

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARY IN THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

by

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May I begin by sharing a prayerful reflection on the verse, "The Holy Spirit will come over you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. For that reason your child will be called holy, and the Son of God". (Luke 1:35). For it seems to sum up what I mainly wish to communicate about the special significance of Mary in the ecumenical movement, namely, that she has a unique influence on us in our quest to meet Christ more intimately. The prayerful reflection: "A forgotten truth: Mary is an opportunity for encountering Christ. Our forefathers seemed to have understood this well and to have expressed it in allusions of race charm. This is surely what they sought to say when they spoke of Mary as 'House of Gold', 'Ark of the Covenant', 'Gateway of the Great King'. They conceived of Mary as the precious container that drew its meaning and beauty from the precious one contained, Christ. Mary is a 'place' for meeting Christ".¹

In recent years we Roman Catholics have become more and more conscious in our doctrine about Mary and our devotion to her that she is a 'place' for meeting Christ. This is of special significance ecumenically since Christ is the source and summit of all true unity and Mary is the one, as chosen by God, who shows us how to focus our attention in faith upon him most efficaciously. Obviously, the closer we all come to Christ the closer we come together as members of his Body the Church. Also, to look upon Mary as an "opportunity for encountering Christ" marks a rediscovery in our Tradition of a more balanced Marian doctrine and devotion that seems to satisfy many of the valid objections from our separated brethren. At the same time it is a development which theologians are calling a Christocentric and ecclesiological

¹ (*Reflections... path to prayer*, by James Turro. Paramus, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1972. p. 35)

mariology in which Mary is contemplated much more properly in the perspective of her unique relationship with Christ and with us the redeemed members of his one Body.

Briefly I propose to discuss three principal convictions, the second of which will occupy most of our attention: 1) contemporary Roman Catholic teaching on Mary is Christocentric and ecclesiotypical; 2) there are at least six points of ecumenical agreement on Mary which forms a solid basis for further dialogue between the Christian Churches; and, 3) the bi-lateral conversations should be getting into the Marian question in the context of Vatican II's 'hierarchy of truths'.

I. Some Characteristics of Contemporary Roman Catholic Teaching about Mary

Since Vatican II both the magisterial teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and the reflections of her theologians may be characterized as Christcentered and ecclesial with reference to the theology of Mary. The very title of *Lumen Gentium* s. chapter 8, "The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church", is a definite indication of this trend. The very fact that Our Lady was considered in the context of the mystery of the Church — as the archetype of the Church, the community of the redeemed — is ecumenically significant. It does seem to represent a new direction from that of the '50's when Mary was placed in a kind of isolated role, when her graces and privileges were not adequately related to Christ and ourselves. All too often she was portrayed as though in competition with Christ. Her title, Co-redemptrix, was sometimes interpreted as if she were the co-author of our salvation. In devotion she was frequently admired at a distance and not as true model of our Christian faith, a fellowbeliever, — one also redeemed by Christ. Although, as truly the Mother of God, Mary is a very special member of the Church, she is nonetheless a member of this redeemed community.

These ecclesiotypical and Christecentric characteristics of Marian doctrine and devotion have not developed in a vacuum. They grew along with the biblical and liturgical renewals in our Church as well as with the return to our roots in the great Fathers of the Eastern and Western Church. Now we begin our contemplation of Mary in the mystery of our redemption with the biblical revelation; and certainly this is very much in keeping with the rich traditions of our Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant brothers and sisters. The first chapter of the American Bishops' Pastoral Letter, **Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith**, is a biblical portrait of Mary. It

shows how the New Testament authors appropriated to Mary several Old Testament themes: Daughter of Zion; the Anawim; the Ark of the Covenant! and, the great tradition of faith from Abraham. The Pastoral Letter indicates how the biblical revelation led, in the early Patristic witness, to the development of the "New Eve" image; how the Church grew in her own self-understanding along with the understanding of Mary as her archetype. The whole being of this woman and of the Church is truly a new creation of the Word and of the Spirit. Mary's total openness to God's Word and Spirit is the perfect example of living completely by faith. This is our life as a Pilgrim Church which is ever called into being by God's Word and our faithful response to His Spirit.

