

- 9 *Man, Culture and Christianity*, (London, Sheed and Ward, 1967)
- 10 *Slant* 13 (February/March 1967) and *Slant* 14 (April/May 1967).
- 11 *Birth Regulation and Catholic Belief*, (London, Sheed and Ward, 1967).
- 12 *Slant* 29 (January 1970) p. 7. A useful account of *Slant* and its achievement, by Alan Wall, was published in *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 66 No. 666 (November 1975) pp. 506–516 under the title ‘*Slant* and the Language of Revolution’.
- 13 Terry Eagleton’s final editorial in No. 30 mentions five, but there were several others which bore Laurence’s trademark, as the *Slant* chronology indicates.
- 14 This debate in *New Blackfriars* lasted from February 1973 to April 1978. The items included were as follows: Denys Turner, ‘Morality is Marxism’ (February 1973 and March 1973) and ‘Can a Christian be a Marxist?’ (June 1975); Brian Wicker, ‘Marxists and Christians: Questions for Denys Turner’ (October 1975); Terry Eagleton, ‘Marxists and Christians: Answers for Brian Wicker’, also October 1975; Brian Wicker, ‘Sincerity, Authenticity and God’ (May 1976); Francis Barker, ‘The Morality of Knowledge and the Disappearance of God’ (September 1976); Terry Eagleton, ‘Marx, Freud and Morality’ (January 1977); Brian Wicker, ‘Marxist Science and Christian Theology’ (February 1977); Denys Turner, ‘Marxism, Christianity and Morality: Replies to Francis Barker and Brian Wicker’ (April 1977); Francis Barker, ‘Science and Ideology’ (October 1977); Dick Lobel, ‘Giving Away Power’, (January 1978); Denys Turner, ‘The “Subject” and the “Self”: A Note on Barker’s Cartesianism’ (March 1978); Brian Wicker, ‘“God” and Ideology’ (April 1978).
- 15 Especially *Law, Love and Language* (London, Sheed and Ward, 1968).
- 16 See John Lewis, in *Dialogue of Christianity and Marxism* (London, Lawrence and Wishart 1968) p. 5.

## The Magnificat of the Redeemed Woman

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There has been a tendency in recent years among feminist and liberationist theologians to read the Magnificat primarily as a proclamation of social justice and liberation for the oppressed. A publication called *Mary, Mother of Socialism*, offers a number of essays which evaluate the liberative potential of the Magnificat, including one by Graham Dowell called “The Magnificat — a Christian Manifesto?” which offers a side-by-side comparison of Mary’s Magnificat and Marx’s Manifesto, with some fascinating juxtapositions and resonances between the two.<sup>1</sup>

This essay is not intended to detract from these imaginative rereadings of the Magnificat to challenge a dehumanising economic order, but I want to suggest that the prophetic vision of social justice which the Magnificat proclaims is secondary to its message that in the redemption of Mary, womankind is liberated from the consequences of the fall and invited into a new world of integrity, freedom and dignity through the incarnation. This is the way in which a number of patristic writers interpreted the Magnificat, and it has profound implications for some of the vexed questions of sexual difference and equality which risk tearing apart the fabric of contemporary Catholic theology. I should add that I do not think that the seamless robe of salvation history is so easily torn apart by theological squabbles, but I do believe that we could save ourselves much hostility and grief if we could only look anew at our rich theological heritage, and setting aside the rhetoric and polemics of secular feminism, ask in all honesty and faithfulness what it means to be woman who bears the image of God no more and no less than man does. That is of course an enormous question which I make no attempt to tackle here, but I want to revisit patristic writings to suggest how the Magnificat invites us to a new understanding of the story of creation, the fall and redemption from the perspective of the woman, Eve/Mary, who stands at the centre of that story alongside the man, Adam/Christ.

Genesis tells us that God created a world that was very good, in which man, woman and God were in communion with one another and humankind lived in harmonious dependence upon and responsibility for the natural world. But the story of Genesis is told in an attempt to explain the loss of paradise, by authors seeking to imagine life behind the veil of suffering in order to give shape to their longings for wholeness. Why does humanity not experience the peace which we desire and for which we believe we were created? Why does man struggle for survival in a natural environment which is hostile to him and which eventually defeats him? Why does woman experience pain in childbirth and domination in marriage? Genesis 1–3 is an attempt to address these questions, and as such it constitutes not an acceptance of but a protest against the human condition as we know it. However, Christianity also believes that in the incarnation God recreates the world through the conception of Christ in Mary's womb, and the church becomes the locus of a new creation in which original goodness is symbolically restored as an anticipation of the renewal of all creation at the end of time. This introduces a highly complex perspective into Christian readings of Genesis.

