

Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman and Our Lady I

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Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) was one of the greatest, most towering Catholic intellects of the nineteenth century. His life spanned almost ninety percent of that century and was divided neatly between his Anglican period and then his Roman Catholic period. He was received into the Catholic Church by Blessed Dominic Barberi (1792-1849), an Italian Passionist and a Mariologist of some note,¹ on the 9th of October 1845 after a fairly long period of prayer and discernment. He described his religious development and what led to his entrance into the Catholic Church in fascinating detail in his famous *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, which began as a series of pamphlets written to counter charges of dishonesty levelled against him by an Anglican clergyman. It has long since been judged a literary masterpiece. It was also instrumental in helping to overcome the profound prejudice against Catholics in nineteenth-century England. In 1879 he was created a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII.

One of the great strengths of Newman was that as a fairly young man in his Anglican period he and a number of his friends in what became known as the Oxford Movement spent a great deal of their time delving systematically into the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, previously largely ignored in the Church of England.² This brought to his attention the theme of Mary as the “new Eve” in the writings of St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus of Lyon and Tertullian. In his important work entitled *A Letter Addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, DD on occasion of his Eirenicon: Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* written by Newman in 1865 and published in January of 1866 he wrote:

Eve had a definite, essential position in the First Covenant. The fate of the human race lay with Adam; he it was who represented us. It was in Adam that we fell; though Eve had fallen, still, if Adam had stood, we should not have lost those supernatural privileges which were bestowed upon him as our first father. Yet though Eve was not the head of the race, still, even as regards the race, she had a place of her own; for Adam, to whom was divinely committed the naming of all things, named

¹ Cf. Alessandro Mary Apollonio, FI, “Marian Coredemption in Blessed Dominic of the Mother of God” in *Mary at the Foot of the Cross – II: Acts of the Second International Symposium on Marian Coredemption* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2002) 299-336.

² Cf. *Mary: The Virgin Mary in the Life and Writings of John Henry Newman* Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Philip Boyce, O.C.D., (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001) [henceforth referred to as Boyce] 6-8.

her ‘the Mother of the living’, a name surely expressive, not of a fact only, but of a dignity; but further, as she thus had her own general relation to the human race, so again she had her own special place, as regards its trial and its fall in Adam. In those primeval events, Eve had an integral share. ‘The woman, being seduced, was in the transgression.’ She listened to the Evil Angel; she offered the fruit to her husband, and he ate of it. She co-operated, not as an irresponsible instrument, but intimately and personally in the sin; she brought it about. As the history stands, she was a *sine qua non*, a positive, active cause of it. And she had her share in its punishment; in the sentence pronounced on her, she was recognized as a real agent in the temptation and its issue, and she suffered accordingly. In that awful transaction there were three parties concerned, – the serpent, the woman and the man; and at the time of their sentence, an event was announced for a distant future, in which the three same parties were to meet again, the serpent, the woman, and the man; but it was to be a second Adam and a second Eve, and the new Eve was to be the mother of the new Adam. ‘I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed.’ The Seed of the woman is the Word Incarnate, and the Woman, whose seed or son He is, is His mother Mary. This interpretation, and the parallelism it involves, seem to me undeniable; but at all events (and this is my point) the parallelism is the doctrine of the Fathers, from the earliest times; and, this being established, we are able, by the position and office of Eve in our fall, to determine the position and office of Mary in our restoration.³

He then verified his sources by citing first these earliest Apostolic Fathers whom he would cite many times over in his response to Pusey:

First, then St. Justin Martyr (AD 120-65), St. Irenaeus (120-200), and Tertullian (160-240). Of these Tertullian represents Africa and Rome, St. Justin represents Palestine; and St. Irenaeus Asia Minor and Gaul; – or rather he represents St. John the Evangelist, for he had been taught by the Martyr St. Polycarp, who as the intimate associate of St. John, as also of other Apostles.⁴

In that same Letter he went on to draw this very important conclusion:

However, not to go beyond the doctrine of the Three Fathers [Justin, Irenaeus & Tertullian], they unanimously declare that she was *not* a mere

³ Boyce 207-208.

