

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary
– From Antiquity to the Lutheran Reformation –

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“It is proper to call you blessed, ever-esteemed Theotokos,
most pure, and mother of God.
You who are more worthy of honor than the cherubim,
and far more glorious than the seraphim.
You who incorruptibly gave birth to God the Word,
verily Theotokos, we fervently extoll you.”

From The Byzantine Liturgy⁽¹⁾

Introduction

In the midst of current post-conciliar ecumenical dialog between Roman Catholics and Lutherans, it seems almost an inevitability that the question is raised, “What about Mary?” Indeed, the question might well be asked, “Is Mary an obstacle to, or a facilitator of, church unity?”

In a recent comment by Pope John Paul II, made during the World Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 1987, he is purported to have said:

“How anxious she [Mary] is for the unity of all her Lord’s disciples! She knows the path leading to this unity. Let us beg her once more, so that all may hear her maternal call, wholeheartedly to identify and fulfill Christ’s Will.”⁽²⁾

According to this view, it would seem that the Bishop of Rome is

confident that Mary has a decisive role to play in the quest for church unity. Yet, ironically, for many Lutherans it is precisely this point, viz., devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary (hereafter BVM), which seems to prevent any possibility for rapprochement with Rome. Karl Barth, though himself a Calvinist and not a Lutheran, sums up the commonly held sentiment of most Protestants when he writes: "Where Mary is 'venerated' ... the Church of Christ does not exist."⁽³⁾

It is clear that understanding between Roman Catholics and Lutherans cannot hope to be achieved unless there is first a concerted effort to determine the extent and meaning of the role which devotion to the BVM has played, and should continue to play, in the tradition of the church. This can only be accomplished by undertaking serious study of the primary sources, from the early church through the confessional writings of the Lutheran reformers.

The purpose of this paper, then, will be to contribute to this dialog toward church unity by looking at examples of devotion to the BVM in various liturgical documents, and then commenting on their significance. This study will not attempt to be exhaustive (the examples are simply too numerous for the scope of this paper), but rather representative of key devotional practices.

The rationale behind exploring liturgical documents, as a way to gaining understanding into the role of Mary in the lives of the faithful, is the fact that the liturgy of the church has always shaped its way of belief. As such, these documents function as primary sources in understanding the faith and practice of church tradition. The early church understood and expressed this concept well in stating, *Lex Orandi Lex Credendi* — *the rule of prayer is the rule of belief*. Liturgical documents, then, serve as exceptional "windows" into perceiving how the church believed and understood itself in history.

While the bulk of this study will concentrate on the period of the Middle Ages, there will also be an examination of the early church, as well

as a concluding section dealing with the XVI century Lutheran position on the place of Mary in devotional practice. In this way the paper will hopefully serve to enhance the current and on-going ecumenical dialog between Lutherans and Roman Catholics on church unity.

I. THE EARLY CHURCH

This section will begin with a look at the Biblical evidence for how Mary is portrayed. It will then examine the theological evidence in the writings of the early church fathers. Next, the liturgical evidence will be investigated. And finally, there will be a short concluding summary.

Biblical Evidence

The attention given the BVM in the Holy Scriptures is relatively sparse; however, when Mary is mentioned she is usually portrayed with honor (as one who has a unique role in salvation history), with humility (as one who is willing to be a servant of the Lord), and with compassion (as one who enters fully into the *pathos* of the moment).

Witness the way in which the *Annunciation* is recounted in Luke's Gospel: "He [Gabriel] went in and said to her [Mary], 'Rejoice, you who enjoy God's favour! The Lord is with you ... Look! You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son ... He will be great and be called Son of the Most High' ... Mary said, "You see before you the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said.'" (Lk. 1: 28-38)⁽⁴⁾ This is clearly the portrayal of one who is extended honor with "God's favor," and one who responds in humility as "the Lord's servant."

The same motif is once again repeated in the *Visitation* of Mary to Elizabeth. She is greeted by Elizabeth as "the mother of my Lord" (Lk. 1:43) — a sign of honor — and Mary responds in humility with a song of praise to the Lord — the *Magnificat* (Lk. 1:46-55).

Still further, the account of the first miracle of Jesus, at the wedding at Cana (John 2: 1-12), Mary is portrayed as one having compassion (in this

case, for the wedding party which inopportunately runs out of wine). Mary asks Jesus for help (out of compassion), and then tells the servants to “do whatever he tells you” (as a model of obedience).

Perhaps the most poignant of the Marian accounts of compassion, however, is the portrayal of her at the foot of the cross; at her Son’s crucifixion. At a time when all the disciples had fled and denied their association with Jesus, the Gospel according to John relates how in contrast to this desertion, “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother.” (Jn.19:25). Mary is portrayed as the faithful, compassionate one. Later, in the Middle Ages, this scene will be captured and immortalized in the Hymn of Mary, “Stabat Mater.”⁽⁵⁾

Theological Evidence In The Fathers

That the early church fathers accorded the BVM a high place of honor, from a remarkably early stage, is without question. There are attestations to this fact already in the second century with the writings of Justin Martyr (d.c. 165) and Irenaeus (d.c. 202). Both of these early church fathers regard Mary as a type of “New Eve;” one who exhibits *obedience* to God rather than rebellion, as did the “Old Eve”.⁽⁶⁾

It wasn’t until the Christological controversies of the fourth century (involving especially the heresy of Arianism, and later Nestorianism), however, that Marian doctrine was propelled to the forefront of theology. Athanasius (d. 373) referred to her as “ever virgin.”⁽⁷⁾ Ambrose (d. 397) thought her to be a type of mother of the church as it was Mary’s womb that brought forth the church’s beginnings.⁽⁸⁾

