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A NEW LOOK AT THE MARIAN DOGMAS IN SACRED SCRIPTURE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

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Abstract. This article will examine the writings of the Fathers of the Church on the four Marian dogmas: the Divine Maternity of Mary, her Perpetual Virginity, her Immaculate Conception, and her Bodily Assumption into Heaven. As will be shown later, the Fathers' teachings on the Church's Marian beliefs are found in their commentaries on the Sacred Scriptures. The purpose of this article is to show how the Church Fathers saw the figure of Mary in the pages of the Bible, what kind of exegetical perspective they had in their Biblical interpretation, and, lastly, how historical-critical exegesis can learn to interpret the Scripture as *God's word* correctly and properly from patristic-medieval exegesis.

Keywords. Marian dogmas; Fathers of the Church; patristic-medieval exegesis; historical-critical exegesis

Introduction

The Fathers of the Church are the earliest commentators of Sacred Scripture. "To understand how the Fathers approached the Scripture is probably the most indispensable means to

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understanding them in general."[1] They were a group of men from the East and West during the first eight hundred years of Christianity whose writings comprise a major part of what is called today "Ancient Christian Literature."[2] Today, their writings continue to be authoritative interpretations of the sacred text despite having gained harsh criticism from historical-critical exegetes as being archaic and unscientific or too mystical or spiritual.[3] Indeed, despite these criticisms, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is replete with quotations from the Church Fathers in its explanations of Church dogmas and doctrines.[4] In other words, the Church continues to give a high value to the teachings and commentaries of these ancient writers.

The dogmas of the Church regarding the Blessed Virgin Mary are teachings often criticized by exegetes of the historical-critical method. To cite an example, the Catholic Biblical scholar of the 20th century, John McKenzie, criticized Mariology and Marian devotion in this way:

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[1] B. Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 22.

[2] "Ancient Christian Literature is that of the early centuries of Christianity or of Christian antiquity. Authors generally fix the limit at the death of St. John of Damascus (c. 749) for the Greek Church, and at the death of St. Gregory the Great (604) or, better, of St. Isidore of Seville (636) for the Latin Church" (J. Tixeront, *A Handbook of Patrology*, trans. S. Raemers [London: B. Herder Book Co., 1947], 1).

[3] "Although twentieth-century scholars have tended to express themselves more modestly, their judgment of the value of classical biblical exegesis has been, in general, equally negative. The main focus of modern criticism has been that patristic and medieval exegesis relied so heavily on figural, or allegorical, interpretation—on taking texts, especially Old Testament texts, not simply [in] their 'plain sense' but as pointing to Christ, to Christian salvation, and to the growth of Christian believers—that the authentic meaning of the Bible was swallowed up in arbitrarily pious or pedantic fantasy" (B. Daley, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable? Some Reflections on Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms," in E. Davis & R. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* [Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003], 70–71).

[4] See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1997) [hereafter cited as *CCC*].

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> We have noticed that the meagre historical knowledge about the real Mary was no obstacle to the development of Mariology and Marian devotion; what Christians did not find they created. No doubt historical and biblical criticism has an iconoclastic effect upon Mariology.[5]
>
> The real or the historical Mary is [at] least as elusive as the real or the historical Jesus and not quite for the same reasons. The genuine historical evidence about Mary is so slight as to impose upon the historian, were anyone else concerned, an embarrassed silence. We know [as] little about her as we know about the mother of Abraham Lincoln, about whom Lincoln is credited with a remark that all he had he owed to his angel mother. Jesus did not even say for the record that much about Mary. But this has left the imagination of Christian devotion entirely unrestrained by information.
>
> The Mary of Christian legend, art, poetry, hymnody and even theology is a fictitious character. I am not sure that we can say of her that the Mary of faith is as important as the Mary of history. *Faith in the Mary of traditional Christian devotion is faith in something which is not true*.[6]

This statement of McKenzie's is a clear denial of the truthfulness of the Marian dogmas of the Church from the perspective of historical criticism. The Mary of faith is nothing else but a fictitious character, a figure based not really on history but on the creative faith and imagination of believers throughout the ages. This is by all means a clear attack on the faith of the Catholic Church regarding the person and role of Mary in salvation history. As a response to this, one can borrow an indispensable hermeneutic principle from Joseph Ratzinger and apply it also to Mary, that is, that the Christ of faith is the Jesus of history and vice versa.[7] As such, *the Mary of faith is also the Mary of history and vice versa*. The kind of interpretation advocated by McKenzie is evidently based on a highly critical and historical reading of Scripture that is devoid of the Church's faith and tradition. What one gets is

[5] J. McKenzie, "The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament," in H. Küng & J. Moltmann, eds., *Mary in the Churches* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 10.

[6] McKenzie, "The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament," 9.

[7] See J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1: *From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. A. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xxi–xxii.

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a very secular reading of a text that is supposed to be sacred and an expression of the faith of the ecclesial community. When the Bible is read like other secular books, it ends up simply being one of them.

The purpose of the present article is to show the truthfulness of the Marian dogmas of the Church—how they are deeply rooted in Sacred Scripture, and the writings of the Church Fathers are the aid to seeing this truth. Before the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was officially defined by Bl. Pius IX as a dogma of the Church in 1854 through the apostolic constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*,[8] and the doctrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin in 1950 by Pius XII through the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*,[9] both doctrines had already been taught by the Church Fathers. Their explanations of these doctrines were simply based on their careful reading and interpretation of the Bible. This also applies to the dogmas of Mary's Divine Maternity and Perpetual Virginity which were very dear and favorite doctrines explained and defended by the patristic writers against the attacks of pagans and heretics.

1. Mary, Mother of God

During the early part of the fifth century, Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, taught that to call Mary the *Theotokos* (God-bearer) or Mother of God is theologically inappropriate and preposterous.[10] He claims that the sacred text taught that Mary is *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer), never *Theotokos*. He even accused those who were believers

[8] See R. Laurentin, "The Role of the Papal Magisterium in the Development of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception," in E. O'Connor, ed., *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 314–318.

[9] See H. Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion,* Vol. II: *From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 146–150.

[10] See H. Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion,* Vol. I: *From the Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 104.

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and who were teaching that Mary is *Theotokos* to be heretics.[11] His theological reasoning is rooted in the proposition that God as divine and eternal could not have been born. Jesus is of two persons; he is a Divine Person and a human person. Mary is the mother of Christ, the human person, and never of the Divine Person.[12] Here one can immediately see where the heresy of Nestorius is rooted—in the denial of the *hypostatic union* of the Word with his humanity. For Nestorius, there is no such thing as the union of the divinity and the humanity in the Divine Person of Christ. Instead, what he taught was the moral union between the humanity and divinity of Christ, "the indwelling of the Word in man as in a temple."[13]

St. Cyril, the Patriarch of Alexandria, was quick to make a response to the heretical views of the Patriarch of Constantinople. Among his many letters to Nestorius, it is his *Second Letter* that has the most profound theological significance. "This letter gets to the theological heart of the matter and shows it to be clearly Christological."[14] Here St. Cyril immediately understood that the controversy around the *Theotokos* is not simply an issue regarding Mary, that it has something to do, above all else, with the correct understanding of the Person of Christ. The right formulation regarding the identity of Mary as the Mother of God is a consequence of a correct understanding of the mystery of the hypostatic union. Three paragraphs from his second letter to Nestorius are worth quoting here to show the essential connection between the doctrine of the hypostatic union and the doctrine of the *Theotokos*:

> We do not say that the nature of the Word was transformed into flesh, nor [that] it was transformed into a [human person] composed of soul and body; we do assert that the Word, being hypostatically united to a

[11] See N. Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2000), 34.

[12] See Graef, *Mary,* Vol. I, 104.

[13] G. Alastruey, *The Blessed Virgin Mary*, Vol. I (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1964), 48.

[14] J. Bastero, *Mary, Mother of the Redeemer: A Mariology Textbook,* trans. M. Adams & P. Griffin (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), 159.

