

Mary: Mediatrix of All Graces?

by James L. Heft, SM

Introduction

During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Blessed Virgin Mary was often invoked as the “Mediatrix of all graces.” Father Chaminade was among those who invoked her frequently as “mediator” and “mediatrix.”¹ In 1921, the pope allowed the Marianists to celebrate on May 12 the Feast of Mary, Mother of Graces and Mediatrix, as a way for the Society to commemorate Pope Gregory XVI’s 1839 Decree of Praise and Pope Pius IX’s 1965 Decree of Approbation of the Society of Mary. The current official Catholic liturgical calendar does not have any celebration of Mary as the Mediatrix of all Graces but has added some new Marian titles; for example, Mary, the Mother of the Church, celebrated now on the Monday after Easter. A lot has happened in official teachings about Mary since the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially when considering the decisions and teachings of Vatican II (1962–65) and subsequent papal teachings on Marian devotions. We see some of those new emphases in the Society of Mary’s 1981 *Rule of Life*. In this essay, I will briefly describe this evolution of devotions and doctrine (not dogmas) and what it might mean for the Marianist Family today.

Father Chaminade (1761–1850) and Nineteenth Century Catholicism

In 1983, Dominican Yves Congar’s (1904–95) third volume appeared in English translation. It was a masterful historical and theological study of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. In it he made the astute observation that when Marian devotions became more popular and widespread (starting with the Rosary in the thirteenth century, promoted by the Dominicans), the important primary role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians diminished, if not entirely disappeared, in the writings of theologians and from the devotions of Christians. Hence, there was a tendency during that time for many people to use language that “maximized”

¹ See William Joseph Chaminade, *Marian Writings*, vol. 2, ed. J.-B. Armbruster, SM (Dayton, OH: MRC, 1980), pp. 426–27.

Mary's role, making it equal in her saving power to that of Christ himself. The Catholic faithful, theologians, and popes spoke of Christ the King and Mary the Queen, Christ the mediator, and Mary as co-mediatrix or Mediatrix of all Graces. During the last two centuries, Catholic theologians began to feel uneasy about this hyper-Marian devotion, especially those who began in the twentieth century, as did Congar, to have conversations with Protestants who were beginning to think seriously about "ecumenism," a movement started by some Protestants to build greater unity among various Christian denominations. It wasn't until Vatican II that the Catholic Church officially encouraged Catholics and especially theologians to enter thoughtfully into these important discussions.

Father Chaminade, like most religious leaders and founders of religious congregations in nineteenth-century France, was at ease with the Marian title Mediatrix of all Graces. He celebrated a Mass annually with that title; after all, it was then part of the Roman Liturgical Calendar. I also believe that though Chaminade drew most of his Marian theology from prominent theologians of his own time, he was a genius in how he came to weave together the formative and apostolic roles of Mary: that Mary helps us be formed into the image of her Son whom she knew, loved, and taught how to pray. Mary, more than any other Christian ever, knew the ways and power of the Holy Spirit. Chaminade recognized this and, inspired by Mary, called his lay communities to re-Christianize France—men and women who witnessed the Gospel-life through their communities, becoming "spectacles" dedicated to spreading the Good News. Chaminade had no interest in promoting a personal devotion to Mary simply for the sake of developing a personal relationship with her (not a bad thing at all, but to what end?). Rather, he wanted us to realize that, in and through Mary's example and mission, we, too, are called to be transformed into Christ so that we might witness together to the Gospel for the realization of God's Kingdom in an ever-growing secular, materialistic, and individualist culture. Chaminade's understanding of Mary's role for the Society was, in a word, prophetic, rooted as it was and should have been in an insightful and correct reading of the "signs of the times." Chaminade's vision was what the Church most needed then and continues to need today. When

Chaminade is canonized, I think the best way to recognize his charism for the Church will be to name him a Confessor of the Faith, that is, a person who created effective ways to rebuild the Church—one grounded theologically in the deepest traditions of a biblically grounded Catholicism.