Mary’s role in interpreting the Christ-event became increasingly important in refuting heresy. Against Arianism, which essentially denied the divinity of Christ, the Council of Nicaea (325) affirmed the miraculous “virgin birth.” The Council of Ephesus (431 AD) defended the orthodoxy of Mary’s title of “Theotokos” (God Bearer, or Mother of God)⁽⁹⁾ ; and at the Council of Constantinople (553 AD) the doctrine of *semper virgo* (ever-

virgin)⁽¹⁰⁾ was officially accepted by the fathers in both the East and the West. Later that same century, Gregory of Tours (d. 594) formally advocated the doctrine of the Corporeal Assumption of Mary, a doctrine long held from antiquity throughout the Middle Ages (but not formally dogmatised by Rome until 1950 with the statement, *Munificentissimus Deus*). One of the early legends to be disseminated by the church, which greatly contributed to this notion of Mary's assumption, was to point out that while there were many relics of her clothing (etc.) in existence, nowhere is there any mention of any corporeal relics of Mary (i.e. her bones!).

It might well be argued that these Marian titles explicated in the early centuries were wholly the result of concern for the person and nature of Christ. As Hilda Graef points out:

“Mary was called Theotokos in order to affirm that Christ, born from her, was true God as well as true man, that he was not a man who later attained to divinity, like the demi-gods of the pagans, nor a sort of hybrid, part man, part God. If Christ was truly God as well as man, then, Mary, his Mother, was also truly the Mother of God.”⁽¹¹⁾

As a corollary to this, what can also be argued is that the increased attention given to Mary, on the theological level, inevitably served to increase the amount of devotion shown to her.

The Liturgical Evidence

There is evidence of the BVM referred to in the Liturgy as early the last part of the II century, or the early part of the III century. This is found in the baptismal and eucharistic portions of the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus (c. 215).⁽¹²⁾ In the baptismal section, the candidate is asked: “Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born from the holy

Spirit from the *Virgin Mary*...?"⁽¹³⁾ [Italics mine]. In the eucharistic prayer (the *anaphora*) the presider says: "You sent him [Jesus] from heaven into the *Virgin's* womb ... being born of the holy Spirit and the *Virgin*."⁽¹⁴⁾ [Italics mine].

In the late III or early IV century we have evidence of what is perhaps the oldest known prayer that is specifically addressed to the BVM; the so-called *Sub tuum praesidium*: "We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God. Despise not our necessities; deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin."⁽¹⁵⁾ Clearly, the prayer is suggestive of a developing theology of "invocation" to the BVM, in this case, for protection and intercession; a trend which is developed further in the Medieval period.

Other liturgical evidence includes numerous hymns beautifully written in the IV century by Ephrem The Syrian (d. 373) to the BVM. Note worthy examples are as follows:

Awake, O my harp, thy chords, in praise of Mary the Virgin.
Lift up thy voice, and sing the generation utterly marvelous of
the Virgin, David's daughter, who hath brought forth life to
the world. Blessed art thou, Mary, daughter of David; and
blessed is the Fruit which thou hast given us. [*Hymns on
Blessed Mary, 18*]

With wonder have I contemplated Mary suckling the Nourisher
of the tribes, who is become an Infant. In a maiden's womb
dwelt He who fills the world. As she nursed the Child, she
caressed Him, fondled and petted Him with coaxing words;
and then adored Him, saying: "Bid me, my Master, embrace
Thee..." [*Hymns on Blessed Mary, 19*]

Thou and Thy Mother are the only ones who are perfectly

beautiful in every respect; for there is no spot in Thee, O Lord, nor any taint in Thy Mother. [*The Nisibis Hymn 27*]⁽¹⁶⁾

What is remarkable about these hymns of Ephrem to the BVM is the warmth and tenderness which is exhibited toward the Mother of the Lord. Images of "lifting up thy voice in praise," "Mary suckling the Nourisher," "caressed," "fondled," and "perfectly beautiful" engender a sense of warmth and tenderness about the BVM. She is a Mother *par excellence*, both of the Christ-child and so too of the whole church. In this knowledge, every Christian is invited to "lift up thy voice" and call her "blessed!" One has the impression that this in fact is exactly what was done.

One other piece of evidence from this early period, while not strictly "liturgical," is instructive as to how the church admired and wished to emulate the *compassion* of Mary. In one of the sayings of the Desert Fathers (c. 320), the following story is related:

Abba Joseph related that Abba Isaac said, "I was sitting with Abba Poemen one day and I saw him in ecstasy and, as I was on great terms of freedom of speech with him, I prostrated myself before him and begged him saying, 'Tell me where you were.' He was forced to answer and he said, 'My thought was with Mary, the Mother of God, as she wept by the cross of the saviour. *I wish I could always weep like that.*'"⁽¹⁷⁾ [Italics mine].

Summary

All the evidence examined above suggests that the BVM was indeed given an exalted place of recognition in the early church, from the time of the New Testament to the early church fathers. Scripture attests to her humility, honor, and compassion. The fathers reiterate these same motifs in

their writings. She was *theotokos* and *semper-virgo*; the new-eve through whom God brings salvation in Jesus to humankind. The liturgical evidence, as well, suggests that she was truly a model of the godly life — being a willing servant of the Lord, full of compassion and tenderness. The Iconography of late antiquity bears this out. The Madonna with Child is normally portrayed with tender loving compassion. In short, the early church admired and praised Mary for her holiness, her purity, and her role in the Christ-event.

II. THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

In this section, the Medieval church, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary will be explored in the various areas where it is most apparent. This includes, Art, Architecture, the Calendar, Relics, Miracles, Prayer, Hymns, Antiphons, as well as a look at devotional abuses. The section will begin with a brief over-view and close again with a brief summary.

