

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: The Miracles of Jesus

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The Approachability of Jesus

Newsweek ran an article in its August 25th, 1997 issue about a movement within the Roman Catholic Church. Led by Mother Theresa millions of Roman Catholics signed and submitted a petition to Pope John Paul II in an effort to name Mary, the Mother of our Lord, as Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, and Advocate for all Christians. This would be the fifth and final Marian dogma. Members of *Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici* ("The Voice of the People for Mary Mediatrix") spearheaded the effort.

Rome defends this by arguing that when the Roman Catholic Church invokes Mary under the title, "Coredemptrix", she means that Mary uniquely participated in the redemption of the human family by Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour. At the Annunciation (cf. Luke 1:38) Mary freely cooperated in giving the Second Person of the Trinity his human body which is the very instrument of redemption, as Scripture tells us: "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10).

Rome further declares that at the foot of the cross of our Saviour (John 19:26), Mary's intense sufferings, united with those of her Son, as Pope John Paul II tells us, were, "also a contribution to the Redemption of us all" (*Salvifici Doloris*, n.25). Because of this intimate sharing in the redemption accomplished by the Lord, the Mother of the Redeemer is uniquely and rightly referred to by Pope John Paul II and the Church as the "Coredemptrix."

Rome says that it is important to note that the prefix "co" in the title Coredemptrix does not mean "equal to" but rather "with", coming from the Latin word *cum*. The Marian title Coredemptrix, Rome claims, never places Mary on a level of equality with her Divine Son, Jesus Christ. Rather it refers to Mary's unique human participation which is completely secondary and subordinate to the redeeming role of Jesus, who alone is true God and true Man.¹

One of the documents of Vatican II, declares,

"This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led into their blessed home. Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix. This, however, is so understood that it neither takes away anything from nor adds anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator."

(*Lumen Gentium* Vatican II §62)

One of the titles Vatican II gave Mary in that document is Advocate because she intercedes before God on our behalf as our advocate and also on December 8th, 2000 Pope John Paul referred to Our Lady as our Advocate of Mercy. In the prayer which we pray after the Rosary, the "Hail Holy Queen", we ask Mary to intercede before God for us. We ask Mary to be our "gracious advocate" before God.²

The distinct impression, and one commonly used by Roman Catholics is that Mary is much more approachable than her *stern* Son.

Rome likes to cite James 5:16 in support of its position on Mary. To pray for someone is one thing, to be a mediator in the biblical sense is quite another. The one is sanctioned in Scripture, the other is strictly forbidden—for there is only one mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. The position that the Roman Church assigns to Mary far exceeds the simple and innocent illustration of someone who prays for someone else. In its theology, she is a mediatrix with all the powers and prerogatives which are given to Jesus Christ in Scripture. She is placed on a par, equal in dignity, honour and function with the Lord of glory. Mary is a channel of grace to men; God had ordained that all the grace that Christ has won should be mediated through Mary. Roman Catholic apologist Karl Keating is explicit on this point: "No grace accrues to us without intercession...Through God's will, grace is not conferred on anyone without Mary's co-operation."³

Chronologically, the event we dealing with follows the famous “Sermon on the Mount”. Other healings (the demoniac at the synagogue, Peter’s mother-in-law, and evening crowds outside Peter’s home) had preceded the cleansing of the leper. What we find then is a movement from the words of Jesus to the deeds of Jesus. The fact that His words are put first may be designed to indicate the relative importance of the two. The words, S. Lewis Johnson points out, “are more important than the deeds.”⁴ The point that needs to be understood is that the main purpose behind this solemn procession of miracles is the confirming of the authority with which Jesus had spoken. The miracles are the credentials, the identifying signs that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God (Isaiah 29:18 – 19; 35:5 – 6; 61:1). “To those who believe that Jesus Christ was what he claimed to be, that is, to those who believe in the Incarnation, there is no difficulty about miracles. They are,” remarks Plummer, “the natural works of a supernatural person.”⁵

THE TEXT

“...a man full of leprosy” (Luke 5:12). Matthew and Mark have simply “a leper”. Luke the physician notes the advanced stage of the disease. The word “full” (Gk. pleres) was used in Greek lit. to refer to the manning of a ship, the full crew of a vessel ready for sea.⁶ Thus the man was in the final stages of the disease.

