

Ever faithful to the Church, in each present moment of her pilgrimage

Last month we started reflecting on the new document from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mater Populi Fidelis* [MPF], promulgated in November with the approval of Pope Leo XIV. As we saw, the document focuses on two Marian titles, ‘Co-redemptrix’ and ‘Mediatrix’ (more specifically, Mediatrix ‘of All Graces’), and concludes that these titles, although orthodox when rightly understood, are nonetheless easily misunderstood. Thus the title ‘Co-redemptrix’ will henceforth be avoided in official documents; (cf. MPF 22) whereas the use of ‘Mediatrix’ simply ‘requires special prudence’. (MPF 24)

Both titles have some support in the previous Magisterium, so at first sight this decision may seem hard to understand. However, this is actually a normal example of coherent doctrinal development as has occurred from the beginning, as St John Henry Newman explained. The underlying *meaning* of doctrine remains the same, but the language is modified according to what the Magisterium judges to best *express and communicate* that unchanging meaning in the present time.

This is exactly what was set forth by Pope St John XXIII at the opening of Vatican II. He declared to the Bishops, ‘The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more effectively...The Council ...wishes to transmit Catholic doctrine, whole and entire, without alteration or deviation...

‘It is necessary that this certain and unchangeable doctrine, to which is owed the obedience of faith, be explored and expounded in the manner required by our times. For the deposit of faith itself, or the truths which are contained in our venerable doctrine, are one thing; another thing is the way in which they are expressed, with however the same meaning...’ (11/10/1962)

In the years after Vatican II, the Holy See explained this in more depth. In its 1973 Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, approved by Pope St Paul VI, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith explained: ‘The dogmatic formulas of the Church’s Magisterium were from the beginning suitable for communicating revealed truth, and that as they are they remain forever suitable for communicating this truth to those who interpret them correctly. It does not however follow that every one of these formulas has always been or will always be so to the same extent...

‘It often happens that ancient dogmatic formulas and others closely connected with them remain living and fruitful in the habitual usage of the Church, but with suitable expository and explanatory additions that maintain and clarify their original meaning. In addition, *it has sometimes happened that in this habitual usage of the Church certain of these formulas gave way to new expressions which, proposed and approved by the Sacred Magisterium, presented more clearly or more completely the same meaning.* [emphasis added]

‘As for the meaning of dogmatic formulas, this remains ever true and constant in the Church, even when it is expressed with greater clarity or more developed.’ (*Mysterium Ecclesiae* 5)

The popes before Vatican II had already warned of the danger of clinging to changeable aspects of the past, in defiance of new directives from the Church. So Pope Pius XII cautioned: ‘Clearly no sincere Catholic can refuse to accept the formulation of Christian doctrine more recently elaborated and proclaimed as dogmas by the Church, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit with abundant fruit for souls, because it pleases him to hark back to the old formulas.

‘No more can any Catholic in his right senses repudiate existing legislation of the Church to revert to prescriptions based on the earliest sources of canon law. Just as obviously unwise and mistaken is the zeal of one who in matters liturgical would go back to the rites and usage of antiquity, discarding the new patterns introduced by disposition of divine Providence to meet the changes of circumstances and situation.’ (Encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947) 63)

And long before that, Pope Leo XIII had unmasked the disobedience of rejecting directives of present-day authority out of supposed respect for past authority. He wrote: ‘It is to give proof of a submission which is far from sincere to set up some kind of opposition between one Pontiff and another. Those who, faced with two differing directives, reject the present one to hold to the past, are not giving proof of obedience to the authority which has the right and duty to guide them; and in some ways they resemble those who, on receiving a condemnation, would wish to appeal to a future council, or to a Pope who is better informed.’ (*Epistola Tua* (1885)) Pope Leo’s words have obvious application to certain currents in the Church today.

‘On this point’, Leo continues, ‘what must be remembered is that in the government of the Church, except for the essential duties imposed on all Pontiffs by their apostolic office, each of them can adopt the attitude which he judges best according to times and circumstances. Of this he alone is the judge.’ (*Epistola Tua*) The ‘essential duties imposed on all Pontiffs by their apostolic office’, taking the words of Leo XIII, obviously include preserving the deposit of faith unchanged in its genuine meaning, and communicating that meaning in the best way for the present day, as John XXIII explained as he opened Vatican II.

This is exactly what Leo XIV has done in approving *Mater Populi Fidelis*. For example, the document explains the unchanging doctrine expressed by the Marian title of ‘Mediatrice’. We read: ‘Christ is the only Mediator, “for there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:5-6)... Given this clarity in the revealed Word of God, special prudence is required when applying the term “Mediatrice” to Mary. In response to a tendency to broaden the scope of Mary’s cooperation through this title, it is helpful to specify the range of its value as well as its limits.’ (MPF 24)

‘It is clear that Mary had a real mediatory role in enabling the Incarnation of the Son of God in our humanity.’ (MPF 26) ‘The Second Vatican Council’s terminology regarding *mediation* primarily refers to Christ; it sometimes also refers to Mary, but in a clearly subordinate manner ...Strictly speaking, we cannot talk of any other mediation in grace apart from that of the incarnate Son of God...’ (MPF 27)

‘At the same time, we need to remember that the unicity of Christ’s mediation is “inclusive.” He enables various forms of participation in his salvific plan because, in communion with him, we can all become, in some way, cooperators with God and “mediators” for one another (cf. 1 Cor 3:9). Precisely because of Christ’s infinitely supreme power, he can elevate his brothers and sisters to make them capable of a genuine cooperation in the accomplishment of his plans.

‘The Second Vatican Council affirmed that “the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in one source.” (*Lumen Gentium* 62) For this reason, “the content of this participated mediation should be explored more deeply, but must remain always consistent with the principle of Christ’s unique mediation.” (CDF, *Dominus Iesus* (2000) 14) Indeed, the Church extends in time and communicates everywhere the effects of Christ’s Paschal Mystery, and Mary holds a unique place in the heart of Mother Church.’ (MPF 28)