General Over-View

An examination of the sources reveals that devotion to the BVM during the Middle Ages operated under the principle of “accumulation.” That is to say, old practices were retained while new practices were continually added. Eventually there accrued such a morass of devotional activities to the BVM that one would have suffered from liturgical exhaustion and spiritual indigestion, trying to simply keep up with it all. Indeed the profusion of Marian devotion is on such a scale that it is nearly incomprehensible to our twentieth century way of thinking.

Time and space will not allow an in-depth examination of all the practices which ensued, however, even simply a cursory look reveals that a profusion of devotion to the BVM blossomed throughout the Middle Ages. This is evident in the following ways: Calendrical Feasts to the BVM, Pilgrimages, Architecture, Art, Music (Hymns and Antiphons), Miracle

Stories, the Little Office of the BVM (modelled after the existing "Liturgy of the Hours"), the Rosary (modelled after the Psalter)⁽¹⁸⁾, Marian Relics, Shrines, Litanies, and Prayers in Sacramentaries.

Art and the BVM

The gradual shift in devotion to Mary from Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval Church, to the Late Medieval and eventually Baroque church, interestingly, is epitomized in the art work of the two periods. During the Medieval era, the motif of the Madonna affectionately nurturing the Christ-Child was gradually replaced with the theme of "Mary, Queen of Heaven." Icons, frescoes, oils, statuary, etc., depicting the BVM, begin to take on a regal motif. By the High Middle Ages, Mary is frequently pictured with a crown and/or queen's scepter, with attendant angels at her side. Instead of the humble, meek and mild Mary of Late Antiquity and Early Medieval church, she is now the glorified Mary — Queen of Heaven. This is especially so from the time of the Baroque period, into the Modern era.

It would be an over-generalization, however, to assume that this shift occurred everywhere in the same way. Artwork in certain areas continued the tradition of the "compassionate Madonna" of the early church, such as in Assisi.⁽¹⁹⁾ Nevertheless, major changes did occur; and nowhere is this more apparent perhaps than in the way the Madonna is depicted in art.

Architecture and the BVM

Architecturally it became common to name one of the chapels in the church (often the chapel in the Apse, directly behind the high altar; or an altar off to the side of the nave) as the "Lady Chapel" — a worship space dedicated solely to Mary. Eventually it became routine to dedicate entire churches to the BVM, such that during the XII century, in France, nearly every church erected was dedicated to the Virgin Mary.⁽²⁰⁾ Monastic

communities, as well, became involved in this general trend. For example, the Cistercians, the new austere monastic order of the XII century, began to dedicate all of their monasteries to the BVM.⁽²¹⁾ In short, devotion to the BVM became readily apparent in the church architecture of the Middle Ages.

The Calendar and the BVM

Calendrical infusions with Marian Feasts abound in the Middle Ages. Some of the Marian feasts may go back to the V or VI century, such as *Mary, Mother of God* (August 15th, Jerusalem), and *The Nativity of Mary* (Sept. 8, Jerusalem).⁽²²⁾ However, much of the Calendrical observances having to do with Mary developed during the Middle Ages, such that by the time of the Reformation there was a veritable proliferation of Major and Minor Feasts in honor of the BVM. The Nativity, the Annunciation, the Purification, the Visitation, the Commemoration of Miraculous Conception, the Presentation, the Holy Name, the Deposition of Mary's Robe, and the Dedication of the Basilica St. Mary Major in Rome, to name just a few!

Relics and the BVM

Relics of the BVM, although not at first a common practice, came to be a significant part of in Marian devotion — they were thought to contain special powers. Shrines to the BVM would often contain such things as strands of her hair (usually Blonde), pieces of her veil, or girdle, which (according to legend) she is purported to have dropped into the lap of doubting Thomas at her assumption! Perhaps the most common, and the most cherished of all relics of the BVM (and certainly the most “earthy”), were vials of the Virgin's milk. These containers with dried lactose were such popular items in the Middle Ages, and so widely disseminated, that it caused one preacher to remark, rather skeptically, “All the cows of Lombardy could not yield as much milk as was ascribed to the virgin!”⁽²³⁾

Miracles and the BVM

A rather intriguing development of Marian piety in the Middle Ages is the advent of the cult of miracles attributed to the BVM.⁽²⁴⁾ Frequently these stories would include accounts of how sinners, who otherwise would be condemned to eternal damnation, through the merits and intercessions of the BVM, were transported into heaven. As one can imagine, these tales made for inspirational sermon illustrations in their day! The impetus for gathering these collections seems to have been to stimulate devotion to the Virgin, as well as to cultivate a particular theology in the efficacy of Marian intercession. The following is but one example:

A certain religious in a monastery of St. Peter lived a bad life. A time came when with some of the brothers he took medicine for the health of his body, and immediately afterwards died without confession or the holy sacrament. His soul was conducted by devils to the prisons below.

St. Peter, whose monk he was, perceiving this, went to the Lord Jesus Christ and begged deliverance for the soul of the brother. To whom the Lord said: "Knowest thou not what the prophet said under inspiration by me, 'O Lord, who shall dwell in Thy tabernacle, etc.? He who enters without spot and doth righteousness.' How can this man be saved when he has neither entered in without spot nor wrought righteousness?" Hearing this, St. Peter went to the Blessed Virgin Mary, begging her to *intercede* with him for that soul. And the holy Mother of God rose and with her holy maidens stood before her Son, and her Son said to her: "What art thou, my mother and ye, my beloved sisters, asking of me?" And when the holy Mother replied that she was begging for the soul of a brother, Christ said to her: "Because it is your wish that he should obtain pardon *by reason of your prayers*, I grant that the soul

of the brother shall return to his body that after repentance for his wickedness, he may enjoy everlasting rest.”

