



De Maria Numquam Satis Vere: The Conciliar Genesis of Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski's Mariology in Context

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Abstract: The concept of practicing Mariology in context was developed in 20th-century Polish theology. Its author is Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski, an outstanding theologian and a recognized authority in the international community of Mariologists and ecumenists. The origins of his way of practicing Mariology should be sought in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Based on Napiórkowski's legacy, his concept rests on two fundamental principles—the Christological image of God and the image of the Church as communion—and on three methodological ways of practicing it: based on the Word of God and the signs of Christ, on dialogue and the unity of Christians, and on the experience of the Church and in the Church. Napiórkowski's methodological-theological model was built on the conciliar hermeneutic of development and has a distinct contextual dimension. However, it cannot be fully classified as classical contextual theology. Practicing Mariology in context by Napiórkowski significantly modified the popular motto *De Maria numquam satis vere*.

Keywords: Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski, Mariology in context, contextual theology, hermeneutics of development, Second Vatican Council

The laureate of the 10th edition of the Pro Ancilla Domini Award in 2007 was Stanisław Celestyn Napiórkowski, a Franciscan. The laudation was delivered by René Laurentin (died in 2017), an eminent theologian and participant and expert at the Second Vatican Council. The award was granted for his significant contribution to the development of Mariology, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, and particularly in Poland. The French theologian, regarded as one of the most outstanding Mariologists, noted that the laureate began his scholarly activity during the great Marian movement and at a time of cultural transition. He represents “an example of the search for a deeper knowledge of Mary, both critical and constructive, intelligent, yet in contact with life.” (Laurentin 2008, 162)

Laurentin referred to Napiórkowski's critique of the so-called maximalist Mariology, as well as to his constructive effort to build Mariology within a Christological and ecclesiological perspective. He highlighted that Napiórkowski based his theological reflection on the Word of God, in close connection with the life and experience of the Church. The laudator was familiar with the article “Ou en est la mariologie” [Where Is Mariology?] by Napiórkowski, published in 1967 in the prestigious journal *Concilium*. This paper was published in seven languages

(Napiórkowski 1967, 52–62). It marked the beginning of the Polish Mariologist's participation in the international debate on Mariology in light of the Council's teaching about the Mother of the Lord.

At the end of his academic and theological career, Napiórkowski once again addressed this question, formulating a methodological and theological guideline: "Mariology should be practiced in context." (Napiórkowski 2004a, 181–91) This postulate also led him to reinterpret the centuries-old motto, dating back to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, which he expanded: *De Maria numquam satis vere* ("Of Mary never enough, but correctly"), indicating the need for a new approach to Mariology within Christian devotion. It is worth adding that he clearly articulated these principles in an extensive interview concerning the conciliar inspiration of Mariology (Napiórkowski 1996b).

Based on this preliminary outline of Napiórkowski's theological work, and in light of the research hypothesis that the postulate of Mariology in context emerges from the theology of the Second Vatican Council, the main research problem can be formulated as follows: which hermeneutic of the Second Vatican Council influenced the formation of a new model of Mariology in Poland and in Central and Eastern Europe? How did Napiórkowski understand the reinterpretation and proper (*vere*) reorientation of the existing doctrine on the Mother of the Lord? In what way does Mariology in context reflect the theological method of the Council, based on dialogue with Scripture, Tradition, and the experience of the Church living in the modern world? And finally, in what sense can Napiórkowski's theological work be regarded as an example of the reception of the Council in the theology of Central and Eastern Europe, bringing an original contribution to the development of postconciliar Mariology?

This study aims to answer the above questions by analyzing Napiórkowski's theological reflection and by identifying the origins and significance of his postulate of practicing Mariology in context.

The source base comprises Napiórkowski's scholarly output, totaling over 1,600 publications, mainly on ecumenism, Mariology, and Franciscan heritage. Of particular importance are his doctoral dissertation on ecumenical Mariology from 1965 (Napiórkowski 1988, 2011) and his scholarly presentation of the conciliar drafting process of Chapter VIII of *Lumen gentium* (Napiórkowski 1992).

Dispersed articles, published in various journals and volumes, were later collected in two collections volumes under the common title *Matka* [Mother] (Napiórkowski 2011, 2019) or *Służebnica* [Servant] (Napiórkowski 2004b, 2009, 2015). These publications may be regarded as representative of Napiórkowski's Mariology.

His scholarly legacy also includes a three-volume edition of excerpts from academic works *Ku mariologii w kontekście* [Toward a Mariology in Context] (Napiórkowski 2008b) written under his supervision, and the academic series *Mariologia w Kontekście* [Mariology in Context] (Pek 2021, 2025; Siwak 2022/2023;

Saniewski 2008; Klauza 2008). This legacy, along with the works of Central and Eastern European authors inspired by his thought, deserves further research.

This study applies a theological research methodology based on reconstructing the theological thought of Napiórkowski in light of his methodological-theological postulate expressed in the motto “Mariology in context.” It also analyzes and evaluates his hermeneutical concept from the perspective of the Second Vatican Council.

It is also necessary to clarify the linguistic meaning and use of the expression Mariology in context. It is not a conciliar term. Napiórkowski did not indicate any theologian who directly inspired him to formulate it. Initially, in his discourse, a postulate of multiple forms of “being in” functioned as a conciliar *novum* integrating Mariology with the whole of theology and with the lived experience of the Church (Napiórkowski 2004b, 335). Over time, he transformed this into Mariology in context. Napiórkowski did not develop his concept of “context” either semantically or philologically. He adopted it in the sense of a “relation,” that is, as the linking of Mariological reflection to the whole mystery of faith and to the life of the Church (Napiórkowski 2000, 5). Nevertheless, this did not prevent this concept from functioning as a carrier of significant methodological-theological content.