On the one hand, Christianity inhabits the world of the fall. Like

Adam and Eve, we carve out a finite existence in a world of suffering and alienation against the near horizon of death, and we experience in our sexual and vulnerable bodies all the consequences of our fallenness. On the other hand, Christianity claims that the world has been reconciled to God in Christ, so that Genesis is a narrative of promise and not of condemnation. In the Easter liturgy there is a reference to the *felix culpa*, the happy fault which led to our salvation in Christ. At least since the second century, there has been a tradition in Catholic theology of interpreting God's promise to the woman in Genesis 3:15 that she or her offspring (depending on which translation one uses) will crush the serpent's head, as the *protoevangelium*, the first good news of the coming of Christ, in a way which creates an association between Eve and Mary. So in the story of the incarnation and in the figures of Mary and Jesus as the new Eve and the new Adam we see the full significance of creation revealed for the first time, but in the experience of the church this revelation is only partially realised since its fulfilment will come at the end of time with the second coming of Christ.

My reading of patristic texts leads me to suggest that in the Magnificat we hear Eve describing the world which she was created to share with Adam, to which she has been restored in Mary, and in which she will live forever in joy with the new Adam in a state of harmony, mutuality and peace with all creation. But it is also important to remember that Mary sings the song of Eve's redemption in a world in which she will suffer cruelly for her obedience to God, and her faith will have to face the test of Herod's genocidal rampage and the brutal deaths of both the children whose conceptions were so joyously celebrated when she went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Mary did not allow historical circumstance, however tragic, to destroy the vision of her faith, for she knew that God's history is not the story of the powerful but of the powerless, and that the ultimate triumph of God's love is the triumph of those like herself and her son whom history would cast aside. We need to share Mary's confidence if we are to explore the Magnificat in the context of a church which has failed to become a community of the people of the Magnificat, and indeed has all too often been complicit in keeping princes on their thrones and exalting the rich. Bearing in mind this tension between the appearances of history and the promises of God in the community of the faithful, I turn now to consider ways in which some patristic writers interpret Mary's Magnificat as Eve's song of redemption, so that the vision of God's Kingdom which Mary proclaims is a celebration of paradise regained and a restoration of the world to its state of original goodness

through the child whom she carries within her.

Severian, Bishop of Gabala in Syria (d. after 408 CE), incorporates a number of themes which are found in other patristic texts in the following reflection on women's salvation:

What then? — Is the female sex doomed to sentence of condemnation, kept in sorrows, and the bond not loosed? Christ has come, who looses the bond. She who brought forth the Lord has presented herself as advocate for the sex, the holy Virgin in place of the virgin. ... Pay attention here to the grace of God. *Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.* For whereas, with her was the serpent, in sorrow: with you is God. And see, the word of the angel, how he interprets the whole economy of Christ. ... From now on all is changed. Until now, those who hear of Eve bewail her: Alas for the wretched one, from what glory has she fallen! Alas for the wretched one, how greatly has she suffered! And now every day is Mary in the mouth of all called Blessed: filled, verily, is she with the Holy Ghost. Hear, in fact, what the Virgin herself in prophecy says. *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, because He has regarded the humility of His handmaid: for from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.* In order thus to show that she bears the person of Eve: Me, she says, until now despised, henceforth shall all generations call me Blessed.<sup>2</sup>

Like Irenaeus writing more than two centuries before him, Severian sees Mary as an advocate for her sex. Eve is the humble handmaid who is blessed in Mary and speaks through her. Not only that, but in the restoration of communion between woman and God is revealed “the whole economy of Christ.” The Magnificat is seen as a prophecy which makes a subtle connection between Eve and Mary as the handmaid of the Lord. Eve is the symbol of the female sex who would have been “doomed to sentence of condemnation” and “kept in sorrows” had Christ not loosed her bond. She represents the exaltation of the lowly and the hungry filled with good things. This interpretation of the Magnificat as the song of the redeemed woman occurs in other patristic writings. James of Sarug imagines Mary saying “From now on, womankind (*muliebre genus*) is blessed through me, because through me Eve's disgrace is removed from women.”<sup>3</sup>

To take seriously the theological implications of these claims entails the recognition that the narrative of salvation is to a certain extent gendered—women have symbols of suffering and redemption which are particular to them, although not outside the overall framework of salvation in Christ. Mary as a woman is not equal to the man Christ in patristic writings, but her participation in the story of salvation is vital if women are to be saved as well as men.

