

Mary And The Convert

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Introduction: What's the Problem?

G. K. Chesterton famously summarized the steps involved in an outsider's approach to the Catholic faith. First is defense of it—he “imagines himself to be indifferent” and “feels he ought to be fair to the Church of Rome” because he sees that the attacks on it are unjust.[1] The second stage “consists in discovering what a very large number of lively and interesting ideas there are in the Catholic philosophy, that a great many of them commend themselves to his sympathies, and that even those which he would not accept have something to be said for them justifying their acceptance.”[2] The third stage we might simply paraphrase as “running like hell in the opposite direction” because, as Chesterton puts it, the inquirer feels “trapped.”[3] This description is quite accurate. Not only that, but I would suggest that for a great many converts, their discovery of the centrality of Mary to Catholic faith is often the stimulus that moves the enquirer from the stage of discovery to the stage of flight. A great many Protestants and “mere Christians” are able to follow C. S. Lewis in seeing the logical and theological appropriateness of a set liturgy, purgatory, a moderate honor giving to the saints, auricular confession, and the real presence of the Eucharist. Mary, however, is a different subject. The language surrounding Mary is simply frightening to Protestant ears. Consider the *Salve Regina* with its declaration that Mary is “our life, our sweetness and our hope”—Mary, not Jesus. Or the *Memorare*, attributed to St. Bernard, and its demand not only that Mary hear but “answer me.” John Henry Newman, a man whose devotion to the Virgin was so great as an Anglican as to have preached something very near to the Immaculate Conception in his sermon “The Reverence Due to the Blessed Virgin Mary,” confessed that the elaborate and extreme honors paid to Mary were his “great crux as regards Catholicism.”[4] Especially disturbing to Newman seems to have been the language that indicated that Mary's own heavenly queenship seemed to allow her to “command” her Son.[5] Newman's objections were in the context of his own strong Marian belief. For many Protestants and even for those who are first discovering Christ in the Catholic Church, the objections are even stronger. The brief against Catholic Marianism is short and to the point: 1) that the Marian dogmas are unbiblical, 2) that belief about her power to “answer prayer” contradicts the unique mediation of Christ, and that 3) devotion to her is at best a distraction, at worst idolatry. Before we can proceed to an estimation of Mary's central position in the faith positively, we must give some answer to these objections.

Unbiblical Dogmas?

The belief that Catholic teaching about Mary is “unbiblical” is perhaps the first to fall in the convert’s attempt to escape the Catholic trap. What does it mean to say that a doctrine is “unbiblical”? Does it mean that a teaching must be found explicitly in the text of Scripture? And if evidence is given for it, what is to be done with passages that might seem contradictory? The Protestant who has discovered the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist has by this time realized that what one finds in the Bible is in part dependent upon assumptions that he has taken to it. To discover Jesus’ explicit discourse on eating his body and drinking his blood in John 6 is quite a shock once one has abandoned the somewhat Gnostic habit of strictly separating “spiritual” from “physical.” Similarly, for those who have come from many of the Protestant traditions of “faith alone,” the discovery that baptism seems to be required for salvation (Jn. 3:5) and that “faith” in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans is from beginning to end (Rom. 1:5 and 16:26) associated with, and not opposed to, “obedience” is enough to make them question whether they understand what it means to have biblical doctrine. The most disturbing discoveries of a potential convert that make him reconsider biblical objections to Mary, however, are not of the “new” or “strange” doctrines that he has found in Scripture. The most disturbing doctrines are the ones he quite often holds already. For those with a bent for history, the discovery of Luther’s approval of polygamy leads them to discover that there is no explicit prohibition on that practice in either Old or New Testament. Jacques Barzun writes of Luther that “He must have suffered when, on Old Testament authority, he recommended bigamy (and secrecy) to Philip of Hesse, knowing that St. John and St. Paul, his favorite apostles, would never have condoned that solution.”[6] What they would or would not have condoned is a moot point—the shock is that such an issue was never addressed by them. For those with a bent for speculative theology, the ins and outs of Trinitarian doctrine and Christology, the doctrine of Christ, often end up knocking the wind out of them. Anyone who has dealt with any of the neo-Arian groups around—and we can here include both Jehovah’s Witnesses and a great many university religion professors and their student products—knows that the Trinity is a difficult thing to figure out, what with all the passages that seem to contradict the view that Jesus is true God from true God and equal in divinity to the Father and the Spirit. One who studies the history of theology finds that, yes, there is continuity from the passages of the Bible to the Nicene Creed, but that there is also a development in understanding of what is the orthodox biblical teaching and not just biblical in the generic sense of having a few passages that one can use for support. The potential convert discovers, often without reading Newman, the principle of the development of doctrine: that what was found in Scripture in an inchoate fashion was made more explicit by the Church in time. Jaroslav Pelikan summarizes the dilemma Newman and the many others who follow him find themselves in:

If the Protestant churches acknowledged the validity of the development of doctrine when it moved from the great commission of the Gospel of Matthew to produce the Nicene Creed, as all of the mainline Protestant churches did and do,

on what grounds could they reject development as it had moved from other lapidary passages of the Bible to lead to other doctrines?[7]

What the potential convert discovers is that when he, or any group of Christians, had claimed that they were ruled by "Scripture alone," what they had really been ruled by is a "rule of faith," or to put it more baldly, by an extra-biblical tradition that governed the interpretation of Scriptures. Of course each group of Christians will say that their own particular interpretive scheme is the one that faithfully reflects the Bible, but this really gets one nowhere, since, as Chesterton put it so amusingly, "You cannot put a book in the witness-chair and ask it what it really means." [8] This discovery is not, however, the end of the rabbit hole for the one who is, by now, a little sick to his stomach and generally suffering from a good bit of insomnia. What one had assumed was stable, sola scriptura, is seen to be dependent upon the rules of a tradition. But then the history of the canon of Scripture is brought out. Not only, it seems, is the interpretation of the Bible a matter of tradition, but the Bible itself is nothing more or less than a piece of the Tradition. Calvin and the Protestant Reformers seem to have believed that the canon of Scripture pretty much dropped into the laps of the Church around the middle of the first century, that the Apostles recognized it with a quick amen, something more like what is claimed for the delivery of the Koran or Joseph Smith's tablets. Indeed, Calvin writes:

For they mock the Holy Spirit when they ask: Who can convince us that these writings came from God? Who can assure us that Scripture has come down whole and intact even to our very day? Who can persuade us to receive one book in reverence but to exclude another, unless the Church prescribe a sure rule for all these matters?[9]

Calvin's belief that it is mocking the Spirit to ask for some authority for the canon is somewhat ironic in view of his older contemporary Martin Luther's attempt to remove James, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation from the canon of Scripture, as well as his successful elimination of the deuterocanonical books from the Protestants' canon. Both Luther and Calvin seemed to assume that the canon of Scripture preceded the Church, an assumption which is, of course, false. Throughout the first few centuries of Christian history the canonicity of books like Hebrews, Jude, 2 Peter, and Revelation was hotly debated, with the end of the discussion not really taking place until the end of the fourth century (and probably not dogmatically until Trent). There simply were no internal criteria to the books themselves that would demand that they "count" as Scripture. Nor was there a divine table of contents to the Bible written either by Paul and the Apostles or handed down from heaven on a golden scroll. The plain assumption of the early Church was that not only biblical interpretation, but the Bible itself, was a matter for the living Tradition, the fullness of teaching, to discern. This same point is made by the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation: "Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone." [10] The Catholic is not