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> body informed by a rational soul, in an ineffable and incomprehensible way, became [a human person] and was called "Son of Man," not by his mere will and pleasure, nor by the assumption of a person; and we say that the natures are distinct, though they are joined in a true unity; yet both constitute a single Christ, a single Son; not in the sense that the diversity of the natures was taken away by the union, but in the sense that divinity and humanity, through their indescribable and hidden concourse, constitute a single Lord and Son, Jesus Christ.
>
> Thus it can be affirmed that even though he subsisted before all ages and was generated by the Father, he was also generated by a woman according to the flesh. But that does not mean that his divine nature took its origin from the holy Virgin or that this nature needed a second birth after his birth from the Father (indeed, it would clearly be unreasonable and foolish to say that he who existed before all ages and who is coeternal with the Father had need of a second generation in order to exist). Rather, it means that, for our sake and for our salvation, he assumed his human nature into the unity of his Person and was born of a woman; this is why it is said that he was born according to the flesh. Therefore, we must not think that the holy Virgin gave birth to some unspecified man, into whom the Word descended later; no, we must believe that there was one single reality from the first moment in his Mother's womb and that he was born according to the flesh, accepting the birth of his own body.…
>
> This is what the orthodox faith affirms everywhere; this is what we find in the works of the holy Fathers. That is why they do not hesitate to call the holy Virgin *Theotokos*, not in the sense that the divine nature of the Word took its origin from the holy Virgin, but in the sense that he took his holy body, gifted with a rational soul, from her. Yet, because the Word is hypostatically united to this body, one can say that he was truly born according to the flesh.[15]

There is no better explanation regarding the hypostatic union and the divine maternity of Mary found in the patristic era than this explanation of St. Cyril. Here Nestorius's erroneous concept regarding

[15] St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Letter II to Nestorius*, in J. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca* (Paris: 1857–1866), 77, 44–49 [hereafter cited as PG]; L. Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. T. Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 238–239 [hereafter cited as *MFC*].

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Christ as both a Divine Person and a human person is overcome by explaining that what was conceived in, and later came out of, the womb of the blessed Virgin was not simply a human nature but a Divine Person wherein human nature and divine nature are perfectly united. Mary gave birth to the Incarnate Second Person of the Trinity; that is why it is correct to call and honor her as the Mother of God. She is the origin of Christ's humanity but never of his divinity.

A further objection to the doctrine of the *Theotokos* resides in the fact that Mary was never explicitly called "Mother of God" in the New Testament. "Nowhere does the Holy Scripture formally and explicitly say that Mary is the Mother of God, *Theotokos*, or *Deigenetrix*."[16] This term is apparently not rooted in the sacred text. But if one carefully examines Luke 1:35, one will immediately recognize the identity of the child Mary is about to carry in her womb:

> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called *Son of God* [emphasis added]."

In this Lucan passage, Jesus is identified as the *Son of God*. Here one will understand the theological position of St. Cyril regarding Mary as the *Theotokos*. Mary is the *Mother of God* due to the obvious reason that her Son is the *Son of God*. In other words, it was clear enough for St. Cyril that the identity and role of Mary can never be separated from that of her Son. Mariology always exists from and follows Christology. The explanation of the Patriarch of Alexandria is rooted in a careful and prayerful theological reflection on the sacred text. Nevertheless, despite this eloquent explanation of St. Cyril regarding this matter, Nestorius refused to recant his erroneous theological position.

> Finally convinced that he [would be] unable to resolve the controversy with Nestorius directly, Cyril appealed to the authority of the pope, Celestine I.… Nestorius then appealed to Emperor Theodosius II, who decided to call an ecumenical council to be held at Ephesus, beginning on Pentecost 431.[17]

[16] Bastero, *Mary, Mother of the Redeemer*, 155.

[17] *MFC,* 236.

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It was at this Council of Ephesus that the bishops and patriarchs headed by St. Cyril formally condemned Nestorius's heretical views on Christ and his Mother. Nestorius was excommunicated and deposed from the see of Constantinople. Truly, the Council of Ephesus was one of the most significant ecumenical councils during the early Church, and Luigi Gambero was right enough to describe the council in this way:

> If we consider it [the council] from the perspective of the Church's faith, we need to recognize that clear and precise decisions were made from the beginning. Mary was solemnly declared *Theotokos*, as a consequence of the fact that the two natures of Christ are inseparably united in a single Divine Person. Thus the Council, which had been called to resolve an essentially christological problem, had an important mariological outcome.[18]

Aside from St. Cyril's defense of Mary's divine maternity during the Nestorian controversy, it is also good to explore and examine some of the writings of the Church Fathers from before the Council of Ephesus. These writings will show that many of the arguments of St. Cyril as quoted above were borrowed from or inspired by the Biblical interpretation of earlier Fathers. For the sake of brevity, only the writings of two Fathers from the East (Sts. Athanasius of Alexandria and Ephrem the Syrian) and two from the West (Sts. Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo) will be presented in this section.

First is St. Athanasius, the famous Patriarch of Alexandria and a great defender of the Nicene faith. His defense of Mary's divine maternity is rooted in his faith in the divinity of Jesus. Christ is God; therefore, it is right to call and honor his Mother Mary as the *Theotokos*. His understanding of the doctrine of the *Theotokos* is obviously tied to the doctrine of the *homoousios*—that of Jesus being consubstantial with the Father:

> Christ, being God, became man for our sake and was born of Mary, Mother of God [*Theotokos*], to free us from the devil's power.[19]

[18] *MFC,* 238.

[19] St. Athanasius, *On Virginity* 3, PG 28, 256, MFC, 101.

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In his commentary on Luke's account of Mary's visitation to Elizabeth (1:39–56), St. Athanasius is again applying the title *Mother of God* to Mary:

> The Mother of the King greets the mother of the soldier; the *Mother of God* [emphasis added] greets the mother of the man; the Virgin greets the married woman. She greets Elizabeth with an outward greeting, and when the two greet each other in a visible manner, the Holy Spirit, who dwelt in Mary's womb, incites him who is in Elizabeth's womb, as one who urges on his friend, "Hurry, get up!"[20]

In this Athanasian commentary, the attribution of the title *Mother of God* must be read against the background of Elizabeth calling Mary the "mother of my Lord" (1:43). Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth calls her cousin the *Mother of the Lord*. This is quite significant since she did not speak of this on her own accord but through the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Bastero explains the importance of this title in this way:

> As has been shown in the exegesis of this passage, the word "Lord" (*Kyrios*) is applied to God and not just to the Messiah. All one need do [sic] is examine the immediate context to see that the term *Kyrios* has truly a divine sense.[21]

It is in this sense that St. Athanasius understood the title in Lk. 1:43, and he will not have another interpretation of it because, as seen above in his commentary, he considers Elizabeth calling Mary the "mother of my Lord" equivalent to calling Mary *Theotokos*, Mother of God. This point is further confirmed by Pitre:

> Perhaps even more striking, the Jewish scholar Amy-Jill Levine suggests that Elizabeth's reference to my "Lord" (Greek *kyrios*) is in fact a "divine title." If this is right, then for Luke, Mary is not just the mother of the messianic king; she is also the *mother of the divine Lord*.[22]

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[20] St. Athanasius, *Homily of the Papyrus of Turin, MFC,* 105.

[21] Bastero, *Mary, Mother of the Redeemer*, 156.

[22] B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary: Unveiling the Mother of the Messiah* (New York: Image, 2018), 85.

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Therefore, one can confidently conclude that the title *Lord* in Lk. 1:43 is referring to both the *Messiah* and *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, as the same Person.

The second Father is St. Ephrem, the deacon from Syria. "The Marian doctrine of the Syrian Church reaches its most sublime expression in the poetry of Ephrem. He is rightly called 'the harp of the Holy Spirit' and deserves the additional title of 'Marian Doctor.'"[23] In one of his hymns on the Nativity of the Lord, Ephrem describes the mystery of Mary's divine maternity in this poetic manner:

> A wonder is Your mother: the Lord entered her
> and became a servant; He entered able to speak
> and He became silent in her; He entered her thundering
> and His voice grew silent; He entered Shepherd of all;
> a Lamb He became in her; He emerged bleating.[24]

The writings of St. Ephrem are good examples of sublime Christology and Mariology expressed in a highly poetic language. This kind of writing facilitated the dissemination of the Church's teaching in a more effective manner, especially among ordinary believers since hymns or poems are easier to remember than prose.

