

This lecture has a thesis, and that thesis is that the essence of Catholicism is sacramentality. What do I mean by that? I'll need about an hour to explain it. *Sacramentality* is not a word of my own, but I will be making my own use of it, so A.I. won't have anything on it. You might as well turn off your cell phone.

I like to begin lectures with apologies and disclaimers. Sometimes they're rhetorical, sometimes wry, usually amusing, but today's is dead serious, and it has a target audience: my own students. The disclaimer is this: DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME: ACCIDENTS MAY BE FATAL. I want you, my students, to take me for a hypocrite, and to do as I say, not as I do. When you write an essay for me, I want you to engage the book on its own terms, to explicate its claims textually, and to offer an engaged response to your author dialectically. Do not use the text as a soapbox on which to declare your opinions on the subject-matter of the text, because even if the deceased author be not there to interrupt, your readership of one is standing with his pen poised high to gainsay you, not paragraph by paragraph, *nay*, but sentence by sentence. If you want to declaim without interruption, write a lecture.

Speaking of which ... this lecture is a reprise of years of wondering about a sentence from the first question of Aquinas' *Summa*. That sentence is the springboard of this declamatory lecture upon it. The sentence comes from the last article of the first question. The first question of the *Summa* concerns the nature of Sacred Doctrine, but the last article of it is given to Sacred Scripture. Aquinas enumerates and organizes

traditional terms for different ways of interpreting Scripture figuratively. The question he poses is whether in Sacred Scripture a word may have several senses. The answer is *Yes*—which shows, yet again, how uninteresting a right answer is without a reason why. Aquinas introduces his account of why with a quotation from St. Gregory: *Holy Writ by the manner of its speech excels all knowledge, because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery.* This is a striking quotation. To state the obvious, Holy Writ is written. One might have thought it would use words to reveal mysteries. Are we to understand that it is not the words of Holy Writ, but rather the wordless facts they describe, that reveal God's mysteries? How do facts reveal mysteries?

Aquinas straightaway offers a reason for this in the first sentence of his reply: *The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only—as man also can do—but also by things themselves. So, whereas in all other knowledge things are signified by words, this knowledge has the special property that the things signified by the words themselves also have a signification.*

Now, Aquinas seems to say that only God can do this. So, I figure it must be as the Creator of Nature or the Lord of History that God can make use of natural things, or historical events, or chosen persons, to serve as signifiers of his actions, his intentions, his mysteries. This is an interesting reversal for Sacred Theology. Aquinas had earlier said that in the natural theology of philosophers, knowledge of God is sought by reasoning from creatures as his effects to God as their primary cause, however, in sacred scripture

God reveals himself as he is known to himself alone, and by reasoning from this self-revelation as from postulated first principles, sacred theology seeks knowledge of other truths about God. But now it turns out that God often reveals himself by means of creatures rather than words, so theology is back to reasoning about creatures.

Now, it seems to me that God won't be very impressive if he uses creatures to signify his meaning symbolically. Using a lion to signify courage, or a heart to signify love, or an eagle an empire, is the stuff of rhetoric and poetry. In this case, the relation between signifier and signified is associational, often within the context of a linguistic or artistic tradition. It seems to me that if God's way of signifying his meaning by facts is unique to him, then it must be that he makes signs out of the intrinsic meaning of things. The natural meaning of these divine signs must matter to their divine meaning.

Furthermore, a sign is a sign for someone, and in order to be significant, a sign needs to be adapted to the dative of signification. Therefore, it is not just the natural meaning of things in themselves, but rather their meaning for us human beings, that will make them significant signs for us. For example: a virgin both conceiving and giving birth virginally. Now, for us, that's extraordinary. The question becomes, What did God mean by *that*?

For an analogue from human affairs of this contrast between a sign that contains what it signifies naturally and a sign that points beyond itself by an association, I propose

to you the difference between a marriage vow and a marriage ring. In our legal system, the speaking of the marriage vow before a witness legally effects the martial bond. Although there are witnesses and documentation of the vow, it is the verbal act to which these witness that creates the legal bond. In contrast, the wedding ring is but a symbolic memento, associated with the vow by custom. It signifies the vow and its import socially by an extrinsic association, not as a principle of it. Similarly, smoke can signify the presence of fire as an effect of it, but the sound of a fire alarm does so by convention.

