

All Generations Shall Call me Blessed

*Dr. D. Alphonse
Anandhan Nagar, Nagercoil*

Introduction

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been aptly described as the woman with thousand faces. What is so amazing and even puzzling is the fact that the persona of these thousand faces was a poor and most probably an illiterate village woman of Nazareth who called herself 'the lowly servant' (Lk 1: 48) and she has been, down the centuries, venerated as the Mother of God, invoked as the semi- divine mediatrix, contemplated and celebrated as the queen of heaven and earth, exalted and exemplified as the model of the Church and referred to with innumerable other glorious titles. In fact, Christians of every country and culture, epoch and context have exhibited their creative best to confer on her their highest honorifics and the greatest glories. So much so she has remained the most recognized and honored woman in the entire human history. The acerbic criticisms of the Protestant Reformers and the corrective measures by Vat. II did little to deter the Catholics from continuing, though after a brief lull, their perennial process of projecting upon her idealized images that would correspond to their picture of perfect womanhood or serve as the answer to their aspirations and needs.

A similar process can also be identified as being at work in the reflections of the Mariologists of various periods. Their approaches to the understanding of Mary have varied down the ages and at every epoch they have articulated her mystery in tune with the spirit and temper of their times.

Thus shifts have taken place from the Christotypical to the ecclesiotypical understanding, from the glorious queen image to that of the poor and humble maiden of Nazareth, from the most powerful mediator of all heavenly graces to that of the model of liberation etc. Though all these have significantly contributed towards a richer understanding of her some others, despite their early promising outlook, have proven themselves basically flawed and have come to dead ends. In this article I shall attempt to first describe briefly these dead end approaches of the recent times and then proceed to elaborate a little more in detail some of the most dominant contemporary approaches to the understanding of Mary. They are the symbolic, liberational, and ecumenical approaches. As models of understanding a multi-dimensional and kaleidoscopic mystery, though they significantly differ from one another they also tend to overlap and are in many aspects complementary.

1. Dead End Approaches

Elizabeth Johnson has briefly described two approaches which she considers as having reached dead ends. They are the ones that hold up Mary as the *ideal feminine* and as *the maternal face of God*. Here I would like to first discuss briefly her arguments and conclusion and proceed to present another such approach which, though traditional, is still popular among the ecclesiastical fringe groups of Marian maximalism. That is the attribution to Mary of the closely interrelated roles and titles of co-redeemer and mediatrix of all graces.

Mary as the Ideal Feminine: Right from the second quarter of the twentieth century theologians have suggested, under the growing impact of Psychology and other human sciences, that Mary is the fullest and most perfect realization of the ideal womanhood. Though Teilhard de Chardin had already in the 1950s written a poem on the theme of Mary as the eternal feminine, and which Henri de Lubac has extensively commented upon, it is

later theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Pope John Paul II who have presented much more elaborated and idealized presentations of Mary as the most perfect embodiment of all womanly qualities. Thus according to Boff, she is the humble, obedient, silent and self-effacing maiden who is always at the service of others and becomes the supreme revelation of the femininity of God himself.

For Balthasar who considers the receptive and non-assertive role of the wife in a patriarchal family as the perfect model to describe the human response to God's love, grace and saving action, Mary is the supreme example of such human response to God. "With typically feminine virtues she is silent, self-effacing, self-giving, lovingly obedient, and so forth." In and because of these qualities she becomes the model of the Church which is the bride prepared for and presented to the bridegroom Christ and with which only she can bear fruit by becoming totally receptive to His Spirit. Though such Marian dimension of being totally receptive and responsive to the Spirit in selfless obedience is what constitutes the essential dimension of the Church there is also the complementary Petrine dimension of the hierarchy which mediates the Spirit so that the obedience of the Church can be rightly directed and governed. Of course, there is also the Pauline dimension which is expressed in its missionary activities. But what concerns us here is Balthasar's profile of Mary as the ideal bride of the Spirit in her total selflessness and obedience.

Pope John Paul II on the one hand unequivocally affirms and teaches the equality of women with men as persons before God. However, he holds up the prevalent cultural view that men and women can and have to actualize their humanness in two different ways. And "woman can only find herself by giving love to others." For she is by her very nature different from man and has special qualities proper to femininity. And so, under no condition women should succumb to the temptation of masculinization of themselves. Though

the pope does not clearly spell out what are the masculine qualities that a woman should never appropriate they certainly include, as Johnson points out, "assertiveness, rational argument and independent action." Mary, for the pope, is the archetype of such femininity, "the fullness of perfection of what is characteristic of woman, what is feminine." This is because the typical feminine qualities of "self-offering totality of love, the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows, the limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work, the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement" are fully realized in her, especially in her motherhood which is the vocation of all women, either in the physical or spiritual order. Mary, according to the pope, eminently exemplifies what it means to be a woman in the reign of God and becomes the model for all women.

Elizabeth Johnson rightly critiques these variant versions of portraying Mary as the ideal feminine on the grounds that they are based on gender dichotomy; cultural gender stereotyping, dualistic anthropology and above all not in accordance with the Mary of the New Testament Gospels and Acts. Gender dichotomy is a patriarchal construct which places men and women at the opposite ends of the human spectrum and highlights their different qualities and not what is common to them. In such a view, though their differing qualities are considered as complementary, men and women are not regarded as equal partners. Rather the assignment of the different qualities is derived from patriarchal cultures in which women are excluded from positions of power, opportunities of learning and full development of their selves as well as exercising their due role in the public life of their society. Rather they are placed lower in the social hierarchy and restricted to roles which are socially less influential, culturally less dignified, economically less rewarding, politically least powerful and physically more tedious.