This comes across clearly in some of Augustine's writings. In a Christmas Day sermon, he explores a theme which occurs repeatedly in his theology: that both sexes played an active part in the fall, and therefore both sexes must play an active part in the incarnation if we are to be sure that both are redeemed:

In order, therefore, to make it impossible for us with a show of righteous, horrified indignation, to put all the blame for our death on the woman, and to believe that she is irredeemably damned; that's why the Lord, who came to seek what was lost (Lk 19:10), wished to do something for each sex by honouring them both, because both had got lost. In neither sex, then, should we wrong the Creator; the birth of the Lord encouraged each to hope for salvation. The male sex is honoured in the flesh of Christ; the female is honoured in the mother of Christ. The serpent's cunning has been defeated by the grace of Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Kari Elisabeth Børresen points out that Augustine very rarely refers to Mary and Eve by name, but tends to speak of them as *femina* in general.<sup>5</sup> There is then clearly a generic dimension to Augustine's Marian theology — Mary symbolises the redemption of all women, and when her role is overlooked, there is a risk that women will be excluded from the story of salvation. This would suggest that in response to Rosemary Radford Ruether's question, "can a male saviour save women?"<sup>6</sup> Augustine might offer a qualified no. Kim Power argues that such writings by Augustine "hint that other issues might have been at stake, issues that involved Mary in her own right as a significant and important Christian exemplar."<sup>7</sup> She suggests that the development of an Eve-Mary duality as a parallel to the Adam-Christ duality "indicates that the later theologians felt the need for a female role model to parallel that of the Christ."<sup>8</sup>

Augustine's hierarchical understanding of the relationship between the sexes leads him to insist that Christ became man because it is "the more honourable of the two sexes."<sup>9</sup> However, this belief in the natural inferiority of woman allows him to emphasise the active participation of woman in the salvation of humankind, without thereby compromising the primacy of Christ's role or male superiority. Børresen writes that in the case of both Eve and Mary in Augustine's writings, "their part is ancillary and subordinate in relation to the principal actor, Adam and the new Adam. But this ancillary function takes on a profound significance by imprinting on the work of salvation the stamp of universality."<sup>10</sup> This "stamp of universality" does not, at least in western Catholicism, entail the eradication but rather the

affirmation of the salvific significance of sexual difference.

In fact, not only the Magnificat but the whole context of the visitation is interpreted in some patristic theology as a woman-centred episode with redemptive significance which reaches back to Eve and the story of the fall. A work attributed to Augustine refers to the “glorious three goods ... the angelic salutation, the divine benediction, and the fullness of grace”<sup>11</sup> with which Mary is exalted. The “divine benediction” is Elizabeth’s greeting to Mary which the Augustinian author interprets to mean “*Blessed are you among women*; for cursed had been Eve, who now we believe, through Mary has returned to the glory of benediction.”<sup>12</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgus (200–270 CE) interprets Elizabeth’s declaration of Mary’s blessedness as meaning “For you have become to women the beginning of the new creation (or, resurrection). You have given us boldness of access into paradise, and you have put to flight our ancient woe. For after you the race of women shall no more be made the subject of reproach.”<sup>13</sup> In both these instances, Mary’s blessedness is interpreted as inclusive and encompasses all the women of history including Eve. I would go so far as to ask if there might be added significance in the fact that both these pregnancies entailed the displacement of patriarchal power. In the conception of John the Baptist, his father, the priest Zechariah, is silenced until after the child has been named, and it is Elizabeth who communicates the child’s name to the elders. In the conception of Christ in Luke’s Gospel, the phallic power of fatherhood is entirely omitted through the virgin birth, and it is Mary who is charged with naming Christ. Thus the traditional privileges of patriarchal authority — the male priestly voice, the power of naming and the husband’s claim to the body of his wife — are rendered impotent when God breaks the patterns of history to renew the world through a woman’s co-operation.

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II suggests that Eve and Mary together constitute the generic woman who occupies a pivotal position in the story of salvation. He refers to the “absolute originality” of the Gospel as lying in the fact that for the first time in the Bible, God’s covenant with humanity is addressed to a woman, and this constitutes the sign that “In Christ the mutual opposition between man and woman — which is the inheritance of original sin — is essentially overcome.”<sup>14</sup> If we explore some of the implications of this argument, then it suggests that the domination of Eve by Adam after the fall is the beginning of all other forms of domination, so that the abuse of male power and the woman’s willing collusion in her own oppression through the blighting of her desire becomes the primal unjust relationship, the original sinful hierarchy between human beings

