



LIGHT & LIFE

VOICE OF THE ROSARY CENTER & CONFRATERNITY

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KNOWING JESUS THROUGH THE LUMINOUS MYSTERIES, PART TWO

By Fr. Joseph Sergott, OP

In the Third Luminous Mystery—*The Proclamation of the Coming of the Kingdom of God and the Call to Conversion*—Jesus proclaims, “The kingdom of God is at hand—repent, and believe in the Gospel!” (Mark 1:15)

The joy, astonishment and jubilation upon hearing, “The kingdom of God is at hand,” cannot be overstated. Ever since the Fall, the people of God waited *thousands of years* for the Messiah to come. We were cut off from heaven due to our own sin. Knowing that we could not reconcile with God on our own, we waited for God to bridge the chasm that stood between us. Then, one day the carpenter’s son stands up in the synagogue at Nazareth and proclaims, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” (Luke 4:18-19) Then, after rolling up the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1-2), Jesus of Nazareth hands it back to the attendant and announces, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21)



Sermon on the Mount - Carl Bloch

What follows these words of Jesus is astonishment by some and fury by others. Some fall down at his feet while others want to stone him. Whether you are of one group or the other, or are somewhere in between, you know what these words mean. Only the Messiah could announce that these words are fulfilled. Thus, in doing so, Jesus presents himself as such. The ramifications are immense: this means that the wait is over! The prophecies and hopes of the entire Old Testament scriptures point to this day. Now, in his person, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is at hand.

Our Lord proclaims the coming of the kingdom at various times in his years of public ministry; it wasn’t a one-time event. However, when we pray the Third Luminous Mystery of the Rosary, we can recall any one of these events of his proclamation for our contemplation, for example, in the event

that I have mentioned above, in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6: 20-26), or in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12). Jesus’ discourse in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is extensive and contains some of the most well-known teachings given to us by the Lord.

In one instance, the Pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God will come. He says in reply, “The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, and no one will announce, ‘Look, here it is,’ or, ‘There it is.’ For behold, the kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 17:21) When Jesus speaks these words, he is referring to himself. As the King of heaven, Jesus is now present to all who would embrace him in faith. What they failed to see was that the kingdom of God was only fingertips away. To become a disciple of Jesus is to open oneself to the kingdom and the eternal life that follows. As Our Lord says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) In another passage, he says, “I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be safe. He will go in and out, and find pasture.” (John 10:9) Thus he proclaims that in his very person he is the way to heaven. Pope St. John Paul II mirrors this wisdom of the scriptures; for in the Luminous Mysteries he teaches that in the very person of Jesus Christ the revelation of the kingdom is made present.¹

The stunning reality of the Lord’s proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand can be seen in the reactions of those who heard his words and witnessed his miracles in various places throughout Judea and the surrounding regions. In one such example, when a possessed man who was blind and mute was brought to Jesus (Matthew 12: 22-28), there was again a mixed crowd present to witness it. Like the incident in the synagogue when Jesus first announced his arrival, there were those who were astonished by him and others who were furious at him. Jesus expels the demon and cures the man; however, his words reveal what is truly going on, for he says, “If it is by the Spirit of God that I expel demons, then the reign of God has overtaken you.” (Matthew 22:28) What this means is

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

Mary in the Theology of the Fathers (Part 2)

By Fr. Ambrose Sigman, O.P.

As we saw in the previous article, theological discussion of Mary and her role in God's plan for our salvation occurred even among the earliest Christian authors and theologians. In this article, we will pick up where we left off and continue to survey the various Fathers and their writings about Mary down the centuries. As we will see, this reflection becomes more elaborate and complex. As theological reflection about the nature of Christ and our salvation also deepens and becomes more profound, so too does the understanding of Our Lady and thus her role in God's plan become clearer.

ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA

The most important author from the third century to discuss Mary was Origen of Alexandria (184-254). Origen was one of the earliest and greatest exegetes of the early Church. His numerous commentaries and homilies on the various books of Scripture remained powerfully influential long after his death. While Origen's theological legacy was controversial, he is also an early witness to some very important Marian doctrines.