When the holy Mary had made this known to St. Peter, in haste St. Peter drove off the devils with the key which he held, and rescued the soul of the brother from their power, and charged two angels to lead back that soul to its body. Moreover, the brother, returning from death, told what had happened to him and what he had seen and how he had been rescued from the power of the devils *by the supplications of St. Mary and St. Peter.* [Italics mine. Miracle LVIII]⁽²⁵⁾

It is clear, from this account, that the efficacy of Mary's *intercession* and *supplication* to her son, on behalf of the human race, is a commonly advanced motif. Witness further another, persistent and yet almost endearing, account of the BVM's intercession:

A certain man, who had long been devout, entered the Cistercian Order, in which, although for some time he lived a holy life, at last overcome by the temptation of the Devil, he fell into sin. Hence he gave occasion for scandal to many. Being severely disciplined for this, as is usual in that Order, in very bitter penitence he returned to his senses and with tears and prayers had recourse to the Glorious Mother of Christ. Lying in great grief, therefore, for no little time, at last one day he prayed and fell into an ecstasy, in which he saw the Glorious Virgin and in her arms, as it were, a Child at her *breast of surpassing beauty.* And he, seeing the Mother supplicating the Son on his behalf, *earnestly begged* that he might be delivered from his sin and trouble and be restored to the grace of his former life. But when the child turned away his face in resistance to her and the Mother on the contrary

shifted her son to the other part of her arm (the forearm), passing her arm to the other side the better to *bring kind looks* into his face, and he again turning away his face as his Mother many times pleaded with him to soften his unwillingness, at last the *wonderful loving Mary* prevailed over her Son and won him to countenance the man's redemption so that he pardoned the man's sin and brought him back to the grace of his former life. [Italics mine; Miracle XLVI]⁽²⁶⁾

Not only are these miracle stories a marvelous source for gaining insight into popular piety regarding the role of Mary in the life of a Christian, (as an intercessor, on behalf of sinners, to her Son, Jesus), but they also provide a rich source for discovering the extent of Marian liturgy used in the Middle Ages. For instance, the stories often refer to the praying of the "Hail Mary," the singing of the "Salve Regina," and other liturgical activities. It is plain to see that the BVM figured large in the daily activities of Medieval life.

Prayer and the BVM

While there are several prayers addressed to the BVM in the early Roman Sacramentaries, such as the Gallicanized Gelasian Sacramentary of the VIII century,⁽²⁷⁾ the oldest, and certainly most widely used prayer, dates back to the early church in the East — the *Ave Maria*. The prayer can be found, with emendations, in the IV century Liturgy of St. James and St. Mark.⁽²⁸⁾ It's early date is also attested to by the discovery of two ostracae of Egyptian origin dating back to the VI or VII century.⁽²⁹⁾

The prayer is comprised of three parts: 1) The words of the archangel Gabriel: "Hail [Mary] full of grace, the Lord is with Thee, blessed art thou amongst women" (Lk 1:28), 2) The words of Elizabeth "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb" ["Jesus" was later added at the end of this line by Pope Urban IV (d.1264)], 3) A formulaic petition: "Holy Mary, Mother of

God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.” [an early XVI century emendation].

The original prayer, more than likely, consisted simply of a combination of #1 and #2 — the Biblical passages. To this, no doubt, various forms came to be attached to the ending of the prayer. It was popularized in the Middle Ages by its repetitive use in the “Little Office of the BVM,” as well as in the saying of the “Rosary.” It came to have its current form during the early part of the XVI century, after which it was permanently fixed to the Breviary of Pius V in 1568. The prayer reflects both the desire to praise Mary for who she is, and the hope that she will intercede on behalf of the human race.

Hymns and the BVM

There are several hymns of the Middle Ages composed in honor of the BVM, including the well-known *Ave Maris Stella* (“Hail Star of the Sea”), but perhaps none is as well-known or well-liked as the *Stabat Mater Dolorosa* (“The Sorrowful Mother Standing”). It was composed as follows:

Stabat Mater Dolorosa

Juxta crucem Lacrimosa
 Dum pendebat Filius;
Cujus animam gementem,
Contristatam et dolentem
 Petrasivit gladius.

O quam tristis et afflicta
Fuit illa benedicta
 Mater unigeniti!

The Sorrowful mother was standing

In tears beside the cross on which
 her Son was hanging.
Her soul was full of grief and
anguish and sorrow,
 for the sword of prophecy
 pierced it.

How sad now and how unhappy
at the fate of her only son was
 that mother, once called
 blessed;

Quae maerebat et dolebat	How the faithful mother grieved
Pia mater dum videbat	and lamented as she saw her Son
Nati poenas incliti!	so shamefully treated.
Quis est homo qui non fleret	Who is there who would not weep,
Matrem Christi si videret	were he to see Christ's
In tanto supplicio?	mother in such great
	suffering?
Quis non posset contristari,	Or who could help feeling sympathy
Christi matrem contemplari	with the mother,
Dolentem cum Filio?	were he to think of her
	sorrowing with her
	Son? ⁽³⁰⁾

The authorship of this hymn is disputed. Some have ascribed it to Bonaventure, and others to Bernard. Connelly and Britt (art. cit.) both suggest the author to be Jacopone da Todi O.F.M. (d. 1306).⁽³¹⁾ It is, in Britt's words, "the tenderest and most pathetic hymn of the Middle Ages."⁽³²⁾ While the hymn epitomizes the depth of grief and pain that the Holy Mother felt for her Son at the foot of the cross, it also is a means for inviting the reader/singer to share in the same sorrow. As the last line reads:

"Who is there who would not weep, were he to see Christ's mother in such great suffering? Or who could help feeling sympathy with the mother, were he to think of her sorrowing with her Son?"

