

## PAPER VII

The Exercise of AuthorityThe dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumptionan Anglican approach

by

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Papal pronouncements on matters of faith have been, and to a certain extent still are prone to arouse gloom and scepticism on the part of some Anglicans, who suspect further corruption of the primitive faith,<sup>1</sup> and excitement and interest on the part of others (mostly of ultramontane inclination) for whom the seat of authority in such matters is indubitably the Holy See. Neither of these reactions is representative, I venture to say, of the best of Anglican theology. If we include Newman in 1845, it is within Anglicanism (though not exclusively) that we encounter much fruitful discussion of the nature of dogmatic statements and equally an attempt to assess the nature of the Church's activity when she actually pronounces to the modern world on matters of faith, Newman<sup>2</sup> and F.D. Maurice<sup>3</sup> in the 19th century, re-examined respectively by O. Chadwick<sup>4</sup> and I.T. Ramsey<sup>5</sup> in our own century are firmly of the opinion that dogmatic statements are but the product of the church articulating the faith she actually believes, and by which she lives and reflecting on her past and present experience of life with and in the Redeeming Christ. To quote Newman's analogy (epitomised by O. Chadwick), 'Just as a converted soul grows in the true understanding of the faith which at first he apprehends only in broad outline, so the Church, which at first perceived the content of her faith only in broad outline, grows in the slow understanding of its content.'<sup>6</sup> And Maurice's approbation of this thesis in the preface to his Warburton Lectures: 'Nothing, I think, can be more just and striking than his (sc. Newman's) description of the effect of a strong conviction upon a mind which has become possessed with it; how it must work and cannot be let; how it must grow and cannot remain in its first seed; how it must communicate itself to other minds and be affected by all it finds in them; how spiritual conflicts and conflicts in the world, the one always answering to the other, must prove its soundness and strength' (cit. Ramsey, On Being Sure in Religion p. 75)

If such is our attitude to dogma and dogmatic pronouncements, then the fact that a very large section of christendom should announce that Mary, mother of the Lord, was immaculately conceived and bodily assumed into heaven ought to arouse neither surprise nor hostility, but should rather provoke careful reflection. Though in principle the authority behind the Anglican formularies between 1552 and 1662 is still an Act of Parliament and though in practice Anglicans still look to the standpoint of their bishops, who in 1886 declared the Scriptures, the Creeds, the two Sacraments (baptism and the eucharist) and the historic episcopate to be a true basis for Christian belief and practice,<sup>7</sup> and

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remembering too that a characteristically Anglican breadth of interpretation is permitted with regard to such basis, the fact that a bishop in full accord with a large body of bishops outside the Anglican Communion should make such statements with regard to the person of the Virgin Mary should not give rise to Anglican's saying that the Roman Church has altered the faith by adding new doctrine. They should rather enquire into and examine the insights into the mystery of redemption that their Roman brethren have been allowed, just as they ought at all times to consider seriously the perceptions of other ecclesial bodies, both in this country and abroad.<sup>8</sup> And this primarily in the belief that no single communion has the absolute monopoly of all that can be said about the central mysteries of the faith, and that God speaks to his people 'at sundry times and in sundry places'.<sup>9</sup> They have too the reassurance that their Roman brethren are prepared to take such a view of the general nature of dogma and its development as is evidenced, for example in the January 1967 number of "Concilium" and in Karl Rahner's essay "Zur Frage der Dogmenentwicklung", though of course Roman scholars will differ from Anglican in their judgement as to the authority of the Holy See in the task of articulating the faith.

A word must now be said about the Anglican approach to the person and work of Mary, which may well shed some light on the Anglican attitude to the pronouncements of 1862 and 1950 and through this bring us to some clearer understanding of the Anglican approach to authority and the Anglican attitude to the authority of the Pope. Generally speaking, the Anglican theology of Mary has been written on the one hand by way of a protest against what was judged to be abuse and corruption in late mediaeval theology,<sup>10</sup> and a measure of this continues even today in the form of somewhat prejudiced and ill-informed bigotry on the part of those who have never been prepared to reflect on the real issues.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand there have been (and still are) those who (as I have already said) have in their own private judgement adopted wholesale the Roman theology of Mary, largely on account of their own peculiar view of authority as residing for them in the Roman see.<sup>12</sup> There has thus been in the Church of England what I would call "extraordinary"<sup>13</sup> devotion to Mary modelled on the Roman (sometimes without great understanding of actual Roman teaching), and all too little attention has been given to what I would call "ordinary" devotion to Mary, and the better and unpolemical theology of Mary of which a limited amount may be found by Anglican writers from the seventeenth century to the present day. The Book of Common Prayer of 1662 preserves five feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary, (The Purification, the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity and the Conception). In the same century, the Caroline divines, though anxious to make clear their disapproval of those, who in their opinion, paid undue honour to Mary and sought favours from her by the invocation of her name, could not on the other hand neglect what was said of Mary in Scripture and the attention drawn to her by the feasts of the liturgical year. Generally speaking it was her example and her role in the salvation of mankind to which they called attention in their writings. So for example, Bishop Bull

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writes (in truly Irenaean vein), "The Holy Virgin was the happy instrument of the saving incarnation of the Son of God who hath effectually crushed the old serpent the devil, and destroyed his power over all those that believe on himself; and thereby she became the instrument of comfort to Eve and to all sinners"; and in the same sermon he exhorts his hearers to the imitation of her poverty and humility.<sup>14</sup> His authority in such matters, like that of his contemporaries, was undoubtedly Scripture, tradition and the current faith of the church. And I think it is worth commenting here that had devotion to Mary not been a living issue in the seventeenth century, then we would not have seen representatives of the Church in England struggling to give voice to their own positive insights into the mystery in which they were living, whatever we may think of their rather unconstructive criticisms of the devotions of the Roman Church. We see in fact, dogma in the making and not simply a destructive polemic; and it would be salutary to look upon such pronouncements in the same way as Roman theologians looked upon the theology and faith of scholars and people before drawing up the Bulls on the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.

