

Mary and Christian Unity

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INTRODUCTION

Marian theology was one of the areas, where differences of views existed between different Christian Churches in the Post-Reformation period. Some Protestant theologians have claimed that Mariology is by definition a controversial subject, and has been one of the major roadblocks in ecumenical dialogue. For example, Karl Barth, the Reform theologian, saw Mariology as *the* heresy of the Roman Catholic Church and as one of the major stumbling blocks in the process of the unity of all Christians.¹ On the other hand, there are also many theologians belonging to other Christian Churches who have spoken positively on the Virgin Mother of God, and even as the source of Christian unity. In the year 1963 Max Thurian of the ecumenical community of Taizé said,

Instead of being a cause of division among us, Christian reflection on the role of the Virgin Mary should be a cause for rejoicing and a source of prayer. Too often, through fear and contrariness, Protestants have not dared to meditate freely on what the Gospel tells us about the Mother of the Lord. Because she played such a distinguished part in the Incarnation of the Son of God, it is both theologically essential and spiritually profitable to consider the vocation of Mary with some freedom.²

In this way, while admitting that people belonging to other Christian Churches need to have a re-look at Mary of Scripture, he has invited Roman

Catholics also to have a serious look at the Marian teachings of the past and to avoid them. He insisted that the reform on both sides was the need of the hour. In the beginning, the participants in the dialogue focused more on the area of convergence than opening up “supposedly ‘neuralgic’ questions.”³ However, in the course of time they were also willing to discuss openly the disagreements on Marian issues too. Towards this objective there had been a number of ecumenical dialogues on Mary.

1. FAITH AND ORDER MOVEMENT

Traces of ecumenical reflections on Mary could already be found in the discussions of the Faith and Order Movement. The Orthodox Churches, in the first World Faith and Order Conference at Lausanne, Switzerland (1927) raised their voice for a discussion on the role of Mary within the economy of salvation. Nevertheless, there was only a firm negative answer to the demands of the Orthodox Churches from other member Churches.⁴ They dismissed the proposal of the Orthodox Churches, saying that Mary was a “Catholic substance”.⁵ In 1937 the Faith and Order Movement held its meeting in Edinburgh from August 3-18 during which one could already witness a wave of change in its attitude. In the discussion on the theme *the Communion of Saints*, it acknowledged that there was communion between the living church and the heavenly church: “For the Orthodox and certain other Churches and individual believers, ... it means fellowship not only with living and departed Christians but also with the holy angels, and, in a very special sense, with the Blessed Virgin Mary”.⁶ The third meeting of the Faith and Order Movement held at Lund, Sweden (1952) made a reference to the veneration of Mary in its discussion on the *Communion of Saints*. It pointed out that the worship of Mary and intercession to her were causes of deep divergence among the Christian communities.⁷ However, in recent documents of the Faith and Order Movement, Mary has been accepted as the example of Christian life and as a disciple by all the Churches.⁸

2. MARIAN/MARIOLOGICAL CONGRESSES

In 1950, the year of the proclamation of the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary, there started the First International Mariological Congress (i.e., the eighth Marian Congress). It took place in Rome and discussed the theme *Alma Socia Christi*.⁹ This Congress, while discussing Mary's association with Christ in the redemptive work, reflected clearly the Mariological trends of the decades of 1920-1950. The Second International Mariological Congress was held in 1954 with the theme *Virgo Immaculata*. The Third International Mariological Congress that was held at Lourdes in 1958 had its theme as *Maria et Ecclesia*.¹⁰