In the case of his revelation, however, God is able to do something even more significant. He can make use of a thing's own natural meaning to express his divine meaning. Take, for example, the water of Christian baptism. Baptism is the first of seven sacraments in the Church. The Church confesses these sacraments to be divine signs that contain divine power to effect what they signify. They are physical signs given by God to human beings to signify his spiritual action on them. The name *sacrament* is from the Latin adjective *sacer*, meaning sacred, and a *sacramentum* was a sacred pledge—in this case, a divine pledge. It was used in Christian Latin to translate the Greek work *musterion*, which meant a secret. In particular, it meant secret knowledge revealed only to initiates, as in ancient Greek mystery cults. The noun is from the verb *to close*, as initiates were to keep their mouths closed about the mystery before the uninitiated.

Allow me to underscore that a religious mystery, both in pagan and Christian senses, means divinely revealed knowledge: privileged knowledge about divine things.

Belief is knowledge, and unbelief is ignorance; belief is enlightened, and unbelief is blind. Such religious belief chooses to remain mute before unbelievers, because their ears are deaf to it. But the minds of believers are enlightened by it, and their hearts understand what they hear, and they judge it unfitting to dispute with the spiritually blind about divine light or with the spiritually deaf about God's word.

The Christian sacrament of baptism is an initiation into knowledge of the mystery of Christ. A ritual act of cleansing the body with water signifies a divine act of cleansing by the Spirit of God. Now, this ritual act of bodily bathing that God has adopted to signify his own act of spiritual cleansing is in fact an act of human contrivance. The New Testament testifies that John baptized repentant sinners in the Jordan River for a ritual demonstration of their repentance, and historians assure us that this was not an uncommon practice among Jews of the 1st century. Consistent with this is a long religious tradition, attested to throughout the Old Testament, of ideating sinning as staining, soiling, polluting; and accordingly of asking God for forgiveness by way of cleansing, purifying, or blotting out. This poetic symbolism recurs throughout Sacred Scripture.

There is of course a natural basis for such religious symbolism. Such a natural basis is well described by Ludwig Feuerbach in his anthropological deconstruction of it. The title of my lecture is a little less presumptuous if you catch its allusion to the title of Feuerbach's book, the *Essence of Christianity*. To reduce the thesis the book to a sentence, he writes, *The secret of theology is anthropology*. Feuerbach argues that religious

consciousness of God is nothing but the unconscious projection by a primitive human consciousness of its own essence, and that in reality the only essence there is for human consciousness to love and adore is the essence itself of human nature. In his critical effort to retrieve what is true from Christian consciousness, Feuerbach offers for an example the following deconstruction of Christian baptism:

We give a true significance to Baptism, only by regarding it as a symbol of the value of water itself. Baptism should represent to us the wonderful but natural effect of water on man. Water has in fact not merely physical effects, but also, and as a result of these, moral and intellectual effects on man. Water not only cleanses man from bodily impurities, but in water the scales fall from his eyes: he sees, he thinks, more clearly; he feels himself freer; water extinguishes the fire of appetite. ... In the stream of water the fever of selfishness is allayed. Water is the readiest means of making friends with Nature. The bath is a sort of chemical process, in which our individuality is resolved into the objective life of Nature. The man rising from the water is a new, a regenerate man.

The doctrine that morality can do nothing without grace, has a valid meaning if, in place of imaginary, supernatural means of grace, we substitute natural means. Moral feeling can effect nothing without Nature: it must ally itself with the simplest natural means. The profoundest secrets lie in common every-day things, such as supernaturalistic religion and speculation ignore, thus sacrificing real mysteries to imaginary and illusory ones ; as in Baptism, for example, the real power of water is sacrificed to an imaginary one. ... But baptism is a rational, a venerable institution, if it is understood to typify and celebrate curative virtues of water, both moral and physical.