Napiórkowski drew attention to this term in 1980, when Angelo Amato (Amato 1980) used the title *Mariologia in contesto* [Mariology in Context]. In later writings, Amato (1994, 1995) distanced himself from the Protestant term “contextual theology” and, as a proponent of inculturation, emphasized it instead. Napiórkowski interpreted this rather as a confirmation of his own direction of practicing Mariology. He did not attach greater importance to the term “contextual,” which, for him, meant the same as “in context.” He also did not refer to contextual theology as known in Asia and Latin America. Amato proposed several models of Mariology in context: traditional, practical, anthropological, and synthetic, based on Stephen B. Bevans’s contextual theology (Bevans 1992, 2002).

The European Mariological milieu, aware of the need to take into account the context of contemporary culture in the study of Mary, likewise did not use the term “contextual Mariology,” preferring “Mariology in context” (Peretto 1996).

Napiórkowski’s methodological and theological concept corresponds to the model adopted by his student, Marek Gilski, in his research under Napiórkowski’s supervision on Augustine’s theology: “By ‘context’ we understand here the material theological environment in which reflection on Mary develops, that is, the substantive connection of the teaching about the Mother of the Lord with other truths of the Christian faith.” (Gilski 2006, 19) Gilski’s dissertation represents an exceptional methodological-theological achievement, offering a comprehensive, coherent, and highly original interpretation of St. Augustine’s Mariology (Napiórkowski 2006). The thought of one of Christianity’s greatest theological authorities is presented as the fruit of consistently articulated “thinking in context,” in which the mutual interconnectedness of the truths of faith (*nexus mysteriorum*) emerges as indispensable.

On this basis, the postulate of practicing Mariology in context naturally opens itself to a diversity of theological references. In this way, Napiórkowski gained a compelling patristic argument demonstrating that the conciliar presentation of Mary in the mystery of Christ and the Church is not only theologically justified but also methodologically warranted and deserving of continued theological development.

It is difficult to classify Napiórkowski's concept unambiguously within any of these models. Rather, one should propose another model that systematizes his Mariology in context. The Italian theologian was also a co-author of the letter of the *Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis*, published in 2000. After reading it, Napiórkowski stated that the document contained nothing new, since he had long been practicing Mariology in context, which refers to theological methodology in Mariology rather than to a Mariological method (Napiórkowski 2009, 62). He shaped his position on the basis of his own hermeneutic of the Council, which incorporated the doctrine of the Mother of the Lord into the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

The analyses conducted thus far on Napiórkowski's use of Mariology in context make it possible to present his concept as principles and ways of practicing Mariology in context. This study applies the formal methodological model that the Polish theologian himself used in interpreting Church documents, including Paul VI's exhortation *Marialis cultus*.

1. Principles of Mariology in Context

Based on Napiórkowski's theological legacy, two fundamental principles for practicing Mariology in context can be identified: the Christological image of God and the image of the Church as communion. To present them properly, it is necessary to refer to several key ideas of the author.

Analyzing the origins of the doctrine of Mary, Napiórkowski observes that the Second Vatican Council faced a fundamental dilemma: should Mariology be treated as a separate discipline or integrated into the broader context of theological reflection? The prevailing concept was to present her person and mission within the perspective of the mystery of Christ and the Church (Napiórkowski 2019, 201). The title of the Mariological chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church thus reads "The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church," and not—as the Polish theologian repeatedly emphasized—"Christ and the Church in the Mystery of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God." (Napiórkowski 2019, 421) In the postconciliar period, Napiórkowski pointed to Roschini as a representative of a type of Mariology based mainly on the teaching of the recent popes, isolated from the wider theological context and striving for autonomy. He pointed out that the preliminary conciliar draft contained only a few references to the Fathers of the Church,

whereas the final text included more than 30 (Pek 2020, 151). This kind of Mariology emphasized, among other things, the proposal for a dogmatic definition of Mary's universal mediation and co-redemption, formulated from a radically Christotypical perspective. The Second Vatican Council rejected such a way of practicing Mariology (Napiórkowski 2004b, 9; 2019, 17). Such a position has also been reaffirmed in recent magisterial teaching of the Church, indicating continuity (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2025).

Napiórkowski argued that isolationism and the pursuit of autonomy caused Mariology to lose prestige in the eyes of theologians of other disciplines. The Council initiated a process of its theological rehabilitation (Napiórkowski 2019, 12), opening it to the fullness of theological sources that had long remained neglected. In this sense, one can say that the Second Vatican Council restored Mariology to its Catholic dimension—rooted simultaneously in Scripture, the tradition of the Fathers, the decisions of the councils, and the teaching of the popes. Theology, as Napiórkowski emphasized, is not truly Catholic if it limits itself to a single current—biblical, patristic, Augustinian, Thomistic, Ephesian, Tridentine, or papal. It becomes Catholic only when all these dimensions are united into an integral whole. In this sense, one can say that the Second Vatican Council gave the Church a more Catholic Mariology—rooted in Scripture, the tradition of the Fathers, conciliar decisions, and papal teaching (Napiórkowski 2019, 94). In light of this conciliar perspective, Napiórkowski postulated that Mariological reflection and the shaping of Marian devotion—both in Poland and in the wider European context—should be carried out in the spirit of contextuality. In his view, Mariology and Marian devotion, if detached from Christology, soteriology, pneumatology, charitology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, become distorted and lose their theological balance. Openness to the aforementioned theological disciplines is therefore a condition of their correctness and maturity. In this sense, as he argued, Mariology should be practiced “in context,” that is, in close relation to the entire mystery of faith as professed and lived.

