

The Marian Texts Blend with Each Other And Define Each Other

When the great Cardinal Newman was beginning to move towards the Catholic Church, one of the difficulties which presented itself to him was the prominence of Mary in the thought and worship of the Church. At that time he was under the influence of the Protestant opinion that such devotion to her was a comparatively modern growth and unjustified. That idea further contended that there was no sign of devotion towards her in the primitive Church, and that the first traces of it were only to be discerned after the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Here let it be remarked that 431 is early enough in the life of the Church. At that stage the Church was only beginning to know itself. It was only one hundred years out of the Catacombs. Before the time of Constantine, the Church was outlawed. Outbursts of persecution were frequent. Churches could not be built. Worship was largely secret and the liturgy was necessarily undeveloped,

reduced to skeleton form. Aspects of devotion which later on would figure prominently were not thought of. It was the case of a flower gradually unfolding. But this would affect approaches to Our Lord just as much as those to Our Lady.

Newman applied an apt description of that situation. His minute examination of the past convinced him that everything in the later Church was to be found in the primitive Church but in germ or miniature form. He suggested that it was like looking at a scene through a lens or diminishing glass; everything was reduced, some of it almost to invisibility. But it was all there. Then reverse that process into magnification and the fact of faithful proportion between infancy and maturity becomes evident.

When Newman began to delve into the very earliest years for indications of devotion to Mary, he had no trouble in finding it. What was there was significant; it was the recognition of Mary as the New Eve. It would be impossible to assign her a higher level than that. For it makes her intrinsic in Christianity. I mention that this is the very latest expression given to her in the latest papal document, *Marialis Cultus*. 'Intrinsic' is a very special word. It goes deeper than 'important' or 'essential', which could relate to accessories only. Intrinsic means that something belongs to the inner essence, so that if it be removed, the character of the thing is no longer the same.

That is the identical idea which is presented to us by the rendering of Mary to us as the New Eve; it makes her intrinsic in salvation. The part that Eve played in the Fall and in her subsequent housekeeping for Adam was utterly intrinsic – if indeed we can apply the word 'utterly' to what is already superlative. If Mary had a role proportionally equivalent to that of Eve, then Mary is

unquestionably intrinsic in Christianity; so that what the Pope says today is no more than what the Adam and Eve parallel proclaimed in the first age of the Church.

The effort has been made to take from the force of this by pointing to the fact that St Paul, when specifying Jesus as the New Adam, carefully abstained from terming Mary the New Eve. The suggestion is that he did not regard her as a New Eve. But if that were so, he was more than imprudent to call Our Lord the New Adam. Because logical minds would not stop where he had done but would press on. This would be inevitable. Adam and Eve were so closely conjoined as to be almost one expression; they cannot be thought of apart. St Paul was not mentally defective; therefore there had to be a good reason for his silence about the New Eve. Anyone aware of the special circumstances of that time would know that reason. It was that in the first presentation of Christianity to the pagan people there would have to be nothing which would create an impression that Mary was a female goddess beside her god-man son. All the pagan religions possessed that feature of a female deity beside the male one. That had to be avoided and for the moment Mary had to recede into the background.

But that reason no longer held when the Christian teaching had been spread and when instructed converts were about in number to explain the Christian position. We see that the immediate successors of the apostles took the forward step which had been inferential in St Paul's teaching and did not hesitate to propagate the full Adam and Eve parallel. Mary was preached as the New Eve. All that emerged from Newman's analysis of the beginning of Christianity and was conclusive for him as setting the role of Mary in the highest possible relief.

I do not discuss the further interesting implications of the Adam and Eve analogy. I content myself with repeating that in the most primitive era of Christianity, Mary is shown in the same primary position as the latest papal document ascribes to her – no more, no less.

That Adam and Eve analogy so peremptorily portrays the central place of Mary in Christian doctrine that it would seem impossible to go further. Yet I dare to think that it is possible to touch greater heights both of antiquity and of grandeur in regard to her; that even a more portentous pronouncement is available – actually given to us in words of the Eternal Father himself.

Immediately after the fall of Adam and Eve, God spoke words which though directed to Satan were really addressed to the coming generations of men to serve as a mainstay to them. This would be necessary. Mankind knew itself to be reduced to the extreme of deprivation. They sat in darkness and in the shadow of death. If they were not to surrender completely to their misery it was imperative that they be given hope. They must realise that their present condition was not final but a tunnel which, however long it might be, had an exit into happiness. That prophecy pointed to a future restoration. It was as a point of light in the distance but it was enough to keep faith alive.

That first of all prophecies was contained in a brief sentence: 'The Lord God said to the serpent; I will put enmities between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. She shall crush your head' (Gn 3:15). That sentence has been styled the *Protevangelium* which is a Greek term meaning 'the first Gospel'. That is a colossal description to bestow on a sentence, but not an excessive one considering its infinite importance. Into a

brief compass it contrives to impress the substance and quality of an entire gospel. I will try to show its almost unbelievable scope and its Marian import.