The Contribution of Vatican II

There were several hotly debated issues at the Second Vatican Council, two of which some bishops wanted discussed but were peremptorily removed from the agenda by St. Pope Paul VI: mandatory priestly celibacy for diocesan priests and contraception. The other difficult issues were religious freedom, inter-religious dialogue (especially the Church's understanding of Judaism), the role of Mary in the salvation of Christians, and "collegiality," the dignity and authority of the college of bishops—an emphasis that threatened popes ever since the fifteenth century (after the Council of Constance, 1414–15). This Council was called to end the scandal of three individuals claiming to be popes who had divided up European Christianity a century before the Protestant Reformation. Out of this ecclesial trauma, the "conciliar" movement grew. It emphasized the rights of bishops, who together were sometimes presented as equal to and even above the authority of pope (Gallicanism, a French form of conciliarism, was strong until the French Revolution, which took place when Chaminade was a 28-year-old priest).

With regard to the proper way to understand Mary's role and her relationship to Jesus in the work of salvation, nearly half of the bishops at Vatican II argued for a separate document written about the Blessed Virgin Mary, one that would emphasize, among other things, her special character and privileges. When the bishops were asked to vote on a proposal that located what was to be said about Mary within the already drafted document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, the vote in favor was very close: 1,114 to 1,074. That vote put Mary within, not above or separate from, the Church. As a member of the Church, Mary, indeed a pre-eminent member, became the perfect disciple of Jesus who directed others to her Son and advised them to do whatever He would tell them. The Council's teaching on Mary thus became chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium*, which was entitled "The Role of the

Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church.”² As a small accommodation, typical of many Church documents on controversial issues, the bishops did refer to Mary as Mediatrix,³ but only as the last of four titles: “Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix.” However, the bishops made clear in the very next sentence how all these titles should be understood: “They (the titles), however, are to be so understood that they neither take away from nor add anything to the dignity and efficaciousness of Christ the one Mediator.”⁴

Subsequent Commentary on “Mediatrix of All Graces”

The sentiment that something still needed to be said about Mary’s special role did not disappear. Some bishops and theologians continued after Vatican II to push for an additional document on Mary defining, even dogmatically (the most authoritative form of Church teaching), that Mary is the mediatrix of all graces. Realizing that exaggerated forms of Marian devotions continued after Vatican II, Pope St. Paul VI published in 1974 a document entitled *Marialis Cultus*, on “the right ordering and development of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.” The document emphasized repeatedly the primary role of the Holy Spirit in the role of sanctification of the members of the Church. It is well-known that Pope Paul VI was a careful reader of the writings of Yves Congar, who played a key role in the formation of several of the major documents of Vatican II. Again, Congar’s history showed that when Marian devotions began to soar in the late Middle Ages, the role of the Holy Spirit disappeared.

The second thing Paul VI did was oppose misguided devotional practices that continued after Vatican II: the recitation of the rosary during the Mass and the inclusion of novenas within the celebration of the Mass. Paul VI also referred to the importance of ecumenical awareness not by compromising Catholic teaching to ease relationships with Protestants, but by paying closer attention to correct interpretations of Scripture and greater precision of theological definitions. He

² *LG* was the only document of sixteen from Vatican II that had an official heading that clearly indicated a chapter’s structure.

³ *LG*, § 62.

⁴ *LG*, § 62.

repeatedly cited the key statement in 1 Timothy 2:5: “God is one. One also is the mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ,” a text also cited at Vatican II in the debates about Mary’s role as mediatrix.

On May 25, 1987, Pope St. John Paul II (1978–2005) published the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, subtitled “Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church,” an extensively biblically based description of Mary’s role and mission in the Church. In the third part of that encyclical, he wrote of Mary as an advocate and intercessor, a spiritual mother for all humanity, a maternal mediator that participates in the unique saving mission of Christ rather than distracts from it in any way.

Again, in 1996, during the long pontificate of St. John Paul II, the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), now named the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, was asked whether the request from the *Vox Populi Mariae Mediatrici* that Mary as “Co-redemptrix or “Mediatrice of All Graces” be made a dogma of the faith. Cardinal Ratzinger, the head of the CDF, answered, “Negative.” He continued:

The precise meaning of these titles is not clear, and the doctrine contained in them is not mature. A defined doctrine of divine faith belongs to the *Depositum Fidei*—that is, to the divine revelation conveyed in Scripture and the apostolic tradition. However, it is not clear how the doctrine expressed in these titles is present in Scripture and the apostolic tradition.⁵

Ratzinger’s references to “not clear” are simply another way of saying these proposed titles will, as understood by the proposers, give Mary a role equal to Jesus in the work of salvation, an understanding that explicitly violates 1 Tm 2:5.