Another important point highlighted by the writings of St. Ephrem is the essential connection between the identity and role of Mary and that of her Son, as already seen above in the writings of St. Cyril. The person of Mary can only be properly understood when considered within the perspective of her Son. The greatness of Mary resides first and foremost in the reality of being the Mother of Jesus, of being the Mother of God. "The mystery of Mary's divine motherhood constitutes her *raison d'etre*, the deepest explanation of her life and of the place she occupies in God's plan of salvation."[25] This truth is expressed poetically in one of the Nativity hymns of St. Ephrem:

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[23] *MFC,* 108.

[24] St. Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* 11, 6, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns,* trans. K. McVey (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 132.

[25] Bastero, *Mary, Mother of the Redeemer*, 154.

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> Blessed are you also, Mary, whose name is great and exalted because of your Child. Indeed you were able to say how much and how and where the Great One, Who became small, dwelt in you.[26]

The third Father is St. Ambrose, the famous Bishop of Milan and baptizer of St. Augustine. "In the writings of St. Ambrose, we find the first important Marian doctrine within Western Christianity, in terms not only of quantity but also of quality, as we encounter rare heights of illuminating reflection."[27] St. Ambrose's interpretation of Prov. 8:22, "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago," as referring to the Incarnation is theologically significant especially if one remembers how this text was used by the Arians to justify their denial of the preexistence and divinity of the Son.[28] A Biblical passage that was supposed to be used to justify the heretics' denial of Jesus's divinity ends up being a solid Biblical reference to the Incarnation—to Christ's self-emptying love or *kenosis*, to Mary's divine maternity, and to the purpose of Christ's salvific act:

> We understand what was written about the Incarnation of the Lord: "The Lord created me" (Prov 8:22) to mean that the Lord Jesus was created from the Virgin to redeem the Father's works. And truly, one cannot doubt that this was said in reference to the mystery of the Incarnation, when the Lord assumed flesh to free his works from slavery to corruption and to destroy, by the suffering of his body, the one who held the power of death.[29]

St. Ambrose is emphasizing in this passage that the purpose of Mary's election is for the Incarnation of the Word to happen. It became possible for the Word to assume human nature through the *fiat* of Mary to the divine plan of God (Lk. 1:38). Another important point that one can learn from this passage is St. Ambrose's profound

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[26] St. Ephrem, *Hymns on the Nativity* 25, 14, *Ephrem the Syrian*, 203.

[27] *MFC,* 189.

[28] See K. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 110–111.

[29] St. Ambrose, *De fide* 3, 46, in J. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina* (Paris: 1841–1864) 16, 623–624 (hereafter cited as *PL*); *MFC,* 195.

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understanding of the essential connection between the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery of Christ. The *telos* of the Incarnation is the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus—his redeeming act "once and for all" (Heb. 9:12) that saved humanity from sin and death, that made men and women children of God. This divine plan of God was fulfilled because of the cooperation of a young woman from Nazareth.

In his work *The Sacrament of the Incarnation of the Lord*, St. Ambrose, like St. Cyril and St. Athanasius, explains that Mary is truly *Theotokos* because of the reality of the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in the one Divine Person of Jesus. Here one can see, again, a favorite theme from the Church Fathers—Mariology proceeds from Christology. Any Marian doctrine (or Mariological heresy) will always come from a correct (or erroneous) understanding of the Person of Christ. The divinity (i.e., his being the eternal Word, the Son of the Father) and the humanity (i.e., his being the biological Son of Mary) of Jesus are inseparable mysteries:

> Though he remains the eternal God, he undergoes the mysteries of the Incarnation while remaining one and undivided; for the One is both and is present in both, that is, in his divinity and in his body. For there is no difference between the One who proceeds from the Father and the One who is born of the Virgin; no, he is the same who comes from the Father in one way and comes from the Virgin in another way.[30]

The last Father is St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, the greatest of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. In one of his sermons, the Doctor of Grace explicitly explained that Jesus is both Mary's Creator and her Son, thus affirming both his divinity and humanity. Furthermore, the perpetual virginity of Mary is also emphasized and seen as an important prerequisite for the Incarnation. This teaching of St. Augustine will be used by the Church later on to defend the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity. The Mother of the Messiah must be a virgin to signal that the child to be born from her is of divine origin. The virginal conception is a miraculous sign pointing toward the divinity of the Word Incarnate:

[30] St. Ambrose, *De Incarnationis dominicae sacramento* 35, PL 16, 862; *MFC,* 193.

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> It was not the visible sun that made this day holy for us, but the sun's invisible Creator, when the Virgin Mother brought to light, out of her fruitful womb and virginal body, the Creator made visible for us, the same invisible God who had also created the Virgin. Virgin in conceiving, virgin in giving birth, virgin with child, virgin mother, virgin forever. Why do you marvel at this, O man? God had to be born in this way when he deigned to become [human]. *Thus, did he make her, who was made by her* [emphasis added].[31]

Another important contribution of St. Augustine to the field of Mariology is to see Mary as a *type* of the Church, and to explain that the maternity of the Church is already seen in the divine maternity of Mary. As Mary gave birth to Christ, so did the Church give birth to Christians. The Church can only understand herself well if she looks and follows closely in the footsteps of the Mother of God. In Mary, the Church is perfectly personified as virgin and mother. The Marian profile of the Church will always be an indispensable aspect of her identity.

> Nevertheless, it is true, the Church is the mother of Christ. Mary preceded the Church as its *type* [emphasis added].[32]

> How is it that you do not belong to the Virgin's birth, if you are members of Christ? Mary gave birth to our Head; the Church gave birth to you. Indeed, the Church also is both virgin and mother, mother because of her womb of charity, virgin because of the integrity of her faith and piety.[33]

This teaching of St. Augustine is so important and influential that it even influenced the Council Fathers of Vatican II to incorporate the teachings about Mary in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Instead of producing a separate Marian document, the Council Fathers deemed it right that the Council's teaching on Mary should never be separated from its teachings on the Church.

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[31] St. Augustine, *Sermo* 186, 1, *PL* 38, 999; *MFC,* 220.

[32] St. Augustine, *Sermo Denis* 25, 8, in G. Morin, ed., *Miscellanea Agostiniana: Testi e Studi publicati a cura dell' Ordine Eremitano di S. Agostino nel XV centenario dalla morte del Santo Dottore* (Romae: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1930), 164; *MFC,* 223.

[33] St. Augustine, *Sermo* 192, 2, *PL* 38, 1012–1013; *MFC,* 223.

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It is for this reason that the last chapter of *Lumen Gentium* (Ch. 8) is about the Blessed Virgin Mary.[34] In the theology of Augustine, one can see the unity of Christology, Mariology, and ecclesiology. And this is quite significant because, in a world of expertise and compartmentalization even in the field of Catholic theology, to see the essential interconnection of the different branches of theology with each other is indispensable for a holistic and correct understanding of the Catholic faith.

2. Perpetual Virginity of Mary

Recent years have witnessed how the historical-critical method has put into question the historical reliability of many of the foundational doctrines of the Church. In his book *The Real Jesus*, the Catholic Biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has a chapter dedicated to discussing the recent attacks by scholars of the historical-critical method on the foundational teachings of Christianity like the resurrection of Jesus and his virginal conception.[35] One of the six authors whose ideas and literary works he discussed in his book is worth mentioning here due to the fact that it has something to do with the virginity of Mary. In his book *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*, John Spong, an Episcopal bishop, argues that the virginal conception did not really happen; rather, "Mary was 'really' a teenaged girl who was raped and became pregnant with an illegitimate child. She was then taken under the protection of Joseph."[36] The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are simply ways of hiding the truth of what really happened.

[34] See *Lumen Gentium*, available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed June 19, 2023), nos. 52–69.

[35] See L. Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 29–56.

[36] Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 33.

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According to him, the infancy narratives are "late in composition and yield little significant historical information."[37]

John P. Meier, a famous Catholic Biblical scholar of the historical-critical method, wrote an article entitled "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus in Ecumenical Perspective."[38] The argument of this article is summarized in one of the lines of its conclusion:

> A historian prescinding from what is held by faith and later church teaching and working solely with the historical and philological data available would most likely come to the conclusion that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were his true physical brothers and sisters.[39]

The point Meier is presenting here is that the historical-critical method cannot give enough evidence for the perpetual virginity of Mary; rather, it will prove the contrary. The philological study of the word *adelphos* in the New Testament indicates that it does refer solely to physical brothers and not to cousins, nephews, and kinsmen:[40]

> With "full brother" and "half-brother" we exhaust the literal meaning of *adelphos* found in the NT.[41]

These interpretations of Spong and Meier run contrary to what the Church has believed throughout the ages. If the Church Fathers read the writings of these scholars today, they would surely disagree with their findings. How come they have different interpretations and conclusions when both the Church Fathers and modern scholars like Meier have read the same sacred text? The reason lies in the fact that the Church Fathers read the Bible within the context of the Church's faith and Tradition. By simply reading and interpreting the Bible as a secular

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[37] Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 32–33.