In his *Commentary on Matthew* and his *Homilies on Luke*, Origen affirms the Perpetual Virginity of Our Lady. He affirms also that she remained chaste throughout her life. "At this point we ought to refute the heretics' usual objections; otherwise some simpler people might be deceived. Someone or other gave vent to his madness and claimed that the Savior had repudiated Mary because she had been joined to Joseph after his birth. I hope he knows what the state of his mind was when he said it. If heretics ever raise an objection like this to you, answer them and say, 'Elizabeth surely was filled with the Holy Spirit when she said, 'Blessed are you among women.' If the Holy Spirit called Mary 'blessed,' how could the Savior repudiate her? Furthermore, they assert that Mary had marital relations after the birth of Jesus. But they have no source of proof. For the children who were called Joseph's were not born of Mary. There is no passage in Scripture that mentions this" (Homilies on Luke 7.4). According to Origen, as Jesus inaugurated a tradition of chastity for men, so Mary did so for women (Homilies on Luke 7). It is possible that Origen was also one of the first to refer to Mary as the *Theotokos* ("Mother of God" in the Latin West) in his *Commentary on Romans*. This term to describe Our Lady only becomes firmly established at the end of the third/beginning of the 4th century.

THE FOURTH CENTURY AND LATER

By the fourth century, there is a renewed interest among Christian theologians in the role of Mary. This is partially explained by the fact that this century witnessed the beginning of the great controversies surrounding the nature of Christ, beginning with the heresy of Arianism. As theologians became more focused on these discussions, the role of

Mary began to take on a greater prominence, especially as a guarantor of the Church's doctrine about Jesus.

St. Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373), the great defender of the Council of Nicaea and its teaching on the full divinity of the Son, did not hesitate to bring discussions about Our Lady into his many Christological debates with the Arians. Athanasius was one of the first authors to refer to Mary as the Mother of God, the *Theotokos*. Athanasius writes, "Christ, being God, became man for our sake and was born of Mary, the Mother of God, to free us from the devil's power" (*On Virginity* 3). Athanasius emphasizes strongly the salvific purpose of the Incarnation. Because of this he can draw an indirect link between Mary's motherhood and human redemption. He writes, "It was for our sake that Christ became man, taking flesh from the Virgin Mary, Mother of God" (*Against the Arians* 3.29).

The bishop of Alexandria was also a strong defender and promoter of the monastic life, being also the author of the very famous *Life of Antony*. In this context, he insists strongly on the idea of Mary's perpetual virginity. In his letters to the monastic communities in Egypt, Athanasius presents Mary as a paradigm of the highest holiness to virgins who have consecrated themselves to the Lord.

In the Western Church, at this same time, St. Ambrose of Milan (340-397) offers one of the most developed Mariologies of the early Church. Drawing on the writings of earlier figures like St. Athanasius, Ambrose stresses the importance of Mary as the Mother of God, as well as her virginity. In his various treatises written to consecrated virgins, Ambrose reminds them of how important a model Mary is for their way of life. "Yes, truly blessed for having surpassed the priest (Zechariah). While the priest denied, the Virgin rectified the error. No wonder that the Lord, wishing to rescue the world, began his work with Mary. Thus she, through whom salvation was being prepared for all people, would be the first to receive the promised fruit of salvation." (*Expositio in Lucam* 2.17)

Saint Augustine, too, writing somewhat later, but still in the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth, contributed much to further our understanding of Marian doctrine. Saint Augustine emphasizes in his works the predestination of Our Lady, chosen by God before her birth to be the God bearer. He writes, "And so he created a Virgin, whom he had chosen to be His Mother: a woman who did not conceive according to the law of sinful flesh; that is, not by the instinct of fleshly concupiscence. Rather she, with pious faith, merited to receive the holy seed within her. He chose her, to be created from her" (*De peccatorum meritis et remissione*, 2.24.38). Mary is the Virgin Mother of God and the holiest of creatures.

Anticipating the ideas expressed at the Second Vatican Council, Augustine does not hesitate to say that Mary is

still a part of the Church though. He writes, "Mary is holy, Mary is blessed, but the Church is better than the Virgin Mary. Why? Because Mary is a part of the Church, a holy member, an outstanding member, a supereminent member, but a member of the whole body nonetheless. If she is a member of the whole body, the body is undoubtedly greater than one of its members" (*Sermon 25.7*). This idea, of course, takes its departure from the Pauline doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ.

