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# Mary, the Diaconate, and the Grace of Holy Orders

Christopher R. Adams 

Independent Scholar, Oxford, UK

Email: [christopher.r.adams@gmail.com](mailto:christopher.r.adams@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

In 1962, Fr Emmanuel Doronzo – a towering figure in preconciliar neo-Thomism – published a seminary textbook containing an 11-page *Nota* examining whether it can be said Mary belongs *proprie ad ordinem sacerdotalem* – properly to the sacerdotal order. His answer was yes: Mary can be said to have exercised *ministerium proprie sacerdotale* – a properly sacerdotal ministry – namely, a unique form of diaconate to Christ the priest.

Far from speculative novelty, Fr Doronzo's *Nota* stood within a long-standing tradition – emerging alongside the feast of Mary's Presentation – attributing to her the grace of Holy Orders. This tradition is reflected across papal teaching, a 7th-century mosaic in the Lateran, authorized devotions, the spirituality of the Sulpicians, approved hymns for the Divine Office, and – arguably – within *Lumen Gentium*.

Given the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's invitation for continued study on the female diaconate, this long-neglected strand of Mariology warrants fresh attention. Across the centuries, Mary is portrayed as possessing Holy Orders non-sacramentally, by divine prerogative, analogous to her prevenient reception of baptismal grace at the Immaculate Conception. Mary's plenitude of grace may therefore offer a historically grounded and theologically coherent rationale for reflection on the diaconate's openness to women – in fidelity to legitimate ecclesiastical authority.

**Keywords:** diaconate; grace; Mariology; ordination; vocation

## 1. Marian plenitude and the present question

Cardinal Fernández, head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, recently stated that while 'there is still no room for a positive decision by the Magisterium' regarding women deacons, 'the opportunity to continue the work of in-depth study remains open'.<sup>1</sup> This essay takes up that invitation, offering a contribution to a question the Church has not yet resolved.

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<sup>1</sup> See Elise Ann Allen, 'As Synod Opens, Vatican Says "No" to Women Deacons', *Crux Now*, 3 October 2024.

Whether women can receive a Major Order such as the diaconate has become one of the most vigorously debated *quaestiones disputatae* of the past decade. At the heart of many objections lies a common claim: that it would be contrary to the divine will. This judgment takes two principal forms. Some argue that women are *per se* incapable of receiving the grace of Holy Orders (*gratia sacramentalis Ordinis*), invoking Christ's maleness and his choice of twelve men as normative. Others appeal to the Church's historical silence or the lack of precedent as itself evidence of divine intent. In both cases, the impossibility is cast as theological and irrevocable.<sup>2</sup>

Yet closer examination of papal, conciliar, liturgical, devotional, and iconographic tradition – especially sources pertaining to Mary – reveals a long-underexamined implication of the doctrine that Mary possesses the fullness of grace. This essay argues that the historic rationale for attributing *gratia Ordinis* to Mary complicates the categorical proposition that women are incapable of receiving such grace.

## 2. Papal approval of the title *Virgo Sacerdos*

In 1873, Pope Pius IX commended Msgr Oswald van den Berghe's *Mary and the Priesthood*, praising the author's proposal that priests should contemplate Mary 'above all as an associate [*sociam*] in the divine sacrifice'. Pius endorsed the title *Virgo Sacerdos* ('Virgin Priest'), on the basis that Mary 'intimately united herself to the sacrifice of her divine Son'.<sup>3</sup> This affirmation presents Mary as more than an example of holiness; calling Mary *socia* and *sacerdos* suggests a certain solidarity in the sacrifice itself.

A generation later, in 1906, Pope Pius X approved a formal devotion to *Virgo Sacerdos*, attaching a 300-day indulgence to a prayer addressing Mary as herself 'both Priest and Altar ... the Host most acceptable to God, offered up, and the glory of priests'. The prayer continues with a remarkable claim: 'although you did not receive the sacrament of Orders, yet whatever dignity and grace is conferred through it [*gratiae in ipso confertur*], of this you are already full [*de hoc plena fuisti*]'.<sup>4</sup> Mary is not imagined to resemble a priest metaphorically; she is said to possess the proper grace of Holy Orders. By promulgating this prayer, the pope situated the title and theology within the authorized devotional life of the Church.

In an era when handling a chalice was restricted to those in Holy Orders, devotional holy cards often depicted Mary holding one, some titled *Virgo Sacerdos*.<sup>5</sup> After Pius

<sup>2</sup>Avery Cardinal Dulles articulated what remains a representative argument against the ordination of women – though his remarks concern the priesthood, not the diaconate. Among other points, he notes the symbolic argument that one representing Christ – particularly as 'bridegroom of the church' – must be 'of the male sex'. Dulles also argues from historical continuity, observing that only heretical sects considered women as permitted to 'perform priestly functions'. The church, in his view, has long 'regarded the question as settled'. See 'Avery Dulles on Women and the Priesthood (from 1996)', reprinted in *America Magazine*, 24 May 2019.

<sup>3</sup>... adeo arcte se iunxit divini Filii sui sacrificio, ut Virgo Sacerdos appellata fuerit ab Ecclesiae Patribus... Mariam proponere studueris ... potissimum uti divini sacrificii sociam. Pope Pius IX, letter of 25 August 1873, printed as the papal preface to Oswald van den Berghe, *Marie et le Sacerdoce*, 2nd edn (Paris: Louis Vivès, 1875), p. vi. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup>*Sacerdos pariter et altare ... es Tu ipsa Hostia acceptissima Deo litata, et gloria sacerdotum ... quamvis sacramentum Ordinis non acceperis, quidquid tamen dignitatis et gratiae in ipso confertur, de hoc plena fuisti: unde merito Virgo Sacerdos praedicaris ... Maria Virgo Sacerdos, ora pro nobis.* Pope Pius X, decree of 9 May 1906, *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 40 (1907), pp. 109–10. This decree also cites the 1873 letter of Pope Pius IX noted above.

<sup>5</sup>*Virgo Sacerdos ora pro nobis*, canivet holy card, plate 137, R. Pannier, *H.D.R. 'Pontifical' edition* (Paris: 3 Rue du Vieux-Colombier, [1889?]). Author's collection. Pencil annotation '1889' on verso.