In addition to Chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium* and to the American Bishops' Pastoral Letter another instance of the Church's official teaching about Mary which has these characteristics is Pope Paul VI's *Marialis Cultus*. This Apostolic Exhortation on the right ordering of devotion to Mary was issued in 1974 and primarily addresses the place of Mary in the Liturgy. The Pope shows how Marian feasts and memorials should only enhance the celebration of Christ's Solemnities and of the mysteries of our redemption proper to the various liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, etc. She is very much within the Communion of Saints who give glory and praise to the "Lamb" of our salvation. Saint Mary, most especially, helps us focus our attention in faith more directly upon Christ, the unique Mediator between God and us. Devotions to her that might be styled private, personal or paraliturgical are also put into a relationship with the Liturgy, being viewed as preparatory for the celebration of the Eucharist or as ways of applying the fruits and special graces of our Eucharistic Lord much more practically to our daily lives.

To sum up the first section of this paper: the ecumenical significance of contemporary Marian doctrine and devotion in the Roman Catholic Church is manifested in its following characteristics which bring her much closer to other Christian Churches: it is Christocentric and ecclesiological; it is biblical patristic and liturgical; and, we may add here, that it is pastoral and spiritual since Mariology is now seen much more in the context of the Church's ministries and mission to share the life

II. Six Statements of Ecumenical Agreement in the Virgin Mary

During May of 1975 in Rome at the 7th Mariological Congress and the 14th international Marian Congress, theologians from various Christian traditions met informally and unanimously agreed to six propositions, which concern the significance of Mary in the problem

of Christian unity. Among those who signed this unofficial document were one Lutheran, one Reformed, one member of the Swedish National Church, three Orthodox and seven Roman Catholics. At each of the last three international Mariological Congresses in which I have participated (1967 in Lisbon 1971 in Zagreb and 1975 in Rome), there has been a rather significant presence of Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant representatives and a time was always set aside for informal ecumenical conversation about the Marian problem or question. At the Roman Congress, the ecumenical consensus was stated clearly in the form of specific propositions. In this section, I shall identify each proposition and make a few comments regarding its special ecumenical significance.

The first proposition states: "It is an essential dogma of the faith that the man Jesus Christ is the sole mediator between God and men..." Mary is the first-fruits of Christ's redemption. In no way can her role in salvation history be on the same level or of the same order as His. Mary, therefore, in her own role today of interceding and mediating on our behalf does not compete with the unique mediatorship of the Lord. Not even does the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception, rightly interpreted, exempt Mary from the redeeming act of God's love in Christ. In fact, it teaches that she is the most perfectly redeemed. The grace of the Immaculate Conception is often called anticipatory redemption since Mary was preserved from actually incurring any sinfulness only by reason of the foreseen merits of her divine Son's redemptive act. He alone is High Priest by nature. The hypostatic union makes his humanity the humanity of God — God in Person of the Word inseparable from the Father and Holy Spirit. She is a creature totally dependent upon God in her entire being. And, even though preserved free from sin, she was born into a sinful human race and so incurred the debt of original sin. Only by reason of a special grace from Christ's redemptive activity did she not actually incur the guilt. This makes her uniquely but at the same time truly one of the redeemed.

The second proposition of ecumenical agreement states: "God chosen to use his creatures in different degrees as his collaborators in the work of Redemption. Among them the Virgin Mary has an exceptional dignity and role". Her exceptional dignity and role as a collaborator in the work of redemption is totally rooted in her unique relationship with Christ. As uniquely redeemed herself, she has a special role in helping us to appropriate redemption. She is the perfect example of faithfully responding to His redemptive love. Her mediation, far from competing with that of Christ, only enhances His by serving to create the atmosphere of grace in which we are disposed to encounter Christ more intimately in our daily

lives of faith. Mary is not to be imaged as a go-between or a bridge between us and a distant Christ. This obfuscates the most basic truth about the Incarnation namely, that He chose to become one of us in and through Mary and he remains one of us forever in his risen humanity. Please note in this context that when I speak of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception or of Mary's intercessory and mediating role in our redemption today, it is not to assert there is ecumenical agreement concerning them. Rather I am proposing that the Roman Catholic belief regarding them does not necessitate a difference with other Christians on matters more central to our faith.