⁴ Boyce 209.

instrument in the Incarnation, such as David, or Judah, may be considered; they declare she co-operated in our salvation not merely by the descent of the Holy Ghost upon her body, but by specific holy acts, the effect of the Holy Ghost within her soul; that, as Eve forfeited privileges by sin, so Mary earned privileges by the fruits of grace; that, as Eve was disobedient and unbelieving, so Mary was obedient and believing; that, as Eve was cause of ruin to all, Mary was a cause of salvation to all; that as Eve made room for Adam's fall, so Mary made room for our Lord's reparation of it; and thus, whereas the free gift was not as the offence, but much greater, it follows that, as Eve co-operated in effecting a great evil, Mary co-operated in effecting a much greater good.⁵

Here Newman points to the reality, known since antiquity and very possibly passed on by the Apostles themselves, that Mary collaborated actively in the work of our redemption just as Eve had collaborated in the fall. As Eve had been the helpmate to Adam in bringing about the fall from grace, so Mary was the helpmate to Christ in bringing about the redemption. John Henry Newman said this in many ways and with various nuances. Already in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, which he wrote in 1845 and which concluded with his entry into the Catholic Church, he wrote:

The special prerogatives of St. Mary, the *Virgo Virginum*, are intimately involved in the doctrine of the Incarnation itself, with which these remarks began, and have already been dwelt upon above. As is well known, they were not fully recognized in the Catholic ritual till a late date, but they were not a new thing in the Church, or strange to her earlier teachers. St. Justin, St. Irenaeus, and others, had distinctly laid it down, that she not only had an office, but bore a part, and was a voluntary agent, in the actual process of redemption, as Eve had been instrumental and responsible in Adam's fall. They taught that, as the first woman might have foiled the Tempter and did not, so, if Mary had been disobedient or unbelieving on Gabriel's message, the Divine Economy would have been frustrated.⁶

The above text makes some very important points, which Newman also made in other places.

⁵ Boyce 213.

⁶ Boyce 283-284.

First, Mary is “intimately involved in the doctrine of the Incarnation itself”. In order to describe the doctrine of the Incarnation, one has to recognize that the Son of God “was born of the Virgin Mary”. She was deliberately willed by God in his divine plan from all eternity and, as Blessed Pius IX stated in defining the dogma of the Immaculate Conception: “by one and the same decree, God had established the origin of Mary and the Incarnation of Divine Wisdom.”⁷ Remarkably, Newman himself had anticipated this insight, which was already a centuries-old staple in the Franciscan Mariological tradition,⁸ in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* when he stated that “To her are applied the words, ‘*Ego primogenita prodivi ex ore Altissimi*’, because she was predestinated in the Eternal Mind coevally with the Incarnation of her Divine Son.”⁹

Secondly, Newman stated that the reality of Mary’s active collaboration in the work of the redemption was clearly recognized in the early days of the Church:

As is well known, they [these prerogatives] were not fully recognized in the Catholic ritual till a late date, but they were not a new thing in the Church, or strange to her earlier teachers. St. Justin, St. Irenaeus, and others, had distinctly laid it down, that she not only had an office, but bore a part, and was a voluntary agent, in the actual process of redemption.

Here it seems that he is acknowledging that the seed of this understanding of Mary as the “second” or “new” Eve and therefore of playing a major, but subordinate, role in the redemption was already planted in the teaching of the Apostolic Fathers, but that it took much longer for its implications to be more fully grasped. He would insist on this point again in his lectures on *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* shortly after his entrance into the Catholic Church:

As Eve was a cause of ruin to all, Mary was a cause of salvation to all; as Eve made room for Adam’s fall, so Mary made room for our Lord’s reparation of it; and thus, whereas the free gift was not as the offence, but much greater, it follows that, as Eve cooperated in effecting a great evil, Mary co-operated in effecting a much greater good.¹⁰

⁷ *Our Lady: Papal Teachings* trans. Daughters of St. Paul (Boston: St. Paul Editions 1961) #34.

⁸ Peter Damian Fehlner, “Fr. Juniper B. Carol, O.F.M.: His Mariology and Scholarly Achievement” in *Marian Studies* XLIII (1992) 17-59.

⁹ Boyce 300-301.

¹⁰ Boyce 66.