I'm persuaded by some of this description of the anthropological significance of water, but I'm not convinced of the power of my hot salt-bath to allay my selfishness,

beloved though it be after the salutary castigations of a deep tissue massage. I have no doubt that water does *not* have the power to cleanse my conscience of my consciousness of sin; to wash away my self-condemnation, my self-contempt, my painful self-awareness that the good I will to do, I do not do, and the evil I will not to do, that I do, wretched man that I am. I have no doubt that water does not have the power to wash away the harm my sin has done to my thinking, my feeling, my desiring; to my memory, my imagination, my will; to my perceptions, my affections, my habits; to my family, to my friends, my fellows. I'm sure that water cannot heal all those maladies of my soul, with all due disrespect to Feuerbach.

The religious penitent does not look to water for healing. Such an expectation would be true superstition in the eyes of faith. Rather, the penitent adopts a ritual bath to signify his desire to be freed from his sins. He knows his sin and his need to be cleansed of its effects, and he adopts water as an expressive symbol of his desire, by way of a poetic transference from bodily needs. Implied in the religious symbolism is an analogy between what the body needs for its life and what the spirit needs for its life. This is the extent of John's baptism: he calls it a baptism of repentance. He ministers this sign of the penitent's acts of repenting of his sins and of asking forgiveness for them. This religious sign is an *empty* sign to the extent that it is a sign, not of what is present, but of what is wanted: of what is needed; of what is desired. It has no power to effect what it expresses.

Now, for a Christian to reduce the significance of Christian baptism to such symbolic self-expression would suit Feuerbach's thesis just as well as his own naturalist deconstruction. Feuerbach aimed to do for Christianity what Lucretius aimed to do for Roman religion, namely demythologize its belief in supernatural agency. Of course, Lucretius' deconstruction of supernatural agency is a scientific deconstruction to natural causes, whereas Feuerbach's, being anthropological, is historical in bent, offering a coming-of-age story for human consciousness. Now, Feuerbach was a student of Hegel's, who disapproved of Feuerbach's thesis. I suspect Hegel rejected it as too historically minded. For his part, Hegel concludes his *Phenomenology of Spirit* with a chapter about Christian theology, which we do not read in the Program. In that afterword, he purposes to demythologize Christian theology symbolically, rather than historically. In particular, he shows how the theological doctrine of the Trinity is an expression in symbolic thinking of the emergence of absolute consciousness in the world. I think that for Hegel the stages of this emergence are not historical, except incidentally. The stages are modes of consciousness rather than historical epochs of it, and their order of emergence from one another is genetic rather than historical. The fact that Hegel achieved absolute consciousness in his age doesn't mean that anybody else did.

Both of these demythologizations of Christianity have been highly influential in Christian Biblical Studies, and they have trickled down to Christian preaching—or rather flooded it, I'd say. Feuerbach's anthropological hermeneutic takes the form of historical

contextualization of the Bible, and Hegel's takes the form of formal analysis. These 20th century trends in biblical hermeneutics seem to me understandable when you consider that both Theology and Biblical Studies are academic disciplines. When Physics became Queen of the sciences, History became Prince of the humanities, because history can mimic the experimental method. To qualify as scientific, humane studies need complete enumeration of measurable data, categorized according to normative definitions and analyzed according to stipulated measures. The data of the humanities are historical artifacts, archaeological or documentary. Humane sciences had to take the form either of historical or formal analysis of such measurable data to continue to count as scientific. Philosophy, for example, became History of Philosophy or Analytic Philosophy.

In academic Christianity, biblical texts became historical documents to be explicated historically, or else mythopoeic narratives to be explicated symbolically. For over a century now, much of Christianity has been in search of the historical Jesus, and the hermeneutical keys of the kingdom of heaven are held by biblical historians who reveal the significance of sacred scripture in historical retellings. When Jesus told Pilate that he came to bear witness to the truth, Pilate replied, *What is that?* Many today would answer: *the facts*. Well, the scriptures cannot be trusted to testify to the historical facts, because their intention is rather to testify to the truth. Thus enter the hermeneuts, who explain to us that the biblical mode of discourse must be understood as more rhetorical

or poetical than historical. One must explicate accordingly in terms of the literary forms of the texts and the rhetorical intentions of the authors.

