

Mary as Mother Church & Bride in Medieval Texts

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Abstract

This article offers an exploration of the Virgin Mary's dual role as both the Mother and Bride of God in medieval Christian theology. It delves into the symbolic interplay between the allegorical interpretations of Canticles (Song of Songs) and Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, revealing a multifaceted portrayal of Mary that transcends her historical role. The article examines the theological insights of Church Fathers like Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysologus, Bede, Ambrose of Milan, and Gregory of Nazianus, who enrich our understanding of Mary's purity, obedience, and maternal role. Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons are highlighted for their profound insight into Mary's roles, particularly during key events like the Annunciation, Visitation, and Pentecost. The exploration underscores Mary's significance in Christian theology and her symbolic representation of the Church's identity and mission. It invites reflection on the spiritual and mystical dimensions of the Christian faith, the role of the Church, and our place within this sacred narrative, emphasizing the Church's call to embody the purity, love, and obedience exemplified by Mary.

Introduction

The Virgin Mary, a central figure in Christian theology, has been venerated not only as the Mother of God but also as a symbol of profound spiritual truths. Among these is her dual role as both the Mother and the Bride of God, a theme that resonates deeply within the rich tapestry of medieval Christian thought. This intriguing aspect of Marian symbolism, explored through the sermons of Bernard

of Clairvaux and the writings of various Church Fathers, offers a window into the mystical and allegorical dimensions of Christian theology.

In this exploration, we touch upon symbolic interplay between the allegorical interpretations of Canticles (Song of Songs) and Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. These texts, when viewed through the prism of Marian symbolism, reveal a complex and multifaceted portrayal of Mary that transcends her historical role. The imagery of Canticles, with its poetic portrayal of the love between a bride and bridegroom, serves as an allegorical backdrop for understanding the union between Christ and the Church. This is further illuminated by the teachings in Ephesians, where the Church is depicted as the immaculate Bride of Christ, sanctified, and cleansed by His love.

From the 4th to 12th Century

The theological insights of Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysologus, Bede, Ambrose of Milan, and Gregory of Nazianus enrich our understanding of Mary's purity, obedience, and maternal role. These insights not only highlight Mary's significance in the salvation narrative but also her symbolic representation of the Church's identity and mission.

Through this article, we aim to assess this Marian symbolism, examining how the Church Fathers and medieval theologians like Bernard of Clairvaux understood and articulated Mary's dual role. This exploration is not just an academic exercise; it invites us to reflect on the spiritual and mystical dimensions of the Christian faith, the role of the Church, and our own place within this sacred narrative.

> *We have advanced in this matter as far as we dared. For the rest it is your part, Blessed Father, to take care that in your days no spot of heretical*

depravity stains the fair beauty of the Church. To you, O friend of the bridegroom, has the bride of Christ been entrusted; it is you to present her, a chaste virgin, to one husband, even to Christ.[1]

In the realm of medieval theological discourse, the symbolic interplay between Mary, the Mother of God, and the Mother Church stands as a profound subject that has long intrigued and inspired scholars. The Church Fathers, with their deep insights into scripture and tradition, have provided a rich framework for understanding this connection, demonstrating that Mary and her womb are symbols and types of both the Mother Church and the Bride of Christ.

Augustine, in his treatise "De Sancta Virginitate" (On Holy Virginity), illuminates this connection, particularly focusing on the virgin birth of Christ as a signifier of the Church's spiritual birth.[2] This statement by Augustine underscores the necessity of Christ's birth from a virgin to symbolize the spiritual rebirth of believers in the virgin Church, further enriching the typological understanding of Mary and the Church. Augustine then draws a compelling direct parallel between the Church and the Virgin Mary. He captures the dual nature of the Church, likening it to Mary who is both virgin and mother.[3] This parallel not only highlights the Church's role in spiritual nurturance and guidance but also its perpetual purity and faithfulness, akin to Mary's own qualities.

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[1] Bernard letter to Pope Innocent. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. (1889). *Life and Works of Saint Bernard* (J. Mabillon, Ed.; S. J. Eales, Trans.; Second Edition, Vol. 2, p. 593). Burns & Oates Limited; Benziger Brothers.

[2] Augustine: "To a virgin, for Christ could only be born from virginity, seeing He could not have an equal in His birth. It was necessary for our Head by this mighty miracle to be born according to the flesh of a virgin, that He might signify that his [church] members were to be born in the spirit of a virgin Church."

[3] In his sermons, Augustine articulates, "As Mary gave birth to Him who is your head, so the Church gives birth to you. For the Church also is both mother and virgin: mother in the womb of our love, virgin in her inviolate faith. She is the mother of many nations who yet are one body and are thus likened to that one Virgin Mary, the mother of many but yet of the one."

Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysologus and Bede further Augustine's typological connection. Cyril's depiction of Mary as ever virgin and simultaneously the holy Church emphasizes her symbolic role in representing the Church's perpetual purity and its intimate union with Christ,[4] while Chrysologus views Mary's announcement of Christ's birth as reflective of the Church's mission to proclaim the good news.[5] This perspective places Mary as a figure through whom the Church's role as a messenger of the divine word is revealed. Bede, delving into pastoral imagery, likens the Church to Mary. His allegorical interpretation positions Mary as the embodiment of the Church's purity and beauty, a guiding symbol for the 'shepherds' of the Church.[6]

Even before these patristic sources, the synergy of Mary as the Church, and both Christ's mother and His bride, is echoed in both Ambrose of Milan and the popular Hymns of Saint Ephrem the Syrian.[7] Ephrem's words not only reaffirm the prophetic fulfillment found in Mary but also extend this mystery to her as the mother, sister and, in the voice of Mary, bridegroom.[8] Ambrose of Milan contributes to this rich tapestry of Marian symbolism. In his "Exposition of the Christian Faith," Ambrose reflects on the uniqueness of Jesus' birth from Mary's

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[4] In his "Commentary on the Gospel of John," Cyril asserts, "Mary ever virgin, who herself is clearly the holy Church, together with her Son, a most chaste spouse."

[5] Crysologus: "Mary brings the news, not now as a woman, but in the person of the Church, so that, as the above woman was silent, here as the Church she might bring tidings and speak."

[6] Bede: "Again, the shepherds of the Lord's flock by contemplating the life of the fathers who went before them, enter as it were the gates of Bethlehem, and find therein none other than the virgin beauty of the Church, that is, Mary."

[7] Ephrem, Hymns 8-11: "Blessed art thou, O Church, for of thee Isaiah speaks in his prophetic song of joy: 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.' O hidden mystery of the Church!" and "Bridegrooms shouted joyfully with their brides, "Blessed is the Babe whose mother was bride of the Holy One" and "For she is Your mother, she alone, and is Your sister with all. She was to You a mother; she was to You a sister. Moreover, she is Your betrothed with the chaste women. In everything, behold, You adorned her"

[8] Ephrem, Hymn 13: "Shall I call you Son? Shall I call You Brother? Shall I call You Bridegroom? Shall I call You Lord?"

womb, drawing a parallel with the Church.[9] Ambrose's insight here parallels that of Gregory of Nazianus, in that Mary's role in the Incarnation prefigures the Church's mission in spiritually birthing and sanctifying the faithful. In his "Orations," Gregory captures the mystical union of Christ with the Church, using the imagery of a marriage feast within the womb of Mary at Christ's conception.[10] Gregory's metaphor of the marriage feast and the bride-chamber eloquently symbolizes the intimate and sacred union between Christ and the Church, a mystical communion that Mary's womb foreshadows.

Bernard of Clairvaux

The writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, particularly his sermons on the mysteries of the Virgin Mary, are a fascinating study in the dual roles Mary plays in Christian theology: as both the Mother of God and the Bride of God. Bernard's sermons offer a profound insight into these roles, especially in the context of key events like the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Presentation in the Temple, and Pentecost.

Bernard's sermon on the mystery of the Annunciation is particularly striking.[11] He describes the incarnation of Jesus as a divine marriage, with Mary as the Bride of God. This imagery is powerful: "the marriage of heaven and earth," as Bernard

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[9] Ambrose: "For if we follow the letter, how can every male be holy, since it is undoubted that many have been most wicked? But He is holy whom in the figure of a future mystery the pious ordinances of the divine law prefigured, because He alone was to open the hidden womb of the holy virgin Church for the begetting of nations."

[10] Gregory: "God the Father made a marriage feast for God the Son, when He joined Him to human nature in the womb of the Virgin…. it is safe to say, that the marriage feast was made by the King the Father for the King the Son when He joined to Him the Holy Church in the mystery of His incarnation. The womb of the Virgin Mother was the bride-chamber of this Bridegroom."

