forth-of-God), however, does reiterate the need to return to the roots of our faith in the concrete categories of biblical revelation and salvation history to test the validity of our abstractions and to proceed from our partial analytical consideration of the mystery towards a more synthetic and concrete contemplation of the revealed truth.

Theotokos, I should like to submit is the term that, properly interpreted in its historical context, that is both in its biblical roots and its impact upon the tradition, is the single word best suited to connote a more profound theological understanding of the concrete meaning of Mary's motherhood today. On the one hand, it helps us to avoid a rationalistic abstraction which can reduce one aspect of the mystery to the status of primary principle, whence all the other marian truths might be logically deduced. Of this type of reductionism, René Laurentin wisely counsels:

It is very important that marian theology should become more aware of the purely relative nature of its principles of systematization, of their limits, of their sub-ordination to the sources, and of the transcendence of God's thought. Even if it is, of necessity, an exercise of the intelligence and rightly has a rational aspect, theology, nevertheless, cannot be detached from the order of analogy and mystery; it is inadequate by its very nature, and must therefore, beware of the temptation to rationalism.⁵

While this form of reductionism — that is reducing the realities of our faith to abstractions — may be done in 'good faith', it can apparently lead to secularistic and even atheistic forms of reductionism and its inadequacies may be perceived in that it fails to render revelation intelligible to our contemporaries. On the other hand, *Theotokos* would seem to be well endowed to enlighten and inspire us to proceed from abstract analyses towards concrete syntheses, in our contemplation of the mystery of Mary's motherhood today. For, while denoting the very centre of that mystery which is her unique relationship to Christ, it still connotes the other aspects of the marian mystery. René Laurentin writes along these lines about the avoidance of an unnecessary proliferation of marian privileges, while at the same time concentrating upon the dogma of the *Theotokos* without impoverishing our mariological concepts:

Should not the solution be sought . . . in the acquiring of a deeper understanding of these formulae which, like all dogmatic

definitions, are of set purpose limited in their scope? Should not our task be to discover their full import by means of a thoroughgoing evaluation of the sources of faith? Should we not try to find out what is meant by their mutual relationships and the wealth of doctrine they each contain? This is intuitively and fundamentally the position of the Eastern Churches. For them *Theotokos* is enough. Sometimes, even, they seem to think that the additions made to this by the Latins have done nothing but diminish Mary's true stature. It would be a mistake to imagine that they reduce her to her simplest expression. What they are doing is seeing her at her highest; there they pitch their tent. The best representatives of this tradition never seem to lose sight of the fact that Mary's virginity, conception in holiness and assumption, as well as her present relationship with mankind are precisely the virginity, sanctity, conception and assumption of the *Theotokos*, or in other words, a particularly privileged illustration of the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation. However, let us not exaggerate. I am not arguing here for a mistrust of formulae, or for an impoverishment of concepts. There is no need for us to be ashamed of our Latin passion for explicit analyses. Nevertheless, do let us see these formulae, always, in their most essential, most theological, most christological light, the light that shines in the word *Theotokos*.⁶

And so we are now prepared to turn our attention more directly to the matter at hand, the concrete meaning of Mary's motherhood today, which is really the same as the perennial quest for the main marian idea or the fundamental principle of a systematic mariology. It poses a most proper question that has more often than not been awarded very improper and highly improbable answers. Without intending to settle the question, let us say that I wish to provide one possible solution to stimulate discussion and set up certain parameters around the problem.