obligated to prove everything strictly from the Scriptures alone because Scripture itself is nothing other than the written form of Tradition. Tradition must be bigger than the Bible because otherwise there is no Bible at all to argue about with regard to Mary or anything else. As the Fathers of the Church affirmed, “Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church’s heart, rather than in documents and records. . .”[11] That I have spent so much time on these questions may seem to some a dodge of the question of Marian dogmas and the Bible. But it is not a dodge at all. The nature of biblical authority in doctrine and dogma must be brought into the clear before the discussion of any particular doctrine begins or the Catholic and the non-Catholic will be talking past each other from the start. For those who are interested in what such a conversation might look like, Dwight Longenecker and David Gustafson’s excellent recent book, *Mary: A Catholic-Evangelical Debate* does a good job at establishing this difference between Catholic and Protestant takes on Scripture in the first chapter so that the discussion that happens does not devolve into a does so-does not discussion over 200-plus pages.[12] If the potential convert can overcome the hurdle of seeing that he does not have to find every doctrine either explicitly stated or immediately and easily deduced from Scripture, the belief that teachings about Mary are unbiblical will have to move to another plane in which he will have to search out the heart of the Church’s Tradition. Different discussions will be had and certain acknowledgments will have to be made. The fact that Scripture does not explicitly say that Mary remained ever-virgin will have to be weighed against the fact that 1) it never says she didn’t, and 2) that the Church both East and West has consistently believed she did. That the end of life is both death and corruption and thus Mary’s assumption body and soul is impossible will have to be weighed against 1) the biblical traditions of Enoch and Elijah who seem to have been assumed bodily at the end of their lives, 2) the historical lack of a gravesite for Mary—a big oddity considering that traditions of graves or remains for all the other important figures exist, even if they are actually fake, and 3) the longstanding consensus East and West that Mary was assumed. For each case of Marian teaching one will have to weigh the history of the Church’s tradition as well as the explicit Scriptural evidence. That Scripture cannot be contradicted is assumed, but that it is the whole and exhaustive truth is a claim that it does not make for itself in any place nor did anyone else make it for Scripture until the Protestant Reformation. This essay is not, of course, designed to be a complete catechism on Mary, so let’s move on to what I believe is the main objection with regard to Marian teaching, the second objection named above—namely, Mary’s own mediatorial role.

Usurper?

I remember quite clearly the different reactions to the revelation that I was going to become a Catholic. My mother repeatedly told me how she had been repulsed by some of her Catholic cousins who prayed in front of a statue of Mary at their brother’s funeral. Why, she asked, couldn’t they pray to Jesus? Was I now going to leave off praying to the Lord and pray to his mother instead? I think her worry bothered me less than other reactions I got. Another associate of mine seemed

very sympathetic to my becoming a Catholic, informing me that he had had a very good experience working at a Catholic college out east. He told me with a knowing sort of air that he knew a lot of priests at his former workplace and that none of them believed that Mary was divine. I responded that this was a good thing since the Church had never taught that. Now he was really surprised. Why the twin assumptions that 1) prayer to Mary detracted from prayer to God, and 2) prayer to Mary somehow implied that she was divine? I think the answer is in the common Protestant understanding of Christ's mediatorial role. Most Protestants will read, and my parents did to me, I Timothy 2:5, "For there is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ," and then assume that this settles the whole matter. Mary's intercession, along with that of the saints in heaven, is obviously unbiblical. If one objects that it is a common Christian practice to pray prayers of intercession for others and preach the gospel to them and that these mediatorial practices are not considered violations of I Timothy 2:5, the answer will then be that Mary and the saints are dead. This is, of course, a non sequitur, as well as a denial of the reality that Jesus himself affirmed when he told the good thief, "Today you will be with me in paradise." If the good thief will simply be dead in paradise, Our Lord has a strange, one might say cruel, way of giving comfort. If the citation of I Timothy is sincere, then the question is what it means to say that Jesus is the unique or only mediator between God and men. If it means that he alone can pray for others to the Father, then those who still walk this earth should not do so. If it means that he alone can be God's messenger to people, then those on earth should not do that either. The problem with this interpretation is that Jesus explicitly told people to go-between, or mediate, between the Father and other people by prayer as well as preaching and even healing. There must be a different understanding of this verse. The Second Vatican Council provides one in its constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. This document includes a section on Mary and the Church that talks about the maternal and mediatorial role given to the Virgin and helps clarify what the Church means when she refers to mediation by Mary or other creatures: But Mary's function as mother of men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power. But the Blessed Virgin's salutary influence on men originates not in any inner necessity but in the disposition of God. It flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on his mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it. It does not hinder in any way the immediate union of the faithful with Christ but on the contrary fosters it.[13]