[11] "But who shall intermeddle with her joy! joy that the hour was come for which all creation groaned; joy that now, for the glory and delight of God and man, the inseparable union of Godhead and manhood should be accomplished; and joy that the marvel, the marriage of heaven and earth, should begin in her". "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to Thy word," was Mary's answer; and the divine marriage between God and man were accomplished in her person. O love of God, preparing for Thyself a human heart, vouchsafe to hear our prayer…. Mary, the woman of all prophecy, the Bride of God, pray for us"

puts it, begins with Mary's humble acceptance, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to Thy word." Here, Mary's role as the Bride of God is not passive; it is an active consent that sets the stage for the Incarnation. This moment signifies the inseparable union of Godhead and manhood, a mystical marriage where Mary's human nature intertwines with divine action.

In his sermon on the mystery of the Visitation, Bernard highlights Mary's elation as the Bride of God.[12] This joy is not just personal; it's cosmic, affecting all of creation. Yet, it's coupled with profound humility. When Elizabeth calls her the "Mother of my Lord," we see the duality of Mary's roles. She is at once the Bride of God, rejoicing in her union with God, and the Mother of God, carrying God the Savior within her.

The Presentation in the Temple further illustrates this duality.[13] Bernard notes that Mary, "the immaculate Bride of the Father, and Mother of God the Son," consents to hide her blessedness. This act of humility, presenting Jesus in the Temple, underscores her role as the Mother of God, while her internal struggle reflects her status as the Bride of God. She grapples with the paradox of her immaculate nature and the typical rites of redemption, questioning whether her actions might dishonor her divine Son. This tension between her exalted status and her humble obedience is a recurring theme in Bernard's sermons, highlighting the multifaceted nature of Mary's roles.

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[12] "Mary arose in haste, and, as she went across the hills, the humble, happy bride of God, that hymn was "singing in her heart," which her lips poured forth when Elizabeth saluted her, "Mother of my Lord."

[13] "He "emptied Himself" for our salvation, and through Mary He became "obedient unto death." Though she was the immaculate Bride of the Father, and Mother of God the Son, she consented to hide her blessedness, and carried her divine Babe to the temple with the typical price of redemption ... "Might not the blessed Virgin have asked: "**Being the Bride and Mother of God**, shall I not dishonour Him by acting as if Joseph were His real father? Being a spotless Virgin, Mother only by the overshadowing power of the Highest, will it not be a false (and even perhaps blasphemous) humility to act as if unclean? Is not my Jesus the Sanctifier of the sanctuary? Am I not, by God's grace, purer than the new-fallen snow?"

Bernard's sermon on Pentecost draws a parallel between the Church's reception of the Holy Spirit and Mary's conception of Jesus.[14] He describes Mary as being "overshadowed by the power of the Most High" once more, this time with the infant Church. The imagery of Mary as the Bride of God is vivid here, as she, along with the Church, receives the Holy Spirit. This event mirrors the Annunciation, where Mary as the Bride conceives Jesus. At Pentecost, she is part of the Church, the collective Bride of Christ, receiving the Holy Spirit. This moment encapsulates the transition from Mary's individual role as the Mother and Bride of God to the Church's corporate identity as the Bride of Christ.

Bernard's sermons offered a rich tapestry of Marian theology to subsequent generations of scholastics. The dual imagery of Mary as both Mother and Bride of God is not just a poetic or mystical expression; it has profound theological implications. As the Mother of God, and crowned queen of heaven at her assumption, Mary is intimately connected with the Incarnation of Jesus within her womb, playing a crucial role in God's plan of salvation. As the spotless (immaculate), cleansed Bride of God, the Church, personified as the Virgin Mary, exemplifies the ideal erotic relationship between the divine and the human, a model of receptivity, obedience, and nuptial union with God, serving not only as the perfect parallel to the Bride of Christ found in Ephesians but also the perfect antitype to Solomon's bride found in Canticles.

Canticles, a remarkable poetic composition in the Bible traditionally attributed to King Solomon, serves as an opulent backdrop for the exquisite and sometimes erotic portrayal of love between a bride and a bridegroom.[15] Yet, beneath the

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[14] "Once more is Mary overshadowed by the power of the Highest. She, with the infant Church, waited for the promise of the Father; and, in fire, the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, came down.... O Mary, Bride of God, the fire of love was the very life of all your life."

[15] Canticles 4: *"Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are* ***doves*** *behind your veil..... You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no* ***spot*** *(macula) in you. Come with*

surface of these verses lies a profound wellspring of interpretations that transcend their romantic origins. Among these interpretations, allegorical representations of the profound union between Christ and the Church emerge as a prominent theme. Within the rich tapestry of Canticles' vivid imagery, theologians found inspiration when viewed through the prism of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 5:25–28 introduces a poignant metaphor, comparing a husband's love for his wife to Christ's boundless love for the Church. Christ's love for the Church is portrayed as a love so profound that He willingly gave Himself for her. This sacrificial love is depicted as the transformative agent by which Christ cleanses and sanctifies the Church. Using baptismal imagery, Paul claims that Christ purifies his bride "by the washing of water with the word," presenting her "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing," akin to the immaculate virgin bride described in Canticles. Ephesians underscores the themes of sanctification and purity within the Church, mirroring the profound symbolism found in Canticles.