I. LEPROSY AS FOUND IN BIBLICAL TIMES

The form of leprosy that we encounter in the Bible is most commonly referred to a white leprosy. It prevailed among the Hebrews to an unusual extent. Barclay writes: “It might begin with little modules which go on to ulcerate. The ulcers develop a foul discharge; the eyebrows fall out; the eyes become staring, the vocal chords become ulcerated and the voice becomes hoarse, and breath wheezes. The hands and feet always ulcerate. Slowly the sufferer becomes a mass of ulcerated growths. The average course of that kind of leprosy is nine years and it ends in mental decay, coma, and ultimately death.”⁷ The disease runs through the skin to the muscle and into the bone. Keil – Delitzsch write in further detail. “The hair becomes white and wooly, and at length falls off; hard gelatinous swellings are formed in cellular tissue; the skin gets hard, rough and seamy, lymph exudes from it, and forms large scabs, which fall off from time to time, and under these are often offensive running sores. The nails then swell, curl up, and fall off; entropium (introversion of the eyelids) is formed, with bleeding gums, the nose stopped up, and a considerable flow of saliva... the senses become dull, the patient gets thin and weak, colliquative (frequent) diarrhea sets in, and incessant thirst and burning fever terminate his sufferings.”⁸

II. THE LIFE OF A LEPER

What with the horrible condition of a leper, one might expect that people would show compassion to one so sore afflicted. But such was not the case. Instead their burdens were increased. They had to take on a mourners appearance and to constantly cry out to others “Unclean, unclean.” Alfred Edersheim, the great Christian Jewish scholar, remarks, “No one was even to salute him; his was to be low, inclining towards the ground. If he even put his head into a place, it became unclean. No less a distance than six feet must be kept from a leper; or if the wind came from that direction, a hundred feet. One Rabbi boasted, that he threw stones at them to keep them far off, while others hid themselves or ran away.”⁹

III. LEPROSY ILLUSTRATES SIN

Why so graphic a description of a disease that is almost non-existent today? Why preach a sermon on leprosy? From among all diseases, leprosy has been selected by the Holy Spirit to stand in Scripture as the supreme type of sin, as seen by God! Let us therefore study it so as to truly see the awful character of sin. (Isaiah 1:4 – 6)

- (1) Leprosy is undoubtedly selected to a special to a special type of sin, on account of its extreme LOATHSOMENESS.
- (2) Another characteristic of the disease and sin is its INSIGNIFICANT AND OFTEN IMPERCEPTIBLE BEGINNING.
- (3) It is PROGRESSIVE. It progresses slowly, but progress is sure. So it is with sin. (II Timothy 3:13) “Sin may not develop in all with equal rapidity, but it does progress in every natural man outwardly or inwardly, with equal certainty.”¹⁰
- (4) Another mark of leprosy is that sooner or later it AFFECTS THE WHOLE MAN, again a symbol of sin.
- (5) As the disease progresses from bad to worse, the victim becomes more and more INSENSIBLE. (Ephesians 4:19, “past feeling”)
- (6) Another element of the solemn fitness of the type is found in the persistently HEREDITARY nature of leprosy. Is anything more uniformly characteristic of sin? (Romans 5:12 – 19)
- (7) Among ancient Hebrews the disease was regarded as INCURABLE by human means. (see II Kings 5:7)
- (8) Lastly, the supreme lesson, as with the symbolic disease of the body, so with that of the soul, sin SHUTS OUT FROM GOD AND FROM FELLOWSHIP OF THE HOLY. (see Revelation 21:7; 22:15)

IV. THE LEPER’S CONDITION

The leper knew his condition, his hopelessness, he was “full of leprosy” (Luke 5:12). Our condition without Christ is the same (Romans 5:6 – 8; Ephesians 2:1, 12). Trench writes, “The leper, thus fearfully bearing about in the body the outward and visible tokens of sin in the soul, was treated throughout as a sinner, as one in whom sin had reached its climax, as dead in trespasses and sins. He was himself a dreadful parable of death.”¹¹

“...came to Jesus...beseeching him and falling on his knees...” (Mark 1:40). This outcast dared to approach Jesus! This fact provides two implications about the person of Jesus:

- (1) Jesus conveyed a conviction of capability or power.
- (2) Jesus conveyed a conviction of openness and approachability (in contrast to His contemporaries). The leper would have fled from a Rabbi, but Jesus was approachable (Hebrews 2:16 – 18; 4:13 – 16). One who had leprosy felt he could approach Jesus.

V. THE LEPER’S CRY

“...thou canst make me clean...” The leper was sure that Jesus was able to help. “...This is more an expression of confidence in Jesus’ ability,” Cranfield points out, “than of doubt about his willingness. But nevertheless it is an entreaty (perhaps approaching ‘Do cleanse me, for thou canst!’) and the sector directs attention here and in the next verse to Jesus’ will to heal.”¹²

VI. JESUS’ RESPONSE

“...moved with compassion...” (Mark 1:41). “Compassion” (Gk. *splagchnisthesis*) – “The centre of human feeling and sensibility generally...a portion of man’s inward parts as the seat of feelings.”¹³
“...put forth His hand...and touched him...” (Matthew 8:3; Mark 1:41; Luke 5:13) “That touch,” writes Laidlaw, “was everything to the lonely outcast. It swept the barrier down that held him aloof from mankind. Every looker-on shrunk back for fear of defilement. All held their breath at the unwonted boldness of the act. But the outstretched hand of the Son of Man was laid with fearless and loving clasp on the unclean.”¹⁴ Calvin remarks, “By His word alone He might have healed the leper but He applied...the touch of His hand, to express the feeling of compassion.”¹⁵