Mary's mediation draws not on any "inner necessity," i.e. she is not "divine" as my friend seemed to think. Instead, she depends on the "disposition of God," i.e. she is full of God's grace given because God wishes to give it and not because he is under obligation to do so. The Council Fathers continue to drive home this point:

No creature could ever be counted along with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer; but just as the Priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by

his ministers and the faithful, and as the one goodness of God is radiated in different ways among his creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source.[14]

Just as the New Testament designation of the Church as “a royal priesthood” (I Pet. 2:9, cf. Ex.19:5-6) does not take away from Christ’s own unique priesthood, so too with Mary. That she is referred to in the Church as a “Mediatrix” does not mean that Mary is a coequal counterpart to the Son, even when the term used is “Co-Mediatrix.” We are all co-mediators in Christ and even co-redeemers. St. Paul dares to rejoice in his sufferings “for your sake” because “in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the Church” (Col. 1:24). As St. Paul’s suffering role is properly understood as part of “the manifold cooperation” in Christ’s unique redeeming mediation rather than, as a literal reading would have it, an addition, so too is Mary’s. In this way we can also account for Paul’s description of himself as a “fellow-worker” of God (I Cor. 3:9) and as a type of “father” to the Christians of Thessalonica (I Th. 2:11). That Mary is referred to in popular piety as a “heavenly mother” does not mean she is somehow a divine counterpart to the heavenly Father, but that she is a mother in the same way that St. Paul describes himself as a mother “in travail until Christ be formed in” his “little children” (Gal. 4:13). An even better parallel is to Abraham who is said by St. Paul to be “our father in faith” (Romans 4:12) and depicted as continuing his role even after death—remember that Old Testament saints were said to be in “the bosom of Abraham” and Jesus himself approves of this idea when he tells of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Lk. 16:23). Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* [Mother of the Redeemer] focuses on this Mary-Abraham parallel, noting that not only did Mary, like Abraham, “in hope believing against hope” believe that she would bear a chosen son, but that she also continued in her faith along the journey. To believe, says John Paul, is “to abandon oneself” to the truth of the word of the Living God, knowing and humbly recognizing ‘how unsearchable are his judgment and how inscrutable are his ways’ (Rom. 11:33).”[15] Mary’s abandonment to the truth, her obedience in “the dim light of faith,” is what makes her, in the words of the liturgy of John Chrysostom, “higher than the Cherubim, more glorious than the Seraphim.” Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it even more starkly than the liturgy: “[However], faith’s Yes, its limitless readiness for all that God may desire and require, means that in the context of the grace that empowers it (cf. Lk. 1:28), the finite creature can really be ‘co-extensive’ with God’s catholicity. Not in what it does, but in what it allows to be done.”[16] Such language is startling: that a human other than Christ might be higher than the heavenly host is one thing, but that she could be “co-extensive with God’s catholicity”? And yet, is it any different than St. Paul’s claim that “I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13)? St. Paul is not even so careful about the wording of “doing” versus “allowing to be done.” That he doesn’t have to be so careful is a result of the fact that St. Paul

has in his sights only the vision of the one Christ, head and body. As Karl Adam put it, "It is not I and you that pray, but the mystical Christ." [17] Or as St Paul, put it when he warned the Colossians, Christians should be "holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God" (Col. 2:19). When we are in Christ we are knit together in such a way that to claim that you or I, or Mary, has done something is impossible without acknowledging both the Head, Christ, and the rest of the body. The Church has no better theology than that of the Three Musketeers—One for all, and all for one. Mary's mediation, seen in these lights, is clearly not in competition with Christ's any more than St. Paul's fatherhood or suffering or co-working with God is in competition with that of the Lord. Nor any more than the mediation of the Church or the co-operation that is demanded of all of us as creatures in response to Divine Grace. The great Protestant theologian Karl Barth correctly discerned Mary's centrality in Catholic faith, which is why he rejected it:

It is in the Marian doctrine and in the Marian cult that the heresy of the Roman Catholic Church is apparent—that heresy which enables us to understand all the rest. The "Mother of God" of Roman Catholic dogma is, quite simply, the principle, prototype, and summing up of the human creature cooperating in its own salvation by making use of prevenient grace; as such, she is also the principle, prototype, and summing up of the Church. . . . Thus, that Church in which there is a cult of Mary must itself be understood as at the [First] Vatican Council; is of necessity that Church of man who, by virtue of grace, cooperates with grace. [18]

If the work of God excludes any part for humans at all, even "by virtue of grace," then of course Mary and the Church are not mediators. God's activity is the only activity and we are, at best, puppets. But this rejection is rooted in a rejection more ominous, for as Yves Congar pointed out, for the Protestant Reformers like Luther who rejected human cooperation with the divine, also rejected Christ's humanity as the instrument of salvation. Luther's theology moved steadily toward what Congar calls a "monoenergism" in which Christ is nothing more than "divine activity using human nature as no more than a kind of garment." [19] The denial of Mary's mediation or of the Church's mediation is thus rooted in a practical denial of the reality and importance of the incarnation. That Luther himself kept a personal Marian piety alive does not mean much since his mature theology left no room for it as anything other than a personal affectation.

Distraction?

The preceding section dealt with objections to Mary's mediatorial role in the strict theological sense. It is fairly easy to see why the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council could say that "Mary, in a way, unites in her person and re-echoes the most important doctrines of the faith." [20] Mistakes about Mary are mistakes relating to the nature of man, the nature of the Church, and even the nature of the Son. As a Catholic Cardinal Newman preached on this, declaring that "the

glories of Mary are for the sake of Jesus; and that we praise and bless her as the first of creatures, that we may duly confess him as our sole Creator.”[21] He went on to turn this claim around, writing that “The Church and Satan agreed together in this, that Son and Mother went together; and the experience of three centuries has confirmed their testimony; for Catholics who have honoured the Mother, still worship the Son, while Protestants, who now have ceased to confess the Son, began then by scoffing at the Mother.”[22] But it is important to note that even Newman, who as a Catholic constantly defended the Marian dogmas, was repelled by much of the devotion, declaring in the *Apologia* with a certain understatement that certain devotional writings, such as those of St. Alphonsus Liguori, were “suitable for Italy, but they are not suitable for England.”[23] For Newman as for the Fathers of the Church, Mary was always seen in the light of her Son, but in the twentieth-century there was some worry even on the part of Catholics that Marian devotion was becoming too separated from its Christological center. Thus, *Lumen Gentium* also includes a warning that theologians and preachers should “be careful to refrain as much from all false exaggeration as from too summary an attitude in considering the special dignity of the Mother of God.” It goes on to make clear that in preaching about her “duties and privileges which always refer to Christ” said preachers should “carefully refrain from whatever might by word or deed lead the separated brethren or any others whatsoever into error about the true doctrine of the Church.”[24] Catholic theologians and preachers have not always been as careful as they should have been, a fact that Newman showed in a series of quotations from spiritual authorities of various periods of time condemning the misuse of the cult of Mary, a list including St. Peter Canisius, St. Epiphanius, and St. Anselm.[25] Is it any wonder that a convert who has stared down the issues of Scripture and Tradition as well as the Mediation of Christ might still feel a hesitation when confronted with the garishness of Marian devotion past and present? Especially if he remembers that a fairly well-educated adult (at least by contemporary standards) could infer from the devotions he witnessed that Mary is divine. The truth is that the Catholic should not feel bad about admitting to a Protestant that devotional and theological excesses have occurred in the history of the devotion to Mary. These excesses have indeed made Mary a distraction from her Son, or perhaps more often in the modern period, a distraction from the Holy Spirit. Yves Congar quotes St. Bernardino of Siena as writing: “All grace that is communicated to this world comes to us by a threefold movement. It is dispensed according to a very perfect order from God in Christ, from Christ in the Virgin and from the Virgin in us.” Not from the Holy Spirit? Well, in Bernardino’s view, the Holy Spirit is a sort of traveling secretary for Our Lady, for Bernardino adds that the Virgin possesses a “certain jurisdiction or authority over the temporal procession of the Holy Spirit, to such an extent that no creature has ever received the grace of any virtue from God except through a dispensation of the Virgin herself.” To which Congar adds simply and, no doubt, with much embarrassment, “This is clearly unacceptable.”[26] But what is to be made of this kind of bad theologizing or bad devotional writing? Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation on Marian devotion, proclaimed quite simply, “The Church’s devotion