X's 1906 indulgence, these multiplied – many with Mary now vested in chasuble and stole – with papal approval printed beside the promulgated prayer. In 1916, the Holy Office issued a decree that ‘disapproved’ such imagery – but notably, not the title or indulgence. *Virgo Sacerdos* was left unchallenged. The censure was disciplinary, not doctrinal.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, Marian priestly language in papal texts continued quite explicitly. In 1918, Benedict XV decreed that Mary’s love for the world meant that ‘insofar as it depended on her, she immolated the Son [*Filium immolavit*]’ and that the ‘graces’ of Redemption ‘are ministered as if from her hands’.<sup>7</sup> While Benedict did not use the title *Virgo Sacerdos*, the use of the verb *immolavit* is striking, seemingly referencing the Temple priest’s slaying of the Victim. Pope Leo XIII had used similar language – that Mary *ultra obtulit* (‘freely offered’) Christ – in 1894.<sup>8</sup> The implication is remarkable: Mary is not merely a bystander at Calvary but – through love and will – assumes an active role, ‘ministering’ both the sacrifice and its grace.

Pius XI continued to commend the title *Virgo Sacerdos* in 1923, when he authorized *Quam Pulchre Graditur* as the office hymn for the Feast of the Presentation of Mary (November 21) in the Diocese of Paris. The hymn casts Mary’s entry into the Temple not as a mere childhood rite but as inauguration of her priestly vocation. Her womb is the ‘altar of Divinity’, and her entrance prepares for ‘a greater sacrifice ... the Victim which she herself will soon offer [*mox offeret hostiam*]’. The rare verb *properat* (‘hurries’) occurs twice – first of Mary’s approach to the Temple, then of the priests urged to follow her there as their ‘Captain, the Virgin priest [*Dux est Virgo sacerdos*]’. The hymn closes by linking her maternity to the daily celebration of Eucharist: ‘You born of the Virgin, are again and again reborn through us’.<sup>9</sup> As part of the revival of Gregorian chant in recent decades, this hymn is once again sung by seminarians at the Catholic University of America.<sup>10</sup>

Though the Holy Office sought in 1927 to limit popular devotion to *Virgo Sacerdos*, fearing confusion among ‘inadequately instructed souls’, it still issued no formal rejection of the underlying theology.<sup>11</sup> Even the devotional current continued: into the

<sup>6</sup>[I]maginem B. M. Virginis vestibus sacerdotalibus indutae esse reprobendam. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [AAS] 8 (1916), p. 146. The notification mentions the recent rapid diffusion of such imagery.

<sup>7</sup>... quantum ad se pertinebat, *Filium immolavit ... gratias ... veluti e manibus ministrantur*. Benedict XV, *Inter Sodalicia*, AAS 10 (1918), p. 182.

<sup>8</sup>Pope Leo XIII asserted that Mary was ‘partner in the work of atonement [*consors cum eo exitit laboriosae pro humano genere expiationis*]’ and ‘herself freely offered her Son [*Filium ipsa suum ultro obtulit*]’. *Encyclical Iucunda Semper* (1894), in *Acta Leonis XIII* 14 (Rome: Ex Typographia Vaticana, 1895), pp. 307–08.

<sup>9</sup>*Praeludit meliori quam mox offeret hostiam... Virgo Numinis ara, Aris victima sistitur ... Dux est Virgo sacerdos, fas sit quo properat sequi. ... Qui de Virgine natus, per nos saepe renascetur*. In *Offices Propres du Diocèse de Paris* (Paris: Société Saint Jean L’Évangéliste, 1923), pp. 163–65. Approved by Pope Pius XI; *imprimatur* by the Sacred Congregation of Rites.

<sup>10</sup>For a recording on the website of the Sulpician *Theological College*, see ‘*Quam Pulchre Graditur*’ at <<https://www.theologicalcollege.org/liturgical-life/>> [accessed 10 August 2025].

<sup>11</sup>In 1927, Fr Édouard Hugon OP, a respected professor at the *Angelicum*, was informed – apparently to his surprise – that the Holy Office had deemed an article promoting *Virgo Sacerdos* devotion as impermissible. See Michael O’Carroll, *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1983), p. 122. This was perhaps puzzling, given the title’s inclusion in indulgenced devotions and its appearance in the recently approved office hymn for the Presentation of Mary.

1930s, Catholic publications continued promoting the title – one featuring a brief text by the eminent Trappist Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard.<sup>12</sup>

Despite periodic cautions from the Holy Office, the theology of Marian agency in salvation continued prominently in papal teaching. In defining the dogma of the Assumption (1950), Pius XII grounded his proclamation in the ‘struggle which was common to the Blessed Virgin and her divine Son’, a shared ordeal culminating in ‘that most complete victory’ over sin and death.<sup>13</sup> In *Ad Caeli Reginam* (1954), Pius describes Mary as ‘procuring spiritual salvation’, though with Christ as its source. Drawing typological parallels with the fallen virginal Eve, the human race ‘is likewise saved through a virgin’.<sup>14</sup> In addition, in *Mystici Corporis Christi* §110, Mary seems to offer a kind of *epiclesis* which is the cause of Pentecost. This is remarkably high Mariology: Mary is a partner in redemption with Christ.

After a century-long development in papal texts, *Virgo Sacerdos* appears to find subtle expression in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. *Lumen Gentium* (1964) describes Mary at Calvary as ‘uniting herself with a maternal heart with His sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation [*immolationi amanter consentiens*] of this Victim which she herself had brought forth’.<sup>15</sup>

The Council’s use of *immolatio* in association with Mary is striking – and perhaps puzzling. Pius XII’s *Mediator Dei* (1947) had explicitly reserved *immolatio* – when applied not to oneself but to Christ as Victim – exclusively for the ordained priest acting in *persona Christi*. This was distinguished from the mere ‘offerings’ or even ‘oblations’ of the faithful – only the priest performs the ‘unbloody immolation’.<sup>16</sup> Yet *Lumen Gentium*, remarkably, attributes this term to Mary.

