



New Stories to Tell: Living Ecumenism Today

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Our Lady of Guadalupe / Wikimedia Commons

CHAPTER XI

Gifts to be given: Mary?

In recent years there have been important breakthroughs towards understanding between Anglicans and Roman Catholics on Marian theology and devotion. This is also a subject that continues to present enduring challenges. The two stories below give a sense of each of these realities.

The first is recounted by Professor Joe Mangina of Wycliffe College, an Anglican seminary in the evangelical Anglican tradition:

In a gesture of ecumenical hospitality, we had been graciously invited to bring some of our Wycliffe

seminarians to share in a prayer service at St. Augustine's Roman Catholic Seminary. A good group from both schools attended. The students filed into the chapel for evensong. Everything was going along beautifully, until an unfamiliar canticle filled the air and the St. Augustine students sang the *Salve Regina*, turning toward the statue of Mary as they did so. Wycliffe students were confused as to how to respond. Should they turn with the St. Augustine students? Would this be seen as 'praying to Mary' (something generally quite strongly rejected by evangelicals)? Should they join in the *Salve Regina*? But they did not know the words! Do they refuse to turn and reject the hospitality of this shared prayer service? In the end, it was an awkward ecumenical moment of misunderstandings.

Anglican Bishop of the Diocese of Huron, Linda Nicholls, shares another experience of the complexities in this area:

The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises are often shared by Christians of many traditions. I was attracted to the opportunity to engage in silence with the intentional prayer practice of St. Ignatius in a retreat setting during my sabbath leave from parish ministry. As an Anglican nurtured in the broad, evangelical tradition of the church I was taken aback by the invitation to engage in prayer with Mary as part of the colloquy in meditation. This was not part of my formation and old prejudices about 'praying to Mary' popped up! However, in the spirit of engaging fully with the pattern of the Exercises, I entered into the colloquy to imaginatively pray with Mary. This proved to be a rich and life-giving aspect of the Exercises – an unexpected joy. The opportunity to engage in this

dialogue and pray with a woman chosen by God to bear Christ in the world proved to deepen my own intimacy with God and became a part of my continuing prayer practice long after the Exercises were completed – an unexpected gift through prayer shared in common.



There is much about the role of Mary that Anglicans and Roman Catholics share. Even at the time of our schism, which included different understandings about the place of Mary in the life of the Church, the emerging Anglican tradition retained the feasts of Mary in the liturgical calendar and acknowledged her special place in salvation history.

Marian theology was an area of dialogue for Anglicans and Romans Catholics from early on. ARCIC I had already noted: “We agree that there can be but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, and reject any interpretation of the role of Mary which obscures this affirmation. We agree in recognising that Christian understanding of Mary is inseparably linked with the doctrines of Christ and the Church” (*Authority in the Church* II, 30).

This continued in later stages of the dialogue. In its document *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, members of ARCIC II sought to deepen the shared Anglican and Roman Catholic understanding of the place of Mary in the economy of grace and the Tradition of the Church. The text notes: “Anglicans have tended to begin from reflection on the scriptural example of Mary as an inspiration and model for discipleship. Roman Catholics have given prominence to the ongoing ministry of Mary in the economy of grace and the communion of saints. Mary points people to Christ, commending them to him and helping them to share

his life. Neither of these general characterizations do full justice to the richness and diversity of either tradition, and the twentieth century witnessed a particular growth in convergence as many Anglicans were drawn into a more active devotion” (MGH, 65).



Icon of the Theotokos / Wikimedia Commons

This implies a re-reception of Marian teaching and devotion in both communities and has specific implications for possibilities of shared prayer: “Aware of the distinctive place of Mary in the history of salvation, Christians have given her a special place in their private and liturgical prayer, praising God for what he has done in and through her. In singing the Magnificat, they praise God with her; in the Eucharist, they pray with her as they do with all God’s people, integrating their prayers in the great communion of saints. They recognise Mary’s place in ‘the prayer of

all the saints' that is being uttered before the throne of God in the heavenly liturgy (Rev. 8"3-4). All these ways of including Mary in praise and prayer belong to our common heritage, as does our acknowledgement of her unique status as Theotókos, which gives her a distinct place within the communion of saints" (MGH, 66).

Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ also addresses the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, teachings about Mary which are defined as doctrine in Roman Catholicism but are not widely held in Anglicanism. While the document seeks fresh ways of understanding these doctrines which could be shared, these issues remain unresolved. Thus, the experience of dialogue reflects the same mixture of awkwardness and joy alluded to in the stories.

In their *Common Declaration* of 1989, Archbishop Robert Runcie and Pope John Paul II noted: "The ecumenical journey is not only about the removal of obstacles but also about the sharing of gifts." There remain obstacles of misunderstanding, as experienced by the students in the shared prayer service while Bishop Linda experienced both the removal of an obstacle and received the gift of Mary in a new way through prayer shared together.

It is likely that, on the road to full communion, Anglicans and Roman Catholics will need to continue their long conversation about the mother of Jesus.

What has been your experience of the role of Mary in the life of the Church?

How might the experience of the students have been improved in their shared experience?

ARCIC II speaks of possibilities of re-receiving the Church's doctrine concerning Mary. Where do you see this as a possibility? What do you see as implications for Anglicans? For Roman Catholics?