Aquinas and the Dominicans

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*me from Lebanon, my **bride**; come with me from Lebanon, thou shall crowned from the top of Amana…How beautiful is your love, my **sister**, my **bride**…My sister, my spouse, **is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed**, a fountain sealed up."*

Canticles 5: *I sleep, and my heart watcheth: the voice of my beloved knocking: Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled (immaculata): for my head is full of dew, and my locks of the drops of the nights.*

Canticles 6: *"My **dove**, my **perfect** one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, **pure** to her who bore her. The young women saw her and called her **blessed**; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her, saying "Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the **moon**, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?"*

The Dominican tradition offers invaluable perspectives on the relationship between Ephesians and Canticles. Aquinas's interpretation places great emphasis on the symbolism of water and its role in the Church's sanctification. He views the sacrament of baptism as the pivotal means through which the Church is purified and unified. This correlation underscores the profound spiritual union between Christ and the Church, as Aquinas underscores that the Church's ultimate objective is to stand before Christ as a glorious, spotless (immaculate) bride. This aspiration resonates strongly with the concept presented in Ephesians 5:25-27.

In his analysis, Aquinas draws a parallel between the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ in the form of a dove during His baptism and the development of community within the Church. He interprets this manifestation of the Holy Spirit as emblematic of the unity Christ seeks to establish within His Church. The dove, symbolizing both love and community, serves as a fitting representation of the Church's nature, mirroring the attributes of the dove-like Bride of Canticles.

By the 13th century both the Bride of Canticles and the Virgin Mary were considered as types of the antitype Church, so it was quite acceptable to equate either Mary or the Bride of Canticles with the Church, or even Mary with the Bride of Canticles. In this regard, Aquinas skillfully weaves together the imagery of the dove at Christ's baptism with the concept of the loving and communal dove-like Bride found in Canticles,[16] specifically citing Canticles 6:8, a verse often used by future Scotists in defense of Mary's immaculate conception against the

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[16] Aquinas, Summa 3.39.6 "*the Holy Ghost appeared over our Lord at His baptism in the form of a dove, in order to designate the common effect of baptism---namely, the building up of the unity of the Church. Hence it is written (Eph. 5:25-27): "Christ delivered Himself up that He might present to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing cleansing it by the laver of water in the word of life." Therefore, it was fitting that the Holy Ghost should appear at the baptism under the form of a dove, which is a creature both loving and gregarious.* ***Wherefore also it is said of the Church (Canticles 6:8): "One is my dove****."*

Dominicans.[17] His purpose is to demonstrate that the bride depicted in Canticles serves as a symbolic representation of the Church, the Bride of Christ found in Ephesians, who attains her heavenly state of immaculacy through the sacrament of Baptism.

Later, in 1481, when writing his Thomist attack against the teaching of Mary's Immaculate Conception, Vincenzo Bandello, parroting Church Father Nicholas of Lyra, introduced the symbols of the moon and the sun found in Canticles 6:10.[18] According to Bandello, Mary is likened to the moon at her birth because she, only reflecting the Light of Christ, was sanctified in the womb before birth. However, at the Annunciation, when Mary conceived Jesus (the Light of the World) in her womb by the Holy Spirit, she is equated with the sun, because carrying the Light of the World in her womb has made her perfectly immaculate, not only washing away all her sin, but even washing away her ability to sin. This transformation signifies her transition from being sanctified to becoming immaculate, radiating with the divine light of Christ, the Sun of Righteousness. Therefore, using Canticles against his rivals, Bandello's interpretation beautifully weaves together Mary's journey from sanctification to immaculacy, offering a nuanced perspective within the broader Immaculate Conception debate.[19]

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[17] In 1476 Sixtus approved the first Office for the Feast of Mary's Immaculate Conception written by Leonard Nagorolis. The Office closes with a recitation of Canticles 6:8, except that Nogarolis changed the very last phrase of the verse from 'beatissimam predicaverunt' (called her happy) to 'immaculatam predicaverunt' (called her immaculate), which would have caused quite a stir among the Thomists. It reads: "*One is my dove, my perfect one, who alone is His chosen mother, the Holy souls saw her and called her immaculate.*"

[18] Canticles 6:10 "Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in array?"