The verb ‘consent’, of course, may at first suggest the posture of a bystander, rather than an actor. But consent of will is the essential part of the sacerdotal act in Catholic theology. Aquinas, for instance, characterizes Christ’s priesthood by this act. Though Roman soldiers carry out the crucifixion, Christ is properly Priest because He freely wills the sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, in the consecration of the Host, the essential element of the priest’s act is the priest’s intention.<sup>18</sup>

By this logic, Mary’s consent at Calvary bears the formal structure of a sacerdotal act, arising from her will. Her presence at the Cross, long depicted crowning rood screens, perhaps reflects a diaconal posture: she stands on Christ’s right, as the deacon stood at the priest’s right in the pre-Vatican II liturgy. Discussion of

<sup>12</sup>*Le Bien Public* (Trois-Rivières, Québec), year 23, no. 67 (Tuesday, 2 February 1932), p. 6. Lowermost rightmost side of the page.

<sup>13</sup>Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, §39. Trans. Vatican website.

<sup>14</sup>‘...spirituali procuranda salute ... sicut per virginem morti adstrictum fuit, ita per virginem salvatur. Pius XII, encyclical *Ad Caeli Reginam*, in AAS 46 (1954), pp. 634–35.

<sup>15</sup>*Lumen Gentium* [LG] §58. Trans. Vatican website.

<sup>16</sup>‘The unbloody immolation ... is performed by the priest and by him alone, as the representative of Christ and not as the representative of the faithful.’ Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* (1947), §92. Trans. Vatican website.

<sup>17</sup>*Summa Theologiae* III, Q. 22, a. 2, ad 1 and ad 2.

<sup>18</sup>‘...cum intentione consecrandi. *Summa Theologiae* III, Q. 83, a. 3, ad 8. Everything else is inessential, as long as there are proper words, matter, and intention.

whether Mary functioned as a deacon to Christ – or even herself exercised a form of presbyterate – appears in preconiliar seminary textbooks, notably in one classic by Fr Emmanuel Doronzo.<sup>19</sup>

Besides *immolatio*, *Lumen Gentium* employs other curiously sacerdotal language. Mary ‘cooperated ... in the work of the Saviour in giving back supernatural life to souls’ – a priest also cooperates in this way.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the title *Mediatrix* is affirmed – subordinate to Christ’s singular mediation – yet analogous to the ordained, who likewise mediate Christ’s grace through the *gratia Ordinis*.<sup>21</sup> In all these ways, the logic of *Virgo Sacerdos* – Mary’s active participation in Christ’s sacrifice and her mediation of its grace – seems to enter the Council’s vocabulary, even if the title itself is absent. Since this essay concerns the diaconate, we will pursue the implications of Mary’s role for diaconal identity.

Taken together, these sources demonstrate striking continuity. Six popes – through commendation, indulgence, liturgical authorization, and use of *immolavit* or *obtulit* – affirm the theology underlying *Virgo Sacerdos*. Mary is called *sacerdos* because she unites herself to her Son’s sacrifice at Calvary and thus may be understood to have been granted a distinctive *gratia Ordinis Mariae*, making her the captain or head of the ordained. *Lumen Gentium* echoes this, describing her immolative will and titling her *Mediatrix*, seemingly incorporating the logic of *Virgo Sacerdos* into the Church’s highest doctrinal vocabulary.

The attribution of sacerdotal terms to Mary is remarkable, and perhaps puzzling. This essay, however, remains deliberately focused on a single implication: what it might mean to speak of Mary as possessing *gratia Ordinis* in a real, though general, sense. Since deacons are conferred with this grace, the question bears directly on the female diaconate. Before turning to this issue, however, it is helpful to examine the historical sources for *gratia Ordinis Mariae* – both in spiritual theology (§3) and ecclesiastical tradition (§4).

<sup>19</sup>In *Tractatus Dogmaticus de Ordine 3: De Causis Extrinsecis* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1962), pp. 460–70, Fr Doronzo makes the assessment that Mary’s ‘priesthood’ cannot be simply the priesthood of the faithful (pp. 464–65). He concludes instead that *Virgo Sacerdos* refers to a unique form of diaconate (pp. 467–68). Though not presbyter, Mary ‘nonetheless properly belongs to the sacerdotal order [*pertinet tamen proprie ad ordinem sacerdotalem*]’ (p. 465) and exercises *ministerium proprie sacerdotale* – ‘properly sacerdotal ministry’ (p. 466). Mary possesses ordination implicitly – but in a real sense – as a result of her divine maternity (p. 467). Strikingly, Doronzo notes that if Mary’s action at Calvary involved *immolatio*, and if two persons could simultaneously offer the same sacrifice, it may follow ‘she was simply and fully priest [*ut fuerit simpliciter ac plene sacerdos*]’ (p. 465). He rejects both premises, so denies that conclusion. Yet curiously, Vatican II affirms Mary’s *immolatio* and the validity of concelebration. These tensions do not resolve neatly – Doronzo himself admitted *Virgo Sacerdos* remained an open problem (p. 460) – one that invites deeper distinctions and consideration. Notably, Cardinal Dulles, in his 1996 essay, though citing Fr Doronzo’s text prominently, seems regrettably unaware that Doronzo considers Mary to have possessed ordination, to belong *ad ordinem sacerdotalem*, and to have exercised *ministerium proprie sacerdotale*.

<sup>20</sup>LG §61.

<sup>21</sup>LG §62’s title *Mediatrix* was controversial at the Council, since some feared it risked placing Mary above the faithful. Yet all ordained ministers are themselves members of the faithful. Read in light of *gratia Ordinis Mariae*, *Mediatrix* need not imply a status above the Church, but can instead present Mary as exemplar of a quite ordinary diaconal or sacerdotal mediation. §65, additionally, links Mary’s maternity to the Church’s apostolic mission. While these texts admit multiple readings, the way *gratia Ordinis Mariae* resolves several tensions within conciliar Mariology deserves closer examination.