Likewise, devotion to Mary should be experienced within the framework of the one Christian worship: to the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. There is no separate, autonomous “Marian cult,” since it is inscribed within the Trinitarian structure of faith—Napiórkowski concluded in 1998 during one of the scientific symposia (Napiórkowski 2004b, 37, 62).

He maintained that a proper Mariology can be developed only in close relation to the theology of God and of man: in reference to the mystery of the Word made flesh, who died on the cross and rose again for our salvation; to the Holy Spirit, through whom the Incarnation took place, who filled Mary, anointed Jesus, and descended in the Upper Room. It should also be considered in the context of the Church, in which the glorified Lord lives—in the light of the Word of God and of the sacraments that are the paths of salvation—as well as in the perspective of the ultimate realities, of what awaits humanity after death (Napiórkowski 2009, 222). Napiórkowski

presented this theological thought at the conference “Kościół w życiu publicznym. Teologia polska i europejska wobec nowych wyzwań” [The Church in Public Life: Polish and European Theology in the Face of New Challenges] (Catholic University of Lublin, 2004). Since that time, these words have become an answer to the question of how to practice Mariology in context.

1.1. The Principle of the Christological Image of God

While discovering the conciliar message that the Mother of the Lord should be understood within the mystery of Christ, Napiórkowski realized that this was by no means an easy task. He examined the Protestant maxim *Solus Christus* (“Christ alone”) and reached the conclusion: *Solus Christus, numquam solus* (“Christ alone, yet not Christ in isolation”). He recognized that the concept of “Christocentrism”—the focus of faith and theology on Christ—is not univocal, not only in Protestantism but also in Catholicism, and therefore requires clarification. Christ is the beginning and the end of all things; through him all was created, and in him all finds its center. Christ constitutes the axis around which all theological reflection and understanding of revelation are organized.

In this approach, Napiórkowski distinguishes between direct Christocentrism, in which the believer adores Christ himself, and indirect Christocentrism, in which one acknowledges his central role while also turning in prayer to the saints or to Mary. He also highlights the affective approach to Christ (Napiórkowski 2019, 124). In the course of this reflection, Napiórkowski arrived at a clear articulation of the problem of the image of God. The Council, by presenting the Mother of the Lord in *Lumen gentium*, outlined at the outset the mystery of the Triune God as a communion of love.

Only a few years after the Council, Napiórkowski observed that how a person conceives and perceives God is of fundamental significance for every religion; in Christianity, this fullness is revealed in Jesus Christ. In him, God reveals himself as Love without limits—merciful and seeking every human person. Jesus not only proclaims God as Love but is himself the incarnate presence of that Love—Emmanuel, God with us and for us. As long as time endures, he remains the Savior, the source of forgiveness, the Friend, and the Way leading to the Father (Napiórkowski 2019, 129, 139). Napiórkowski concluded his academic exposition with a practical presentation that shaped the Church’s experience of faith. He noted that almost the entire text of *The Angelus* is derived from Scripture. In praying it, we venerate the mystery of the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery, recalling the salvific plan of the Father, the obedience of the Son which brought redemption, and the action of the Holy Spirit placed at the service of human salvation (Napiórkowski 2019, 26).

Similarly, he broadened the interpretation of another biblical text deeply rooted in Central European devotion. He observed that, according to John, the scene

at Cana (John 2:1–12) portrays Mary as a believer in Jesus—at least as a miracle worker—yet not fully understanding him. Jesus distances himself from her, indicating the primacy of the Father’s will (Napiórkowski 2019, 55). In his theological reflection on the image of God, also in the context of Mariology and Marian devotion, Napiórkowski observed that contemporary theology increasingly sees not only Father but also Mother in God. Divine parenthood encompasses the totality of life and requires no completion in any creature. God himself is the full source of supernatural life, and his maternal tenderness complements his paternal power. In this light, the Polish theologian pointed out that a simple comparison of God the Father with Mary as a spiritual Mother may lead to an oversimplification of the mystery of the divine essence. The mystery of God transcends human categories and combines both the paternal and the maternal (Napiórkowski 2004b, 130). From his reflection on the thesis that Christian devotion depends on the image of God, Napiórkowski drew the conclusion that one should not idealize popular piety nor treat it uncritically as a theological source. When reviewing the forms of Marian devotion, one must remember that they derive from divine revelation. It is to be emphasized that veneration of Mary flows from her unique dignity as the Mother of the Son of God, the beloved Daughter of the Father, and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. Napiórkowski concluded that her participation in the work of redemption is also recognized. Mary holds a special place among the People of God and in the glory of heaven. All expressions of Marian devotion should therefore be shaped in accordance with these truths and lead to a deeper union with Christ (Napiórkowski 2019, 28). Given this conciliar premise—emphasizing the mystery of Christ, which illuminates the mystery of the person of the Mother of the Lord—Napiórkowski is critical of the message of certain prayers. He observed that the most striking example is the antiphon *Salve Regina*, which presents Mary as the Mother of Mercy and the embodiment of divine mercy essential for salvation, whereas the true embodiment of the Father’s mercy is Jesus Christ (Napiórkowski 2019, 62).

Interpreting the image of Christ, Napiórkowski saw Mary as “the Masterpiece of the mission of the Son and the Spirit in the fullness of time.” (Napiórkowski 2019, 721) She became the space of the Son’s and the Spirit’s special indwelling among humanity.