And so we turn to the third proposition which reads: "Mary was chosen to conceive and bear the Redeemer, who received from his mother the humanity he needed to accomplish his sacrifice on Calvary as victim and High Priest". Mary is the Theotokos, and in a certain sense, when we have affirmed that of her, we have said it all. This Christological dogma from the Council of Ephesus has an ancient tradition. It is held that the invoking of Mary as God-bearer or bringer-forth-of-God dates back to the witness of Hypolytus, c. 21' a.d. Mary is ever the living testimony to the realism of the Incarnation, that in Jesus Christ, God has truly become one of us without ceasing to be God. St. Thomas Aquinas interprets her call to be the Mother of God in a sense that preserves the ontological reality of the hypostatic union from the first instant of the redemptive Incarnation. He teaches that motherhood properly pertains to the woman who has conceived and given birth to a person. The Person conceived and born of the virgin Mary is the Son of God, even though it is in his humanity that he comes forth Mary. Her maternity, therefore, is of the divine Person who became one of us. So firmly does the Angelic Doctor hold to the truth about the Theotokos that he believed to deny it was the same as rejecting the Incarnation. Consequently, this central dogma is crucial to the very heart of our Christian faith.

The fourth proposition of ecumenical agreement states: "The 'fiat' which retains a permanent character, was Mary's free consent to the divine motherhood, and consequently to our salvation". Both Sts. Bernard and Thomas Aquinas speak in dramatic yet realistic terms that, when Mary freely her consent at the annunciation, she was speaking in the name of humanity. Our salvation was hanging in the balance, so to speak, awaiting her consent. This interpretation which seems to be at least implied in the ecumenical proposition gets right to the proper understanding of justification through faith and the question of human merit so much at issue in the Protestant Reformation. I submit in this context that the theological distinction between *gratia operans* and *gratia cooperans*

is helpful in analysing the free consent and permanent character of the "fiat". On the one hand, at the annunciation God's love, as always takes the initiative and the overshadowing of His spirit makes possible whatever Mary does in terms of freely responding to His invitation (*gratia operans*). At the same time, her response is truly intelligent and free (*gratia cooperans*). The fact that she freely cooperates does not make it any less grace or the gratuitous favor of divine love. In a word, God's grace makes it all possible by endowing human freedom with authentic responsiveness but without removing its liberty and responsibility. The "permanent character" of Mary's religious experience in the mystery of the annunciation appears to be based upon her spirituality as one of the Anawim, the poor of Yahweh, one who lives with complete docility to His holy will and utter dependence upon His mighty deeds in salvation history. Whatever may have been her explicit knowledge about the Messiah at the time of the annunciation, it does seem reasonable to assume enough intelligence behind her consent to hold that Mary was saying "yes" to becoming mother of the "Suffering Servant of Yahweh." Thus she begins a spiritual odyssey culminating on Calvary at the foot of the cross, a very special moment in her life of faith.

This brings us to the fifth proposition: "Mary's collaboration showed itself especially when she believed in the Redemption accomplished by her Son, and when she remained at the foot of the cross, while almost all the apostles had fled." Her 'silent fiat' on Calvary, particularly in the context of the fourth Gospel, reveals Mary as the woman of faith par excellence. In the representative personality of the "beloved disciple" Christ on the cross gives us his own mother as our spiritual mother, the model of believing in the fullness of his promises. She accepts as the Father's will for our redemption her Son's suffering and death upon the cross. Mary is revealed as the one whose faith truly overcomes the "world" and leads to eternal life in Christ. (It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop this interpretation in any detail; but both the Cana and Calvary accounts in John's Gospel do seem to provide a sound basis for contemplating Mary as the one who believed most fully in the mission of Christ and so is the model of our faith.