It is interesting to learn that Cardinal Ratzinger, as a young theologian, had difficulties with various exaggerated Marian titles.⁶ Ratzinger mentioned that in the early 1960s he had trouble making theological sense of various maximalist Marian

⁵ J. Ratzinger, *Minutes of the Feria IV of 21 February 1996*, in the Archives of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

⁶ See V. Messori and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* (Ignatius Press, 1985).

titles and devotions. He later came to see the critical importance of Mary through two key biblical references: that she conceived by the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35) and that Jesus was born of a woman (Gal 4:4–5), protecting the central claim that Jesus Christ was both divine and human.

Despite the clear warnings and opposition to exaggerated Marian titles, a minority of Vatican II bishops continued to push for recognition of that title, even dogmatically, thirty years after Vatican II. Today, sixty years after Vatican II, these groups remain persistent. They continue to promote distorted and exaggerated forms of Mariology.⁷

While space does not permit further references to *Mater Populi Fidelis*, I encourage everyone to read the document. It is rich in its treatment of the history of commentary by great theologians and religious thinkers about Mary's role in the Christian life and, in particular, enriches the theological and pastoral understanding of Mary for members of the Marianist Family today. Allow me to cite only two examples.

The first example summarizes several clear statements on this matter by Pope Francis (2013–25):

On at least three occasions, Pope Francis expressed his clear opposition to using the title “Co-redemptrix,” arguing that Mary “never wished to appropriate anything of her son for herself. She never presented herself as a co-Savior. No, a disciple.” Christ’s redemptive work was perfect and needs no addition; therefore, “Our Lady did not want to take away any title from Jesus.... She did not ask for herself to be a quasi-redeemer or a co-redeemer: no. There is only one Redeemer, and this title cannot be duplicated.” Christ “is the only Redeemer; there are no co-redeemers with Christ.” For “the sacrifice of the Cross, offered in a spirit of love and obedience, presents the most abundant and infinite satisfaction.” While we

⁷ See Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mater Populi Fidelis* (“Mother of the Faithful People of God”) (Vatican Official Document: Nov. 4, 2025). Published by the Dicastery during the first year of Pope Leo XIV’s pontificate and signed by the pontiff on Oct. 7, 2025, §19 rehearses the 1996 authoritative decision.

are able to extend its effect in the world (cf. Col. 1:24), neither the Church nor Mary can replace or perfect the redemptive work of the Incarnate Son of God, which was perfect and needs no additions.⁸

A second example explains well the appropriate mediating role that Mary does play.⁹ It points out that in ordinary life, the word “mediation” is simply understood as “cooperation, assistance, or intercession,” and can certainly be applied to Mary in a sense “subordinate” to Christ. Noting also that Mary was active in asking questions (at the Annunciation), she is involved not only biologically in bringing forth Christ, but also fulfills a mediating role at the wedding feast of Cana. Finally, it notes that at Vatican II the bishops referred to her role as “maternal assistance” and “help.” Finally, again referring to Vatican II, it speaks of Mary’s intercession that can never be separated from Christ’s action through the Holy Spirit.

Marianist Rule of Life (1981)

Following the call of Vatican II that religious orders return to a deeper understanding of the original charism, and restate it in the light of the signs of the times, the Society of Mary elected delegates for the General Chapter of 1981 that met in Linz, Austria. As a member of the General Chapter of 1981, I had the privilege of serving on the committee given the task of writing the first chapter of the Rule on the nature and mission of the Society of Mary. Articles 5-8 describe “Mary in our Life.” Those articles make clear the primacy of the Holy Spirit: “Jesus was formed in her (Mary) by the Holy Spirit” (RL 5). “Moved by Jesus’ love for his Mother, we dedicate ourselves to her so that the Holy Spirit, in whose action she cooperates with a mother’s love, may form us more fully to the image of her Son” (RL 6). Taken together, these four articles offer an excellent understanding of Mary’s role in the Marianist Family and the Church, not only as the perfect disciple of Jesus, but also as someone who “shows us the way of true Christian life,” during

⁸ *Mater Populi Fidelis*, § 21.

⁹ See *Mater Populi Fidelis*, §§ 25–27.

which we follow her example of “faith, poverty of spirit, and attentiveness to the Lord” (RL 7).