[38] See John P. Meier, "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus in Ecumenical Perspective," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54:1 (1992): 1-–28.

[39] Meier, "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus," 27.

[40] See Meier, "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus," 16–17.

[41] Meier, "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus," 20.

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book, many of its important aspects are being neglected and ignored by historical-critical scholars. When a writing is read and interpreted outside its natural habitat or the community that formed it, e.g., the Bible being read and interpreted outside the faith community of the Church, it will surely be misunderstood or erroneously interpreted. A botanist will not better understand the life cycle of a plant by uprooting it and studying it in a laboratory; rather, he will understand its life cycle better by studying and examining it in its natural habitat. In other words, a "non-biased" reading of the sacred text advocated by historical-critical scholars is not "non-biased" at all. It has its own bias, and that is to read the Bible outside the faith community that formed it.

If modern scholars like Meier and Spong would deny the truthfulness of the perpetual virginity of Mary, the Church Fathers would rather affirm it with their whole hearts. As Meier pointed out in his article, St. Jerome was the first Church Father to interpret the Greek word *adelphos* as not simply referring to physical brothers but also to cousins, relatives, and kinsmen.[42] Jerome explains that the brothers and sisters of Jesus in the Gospels are not actually his biological siblings but his cousins and relatives. This explanation is in consonance with the Church's belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary.

Meier accepts St. Jerome's argument, though with some reservations, that the word *adelphos* can be understood in the context of the Hebrew word *ach* which means "brother, cousin, or nephew." This is seen in the Greek Old Testament when the word *ach* is translated as *adelphos*. But, still, Meier does not agree that it can be applied in the New Testament since hagiographers like St. Paul knew Greek well and if they meant "cousins" instead of "brothers," they would have used *anepsios* instead of *adelphos*. His justification is Col. 4:10, where Paul used *anepsios* in describing Mark as the cousin of Barnabas. If *adelphos* can be used for "cousin," Paul would have used it for Mark, instead of *anepsios*.[43] But this kind of argument pursued by Meier was already debunked by Jerome in his work *On the Perpetual Virginity of Blessed*

[42] See Meier, "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus," 16–17.

[43] See Meier, "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus," 16–17.

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Mary Against Helvidius. The saint from Illyria argues that Jesus called his disciples "brothers" even though they were not his biological siblings: "Go to my *brothers* [emphasis added] and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"[44] (Jn. 20:17).[45] The next verse illumines what Jesus meant to Mary Magdalene with the word "brothers": "Mary Magdalene went and said to the *disciples* [emphasis added], 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her" (Jn. 20:18). By carefully examining the context of these passages, one can see that Jesus was referring to his disciples when he used the word "brothers" and Mary Magdalene understood it that way. If she understood it in another way, she would have gone to Jesus's physical brothers (if they really existed) instead of going to the disciples of the Lord. Here one can see how flawed Meier's argument is that the word *adelphos* in the New Testament is used only for physical brothers. Jerome further argues that St. Paul used the word *adelphos* in referring not to a physical brother but to a member of the community, although in the context of 1 Corinthians, a community member who is not living a morally upright life:

> But rather I write to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of *brother* [emphasis added] if he is guilty of immorality. Or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one.[46] (1 Cor. 5:11)[47]

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[44] Legei autē Iēsous, mē mou haptou, oupō gar anabebēka pros ton Patera poreuou de pros tous *adelphous* mou kai eipe autois Anabainō pros ton Patera mou kai Patera hymōn kai Theon mou kai Theon hymōn (author's transliteration of the original Greek text of Jn. 20:17).

[45] See St. Jerome, *On the Perpetual Virginity of Blessed Mary Against Helvidius*, 15, in *St. Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, trans. J. Hritzu (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, Inc., 1965), 33 (hereafter cited as *SJDPW*).

[46] Nyn de egrapsa hymin mē synanamignysthai ean tis *adelphos* onomazomenos ē pornos ē pleonektēs ē eidōlolatrēs ē loidoros, ē methysos, ē harpax tō toioutō mēde synesthiein (author's transliteration of the original Greek text of 1 Cor. 5:11).

[47] St. Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, 15, *SJDPW,* 33.

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In Acts 9:17, Ananias called Saul brother even though Saul is not a biological brother of Ananias:

> *Brother Saul* [emphasis added], the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.[48]

Another important point emphasized by Jerome in his polemic against Helvidius is the fact that one can never find a passage in the New Testament that refers to the alleged "brothers of the Lord" as "sons of Mary" or the "sons of Joseph":

> Now I ask you: for what reason do you think are the individuals in the Gospel called brothers of the Lord? Is it birth? But Scripture does not say this; for it calls them neither the sons of Mary nor sons of Joseph.[49]

Unlike many scholars of the historical-critical method, Jerome takes the words of the Scripture very seriously. He based his arguments on what is in the Biblical texts and not on what is not there. Unlike Spong or Meier, he did not read the Bible based on a notion or preconceived idea that the proper way to read the Bible is to disregard what is supernatural and insist simply on explanations based only on natural causes. Jerome will surely reject Spong's theory that Mary was no virgin but rather a rape victim by arguing that the Gospels never spoke about it. It is more of a wild conjecture than an established fact stated in the Bible. The argument that the individuals mentioned in the Gospels as "brothers and sisters of the Lord" are really his physical siblings is the strongest argument against the dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary. But, as seen above, Jerome refuted this argument through a careful reading and examination of the sacred text.

Other arguments of Helvidius against the perpetual virginity of Mary that were refuted by Jerome are on the meaning of the word "until" in Mt. 1:25 and the word "firstborn" in Lk. 2:7. Helvidius argues

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[48] *Saoul adelphe* ho Kyrios apestalken me Iēsous ho ophtheis soi en tē hodō hē ērchou hopōs anablepsēs kai plēsthēs Pneumatos Hagiou (author's transliteration of the original Greek text of Acts 9:17).

[49] St. Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, 15; *SJDPW,* 33.

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that Mt. 1:25 proves that Mary did not remain a virgin after the birth of Jesus because of the word "until" in Matthew's infancy narrative:

> But [Joseph] knew her not *until* [emphasis added] she had borne a son and he called his name Jesus.

Helvidius argues that the word "until" denotes that Mary already had sexual relations with Joseph after the birth of Jesus:

> She was known after she brought forth her child, and that the birth of her child merely delayed sexual relations.[50]

This argument was refuted by Jerome who explained that the word "until" has a double meaning. "Until" indicates both definite time and indefinite time. Jerome pointed out that the word "until" is used several times in the Bible to refer to an indefinite period. "It is not intended to say anything about the future beyond that point."[51]

> Now it must be pointed out that just as he accepted the custom of Scripture in the one instance, so also he should yield to the authority of the same Scripture as far as the conjunction "until" is concerned, which is often used to indicate a definite time (as he himself asserted), and often an indefinite time, as in the following passage where God addresses some individuals in the Prophets: "I am, I am, and I am till you grow old" (cf. Isa. 46:4). Will God cease to be after they grow old? And in the Gospel, the Savior says to His apostles: "Behold, I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world" (Mt. 28:20). Will the Lord, therefore, leave His disciples after the consummation of the world and, when they shall judge the twelve tribes of Israel on twelve thrones, will they be deprived of the company of the Lord?[52]

What is being pointed out here is the insufficiency of the argument using Mt. 1:25 as a proof against the perpetual virginity of Mary. Jerome further argues that a just man like St. Joseph would never dare to have

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[50] St. Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, 5, *SJDPW,* 17.

[51] T. Staples, "The Case for Mary's Perpetual Virginity," *Catholic Answers* (July 1, 2009), available at https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/the-case-for-marys-perpetual-virginity.