At around this same time, there was another great defender of the Council of Nicaea, St. Ephrem the Syrian. Dubbed the harp of the Holy Spirit, the poetry and sung homilies of Saint Ephrem are some of the most beautiful poetic works of this period. Ephrem was one of the first to lay such strong emphasis on the mysteries and grandeurs of the Mother of God.

Many of the themes already discussed, and some new ones which become of increasing importance are found in the works of St. Ephrem. In his works, Ephrem evokes very powerfully the mystery of Mary's role in creation, her privilege as the one chosen to bear the Savior of the world. Mary is the figure of the Church, and the alternative to Eve. He writes, "The Church gave us the living Bread, in place of the unleavened bread that Egypt had given. Mary gave us the refreshing bread, in place of the fatiguing bread that Eve had procured for us" (*Hymns for the Unleavened Bread*, 6.6-7). Ephrem lays great stress on Mary's Divine Maternity, according to him, since Christ's flesh came from Mary's flesh, she shares directly in the process of redemption brought about through the Incarnation. As the New Eve, Mary is the mother of our new life in Christ, just as Eve was the mother of the old life.

In the year 428, the imperial capital of Constantinople received a new bishop, a man from Antioch named Nestorius. Within a short time of his arrival, Nestorius would spark a controversy that would sweep the Christian world, when he denied the Virgin the title of *Theotokos*, calling her instead *Christotokos*. Meaning "Christbearer," the title was meant to reflect Nestorius' ideas about the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Christ. In the city of Constantinople, Nestorius was opposed by the priest (and future Patriarch) Proclus. On a Marian feast in 429, in the presence of Nestorius, Proclus preached his famous sermon on the Incarnation, which affirmed Mary as *Theotokos*, thus sparking a controversy that would sweep the Christian world. Nestorius' greatest opponent, though, was the bishop of Alexandria, St. Cyril. The two exchanged a series of letters laying out their various positions, and the exchange ended with a decision to call a council of the Church to meet in Ephesus in 431. This Council affirmed the title of *Theotokos* and removed Nestorius as Patriarch of Constantinople. The events surrounding this council were a watershed in the history of Christian devotion to Mary.

**Repent, therefore, and be converted,
that your sins may be wiped away
(Acts 3:19).**

One of the last Fathers of the Church, and one whose writings show the full flowering of early Christian reflection on Mary is St. John of Damascus (675-749), who is also referred to as the Doctor of the Assumption because of his writings concerning the Assumption of Our Lady. A story is told in his biography about how the Caliph in Damascus, thinking that John was part of a Byzantine plot to attack the city, ordered his right hand cut off and hung up for public display. After a few days, John asked for his hand back and prayed fervently to the *Theotokos*, before her icon, asking that his hand be restored, a miracle which was granted. In gratitude, John attached a third, silver hand to the icon, which afterwards became known as the "Three-Handed" or "Tricheirousa."

This is only a small taste of the many authors and figures who discussed and contemplated the role of Mary in the theology and life of the Christian faithful during this period. Many more could have been added more. The purpose of these articles was to offer a grounding in some of the basic ideas that were circulating at this time about the Virgin Mary and her role in Christian theology, especially about her role as a guarantor of Christological doctrine. From the very beginning, Christian authors recognized the importance of Our Lady in theological discourse, especially for what she could reveal to us about her Son. ■

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Knowing Jesus Part 2 (Continued from page 1)

that the reign of God is present in himself. Jesus is not just a rabbi, or a “holy man,” or a prophet, or a saint, he is the Son of the Living God who was present with the Father and the Holy Spirit at the beginning of time. Now, at his coming, the kingdom of God is brought to earth. And with his death three years later, the pathway to heaven will be opened for those who accept him in faith.