In these four articles, her subordination to the action of the Holy Spirit does not diminish her appropriate maternal mediation. In the Creed, we profess the communion of saints, those already in heaven, those in purgatory, and those of us still on our earthly journey, all capable of praying for each other in and through our Risen Christ, our “ambassador” in heaven. There is also no reason that we cannot and should ask for the prayers of Mary, especially given her unique closeness to her Son and her special love for her family, the Marianist Family.¹⁰

Was Chaminade Wrong? Gaining a Historical Perspective

I began this essay noting how Chaminade lived during a time of great emphasis on the intercessory role of Mary. Since Vatican II, the Mary Mediatrix title has been criticized as being unclear and detracting from the one Mediator, Jesus Christ. I noted the documented distortions of exaggerated Mariologies that, from the time of the late Middle Ages, mistakenly underplayed and even failed to mention the primary role of the Holy Spirit. With the birth of the Protestant ecumenical movement in the early twentieth century, renewed biblical studies, and the teachings of Vatican II, our understanding of Mary’s role has been clarified and enriched in significant ways, one of which discourages and even outrightly opposes using the title of Mary as mediatrix, a title Chaminade was quite at home with during his life. Was Chaminade guilty of Marian maximalism? Not only did he refer to Mary as mediator and a mediatrix, but also as an “aqueduct,” as a “distributor” of the fruits of redemption, and as a “canal” of grace?¹¹ Was the Church in France on the wrong track about these Marian expressions?

Allow me to make three points and then return to my question about Chaminade’s thinking about Mary. First, an obvious point: Chaminade was a man

¹⁰ For two commentaries on the Marian articles of the *Rule of Life*, see James Heft, SM, “Mary, The Mother of Jesus: A Marianist understanding of her faith as the first of believers,” *Alive*, Spring 2024, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 4–5; and James Heft, SM, “Mary, A Gift from God: By faith, the Blessed Mother is the first of all believers,” *Alive*, Summer 2024, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 4–5.

¹¹ See the index in *Marian Writings*, vol. 2, p. 427.

influenced by his own times, just as all of us are by the times we live in. How much we are influenced and in what ways differs from person to person, family to family, and from the communities we form and the friendships we have. For example, I realize that I live in a quite materialistic, individualistic, and secular culture dominated by commodification, secularism, and entertainment. Am I affected by it? Certainly. Do I fight it? Yes, on my best days. Unless I am careful, it can have too much influence on how I think of faith, reason, happiness, and commitment. Chaminade faced squarely the *philosophes* of his own day, those who canonized reason and opposed faith. He fought a good battle, knowing that reason alone led to religious indifference.

Our fight today is somewhat different but just as dangerous. We fight the ubiquitous technocratic fixes, the polarization of political life and nations, racism, nationalism, and the destruction of the environment. However, just as Chaminade's time was not all bad, neither is ours. We also have begun to honor human rights, human dignity, religious freedom, and greater awareness of the dangers of racism and nationalism. In short, our culture, like Chaminade's, is a mixed bag, not all good nor all bad. And we are all influenced by our times to varying degrees. My estimation is that Chaminade not only did the best he could (given his times and its thinking) but also did a much better job than most did and that we do today. His vision of the Marian dimensions of the Christian life inspired a movement that continues today in and through all of us. Moreover, he made regular references to the sole mediatorship of the Son of God and constantly called his followers, after the advice of Mary, to do whatever Jesus tells them.

Second, accurate language counts. Augustine's *Confessions* remain a "classic" because of the precise way he managed to describe his journey, and the human condition in general, from a very self-absorbed and vain way of living to one of Christian love and wisdom. One of the jobs of theologians is to take care that language about God is as accurate as it can be. Fully accurate? Never. After all, though graced, we are finite creatures trying to understand and say something about the infinite. If we are created in God's image and likeness—God who remains a rich and deep mystery to us—is it any wonder that we will also never come to a

full understanding of even ourselves? We are fond of saying that life is a “journey,” and as a journey we have yet to arrive at our destination.