### 3. *Gratia Ordinis Mariae* in Catholic spirituality

Fr Jean-Jacques Olier (1608–1657), founder of the Sulpicians, played a monumental role in shaping French clerical formation. Long before the papal texts discussed above, Olier taught that Mary was imbued from her Conception with all the grace necessary for her vocation, including *gratia Ordinis*, conferred apart from sacramental rite. For Olier, Mary's Presentation in the Temple was a moment of self-realization: she entered already 'consecrated a priest in advance for the sacrifice she would one day offer on Calvary'. Possessing *gratia Ordinis* 'without knowing it', she began to learn it in the Temple: 'holy priest, O Mary'.<sup>22</sup>

After Jesus' birth, at his Presentation, Mary 'offered Him in advance as a victim, just as she would one day offer Him to God on Calvary'.<sup>23</sup> According to Olier, this was 'not only as the representative of the Church', as if merely standing in for the faithful, but 'to offer to God the Victim who was hers by nature and by grace'.<sup>24</sup> At the end of his mission, Christ would entrust 'the beloved sacrifice into her hands'.<sup>25</sup>

This Marian theology became embedded in Sulpician seminary formation and found liturgical expression in the hymn *Quam Pulchre Graditur* (1706), written by a Sulpician seminarian. As noted above, the hymn explicitly titles Mary *Virgo Sacerdos*, echoing Olier's vision of Mary as possessing *gratia Ordinis*. Given the Sulpicians' formative role in 19th- and 20th-century clerical education, this imagery likely shaped the theological imaginations of many *periti* and bishops involved in drafting the Marian chapter in *Lumen Gentium*.<sup>26</sup>

*Virgo Sacerdos* devotion also found expression in a religious order founded by another French luminary, St Marie Deluil-Martiny (1841–1884). In the wake of Pius IX's 1873 letter, Deluil-Martiny dedicated her fledgling Daughters of the Heart of Jesus to *Virgo Sacerdos*. Troubled by clergy she viewed as comfortable 'sacrificers', living without sacrifice, she exhorted her nuns to serve as 'humble supplements for what is lacking in the priestly spirit of certain priests'.<sup>27</sup> Perpetual Eucharistic adoration became central to the community's life. In the chapel, the Daughters – 'just as Mary on Calvary' and 'united with all the priests in the world' – would 'offer Jesus the immolated

<sup>22</sup>...comme prêtre pour y apprendre la sainteté que Dieu figurait dans les prêtres et qu'elle possédait dedans elle sans la connaître, ayant été consacrée prêtre par avance du sacrifice qu'elle devait offrir un jour à Dieu sur le Calvaire. ... Prêtre saint, ô Marie. Jean-Jacques Olier, *Écrits sur la Sainte Vierge* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2020), p. 55.

<sup>23</sup>Car alors elle l'offrit par avance en qualité d'hostie, comme un jour elle devait l'offrir à Dieu sur le Calvaire. Olier, *Du Pain Bénit* in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Migne, 1856), col. 378.

<sup>24</sup>C'est pourquoi la sainte Vierge devait venir au temple, non-seulement pour y assister de la part de l'Église ... Mais encore elle y devait venir pour présenter à Dieu cette hostie qui était à elle, et que la nature et la grâce lui avaient donnée. Olier, *ibid.*, col. 378–79.

<sup>25</sup>...à sa sainte Mère ... de lui mettre entre les mains le sacrifice adorable. Olier, *Sentiments de dévotion à la sainte Vierge* in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Migne, 1856), col. 1105–06.

<sup>26</sup>For example, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani – head of the theological commissions under whose watch the Marian schema was drafted – was ordained in 1916, at the height of *Virgo Sacerdos* devotion. He entered the Pontifical Roman Seminary under Pius X, and – like seminarians today – his formation was likely influenced by the theology of the reigning pontiff. Seminarians of the time may well have recited the newly indulgenced prayer printed on holy cards invoking *Virgo Sacerdos* – perhaps with particular fervor.

<sup>27</sup>...d'humbles suppléments de ce qui manque à l'Esprit sacerdotal de certains prêtres. René Laurentin, *Marie Deluil-Martiny* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), p. 68.

Host from altar to altar': they would be 'priests with Mary'.<sup>28</sup> Above each altar was hung *Virgo Sacerdos*: Mary, vested in a dalmatic and in *orans*.<sup>29</sup> This arrangement created a distinctively female liturgical space.

Deluil-Martiny's final words were ones of forgiveness. In a harrowing and tragic consummation of her lifelong devotion to sacrificial love, she was murdered in 1884 by a mentally unstable gardener who harbored a peculiar animus toward religion. In 1902, the Daughters received papal approval of their institute and, in gratitude, sent a painting of *Virgo Sacerdos* to Pope Leo XIII, who 'received it with joy'.<sup>30</sup> The gesture suggests just how normalized this imagery had become within Francophone religious life by the turn of the century.

Within this context, St Thérèse of Lisieux's expressed desire to be a priest – often read as an isolated burst of fervor from a young nun – may be better understood as emerging from a broader Marian devotional current. Thérèse articulates this longing, yet submits it in ecclesial obedience, resolving instead to imitate St Francis – himself never a priest, but a deacon.<sup>31</sup> The confidence with which St Thérèse spoke may reflect a theological climate in which Mary was portrayed as possessing *gratia Ordinis*. One might wonder whether the diaconate – had it been presented as a possibility – may have fulfilled her specific sense of calling.

Pope John Paul II would later affirm the enduring witness of both women – beatifying Deluil-Martiny in 1989 and, in 1997, proclaiming Thérèse a Doctor of the Church.

#### 4. *Gratia Ordinis Mariae* in the Catholic tradition

The depiction of Mary as possessing *gratia Ordinis* is no modern innovation. It emerges from a rich theological, liturgical, and iconographic tradition nearly as old as the Church itself. Across the centuries, a distinct array of sources have consistently linked Mary to sacerdotal identity.