It is a promise of Redemption. The element which it mentions first is the woman who shall repair what a woman ruined. It makes it clear that she is not going to accomplish the restoration by herself any more than Eve wrought the harm by herself. She will have a child and between them in a sort of partnership they will crush the head of the serpent who had crushed Adam and Eve.

There, immediately after the Fall, we have in precise outline the same image of the new Adam and Eve which the Church will use thousands of years afterwards. Both images show that the Redemption represented what is called a divine revenge. In other words by a merciful process it took every detail of the Fall and converted it into the opposite purpose.

I have spoken of a partnership between the woman and her seed. That is not to signify an equal partnership. Jesus is divine. His mother is not. It is his virtue which affects the Redemption, but nonetheless her co-operation is made necessary to it just in the same measure as Eve's action was instrumental in the Fall even though it was in Adam that the race fell.

The same type of mind which refuses to put the New Eve beside the New Adam likewise will not recognise Mary in the woman of Genesis. Then whom do they make out that woman to be? Surely she is unmistakably the mother of the Messiah who is designated as the seed? So one would think but they will not have it so.

They claim that the word 'woman' does not denote an individual but stands for the Chosen People out of whom the Messiah will spring. Of course there are innumerable

examples in scripture where such a symbolism is employed. Can this be one of them? If it is, it is a mixed symbolism, the case of a class bringing forth an individual person. An interesting commentary on this is afforded by the fact that the modern Jews, having being compelled by the lapse of time to abandon the hope of a person as the Messiah, have taken refuge in the idea of a national restoration of their people brought about by political or military means. But would this not make nonsense of the other interpretation, for the two together would say that the Jewish race will bring forth the Jewish race!

Let us delve into scripture and see what justification there can be for ruling out the woman as a real person.

1. The Fourth Chapter of Genesis (4:1) says that Eve conceived and brought forth Cain and said: 'I have gotten a man from the Lord.' Some writers have contended that this form of expression showed that Eve believed her child to be the promised Redeemer and herself to be the designated woman. This may only be a legend, but at least it would indicate that Adam and Eve, the immediate heirs to the Promise, believed that a real woman was to bring forth the Messiah. Furthermore, is it at all likely that the original, simple generations, for whom that prophesy was intended, would see in it anything but the direct sense that a real woman would have a real child?

At that moment, before a child had been born to constitute a family, and when the idea of a nation would be utterly before its time and inconceivable, why should God propose a symbolism which would be meaningless in the circumstances? I just say that it is not likely. Moreover, if God had been speaking in terms of a symbolism, it was not in that way that

people took it up. In their expectation the people looked forward to a personal Messiah and to a woman who would bear him. It became the ambition of the Jewish maiden that she might be that person.

2. Nor did the earliest races of men read the prophecy in that symbolic light. As mankind dispersed over the face of the earth they brought with them that prophecy. Though it became distorted in different ways, it formed the nucleus of all their ancient religions or mythologies. Side by side with their deity was a female one. This imagery unquestionably derived from that promised woman and her seed whom those peoples understood as real persons.
3. The Prophet Isaiah, about 700 years before Our Lord, declares (7:14): 'The Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be Emmanuel,' that is God is with us. Therefore it is a virgin who will bring forth and her child shall be none other than God himself. St Matthew includes that text in his Gospel (1:23).
4. St Matthew (1:20) tells us that when St Joseph was distressed at finding that his espoused wife was with child, the angel of the Lord instructed him: 'Fear not, son of David, to take unto thee Mary, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.' Here again is Mary's position defined. The Messiah has been conceived in her by the power and operation of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it could not have been God's intention to exclude her from his original promise of that very occurrence.
5. St Luke (1:42-43): 'Elizabeth cried out with a loud voice and said: blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to

me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?' This phrase that a person spoke with a loud voice is used in scripture to denote that it is an utterance of the Holy Spirit. There is no doubt in Elizabeth's mind as to the fact that the woman of Genesis stands before her, and that the child she carries within her is the promised Messiah.

6. St Matthew (2:11) says that when the Wise Men from the East came to Bethlehem, they found the child with Mary his mother. And immediately afterwards (2:13) the angel appeared to St Joseph and bade him to take the child and his mother and to fly into Egypt. Again this specific pointing to the mother and the Messiah!
7. St Luke's prodigious prediction description runs (1:35): 'The angel said to her: the Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy One who shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.' Where does this show the very slightest divine intention of overlooking or lessening the motherhood of Mary? Could language rise higher or speak more clearly? That passage of St Luke shows the fulfilment in time of the Genesis promise. Bring the two texts together and see how impossible it is to suppose that Mary is not the woman of Genesis. God is author of both of those texts, of the one which promises and of the one which describes the fulfilment of that promise.
8. St Luke (2:29-30; 34-35) tells us: 'Simeon said: now thou dost dismiss the servant O Lord according to thy word in peace; because my eyes have seen thy salvation. And he said to Mary his mother: behold this child is set for the Fall and Resurrection of many in

Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted. And thy own soul a sword shall pierce.'