On 2 February 1965, Pope Paul VI, in his address to the members who were to participate in the Fourth International Mariological Congress a month later in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, expressed "his hopes that the participants would help to clarify the pure fonts of Marian devotion in Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, the liturgy, the theological reflections of scholars in the sacred sciences, and the traditional teaching of the Eastern and Western Church".¹¹ Thus it was the Fourth Mariological Congress that had for the first time an ecumenical outreach. The Fifth International Mariological Congress was held in Lisbon, Portugal in the year 1967. Here the Catholic participants promised that they would make a serious study of the issues raised by their brothers and sisters from the other Churches. In the next meeting that was held in Zagreb, now in Croatia (then Yugoslavia) (1971), the members pointed out that their analysis of the Marian history showed them that in the pre-Reformation period "Marian piety was truly Christo-centric".¹² The next meeting in Rome (1975) took up the theme on the role of Mary in redemption. It insisted on the dogma of Christ as the irreplaceable Mediator and spoke of Mary as a collaborator in the work of redemption of Christ.¹³ The Zaragossa Congress (1979) took up the question of different forms of Marian devotion such as praising, imitating, venerating and invoking Mary. The members of this Congress acknowledged that among these four elements in the devotion to Mary, there were strong agreements

on three levels –praise, imitation and veneration. No consensus was possible, however, with regard to the invocation. The Ninth Mariological Congress at Malta (1983) dealt with the role of Mary in the communion of saints. Here certain consensus was reached on the aspect of Mary praying *with* the Church, as she prayed in preparation for Pentecost (Acts 1:14).¹⁴ The Tenth Mariological Congress at Kevelaer (then West Germany) in 1987 discussed ‘The Devotion to Mary from about 1800 to the eve of Vatican II’. Here too there was insistence on the invocation of saints and Mary¹⁵ The Eleventh Mariological Congress (1992) was held in Huelva in Spain on the theme ‘Marian Doctrine, Devotion and Cult from Vatican Council II up to Our Day’. The Twelfth International Mariological Congress (1996) was held in Czestochowa in Poland on the theme ‘Mary, Mother of the Lord, in the Mystery of Salvation as Celebrated in the Eastern and Western Churches’. The Thirteenth Mariological Congress (2000) that was held in Rome had as its theme ‘Mary and the Mystery of the Holy Trinity’. The Fourteenth Mariological Congress (2004) that was held also in Rome, had the theme ‘Mary of Nazareth Welcomes the Son of God into History’. The Fifteenth meeting of the Mariological Congress was held in Lourdes in 2008. All these Mariological Congresses kept up the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

3. THE ECUMENICAL SOCIETY OF THE BVM

Besides these Mariological Congresses, there was also the *Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary (ESBVM)* that had been seriously involved in the ecumenical reflections on Mary. This society was founded in London by H. Martin Gillett, a Roman Catholic Layman in the year 1967. Comprised of Lutherans, Reformed and Methodists along with Anglicans, Catholics, and Orthodox, it aimed at promoting ecumenical reflections on the place of Mary in the Church under Christ. Although it holds annual ecumenical meetings on Mary, it has not published any official or unofficial statement so far. Besides England, this society has spread to other countries.

Now there are five societies that are devoted to Mariological studies which meet periodically and come out with publications of their proceedings.¹⁶

4. ECUMENICAL DIALOGUES ON MARY

Besides the efforts of the Faith and Order Movement, Marian Congresses and ESBVM there are some ecumenical dialogues that took place between different Churches. Though we do not discuss them in detail, we highlight the conclusions reached in these ecumenical dialogues.

4.1. The Old Catholic – Orthodox Conversations

The Old Catholics and the Orthodox Christians, in their agreed statement on Christology – *the Old Catholic – Orthodox Conversations of 1975 and 1977*¹⁷ – confirmed the dogma of Mary as *Theotokos*. Though the dogma of the Assumption of Mary had no place in this statement it encouraged the people to solemnly celebrate the entry of the mother of God into eternal life – the dormition. This report affirmed that their Churches ascribed to Mary a relative sinlessness by grace, from the time the Holy Spirit descended upon her. Hence they too asserted that Jesus Christ alone is sinless absolutely and ontologically.¹⁸ The Old Catholic – Orthodox report affirmed that their Churches recognized Mary as intercessor for the humans before God without any detriment to the unique mediatorship of Jesus Christ. It acknowledged that though their Churches call Mary *Mediatrice (mesiteia)* in the hymns of the Churches, this term was used only in the limited sense of intercessor and not as *Co-redemptrix*.¹⁹