The answer, of course, to these haunting questions is, "no one." The compassionate mother compels one to respond in kind. Such is one of the themes of devotion to the BVM which was especially emphasized in the Middle Ages.⁽³³⁾

Antiphons and the BVM

There are four "Antiphons of the BVM" which were composed in the Middle Ages, and came to be used extensively in the Liturgy; especially in the Liturgy of the Hours. The names of the four antiphons are as follows: *Alma Redemptoris*, *Ave Regina*, *Regina Caeli*, and *Salve Regina*. Of the four, the *Salve Regina* is perhaps the most well-known:

Salve Regina, mater miseri-
cordia,

Vita, dulcedo et spes nostra,
salve.

Ad te clamamus, exsules filii
Hevae.

Ad te suspiramus, gementes et
flentes in hac lacrimarum
valle.

Eja ergo, advocata nostra,
illos tuos misericordes oculos ad
nos converte.

Et Jesum, benedictum fructum
ventris tui, nobis post hoc
exsilium ostende.

O clemens, o pia, o dulcis Virgo
Maria.⁽³⁴⁾

Hail Queen, mother of
mercy-love,

Hail our life, sweetness,
and hope.

We cry to you, exiled children
of Eve.

As we journey in sorrow and
lament through this
valley of tears, we sigh
and long for your help.

Come then, our advocate, and
turn those eyes of pity
towards us.

After our time of exile is past,
show us Jesus, the blessed
fruit of your womb.

O merciful, O pious, O sweet
virgin Mary.⁽³⁵⁾

Medieval tradition held St. Bernard to be the author, however, manuscript evidence suggests an earlier dating. Most scholars now attribute this antiphon to Hermann Contractus (d.1054), although there is no concrete

evidence of this and the debate is still very much open to question.⁽³⁶⁾ It's popularity, however, is clearly attested to by the numerous manuscripts which are in existence from the Medieval period. In many ways the *Salve Regina* captures and epitomizes the devotion of the Medieval church towards the BVM, such that it provides a useful summary of the topic at hand. As Hilda Graef, in her monumental work Mary: A History Of Doctrine And Devotion, points out:

"The *Salve Regina* expresses to perfection medieval men's [sic] attitude to Mary; their complete confidence in her, the Mother of Mercy, to whom the exiled sons of Eve recommend themselves and whose life, sweetness and hope she is; her power as their advocate with God and her mediation between themselves and Christ, whom she will show them after the exile of this earth is over."⁽³⁷⁾

It might be argued that in the *Salve Regina* the two strands of Marian devotion, the early church's emphasis of her humility and the Medieval church's emphasis of her nobility, are joined together to form one single cord. It is a cord which cherishes Mary's sweetness (*dulcedo*) as Mother of Mercy (*mater misericordiae*) and also her Queenly-ness (*Regina*).

Devotional Abuses and the BVM

As evidenced in the early church sources, devotion to the BVM arose out of, and was sustained by, a concern for the person of Christ. As pointed out above, it was the great Christological controversies of the III through V centuries (especially so in the IV century) which spurred Marian theology, and subsequent Marian devotion, to the vanguard of the church. Without Mary, the willing "hand-maid" (*ancilla domini*) there would be no Christ-Child. Without Mary, the "compassionate mother," there would be no Christ-The Adult. Thus, Mary's role in the incarnation was absolutely and

unequivocally essential in God's salvation history. In the mind of the church, then, devotion to Mary is devotion to her child. This is so because Mary's sole role as *Theotokos* (the "God-Bearer") is to bring her Son to the church, and the church to her Son. Thus, to behold Mary is to behold the one who points to Christ, the Saviour.

This understanding, however, did not always prevail. It is an unfortunate consequence of certain Medieval theology and practice that led to abuse in Marian devotion; and thus, is rightly termed "Mariolatry." One such writer in the Middle Ages, who in his enthusiasm for the BVM resorts to elevating Mary to an even higher level than God, is Bernardine of Siena (d. 1444). He writes the following:

"The blessed Virgin could do more concerning God than God could do concerning himself... O the unthinkable power of the Virgin Mother! ... the blessed Virgin Mary has done more for God, or just as much as God has done for all mankind."⁽³⁸⁾

This is a glaring example of Marian devotion which has become excessive and extreme. In the mind of Bernardine, the BVM can be elevated above the level of God because of what she has done as God-Bearer.

Summary

The above study of the Medieval sources, concerning devotion the BVM, reveals several important facts which can now be summarized. First, the Medieval church inherited an already well-established tradition of devotion to the BVM, evident in the early liturgy and the writings of the early church fathers. As such, the Medieval era did not "invent" the notion of Marian piety. Second, although Marian devotion was an already established tradition, it is without question that, the Medieval church expanded and elaborated what was already there; implicitly or explicitly.

Third, the Medieval church, in its zeal for fervent devotional piety, became at times excessive; as a result Marian devotion suffered from abuse. It should be noted that this tendency towards "abuse" was not limited solely to Marian devotion. It most certainly can be observed in other areas of devotional practices as well, and as such is an indication of a general trend in Medieval piety, rather than a particular and isolated deviance.

The question which remains to be asked is, "what is the reason for the proliferation of Marian devotion, particularly in the Middle Ages?" Numerous explanations have been put forward; such as, the possibility that the church needed, and was looking for, a feminine image that would provide a balance to the otherwise predominantly masculine images that were a part of church life. While there may be some truth in this, it does not explain the phenomenon completely.

Rather than explaining Marian devotion as a gender issue, it is more likely to be accounted for if understood as a natural development of piety when confronted with a particular socio-religious *Sitz im Leben*. Studies in Medieval church life have shown that the prevailing understanding of God and the Sacraments was one of "distance."⁽³⁹⁾ God was imagined to be a wrathful Judge who required righteousness, and as such was determined to exact divine retribution of sinners. The Sacraments (and in particular, the Eucharist) was not to be approached unless one was without stain of sin. It was, in short, a terrifying period to be a Christian. It is in this context, then, that Marian devotion is best understood.