The christocentric and ecclesio-typical characteristics of Theotokos

The most important step in the process of arriving at the formulation of the central concept about Mary is to ascertain which truth about her sheds the greatest light upon the mystery of her Son (christocentric) as well as upon the mystery of his Church (ecclesio-typical). Both of these characteristics, as well as their intimate relationship in the mystery of Mary's motherhood of God incarnate, are clearly and crisply expressed by chapter eight of *Lumen Gentium*, the marian teaching of Vatican II's dogmatic constitution on the Church:

By reason of the gift and role of her divine motherhood, by which she is united with her Son, the Redeemer, and with her unique graces and functions, the blessed Virgin is also intimately united with the Church. As St Ambrose taught, the mother of God is a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ. For in the mystery of the Church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother. Through her faith and obedience she gave birth on earth to the very Son of the Father, not through the knowledge of man but by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, in the manner of a new Eve who placed her faith, not in the serpent of old but in God's messenger without wavering in doubt. The Son whom she brought forth is he whom God placed as the first born among many brethren (Rom 8,29), that is, the faithful, in whose generation and formation she co-operates with a mother's love.⁷

This marian doctrine of the most recent ecumenical council makes very clear both the aspects of Mary's motherhood that are centred upon Christ and those that focus upon his redeemed-redeeming body, the Church. The *Theotokos* is, always was, and ever shall be essentially and primarily a christological dogma. This does not mean that it fails to predicate any truth content about Mary, but does emphasize the important point that it does so totally in relation to her Son who is at the very centre of our christian faith. At the same time, in the faith-understanding of the ancient Church the *Theotokos* was never disassociated from her special relationship with the Church. Cardinal Newman, after his prayerful and scholarly meditation upon the witness of the patristic period, summed it up beautifully when he preached: 'her glories are not only for the sake of her Son; they are for our sakes too'.⁸ They are for the sake of Christ and of his Church.

In their Pastoral Letter on Mary issued on 21 November 1973, the American bishops taught; 'The Church saw herself symbolized in the Virgin Mary'.⁹ The new Eve image, which reflects the most ancient meditation of the Church on Mary after the scriptures, was also attributed to the Church herself. Mary, as the archetype of the Church, was never far from the mind of the Fathers. They contemplated in her grace-filled reception of the Word of God and in her generous response of faith and loving obedience to redemption, the model *par excellence* of what it means to be a christian disciple, a member of the Church. And so we have the common patristic

patrimony about Mary's conceiving Christ *in corde priusquam in carne* or *in mente priusquam in ventre*, that is, she bore Christ spiritually in her heart and mind even before doing so physically in the flesh and in her womb. This particularly points to the fact that the spiritual aspects of her motherhood of Christ were never separated by an artificial abstraction from the physical aspects, nor was her motherhood of the Lord divided against that of her spiritual maternity over all the faithful as the prototype of the whole Church.

From an address delivered by Archimandrite Kallistos Ware to our Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1969, we read the following comments upon the connection between her motherhood of Christ and her openness to God's word:

This insistence upon the freedom of Mary's response is clearly evident in the selection of the gospel reading at feasts in her honour (8 September, 1 and 22 October, 21 November, 8 July, 15 August, Saturday of the *Akathist*). The story of the woman in the crowd is read: 'A certain woman in the company lifted up her voice, and said unto him, blessed is the womb that bore thee, and the breasts which thou hast sucked. But he said, yea rather blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it' (Lk 11,27-28). At first sight these must appear strange words to choose for the festival of the blessed Virgin, since seemingly they imply that no special veneration is due to her as Christ's mother. But our Lord, so far from slighting her in his answer, is in reality indicating where the true glory of her divine motherhood is to be found. The woman in the crowd referred to the physical fact: Christ directed attention to the spiritual attitude which underlay that physical fact, and without which the physical fact would not have been possible. 'Blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it': Mary is blessed because she heard the word of God and kept it when the Archangel spoke to her at the Annunciation, for if she had not first heard the word and been obedient to it, she would never have borne the Saviour in her womb or nursed him at her breast.¹⁰

This churchman and theologian of the orthodox tradition continues his reflection in the same context by calling attention to the fact that Mary's prompt and loving obedience to God's word was manifested throughout her spiritual pilgrimage of faith in this life as is indicated by St Luke: 'Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart' (2,19), and 'but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart' (2,51).