One of the earliest associations between Mary and ministry appears in the *Protoevangelium of James*, a 2nd-century non-canonical text reflecting one emergent strand of Marian theology. At Mary's conception, her mother Anna vows that, 'if I beget either male or female', the child 'shall minister to Him in holy things all the days of its life'. Mary will have 'her heart be captivated from the temple of the Lord', dwelling there 'as if she were a dove'. God sends 'grace upon her' when, as a young girl, she is invited onto the altar steps – an area normally reserved to priests.<sup>32</sup>

The 7th/8th century saw the flowering of both a liturgical feast for Mary's Presentation and developments in Mariology that gave it substance. One Greek source

<sup>28</sup>*Comme Marie sur le Calvaire ... ainsi les Filles du Cœur de Jésus offriront Jésus-Hostie immolé d'autel en autel ... unies à tous les prêtres du monde ... Prêtres avec Marie.* In Abbé Louis Laplace, *La Mère Marie de Jésus*, 3rd edn (Paris: Emmanuel Vitte, 1906), pp. 175–76.

<sup>29</sup>To view one such image, see Laplace, *ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>30</sup>*Le pape Léon XIII, à qui une copie fut offerte, la reçut avec joie.* In Laplace, *ibid.*, p. 404.

<sup>31</sup>St Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, trans. Michael Day, Cong. Orat., (London: Burns Oates, 1951), pp. 187–88.

<sup>32</sup>*Protoevangelium of James*, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., Alexander Walker, trans., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 8, 2nd printing (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), §§4, 7–8, pp. 362–63. For the altar area's restriction to priests, see *Kelim* 1:8.



names Mary both ‘virgin-priestess’ (*hierēa parthenon*) and ‘altar’ (*thysiaστῆριον*).<sup>33</sup> St Andrew of Crete describes Mary as ‘offered as a sacrifice’ at her Presentation, and her body as the ‘spiritual altar for the divine holocaust’.<sup>34</sup> In the Latin West, St Bernard of Clairvaux (12th c.) portrays Mary as an agent in the sacrificial act: ‘Offer your Son, O consecrated Virgin, and present to the Lord the blessed fruit of your womb. Offer this holy victim for the reconciliation of all of us’.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, St Bonaventure (13th c.) would exhort his clerical listeners: ‘Priest, you offer the Blood of Christ! ... Who taught you this? The glorious Virgin’.<sup>36</sup>

Commissioned art offers compelling testimony to *gratia Ordinis Mariae*. In *Le Sacerdoce de la Vierge* (1438), a luminous late-medieval panel, Mary stands before the altar, holding a Gospel book to her heart with one hand and gently offering the Christ-Child with the other – a visual synthesis of Word and Sacrament. Every detail – her elaborately brocaded gold chasuble adorned with gems, her stole visible from beneath the vestment, the inscription *Digne vesture au prestre souverain* (‘A worthy garment for the sovereign priest’) – seemingly proclaims the image’s audacious theological claim: that Mary possesses *gratia Ordinis*. On display at the *Louvre*, this painting repays careful study. Even viewed online, it invites reflection on the liturgical imagination of the late medieval Church.<sup>37</sup>

The connection of Mary to the altar is taken up again by Fr Giovanni Battista Guarini, canon regular of the Lateran, in 1609. For Guarini, Mary at Calvary fulfills the ‘office of high priestess [*gran sacerdotessa*], offering her Son with the words: ‘this flesh is part of my flesh, and this blood is of my own blood’.<sup>38</sup> The sacrifice of Christ and Mary at Calvary, he writes, ‘is the very same sacrifice that is offered by priests at the altar’.<sup>39</sup> A century earlier, St Ignatius of Loyola recorded a moment of interior illumination during the Mass for the Presentation of Jesus, describing Mary as ‘part or rather portal’ of that ‘great grace’, revealing that ‘her own flesh was in that of her Son’.<sup>40</sup> Both Guarini and Ignatius thus affirm a profound connection between Mary’s maternity, her presence at Calvary, and the altar. Likewise, in Byzantine church art, Mary is frequently depicted as ‘provider of the Eucharist’, occupying a central position in

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous Greek homily, *In Laudes Sanctae Mariae Deiparae* in Migne, PG 43, col. 497. This text is sometimes attributed to Epiphanius of Salamis, likely incorrectly.

<sup>34</sup> St Andrew of Crete, in Brian E. Daley SJ, trans., *On the Dormition of Mary* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s, 1998), pp. 105 and 133.

<sup>35</sup> *Offer filium tuum, Virgo sacrata, et benedictum fructum ventris tui Domino repraesenta. Offer ad nostram omnium reconciliationem hostiam sanctam.* St Bernard of Clairvaux, *De Purificatione B. Mariae Sermo*, in Migne, PL 183, col. 370.

<sup>36</sup> *Sacerdos, tu offers sanguinem Christi! ... Quis te docuit? Virgo gloriosa.* St Bonaventure, *De Purificatione B. Virginis Mariae*, in *Opera Omnia* 9 (Quaracci: 1901), p. 640a.

<sup>37</sup> *Le Sacerdoce de la Vierge* (1438), commissioned for the *Confrérie du Puy Notre-Dame d’Amiens* <<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010059205>> [accessed 17 August 2025]. On display at the Louvre, Salle 820, Richelieu Wing, Level 2 (inv. RF 1938 63).

<sup>38</sup> *...facendo ufficio di gran sacerdotessa ... fra sé così fauellasse ... mira il sacrificio, che io ti porgo ... questa carne è parte della carne mia, e questo sangue è del mio proprio sangue.* Giovanni Battista Guarini of Cremona, *Della Gierarchia Overo del Sacro Regno de Maria Vergine* 2 (Venice: Deuchino and Pulciani, 1609), p. 196.

<sup>39</sup> *E chi non sa, che il sacrificio da Christo fatto di sé medesimo & offerto dalla sua madre santissima soura l’altare della croce, e quello, che da sacerdoti è offerto all’altare, è l’istesso sacrificio?* Guarini, *ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>40</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, entry for 15 February, in Joseph Munitiz, ed. and trans., *The Spiritual Diary of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* (London: Inigo, 1987), p. 30.



murals alongside vested clergy – as if liturgically co-operative in some form with their ministry.<sup>41</sup>

In various sources, Mary is depicted as leading liturgical praise – an act resonant with a diaconal role. One striking example appears in the well-known hymn *Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones*, where Mary, by virtue of her plenitude of grace, initiates the angelic doxology:

[L]ead their praises! Alleluia!  
Thou bearer of th' eternal Word,  
most gracious, magnify the Lord.

