

Being Dogmatic About Mary

John Hunwicke takes a different view of ARCIC's latest production

It's official! Anglicans believe in the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Well, of course that's not true. As John Hunwicke reminds us in this provocative article, *pace* the new ARCIC report, Anglicans as a body, don't believe anything of the sort; in fact some Anglicans don't believe very much of the traditional Christian faith at all. So what is to be done? Considering how the Marian dogmas were actually formulated, he makes an intriguing suggestion about the basis for future ecumenical dialogue on these and indeed other matters.

The new ARCIC report (*Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*) is full of excellent things that will need little commendation to Catholic Anglicans. Since everybody else will be pointing that out, I would like to draw attention to a problem of methodology.

'COMMON ANCIENT TRADITIONS'

Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Ramsey prescribed, as ARCIC's basic method, "dialogue founded upon the gospels and on the common ancient traditions" (1966). I rather wonder if those two hierarchs of blessed and beloved memory really intended their words to bear quite the weight that is now being rested on them. If they did, ARCIC should have begun by sorting out what the phrase 'common ancient traditions' meant: to me, at least, its sense is by no means clear. Here are some possible definitions:

1. Those traditions which were common to Rome and to the English prov-

inces between Augustine's arrival and the sixteenth century breach.

2. The same; but subtracting those elements dropped by the English Reformation formularies.

3. As 2, but also removing elements subsequently lost or abandoned in large sections of the Anglican community.

Mary repeats the formula 'common ancient traditions', although a pedantic examination of the text (pp viii, 29, 32) reveals an uncertainty whether 'tradition' is singular or plural. (This is not, in fact, an insignificant matter; but let us pass on.) The Co-chairmen gloss it (p ix) as "the common tradition which predates the Reformation and the Counter Reformation"; this suggests my definition 1, and so does a footnote on p63.1 think this is a very nice idea; but it is far from being obvious that the Church of England has retained the wholeness of what it shared with Rome until 1532 to the same extent that Byzantium has retained what it shared with Rome until 1053. Ever since the breach, some traditions within Anglicanism have been marked by a strong sense of discontinuity with considerable elements of doctrine and practice in pre-Reformation England. Unfortunately, however, even 2 - which might suit traditional Evangelicals - looks more and more like a hopeless pipe-dream. There is a number of matters in

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which, as late as the early twentieth century, Anglicans of all types were very close to the positions held then by (and still the official teaching of) the Roman Church. These 'ancient' traditions are not now widely enough held within Anglicanism to be 'common' ground in our dialogue with other Christians.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT!

In fact, I wrote the substance of the above some fifteen years ago, and as examples, I gave divorce, contraception, and the gender of the ministry. An additional example, to which *Mary* forcibly draws our attention by what it does not admit, is the widespread disbelief, well documented among modern Anglicans, about the Lord's bodily Resurrection and Virginal Conception. I receive with joy what *Mary* says about the Assumption and Immaculate Conception of our Lady, and I am saddened by the knowledge that my evangelical brethren do not like these wonderful truths which so admirably buttress central Gospel themes, such as the need for redeeming grace and the hope of glory. But really! Isn't it like nit-picking while Rome - or I think I mean Canterbury - burns, to fiddle around with these relatively insignificant matters, and then cheerfully to claim a consensus, when the secret which everybody knows is that our ecclesial community sits very lightly on the content of its own Articles I, II, III, and IV? *Mary* tells us that "The Church proclaims that Christ was ... raised bodily from the tomb", but how many of our

bishops and clergy believe that? Perhaps ARCIC's successive Anglican Co-Chairmen, Frank Griswold and Peter Carnley, could check the numbers for us.

And I welcome what *Mary* says about the 'brethren' of Jesus, and its positive treatment of ever-virgin. We are told that "Our two communions are both heirs to a rich tradition which recognizes Mary as ever virgin ..." (p48). This is a truth taken for granted in the Tome of Leo (a document central to Chalcedon), in subsequent Councils, and in the liturgies of East and West. My welcome is all the warmer because in 1996, after John Paul the Great affirmed this truth, it was denied within twenty four hours by an anonymous 'Church of England spokesman'. I had a lot of trouble getting an admission who this was; it turned out to be the then chief spin-doctor of General Synod, Eric Shegog. Journalists had asked for a comment with a very short deadline; he had phoned the present bishop of Durham; and on the strength of Our Tom's say-so, Eric assured *The Times* that "the majority of New Testament scholars" believed Jesus to have had uterine brothers (despite the clear indications in Mark 15:47 and Matthew 27:56 that the 'brethren' had a different Mary for their mother). (I hope we have seen the end of the Carey-Hill ecumenism of cheerfully shooting from the hip - remember Dominus Jesus? - within hours of the appearance of Roman documents, especially those signed by Joseph Ratzinger.)

But *Mary* never lets on that the so very much more central



doctrine of the Lord's Virginal Conception is commonly treated with amused contempt among Anglicans. Or does it? A close engagement with its text suggests that it may let just a whisker of this cat out of its bag. It describes the belief as "an early Christian tradition" and is a little bit shy about using words like Truth. A sensible defence of the authenticity of the 'tradition' is relegated to a footnote.