created for loving equality in difference, which then proliferates in all other forms of oppression and injustice. Thus the restoration of woman to the original freedom and dignity of Eve in paradise would constitute the first and most significant moment of redemption for humankind. Only then does it make sense to see the redemption of woman as prior to every other form of redemption, in such a way that all the other consequences of the incarnation flow from this first redemptive act. So it is when Eve is created by God anew in Mary by way of the Immaculate Conception, that the transformative power of the incarnation begins to be revealed in such a way that Mary constitutes the beginning of the new creation. But like Eve, Mary is created in freedom and she must therefore participate in Eve's freedom to disobey. So woman's redemption, and consequently the redemption of all creation, depends upon Mary facing the same kind of choice that Eve faced as the creature who speaks for creation. The Catholic tradition has of course always recognised this in contrasting Mary's obedience with Eve's disobedience, but gradually Mary became a symbol of Eve's condemnation rather than her redemption, and the insights of some patristic writers of a more positive understanding of Eve gradually yielded to a dualistic and oppressive symbolism. *Mulieris Dignitatem* is I believe a significant document, for all its shortcomings, insofar as it rediscovers something of the redemptive and life-giving relationship between Eve and Mary with regard to the woman's role in the story of salvation. I wonder if this is because the document is written to women and not just about women, and therefore it requires of its male author a reflective awareness of how women might feel when they read it.

I am aware that this essay might raise more questions than it answers. In particular I think we face an acute theological challenge today if we are to proclaim perfect equality in difference between man and woman, and also take seriously the claim that Mary plays an active part in our salvation with Christ. If Augustine's theology is rescued from its hierarchical understanding of sexual difference, then I would suggest that it leaves us little option but to recognise Mary as co-redemptrix whose role is different from but no less significant than that of Christ (and this of course has implications for ecclesiology, given that Mary is the type of the church). The alternative is to reject Augustine's insistence that the participation of both sexes is necessary for our redemption, but feminist theologians are pointing out with increasing urgency that this is a truncated vision of redemption which comes perilously close to excluding women from salvation. If the church is to become a community in which the drama of redemption is

played out in anticipation of its fulfilment at the end of time, then we must recognise that the church's sexual division of labour is modelled on fallen cultural stereotypes which came into force when Adam and Eve were exiled from Eden, and not on the restorative vision of the early church.

Perhaps I shall return to Graham Dowell's Christian Manifesto, to let Mary and Marx have the last word: "So wonderfully has he dealt with me, the Lord, the Mighty One." (Mary) Some patristic writers might have assented to Dowell's juxtaposition which interprets this as: "We have established the community of women, who are no longer mere instruments of production, or prostitutes exploited by the bourgeoisie. We have stopped the exploitation of children and replaced home education by social education." (Marx)

- 1 See Andy Delmege (ed.), *Mary, Mother of Socialism* (Croydon: The Jubilee Group, 1995), 25–36.
- 2 Severian, *De Mundi Creatore*, Orat. vi. 10. int. Opp. S. Chrysost. Tom. vi. p. 497, Migne, in Thomas Livius, *The Blessed Virgin in the Fathers of the First Six Centuries* (London: Burns and Oates Ltd.; New York, Cincinnati, Chicago: Benziger Brothers, 1893), 56 (translation modified).
- 3 James of Sarug (Jacobus Sarugensis), *Homily on the Visitation of Mary* in Sergius Alvarez Campus, O.F.M. (collected by), *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*, Vol. 5, 5189, 46.
- 4 Augustine, "Sermon 190" in *Sermons J84–229Z* in *The Works of Saint Augustine — a Translation for the 21st Century*, III, under the auspices of the Augustinian Heritage Institute, trans. and notes, Edmund Hill, OP. and John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., Vol. 6 (1993), 39.
- 5 See Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1995 [1968]), 75.
- 6 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1992 [1983]), 116.
- 7 Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine on Writings on Women* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995), 172.
- 8 Ibid, 173
- 9 Augustine, *De diversibus questionibus* 83, 11. CC. 44A, p. 18, quoted in Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence*, 74.
- 10 Børresen, *ibid*, 75.
- 11 Serm. 123, *In Nat. Dom.* vii. nn. 1, 2, 3, int. Opp. S. Augustine, in Livius, *The Blessed Virgin*, 73.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Gregory Thaumaturgus, "On the Annunciation to Mary — the Second Homily" in *The Writings of Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Archelaus in Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vol. 20 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1871), 133 (translation modified).
- 14 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem: apostolic letter on the dignity and vocation of women on the occasion of the Marian year*, 15 August 1988 (London: Catholic Truth Society), n. 11, 43.