Now, none of that is not true. It's just not the whole truth, nor the heart of the truth, so that it is only reducing the whole truth to that, that makes it untrue. I think that all these historical considerations pertain only to the historical matter of the divine signs, and not to their divine significance. Now, the natural matter of the divine sign does indeed matter. It is of the essence of Catholicism that, as Aquinas puts it, grace builds on nature and revelation on reason. Aquinas says that grace completes nature, and that nature is the natural potency of grace, so that the two are interrelated essentially as perfectible and perfection. It is of the essence of Catholicism to believe this about nature.

The revelations of God are much complicated—or perhaps I should say enriched—by the fact that they are conveyed in the language of the sons of men. On a Catholic view, divine revelation is not divine dictation, but divinely inspired interpretation. Accordingly, the scriptural descriptions of the divine signs are anthropological through and through. All the human powers of the sacred writer are in play when he authors his narrative of the historical facts and his interpretation of their divine significance. His intention is to testify that these historical facts are divine signs of divine mysteries, and to explicate their mystical meaning. All the resources of human logic, rhetoric, poetry, history, science, philosophy, are at his disposal, and like any other writer, he speaks from

his own person and time to his contemporaries. But at the same time he intends to speak of eternal mysteries that transcend his own time, place, and subjectivity.

God's grace thus builds on human nature and God's revelation on human reason. We know from sad self-experience, however, that human nature and reason are far from perfect. In fact, it is of the essence of Catholicism to testify that they are fallen from their original state of grace. *Sin's a big complication.* (How's that for understatement?) But it is of the essence of Catholicism to say that this corrupted perfectible called human nature is predestined by God to be reclaimed for supernatural sublation. Sinful nature is understood to be wounded, or ill, or sullied, yes; and it needs to be healed, purified, and restored, yes; but precisely in order to be elevated, glorified, even divinized.

Every natural good is therefore to be reclaimed by the Church for the glory of God. For this reason is the Catholic Church, on its best days, a patron of all arts and sciences. For this same reason, besides its sacraments, the Church has innumerable sacramentals. Any human symbol of anthropological significance can be adopted by Catholics as a sign of their devotion. For one example, as the wedding ring is a memento of the wedding vow, so is holy water a memento of the water of baptism. For another, all the paraphernalia of Mosaic Temple sacrifice, which perished from Judaism with the Temple, has been adopted by the Catholic Church for the sacramental sacrifice of the risen Christ's body and blood. Every new proselytized culture adds its devotional sacramentals to the treasury of Catholic tradition. The Church's mandate is that everything naturally good,

true, or beautiful should be claimed for Christ. This burgeoning of sacramentals in the Church expresses the fecundity of the Incarnation. When the Word became flesh to dwell among us, he rendered the whole material creation fit to be a sign of his indwelling in it.

Returning to John's baptism, God has adopted this human sign, resonant with all its anthropological and religious significance, to serve as his sign of his fulfilling the need and desire that it signifies. As a human sign of a human desire, it was an empty sign. God adopted it to fulfill it. He fills the human sign with his divine power, so that it becomes a divine sign that effects what it signifies. John himself testifies to this, saying *I indeed baptize you in water for repentance, but he that shall come after me, he shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire*. John also testifies that this power of Christ's baptism was divinely revealed to him: *The one who sent me to baptize with water said to me: 'He upon whom you shall see the Spirit descending and remaining, he it is that baptizes with the Holy Spirit*. John offers the figure of fire to signify the purgative action of Christ's Holy Spirit. He expands upon this figure of fire as follows: *His fan is in his hand and he will purge his floor, and he will gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*. The water of Christ's baptism is thus revealed to be a divine sign of a divine fire/