In the face of this angry God stands Mary, full of compassion and mercy. She is the mother who pleads and intercedes with Christ, on behalf of humankind.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Is it any wonder that one of the early titles given to Mary, in the Middle Ages, is *Mater Misericordiae* (Mother of Mercy)? It is not that she takes the place of Christ, who is still our sole mediator (I Timothy 2:15).⁽⁴¹⁾ Rather, that she, being full of compassion and mercy, asks/reminds her Son (the mediator) to plead our case with the Father. Thus, Mary provides an image of accessibility and enduring mercy, at a time which

otherwise left little room for these ideas in the church. The art (with its common depiction of Mary as “the nursing mother”), the legends (with their common theme of Mary as the “compassionate intercessor”), and the antiphons, hymns, and prayers (with their frequent use of the title “Mother of Mercy”) all bear witness to this summation.

III. THE LUTHERAN POSITION

In order to understand the Lutheran position on devotion to the BVM, at least as it occurs in the XVI century, Luther’s own publications as well as the documents of the Lutheran Confessions will be examined. A summary will again be given at the end.

Martin Luther and the BVM

What is truly surprising to find, upon examining the writings of Martin Luther, is his decidedly non-polemical stance in regard to Marian devotion. One might be inclined to suppose, given the generally acerbic way in which he addresses the abuses of his day, that he would have little place for devotion to the BVM in his own piety. However, contrary to this supposition, what is found in Luther is an unequivocally affectionate regard for Mary. Indeed, it can be stated with confidence, that of all the reformers in his day, Luther held Mary in the highest regard and showed the greatest amount of devotion toward her.

In his translation and exposition of the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46–55) Luther writes the following accolade regarding the BVM:

“...she became the Mother of God, in which work so many and such great good things are bestowed on her as pass man’s understanding. For on this there follows all *honor*, all *blessedness*, and her *unique place* in the whole of mankind, *among which she has no equal* ... hence men have crowded all her glory into a single word, calling her the Mother of God.

No one can say anything greater of her or to her, though he had as many tongues as there are leaves on the tress, or grass in the fields, or stars in the sky, or sand by the sea."⁽⁴²⁾

Clearly, for Luther, Mary was the *Theotokos* (Mother of God) to whom belonged all "honor" and "blessedness," for among the whole of the human race "she has no equal." These are indeed words of praise!

As further evidence of Luther's personal devotion to the BVM, in his *Personal Prayer Book* (of 1522), Luther suggests continuing the practice of saying *The Hail Mary* and writes concerning its use: "Praise and thank God through Mary and the grace given her. *Laud* and *love* her ... these words are not concerned with prayer but purely with giving *praise* and *honor*."⁽⁴³⁾ Luther entreats the reader to use the *Hail Mary* not as a prayer, but as a way of praising and honoring Mary. His positive regard for this devotion is further explained by writing:

"First, we can use the Hail Mary as a meditation in which we recite what grace God has given her. Second, we should add a wish that everyone may know and respect her [as one blessed by God]."⁽⁴⁴⁾

Luther's concern was not that Mary should be shown devotion (giving her "praise" and "honor"), but rather that she should be inordinately exalted to the point of displacing the attention given to Christ. Thus, Luther preferred to concentrate on the humility of Mary and her role as "hand-maid of the Lord,"— a willing servant. In accord with this he at times referred to her, rather affectionately, as "God's workshop,"⁽⁴⁵⁾ as well as "A cheerful guest chamber and willing hostess."⁽⁴⁶⁾ It was not that he objected to the traditional titles given to Mary. Indeed he says of the title, "Queen of Heaven," that it "is a true-enough name;"⁽⁴⁷⁾ simply that he wished to recover in some way the emphasis of the early church on Mary's

humility and servanthood.

In his 1523 work, *Concerning The Order Of Public Worship*, Luther writes regarding the Marian feast days: "The festivals of the Purification [Feb. 2] and Annunciation of Mary [March 25] may be continued, and for the time being also her Assumption [August 15] and Nativity [Sept. 8]."⁽⁴⁸⁾ What is so remarkable about this statement is the fact that Luther expresses this sentiment just after explaining, in the very same paragraph, that "all the festivals of saints are to be discontinued."⁽⁴⁹⁾ In other words, Luther was ready to be rid of "all the festivals of saints," but he was not willing to forego the festivals of Mary! This is unmistakable witness of Luther's enduring piety toward the BVM.

With the inclusion of these festivals in his church calendar, and with statements made elsewhere, Luther defends the church's traditional teaching concerning Mary. She is *Theotokos* (Mother of God); as Luther writes, "she became the Mother of God."⁽⁵⁰⁾ She is *Semper-Virgo* (Ever-Virgin).⁽⁵¹⁾ She is assumed into heaven (the doctrine of *Assumption*).⁽⁵²⁾ She is conceived "without stain of sin" (the doctrine of *Immaculate Conception*); as Luther writes, "God's grace fills her with everything good and makes her *devoid of all evil* ... she is blessed above all other women, not only because she gave birth *without* labor, pain, and injury to herself, not as Eve and all other women, but because by the Holy Spirit and *without sin*, she became fertile, conceived, and gave birth in a way granted to no other woman."⁽⁵³⁾