If I were Joseph Ratzinger's successor at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, I would express polite pleasure at *Mary's* kind treatment of the Marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950, but ask for reassurance about the corporate, and real, commitment of Anglicans to the Bodily Resurrection and the Virginal Conception. Of course, there would be the usual uproar from the usual elite about Rome Dragging Its Feet, but so what? Is it really so wrong to live in the real world, and to ask to be told the truth?

THE MYTH OF MEDIEVAL DECADENCE

Is it really so wrong to live in the real world, and to ask to be told the truth?

'The Common Ancient Traditions' also raise chronological question. They seem to be marooned in the first millennium pp 29-38). As soon as we reach 'the Middle Ages' (p38) we are apparently no longer in the period of 'common ancient traditions' and the tone of the survey subtly moves from the deferential to the dismissive. ARIC seems to take the view that if fifth century Greeks wrote extravagant poetry about Mary (p36), this was 'flourishing'; if fifteenth century Latins did the same, we look disdainfully down our donnish noses and murmur 'florid' (p41). If 'late medievals' had popularised devotions to Mary with the refrain "Most Holy Mother of God, save us", this would be a matter of some embarrassment to

ecumenists. When post-Chalcedonian Orientals do it, nobody bats an eyelid. The reasons are clear: not only is it still politically incorrect to be too rude to Orthodox, but, additionally, protestant ecumenists have a vested interest in maintaining the 'corruption' of the late Middle Ages in order to preserve the necessity of the 'Reformation'; and catholic ecumenists are too polite to suggest that the Reformation emperors have no clothes. Historians (Duffy, Scarisbrick, Haigh) have exploded the myth of Medieval Decadence, but in the happy never-never land of Ecumenia it is convenient to maintain a fiction from which the historians have now walked away.

THE DIOCESE OF EXETER AND THE RESURRECTION OF MARY

Problematic as it is to confine 'the common ancient traditions' to the first millennium, if one does so there are entertaining logical consequences. *Mary* recalls (p36) the ancient prayer *Sub tuum praesidium* and reminds readers of its immense antiquity and of its widespread use ecumenically ("Ambrosian, Roman, Byzantine, and Coptic"). Here in the Diocese of Exeter we are immensely proud that one of our greatest bishops, the nearly-canonised Edward Lacy, a doughty defender of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, loved this prayer and ordered it to be said daily after Evensong.

So here we have a piece of Tradition which is indubitably Ancient and Common. And the Diocese of Exeter has more riches to offer ARIC in the reconstruction of the Common Ancient Traditions of the first millennium. One of our most venerable relics is the Leofric Missal. Before it was taken to Exeter by the eleventh century bishop who transferred the see from Crediton, it had a highly significant history. A superb recent edition of it shows that it

had previously been the Pontifical of the Archbishops of Canterbury, who used it, adapted it, and added to it; that there is a strong probability of its text type going back to the liturgical materials which S Augustine brought with him from Rome. Its texts for the vigil and feast of the Assumption are largely identical with those of the so-called Gregorian Sacramentary, the book which Charlemagne acquired from Rome to be the basis of his reforms throughout mainland western Europe. And what do those texts, so manifestly Ancient and Common, teach about the Assumption of our Lady?

That she "underwent temporal death"; that nevertheless she "could not be held down by the bonds of death" and that the precise reason why God "translated her from this Age" was "that she might faithfully intercede for our sins". In other words, these texts, common to Rome and Canterbury (and Exeter), express the tradition common also to eastern Christians, that Mary died and was resurrected. So here we have the Ancient Common Tradition, expressed liturgically (*lex orandi lex credendi*), which was the faith of S Odo, S Dunstan, S Aelfheah, S Aethelnoth, S Eadsige and very probably of so many other Archbishops of Canterbury stretching behind Plegmund (890-914) to S Augustine. Normative, surely?

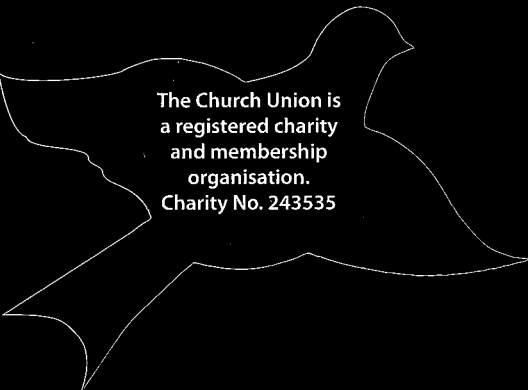
PIUS XII: REFORMER

Yet that is not what Pius XII defined in 1950. His definition, as *Mary* records, does not "use about her the language of death and resurrection, but celebrates the action of God in her". In other words, Pius XII reduced the Common Ancient Tradition about our Lady's end by pruning away even the bare bones of the Ancient Common apocryphal stories. His decree was not the imposition of some new dogma but the elimination of 99% of what the Ancient Common Tradition had asserted. Those whose instinctive disposition is to avoid speculation

about our Lady's end ought to applaud Pius XII and the radical austerity of his definition for going almost all the way to meet them.