Okay, physical water signifies spiritual fire. That's complicated. Worse yet, Christ himself never baptizes anyone with water. He will command his chosen Apostles to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit after he leaves the world, but while in the world, neither they nor he baptize with water. On the other

hand, he does submit to John's baptism, over John's objection, overruling it by saying that he must fulfill all justice. Much later, he calls his sufferings to come a baptism, saying: *I have a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how I am in anguish until it be accomplished.* This association by Jesus of his passion with baptism resonates with John's calling Jesus at his baptism *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. This declaration identifies Jesus with the paschal lamb of the Mosaic Passover. John the Evangelist likewise testifies to this identification of Jesus with the Pasch in his gospel narrative of the crucifixion, when he relates that the Roman soldiers did not break Jesus' bones, but rather pierced him with a lance. It was a sign yet more significant, testifies John, that there then flowed from Jesus' pierced heart not only blood but also water. In one of his subsequent letters, the evangelist explicates this sign thus: *And there are three that give testimony: the Spirit and the water and the blood. And these three are one.* They are one? How are they one, John?

Do you see how a sacred semiotics is what is needed to understand the signs to which the sacred scriptures testify? Neither an anthropology nor a symbology can get to the heart of the matter. The essence of sacred theology is, rather, divine semiotics. Divinely inspired scripture reveals the water of Christian baptism to be an effective sign of the purgative power both of Christ's Spirit and of his blood. These signs, prophetically interpreted, reveal to faith both the action of God and the eternal intentions of God that are the first and final cause of his divine signs. These divine intentions are the hermeneutical key to the signs' mystical meaning.

The temporal signs are evident, but their mystical significance is not. Jesus' signs are rather like Jesus' parables, intended at once to conceal and to reveal. He tells his disciples that he speaks to the crowds in parables, "so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand." Here Jesus is echoing more than one prophet. Among them is Jeremiah, who says, *Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear.* Then there is Isaiah, who is commanded by God thus: *Make the hearts of this people calloused; deafen their ears and close their eyes, lest they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.* Augustine refers to his own failure to understand the figurative meaning of scripture by saying: *God resists the proud.* God's signs are performed for all the world to see, yet their divine intention resists the proud, the foolish, the hardened heart. These signs are not magical. Their effective power is for the faithful: so much so, that Jesus says to them, *According to your faith, so may it be done to you;* and then, *"Your faith has healed you.*

Perhaps the sign of all signs is Christ crucified himself. When he is presented in the Temple as a firstborn, the priest Simeon prophesies to Mary: *Behold, this son of yours is set to be a sign that shall be contradicted; and a sword will pierce your own soul too, that the thoughts of many may be laid bare.* His Christ rejected is a sign of God's to men—a sign of their own human making and his divine appropriation. Paul writes, *Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

Christ crucified is for believers the ultimate sign of God's power and wisdom at work in the world redeeming humankind from its sin. The crucifixion is a historical fact witnessed by both believers and unbelievers, but for the one, the manner of his death signifies divine wisdom and power, and for the other, human frailty and absurdity.

In Matthew's gospel account of Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus says from his cross, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Jesus is quoting the well-known first line of a psalm—and Matthew well knows that his audience of Jewish Christians will know that. It is clear that Matthew thinks the psalm is prophetic of the manner of Jesus' death. It describes a just man delivered into the hands of his enemies and tormented by them unto death, although ending with a hope of rescue by God. How shall we understand such psalm as prophecy?

The historicist may well posit some contemporary historical figure who suffered; or else explain the psalm as a figurative expression of the historical sufferings of Israel; or else a prediction of the sufferings of a suffering servant to come. Now the symbolist might want to rescue us from the hermeneutical ingenuousness of such historicism by interpreting the psalm's application to Jesus poetically: Matthew sees in the psalm's description of the just man delivered over to his enemies a figure of Christ's suffering, and makes use of it as a paradigmatic prefigurement of what has its culminating expression in Jesus' crucifixion. Indeed, the evangelist may well have fictionalized details to suit his application of the psalm to the event.