Commenting on the Church’s teaching expressed in the *Catechism*, he discerned its conciliar origin. Napiórkowski stated that the sanctification of Mary was not intended primarily for her own sake, but for the work of Jesus. In her, the Spirit of God fulfills the Father’s plan, reveals the Son, inaugurates the communion of Christ with humankind, and universalizes Mary’s motherhood (Napiórkowski 2019, 670). According to Napiórkowski, the Council, in describing the relationship of the Holy Trinity and Mary, presents her as the most beloved Daughter of the Father and the holy dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. In this way, it emphasizes that Mary’s holiness has a deeply relational and personalistic character, rooted in the mystery of divine

filiation. Mary appears not only as the Mother of the Son of God but also as a person living in full communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which reveals the Trinitarian totality of her holiness. Such a perspective presents grace as the relationship between God and man (Napiórkowski 2004b, 32). Following Napiórkowski's thought, one should add that the conciliar description of the relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit is particularly prominent—mentioned no fewer than ten times—and therefore cannot be limited solely to “the mystery of Christ.” Reading the conciliar text together with Napiórkowski's commentary, one should note that Mary ought to be understood primarily within the mystery of the Spirit, as his temple rather than merely his spouse. Too narrow a conception of Mariology referring only to Christ could impoverish its pneumatological dimension and deprive the Word of God of its nuptial meaning. Only by recognizing Mary as the prototype of the Church-Bride can one preserve the fullness of the relationship among the Word, the Spirit, and the Church.

The Council, following the interpretation of Gérard Philips, a Belgian theologian (reiterated by Napiórkowski), does not include the activity of the Holy Spirit within the category of mediation understood as participation in Christ's mediation. According to this concept, the Holy Spirit does not mediate in an analogous way to Christ, because his action does not depend on the human nature of the Incarnate Word. It is Christ, as Mediator between God and humanity, who bestows the Holy Spirit upon the world, not the other way around. Mediation thus takes place “through the body” of Christ, while the Holy Spirit is not dependent on that body; rather, he shapes it, making it the instrument of sanctification in the Eucharist and in the life of the Church (Napiórkowski 2004b, 34). The Council leaves open the possibility of reinterpreting the notion of mediation. Napiórkowski noted that, although the formal definition of the Holy Spirit's activity as mediation is absent, one can discern a mediating dimension in the very nature of his presence and action. He thus indicated the possibility of developing the theme of “Mary as Mediatrix in the Holy Spirit.” (Napiórkowski 2004b, 34)

Reading Mary in the mystery of Christ, following the Council, Napiórkowski showed that this simultaneously reveals the mystery of the Christian God—living and active in the Church.

The consequence of such thinking is a different perception of human action: as more receptive (*receptio*) than cooperative (*cooperatio*) toward the action of God. God appears as the creator of relationships. The Polish theologian enthusiastically embraced John Paul II's postulate that the motto *Per Mariam ad Iesum* (“through Mary to Jesus”) should be complemented by *Per Iesum ad Mariam* (“through Jesus to Mary”), accepting the latter as fundamental (Napiórkowski 2004b, 155, 159, 287; 2009).

1.2. The Principle of the Communion Image of the Church

Interpreting the conciliar presentation of the Mother of Christ within the mystery of the Church, Napiórkowski also asked himself the question: “in what kind of Church?” He did not limit himself merely to reading Mariological texts but examined the entire conciliar debate, interpreting it from the perspective of one increasingly engaged in ecumenical dialogue. As a theologian, he participated in mixed commissions at the international level.

He first analyzed the intra-ecclesial discussions among Catholics regarding the Church. He observed that the Second Vatican Council did not unequivocally side with either of the two dominant tendencies in ecclesiology. Although the Council clearly distinguished the reality of Christ from the reality of the Church, it did not take a definitive stance on the issue. The Council Fathers did not fully clarify the extent to which the Church can be regarded as the agent of salvific action.

In the background of this question lies the classical tension between understanding the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ and the continuation of the Incarnation (in which the Church appears as an active instrument of salvation) and viewing the Church as the sign and sacrament of salvation—a passive instrument that participates in the work of Christ without replacing Him. It is precisely this tension, according to the Polish theologian, that constitutes the specificity of typically conciliar ecclesiology (Napiórkowski 2019, 215).

To this reflection, he added an analysis of the image of the Church from an ecumenical perspective, particularly with reference to Mariological issues. He drew attention to the question of *communio sanctorum*. In his view, this truth should be understood broadly: between those who have already attained the fullness of salvation with the Lord and those still journeying on earth, there exists a real and living bond. The former, the Polish theologian noted, intercede for the latter, while those still on pilgrimage enjoy the full right and freedom to turn to the saints with requests for their intercession.

Napiórkowski’s research on this topic drew the attention of leading Italian Mariologists, who in 1985 invited him to write a theological entry for the *Nuovo dizionario di mariologia* (Napiórkowski 1985; Pek 2014). According to Napiórkowski, the level of ecumenical discussion should take into account the fact that ecclesiological issues are also conditioned by anthropology. Evangelical Christianity, he observed, proceeding from an anthropology fundamentally pessimistic about human capability and moral condition, maintains a significantly greater distance from this form of mutual relationship between the pilgrim and the triumphant Church (Napiórkowski 2019, 47).

As a Catholic theologian, Napiórkowski was convinced that Mary’s transition to the glory of her Son in no way weakened her bond with believers in the mystery of *communio sanctorum*. On the contrary, it strengthened her spiritual closeness

and involvement toward those for whom Christ, her firstborn Son, gave his life. In his interpretation, the Council's teaching on Mary's place in the mystery of the Church revealed her maternal role in the order of grace. Napiórkowski pointed out that the ecumenical debate on the Church—and within it, also on Mary—emphasized the uniqueness and perfection of Christ's mediation, while also pointing to the mediating and intercessory function of the Holy Spirit, who acts as Advocate, the Paraclete.