4.2. The Final Report

Pentecostals are the farthest removed from the Roman Catholic Church regarding the teachings on Mary. In *the Final Report of the Dialogue between the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and Some Classical Pentecostals (1977-1982)*²⁰, the Pentecostal Churches made it very clear that they could not go beyond the clear meaning of the New Testament and added that the New Testament contained no reference to

the Marian dogmas.²¹ Though there was an agreement on the title *Theotokos*, the Final Report pointed out that this definition of Mary was not a Marian definition, as if giving Mary a new title, but a Christological definition concerning the identity of Jesus Christ. It claimed that it was only at the moment of incarnation that Mary became the Mother of God. Hence she was not the Mother of God, in His eternal triune existence, but the Mother of God the Son, in his incarnation. Pentecostals agreed that Mary was a virgin in the conception of Jesus. However, they have been commonly maintaining that in Scripture, we find ample records to say that Mary had other offspring and lived as the wife of Joseph in the full sense. According to them, there is no basis for the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception in Scripture, and hence they do not find any value for salvation in this doctrine. They acknowledged the Catholic assurance that the special grace claimed for Mary was a redeeming grace which came from Jesus that placed her in the community of the redeemed. Similarly with regard to the dogma of the Assumption, the Pentecostal difficulty rests in the absence of biblical evidence. *The Final Report* too said that Pentecostals, for their part, would not invoke the intercession of Mary or other saints in heaven, as they do not consider it to be a valid biblical practice. For the Pentecostals certain Roman Catholic practices of Marian veneration appear to be superstitious and idolatrous.²²

4.3. The Evangelical – Roman Catholic Dialogue

Along with Pentecostals, Evangelical Christians too reject the Marian teaching and devotion of Roman Catholics. In *The Evangelical – Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (1977-1984)*²³, the focus was given to interpretation of the Catholic documents such as *Marialis Cultus* and chapter eight of *Lumen Gentium*, where Marian dogmas figured predominantly. Evangelicals saw the issue of Mariology as an obstacle to agreement on missions, as they thought that Roman Catholics have elevated Mary to the realm of almost a co-redeemer. However, Evangelicals too acknowledge to an extent the role of Mary in their tradition, though they differ by and large from Roman Catholics.

4.4. Baptist – Roman Catholic Dialogue

The Baptist – Roman Catholic dialogue that took place in 1988 dealt with the theme *Summons to Witness to Christ in Today's World* in which the Marian issues were also discussed in brief.²⁴ The Baptists pointed out two major problems in the Marian devotion of the Roman Catholic Church. First, according to them any unique intercessory role for Mary or any other saint on earth or in heaven, compromises the sole mediatorship of Jesus as Lord and Saviour; so they reject any other mediator apart from Christ. Secondly, the Marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950 proclaimed by the Roman Catholic Church as infallible, and so to be believed in faith, have little explicit grounding in the Bible. They opposed also recognizing Mary as the icon of the Church, as it had no biblical foundation.²⁵

4.5. LUTHERAN – ROMAN CATHOLIC DIALOGUE

The Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians came up with a common statement *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary* which was published in 1992.²⁶ Though the core aim of the document was to affirm the uniqueness of Christ and his justifying grace, it also explained the past and present Marian devotional practices and respect for saints in both Churches. There was also certain consensus on different Marian issues in this dialogue. For instance, *Theotokos* was recognised as a model of the justified saint. It recognized the justification of Mary by grace through faith and Mary as an icon of the Church, although no consensus was reached on the implication of her role in the life of the faithful.²⁷ Besides, the Lutherans expressed that they respected the saints for their exemplary life and for their obedience to God while they lived on earth for which they need to be honoured and imitated. In this regard they considered Mary to be the pre-eminent member in the company of saints. They felt that the veneration of saints by Roman Catholics was not idolatry. In response, the Catholics appreciated the honour given by Luther and many Lutherans to Mary. The Lutherans never denied the saints praying for the Church on earth; however, they questioned the essential role played by them in the salvation of others, since their insistence was always