to the Blessed Virgin is an intrinsic element of Christian worship.”[27] This proclamation is not in itself an exaggeration of Mary’s role, for it is a fulfillment of Mary’s own prophecy that “All generations will call me blessed” (Lk. 1:48). The Church cannot cease to ponder the marvel of God’s grace in the woman addressed by Gabriel as “Full of Grace,” nor can the Church cease to call her blessed, for if she is not blessed, then, as Newman pointed out, neither is her Son. The prospective convert who thinks he can simply ignore Mary is put at a loss. But the Church has several things to say and do regarding this problem. First, the Church is always clear that the saints, no matter how great, are not always right in their theology. The fact that Catholic teaching is defined and regulated by the Magisterium — The Bishop of Rome and the Bishops surrounding him in the Apostolic College — is a fact that many outsiders (and today, all too many insiders) take as the Church’s tyranny over the believer. The truth, writes Karl Adam, is in fact the opposite:

[Consequently] such a conception of authority does not paralyze and petrify the believer, but enfranchise him, directing his gaze, directing his gaze to Christ and Christ alone. No human authority, no extraneous personality, may stand between Christ and the believing subject. Divine truth, grace and life must flow into the soul directly from Christ himself. Therefore—however paradoxical it may seem—the authority of the Church secures the liberty of the individual Christian, by its impersonal and extra-personal character. It protects that liberty from the spiritual domination and claims to mediatorship of alleged leading personalities, and sets Christ and the believer in direct contact with each other.[28]

Adam adds that this is no mere boast, for the Church “has not hesitated to override even her greatest sons, an Origen, an Augustine, yes, in some points even a Thomas Aquinas.”[29] If she can override Augustine and Aquinas, how much more easily St. Bernardino? I say this not to make light of St. Bernardino, but to point out the fact that the Church’s authority is not located in charismatic individuals, Marian apparitions, or even great theologians, but in Christ himself, meaning that the individual who worries about a particular devotion is simply advised to refrain from it. Even the great personal revelations that have been approved by the Church are binding only on those to whom they have been received. For in the Church’s thinking, an “approved” revelation is only one that the Church has determined is congruent with the Church’s dogma, not one that can bind the faith or the devotional life of the individual believer, much less change the faith. In Balthasar’s phrase, “Dogma is there [only] to prevent faith veering to right or to the left of the mysterium, to keep it docile to the Lord’s fashioning of life and faith.”[30] A second reminder that the Church gives is in the kinds of devotion that are fitting. The Church always goes back to the principle of differentiation in the praise it gives to created beings, no matter how glorious, and that it renders to their creator. As *Lumen Gentium* puts it, “This cult, for all its uniqueness, differs essentially from the cult of adoration, which is offered equally

to the Incarnate Word and to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and it is most favorable to it.”[31] The traditional teaching of the Church has used the Latin terms *latria*, *dulia*, and *hyperdulia* to designate the different types of honor given to God and creatures respectively. *Latria* is defined as the honor that belongs to God alone—the cult of adoration spoken of in the passage above. *Dulia* is the veneration given to created saints and angels and is, says the Baltimore Catechism, “an act of respect and honor of an entirely different nature.” *Hyperdulia* is what is given to the Blessed Virgin: it is a “veneration that surpasses that of the angels and saints.”[32] David Gustafson, in the book length debate with Dwight Longenecker that I mentioned earlier, makes a common objection to this scheme when he says that some people lack a “refined religious sensibility”:

Low-grade veneration may be the highest spiritual plane they ever achieve, even when they intend to worship God. If *dulia* is the best that they personally have to offer, then when they offer *dulia* to Mary, they are giving her the best they have to offer, and they are saving nothing special for God. On the other end of the human spectrum—say, a very religious Marian devotee—is this person’s Marian *hyperdulia* really subjectively different, in his actual experience, from the *latria* he offers God?[33]

There are, of course, several problems with Gustafson’s worries. First, all of this business about trying to figure out whether people really get the right levels of devotion to God, saints, and angels is simply impossible. We are not given the ability, and unless we are given particular pastoral responsibilities over others, we are commanded not to attempt to read and evaluate others’ souls. St. Paul, remember, reminds us that he does not even judge himself. Second, Gustafson acknowledges later in the same discussion that he himself gets confused about priorities and even acknowledges the fact that it is possible to be idolatrous with regard to finances, love of one’s wife or children, and even in the ostensible worship of God.[34] This is where the principle known in its Latin phrasing as *abusus non tollit usum* [abuse does not eliminate proper use] must be brought in. In colloquial English we know it as “Don’t throw out the baby with the bathwater.” Critics who reject Marian devotion on the basis that it might be malformed or based upon a substandard theology must in the end reject all forms of devotion, including love of wife and children and ultimately, God, because, done by fallible humans, they are all liable to lapse into idolatry of one sort or another. It’s not clear on such a principle that one could even keep a dog (though most likely a cat). Leaving aside this broader point, we must return again to what we said before. The Church does not require any of the extra-liturgical forms of piety that seem to worry other Christians so. The popular Catholic writer and radio personality Mark Shea often explains it in this fashion: because the Church permits it does not mean she prescribes it. That she does not immediately squash the practices which are somewhat ambiguous is evidence not of her

laxity, but of her commitment to the wisdom enjoined by another “non-Christian,” Gamaliel, when he told the Jewish council regarding Jesus’ disciples, “. . .let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God” (Acts 5:38 -39). Even with the danger of heathenism, the Church has always been careful to sift carefully through the wisdom of the world in order to discern which parts of it really count as wisdom. This is not an activity that can be done in an afternoon. But it is an activity at which the Church has been much more successful than most would admit:

Protestantism has been so bothered by the relation of Catholicism to heathenism—that the Church has made the sign of the cross on some heathen relics and confirmed some heathen thoughts about the hidden God—that the ‘reformed’ churches have not really bothered to look at what Catholicism received as flowers and what it tread underfoot as poisonous snakes.[35]

Conclusion

I think it sufficiently clear that the last hurdle of the potential convert who has discovered Mary is not so much intellectual as it is visceral. If one has understood properly the kind of justification one needs for Marian belief, seen that its main claims are coherent and not detrimental to belief in her Son, but rather a re-echoing of belief about Christ, then one understands well Chesterton’s third phase of conversion. I described that phase as running like hell to get out of a trap. What makes the trap so powerful, says Chesterton, is that “the trap is the truth” and the potential convert has found that he “himself has made his way towards the trap of truth, and not the trap that has run after the man.”[36] When the trap is the truth and this is acknowledged, then one must resort to worries about the extremes of devotion and particular forms of Marian piety that seem distasteful. “I may say,” said Chesterton, “that I for one was never less troubled by doubts than in the last phase, when I was troubled by fears.”[37] It is at this point that love of the truth must cast out fear. At this point, the potential convert must begin to honor Mary in the best way that he can, if he is to move forward. If all men should call her blessed, then so should I, he says. If such pillars of sanity and sanctity as John Paul II, Chesterton, Newman, Francis de Sales, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm, Bede, Augustine, Chrysostom, and all the great fathers of the Church going back into the dawn of the Church could love her as a mother and ask for her to pray with them as children do, then who am I, says he, to consider it an unworthy or a useless or a dangerous activity. That is what I did. I suppose I am not the only convert who physically cringed, perhaps expecting lightning, the first time I asked Mary for her prayers. Nor, I doubt, am I the only one who asked in a somewhat cringing tone that I be forgiven if such behavior were not all right with her son, even though I knew in an intellectual

sense that all honor and veneration of saints is ultimately directed to God himself. I persevered, and what seemed unnatural at the time has become more natural. Better yet, for me, as Richard John Neuhaus said of himself, “Marian devotion has become an exciting and never-ending discovery of deeper dimensions of Christian fidelity.”[38] Those awkward steps of devotion seemed so final—I’m really becoming Catholic—but looking back now they seem to me like the steps of a child learning to walk. And they were necessary for me to begin that never-ending discovery. I’m glad I did.[39]