In his response to Pusey in 1865 he would go further in acknowledging that Mary's unique role in the work of our salvation went beyond the Incarnation to sharing intimately in the Passion of Christ in a way beyond that of any other creature, indeed to the very end of her life on earth:

The only question is, whether the Blessed Virgin had a part, a real part, in the economy of grace, whether, when she was on earth, she secured by her deeds any claim on our memories; for, if she did, it is impossible we should put her away from us, merely because she is gone hence, and should not look at her still according to the measure of her earthly history, with gratitude and expectation. ... *[I]f she had a meritorious share in bringing about our redemption, if her maternity was gained by her faith and obedience, if her Divine Son was subject to her, and if she stood by the Cross with a mother's heart and drank in to the full those sufferings which it was her portion to gaze upon, it is impossible that we should not associate these characteristics of her life on earth with her present state of blessedness; and this surely she anticipated, when she said in her hymn that all 'generations should call her blessed'.*¹¹

Effectively here Newman is arguing for the concept of Mary's active collaboration in the work of the redemption as Coredemptrix. This does not deny that the work of Christ in bringing about the redemption on the cross was all-sufficient, but that, just as Eve collaborated in the fall so God wanted a new Eve to collaborate in bringing about the redemption in a way that was secondary, subordinate and fully dependent on Christ.¹²

While John Henry Newman's primary emphasis, like that of the early Fathers of the Church, was on Mary's role in the Incarnation, in his later years he also came to appreciate her role in the Passion and death of Jesus as he indicated in his meditations on the Litany of Loreto published after his death in *Meditations and Devotions*. He did this in two ways. First, he pointed to Mary's compassion, literally her "suffering with" Christ:

But great as was St. Paul's devotion to our Lord, much greater was that of the Blessed Virgin; because she was His Mother, and because she had Him and all His sufferings actually before her eyes, and because she had the long intimacy of thirty years with Him, and because she was from her special sanctity so ineffably near to Him in spirit. When, then He

¹¹ Boyce 234; emphasis my own.

¹² Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, #56-57, 60 & 62.

was mocked, bruised, scourged, and nailed to the Cross, she felt as keenly as if every indignity and torture inflicted on Him was struck at herself. She could have cried out in agony at every pang of His.

This is called her *compassion*, of her suffering with her Son, and it arose from this that she was the ‘*Vas insigne devotionis*’ [singular vessel of devotion].¹³

Secondly, he indicated Mary’s position on Calvary according to John 19:25: she stood.

But He, who bore the sinner’s shame for sinners, spared His Mother, who was sinless, this supreme indignity. Not in the body, but in the soul, she suffered. True, in His Agony she was agonized; in His Passion she suffered a fellow-passion; she was crucified with Him; the spear that pierced His breast pierced through her spirit. Yet there were no visible signs of this intimate martyrdom; *she stood up, still, collected, motionless, solitary, under the Cross of her Son*, surrounded by Angels, and shrouded in her virginal sanctity from the notice of all who were taking part in His Crucifixion.¹⁴

Though she suffered more keen and intimate anguish at our Lord’s Passion and Crucifixion than any of the Apostles by reason of her being His Mother, yet consider how much more noble she was amid her deep distress than they were. When our Lord underwent His agony, they slept for sorrow. ...

The Apostles, one and all, forsook our Lord and fled, though St. John returned. ... How different this even from the brave conduct of St. Mary Magdalen! And still more from that of the Virgin Mother! It is expressly noted of her that she *stood* by the Cross. She did not grovel in the dust, but *stood upright* to receive the blows, the stabs, which the long Passion of her Son inflicted upon her every moment.

In this magnanimity and generosity in suffering she is, as compared with the Apostles, fitly described as a *Tower*.

The style of Saint John Henry Newman has always been noted for its sobriety and elegance of expression in his exposition of the Catholic faith. In overcoming the hesitations and even prejudices against Marian doctrine and devotion which had been passed on to him in the Church of England he became an ardent defender of the

¹³ Boyce 394.

¹⁴ Boyce 395; emphasis my own.

Mother of God to the point of stating that “in His Agony she was agonized; in His Passion she suffered a fellow-passion; she was crucified with Him; the spear that pierced His breast pierced through her spirit.” In his own way he testified to the doctrine of Marian Coredemption, not in great detail and with the sensitivity and theological perspicacity as his fellow Oratorian Father Frederick William Faber (1814-1863) had done,¹⁵ but he did so nonetheless with sobriety in expounding the great Catholic Marian tradition.

¹⁵ Cf. my study “Mary the Coredemptrix in the Writings of Frederick William Faber (1814-1863)” in *Mary at the Foot of the Cross: Acts of the International Symposium on Marian Coredemption* (Vol. I) (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2001) 317-343.