As he speaks those prophetic words, the eyes of holy Simeon penetrate the future and see the accomplishment of the Redemption by the woman and her son. He is hanging upon the Cross, and she is being crucified in her soul.

9. The Apocalypse (12:1) says; 'And a great sign appeared in Heaven: a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of 12 stars.' This points to the glorified Mary. As the council teaches, she signifies in her person the fullness of Redemption. She is now what all saved mankind will be.

This sequence of texts could be pursued. But perhaps enough has been said to prove how strained and impossible in the circumstances would be any interpretation of that Genesis text which would turn the woman into a symbolism, meaning the Jewish people. This latter procedure is only possible if one divorces that text from those others which I have been quoting; and such a separation cannot be thought of. I will expand on this because of its extreme importance.

God is the originator of that first prophecy just as he is of the various texts which I have set out. He is not like a writer who in the course of the years may contradict himself, or give different meanings to the same thing.

To God a thousand years are but a moment; and all those different texts are as but one single thought of his. This fact will be our master key to the situation. We must bring all those texts together and see them as facets of God's prophecy to Satan. Each taken by itself may offer

a problem. Assembled, each explains the others and all blend into a harmony. Looked at thus, the Protevangelium could not be more clear about the future: the Blessed Virgin Mary, untouched by the Original Sin will bring forth the Son of God and with him will reverse the Fall and restore mankind.

None but the perverse could refuse to see what a vital part the Protevangelium thus gives to Mary. The Church has always mirrored it faithfully. The Catholic tradition assigned to her the office of crushing the serpent. The translation of the Old Testament into Latin put it: she shall crush your head, a rendering that must have been influenced by the common understanding of the day.

But it could also be translated by 'he' or 'they' or 'it', the cause of this varied possibility being the absence in Hebrew of the personal pronoun. The modern tendency is to adopt 'he', attributing the defeat of the serpent to the direct action of Jesus. Protestantism had its own reasons for reading it thus. Today for the sake of achieving a uniform Bible, the Church is turning to that version. Whichever word is used, the ultimate meaning is the same. Jesus, not Mary is the Redeemer. If Mary crushes the serpent, it is by the power of her son. But her essential place in the total scheme is evident is evident from the Protevangelium. She is second to Jesus. She is intrinsic in Christianity.

Another point: why does the Protevangelium use the word 'seed' instead of the more natural one of son or child which appears in the other parts of scripture where he is mentioned along with Mary? A special reason may be intended. So let us look carefully. 'Seed' points to a plurality as much as to an individual. But why suggest that when it is Jesus who is being prophesied? Can the explanation be that the great prophecy is also teaching

us the doctrine of the Mystical Body? To legionaries that doctrine is familiar. Perhaps for others I may devote a few words to it. It means that by baptism a union between Jesus and the soul is contracted. A sort of common life is subsequently lived in which each contributes to the union. The soul bestows its faith, its other qualities and energies – and perhaps its weaknesses. The Lord gives his divine power. The sum total of all the souls thus comprised, together with Jesus and his mother, form what the Church calls the Mystical Body. It is a real body and not in any sense a symbolism or mere image. It is the Catholic Church. In it each one fulfils a particular role. The leading roles are of course those of Jesus and Mary. Following the imagery of the human body, Our Lord is likened to the head, the principal part; and Our Lady to the heart, the distributor of life.

I repeat: can it that the use of the word ‘seed’ where we would expect to find a more individual expression, is to express that future fullness of Christ which we call the Mystical Body? This would display still more the nuclear richness of that first and divine prophecy. I quote from the Gospel of St John: (19: 26-27) ‘Jesus seeing his mother and the disciple John standing by the cross, said to his mother: woman behold thy son. Then he said to the disciple, behold thy mother.’ Therefore ‘seed’ is at the same time one and many. It stands for Jesus and his members. And Mary is true mother of both.

Note again the use of that word of destiny ‘woman’ in regard to Mary. I have given four instances of it, each representing an epochal moment of Redemption.

I bring them together: first, in the Protevangelium. Second, at Cana where Our Lord enters on his mission. Third, on Calvary where Our Lord consummated his

work. In saying 'woman' he is undoubtedly pointing back to the Protevangelium where he and Mary are promised. Fourthly, where Mary is crowned as the first fruits of Redeemed mankind.

I have made so much point of the Marian aspect of the Protevangelium because it seems to me to be the most significant of all scriptural pronouncements about Our Lady. I do not think that sufficient attention has been given to it from this aspect. As I have been urging, it compresses into a nutshell the whole mighty epic of Redemption. It starts by announcing the woman. She proceeds first in time; she has at least that little precedence over her son. But she does far more than arrive before him. She generated him both physically and by faith, and after that she is his partner, necessary to him for the carrying through of the divine plan in its entirety. Not only does she help in the winning of Redemption but in the application of it. Not only is she the mother of Jesus but of his Mystical Body, and as necessary to it as she was to him.

So I say it once again: As an exposition of Mary's place and grandeur, the First Prophecy stands monumental, towering over everything else. Mary is not the chief ingredient in Christianity. Jesus is that. But Mary is intrinsic to it.