[52] St. Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, 6, *SJDPW,* 18.

sexual relations with a woman whom he knew evidently belonged to God in the first place. Joseph knew his role as husband of Mary and foster father of the Lord, and his great reverence for the person of his wife and adopted Son would surely prevent him from having sexual intercourse with his wife.[53] This argument may sound illogical and silly for many people today especially in the context of life in a highly sensual and pornographic world. Society today is highly sexual, and purity and chastity are considered more as curses rather than as gifts and values to be upheld. Sexual pleasure becomes the priority. Sex is valued not so much because of its procreative purpose but because of its pleasure. But if sex is considered and understood in the context of Mary's and Joseph's time, where its importance is seen primarily in its procreative purpose and not simply for its pleasure, as an instrument to build up the family, one can immediately understand that sexual intercourse will never be the priority of those people who would like to follow the will of God. It becomes secondary, and the continence of Mary and Joseph is seen and understood in a better light.

Finally, Helvidius argues against the perpetual virginity of Mary by pointing out that Jesus is described as "firstborn" in Lk. 2:7. If Jesus is called firstborn then it only means to say that he is the first of many brethren. For Helvidius, it is ridiculous to call a child a firstborn if there is no second, third, or fourth child.[54] But Jerome refutes this argument by explaining the meaning of "firstborn" in the Bible:

> This is our definition: Every only child is a firstborn child; but not every firstborn is an only child. A firstborn child is not only one after whom other children are also born, but also one before whom no other child is born. "All that opened the womb," says the Lord to Aaron, "of all flesh that are offered to the Lord, of men and beasts, shall belong to thee; only the firstborn of men shall be redeemed with a price and the firstborn of beasts that are unclean" (Num. 18:15; cf. also Ex. 34:19). The word of God defined what was meant by a "firstborn." "All," it says, "that opened the womb." Otherwise, if no child is a firstborn child but only one who subsequently has brothers, the firstborn are not due

[53] See St. Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, 8, *SJDPW,* 20–21.

[54] See St. Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, 9, *SJDPW,* 23.

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> the priests until others are also born, lest, perchance, a child be an only child and not the firstborn child, in the event that no other child shall be born subsequently.[55]

Here Jerome explains that the word "firstborn" is a technical term given to the first child regardless of whether or not he or she will have siblings later on. In other words, Lk. 2:7 cannot be used as a Biblical passage to disprove the perpetual virginity of Mary. The argument of Helvidius relied deliberately on his misunderstanding of the word "firstborn." That is why it was easy for Jerome to refute such an argument simply by explaining the Biblical meaning of the said term.

Aside from Jerome, it was also St. John Chrysostom who defended the perpetual virginity of Mary by explaining the meaning of the word "until" in Mt. 1:25. During his time, many people were still proposing that Mary lived a normal conjugal life with Joseph in Nazareth after the birth of Jesus, arguing that Mary was a virgin only before and during the conception of Jesus in her womb.[56] After she gave birth to him, she had sexual intercourse with Joseph, which is why there were individuals in the Gospels known as the brothers and sisters of the Lord. Chrysostom's explanation of the word "until" is found in his *Fifth Homily* on the Gospel of Matthew:

> And when he has taken here, "he knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born Son" (Mt. 1:25). He hath here used the word "till," not that thou shouldest suspect that afterwards he did know her, but to inform thee that before the birth the Virgin was wholly untouched by man. But why then, it may be said, hath he used the word, "till"? Because it is usual in Scripture often to do this, and to use this expression without reference to limited times. For so with respect to the ark likewise, it is said, "The raven returned not till the earth was dried up" (Gen. 8:7). And yet it did not return even after that time. And when discoursing also of God, the Scripture saith, "From age until age Thou art" (Ps. 90:2), not as fixing limits in this case. And again when it is preaching the Gospel beforehand, and saying, "In his days shall righteousness flourish, and abundance of peace, till the moon be taken away" (Ps. 72:7), it doth

[55] St. Jerome, *Against Helvidius*, 10, *SJDPW,* 23–24.

[56] See *MFC,* 177.

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> not set a limit to this fair part of creation. So then likewise, it uses the word "till," to make certain what was before the birth, but as to what follows, it leaves thee to make the inference. Thus, what was necessary for thee to learn of Him, this He Himself hath said; that the Virgin was untouched by man until the birth; but that which both was seen to be a consequence of the former statement, and was acknowledged, this in its turn he leaves for thee to perceive; namely, that not even after this, she having so become a mother, and having been counted worthy of a new sort of travail, and a child-bearing so strange, could that righteous man ever have endured to know her. For if he had known her, and had kept her in the place of a wife, how is it that our Lord (Jn. 19:27) commits her, as unprotected, and having no one, to His disciple, and command[s] him to take her to his own home?[57]

In this homily, Chrysostom not only explained the meaning of the word "until" but also justified the perpetual virginity of Mary by having recourse to Jn. 19:27, wherein the Lord, dying on the cross, entrusted his Mother to his beloved disciple. Chrysostom argues that if Jesus had biological brothers and sisters, it would be logical to entrust his Mother to them. The fact that Jesus, before his death, entrusted his Mother to one of his followers is a clear indication that Jesus was the only Son of Mary.

St. Augustine, in one of his Christmas sermons, professed the perpetual virginity of Mary in this manner:

> Virgin in conceiving, virgin in giving birth, virgin with child, virgin mother, virgin forever.[58]

This is an essential passage from the writings of the Doctor of Grace because it is one of the most explicit professions of faith of a Church Father in the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity. The importance of this passage is given even greater emphasis in its use as an authoritative patristic quotation in the *Catechism*'s explanation of the

[57] St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Matthew* 5, 5, in P. Schaff, ed., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. 10: *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 33.

[58] St. Augustine, *Sermo* 186, 1, PL 38, 999; *MFC,* 220.

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said Marian dogma.[59] The Church's belief in Mary's perpetual virginity is encapsulated in this lapidary Augustinian teaching, a passage that was part of Augustine's commentary on Jesus's Infancy Narratives which he proclaimed before the Christian community of Hippo. Here one can see the essential connection between Scripture, Tradition, and the ecclesial community. A dogma is professed to be true not simply because it is founded in Scripture but also because it is a teaching handed down from one generation to the next. Augustine received this teaching from previous teachers of the faith, and it becomes fully alive and relevant by being proclaimed in an ecclesial community. Dogma as the Church's official exegesis of Sacred Scripture[60] becomes truly alive when it is proclaimed in the liturgy and lived out by believers in their day-to-day life.

The Church's traditional way of stating the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity (*Aeiparthenos*, "ever-virgin") as *ante partum* (before the birth of Christ), *in partu* (during the birth of Christ), and *post partum* (after the birth of Christ) was borrowed from the writings of a post-Nicene Church Father, the Bishop of Ravenna, St. Peter Chrysologus:

> She conceives as a virgin, she gives birth as a virgin, and she remains a virgin. Therefore, her flesh knows the power of the miracle but does not know the pain. In giving birth, it gains in integrity and knows nothing of physical suffering.[61]

Sts. Jerome, Augustine, Chrysostom, and Chrysologus all professed and taught the same thing about Mary's perpetual virginity. Jerome and Chrysostom focused more on words found in the Gospels that heretics were using as counter-arguments to the dogma of the *Aeiparthenos*, like the words "until" and "firstborn," or the alleged siblings of the Lord, while Augustine and Chrysologus emphasized this dogma in their preaching to their respective Christian communities. The common

[59] See *CCC,* no. 510.

[60] See J. Ratzinger, "Crisis in Catechetics," *Canadian Catholic Review* (June 1983): 178.

[61] St. Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* 117, 3, *PL* 52, 521; *MFC,* 294.

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consensus among these Fathers is the belief that Mary's perpetual virginity is based on the Scripture and Tradition of the Church.

3. The Immaculate Conception

In 1854, through the apostolic constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, Blessed Pius IX defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as a dogma of faith in this way:

> We declare, pronounce and define that the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her Conception was preserved Immaculate from all stain of original sin, by the singular grace and privilege of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, and that this doctrine was revealed by God, and therefore must be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.[62]

What preceded this definition were the proofs and arguments that support that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception can be defined as a dogma, such as the liturgy of the Church,[63] the teachings of previous pontiffs,[64] the teachings of the Council of Trent,[65] its Biblical foundations especially the accounts of the Annunciation and Visitation in the Gospel of Luke[66] and the *Protoevangelium* in the book of Genesis,[67] its types in the Old Testament,[68] and the teachings of the Fathers and Writers of the Church.[69] What is evident in *Ineffabilis Deus* is

[62] Pius IX, "Ineffabilis Deus" (1954), *Marian Reprints* Paper 21: 13, available at http://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_reprints/21.