The Lutheran Confessions and the BVM

The Lutheran Confessions, following Luther's cue, are equally non-polemical towards Mary and Marian devotion. Mary is referred to as "the pure, holy, and virgin Mary;"⁽⁵⁴⁾ and "the most blessed virgin;"⁽⁵⁵⁾ and "truly the Mother of God."⁽⁵⁶⁾ As with Luther, the confessional statements have nothing but the highest regard for Mary and accord her a place of honor, worthy of the church's praise. They even acknowledge that "blessed Mary

prays for the church..."⁽⁵⁷⁾ This would indeed come as a surprise to most twentieth century Lutherans

However, as with Luther, the confessional statements of the Lutheran Church are determined to point out certain abuses with Marian devotion, and are concerned with correcting these. As they state:

"The fact of the matter is that in popular estimation the blessed Virgin has completely replaced Christ. Men have invoked her, trusted in her mercy, and sought through her to appease Christ, as though he were not a propitiator but only a judge and avenger."⁽⁵⁸⁾

The displacing of Christ with Marian devotion was something the Lutheran Reformers could not abide. It was not only an affront to Christ, but also to Mary; as they write: "Even though she is worthy of the highest honors, she does not want to be put on the same level as Christ but to have her example considered and followed."⁽⁵⁹⁾ True devotion to Mary, according to the Lutheran understanding, entails not displacing Christ's role, but rather following Mary's example of humility and in so doing turning toward Christ. Mary points to her Son. Thus, true devotion to Mary is Incarnational (that is, recognizing God's activity in the flesh) and Christocentric (bearing witness to Christ).

Summary

What can clearly be observed in the writings of both Martin Luther and the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century, is a stance which reflects a high regard for Mary and Marian devotion. This, however, is tempered (and rightly so) with a desire to reform any abuses surrounding this honored tradition of the church.

There is a recognition that Mary is unique among all of humanity, and as such she deserves the church's praise and honor. There is even the

recognition that Mary prays for the church, and as such may be thanked. Yet, there is unquestionably a desire to keep a clear distinction between the mediating role of Jesus and the role of the BVM. Mary serves as the model and prototype of the church. She is to be praised and emulated, for in so doing the church is brought to her Son, Jesus.

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Notes:

- (1) Quoted in, Lawrence Cunningham. *Mother of God*. Harper & Row, 1982, p. 121.
- (2) Quoted in, Harding Meyer, *The Ecumenical Unburdening Of The Mariological Problem: A Lutheran Perspective*, in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. 26:4, Fall 1989, p.682.
- (3) *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 2 Halbband, 3rd ed. pp. 151-3. Quoted in Hilda Graef. *Mary: A History Of Doctrine And Devotion*. Sheed and Ward: New York, 1963, Vol. II p. 135.
- (4) *The New Jerusalem Bible*. Doubleday, 1985.
- (5) See below, page 16.
- (6) See Justin Martyr's, *Dialogue with Trypho*, and Irenaeus; *Against Heresies*.
- (7) Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 26, 161B, *Oratio* II, 7.
- (8) Interestingly, some of the Iconography and Artwork of the church later brings out this motif in depicting Mary standing with her mantle stretched-out, covering the members of the church.
- (9) The Title "Theotokos" was more than likely in use long before this (possibly as early as Origen and in other Alexandrian theologians), but had recently come under attack, in the V century, by Nestorius and his followers. The council issued the following decisively worded statement: "*Anathema 1. If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is in truth God, and that the holy Virgin is, in consequence, Theotokos, since she brought forth according to the flesh the Word of God who has become flesh, let him be anathema.*" Quoted in Paul F. Palmer S.J. *Mary In The Documents Of The Church*. Newman Press, 1952, p.11.
- (10) A concept that most certainly was in existence from the time of Athanasius (d. 373); but not officially dogmatized until the VI century.
- (11) Hilda Graef. *Mary: A History Of Doctrine And Devotion*. Sheed and Ward: New York, 1963, Vol. I, p. 103. She also provides a rclplful example of typical Byzantine preaching concerning the event of the virgin birth, quoting from one of Proclus' (c.428) sermons: "I see the miracles and proclaim the Godhead; I see the

sufferings and do not deny the manhood. Emmanuel has, indeed, opened the gates of nature, because he was man, but he did not break the seals of virginity; because he was God. As he entered through the hearing, so he went out from the womb [i.e., without violating it]; he was born as he was conceived; he had entered without passion, he went forth without corruption, according to the prophet Ezekiel [here follows the well-known text ch. 44: 1ff] ... Behold, an exact description of the holy Theotokos Mary!" Ibid., Vol. I, p. 102-103.

- (12) Cuming, Geoffery J. *Hippolytus: A Text For Students*. Grove Liturgical Study No. 8, 1976.
- (13) Ibid., p. 19.
- (14) Ibid., p. 10.
- (15) Quoted in, Cunnigham, Lawrence. *Mother of God*. Harper & Row, 1982. For a definitive study of the *Sub tuum praesidium*, see P.F. Mercenier, La plus ancienne prière à la Sainte Vierge, le Sub tuum praesidium, in *Les Questions Liturgiques et paroissiales*, Louvain, 1940, pp. 33-36. For an analysis of other ancient prayers to the BVM, see Brou, Dom Louis O. S. B. *Les Plus Anciennes Prières Liturgiques Adressées A La Vierge en Occident*, in *Hipania Sacra*. 3 (1950), pp. 371-381.
- (16) These Hymns of Ephrem The Syrian are exerpts quoted in Paul F. Palmer S. J. *Mary In The Documents Of The Church*. Newman Press, 1952, p.15ff. For a fuller treatment of Ephrem's hymns, see McVey, Kathleen E., translation and introduction. *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*. Classics of Western Spirituality. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1989. Also, Church, F. Forrester and Mulry, Terrence J., ed. *The Macmillan Book of Earliest Christian Hymns*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988.
- (17) Ward, Benedicta. translator. *The Sayings of the Desert Father*. Cistercian Publications, 1975, p. 157.
- (18) It is interesting to note that much of the Marian devotion, such as the "Little Office" and the saying of the "Rosary," was patterned after existing liturgical practices, such as the "Liturgy of the Hours" and the reciting of the "Psalter." This can also be seen, although to a lesser extent, in the Marian Feasts. Her nativity and assumption parallel Christ's nativity and resurrection.
- (19) A common theme in the artwork in and around Assisi, during the XIII and XIV century, showed the Modanna in a compassionate

pose nursing the baby Jesus.