And so the sixth and final proposition would follow: "Prayer of intercession addressed to the Virgin have as their foundation, besides the trust in the Mother of God which the Holy Spirit has inspired among Christian people, the fact that Mary remains forever bound to the work of Redemption, and consequently to its application throughout space and time". Briefly, I should like to comment here that the Acts of the Apostles gives us testimony

to the influence of Mary's presence upon Christ's first followers as they prepared for Pentecost. We too, as the Christians of every generation, are called to persevere with her in prayer for the continuous coming of the risen Lord's Holy Spirit who alone can sustain the New Creation of the Church. Roman Catholic faith in her glorious Assumption is an affirmation of her real personal influence upon our daily lives of faith and fidelity to the Spirit. She has been received into the fullness of our Lord's glory not only for her own sake but for ours. The virginal Theotokos is now our spiritual mother ever wishing to inspire us toward a deeper participation in the life of her divine Son.

III. Mary's Place in the Ongoing Quest for Christian Unity

In this relatively brief presentation, which is just the beginning of our ecumenical marian conference, I should like to make a few remarks about the future of our dialogue. Although the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption do cause considerable difficulty along the way to unity, they cannot be dismissed from any honest ecumenical conversations. They must be considered, however, very much in the context of the "hierarchy of truths" from Vatican II's decree on Ecumenism. They are not believed by Roman Catholics to be revealed truths or Christian mysteries that are primary or central in our faith. This principle puts the revealed truth of Mary as the Virginal Theotokos into proper perspective as an essentially Christological dogma. Even the traditional faith in the realism of her virginity is thus viewed as primarily a witness to the transcendence of her Son who has no human father since only God is his Father. The 'hierarchy of truths' approach also enables us to see the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption primarily in an ecclesiological setting. They reveal to us the wondrous power of God's redeeming love, the transforming power of his grace in one who responds to his Word so generously in faith. From the beginning of her human existence to the glorification of her total personality, Mary is so completely redeemed by Christ that she never is guilty of sin. As in the case of the rest of us who are redeemed, she is not rescued from a state of alienation and estrangement from God but has ever been in a constant condition of union with Him. God's favor endowed her from the beginning with the friendship of love to which we are all called in Christ. We must ask one another sincerely in the dialogue: does one's acceptance or rejection of these two Marian Dogmas have a necessary connection with the central mysteries of the Christian faith, namely, the triune God revealed in Christ our Redeemer. I submit for our further dialogue my conviction that, if a denial of them is based upon some defect of

faith in the power of God's redeeming love or in the fullness of eternal life, then we must return to inquire more deeply about our mutual beliefs in the central Christian mysteries.

In conclusion, may I suggest that one area of mariology which requires much development, especially among Roman Catholics, is that of the special relationship between Mary and The Holy Spirit. Here we can learn a great deal from our Orthodox brothers and sisters who pneumatology has been much richer than that of the Western Church generally.² We must be particularly perceptive to discover just what the Holy Spirit is revealing to us in this woman who is the greatest expression of the New Creation among the redeemed. Through her God speaks to us more clearly about the feminine aspects of his love for each one of us. Of common ecumenical concern is the question of the true liberation for the women of our own times. Rightly interpreted and adapted, the revelation of the Holy Spirit in Mary should provide an invaluable guide in helping our sisters in the Lord to find equality in the Church. In a similar context, both Orthodox and Roman Catholics have much to learn from our Protestant brothers and sisters about contemporary woman's participation in Christian ministry. Dr. Ross Mackenzie offers us some reflections on Mary as a model of true service in the Church in a paper that he gave at the 1975 annual convention of the Mariological Society of America.³ Finally, may I conclude with the conviction that the great Christian traditions represented here at this first ecumenical conference have much to give and receive in our dialogue about the place of Mary in the cause of true unity.

² (I should like to call your attention to an excellent paper given by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, an Orthodox theologian, at the 1972 annual convention of the Mariological Society of America: "Our Lady and the Holy Spirit" in *Marian Studies*, Vol. XXIII, 1972, pp. 69-78).

³ ("Mariology As An Ecumenical Problem", *Marian Studies*, Vol. XXVI, 1975, pp. 204-220).