[1] G. K. Chesterton, *The Catholic Church and Conversion in Collected Works III* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 89.

[2] *Ibid.* 91.

[3] *Ibid.* 92

[4] Philip Boyce, *Mary: The Virgin Mary in the Life and Writings of John Henry Newman* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 18; John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, 195. [5] John Henry Newman, *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*, 2 vols. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), II: 128-30.

[6] Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 20.

[7] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 10.

[8] Chesterton, *Why I Am a Catholic in Collected Works III*, 131.

[9] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I: I.VII.1. For a thorough yet accessible treatment of the Protestant Reformers’ beliefs about Scripture see Robert Fastigi, “What did the Protestant Reformers Teach about Sola Scriptura?” in Robert Sungenis, ed., *Not By Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Queenship Publishing, 1997): 325-68.

[10] Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* 9.

[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 113.

[12] Dwight Longenecker and David Gustafson, *Mary: A Catholic-Evangelical Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2003).

[13] Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* 60.

[14] *Ibid.* 62,

[15] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* 14.

[16] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *In the Fullness of Faith: On the Centrality of the Distinctively Catholic*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 81.

[17] Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, trans. Justin McCann (New York: Doubleday, 1954), 135.

[18] Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (1938), vol. 1, 2: 157 and 160, quoted in Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), 316.[19] Yves Congar, *Christ, Our Lady, and the Church*, trans. Henry St. John (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1957), 30.

[20] *Lumen Gentium* 65.

[21] John Henry Newman, *Discourses Addressed to Mixed Congregations* (Longmans, Green, 1891; repr. Roman Catholic Books), 344.

[22] *Ibid.* 348. This analysis surely fits what is known as mainline or even old-line Protestantism. It is unclear what Newman would make of the continuing liveliness of the Evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Protestantism. He might note that such a careful observer as Mark Noll still

- labels Evangelical piety “nearly gnostic,” in “The Evangelical Mind Today,” *First Things* 146 (October 2004): 34-39, at 34.
- [23] *Apologia*, 176-7.
- [24] *Lumen Gentium* 67.
- [25] John Henry Newman, *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, 2 vols. (Montreal: D. J. Sadlier and Co., 1907), II: 107-13.
- [26] Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Smith (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 163-4. Congar takes these passages from Leo XIII, *Encyclical lucunda semper* (1894) in *AAS* 27 (1894-95), 179.
- [27] Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Marialis Cultis* (1974) in *Mary in the Church: A Selection of Teaching Documents* (Washington , D.C. : U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003): §56.
- [28] Adam, *Spirit of Catholicism*, 22.
- [29] *Ibid.* 23.
- [30] Balthasar, *Fullness of Faith*, 56.
- [31] *Lumen Gentium* 66.
- [32] John A. O'Brien, ed., *Understanding the Catholic Faith: An Official Edition of the Revised Baltimore Catechism No. 3* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1954), 150 (Question 214).
- [33] Longenecker and Gustafson, *Mary*, 165.
- [34] *Ibid.* 166.
- [35] Sigrud Undset, “Catholic Propaganda,” in *Sigrud Undset: On Saints and Sinners*, ed. Deal Hudson (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 255.
- [36] Chesterton, *Catholic Church and Conversion*, 92.
- [37] *Ibid.* 93.
- [38] Richard John Neuhaus, foreword of Longenecker and Gustafson, *Mary*, 12.
- [39] A version of this essay was given as a talk at the Church of St. Helena , Minneapolis , Minnesota (USA) on October 24, 2004 .