[63] See Pius IX, "Ineffabilis Deus," 2–3.

[64] See Pius IX, "Ineffabilis Deus," 3–6.

[65] See Pius IX, "Ineffabilis Deus," 6.

[66] See Pius IX, "Ineffabilis Deus," 8–9.

[67] See Pius IX, "Ineffabilis Deus," 7.

[68] See Pius IX, "Ineffabilis Deus," 7–8.

[69] See Pius IX, "Ineffabilis Deus," 7.

Pius IX's emphasis on the Biblical foundation of this dogma and how it was taught in the writings of the Church Fathers and ecclesiastical authors. He summarized their teaching on the Immaculate Conception in this manner:

> The Fathers and Writers of the Church, thoroughly schooled in the writings of heaven, had most at heart to vie with one another in preaching and teaching in many wonderful ways the Virgin's sublime holiness, dignity, and immunity from all stain of sin and her splendid victory over the most hateful foe of [humankind]. They did this in their books which explain the Scriptures, vindicate the dogmas, and instruct the faithful.[70]

In discussing the Biblical foundations of the Immaculate Conception, Pius IX started with Genesis 3 which narrates the account of the Fall, with an emphasis on Gen. 3:15, the *Protoevangelium* which is a promise regarding the coming Messiah who will destroy the works of the evil serpent:

> I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

Commenting on this passage, Pius IX identified the woman as Mary, and her son who will crush the head of the serpent as the Lord Jesus Christ.[71] Without mentioning a particular Church Father, Pius IX is alluding to an important teaching of a recently declared Doctor of the Church, the *Doctor unitatis*—St. Irenaeus of Lyons,[72] regarding the role of Mary in salvation history. Though it was St. Justin Martyr who first identified the woman of Gen. 3:15 as Mary, the new Eve, in

[70] Pius IX, "Ineffabilis Deus," 7.

[71] See Pius IX, "Ineffabilis Deus," 7.

[72] Francis, "Decree of the Holy Father for the conferral of the title of Doctor of the Church on Saint Irenaeus of Lyon" (January 21, 2022), available at https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2022/01/21/220121b.html.

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his work *Dialogue with Trypho*,[73] it was St. Irenaeus who developed this concept well in one of his writings. The Eve-Mary parallel following the Adam-Christ parallel of St. Paul[74] is explained by him in Book III of his monumental work, *Adversus Haereses*:

> In accordance with this design, Mary the Virgin is found obedient, saying, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word" (Lk. 1:38). But Eve was disobedient; for she did not obey when as yet she was a virgin. And even as she, having indeed a husband, Adam, but being nevertheless as yet a virgin (for in Paradise "they were both naked, and were not ashamed" [Gen. 2:25], inasmuch as they, having been created a short time previously, had no understanding of the procreation of children: for it was necessary that they should first come to adult age, and then multiply from that time onward), *having become disobedient, was made the cause of death, both to herself and to the entire human race; so also did Mary, having a man betrothed [to her], and being nevertheless a virgin, by yielding obedience, become the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race* [emphasis added]. And on this account does the law term a woman betrothed to a man, the wife of him who had betrothed her, although she was as yet a virgin; thus indicating the back-reference from Mary to Eve, because what is joined together could not otherwise be put asunder than by inversion of the process by which these bonds of union had arisen; so that the former ties be canceled by the latter, that the latter may set the former again to liberty. And it has, in fact, happened that the first compact looses from the second tie, but that the second tie takes the position of the first which has been canceled. For this reason did the Lord declare that the first should in truth be

[73] "He became man by the Virgin, in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin. For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her" (St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 100, in A. Roberts & J. Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* Vol. 1: *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus* [Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994], 249).

[74] "'Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living soul;' the last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45).

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> last, and the last first (Mt. 19:30; 20:16). And the prophet, too, indicates the same, saying, "Instead of fathers, children have been born unto thee" (Ps. 45:17). *For the Lord, having been born "the First-begotten of the dead" (Rev. 1:5), and receiving into His bosom the ancient fathers, has regenerated them into the life of God, He having been made Himself the beginning of those that live, as Adam became the beginning of those who die* (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20–22 [emphasis added]). Wherefore also Luke, commencing the genealogy with the Lord, carried it back to Adam, indicating that it was He who regenerated them into the Gospel of life, and not they Him. *And thus also it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith* [emphasis added].[75]

In the above passage, there is no explicit mention of Mary being the Immaculate Conception. But to identify Mary as the new Eve who untied the knot of Eve's disobedience is an indispensable starting point for the development of the Church's belief in and understanding of Mary's Immaculate Conception. The grace and privilege of being the Immaculate Conception was given to Mary so that she could perform the task of being the new Eve, the helper of the new Adam, for the complete realization of the salvation of all men and women.

Reading between the lines, St. Irenaeus's teaching on Mary as the new Eve is a strong argument for the Immaculate Conception. Why? Because if Mary is not sinless from the very beginning, then the parallel between her and sinful Eve will not make any sense. The one that can undo the power of sin is the power of grace—the power of being sinless. Mary cannot be considered the new Eve if, in the first place, she is no different from the first Eve. In the words of Irenaeus, Mary loosed the knot of Eve's disobedience through her obedience. Following this argument, one can also confidently say that Mary likewise loosed the knot of Eve's sinfulness through her sinlessness.

St. Epiphanius of Salamis, commenting on Gen. 3:15, follows the same line of thought as St. Irenaeus on the Eve-Mary parallel:

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[75] St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses* III, 22, 4, in Roberts & Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* Vol. 1, 455.

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> But we must consider another marvelous aspect of the comparison between Eve and Mary. Eve became for [men and women] the cause of death, because through her death entered the world. Mary, however, was the cause of life, because life has come to us through her.… And as in paradise Eve, still a virgin, fell into the sin of disobedience, once more through the Virgin came the obedience of grace, when the joyful announcement was given that eternal life in the flesh was descending from heaven. For God said to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and hers" (Gen. 3:15). Woman's seed is found nowhere; and so it is in a figurative sense that this enmity is applied to Eve in relation to her and the serpent and to that which was represented by the serpent, namely the devil and envy.
>
> But all this cannot be perfectly fulfilled in her. Instead, it will be realized truly in the holy, elect, and unique seed, which comes from Mary alone and not from relations with man. This seed came to destroy the power of the dragon, that is, the tortuous and fleeting serpent, who boasted of holding possession of the whole world.[76]

This commentary of St. Epiphanius is an essential patristic foundation for the dogma of the Immaculate Conception especially when he pointed out that Jesus, "the holy, elect and unique seed … comes from Mary alone." This point is further elucidated when read against the background of the teaching found in Mt. 7:17, which says, "So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit." If Jesus is the holy, elect, and unique seed or fruit, then it only follows that the tree from which he came from, the source of his humanity, must also be holy, elect, and unique, because the good fruit can only come from a good tree. It is a contradiction to believe that Jesus is all holy and sinless while at the same time believing that Mary is like the rest of humanity—stained with original sin. It is another way of saying that the source of Jesus's humanity is defiled and sinful.

> If Christ had taken flesh from a Mother tainted with sin, it would be to Christ's dishonor, since the Mother and the Son are in a certain way the same flesh. It was fitting for the Son of God to fashion for Himself a Mother free from all sin.[77]

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[76] St. Epiphanius, *Adversus Haereses* 78, 17–19, PG 42, 728 B–729 C; *MFC,* 129.

[77] Alastruey, *The Blessed Virgin Mary*, Vol. I, 143.

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The writings of Sts. Irenaeus and Epiphanius did not explicitly teach Mary's Immaculate Conception, but, as noted above, their teachings are a good foundation for understanding this Marian dogma in a better way.