We do not so much sing this hymn as are caught up in it – an eternal liturgy led forever by Mary's *Magnificat*, with the Apostles and angels following.

This liturgical vision of Mary is physically enshrined at the heart of Western ecclesial authority: the pope's own cathedral complex. In the apse mosaic of the 7th-century Lateran St Venantius Chapel, Mary stands in *orans*, flanked by Apostles – Peter holding the Keys at her side. She wears red shoes and the *pallium*, the emblem of episcopal authority popularized by Gregory the Great just decades earlier, and presides over the very space where popes once celebrated the liturgy. The symbolism is striking: Mary leads the apostolic band in worship, while the pontiff below – vested likewise – does not preside alone, but joins her liturgy from within the Church militant, guiding the faithful into the worship of heaven.<sup>42</sup>

This imagery of Mary in liturgical insignia bears witness to a visual theology. Depicted leading apostolic worship, such art embodies a long-standing instinct in Christian thought: that she who bore the Eternal Word may also bear the grace of Orders. Such imagery shaped generations of clergy and faithful, offering a vision of Mary marked not only by receptivity but by agency and liturgical leadership. The suggestion that Mary may possess *gratia Ordinis*, then, is no modern innovation, but the retrieval of a recurring thread in Catholic tradition.

## 5. Devotion as *sensus fidelium*: the case of *Doctores Ecclesiae*

How the Church should respond to the visual and devotional traditions above remains an open question. Historically, the Church has come to recognize and articulate doctrine gradually: 'there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down'.<sup>43</sup> As Newman observes, while formal teachings may be defined 'from the high places of the Church', they often begin 'in the shape of devotion ... it starts from below'.<sup>44</sup> Pius IX, in *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854), makes this point

<sup>41</sup>See Maria Evangelatou, 'Krater of Nectar and Altar of the Bread of Life: The *Theotokos* as Provider of the Eucharist in Byzantine Culture', in *The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium*, eds. by Thomas Arentzen and Mary B. Cunningham (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), pp. 77–119.

<sup>42</sup>For one early 20th-century account of this image, see Laplace, *La Mère Marie de Jésus*, p. 403. Also see Ally Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2019), pp. 85–86. Kateusz notes two earlier examples of Mary with *pallium* from the 6th-century *Euphrasiana Basilica*, pp. 82–83.

<sup>43</sup>*Dei Verbum* §8. Trans. Vatican website.

<sup>44</sup>John Henry Newman, 'On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine', in *Rambler*, July 1859. <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/rambler/consulting.html>.

implicitly, drawing on long-standing Marian veneration as a theological warrant for the Immaculate Conception.

Besides *Ineffabilis Deus*, another memorable example of devotion anticipating doctrinal clarification is the long path toward recognizing St Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) as *Doctor Ecclesiae*. By the early 18th century, Iberian art and statuary already depicted her donning an academic biretta. Despite centuries of resistance – *obstat sexus* reputedly annotated into marginalia of deliberations – popular devotion endured.<sup>45</sup> When Paul VI finally conferred the title on her in 1970, he was not inaugurating a tradition, but *acknowledging* one long sustained by the faithful.

So too with *gratia Ordinis Mariae*: the artistic evidence may mark a real theological intuition – one worthy of serious attention. As with the long process needed to recognize St Teresa as *Doctor Ecclesiae*, art and devotion can, in certain cases, express the *sensus fidelium* long before the Magisterium finds language for it.

## 6. Theological rationale for *gratia Ordinis Mariae*

### 6.1. Lines of theological argument

At first glance, the claim that Mary possesses the grace of Holy Orders may seem perplexing. Yet as we have seen, a wide array of theologians – including at least six popes – have, in different ways, affirmed the Marian title *Sacerdos* or the theology behind it. Several converging lines of argument, drawn from the sources above, may be summarized as follows:

- (1) **Surpassing the Levitical cult:** Mary's entering the Temple reveals her possession of a new priesthood, fulfilled at Calvary.
- (2) **Priestly consent of will:** Mary's *Fiat* and *Stabat* are two acts, framing the sacrifice of Christ, exercising *gratia Ordinis*.
- (3) **Leader of heavenly liturgy:** Mary presides over the Church's worship as liturgical leader of the church triumphant.
- (4) **Plenitude of grace:** Mary is filled with grace (*gratia plena*), which, due to her unique role, cannot exclude *gratia Ordinis*.
- (5) **Maternal provision of the Eucharist:** Christ's body – the sacrificial victim (*hostia*) of every Mass – is drawn from Mary. Each Eucharist re-presents her original maternal offering.

These five arguments recur throughout theological tradition to support *gratia Ordinis Mariae*.

### 6.2. Liturgical analogues to theological arguments

The five theological lines above correspond, loosely, to the structure of the Roman Liturgy of the Eucharist. Mary's Presentation anticipates the deacon's reception of the elements and preparation of the gifts. Her *Fiat* and *Stabat* echo in the Prayer over the

<sup>45</sup>Lucas Viar, 'Saint Teresa of Avila's Biretta: A Brief Introduction to the Iconography of St. Teresa of Avila as Doctrix Ecclesiae', *Liturgical Arts Journal*, 16 October 2020. <https://www.liturgicalartsjournal.com/2020/10/saint-teresa-of-avilas-biretta-brief.html>.

Gifts. Her role as heavenly presider is imaged in the *Sursum Corda* and the Preface. Her *gratia plena* corresponds to the *Epiclesis*, the Spirit's descent over the gifts. Finally, in the Consecration, the priest elevates the very flesh she once gave – making the altar a mystical return to Bethlehem and Calvary, where Mary first bore Christ, offered to the world, and then on the Cross.

Seen in this light, clergy act not only *in persona Christi* but also, in some sense, in the likeness of Mary. To speak of *in persona Mariae* presses the language too far, for it is Christ in whose salvific 'person' the clergy act. Yet priests consent to his sacrificial act at a certain distance – just as Mary did. An ordinand is traditionally called *alter Christus* ('another Christ'); so too, loosely, perhaps an ordinand might be called *altera Maria* ('another Mary'). At the least, the Eucharistic rite entrusted to the ordained seems to mirror her own mission. This resemblance between the ministry of clergy and that of Mary bears directly on debates whether women can serve in liturgical roles – one of the principal controversies around admitting women to the diaconate.