“...I am willing; be cleansed...” The result was instant. “The skin returned to its natural color and health. The members returned to wholeness. The voice was immediately firm, clear, and sound. The odors vanished.”
“Better still,” remarks Johnson, “there came social and civil restoration to family, friends, and the community.”¹⁶

VII. JESUS’ SPIRIT-CENTERED INTEREST

He immediately commanded the healed man not to tell of Jesus’ part and forceably sent the man away. Jesus shrank from the fame connected with miracles and from aspirations for mere temporal benefits. The man disobeyed Jesus. But Jesus would not become a mere humanitarian. He “withdrew Himself in the deserts, and prayed...” (Luke 5:15 – 16) He did not want to be known as a mere miracle performer, with the promise of physical and material blessing to all who would come to Him.

CONCLUSION:

The Jesus that we meet in the New Testament was approachable—especially by those who saw their own unworthiness. The New Testament *never* portrays Mary as a Coredemptrix or as an intercessor. They focus on Christ *alone*, not Mary or the Apostles nor the saints. Christ *only* is the focus of the New Testament. Machen put it so well when he wrote, “In Christ, all things are ours. There is now no awful beyond of mystery and fear. We cannot explain the world. But we rejoice now that we cannot explain it. To us it is all unknown. But it contains no mysteries for our Saviour. He is on the throne. He is at the centre. He is ground and explanation of all things. He pervades the remotest bounds. In Him all things consist. The world is full of dread, mysterious powers. They touch us already in a thousand woes. But from all of them we are safe. ‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’”¹⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.catholicsource.net/articles/coredemptrix.html>.

² http://www.frtommylane.com/homilies/year_c/02.htm.

³ Cited by William Webster, *The Church of Rome at the Bar of History* (Banner of Truth, 1995), p. 86. Over the past few years a number of prominent evangelicals in a new desire to promote bridge building with Rome have been willing to embrace a distinctly Roman Catholic understanding of Mary. These include the likes of John Armstrong, Scott McKnight and Tim Perry who authored the book *Mary for Evangelicals: Towards an Understanding of the Mother of Our Lord* (IVP, 2006) Perry is willing to give Mary a proper place in her role as intercessor, mediator and advocate – although he suggests that, from his own self-proclaimed Reformed perspective, Mary’s role as coredemptrix can be affirmed ‘only in the weakest possible sense,’ since from this perspective Mary cannot be regarded as cooperating synergistically with grace (p. 306). Evangelicals would do well on this particular subject to listen to Karl Barth who warned concerning the Christological context of Marian teaching in the NT, “In this category is to be put the well-known *kecharitomene* of Luke 1:28, which, translated *gratia plena*, has given rise to so many mariological speculations, against which ought to have contributed a serious warning.” It is interesting to note the NIV rendering is, ‘Greetings, you who are

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- highly favoured.' The Roman Catholic Douai-Rheims Bible translates as 'Hail, full of grace', while both RSV and Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible relegate the poorly attested 'blessed are you among women' to the margin, although of course it is found in Luke 1:42. Barth boldly declared that the Marian dogma is neither more nor less than the critical, central dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. In the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest. *Church Dogmatics* (T & T Clark, 1956), I, 2. 139 – 143. cf. also David Parker, 'Evangelicals and Mary: Recent Theological Evaluations', in *Evangelical Review of Theology* (2006), 30:2, 121 – 140.
- ⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, *Sermons on Matthew*, Believers Bible Bulletin (Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas, 1976), Lesson 25, p. 1.
- ⁵ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* (MacMillan, 1909), p. 122.
- ⁶ *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975), vol. I, p. 734.
- ⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster, 1958), I, p. 300 – 1.
- ⁸ Keil – Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1975), vol. I, p. 378.
- ⁹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Longmans, 1896), vol. I, p. 495.
- ¹⁰ S. H. Kellog, *The Expositor's Bible* (1921), vol. I, p. 322.
- ¹¹ R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Miracles and Parables of the Lord* (Revell, 1968), p. 231.
- ¹² C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, St. Mark* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 91.
- ¹³ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1971), vol. VII, p. 551.
- ¹⁴ John Laidlaw, *The Miracles of Our Lord* (Baker, 1956), p. 173.
- ¹⁵ *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1972), vol. I, p. 244.
- ¹⁶ S. Lewis Johnson, *Ibid*, p. 5.
- ¹⁷ J. Gresham Machen, *God Transcendent* (Eerdmans, 1949) , p. 80.