St. Ephrem of Syria, in one of his Nisibene Hymns, made mention of Mary being beautiful, unblemished, and free from all stains:

> You alone and your Mother are more beautiful than any others, for there is no blemish in you nor any stains upon your Mother. Who of my children can compare in beauty to these?[78]

The hymn is obviously about Jesus and his Blessed Mother. It highlights the intimate and essential relationship between the Mother and the Son. What is being emphasized here is the fact that Mary's being without stains is due to her role as the Mother of the Savior. Later explanations of Mary's Immaculate Conception would explain that her being preserved from original sin is a privilege given to her so that she will be the worthy habitation of the Word of God. The person of Mary and her privileges can be understood properly only from the perspective of the Person and role of her Son as Lord and Redeemer.

Later in the West, several years after the death of St. Ephrem, the Church Father that would explicitly teach about Mary's perfection and being without sin is, again, the *Doctor gratiae*, St. Augustine. This teaching is found in his work *De natura et gratia:*

> With the exception of the holy Virgin Mary, in whose case, out of respect for the Lord, I do not wish there to be any further question as far as sin is concerned, since how can we know what great abundance of grace was conferred on her to conquer sin in every way, seeing that she merited to conceive and bear him who certainly had no sin at all?[79]

This teaching is based on Lk. 1:28 wherein the Archangel Gabriel addressed Mary as "full of grace." The argument of St. Augustine for Mary's being free from sin lies in her being "full of grace." If Mary is

[78] St. Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 27, 8, available at https://www.catholic.com/tract/mary-full-of-grace.

[79] St. Augustine, *De natura et gratia* 36, 42, PL 44, 267; *MFC,* 226.

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endowed with a "great abundance of grace," then it simply follows that sin will have no place in her person. A person who is full of God's grace cannot be corrupted by the power of sin. If Mary is sinful just like the rest of humanity, then the words addressed to her by the Archangel were not true at all. A person cannot be "full of grace" and sinful at the same time. It is an either/or situation.

Lastly, it was St. Andrew of Crete who taught during the 8th century AD that Mary was the first to be liberated from the consequences of the original fall of Adam and Eve:

> This is Mary the *Theotokos*, the common refuge of all Christians, the first to be liberated from the original fall of our first parents.[80]

He "speaks of Mary as the first person to be redeemed, or as the first to be liberated from original sin," but "he does not define the nature of the intervention God wrought in her. Hence, we would not be justified to attribute to him the concept of preservation from original sin as we understand the concept today."[81] Nevertheless, while this may be the case, St. Andrew's teaching was already an important contribution to the development of the Church's understanding of Mary's Immaculate Conception.

The teachings of the Church Fathers on Mary's holiness and freedom from sin, her being paralleled with the first Eve and identified as the New Eve, and as the first one to be redeemed from the Fall of the first parents are far from being comprehensive explanations of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Their teachings can be considered more as seeds that are still in need of growth and development rather than as fully grown plants. The Church must wait for the arrival of Bl. John Duns Scotus for her to have the most compelling argument and explanation for this Marian doctrine.[82]

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[80] St. Andrew of Crete, *Homily 4 on Mary's Nativity*, PG 97, 880 C; *MFC,* 393.

[81] *MFC,* 393.

[82] See Alastruey, *The Blessed Virgin Mary*, Vol. I, 123–127.

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4. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Catholic theologian and exegete Matthew Levering summarized the Church's belief in Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven in this manner:

> Since the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., when belief in Mary's Assumption took firm root in the Eastern and Western churches, Catholic and Orthodox Christians have borne witness to the reality that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was assumed body and soul into heaven after her death. According to Catholic and Orthodox faith, Mary's body did not corrupt in the grave but was assumed into heaven, which explains why the Church never possessed relics of Mary's body.[83]

This reference to the seventh and eighth centuries is quite significant because this was the period in which St. Germanus of Constantinople and St. John Damascene lived and exercised their respective pastoral ministries. The importance of these patristic writers in the development of the Church's belief in Mary's bodily Assumption is mentioned by Pius XII in *Munificentissimus Deus*, the 1950 apostolic constitution that defined the said Marian doctrine as a dogma of faith.[84]

St. Germanus was the Patriarch of Constantinople during the early part of the 8th century A.D.,[85] and his importance in the field of Mariology lies in the fact that his teaching, like that of St. John Damascene, is a testimony to the antiquity of the Church's belief in Mary's bodily Assumption.[86] His argument is based primarily on the divinity of Jesus. As recalled in the previous discussions, a common argument of the Church Fathers is that Mariology is always based on

[83] M. Levering, *Mary's Bodily Assumption* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 1.

[84] Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* nos. 21–22, available at https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html (accessed July 7, 2023).

[85] See *MFC,* 381.

[86] See *MFC,* 383.

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Christology. Since Jesus is divine, it simply follows that the one who contained him in her womb should be greatly affected and transformed by his divinity. Therefore, Mary is freed, like her Son, from the power of the corruption of sin and death:

> [Her body], being human, was adapted and conformed to the supreme life of immortality; however, it remained whole and glorious, gifted with perfect vitality and not subject to the sleep [of death], precisely because it was not possible that the vessel that had contained God, the living Temple of the most holy Divinity of the Only-begotten, should be held by a tomb made for the dead.[87]

What Germanus is saying is that Mary's Assumption is a consequence of Jesus's divinity, Incarnation, and resurrection from the dead. If Christ is truly divine and rose from the dead, then the immediate consequence of this is the bodily preservation from corruption of his Mother, from whom his humanity was taken. Germanus argues that it is impossible for the source of Jesus's human nature to be subjected to the laws of death and corruption.

The Adam-Jesus parallel of St. Paul and the Eve-Mary parallel of Sts. Justin, Irenaeus, and Epiphanius are useful here to elucidate Germanus's explanation even further. If the first Adam and Eve brought sin, death, and corruption to humankind and the last Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, brought life, resurrection, and salvation, then it simply follows that the new Eve, Mary, is a cooperator in reaping the fruits of the last Adam's redeeming act. If the first Adam and Eve were together in leading humanity to damnation, then it also follows that the last Adam and the new Eve are together in leading humanity to salvation and glorification.

The other argument of St. Germanus for Mary's bodily Assumption is the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue, "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). While this commandment apparently is not fit to be a Biblical basis for the Assumption, Germanus

[87] St. Germanus of Constantinople, *Homily 1 on the Dormition*, PG 98, 345 B; *MFC,* 384.

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has a compelling explanation why the commandment to honor one's parents is a plausible basis for Mary's being assumed body and soul into heaven:

> Indeed, as a son looks for and desires his own mother, and the mother delights to live with her son, thus it was right that you also, whose heart was full of motherly love for your Son and God, who for his part had the kind of feelings of love toward you that a son has for a mother, should make you a sharer in his community of life.[88]

For the Patriarch of Constantinople, Mary's sharing in her Son's glorification in heaven is a consequence of their intimate maternal and filial relationship. A good son will never allow his mother to be separated from him. A good mother will do everything not to be separated from her son. Jesus's great love, devotion, and respect for his Mother is clearly seen in the moment of his Crucifixion as narrated by St. John in his Gospel. Before dying on the cross, Jesus made sure that someone would take good care of his Mother (Jn. 19:27). This sublime action is the most perfect expression of a Jew's obedience to the Fourth Commandment. If Christ considered it serious business that someone should look after his Mother in the realm of this earthly life, then it logically follows that it would be more serious business for him to make his Mother share in his heavenly glorification.

The above explanation of St. Germanus also alludes to the relationship of the Davidic King with his Queen-Mother or the *Gebirah* by pointing out that Mary must "share in his [Jesus's] community of life." In the Old Testament, the "community of life" of the Davidic King is his kingdom. Starting from Solomon, the son of David, all the mothers of the Davidic Kings were given the office of the *Gebirah*.[89] At that time, kings were practicing polygamy and the practical thing to do to secure the unity of the kingdom was to choose the mother of

[88] St. Germanus of Constantinople, *Homily 1 on the Dormition*, PG 98, 348 A, *MFC,* 384.

[89] See S. Hahn, *Hail, Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 79.

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the king as queen instead of one of his wives.[90] In the First Book of Kings, it is evident that Bathsheba, the Queen-Mother, was honored, venerated, and respected by King Solomon (2:19). The King reigns and rules the kingdom with his Queen-Mother. Now, if Christ is the last and the definitive Davidic King, the *everlasting King* of heaven and earth, then it simply follows that Mary, his Mother, must join in his reign as the *everlasting Gebirah*. If Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father as the definitive King of all, then his Mother should also join in his company as the definitive Queen-Mother, for it is disadvantageous and inappropriate for a King not to have or to be separated from his Queen.

