



ANGLICANS, ROMAN CATHOLICS AND THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

EDWARD YARNOLD, S.J.

The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The third Martin Gillett Memorial Lecture was given jointly by two members of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission, Bishop Edward Knapp-Fisher, Archdeacon and Sub-Dean of Westminster, and the Reverend Edward Yarnold, S.J., of Campion Hall, Oxford. The Bishop's contribution, which it is hoped will be published later, came first; we print here Father Yarnold's presentation of a Roman Catholic point of view. The original intention had been to ask the speakers to discuss the paragraph on Our Lady in the Final Report of ARCIC. Unfortunately the delayed publication of the report made that impossible. However, although the speakers were not able to quote the report in their addresses, we are able now to reproduce the Marian paragraph in an appendix.

In speaking of this subject from the Roman Catholic side, I shall refer first to Our Lady, and then to a united Church.

1. The Blessed Virgin Mary

Although polemics and exaggerations have clouded the vision of Christians, it seems to me possible to enunciate some principles of Marian theology which should be acceptable to all who are unprejudiced.

- (1) Understanding of Mary must be related to the main Christian doctrines concerning Christ, the Church, the communion of saints, the Holy Spirit, grace, salvation.
- (2) No form of expression concerning Mary is acceptable which implies that she is a mediator between God and mankind in the same way that her Son is.
- (3) God gave her the grace she needed to be the Mother of the Saviour, grace which she herself received through the saving work of her Son.
- (4) When her life came to an end she was received by her Son into glory.

In this exposition of a general understanding of Mary I have said nothing of the belief that she was the Mother of God the Son made man and that she was so by the direct action of the Holy Spirit, without the biological cooperation of a human father. I would like to include these beliefs in our list of agreements, but contemporary liberal theology and biblical criticism often regard them both as figurative statements which must not be taken literally. ARCIC did not confront this problem as it is not an issue that divides RC's from Anglicans as

such. I hope, however, that I can take these doctrines of Mary's divine motherhood and virginal conception as agreed among us all.

In addition Christians can help one another to discover a Marian piety or spirituality, or to penetrate it more deeply. Using the indications provided in the Gospels and drawing upon human experience, we can prayerfully contemplate the 'great things' which He who is mighty worked in the personality of that Galilean Jewish girl and woman. We can try to present to our imaginations what it was like to be 'the handmaid of the Lord', and take her obedience and faith as models for our own lives. We can be moved to admiration and even love of her, and thank God for her as for a masterpiece of His grace. Some too will feel it right to view her through her Son's eyes, and see her as a mother. Some will find it appropriate to invoke her in prayer, asking her to join her prayer with ours.

Our own Society will have helped us each to enrich his or her theological and spiritual vision of Mary by sharing in the experiences of brothers and sisters of different traditions. In this way the Society performs an almost unique ecumenical service. However ecumenism must go further and face those points at which the separation of Churches has hardened into apparently incompatible dogmatic positions. This has been the chief function of ARCIC, whose Final Report we had hoped to be able to discuss today. Such discussions may seem pedantic and far removed from the heart of the Gospel. But they must be faced and resolved, if our growing together is not to be haunted by skeletons in the cupboard about which we dare not speak. And, although these thoughts are occasioned by the consideration of a commission of Anglicans and Roman Catholics, the issues are of ecumenical importance for all of us.

I wish to consider the ecumenical Marian problem in its knottiest form, that is, in the form which depends most on precise definitions, in particular the two dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. If anyone says that that serves Roman Catholics right for importing conceptual and legal precision into an area which does not admit of such precision, I sympathise with them. But the solution of the problem will not lie in putting pressure on one another to renounce treasured and canonised convictions. It should be a first principle of ecumenism that in our positive insights that have been tested and matured over the centuries all of our traditions have been guided by the Holy Spirit. In saying this I am being faithful to my father in religion, St. Ignatius Loyola, whose own experiences at the hands of the Inquisition led him to set out at the beginning of his *Spiritual Exercises* this 'Presupposition': 'It is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another's statement than to condemn it as false.'