Our own century has seen a great revival in the study of the Fathers and an attempt in Mariology to recapture the symbolic patterns of thought which characterised the patristic age. This has affected both Anglican and Roman scholars alike, and in the studies of Hugo and Karl Rahner<sup>15</sup>, on the one hand, and of Eric Mascall and H.S. Box<sup>16</sup> on the other we can perceive an appreciation and reappraisal of the themes of Mary as the type of the Church (the church "without spot or wrinkle", and the church, assumed into heaven<sup>17</sup>), of Mary as the beginning of our redemption and freedom from sin, from whose womb comes that new human race cleansed from the guilt of Adam, and of Mary whose final salvation of soul and body prefigures that of all who are to be redeemed. This theology in itself enlightens and brings warmth to the rather dry logic of official Roman pronouncements, and it seems quite clear (to judge by recent conferences amongst Anglicans and non-conformists) that a large measure of agreement in faith and understanding can be reached among all Christians if the theology of Mary can be approached in this way. I would suggest too that in this particular instance, theology must be taught first that faith may be aroused. So too English devotion is obviously going to differ from the continental, and Englishmen will inevitably express their devotion in a variety of way.<sup>18</sup> But if all can come to a basic agreement with regard to what has been said and what is now being said, and to an appreciation of the role of Mary in the salvation of all men, then the papal pronouncements of 1862 and 1950 will be seen to be no longer stumbling blocks for non-Roman Catholics, but testimonies, among many others to the truth about Mary.

#### NOTES

1. Cf the opening remarks of Dom Augustine Morris, OSB in his contribution to The Blessed Virgin Mary ed. Mascall and Box, p. 121.
2. The Essay on Development.

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3. Warburton Lectures, introduction.
4. From Bossuet to Newman, The Idea of Doctrinal Development, Cambridge '57.
5. On Being Sure in Religion, London 1963.
6. Op.cit.p.151.
7. Cf the article in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 'Lambeth Quadrilateral'.
8. The conversations in this country with the Methodists have helped some Anglicans to become more aware of e.g. the covenant relationship between God and his people and of some aspects of the eucharistic sacrifice.
9. Hebrews 1.1.
10. Cf S. Cwiertniak, OM, 'La Vierge Marie dans la Tradition Anglicane' p.89, quoting Bishop Latimer's attack on pre-Reformation centres of Marian devotion.
11. John de Satge's article on the evangelical approach to devotion to Mary in Mascall and Box's collection (cit.supra) gives a very good account of traditional attitudes.
12. Visitors to Walsingham a few years ago would have been amazed at the almost entirely Roman character of the devotions at the Anglican shrine.
13. I do not use this term in at all a derogatory sense.
14. Cit J.E.Barnes, Bishop Bull's Mariological Sermon, in Marianum Vol.32 Fasc 1.1970 Cf. also A.N.Allchin's essay 'The BVM in 17th century Anglican theology' in Mascall and Box op.cit.
15. Hugo Rahner, Our Lady and the Church, DLT 1962; Karl Rahner, Mary, Mother of the Lord, Nelson 1962.
16. The Blessed Virgin Mary, ed. Mascall and Box, including essays by E. Symonds, A.Farrer, A.M.Allchin, John de Satge, J.C.Stephenson, Dom A. Morris.
17. Cf Victor White, Soul and Psyche, ch. on 'The Missing Feminine'.
18. J.C.Stephenson analyses the problems of devotion in the Mascall/Box collection.

#### Some Points for Discussion.

1. In what way and to what extent are both Roman Catholics and Anglicans attempting to instruct all the faithful in the theology which underlies our devotion to Mary?
2. To what extent do Roman Catholics consider the papal pronouncements on the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption to be final definitions of these dogmas. Is there more to be said, and can the present definitions be rephrased or re-explained?
3. Would Roman Catholics wish the Anglican bishops to make some official pronouncement on Mariology by way of confirming and summarising what is already believed and practised within the Anglican Communion?

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4. Anglicans are not prone to use the term 'binding on the conscience' when speaking of what they believe, for authority in matters of faith is not normally exercised by this kind of appeal and we are not swift to excommunicate or reprove for heresy. Generally speaking, truth and falsehood are allowed to grow together on the understanding that 'magna est veritas et praevalebit'.<sup>(i)</sup> Does this method of exercising authority sound wholly repugnant to Roman Catholics?; and is there not even a measure of this approach within the Roman Communion today?

(i) I say this, because at the moment, it does look as if a really sound theology of Mary is emerging within Anglicanism, and one hopes that in due time this will be as firmly established among the faithful as e.g. the appreciation of the centrality of the eucharist in public worship today.