For an alternative to such historicist and symbolist hermeneutics, listen to how Melito of Sardis identifies Christ as the paschal lamb, in this Easter homily from the Church's Liturgy of the Hours on Holy Thursday:

There was much proclaimed by the prophets about the mystery of the Pasch: that mystery is Christ. For the sake of suffering humanity he came down from heaven to earth and clothed himself in that humanity in the Virgin's womb. And he was born a man. Having then a body capable of suffering, he took the pain of fallen man upon himself, It is he who endured every kind of suffering in all those who foreshadowed him. In Abel he was slain; in Isaac he was bound; in Jacob, exiled; in Joseph, sold; in Moses, exposed to die. He was sacrificed in the Passover lamb; persecuted in David; dishonored in the prophets.

On this account, God the Son takes human nature to himself in order to take to himself the history of its suffering from its sin. He suffers all manner of human sin as a just man despised, scorned, reviled, tried with torments, and unjustly condemned to death with criminals. In such sufferings, God the Son identifies himself existentially, not merely symbolically, with the sufferings of Abel at the hand of his brother; and of Jacob at the hand of his brother; and of Joseph at the hand of his brothers. As Moses was persecuted by the unjust Pharaoh; and David by the unjust Saul; and the prophets by the unjust kings of Israel; so was Christ by the rulers of Empire and Temple. In his own sufferings God the Son personally appropriated to himself the history of human suffering, learning a human obedience by what he suffered, and he adopted as his own the perennial cry of the just man in the hands of sinners: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* He

adopted this human cry in order to convert it into a sign of his divine power to answer it with resurrection from the dead to an eternal life freed of all suffering from sin.

Such intentions of God are not temporal. For us, human history unfolds, but it is present as a whole to God eternally. What he wills and does, he wills and does eternally, even if what he wills and does eternally unfolds for us temporally. Unlike ours, God's thoughts bring about what he thinks. In human temporal terms, we say that God foresees all that he sees and predestines all that he intends, but God's adoption of the psalmist's cry for his own sign is not either retrospective or prospective. The psalmist's cry is known to him and willed by him eternally, as is his adoption of it for a sign of his eternal intention to redeem us from such sufferings in time.

Prophetic interpretation of God's historical signs are enriched with symbolism because man is not only the rational or political animal, but also the artistic animal, the poetic animal, the figurative animal. Maimonides says that God speaks to the sons of men in the language of the sons of men. For Maimonides, because God transcends his creation absolutely, because his otherness to it is absolute, all scripture can't but be metaphorical, a poetic stand-in and substitute for the ineffable. Revelation can reveal the truth about God to the metaphysically-minded believer only indirectly, in progressive negations of created perfections. Aquinas' Catholic reply to Maimonides is that, on the contrary, it is metaphysically necessary that every effect resemble its cause, however remotely, including the first and primary cause, the Creator of all being. Thus, although it is

certainly true that the sacred scriptures are often metaphorical, revelation can also by analogy with created being reveal to us in part truths about the Creator. Such self-revelations of God's are called mysteries in the sense of divine knowledge revealed, spiritual enlightenment beyond human ken. *The Law was given by Moses*, writes St. John, *but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. The one and only Son, who is himself God and is at the Father's side, he has made him known.* It is of the essence of Catholicism to believe that you can know the truth about God, and that truth can set you free from your sin.

Now, no talk on the essence of Catholicism may conclude without adulation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Allow me to propose an understanding of that Catholic adulation in terms of Catholic sacramentality. In a word, Mary is the sacrament of the Church. To this woman, the Mother of Jesus, God vouchsafed the fullness of grace which he wills ultimately for the whole Church and for each member of the Church. By a sacramental metonymy, its preeminent member personifies the Church. She is the first member of the Church to whom the mystery of Christ is revealed, and the first to assent to it with faith. Every other member of the Church assents in faith to what God has done in her; she alone assented to his doing it. Why did God want this prior human assent given to his will? Meditation on this mystery continues in the Church to this day.