My favourite way of tackling a problem is to analyse it as exactly as I can. What I wish to do is to refract belief about Our Lady into a spectrum of seven different positions, to try to locate Anglican and RC belief on the spectrum, and to see to what extent the two traditions are compatible. I do not take account here of those who would not accept the generally acceptable Marian position I began by describing.

Beginning, then, at the violet end of the spectrum, there is the view of those who, while accepting this broadly-based theology of Mary, reject the two Marian doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption as unscriptural, incapable of definition, and, perhaps, false.

Secondly, there is the position of those who, while themselves unable to subscribe to these two doctrines, regard them as positions which may legitimately and freely be held without infidelity to the Gospel. Such permissible but not essential beliefs are sometimes called *theologoumena*. A well-known example of another such *theologoumenon* is Scotus' theory that the Word would have become flesh even if the world had not sinned; and one can reject this view without regarding it as an un-Christian and heretical perversion of revelation.

A third view is the *acceptance* of the truth of the Marian doctrines as *theologoumena*, without believing that they are part of essential Christian faith.

A fourth position recognises that in sound Roman Catholic theology the Marian doctrines are, as Donal Flanagan stated in one of the most important papers to be presented to our Society ('*An Ecumenical Future for Roman Catholic Theology of Mary*', p.18), 'truths about the nature of Christian salvation, as salvation in and through Christ and His community, not just doctrinal information about Mary. They represent in theological terms, not embarrassing pietism posing as theology but true gains in the field of the doctrines of Christian anthropology and eschatology which we ignore to our loss.' In other words, just as Christians of all traditions see the doctrines of the divine motherhood and the virginal conception as doctrines fundamentally about the nature and person of Christ, though expressed in terms of His mother, so Roman Catholics are coming to see the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption as exemplifications, in terms of Mary, of the way in which God's grace works in the lives of all the faithful. In the words of the Decree on the Church of Vatican II, 'The Mother of God is a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ' (n.63). To quote Dr. Flanagan again, 'the Marian doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church represent her clearest statements on human perfectibility by the grace of God, and on the actual involvement of man in the work of God's salvation' (ibid., p.18). This fourth position, then, recognises the essential truth concerning salvation underlying the Marian definitions, but is unable to believe that the doctrines can be articles of faith in so far as they apply this general teaching concerning salvation to historical realities in Mary's life not directly attested by Scripture.

Fifthly, there is the view—which, I take it, is the Orthodox attitude to the doctrine of the Assumption—that the doctrines, even in their Marian application, are true and matters of essential faith, but do not need to be defined and, perhaps, cannot be defined formally as dogmas.

The sixth view would be that the Marian dogmas are strictly definable, but that their essential truth concerning salvation can also be expressed in non-Marian terms. In other words, we have here an example of permissible pluriformity in doctrine, such that essential christian truth can be expressed in a number of radically different dogmatic formulations.

The seventh position—the red end of the spectrum—would be to hold that the Marian dogmas are such essential expressions of faith that without them faith would be defective.

Now if Roman Catholics believe they are committed to this seventh position, doctrinal agreement can be reached only if those who are not Roman Catholics change their minds. At the other end of the spectrum, if the Churches of the Reformation believe they are committed to the first position which rejects the dogmas without qualification, doctrinal agreement can be reached only if Roman Catholics agree to renounce the doctrines. But if the

views of both traditions are located somewhere between the violet and the red extremes, then the way is open to agreement without either side renouncing a fundamental tradition. If the Churches of the Reformation will at least accept the two Marian doctrines as legitimate *theologoumena*, still more if they accept the truths underlying them as integral Christian faith concerning salvation, and if Roman Catholics on their side will accept that this essential doctrine can also be expressed in non-Marian terms, it should not be too difficult to discover common ground.

2. A united Church.

But *is* that an authentic Roman Catholic position? *Is* it open to members of that Church to admit the possibility of diversity—what is often now called pluriformity—of essential doctrine? So I am brought to my second subject, the Roman Catholic conception of a united Church.