All who are justified by grace form the community of saints (*communio sanctorum*), which embraces both the living and the dead. Within this community, Mary holds a unique place as the one who fully participates in the Economy of Salvation (Napiórkowski 2019, 549).

The Polish theologian's reflection also included liturgical sources. He considered the liturgy as the revelation of the depth of communion existing within the Church, encompassing the angels, the saints, and the community of the faithful still journeying on earth. Within this reality of *communio sanctorum*, Mary occupies a special place as the Mother of God and the Mother of all people. As the Mother of Christ, true God, she radiates mercy and power; as our Mother, she radiates graciousness and tender care (Napiórkowski 2019, 386).

According to Napiórkowski, the prayer of the Church's liturgy is directed primarily to God the Father, and, more rarely, to the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, or Christ; it is never addressed to any other person. At times, however, the Church in prayer also turns to Mary and the saints, incorporating them into the dialogue with God and Christ (Napiórkowski 2019, 97).

Napiórkowski concluded that the life of a Christian consists in unity with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that is, in relationship with the Father through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Its source lies in Christ, who is the center of faith and proclamation. It is precisely in him that a person encounters Mary, the Church, and the world, and experiences communion with the Father in the action of the Holy Spirit (Napiórkowski 2019, 382).

According to the theologian, the human person should not seek enlightenment and salvation in isolation, but within the community of believers. There are two principal paths leading to salvation: the Word of God and the Eucharist. It is the Word of God, proclaimed within the community, that brings light and salvation to humanity (Napiórkowski 2019, 268). The Polish theologian also drew attention to the teaching of St. Ambrose of Milan, present in conciliar ecclesiology, according to which the Mother of the Lord is the model and prototype of the Church (Napiórkowski 2019, 447). Napiórkowski linked this aspect of Ambrose's teaching with the idea of the Church as Mother and Bride.

Above all, however, he focused his reflection on the theological image of the Church as communion. What seemed at first glance a simple observation—the recognition in the biblical narrative of Mary's various relationships, first with

the personal God and later with the disciples of Jesus—led Napiórkowski to emphasize that popular devotion should also be shaped by the truth of Mary’s bond with Joseph. Thus, Mary should be seen not only as Mother but also as Sister (Napiórkowski 2004b, 12, 349, 351).

2. Ways of Practicing Mariology in Context

Inspired by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the Mother of the Lord in the mystery of Christ and the Church, Napiórkowski made this principle the central methodological foundation of Mariology in context. His reflection, grounded in the analysis of conciliar sources and the hierarchy of truths of faith, arose from theological reflection on the experience of popular religiosity (especially Marian devotion) and on ecumenical dialogue. At the heart of this concept, he placed the authority of the Word of God, the life of the Church, and the pursuit of Christian unity as the fundamental criteria for shaping Mariology in context.

2.1. The Way of the Word of God (And the Signs of Christ)

In his early theological work, Napiórkowski encountered two fundamental positions regarding the sources of revelation. On one hand, there was the tradition which, after the promulgation of the encyclical *Humani generis* (1950), had been identified primarily with the Church’s magisterium—something that, in practice, led to the marginalization of Scripture and the writings of the Fathers of the Church (Napiórkowski 2019, 92). On the other hand, there stood the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* (1988).

The conciliar teaching about God as the sole source of revelation enabled the Polish theologian to reconstruct theological *topoi* and to reject the exclusive model based solely on Scripture. This became the starting point for emphasizing the theology of the Word of God as the central dimension of theological reflection (Napiórkowski 1975). Napiórkowski found inspiration for this concept primarily in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, especially in its presentation of the Mother of the Lord in the perspective of salvation history, as well as in the liturgy. In the Word of God, he perceived the primary source for deepening Mariology and as a light for the contemporary world (Napiórkowski 2019, 268). He firmly emphasized that Catholic theology is not based on the principle of *sola Scriptura*, and that Tradition is not its alternative but rather the integral bearer of the same Word of God (Napiórkowski 2019, 93). Against this background, the theologian developed the distinction between “Tradition” (capitalized) and “tradition,” understood as different yet complementary forms of transmitting revelation. Napiórkowski’s reflection

also encompassed the ecumenical dimension, especially regarding the Orthodox understanding of tradition. He observed that Eastern theology likewise faces the need to verify the function of tradition in the theological process. At the same time, he emphasized those perspectives that authentically reveal and transmit the living Word of God (Napiórkowski 2019, 46).

Reading the Word of God in the light of the Council's interpretation, especially the constitution *Lumen gentium*, led Napiórkowski to a deeper understanding of its inner connection with the Holy Spirit. The theologian called the Spirit the "Artist" and the Word of God, his "chisel," through which God continually shapes the face of the Church and of the human being (Napiórkowski 2019, 108). It is precisely in the dynamic interplay of Word and Spirit that the living reality of revelation is manifested, in which Mary holds a special place.

From the biblical and theological perspective, the Word of God presents Mary at the center of salvation history, alongside the Incarnate Word—Christ, the Redeemer and Savior. Through her motherhood, she participated in the work of salvation in a unique and unrepeatable way (Napiórkowski 2019, 189). This participation, rooted in her relationship to Christ, is an essential element of Christian reflection on humanity's cooperation in God's salvific plan.

The Word of God is not exhausted in the words of Christ alone. Napiórkowski observed that the decades following the Second Vatican Council saw a noticeable decline in the general criticism of Catholic teaching and Marian devotion. In his view, the radical Protestant stance was often less an authentic proclamation of the Word of God than an opposition to Catholicism itself (Napiórkowski 2019, 66). Emphasizing the role of the Word of God in shaping Mariology in context gave particular significance to the concept of *sacra Scriptura*—not in the sense of *solus*, but primarily in relation to the living presence of God in the Church and in the world. The Bible, for Napiórkowski, did not serve speculation but theological systematization, as it normatively reveals the truth about God and about the human being to whom God speaks.