However, there is something further to be considered in the Third Luminous Mystery that is essential. Not only is the Lord announcing that the kingdom of God is at hand, in the same breath he says, “Repent, and believe in the Gospel!” Therefore, acknowledging that the kingdom of God is at hand and that Jesus is the Messiah is one thing, but then we need to embrace him by committing to a life of faith. This means that every Christian who professes faith in Jesus Christ must be open to ongoing conversion. As a result, we must strive continuously for a right relationship with God. Remember what the Lord said, “Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it.” (Luke 11:28)

It’s about entering into the mystery of the life of Christ. What is so critical in meditating upon the mysteries of the Rosary, is that as I meditate on the mysteries of the lives of Jesus and his Mother, I reflect upon my own life and discern how much of my life reflects that of Christ. In doing this, I need to discern whether or not I am striving for and living the virtuous life. Or, have I given myself permission to live a compromised way of life that does not reflect the Gospel?

During Lent, it is apropos to contemplate the *Proclamation of the Coming of the Kingdom of God and the Call to Conversion*. Lent is the season for conversion. As we begin our Lenten journey, sometimes we are not oriented as we ought to be; for example, we start giving up our favorite foods and don’t ask ourselves why we are doing this. Too often, giving up food develops into a preoccupation with weight loss. What about having our sights set on Easter Sunday with the mindset of growing in holiness over the next 40 days? Lent is about assessing our relationship with Christ and discerning where we are called to conversion. Make no mistake—*each of us is in need of conversion*. Even with the great saints, the Lord was constantly at work in them to bring them closer to him. So, the Third Luminous Mystery is an active call to strip away those things that lead us away from God.

For some, this may mean working on small character defects that we need to allow the Lord to refine; however, it strikes me that many of us have more serious areas of concern where we need to be truly reconciled with the Lord, e.g., because of deep wounds, marital strife, mortal sin, or addictions such as alcohol, pornography or food. It’s important to remember though, that Jesus comes from a place of love. When he proclaims, “The kingdom of God is at hand—repent, and believe in the Gospel,” he looks into our hearts and loves us, and invites us to love him in return.

What’s amazing about this particular mystery of the Rosary is that God himself became incarnate in Jesus Christ; he walked the face of this earth, personally inviting every person he encountered to embrace his life of grace! It doesn’t get any better than a personal invitation by the Son of God himself.

Finally, Pope John Paul II gives us the perspective of the Blessed Virgin Mary² as we contemplate the Third Luminous Mystery:

Christ is the supreme Teacher, the revealer and the one revealed . . . In this regard could we have any better teacher than Mary? From the divine standpoint, the Spirit is the interior teacher who leads us to the full truth of Christ. But among creatures no one knows Christ better than Mary; no one can introduce us to a profound knowledge of his mystery better than his Mother.

[As Mary took an active role at the wedding at Cana], we can imagine that she would have done likewise for the disciples after Jesus’ Ascension, when she joined them in awaiting the Holy Spirit and supported them in their first mission. Contemplating the scenes of the Rosary in union with Mary is a means of learning from her to “read” Christ, to discover his secrets and to understand his message.

This school of Mary is all the more effective if we consider that she teaches by obtaining for us in abundance the gifts of the Holy Spirit, even as she offers us the incomparable example of her own pilgrimage of faith. As we contemplate each mystery of her Son’s life, she invites us

to do as she did at the Annunciation: to ask humbly the questions which open us to the light, in order to end with the obedience of faith: “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). ■



The Madonna in Sorrow - Sassoferrato

Update on the Rosary Center

Dear faithful supporters of the Rosary Center & Confraternity, **the Rosary Center is a 95-year-old building that will finally get a make-over! She is indispensable to our apostolate of the Rosary Confraternity.** In order to continue our vibrant ministry and to ensure that it flourishes into the future, we need to make the requisite renovations. In other words, it’s time to shore up the old girl! In these days, I have been meeting with architects to finalize designs for our restorations. **When all is said and done, we hope to have a destination chapel in which YOU can come to adore the Lord and pray the Rosary with us in person.** If you seek to help us with our dreams, please call me, write me or email me at the Rosary Center. May Our Lady’s work continue!

Fr. Joseph Sergott OP, Director of the Rosary Center
& Promoter of the Rosary Confraternity.
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1. Pope Saint John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, #21.
2. Ibid., #14.