

Mary as Liturgical Person

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I hope to offer some stammering but grateful words about Mary as a small repayment toward a debt I owe to her. When I want to puzzle my friends as to why I became Catholic, I give them a pop quiz on the liturgical calendar and say “Because my birthday is August 15 and Jesus still can’t refuse his mother anything.” The medieval person knew he had refuge to Mary because though he was a sinner, he was *her* sinner (*son pecheor*).¹

I want to speak about “Mary as liturgical person.” The reader will notice that I have used neither definite nor indefinite article in this title, for although I do think Mary is a liturgical person, and I do think she is *the* archetypal liturgical person, what I want to focus on here is how Mary exemplifies liturgical personhood itself.² Mary is the paradigm of Christian liturgical life in the cult of the New Adam. Seeing Mary as

¹ Cf. Eileen Power, introduction to Johannes Herolt’s *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1928) xxvii: “the point is not that the man is a sinner, but that he is *her* sinner, ‘son pecheor,’ as Gautier de Coincy puts it.” And also Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1980) 144:

*“Mais cele ou sort tote pities
Tote douceurs tote amisties
Et qui les siens onques n’oublie
SON PECHEOR n’oblia mie.*

‘HER sinner!’ Mary would not have been a true queen unless she had protected her own.”

² Canon 96 of the Code of Canon Law says, “By baptism one is incorporated into the Church of Christ and is constituted a person in it with duties and rights.” The commentary explains that this canon is using a classic definition of person, namely, “a subject of rights and duties.” A liturgical person is someone with duties and rights in the cult of the New Adam.

liturgical person brings her nearer to every Christian who is also in formation as liturgical person. She is for us the model of liturgical life, and as such she is the icon of humanity in its fullness.

Jean Corbon writes that “the Virgin Mary is the Church as it dawns in a single person.”³ In so saying, he must be using a thicker grammar about the Church than is used in ordinary conversation. He must mean something like what Clement meant when he said “If we do the will of God our Father, we shall be of the first Church, which is spiritual, which was created before the sun and moon.”⁴ This is the protological and eschatological Church, which is both the reason for creation’s start, as well as the transfiguring power to bring creation to its proper end. This Church is something like a dynamism within history, as Olivier Clément suggests when he writes that “the Church is nothing other than the world in the course of transfiguration.”⁵ This Church is salvation-in-motion, as Charles Journet suggests: “the Church is the world being reconciled to God,”⁶ and pointedly adds “thus the frontier of the Church passes through each one of those who call themselves her members, enclosing within her bounds all that is pure and holy, leaving outside all that is sin and stain.”⁷ This Church is a divine artifact, as Pope Benedict XVI suggests when he writes, “The Church is not a manufactured item; she is, rather, the living seed of God that must be allowed to grow and ripen. This is why the Church needs the Marian mystery; this is why the Church herself is a Marian mystery.”⁸ This living seed has

³ Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship* (New York: Paulist, 1988), 173.

⁴ 2 Clement 14:1. Something that is created, not Uncreated, but which existed before matter (i.e. sun and moon) is a motivating component of Sophiology. Consider Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁵ Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New York: New City Press, 1995), 95.

⁶ Charles Journet, *The Theology of the Church*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 38.

⁷ Charles Journet, *The Church of the Word Incarnate* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1955), xxvii.

⁸ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “My Word Shall not Return to me Empty!” in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, eds., *Mary: the Church at the Source* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 16–17.

been at work underneath the whole cosmic history until it broke through the surface in the Incarnation to become visible, as one liturgical anthology phrases it:

Through its sacred signs the liturgy celebrates the work of salvation that God the Father accomplished through Christ in the Holy Spirit. This salvation is a work that God the Father has carried on through the ages. This is the salvation announced by the patriarchs and prophets. ... This is the salvation that was fully revealed in Christ Jesus. ... This is the salvation that comes to pass in the “age of the Church.” This is the salvation that will reach its consummation in Christ’s glorious Second Coming.⁹

This is the Church that Ambrose saw in his neophytes and their mystagogy. In the Song of Songs, he hears Christ speaking to a newly baptized. “Christ, beholding His Church, ... seeing, that is, a soul pure and washed in the laver of regeneration, says: ‘Behold, you are fair, My love, behold you are fair, your eyes are like a dove’s.’”¹⁰ The baptized are beautiful for having the Holy Spirit now living in them, looking out from their eyes, so to speak; they are beautiful for being transparent to the light of the indwelling Spirit and showing forth the beauty of what the Church really is, as it is intended by God.¹¹ Therefore, Ambrose concludes, “the Church is beautiful in them.”¹² He reverses our ordinary grammar, speaking not about the Church we go into but the Church that comes into us.

This Church-in-motion is the liturgy. Liturgy is the life of Christ soaking into us ever since our baptism moistened these dry mortal bones for resurrection. Liturgy is a eucharistic transfusion of Christ’s blood into our veins, like an intravenous

⁹ General Introduction to *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1988) ¶4.

¹⁰ Ambrose, *On the Mysteries*, 7:37.

¹¹ Gratitude to my colleague, Pamela Jackson, for phrasing it this way in a conversation.

¹² Ambrose, 7:39.