The presentation of the role of the Word of God in shaping Mariology in context should also be linked with the signs of Christ, that is, with the liturgy. Napiórkowski insisted that it should always be oriented "through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ" (*per Christum et cum Christo et in Christo*). He asked whether Polish Marian devotion fully respects this principle, which includes trust and love toward God as well as the sacramental dimension of the Word of God (Napiórkowski 2019, 421).

It is worth noting that in this thematic area, Napiórkowski drew only indirect inspiration from conciliar teaching. His primary point of reference was Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Marialis cultus*, in which—particularly in its commentary—he most fully articulated his understanding of the liturgy as a way of shaping both Marian devotion and Mariology in context.

2.2. The Way of Dialogue and Christian Unity

While familiarizing himself with the newly published conciliar documents, Napiórkowski read them alongside the works of Protestant theologians. The fruit of these studies was his doctoral dissertation, *Mariologia a ekumenizm. Poglądy mariologiczne współczesnych europejskich teologów protestanckich rozpatrywane w aspekcie ekumenicznym* [Mariology and Ecumenism: Mariological Views of Contemporary European Protestant Theologians from an Ecumenical Perspective], which he defended shortly after the promulgation of *Lumen gentium* (Napiórkowski 2008a, 2011; Pek 2011).

Given the then-prevailing tension between Protestantism and Catholic teaching on the Mother of the Lord, the Polish theologian clearly identified this issue as contentious. He also revealed the main sources of misunderstanding: the “image of God” (which differs not only between Protestants and Catholics but also within Protestant traditions themselves) and the “image of the human being” (particularly the Protestant pessimistic anthropology, distinct from the Catholic approach).

The next stage of Napiórkowski’s theological work was his participation in the international Lutheran–Catholic commission and his co-authorship of ecumenical declarations at Mariological congresses. The Second Vatican Council, together with his involvement in doctrinal sessions, highlighted in his thought the category of dialogue. The theology he developed in the ecumenical context provided a rationale for theological pluralism and a certain degree of “pluriformity in” Marian devotion.

Practicing Mariology from the perspective of ecumenical dialogue culminated in the publication—unique in the world—of a collection of texts dedicated to the Mother of the Lord in Evangelical Christianity (Napiórkowski 2019, 51, 85, 207, 233).

Napiórkowski’s research on the drafting of conciliar teaching on the Mother of the Lord cannot be overestimated. He discerned in it the image of Christ the Mediator and the idea of mediation “in Christo,” formulated by the Lutheran pastor Hans Asmussen (Napiórkowski 2019, 86) and probably introduced at the Council by Karl Rahner (Napiórkowski 2019, 112). In the conciliar reflection, the Polish theologian also recognized the specificity of the Catholic methodological approach, which consists in a broad interpretation of the Word of God and, consequently, in a broader understanding of justification and grace.

This approach, inspired by the spirit of dialogue, opened the possibility of encouraging Protestant theologians to reconsider the exclusive application of the principles *sola gratia* and *sola Scriptura* (Napiórkowski 2019, 51). According to Napiórkowski, agreement on theological pluralism among the Churches should entail maintaining different theological models. In his view, theological dialogue aimed at complete identification deprives each side of something profoundly valuable. Paradoxically, in Napiórkowski’s conviction, it is precisely respect for one’s own tradition

and its deeper interpretation in the light of the Word of God that bears fruit in “unity within diversity.”

Within this theological and ecumenical framework, the Polish theologian proposed to both sides the practice of “Mariology in the ecumenical context.” (Napiórkowski 2019, 545) One need not be an expert in conciliar teaching to recognize in this an echo of *Lumen gentium*, which expressed the truth about the possibility of deepening theological knowledge of revelation.

2.3. The Way of Experience as a Locus Theologicus in and Within the Church

Napiórkowski placed particular emphasis on the need to include “experience” as a *locus theologicus* after the publication of John Paul II’s 1987 encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*. In it, the pope pointed to the “historical experience of persons and Christian communities” (*experientia historica variarum communitatum christianarum*) in the teaching on the Mother of the Redeemer. Long before he became pope, as early as 1970, he had studied the significance of experience in ethics and theology. For the future Bishop of Rome, experience was a form of human cognition—both intellectual and sensory—embracing the whole human person (Napiórkowski 2019, 629).

The Polish theologian had already reflected on the “signs of the times,” inspired by conciliar teaching. He sought a “hermeneutics of the signs of the times” by analyzing the reflections of specific figures, such as Bishop Hélder Câmara (Napiórkowski 2009, 204–7) and his thought on liberation in Brazil, Fr. Franciszek Blachnicki (Napiórkowski 2009, 206, 208, 211) and his concept of forming a “new man” in a Church constrained by communism in Poland, or the witnesses of faith in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century. Napiórkowski observed the principle “see—judge—act” within the hermeneutics of the signs of the times, formulated by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1882–1967). However, this was a method of practicing mercy inspired by Catholic social teaching, lacking a methodology of merciful “seeing” of the surrounding world, especially of the poor.