For further testimony of this truth about the intrinsic connection between Mary's motherhood of the Lord and her call to discipleship, let us listen to another voice in our christian tradition. Bishop Jeremy Taylor (1613-67), one of the seventeenth-century anglican divines, at least insinuates it nicely in his inspiring 'prayer for grace to follow her example':

O eternal and almighty God, who didst send thy holy angel in embassy to the blessed Virgin Mother of our Lord, to manifest the actuating of thine eternal purpose of the redemption of mankind by the incarnation of thine eternal Son; put me, by the assistances of thy divine grace, into such holy dispositions, that I may never impede the event and effect of those mercies which in the counsels of thy predestination thou didst design for me. Give me a promptness to obey thee to the degree and semblance of angelic alacrity; give me holy purity and piety, prudence and modesty, like those excellencies which thou didst create in the ever-blessed Virgin, the mother of God; grant that my employment may be always holy, unmixed with worldly affections, that I may converse with angels, entertain the holy Jesus, conceive him in my soul, nourish him with the expresses of most innocent and holy affections, and bring him forth and publish him in a life of piety and obedience, that he may dwell in me forever, and I may for ever dwell in him, in the house of eternal pleasures and glories, world without end.¹¹

The christocentric and ecclesio-typical characteristics of *Theotokos*, and of contemporary marian doctrine and devotion generally, are mutually complementary and cannot really be in conflict.¹² For how can Mary be related to Christ without simultaneously being intimately associated with the ecclesial body that he received through his redemptive activity? At the same time, how can she be the Archetype of the Church unless her unique relationship with Christ becomes the exemplar for the Church's own share in his redeeming work? Consequently, to concentrate upon the ecclesio-typical aspects of the *Theotokos* should not distort its basic christocentric character and vice versa. The theological stage is now set for proposing my opinion regarding the fundamental principle of a systematic mariology.

The main marian idea

Theologians today are more inclined to include the Mary-Church analogy within the main marian idea of fundamental principle of mariology. In so doing they avoid the extreme of identifying the

'divine maternity' as the central mariological principle in such a way as to make it an artificial abstraction of biological motherhood isolated from Mary's conception in holiness, virginity, and role in redemption. This interpretation does not do justice to any experience of human maternity, let alone to the motherhood of God incarnate. For to conceive and bear a child is essentially a human action and not an expression merely of the vegetative-reproductive and animal-sexual dimensions of a woman's nature. St Thomas Aquinas, while awarding centrality to Mary's true motherhood of God, personalized the relationship most profoundly by showing that human maternity terminates in the person conceived and born of a woman. In the case of Mary's child, the person conceived in her womb and born of her flesh is the second person of the blessed Trinity, the Son of God incarnate. And so she is truly the *Theotokos* since the relationship of her motherhood terminates in a divine person.¹³ Along with this realistic interpretation of the mystery of Mary's divine maternity by analogy with human motherhood, the Angelic Doctor, following the footsteps of St Bernard of Clairvaux, attributes to Mary's free consent at the Annunciation its proper spiritual significance, thus emphasizing the christocentric and 'ecclesio-typical' aspects of her motherhood.¹⁴ This approach avoids the opposite extreme of making the main marian idea that of Mary as the archetype of the Church. This does not take sufficient account of the centrality of her unique calling to be the *Theotokos*. Such an extreme is apparently another form of abstraction in not allowing the concrete meaning of Mary's motherhood to connote the 'ecclesio-typical' emphasis.