What do we need if we are to unite to proclaim the Gospel of our only Redeemer? The common denominators within our two communions are not good enough; Liberals deny the uniqueness of Jesus, the emptiness of the tomb, the normativeness of heterosexual marriage. Uniting around what historians can show to be Common Ancient Traditions would encumber us with teaching the death and resurrection of Mary. What is left, if not the glorious truth of Scripture proclaimed, protected, by the living magisterium of the Catholic Church?

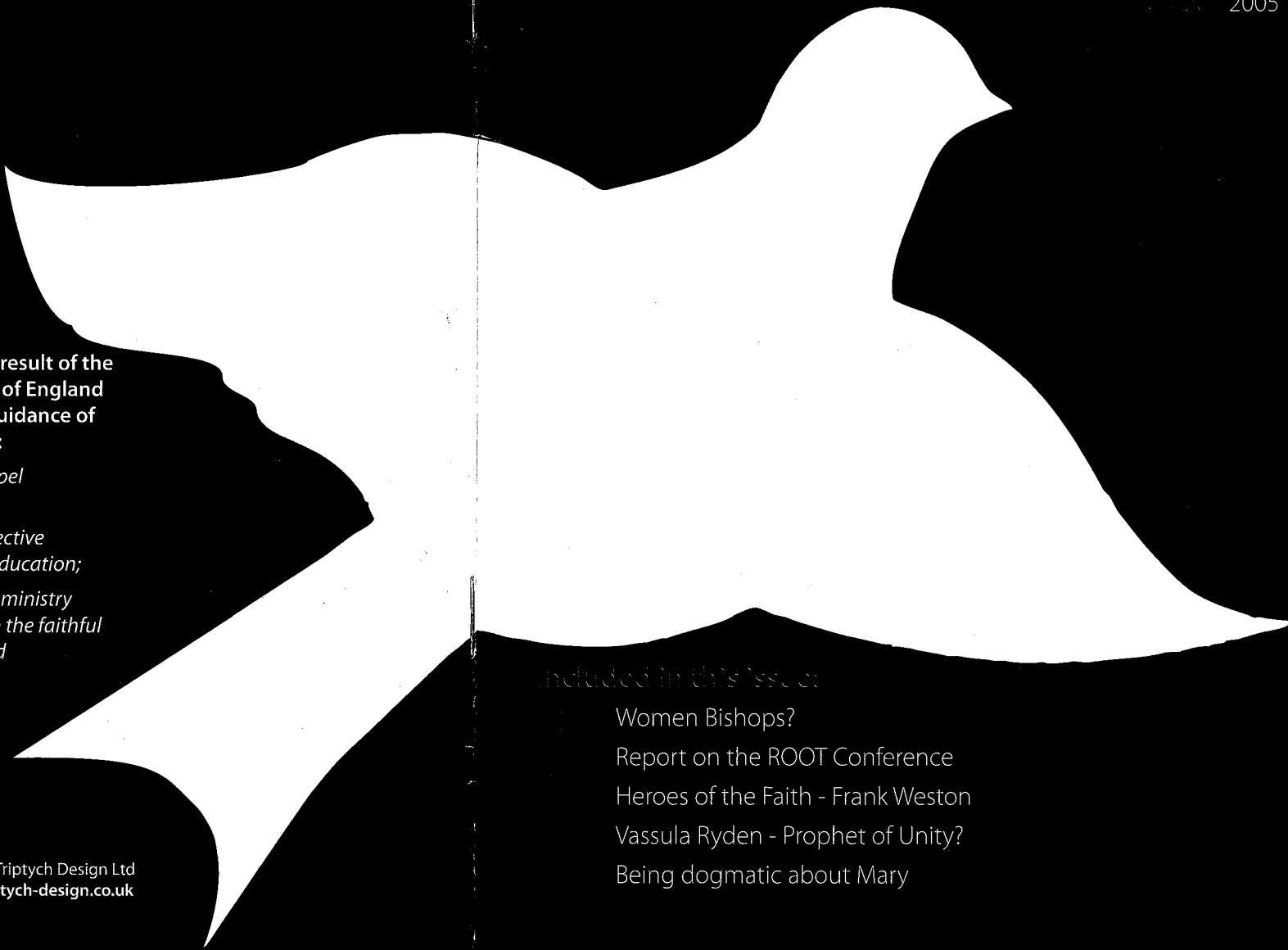




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The Church Union was founded as a result of the
Catholic Revival to recall the Church of England
to her Catholic identity. Under the guidance of
the Holy Spirit we commit ourselves:

*To evangelise and proclaim the Gospel
to all who will hear;*

*To build up the Body of Christ by effective
means of Christian formation and education;*

*To support clergy in their distinctive ministry
and to encourage all the baptised in the faithful
witness and joyful service of the Lord*

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Women Bishops?

Report on the ROOT Conference

Heroes of the Faith - Frank Weston

Vassula Ryden - Prophet of Unity?

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