Another sign of the times for Napiórkowski was popular religiosity, and particularly Marian religiosity in Poland. He saw in it a bearer of the Gospel, conditioned by historical, social, and even political contexts. At the same time, he recognized within it numerous forms and contents that were far removed from Christianity. Nevertheless, he did not consider it a point of departure for theological reflection; rather, he saw the need to illuminate it with the light of the Gospel. Despite his critical view of Marian devotion, he was convinced of its value and its potential for renewal. His positive attitude was strengthened by his reading of the documents of the “Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano” conferences (Medellín 1968, Puebla 1979, Santo Domingo 1992, etc.), which emphasized popular religiosity and presented Marian devotion as positively conditioned by the cultural context. It was probably at that time that

he encountered contextual theology; however, this model of doing theology did not convince him. He remained faithful to his own method, which he called Mariology in context.

When Napiórkowski encountered John Paul II's statement about the experience of persons and communities (*Redemptoris Mater* no. 48)—he noted the omission of “persons” in the Latin text of *Redemptoris Mater* (AAS 79 [1987], 427) (Napiórkowski 2019, 404)—having already reflected on the signs of the times and popular religiosity, he was even more motivated to respond to the question of how Marian devotion—often based on doubtful doctrinal and theological foundations, yet drawing from the richness of historical and contemporary experiences—bears witness to the preservation of Christian identity (Napiórkowski and Kowalik 1999, 269–70). Without hesitation, he defined experience (more “in the Church” than “of the Church”) (Napiórkowski 2019, 253) as a non-objectified *locus theologicus* and included it in the theological *topoi* of his manual *Jak uprawiać teologię* [How to Practice Theology] (Napiórkowski 1996a, 38, 47–48).

In light of the statement in *Lumen gentium* no. 67 that true devotion “derives from true faith” (*a vera fide procedere*), the Polish theologian interpreted the Marian intuition of the Council—read through *Redemptoris Mater* no. 48—as a reference to the *sensus fidei* of the faithful, as well as an indication of the experience of faith which the Church recognizes in the practice of certain forms of Marian devotion. In experience, according to Napiórkowski, one can also discern new forms and paths of Christian piety (Napiórkowski 2019, 399).

Convinced of the need to practice Mariology in context, Napiórkowski did not cease to explore the role of experience within theology. He initiated a broad consultation with Edward Schillebeeckx, one of Europe's most renowned scholars of the theological significance of experience. This work was developed creatively by Antoni Nadbrzeźny, who provided sufficient arguments to demonstrate that the Mariology (inspired by experience) of the Flemish theologian is “in context” (Napiórkowski 2005). Meanwhile, proponents of contextual theology would probably have called it “contextual Mariology,” since a few years later, during a major academic session, they interpreted Schillebeeckx's theological thought as “contextual interpretations of fundamental experiences of salvation.” (Schillebeeckx 2010, xiii) This matter remains debatable, as the doyen of Flemish theology himself, who was present at that session, did not confirm such an interpretation.

For Napiórkowski (Napiórkowski and Kowalik 1999; 2009, 203–13), experience constitutes an essential dimension of practicing Mariology in context, because it enables the discernment of the signs of the times and of Marian devotion in its historical, cultural, and ecclesial conditions. Experience is not merely a source of empirical data (he followed the insights of the sociology of religion with interest), but a theological place of encounter between the mystery of the Word of God and the concrete experience of believers. In this way, Mariology in context becomes a hermeneutical

space in which experience serves not only to interpret but also to verify Marian devotion in the light of the Gospel and Tradition.

Napiórkowski emphasized the significance of experience as a *locus theologicus* after the promulgation of the 1987 encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, which he read in the light of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The pope appeared to him as an interpreter of the Council. Earlier, the functional equivalent of experience for Napiórkowski had been the “signs of the times.” Although he did not formulate his own definition of experience, he regarded it as indispensable for the practice of Mariology in context, in accordance with the intention of the Council.

It is worth adding that Napiórkowski’s openness to the signs of the times and to broadly understood experience proved fruitful for the academic world in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe, where he organized theological forums and supervised numerous dissertations.

Conclusion

The study conducted above allows for the positive verification of the hypothesis concerning the conciliar origin of Napiórkowski’s postulate of practicing Mariology in context. The early works of this eminent Polish theologian already contained contextual intuitions that the Second Vatican Council would later make into a binding rule of theological reflection. Therefore, it may be said that without the Council, his Mariology in context would likely not have assumed its particular shape or significance. After an analysis of Napiórkowski’s writings, can one say what “context” means? One possible answer may be formulated as follows: “context” denotes an ecclesial space in which the mystery of God revealed in Christ is lived and theologically articulated in reference to the totality of the truths of faith (*nexus mysteriorum*), the life of the Church as *communio*, the historical and cultural situation of believers, and their experience of faith. In this perspective, Mariology in context appears as a way of doing theology that integrates reflection on the Mother of the Lord with the entirety of the mystery of faith and with the concrete life of the Church.

Napiórkowski’s originality lies not simply in relating Mariology to Christ and the Church, but in transforming this relationship into a lasting methodological principle. The postulate of Mariology in context emerged as a response to an autonomous model of Mariology separated from the broader theological reflection.

A study of Napiórkowski’s writings makes it possible to formulate three responses to the questions posed in the introduction:

- 1) **The Hermeneutics of Development and Mariology in Context.** For over 50 years, Napiórkowski read and interpreted the Second Vatican Council and worked creatively toward formulating the postulate of practicing Mariology in

context. It would therefore be too risky to frame his entire body of work within a single model of conciliar hermeneutics. He cannot be unambiguously classified either within the hermeneutics of reception (as in John Paul II), or the hermeneutics of continuity and reform (as in Benedict XVI), or—still less—within the hermeneutics of rupture, especially where he criticized isolated Mariology. Nevertheless, elements of all these hermeneutical forms can be found in his theology.