### 6.3. *Gratia Ordinis Mariae as analogous to the Immaculate Conception*

If Mary received the grace of Holy Orders, when did this occur? Naturally, no record of her *ordination* exists – just as none exists for her baptism. Yet since 1854, Catholic dogmatics affirms that Mary did not need baptism: she was redeemed in advance by the grace of the Immaculate Conception. By analogy, one might ask whether she could also have received a prevenient grace of Orders. On this view, *Virgo Sacerdos* is not merely a poetic metaphor but a theological claim: Mary truly possesses *gratia Ordinis*.

Mary is called 'full of grace' by the angel at the Annunciation. Perhaps there are several ways to interpret this. A *maximalist* view holds that she received *every* grace – at least *in habitu* – even with no occasion to use them (e.g., contrition or martyrdom). A *minimalist* view, by contrast, holds that she received only an intensified share of her granted graces – possibly excluding the grace of Orders.

Perhaps a middle way, however, might read *gratia plena* to mean that Mary received – fully – the graces proper to *her unique mission*. As Aquinas notes, 'to each, grace is given by God according to that for which they are chosen'.<sup>46</sup> On this view, the decisive question becomes whether some real share in the grace of Orders is *fitting* to her vocation.

If Mary's vocation included giving Christ flesh and consenting to his sacrifice, then it is fitting – perhaps even necessary – that she receive the grace conferred in every ordination. Just as her redemption was granted through the grace of baptism without the sacrament, so too her *gratia Ordinis* may have been conferred non-sacramentally, in virtue of her maternity.<sup>47</sup> 'Immaculate Conception' denotes her beginning, 'Assumption' her end – what, then, of the span between? What defines her mission? *Virgo Sacerdos* offers a bold answer: her life is ordered to ministry, specifically the sacrifice of her Son. If this analogy holds, it challenges the blanket claim that it is against the divine will for a woman to receive *gratia Ordinis* – the same grace conferred in diaconal ordination – for it would seem that, by God's own initiative, one woman already has.

<sup>46</sup>...unicuique a Deo datur gratia secundum hoc ad quod eligitur. Thomas Aquinas, ST III, q. 27, a. 5, ad 1.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Doronzo, *Tractatus Dogmaticus de Ordine* 3, p. 467.

## 7. *Gratia Ordinis Mariae* in medieval ordination rites

The *Euchologion Barberini* – an 8th-century Byzantine manuscript preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Library – contains parallel ordination rites for male and female deacons nearly identical in form. The rite for women refers explicitly to Mary:

Holy and almighty God, who through the birth of your only-begotten Son and our God from the Virgin according to the flesh sanctified the female, and not to men alone but also to women bestowed grace and the advent of your Holy Spirit ... Lord, who do not reject women offering themselves and wishing to minister in your holy houses ... fill her with the grace of the diaconate, as you gave the grace of your diaconate to Phoebe.

This rite occurs at the altar and includes laying on of hands, investiture with stole, and reception of communion via chalice.<sup>48</sup>

In other *euchologia* where ordination rites are arranged in *ascending* order (reader, chanter, subdeacon, deacon, priest, bishop), the rite for female deacons consistently follows that of male deacons – suggesting they were seen as belonging to the same hierarchical tier, at least above the Minor Orders.<sup>49</sup> Eastern Orthodoxy's deep consciousness of its Byzantine heritage may help explain why the ancient Patriarchate of Alexandria has recently resumed using these rites to ordain women as deacons to serve at the altar.<sup>50</sup>

Strikingly, the rite in the *Euchologion Barberini* grounds its theological justification in Mary's maternity. Through Mary's bearing of Christ, God establishes a precedent for bestowing diaconal grace upon women. While the rite does not claim that Mary possesses *gratia Ordinis*, it closely aligns her maternity with the Spirit's conferral of ministerial grace – a connection that, at minimum, frames Mary as a theological archetype for the female diaconate.

## 8. Theological objections considered

### 8.1. Mary's 'priesthood' is merely the 'common priesthood'

Some might characterize *Virgo Sacerdos* to reference the 'common priesthood' of all the baptized, a term memorably employed in *Lumen Gentium*. But *Lumen Gentium* speaks of Mary as *Mediatrix* and her will as being *immolative* of Christ – not the language of generic discipleship. This document also carefully reserves the concrete noun *sacerdos* ('priest') for the ordained, referring to the faithful's 'priesthood' only by the abstract *sacerdotium*.<sup>51</sup>

In historical context, it is difficult to imagine that Pius IX, Pius X, or Pius XI – writing in an era still marked by polemics against Reformation notions of universal priesthood

<sup>48</sup>Valerie A. Karras, 'Female Deacons in the Byzantine Church', *Church History* 73/2 (June 2004), pp. 300–01. For the Greek, see Stefano Parenti and Elena Velkovska, eds., *L'Eucologio Barberini gr. 336* (Rome: C.L.V., 1995), §§163–64, pp. 185–88.

<sup>49</sup>See Karras, *ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>50</sup>'Bishop Ordains Orthodox Christian Woman as Deaconess in Response to Local Needs in Africa', news article by *Orthodox Christian Laity*, 2 May 2024.

<sup>51</sup>LG §10. The exception is in a biblical quotation.

– would have called Mary *sacerdos* without deliberation. Pius X's text is explicit: Mary possesses the *gratia Ordinis* in 'full'. It is puzzling that Henri de Lubac, when discussing *Virgo Sacerdos*, appears to overlook the plain sense of these words.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Cardinal Cantalamessa in a recent homily seems to do the same.<sup>53</sup>

### 8.2. Mary's 'priesthood' is typological, not real

Another objection reads *Virgo Sacerdos* typologically – casting Mary as a Melchizedek-like figure whose 'priestliness' is poetic and anticipatory, not actual. On this reading, her stance at Calvary merely mirrors the ordained priest. The title becomes a metaphor, not a theological claim.