on the sole sufficiency and merits of Christ. Thus they raised their difficulty in placing their trust in Mary and saints. The Catholics, on their part though never denied Christ as the sole mediator, said that He empowers the saints to cooperate with him. The Catholics pointed out that they portrayed Mary only to be a submissive woman and emphasized the need of portraying her as a responsible disciple as well as the model of the Church. Despite all these encouraging ecumenical signs, they could not reach a consensus on three issues: the invocation as distinct from the veneration of Mary (*The One Mediator*, 80-83) and the two Marian doctrines of 1854 and 1950 (*The One Mediator*, 84-89).²⁸

4.6. The Joint Statement of British Methodists and Catholics

The Joint Statement of British Methodists and Catholics: *Mary, Mother of the Lord: Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness: Towards a Shared Understanding* (hereafter *MML*), published in 1995,²⁹ focused its attention more on the theme of sanctification and responsible grace. Methodists insist on the utter gratuitousness of God's grace and reject the salvation by merits or works. However, Methodist theology though sets out no limitation to the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, encourages all the faithful to "press on to full salvation".³⁰ Hence the British Catholic – Methodist dialogue was able to make the statement that Methodists and Catholics recognise the need for human beings to co-operate in the mystery of salvation. So, the Joint Statement in its concluding paragraph affirmed, "In Mary, we see what great things God can do in a human life freely and fully surrendered and opened to his grace. She sums up the faithful discipleship and perfect holiness to which each of us is called, and embodies in herself the vocation and destiny of the Church" (*MML*, 42).

4.7. The Groupe des Dombes

The *Groupe des Dombes's* document *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints: Towards a Common Christian Understanding* (hereafter *Dombes*) was the fruit of seven years (1991-1998) of meetings and study. This document focused more on the

controversies over grace and response. The document objected against any use of the language of mediation of Mary that is not subordinate to Christ, the sole Mediator (*Dombes*, 210). Thus the term ‘co-operation’ has to be understood as something where the grace of God allows one to respond (*Dombes*, 220). This response of human beings too “is both the work of God’s grace and human freedom stirred by grace. Hence, this document made an attempt to strike a balance between the Catholics’ emphasis on the nature of ‘engraced response’ and the Protestants’ stress on the sovereignty of God: “Passivity in the presence of grace, faith’s “letting itself be moved” by grace – these are the source of a new activity; receptivity turns into obedience” (*Dombes*, 219).

4.8. The ARCIC Agreed Statement

ARCIC is the official instrument of theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church. The Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) is the first international, officially commissioned bilateral dialogue that took up for discussion the role of Mary in the Church. This Agreed Statement *MGHC* focused its attention mainly on the Roman Catholic teachings on the Marian dogmas that Mary was conceived in a special way without sin and that she was taken to heaven at the end of her life.

In rearticulating the Marian dogma of 1854, the Commission highlights some scriptural texts that portray the care of God for his servants before the time of birth (Jer 1: 5) and His grace preceding their conception. The Statement affirms that in Mary’s acceptance of God’s invitation to be a virgin mother, we could see “her prior preparation” from the very beginning of her existence (*MGHC*, 55). This is the reason for Mary being addressed as ‘graced’ by Gabriel and being declared as “blessed among women” by Elizabeth (*MGHC*, 54). These affirmations are linked by ARCIC with the dogma of the Immaculate Conception: “In view of her vocation to be the mother of the Holy One (Lk 1:35), we can affirm together that Christ’s redeeming work reached ‘back’ in Mary to the depths of her being, and to

her earliest beginnings” (*MGHC*, 59). Thus moving from the end of her life to the beginning, the Statement says that we can see God’s redemptive grace filling Mary right from her conception.