Recent popes have frequently expressed their understanding of what the nature of a reunited Church would be. I would like to pick out two concepts: the notion of *sister-Churches* and the idea of *pluriformity*. Both ideas came together in Paul VI's often-quoted remark on the occasion of the canonisation of the Forty Martyrs in 1970:

Is it not one—these Martyrs say to us—the Church founded by Christ? Is not this their witness? Their devotion to their nation gives us the assurance that on the day when—God willing—the unity of faith and Christian life is restored, no offence will be inflicted on the honour and sovereignty of a great country such as England. There will be no seeking to lessen the legitimate prestige and the worthy patrimony of piety and usage proper to the Anglican Church when the Roman Catholic Church—this humble ‘Servant of the Servants of God’—is able to embrace her ever-beloved sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ: a communion of origin and of faith, a communion of priesthood and of rule, a communion of the Saints in the freedom and love of the Spirit of Jesus.

To describe the Anglican communion as a ‘sister’ is not an expression of conventional politeness; it is a deeply theological term, and its application here is a matter of great significance. The Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism (n.14) rightly attributed to the Orthodox the view that local churches are linked by ‘family ties’ like sisters. The Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras, frequently applied the same term to the relations between Rome and Constantinople. When Paul VI visited Constantinople in 1967, in addressing Patriarch Athenagoras, he made this terminology his own:

Having become sons in the Son in all reality (cf. I John 3.1–2), we have become also really and mysteriously brothers to each other. This mystery of divine love is realised in every local church, and is this not the reason for the traditional and so beautiful expression, according to which local churches like to call themselves sister churches?

Catholics and Orthodox, he continued, before their separation, lived this life of a sister church for centuries, celebrating together the ecumenical councils which defended the deposit of faith against any alteration.

Pope John Paul II has also adopted the term in referring to the Orthodox. The implication is that in a reunited Church the various sister-Churches each keep their own traditions. Thus when Pope John Paul himself visited Constantinople twelve years after Paul VI, he described the ten centuries of unity between Rome and Constantinople before schism occurred as a relationship between sister-Churches:

For nearly a whole millennium, the two sister-Churches grew side by side, as two great vital and complementary traditions of the same Church of Christ, keeping not only peaceful and fruitful relations, but also concern for the indispensable communion in faith, prayer and charity, which they did not at any cost want to question, despite their different sensitivity.

Both Paul VI and John Paul II frequently spoke of pluriformity in a united Church. The former Pope made his own Dom Lambert Beauduin's watchword—beloved by that great worker for unity, Cardinal Mercier—'United not absorbed'. Thus, at a general audience held on 14 July 1965, Paul VI, speaking on the pastoral service performed by authority in the Church, asked:

...must, then, an authority so qualified and destined to make of mankind one single flock, level everyone and make everything uniform according to one single type of religiousness? We will answer you with a phrase of St. Gregory the Great... 'When faith is one, diversity of customs does not harm the Church.' The unity of the Church is not uniformity, unless it be of faith and love.

On his visit of the Patriarch of Constantinople Pope Paul cited St. Irenaeus, who said in the second century that diversity of usage 'confirms the accord of faith', and St. Augustine of Hippo, who in the fifth saw that such diversity contributed 'to the beauty of the Church of Christ'.

John Paul II spoke to the same effect during the 1981 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity:

The subject of the week of prayer this year is rich in content and very inspiring: 'One Spirit, various gifts, one body' (cf. I Cor. 12.3-13). The variety of gifts, ministries and tasks within the people of God comes from one and the same Spirit and is geared to common advantage and to the harmonious functioning of one body, that is, the Mystical Body of Christ.

This pluriformity which the two popes envisage is a pluriformity not only of customs but also of expressions of faith. This is most clearly illustrated by the agreement which has been reached between the Roman Catholic Church and some non-Chalcedonian Churches. The latter Churches, for complex historical reasons, have not accepted the fourth ecumenical council, the Council of Chalcedon of A.D. 451 which defined the relation between the divinity and the humanity as that of two natures (of God and man) in the one person of God the Son. Because of their rejection of this two-nature formula these Churches are sometimes called 'monophysite'. However, though rejecting this formula, they do not at all reject the truth which underlies it, namely that Jesus Christ is true God and true man.