Napiórkowski's thought was not aimed at reproducing the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, but at seeking to think in its spirit and according to its method. For him, Mariology in context functions as a methodological rule rather than as a collection of theses derived from conciliar documents. His model grows out of conciliar teaching, yet it cannot be reduced to its literal reception or to a systematic exegesis of the Council's texts. Napiórkowski did not formulate his own theory of conciliar hermeneutics; instead, he consistently employed the Council's mode of reasoning in reflecting on the development of the understanding of the Trinitarian mystery within the Church and the world. In this sense, the contexts he proposed do not exhaust the conciliar perspective, but rather reveal its capacity for further theological generation of meaning.

It appears that in his approach to the Council, Napiórkowski primarily employed a hermeneutics of development. This model is close to the typology proposed by French theologians who spoke of a so-called dynamic hermeneutics (Galinié-Pallerola et al. 2012; Donneaud 2013). The hermeneutics of development that Napiórkowski practiced reveals two interrelated levels in his Mariology in context.

At the formal level, he remains faithful to the Trinitarian-ecclesial principle, interpreting the Second Vatican Council as an authority not merely institutional but also substantively rooted in the Word of God, in the image of God revealed in Christ, and in the communion of the Church.

The second level of the hermeneutics of development is dynamic, grounded in the truth of God's real presence in history, and shaped by his Word, which transcends human experience. Mariology in context thus becomes a space of the maturing of the Church's faith, a locus in which the mystery of Mary, inscribed within the mystery of Christ and the Church, is read in the light of the Word, the liturgy, and the lived experience of believers.

The next step in this hermeneutics of development should be reflection on the meaning of "mystery" itself. Commentaries on conciliar Mariology generally omit the phrase "in the mystery." Similarly, Napiórkowski, though deeply convinced of the theological significance of the image of God, did not make use of this expression, which carries considerable theological potential.

- 2) **The Theological Significance of Mariology in Context.** Among the theological values of Mariology in context, the first to be highlighted is the image of God upon which it depends. In his reflection on the person of Mary, Napiórkowski

remained consistently faithful to the Gospel. The Council and its Mariological teaching became for him an authority precisely because he sought to preserve fidelity to the Gospel.

The conciliar depiction of the Church is conditioned by the Christological image of God as a communion of persons and by the image of the Church as communion. In this light, the Mother of the Lord appears as both relational and real.

The theological dimension of Napiórkowski's Mariology in context led him to emphasize the importance of Christian formation, understood as a process of growth. Yet, he never reduced it to a form of spiritual therapy for contemporary humanity, whether within or outside the Church. In the final phase of his academic activity, his hermeneutics of development became closely associated with his postulate that Mariology in context should be grounded in the Word of God, in the signs of Christ, in dialogue and Christian unity, and in the experience of the Church, both within it and in relation to the world.

There was, however, a stage in Napiórkowski's work when he strongly advocated the renewal of Mariology and Marian devotion. Among both the Polish episcopate and certain theologians and pastors, this caused unease, as it seemed to promote a conciliar hermeneutics of rupture.

Over time, Napiórkowski himself recognized certain limits to the postulate of renewal. Perhaps he had, at times, overemphasized the need for renewal, not fully taking into account the original intentions of its earlier proponents.

In a certain sense, he thus echoed the tension also present in contemporary contextual theology, whose promoters often regard Mariology as merely speculative. Yet, it should be remembered that the so-called maximalists likewise sought a deeper understanding of Mary's place within the mystery of faith, guided by the logic of the development of Christian doctrine.

- 3) **The Contextuality of Mariology in Context.** Paradoxically, Napiórkowski—who deliberately avoided the terms “contextual theology” or “contextual Mariology”—proposed a method of practicing Mariology in context that is inherently contextual. The context he most profoundly considered was the living, complex reality of the Church itself, encompassing both traditional communities and communities of renewal. Initially, he applied this primarily to the situation in Poland, and after the sociopolitical transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, also to that broader region.

He paid particular attention to the contexts of Marian devotion and ecumenism. He also took into account the dramatic (and often martyrological) history of Christian life in this part of Europe, where he saw “greater and lesser prophets.” Another significant context for him was the academic world of the Catholic University of Lublin, where he taught, inspired, and guided nearly 500 students.

The Council and its reception in different regions of Europe, as well as the wider Western theological tradition, also formed crucial contextual horizons.

In relation to the latter, Napiórkowski articulated the postulate of reorienting theology (and Mariology) in Poland, convinced that one must not rely solely on “ready-made” theologies. This list of contexts cannot be regarded as exhaustive. For Napiórkowski, context was not the backdrop of theology but the very place of its actual realization—the space where the faith of the Church encounters reality. He clearly perceived context within the Church itself.

Behind this stance lies an essential assumption, close to what John Henry Newman once observed, that Christianity has never existed in a “pure” form. Likewise, Napiórkowski recognized the crucial process by which believers move from religiosity to faith.

In this light, it must be emphasized that practicing Mariology in context within the Church in Poland should not be viewed as a narrow panorama but as an expression of the creative realism of this theology. Napiórkowski did not idealize context; he perceived it as a living, personal reality containing either the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit or their complete absence. In such an approach, one does not encounter a merely symbolic narrative but a realistic and personal one, revealing the Mother of the Lord within the lived faith of believers.

Despite this contextual dimension, Napiórkowski cannot be classified among the representatives of contextual theology (Bevans 2002), which continues to be carefully examined in Poland (Napiórkowski, Gilski, and Wąsek 2025).

The culmination of Napiórkowski’s reflection remains the motto *De Maria numquam satis vere*. This phrase encapsulates his theological method: about Mary, never too much but always correctly.

Translated by Thaddaeus Lancton

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