- (20) The first example of the practice of dedicating a church to the BVM actually dates back to the V century when Pope Sixtus III built and dedicated the largest church in Rome (St. Mary Major) in honor of the BVM. This event transpired soon after the council of Ephesus (431) which had clearly defined Mary's title as Theotokos. The dedication of the church, then, can be viewed as a way for Sixtus to confirm this doctrine.
- (21) Raitt, Jill. *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*. Crossroads: New York, 1988, p. 90.
- (22) For a good history of the Marian Feasts, see Brian Daley S.J. *Mary, Feasts Of*, in *A Dictionary of Sacramental Liturgy*. Liturgical Press, 1990, p. 818-825.
- (23) Ibid. p. 90.
In one of the tales found in *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. (1435-1440) trans. Bland and Power. London, 1928, p. 54, the story of a sick man being nursed by the BVM is told: "As he thus cried out in the ears of the sick man, being as plainly seen by his eyes, the Mother of god did actually appear and draw near to his bed, as if to make amends for the neglect of her servant with which she was charged, and, drawing out her breast, she seemed forthwith to put it into the mouth of the sick man, and as the dew of her sacred milk was poured into it, suddenly his tongue and lips became whole and fair to see as before, and throughout his body his former health returned, and he arose sound and free of all sickness."
- (24) See Herolt, Johannes. *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. (1435-1440) trans. Bland and Power. London, 1928. Also, Caesarius of Heisterbach. *The Dialogue on Miracles*. (1220-1235) trans. Scott and Bland. London, 1929.
- (25) Herolt, Johannes. *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. (1435-1440) trans. Bland and Power. London, 1928, p.82.
- (26) Ibid., p. 72ff.
- (27) See Chavasse, Antoine. *Le Sacrementaire Gelasien*. (Vaticanus Reginensis 316), 1958.
- (28) See F.E. Brightman, *Liturgies Eastern and Western*. Oxford, 1896.
- (29) See W. L. Crum. *Coptic Ostraca*. (1902), p. 3. The prayer exists in the following manner: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of

thy womb, because thou didst conceive the Redeemer of our souls."

- (30) Text and translation provided by Joseph Connelly. *Hymns Of The Roman Liturgy*. Newman Press: Maryland, 1957, p. 186.
- (31) Britt, Matthew O. S. B. *The Hymns of the Breviary and Missal*. Benziger Brothers: New York, 1922, p. 134.
- (32) *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- (33) As a corollary to this, there is much evidence of the fact that Medieval piety was "caught up" in the suffering and passion of Christ. For example, it was during this time that the corpus (often in grotesquely disfigured form) came to be affixed to the cross. It was a way to convey, and participate in, the agony of Jesus!
- (34) *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- (35) Translation is my own.
- (36) For a discussion of the dating, author, and use of this and the other three Antiphons to the Blessed Virgin Mary, see Joseph Connelly. *Hymns Of The Roman Liturgy*. Newman Press: Maryland, 1957, p.44ff.
- (37) Hilda Graef. *Mary: A History Of Doctrine And Devotion*. Sheed and Ward: New York, 1963, Vol. I, p. 229.
- (38) *Ibid.*, pp. 316-318.
- (39) See, Bernard J. Cooke. *The Distancing Of God*. Fortress Press, 1990. [In particular, his chapter of "The Medieval World of Symbols"]
- (40) The "Miracle Stories," examined above, are perhaps one of the best sources for finding evidence of this concept.
- (41) "*For there is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and humanity, himself a human being, Christ Jesus, who offered himself as a ransom for all.*" (I Tim.2:5)
- (42) Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*. Vol. 21, Fortress Press, 1956, p. 326. [Italics mine]
- (43) *Ibid.*, Vol. 43, p. 39. [Italics mine]
- (44) *Ibid.*, Vol. 43, p. 40.
- (45) *Ibid.*, Vol. 21, p. 329.
- (46) *Ibid.*, Vol. 21, p. 308.
- (47) *Ibid.*, Vol. 21, p. 327.
- (48) *Ibid.*, Vol. 53, p. 14. [Unfortunately, the next generation of Lutherans quickly discontinued these festivals. The LBW does retain August 15th on its calendar, the traditional date for the

feast of the Assumption. It is listed, in accord with the ancient Jerusalem festival on this date (as discussed above) as "Mary, Mother of our Lord"].

- (49) Ibid., Vol. 53, p. 14.
- (50) Ibid., Vol. 21, p.326.
- (51) Luther, in sermons and in his exegesis, defends the virginity of Mary. See for example *Luther's Works*. Vol. 24, p. 320.
- (52) He makes reference to "Mary's ascension" and "the feast of the Assumption" in several places, suggesting his observance of and adherence to this doctrine. See for example, *Luther's Works*. Vol. 2, p.21n.
- (53) Ibid., Vol. 43, p. 40. [Italics mine]
- (54) *The Smalcald Articles*, in Theodore Tappert, tr. and ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1959, p. 292.
- (55) *Formula of Concord*, Ibid., p. 595.
- (56) Ibid., p. 595.
- (57) *Apology Of The Augsburg Confession*, Ibid., p. 232.
- (58) Ibid., p. 233.
- (59) Ibid., p. 232.