Yet such a reading sits uneasily with how the Church treats Mary in general: not as prefiguration, but as realization. Mary's *redemption*, via Immaculate Conception, is not a poetic metaphor – it is the consequence of real and efficacious grace. Why then would she not be given the grace she needs for her vocation?

### 8.3. Isn't the 'sacrament' what matters, not 'grace'?

One might object: if Mary did not receive the sacrament, she could not have received Holy Orders – implying that grace without sacrament is insufficient. But this flips sacramental logic on its head. Sacraments are *conduits* of grace – not its source. God can confer grace at will, sacraments aside. The Immaculate Conception is a prime example. The 1993 Catechism says it well: sacraments bind us, but not God.<sup>54</sup>

A related view claims Mary possessed *gratia Ordinis* only in 'spirit' (inner oblation), not in 'character' (manifest sacramental configuration). Even if such a distinction can be made, it seems superfluous. What would it mean that Mary, though filled with the 'spirit' of redemption, lacked its 'character'? Even if we can say this, presumably this would not diminish her ability to serve as an exemplar for the redeemed. Why not also for the diaconate?

### 8.4. Mary's grant is a singular, exceptional case

One might concede that Mary was uniquely granted *gratia Ordinis*, yet object that – like her Immaculate Conception – this was a singular, unrepeatable privilege. On this view, her Orders are exceptional by nature and thus irrelevant to the question of admitting other women to the diaconate.

<sup>52</sup>Henri de Lubac, in *Splendor of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), p. 135, interprets *Virgo Sacerdos* as referring to the common priesthood, characterizing *Quam Pulchre Graditur* as mere moral metaphor. Yet de Lubac overlooks the hymn's explicit language – 'the Victim which she herself will soon offer', the reference to her womb as altar, and the historic connection between Mary's Presentation and clerical identity – striking omissions given de Lubac's usual attentiveness to liturgical sources.

<sup>53</sup>Raniero Cardinal Cantalamessa, 'Mary, Mother and Model of the Priest', Third Advent Sermon, 2009. <[https://www.piercedhearts.org/scriptures/commentaries\\_sunday/cantalamessa/advent\\_sermons/3\\_advent\\_sermon\\_2009.htm](https://www.piercedhearts.org/scriptures/commentaries_sunday/cantalamessa/advent_sermons/3_advent_sermon_2009.htm)> [accessed 12 August 2025]. Cantalamessa does not address the Council's use of Marian-sacerdotal terms such as *Mediatrix* and *immolatio*. He also questions whether the Sulpician tradition ever understood Mary's priesthood to be more than the common priesthood – a reading which seems difficult to sustain when measured against the plain sense of Olier's own words.

<sup>54</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), §1257.

But this essay does not claim Mary's case mandates ordination of women, *simpliciter*. It argues something more fundamental: if even one woman – however exceptional – has received *gratia Ordinis*, then being female cannot be an intrinsic impediment. Mary's singularity does not obscure the principle; it illuminates it. A woman possessing this grace is not contrary to divine will, but a witness to it. Even if Mary's Holy Orders remain speculative, these sources seem to offer no sense of incompatibility between this grace and her femininity.

## 9. Conclusion: toward a recovery of a distinctively Marian grace

The question before the Church is whether women may be admitted to the diaconate. Therefore, my aim has been deliberately modest: to show that Catholic tradition attributes to at least one woman – Mary – the *gratia Ordinis*. Mary is a figure who has always, in a sense, been hiding in plain sight. So too, perhaps, is the tradition attributing Holy Orders to her.<sup>55</sup>

The sources gathered here are intriguing; I have to admit I remain perplexed by how far some of them go. Some speak of Mary as endowed with the fullness of Orders *in plenitudine*. I do not, in this essay, attempt to resolve the full implications of such claims. I have let these voices speak on their own terms. My argument remains focused on the immediate question, as framed by Cardinal Fernández.

What, then, can be said to this question? Catholic tradition has never definitively excluded the possibility that a woman might receive the grace of Holy Orders. Mary's example – singular and fitting – confirms that such a reception, at least in her case, is neither impossible nor contrary to God's will.

The slow process of recognition of the Immaculate Conception and female *Doctores Ecclesiae* shows how the Church comes to renewed understanding of its tradition over time, sometimes shaped by devotion from below. Though always under proper ecclesial authority, such a process might permit listening to neglected threads of that tradition. If the Church ultimately discerns that the diaconate remains reserved to men, a deeper theological account may be needed to explain why the grace given to Mary should remain closed to other women.

Pius IX affirmed both the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and the title *Virgo Sacerdos*. As the history of this title intersects closely with this dogma, along with the Assumption, further study is warranted to clarify how a claim of *gratia Ordinis Mariae* might relate to the infallibility of these dogmas.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the Second Vatican Council affirmed a peculiar significance to Mary's willed consent at Calvary. Whatever

<sup>55</sup>I am indebted to Marianist Bro John M. Samaha SM, whose essay 'Mary's priestly dimension' in *The Month* 33.5 (May 2000), pp. 184–89, first introduced me to the idea that Magisterial sources may support the claim that Mary possesses a form of sacerdotal identity.

<sup>56</sup>LG §25 affirms that even when the pope does not speak *ex cathedra*, the faithful are to give 'religious submission of mind and will'. Manifest intent, the Council says, may be known from 'frequent repetition of the same doctrine'. In this light, the consistent papal affirmations of Mary's unique role at Calvary arguably constitute 'frequent repetition', a fact meriting serious attention.



this may mean, it carries significant doctrinal weight: a Conciliar teaching is, presumably, to be held definitively by the faithful. Yet its implications – particularly in relation to clerical identity – remain largely underexplored.<sup>57</sup>

Whatever insights may yet arise through continued reflection and discernment under proper ecclesial authority, increased devotion to Mary, full of grace, promises to yield benefit for the Church.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10109>.

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<sup>57</sup>Perhaps due to the ecumenical sensitivities of Mariology in dialogue with Protestants – and the complicated history surrounding the insertion of the Marian chapter into *Lumen Gentium* – many may have overlooked these passages, phrased in a remarkably high Mariology, for far too long.

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