ARCIC is honest in acknowledging that there is neither direct scriptural reference nor historical evidence to prove the Assumption of Mary to heaven. However, the analogy of the Old Testament figure of Elijah, who was taken up into heaven in a whirlwind and the penitent thief on the cross with Jesus, who was promised a place in paradise immediately, are quoted in the text. Besides them, Stephen (Acts 7: 54-60), and Enoch (Gen 5:24) are also mentioned in the Statement. By quoting these analogies, the Statement affirms that it was fitting that Mary, the closest disciple of Christ, was taken up to heaven at the time of her death (*MGHC*, 56-57). ARCIC insists that this dogma of the Assumption of Mary is to be understood and explained in an apocalyptic and eschatological context, as all graces are oriented only towards the end of final glory. Here a link is made between the dogma of the Assumption of Mary and the grace and hope that was operative in the life of Mary. Hence in the case of Mary, it was realized at the end of her life and became a sign of hope for all. Thus the Commission here explains the dogma of the Assumption from the logic of hope and glory. One should also acknowledge that Scripture offers foundations for the belief that those who follow God’s purposes faithfully will be drawn to the presence of God. Hence, though Scripture does not directly bear testimony with regard to the end of the life of Mary (*MGHC*, 56), ARCIC argues, “it is fitting that the Lord gathered her wholly to himself: in Christ, she is already a new creation” (*MGHC*, 57). Thus the Statement reads: “we can affirm together the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory as consonant with the Scripture and that it can, indeed, only be understood in the light of the Scripture. Roman Catholics can recognize that this teaching about Mary is contained in the dogma” (*MGHC*, 58).

CONCLUSION

When we look at all these ecumenical dialogues, we see that there has been a positive progress from all the Christian Churches. The Protestant brethren who in the initial stage dismissed Mary as ‘Catholic stuff’ came to the level of admitting the place of Mary as found in Scripture. There has also been a clear admission from the side of the Protestant Churches, that they have largely ignored giving a proper place to Mary. On the part of the Roman Catholic Church, there has been a clear acceptance of some excessive Marian devotion in the past; they too have admitted that Marian teaching ought to be more scriptural and Christological.

Footnotes

- ¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1955), 143.
- ² Max Thurian, *Mary, Mother of the Lord, Figure of the Church* (London: Faith, 1963), 7.
- ³ David Carter, “Discussion Paper: Ecumenical Dialogue on Mary,” *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies* 2 (2001), 105.
- ⁴ David Carter, “Mary in Ecumenical Dialogue and Exchange,” in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London: Continuum, 2007), 340.
- ⁵ George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996), 249.
- ⁶ See, Second World Conference on Faith and Order, “Final Report, IV: The Communion of Saints, nos. 50-62,” in *A Documentary History of the Faith and Order Movement, 1927-1963*, ed. Lukas Vischer (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1963), 50.
- ⁷ John A. Radano, “Toward the Great Jubilee 2000: Mary and the Search for Christian Unity,” *Marian Studies* 48 (1997), 25-26.
- ⁸ The document speaks of Mary as “an *important example* for all who seek to understand the full dimensions of life in Christian Community”. See, *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*, Faith and Order Paper No. 151 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 64. The other document of Faith and Order speaks of Mary as the “example par excellence of our discipleship”. See, *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication*