[19] Bandello, Treatise: "*According to Nicholas of Lyra, this passage [Canticles 6] is to be interpreted 'spiritually' as referring to the Blessed Virgin, in that, being sanctified in the womb by the Light of Grace, she was born as beautiful as the moon, but still with the inclination to sin. However, in her conception of the Son, she was granted to become bright as the Sun, for all impurity and incentive to sin was destroyed by the fullness of Light which she carried.... The Blessed Virgin had the stain of original sin in her mother's womb but was cleansed and sanctified. In this way, she was 'beautiful as*

Bandello was a Medici partisan, so it's no wonder then that another Medici partisan Gentile Becci, the creator of the Flornetina Synodus, leveraged Aquinas' comparison between the bride of Canticles and the Church to sarcastically attack the prime supporter of Mary's Immaculate Conception, Pope Sixtus, for his ecclesiastical corruption and complicity in the murder of Giuliano Medici.[20]

It is evident that theologians from the 5th to 15th century perceived Mary not merely as a historical figure but as a profound symbol encapsulating the essence of her dual role as both mother and bride. Her purity, obedience, and maternal role resonate deeply with the Church's identity as both the mother of believers and the sanctified Bride of Christ. This dual symbolism, richly articulated by the Patristic sources, found scriptural resonance in the writings of Paul, particularly in Ephesians 5:25-27. Here, the heaven-bound Church is depicted as the immaculate Bride of Christ, sanctified, and cleansed by Christ's sacrificial love, paralleling the theology of Mary's sanctification in her mother's womb and subsequent complete immaculacy at the incarnation of Christ in her own womb. The baptismal imagery of washing and cleansing in Ephesians not only symbolizes the Church's purification in the rite of its members' baptism, but also its continual spiritual renewal and growth, a process mirrored in Mary's own sanctity and submission to God's will. The Church, as a symbol of Mary and the Bride of Christ, anticipates the ultimate consummation of its heavenly union with Christ, a theme that is vividly portrayed in the Book of Revelation where the

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the moon' in her birth. At the Conception of the Son she was liberated from the fomes. In this way she was 'bright as the Sun' at the Annunciation."

[20] Florentina Synodus: "*This minister of adulteries (Sixtus) made that woman (the Church) -- whom the **celestial bridegroom** (Christ) had called his own **unique beauty and immaculate dove** -- into a misshapen prostitute and a crow stained with filth: for he bought her in the temple and sold her to the impious, and from his earnings he fed pigs with nuggets of gold. Then this successor of Peter murdered his son, and as the devil's Vicar he assaulted whoever was most Christian."*

Church is depicted as the Bride adorned for her Bridegroom.[21] This eschatological vision not only provides a future hope but also shapes the present reality and mission of the Church.

Conclusion

The exploration of the Virgin Mary's dual role as both the Mother and Bride of God, as articulated in the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux and the writings of various Church Fathers, offers a profound insight into the heart of medieval Christian theology. The interplay between the allegorical interpretations of Canticles and the teachings of Ephesians provides a rich, multifaceted view of Mary that goes beyond her historical role, elevating her to a symbol of the Church itself.

The imagery in Canticles, with its poetic and sometimes erotic depiction of love, serves as a powerful allegory for the intimate and sacred union between Christ and the Church. This is beautifully complemented by the imagery in Ephesians, where the Church is portrayed as the immaculate Bride of Christ, sanctified and cleansed by His love. The theological insights offered by Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysologus, Bede, Ambrose of Milan, and Gregory of Nazianus, further enrich our understanding of this symbolism, each contributing unique perspectives on Mary's purity, obedience, and maternal role.

Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons, in particular, illuminate the mystical dimensions of Mary's roles in key events such as the Annunciation, Visitation, and Pentecost.

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[21] Revelation 19:-8, “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure” for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.”

His portrayal of the Incarnation as a divine marriage and Mary as the active participant in this mystery underscores her central role in the salvation narrative.

This exploration not only highlights Mary's significance in Christian theology but also profoundly impacts our understanding of the Church's historical identity and mission. The Church, mirroring Mary as the Bride of Christ, is called to a life of purity, obedience, and intimate union with Christ. The eschatological vision of the Church as the Bride adorned for her Bridegroom, as depicted in the Book of Revelation, provides a future hope and shapes the present reality and mission of the Church.

In essence, the dual symbolism of Mary as both mother and bride deepens our appreciation of the medieval Christian narrative, inviting believers to reflect on their own relationship with the divine and their role within the Church. It is a reminder of the Church's call to be a community that embodies the purity, love, and obedience exemplified by Mary, the Mother and Bride of God.