Even dogmatic definitions are finite efforts to describe the infinite. An important document *Mysterium ecclesiae* issued by the Vatican in 1973 explained that dogmatic definitions can be seen at one and the same time as true and still, at a later date, in need of reformulation because all such definitions are inescapably conditioned by (1) the limited state of human knowledge at the time of the original definition; (2) the changeable conceptions and thought patterns that belong to a certain period of time; (3) the specific concerns that motivated the definition; and (4) the limited expressive power of language. Looked at from one angle, this document could be seen as destabilizing even dogmas! However, what it is actually saying is that we grow in our understanding of God’s revelation without ever arriving at a perfect understanding of them, at least in this life. In one of John Henry Newman’s 1839 sermons, “Christian Sincerity: Unreal Words,” he wrote:

We ever promise things greater than we master, and we wait on God to enable us to perform them. Our promising involves a prayer for light and strength. And so again we all say the Creed, but who comprehends it fully? All we can hope is, that we are on the way to understand it; that we partly understand it; that we desire, pray, and strive to understand it more and more.

Being aware of the limitations of language, especially when we try to describe religious realities, will make us more alert to other typical Marian sayings that are not clear. For example, Marianists often say *Per Mariam ad Jesum*, meaning that it is through Mary that we come to know Jesus. That would certainly be true for her betrothed, Joseph. It would be true of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, who at the Visitation met the Lord in and through the pregnant Mary, and for the shepherds who came to the manger in which Mary had placed Jesus. However, surely there are many Christians who came to Jesus without thinking about Mary, but came as many of us have, only gradually, and then ever more deeply, to

recognize her key role in bringing Christ to us, others, and the world. We must also remember that God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him (1 Jn 4:16). It is true that for some believers it is through Mary that they come to Jesus. On the other hand, to claim that it is *only* through Mary that people come to Jesus is an exaggeration.

I have also heard some Catholics speak of Mary as the link between her son, the Head, and the Body of the Faithful—suggesting that all that comes from Christ has to flow from Him through the neck (Mary) in order to get to the body of the faithful. That is an even more obvious uncaredful way of thinking about Mary's role in the life of the Church. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), a famous monastic leader who several historians of Christian doctrine describe as the founder of Mariological thinking, was fond of saying that it was impossible to say enough about Mary (*De Maria numquam satis*). By now it should be obvious that if you say more about Mary than Christ (or worse, think that Mary is more important, equal to, or even above Christ), something is seriously out of balance. Likewise, it can also be misleading to refer to Mary as the conqueror of all heresies because it is Jesus, human and divine, who conquers all heresies. Instead, when referring to Mary's role, we should note that Mary—filled with God's grace, the perfect disciple of her son Jesus, moved by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ's perfect disciple—helps, more than any other human disciple, defeat the way of the serpent, as we read in the Book of Revelation (Rv 12).

Chaminade lived a long life in very turbulent times and confusing times. In a letter written in 1831, shortly after the French government shut down all his teacher education programs, Chaminade was stunned, even confused. He wrote:

We are in the midst of such a new world! I am in France almost like in a foreign land. I seem not to know any longer what to say or do. For my part, I am waiting for events to come my way instead of going forward to meet them. I have no other policy than that of having daily recourse to the Blessed Virgin.¹²

¹² Chaminade, *Letters*, no. 575 to Fr. Jean Lalanne, Jan. 20, 1831; vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 454.

Our times are also perplexing, even vexing. In his time, Chaminade got the core of the Gospel more deeply, I believe, than many of us do today. He stressed again and again that Mary directed us to Jesus (“do whatever he tells us”); remained faithful at the foot of the cross (only one disciple with several women stood there); and given her special knowledge of the ways of the Holy Spirit, forgave those same Apostles who prayed with her for the coming upon them for the first time the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In these matters, Chaminade, I believe, got so many important things about Mary right that his use of the commonly used title “mediatrix” takes away little from his powerful and inspiring Marian vision.

Third and finally, some historians are dangerous in the way that they write history. When they focus only on the changes, they seem to relativize everything, making it difficult for Christian believers to be confident that there are any eternal truths. But for Christianity, there are fundamental truths that will not change: the Creed, the dogma of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, the Trinity, and life eternal. Do we understand these realities of our faith fully? No, but enough to build our lives upon them. Can we be certain about them, rely upon them, even as we ask questions about them—of course. Chaminade was curious about many things in his life, including science, as the latest circular of our Superior General, Father André-Joseph Fétis, SM, has written.¹³ In short, though we continue to search for deeper and better understandings of realities natural and spiritual, we can and should be confident in affirming the core truths of the faith. Not only that. We should also be confident that Chaminade is a graced and gifted guide in our Marianist mission.

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¹³ See André-Joseph Fétis, SM, “Knowing to Love and Serve: Following Blessed Father Chaminade,” *Circ.* 5, Apr. 8, 2026.