- of the Apostolic Faith as It is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*, Faith and Order Paper No. 151 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), no. 122.
- ⁹ Donal Flanagan, "The Church and Our Mary," in *The Evolving Church*, ed. Donal Flanagan (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son Ltd, 1966), 148.
 - ¹⁰ Flanagan, "The Church and Our Mary," 148-149.
 - ¹¹ Frederick M. Jelly, "Mariology and Ecumenism - Reflections upon 1965-1990," in *Mater Fidei et Fidelium: Collected Essays to Honor Théodore Koehler on His 80th Birthday (Marian Library Studies, Vol. 17-23)* (Dayton: University of Dayton, 1985-1991), 547.
 - ¹² Eamon R. Carroll, "Ecumenical Roundtables at International Mariological Congresses," in *Mater Fidei et Fidelium: Collected Essays to Honor Théodore Koehler on His 80th Birthday (Marian Library Studies, Vol. 17-23)* (Dayton: University of Dayton, 1985-1991), 569.
 - ¹³ The entire statement of this Congress is found in, Carroll, "Ecumenical Roundtables at International Mariological Congresses," 570-571.
 - ¹⁴ As cited in, Carroll, "Ecumenical Roundtables at International Mariological Congresses," 575.
 - ¹⁵ The entire text is found in, Pierre Masson, "An Ecumenical Approach: The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Unity," in *Mater Fidei et Fidelium: Collected Essays to Honor Théodore Koehler on His 80th Birthday (Marian Library Studies Vol. 17-23)*, Marian Library Studies (Dayton, Ohio: University of Dayton, 1985-1991), 587-589.
 - ¹⁶ The Mariological Society was founded in America, Spain, France, Germany and Italy. Eamon R. Carroll, "Review of Marian Literature," in *Mary for Time and Eternity*, ed. William M. McLoughlin and Jill Pinnock (Leominster: Gracewing, 2007), 49-50.
 - ¹⁷ *The Agreed Statement on Christology – The Conversation of the Old Catholics and the Orthodox* is found in, Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, eds., *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 399-401.
 - ¹⁸ Kevin McDonald, "Mary in Recent Ecumenical Documents," *One in Christ* 22 (1986), 382.
 - ¹⁹ Meyer and Vischer, eds., *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, 400.
 - ²⁰ "Final Report of the Dialogue between the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church and Some Classical Pentecostals 1977-1982," in *Deepening Communion: International Ecumenical Documents with Roman Catholic Participation*, ed. William G. Rusch and Jeffrey Gros

- (Washington, D. C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 379-397. In this final report the Marian issues are discussed under the heading "Perspectives on Mary" from paragraph number 58 to 85.
- ²¹ McDonald, "Mary in Recent Ecumenical Documents," 381.
- ²² "Final Report of the Dialogue," no. 63-76.
- ²³ "The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984," in *Deepening Communion: International Ecumenical Documents with Roman Catholic Participation*, ed. William G. Rusch and Jeffrey Gros (Washington, D. C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 399-437. In this, agreed statement *The Role of Mary in Salvation* is found on pages 418-420.
- ²⁴ The summary of the Baptist-Roman Catholic dialogue is found in "Summons to Witness to Christ in Today's World: July 23, 1988," in *Deepening Communion: International Ecumenical Documents with Roman Catholic Participation*, ed. William G. Rusch and Jeffrey Gros (Washington, D. C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 343-359. The agreements and disagreements on Marian issues are found in paragraphs 56-57.
- ²⁵ See, "Summons to Witness to Christ in Today's World: July 23, 1988," no. 56-57.
- ²⁶ Hereafter this common statement is referred within the text as *The One Mediator* along with the paragraph numbers of the text. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph A. Burgess, *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII* (Augsburg: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).
- ²⁷ George H. Tavard, "The Role of the Virgin Mary in Ecumenical Dialogue," *One in Christ* 33 (1997), 224-225.
- ²⁸ Michael Hurley, "Ecumenism and Mariology Today," *One in Christ* 36 (2000), 304.
- ²⁹ British Methodist/Roman Catholic Committee, *Mary, Mother of the Lord: Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness - Towards a Shared Understanding* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1995).
- ³⁰ Carter, "Discussion Paper: Ecumenical Dialogue on Mary," 111.