It is not only by his choice that this woman mothered God, it was also by his grace. She had been prepared for her momentous assent by a fullness of God's provident grace. In the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel greets Mary, not by her name, but by an

extraordinary new name, signifying an extraordinary vocation—a vocation far exceeding Abraham’s, for his was for a chosen people and hers is for all the world. God calls her, *O fully graced!* In Greek, this is the participle of the verb *to grace*, used substantively in the vocative voice, and in the perfect tense, which always connotes a superlative degree. Because the Latin participle does not carry this superlative connotation, the name was translated first into Latin, and then into English, by the adjectival phrase “Full of grace.” *Hail, most fully graced*, says the angel sent by God, *the Lord is with you!* The Church testifies that this extraordinary fullness of grace given Mary for her extraordinary collaboration in salvation history included sinlessness from the first moment of her conception. And her sinlessness is a sign given the Church of the sinlessness which God has promised to every member of the Church. Christ intends to render his Church holy, and immaculate, and blameless before him, testifies Scripture, and he begins with Mary for a sign.

It is upon Mary, the Mother of Jesus, that the Holy Spirit of God descended, and whom the power of God overshadowed—as it did the tabernacle in which God spoke with Moses face to face—so that she might conceive in the tabernacle of her womb the Son of God, and bring him forth for the salvation of the world. *In the fullness of time*, writes Paul, *God sent his Son, made from a woman, that we might receive the adoption of sons.* Her virginal conception of Christ is a sacramental sign of the spiritual begetting by God’s Holy Spirit of every believer in Christ, as John testifies in the prologue of his Gospel:

To all who receive him, to those who believe in his name, are given the power to become children of God—children born not of blood, nor of the desire or will of man, but of God.

It is at the sound of Mary's voice that Christ's herald, John the Baptist, is filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. Scripture shows Mary's voice performing the priestly function of mediating the presence of Christ, for Elizabeth testifies that as soon as Mary's greeting sounded in her ears, the infant in her womb leapt with joy. They both fill with the Holy Spirit, and she cries out to Mary, *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!* After praising Mary for believing that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled, she goes on to ask, *"But who am I that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?"* When Elizabeth thus gives Mary the Davidic title of the Queen Mother in Israel, Mary is revealed to be not only progenitor of the long-awaited Son of David, but also Queen Mother of his kingdom to come.

When Mary presents Jesus in the Temple to offer up the Mosaic sacrifice for the firstborn of Israel, the prophet Simeon reveals the unique participation in Christ's passion that her motherhood entails: *This son of your is set to be a sign that shall be contradicted; and a sword will pierce your own soul too, that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.* And when his hour does come, she is at the foot of the Cross, *filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ*, as Paul says every Christian must. And when from his cross Jesus gives her to John as a mother, the Church identifies itself with the beloved disciple and accepts Jesus' command: *Behold your mother*, as it trusts that she accepts hers, *Behold your son*.

All the Church's Marian liturgies apply to her the promises made to the Church universal; and contrariwise, apply to the Church universal the graces vouchsafed to her personally. Isaac of Stella enunciates the following hermeneutical rule of scriptural interpretation: Whatever scriptures are used of the Church in a universal sense, apply to Mary in a special sense, and to the individual Christian in a particular sense; likewise, whatever scripture says of Mary in a special sense, applies to the Church in a universal sense, and to every Christian in a particular sense. This rule of semiotic interpretation holds because Mary's person is given by God to the Church as a living sign of that fullness of grace which he promises to all Christ's members. She is what she signifies.

The temple of God in heaven was opened.... And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. John reports this divinely given vision in his Book of Revelation. The woman gives birth to a son who will rule the nations with an iron rod. But who is this woman? Is she the old Israel, which gave birth to Christ historically? Is she the New Israel, the Church, which bears Christ to the world spiritually? Is she Mary, who gave birth to him bodily, in a manger in Bethlehem, in the reign of Tiberius, in the fullness of time? The woman is all three at once, I answer. The symbol of John's vision resonates like a triadic chord. But what is the root note, I wonder? Well, Israel and the Church give birth to Christ figuratively, but Mary did so factually, and that makes her, not just a symbol of John's vision, but a sacramental sign of God's.