The last Church Father whose writing will be considered in this article is St. John Damascene. He is considered to be the last and one of the most outstanding of the Fathers of the Church who lived in the East.[91] His death in 750 A.D. is considered the end of the patristic era. His writings on Mary's Assumption are of the utmost importance because these are the most developed explanations about this Marian dogma found in the writings of the Church Fathers. "The three homilies on the Dormition reveal the exceptional importance of Damascene's teaching for the development of doctrine on the Assumption. John explicitly teaches the truth of Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven."[92]

The first important point clarified by John in his teachings on the Assumption is the death of Mary. Did Mary truly die? If one follows the teaching of St. Paul that the "wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), then one can conclude that Mary did not die since she was free from sin. But John, though in agreement that Mary was free from sin, was not in agreement with the theological opinion that she did not die. For him, Mary truly died as a participation in her Son's death on the Cross. His argument is based on St. Paul's teaching in the Letter to the Romans: "But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall live

[90] See Hahn, *Hail, Holy Queen*, 78–79.

[91] See *MFC,* 400.

[92] *MFC,* 403.

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with him" (6:8). In other words, for Mary to participate fully in her Son's glorification, she must first participate fully in his death:

> O how could the Font of life be led to life through death? O how could she, who in giving birth surpassed the limits of nature, now yield to nature's laws, and have her immaculate body undergo death? She had to put aside what was mortal and put on incorruptibility, seeing that even the Lord of nature did not excuse himself from facing death. He truly died in the flesh to destroy death by means of death; in place of corruption he gave incorruptibility; he made death into a font of resurrection.[93]

The second important point of St. John, after clarifying that Mary truly died as a participation in the death of her Son, is the fact that her body did not remain in the grave; rather, it was preserved from corruption:

> Even though your most holy and blessed soul was separated from your most happy and immaculate body, according to the usual course of nature, and even though it was carried to a proper burial place, nevertheless it did not remain under the dominion of death, nor was it destroyed by corruption.
>
> Indeed, just as her virginity remained intact when she gave birth, so her body, even after death, was preserved from decay and transferred to a better and more divine dwelling place. There it is no longer subject to death but abides for all ages.[94]

Mary's freedom from corruption is seen by John as essentially linked to her virginity, maternity, and being immaculate. Here one can see that the theologian from Damascus considered the Assumption to be the conclusion and zenith of the other Marian privileges. The four Marian dogmas are essentially connected to each other. The Assumption can be properly understood only when it is seen against the background of the other Marian privileges.

The third and final point of St. John regarding Mary's bodily Assumption is its suitability in the divine plan of God and how this

[93] St. John Damascene, *Homily 1 on the Dormition* 10, PG 96, 713 D; *MFC,* 403.

[94] St. John Damascene, *Homily 1 on the Dormition* 10, PG 96, 716 A-B; *MFC,* 404.

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doctrine is based on the heavenly vision of the Ark of the Covenant and the Woman clothed with the sun in Rev. 11:19–12:6.

Argument from Suitability. John argues that the Assumption is suitable for Mary's indispensable role in the Incarnation of the Word of God. The womb that contained the eternal Son of God must not experience corruption. It is not fitting for Jesus's divinity to allow his Mother to undergo decay and corruption. The Incarnation of Christ has permanently transformed the body of Mary, making it incorruptible:

> It was necessary that the body of the one who preserved her virginity intact in giving birth should also be kept incorrupt after death. It was necessary that she, who carried the Creator in her womb when he was a baby, should dwell among the tabernacles of heaven.…
>
> It was necessary that the Mother of God share what belongs to her Son and that she be celebrated by all creation. An inheritance is normally passed down from parents to children; now, however, to use the expression of a wise man, the sources of the sacred rivers flow back toward their origin, now that the Son has made all created things his Mother's slaves.[95]

Mary, the New Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant and the Woman clothed with the sun in the heavenly vision of Rev. 11:19–12:6 are both identified by John as referring to the Mother of God—Mary is the Woman, the new Ark of the Covenant.[96] Rev. 11:19–12:6 is an affirmation of Mary's bodily Assumption.[97]

> Today the holy Virgin of Virgins is presented in the heavenly temple.… Today the sacred and living Ark of the living God [the Ark], who

[95] St. John Damascene, *Homily 2 on the Dormition* 14, PG 96, 741 B; *MFC,* 404.

[96] For further discussion, see R. Salvacion, "Mary: The New Ark of the Covenant in Revelation 11:19–12:6," *Loyola Papers: Student and Alumni Journal of Loyola School of Theology* 4:2 (2023): 181–211.

[97] See Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* no. 27.

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> conceived her Creator himself, takes up her abode in the temple of God, not made by human hands.[98]

The Ark of the New Covenant is no longer a container made of acacia (a wood known to be incorruptible in the ancient world) and covered with pure gold (Ex. 25:10–11) but a living person, a Woman in whose womb God and not simply the things symbolizing God's presence (the tablets of the Decalogue, the golden urn of the manna, and the rod of Aaron [Heb. 9:4]) is contained. And this same Woman is now in heaven together with her Child (Rev. 12:2). The Ark in the Old Testament can never be separated from the three sacred things contained in it. Therefore, it is the same thing with the Ark of the New Testament—she cannot be separated from Him who was once contained in her womb. Mary cannot be separated from her Son. That is why the vision shows that the Woman and the Child are together in the heavenly abode. Mary was truly assumed body and soul into heaven.

Conclusion

The evidence of the antiquity of the Church's Marian beliefs is clearly seen in the writings of the Church Fathers, who were considered as the first interpreters and commentators of Sacred Scripture. The twentieth century until the present time has seen both the advantages and disadvantages of the historical-critical method. Its advantages can be seen in how it can give, in several ways, precise details and contexts of events narrated in the Bible, its emphasis on Scripture as literature—that its passages must be understood based on the context of its literary genres, and how it provides details on how the final text was handed on and formed in the respective communities where it first saw the light of day. Its disadvantages can be seen in how the Bible is politicized and treated as an ordinary literary work that can be

[98] St. John Damascene, *Homily 2 on the Dormition* 2, PG 96, 723 was quoted by Benedict XVI in his homily on the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (2011), available at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20110815_assunzione.html (accessed November 14, 2022).

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interpreted in the manner of secular scholars, and in how the Bible is compartmentalized, with each book treated as an independent literary work without any essential connection with the other books. Instead of being seen as the inspired text that speaks of God's unified plan for humanity, as a single book that contains God's revelation, the Bible is now seen simply as a conglomeration of ancient texts that are now at the disposal of textual scholars, historians, and literary critics.

This author is in no way suggesting the debunking of the historical-critical method because he, in the first place, believes and trusts in its advantages. But it can reach its fullest potential and truly be of service to theological reflection only when it starts to learn and appreciate the way the patristic writers have interpreted the Bible. It can interpret the Bible correctly using its sophisticated tools of interpretation only if, like the Church Fathers, it will first consider seriously what the Bible is, i.e., *a sacred text, God's revelation.* The Bible is properly understood not by isolating it from the faith community of the Church but by interpreting it in the heart of the Church that collected and compiled it.

In this study, this author tried to show how the Church's Marian beliefs are deeply rooted, in the first place, in the teachings of Sacred Scripture through the writings of the Church Fathers. The historical-critical method has done enough harm in persuading many people to believe that the Mary of faith is not actually the Mary found in the Scriptures. This happened because what the historical-critical exegetes used was a *hermeneutic of suspicion* instead of a *hermeneutic of faith*. When one reads and interprets the Bible based on suspicion toward what is supernatural, then one can never approach the text as God's revelation.

The only way for the historical-critical method to interpret the Bible as *God's word* is to have *faith* as the starting point. The Church Fathers have seen Mary clearly in the pages of the Bible because they, in the first place, have faith in Christ and His Mother. This author believes that the historical-critical exegete will also see the mysteries of faith (like the Marian dogmas) in the Scriptures if he or she learns from the patristic-medieval exegetes, i.e., that *faith* and not *doubt or suspicion* is the starting point of Biblical exegesis and hermeneutics.

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