The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch is a non-Chalcedonian Church. When the Patriarch of this Church visited Rome in October 1971, he and Pope Paul VI expressed ag-

reement that full faith in Jesus Christ could be expressed by the formulas of both the Churches. Welcoming the Patriarch, Pope Paul stated:

The dogmatic definitions of the first three ecumenical councils form part of our common heritage. Thus we confess together the mystery of the Word of God, become one of us to save us and to permit us to become in him sons of God and brothers of each other.

...Already theologians are working with renewed effort to throw new light on the mystery of the one Lord Jesus Christ. If they recognise that there are still differences in the theological interpretation of this mystery of Christ because of different ecclesiastical and theological traditions, they are convinced, however, that these various formulations can be understood along the lines of the faith of the early councils, which is the faith we also profess.

Two days later the two Church leaders issued a Common Declaration, in which they affirmed that:

...Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch Mar Ignatius Jacob III are in agreement that there is no difference in the faith they profess concerning the mystery of the Word of God made flesh and become really man, even if over the centuries difficulties have arisen out of the different theological expressions by which this faith was expressed.

Pope John Paul II has spoken to the same effect in advocacy of a pluriformity of doctrinal expressions. In June 1979 the Pope received a delegation from another non-Chalcedonian Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. Addressing the Coptic delegation, the Pope exclaimed:

How marvellous are the ways of the Lord! He permits us to profess today our common faith in Jesus Christ, his divine Son, true God and true man... We rejoice together that the doubts and suspicions of the past have been overcome so that with full hearts we can proclaim together once again this fundamental truth of our Catholic faith.

The Pope went on to speak of the 'fundamental...recognition' that

the richness of this unity in faith and spiritual life has to be expressed in diversity of forms. Unity—whether on the universal or the local level—does not mean uniformity or absorption of one group by another.

Cannot this recognition of the possibility of diversity in expressions of doctrine be applied to the two Marian doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption? It is above all a Society like ours, where we talk, pray and live together a common faith in Jesus Christ and relate that faith to His Mother, that we shall be able to learn for ourselves—and share our discovery with others of our own Churches—that there can be a unity of faith underlying a diversity of traditions concerning the Mother of God.

APPENDIX

An extract from the *Final Report of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission.*

This approach is illustrated by the reaction of many Anglicans to the Marian definitions, which are the only examples of such dogmas promulgated by the bishop of Rome apart from a synod since the separation of our two communions. Anglicans and Roman Catholics can agree in much of the truth that these two dogmas are designed to affirm. 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 of the Church. We agree in recognising the grace and unique vocation of Mary, Mother of God Incarnate (*Theotokos*), in observing her festivals, and in according her honour in the communion of saints. We agree that she was prepared by divine grace to be the mother of our Redeemer, by Whom she herself was redeemed and received into glory. We further agree in recognising in Mary a model of holiness, obedience and faith for all Christians. We accept that it is possible to regard her as a prophetic figure of the Church of God before as well as after the Incarnation.* Nevertheless the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption raise a special problem for Anglicans who do not consider that the precise definitions given by these dogmas are sufficiently supported by Scripture. For many Anglicans the teaching authority of the bishop of Rome, independent of a Council, is not recommended by the fact that through it these Marian doctrines were proclaimed as dogmas binding on all the faithful. Anglicans would also ask whether, in any future union between our two Churches, they would be required to subscribe to such dogmatic statements. One consequence of our separation has been a tendency for Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike to exaggerate the importance of the Marian dogmas in themselves at the expense of other truths more closely related to the foundation of the Christian faith.

*The affirmation of the Roman Catholic Church that Mary was conceived without original sin is based on recognition of her unique role within the mystery of the Incarnation. By being thus prepared to be the mother of our Redeemer, she also becomes a sign that the salvation won by Christ was operative among all mankind before His birth. The affirmation that her glory in heaven involves full participation in the fruits of salvation expresses and reinforces our faith that the life of the world to come has already broken into the life of our world. It is the conviction of Roman Catholics that the Marian dogmas formulate a faith consonant with Scripture.