Edward Schillebeeckx seems to propose a mediating position when he states:

Her concrete motherhood with regard to Christ, the redeeming God-man, freely accepted in faith — her fully committed divine motherhood — this is both the key to a full understanding of the marian mystery and the basic mariological principle, which is concretely identical with Mary's objectively and subjectively unique state of being redeemed.¹⁵

His thesis includes both the christocentric (Mary's 'fully committed divine motherhood') and the 'ecclesio-typical' (her 'objectively and subjectively unique state of being redeemed') within the single organic principle as the main marian idea. Mary's unique vocation in salvation history to be the *Theotokos* must be contemplated in close

connection with the gifts that reveal her calling to be the archetype of the Church. As the first fruits of her Son's redemption, Mary is uniquely redeemed *objectively* (the Immaculate Conception). In responding with complete openness to God's word at the Annunciation and the various events of her pilgrimage of faith throughout her spiritual odyssey, she is uniquely redeemed *subjectively*. Having welcomed the Redeemer into her own life in appropriating the gift of his redemptive love, Mary, at the same time, co-operated maternally in Christ's objective redemption of the human race. While Christ alone is our Redeemer, her 'fully committed divine motherhood' has bestowed upon her graced and free act of identification with his objective redemption, a truly redemptive meaning and value for all the members of his redeemed-redeeming body the Church.

The concrete meaning of Mary's motherhood which is both bridal and virginal, has also rich 'ecclesio-typical significance'.¹⁶ Her relationship as spiritual bride of the Redeemer is based both upon the vocal *fiat* of her free consent to the wedding of divinity and humanity at the Annunciation and upon her silent *fiat* at the foot of the cross, where her compassion freely accepted the fruits of her Son's sacrifice for herself and his whole Church. Mary's bridal motherhood must also be virginal since, had she been made fruitful by man's power instead of the breath of the Holy Spirit, her bridal relationship with the *Logos* incarnate would have been obscured. Likewise her perpetual virginity typifies complete commitment and continuous fidelity to Christ and his mission. Mary, then, is the archetype of the Church and also the bridal and virginal mother of Christ and, so called, to be constantly faithful to his word and to share his life of redeeming love with all.

As bridal and virginal mothers, both Mary and the Church are intimately related to the Holy Spirit. As Cardinal Suenens has so often brought out in many magnificent ways, their spiritual fecundity is the fruit of a continuous Pentecost, the abiding presence and activity of our risen Lord's Spirit. Among the redeemed people of God, Mary is the masterpiece of the new creation in her son's Holy Spirit who uniquely touched Mary and fashioned her to be the *Theotokos* and perfect disciple of Christ. In contemplating the concrete meaning of Mary's motherhood, the archetype of her own mystery, the Church comes to believe more firmly that the Spirit touches each one of her members in order to actualize what is best in the personality of each, for the sake of building up the whole body of

Christ in love. Mary is the exemplar of what the Church is called to be, and to become, in all her members as the *pleroma* of grace and glory (the Assumption).

Spiritual and ecumenical significance of Theotokos today

By way of giving some anthropological guidelines for devotion to our Lady, Pope Paul VI taught: 'she is worthy of imitation because she was the first and the most perfect of Christ's disciples. All of this has a permanent and universal exemplary value'.¹⁷ She exemplifies every christian virtue.¹⁸ This does not mean, however, that Mary is a blueprint model for the contemporary Christian to mimic. On the contrary we must prayerfully penetrate to the perennial relevance of her faith, hope, love, obedience, courage, fidelity, and concern. And, although her example is universal for all the redeemed members of her Son's Church, Mary does seem to have a special message for the contemporary christian woman. Concerning this Paul VI observed:

... the modern woman, anxious to participate with decision-making power in the affairs of the community, will contemplate with intimate joy Mary who, taken into dialogue with God, gives her active and responsible consent, not to the solution of a contingent problem, but to that 'event of world importance', as the Incarnation of the Word has been rightly called.¹⁹

If we are receptive to the enlightenments and inspirations of her son's Holy Spirit, the spiritual significance of the concrete meaning of Mary's motherhood will become clearer to each one of us. The year of 1981 marks the sixteenth centenary of Constantinople I (A.D. 381), the ecumenical council which defined the divinity of the third person of the Blessed Trinity. How fitting that we be especially aware of the Holy Spirit's central place in our spiritual lives.

The christocentric and ecclesio-typical interpretation of the *Theotokos* as the main marian idea is indeed ecumenically significant for several reasons. First, it reflects the faith of the scriptures and of the patristic tradition in the *undivided* Church, the common patrimony of all the christian churches and ecclesial communities today. Secondly, it moves away from a 'privilege-centred' towards a 'sharing-oriented' mariology which speaks more about the concrete meaning of her motherhood as an example of the complete christian disciple than about gifts and privileges which do not appear to have much connection with Christ or us. Finally, the *Theotokos*, rightly

understood as the fundamental principle of a systematic mariology, helps us apply the important teaching on a 'hierarchy of truths' found in Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* (n 11).²⁰ Since the Trinity, the Incarnation and Redemption constitute the central mysteries of our christian faith in this hierarchy or sacred order of revealed truths, the other dogmas of the Church, such as the marian, derive their principal salvific significance from illuminating and applying to daily life the central mysteries which we hold in common with our fellow Christians. And, in conclusion, the ecumenical problems associated with the invocation and intercession of Mary would be placed in better perspective by perceiving her spiritual maternity in glory, as based upon God's will for her motherhood of the Lord upon earth.²¹ As her motherly role in the accomplishment of redemption in no way interferes with the unique status of Christ as our sole Redeemer, so the ministry of Mary's spiritual maternity in mediating the fruits of redemption from heaven does not detract from, but only enhances, her Son's unique mediatorship.

NOTES

¹ Rahner, Hugo.: *Our Lady and the Church* (New York, 1961), p 37.

² Quoted by Leon Cardinal Suenens, 'Mary and the world of today', in *L'Osservatore Romano*, english edition (15 June 1972).

³ Fuller, R.: 'New Testament roots to the *Theotokos*', in *Marian Studies* 29 (1978), pp 46-64.

⁴ Denzinger, H. and Schönmetzer, A. (eds): *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, n 251, Letter of Bishop Cyril of Alexandria to Nestorius.

⁵ Laurentin, R.: *The question of Mary* (New York, 1965), p 104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 142-43.

⁷ Flannery, Austin (ed): *Vatican Council II — the conciliar and post-conciliar documents* (New York, 1975), pp 419-20, n 63.

⁸ Newman, John Henry.: *The new Eve* (Westminster, Md., 1952), p 89.

⁹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, U.S.A; *Behold your Mother: woman of faith* (Washington D.C., 1973), p 15.

¹⁰ Ware, K.: *The Mother of God in Orthodox theology and devotion* (Oxford, ESBVM, no 6), pp 4-5.

¹¹ *All generations shall call me blessed — XV devotions of Our Lady from Anglican writers of the XVII century*, gathered by Barnes (The Society of St Peter and St Paul, London, 1973), p 9.

¹² Semmelroth, Otto.: *Commentary on the documents of Vatican II*, vol 1, ed H. Vorgrimler (New York, 1967), p 286.

¹³ Aquinas, St Thomas: *Summa of Theology* III, q 35, a 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, q 30, a 1.

¹⁵ Schillebeeckx, Edward.: *Mary, mother of the redemption* (New York, 1964), p 106.

¹⁶ Semelroth, Otto.: *Mary, archetype of the Church* (New York, 1963), pp 117-42.

¹⁷ Pope Paul VI.: *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Washington D.C., 1974), p 26, n 35.

¹⁸ Aquinas, St Thomas.: *Explanation of the angelic salvation*.

¹⁹ Pope Paul VI.: *op. cit.*, p 27, n 37.

²⁰ Flannery, Austin: *op. cit.*, p 462, n 11. cf Jelly, Frederick M.: 'Marian dogmas within Vatican II's hierarchy of truths', in *Marian Studies* 27 (1976), pp 17-40.

²¹ Flannery, Austin: *op. cit.*, pp 418-19, nn 60-62.