Celebrating Mary as the ideal feminine who most perfectly embodied such qualities and fulfilled such roles assigned to women by patriarchal cultures neither serves the cause of women's liberation nor does it do justice to the New Testament portrait of Mary. For it presents her also as a courageous, assertive, questioning, independent woman, qualities which patriarchal cultures associate with men, and as one who does not always play by the rules and roles set by patriarchy. In fact she is presented in the New Testament as a woman who had the best and highest of human qualities and not merely just what are considered as mere feminine virtues.

The Maternal Face of God: Another approach to the Marian mystery that follows from the understanding of her as the ideal feminine is that she is the maternal face of God. Though this understanding has sustained much of the popular devotion to Mary all through the ages it has been explicitly articulated only in recent decades. The most far reaching of such articulations is that of Leonardo Boff who claims that the Holy Spirit is the feminine person in the Trinity vis-a-vis the other two persons who are males, the Father and the Son. He goes on to claim that as the divine Son, *Logos*, became incarnate in Jesus who was a male, so the Holy Spirit, being the divine feminine, needed an earthly woman to incarnate the feminine dimension of God. Boff asserts that Mary is that woman in whom the Holy Spirit is incarnate: "... the Holy Spirit has made her his temple, sanctuary, and tabernacle in so real and genuine a way that she is regarded as hypostatically united to the Third Person of the Blessed trinity."

Such feminine divinization of Mary has its roots in the historical fact that she replaced, at least in popular imagination and devotion, the great Mother Goddess venerated in various forms and names in the Mediterranean countries. Not only various shrines and temples of female deities of the Greco-Roman world were replaced or rededicated to Mary but also the many elements of their cult such as the iconography, titles, functions, prayers

and hymns associated with them were transferred to Mary with the needed modifications. Such divinization of Mary, at least in the minds of ordinary people, was further greatly facilitated by the dogmatic definition of Mary as the Mother of God (*Theotokos*) by the general council of Ephesus in 431. The subtle distinction the Council made that Mary is the mother of the incarnate Son of God not in his divinity but in his humanity was not always clearly perceived by the simple Christians who found it easier to identify the title mother of God with mother Goddess.

Another theological development that greatly contributed to the elevation of Mary as the female counterpart of the patriarchal God was the increasing tendency to move away from Jesus' understanding of God as Abba and to regard Him more and more as King, in the model of human monarchs, though heavenly and supreme, almighty and all just. He also became the ultimate cosmic moralist, the originator of all the ecclesiastical and civil laws and the stern and strict final judge who rewarded the observants of the laws with entry into heaven and punished with condemnation to hellfire those who violated them.

While preachers constantly threatened the believers with the tortures and torments of the eternal hellfire to which God, the all male almighty heavenly King, can consign the sinners to, popular piety craved for a God who is much more human and humane, understanding and approachable. Gradually, Mary emerged as such a maternal divine figure embodying all the feminine qualities such as tender love, boundless compassion and never-failing forgiveness. She would not only intercede with an angry God in favor of sinful human beings but also exercise her maternal power over Him in order to restrain His raging anger against them.

However, such divinization of Mary, first of all is based on a faulty patriarchal understanding of God as male king in the mold of ancient monarchs and medieval despots. For, though the Old Testament predominantly presents

God as king it also often portrays Him with maternal qualities and even alludes to God as a mother. Anyway, assigning femininity to the Holy Spirit and masculinity to God the Father and the Son is not only unbiblical but also runs counter to the magisterial teaching of the Church. For if the Holy Spirit is referred to in feminine terms so also is the second person of the Trinity, identifiable as the Wisdom in the Old Testament, in feminine nouns such as *Hokhma* in Hebrew and *Sophia* in Greek. Also, the Church's doctrine has always held that the Trinity is the communion of three different persons having only one nature which has qualities that we regard as both paternal and maternal. All the three persons have one and the same divine nature which includes the male and the female, though it transcends them. This is indicated in the story of creation in which it is both the human male and the female who together constitute God's image and likeness (Gen 1:27). Therefore the gender dualism that Boff speaks of as existing in the Trinity goes against its unity of nature. All this radically challenges his view that the Holy Spirit is incarnate in Mary. Besides, such a view has no basis in the Christian Scriptures nor in the magisterial or theological tradition of the past two thousand years.

Co-Redeemer and Mediatrix of All Graces: Two more related titles which the Marian movement has sought to make popular are those of Mary the co-redeemer and mediatrix of all graces. It has also made repeated attempts to have at least one of them declared as a doctrine of the faith by its persistent appeals to the recent popes. Such efforts reached their crescendo just before and during Vat. II.

Such titles have their roots in the medieval Marian principle of *similarity* which flowed from the other two principles of *suitability* and *singularity*. These triple principles are the fall-out of the axiom *decurit, potuit, fecit* enunciated by Duns Scotus in the 13th century in the context of the discussion on Mary's immaculate conception. Once *suitability* became the operating

principle for attributing to Mary every glory and privilege God could bestow on her, she came to be more and more seen as a singular person unlike any other human being. This principle of *singularity* soon gave rise to that of *similarity* in so far to the extent Mary is totally singular and very dissimilar to us, the more she would be like Jesus. This principle of similarity with Jesus led to the attribution to Mary the various functions and glories of Jesus, of course with the needed modifications. Due to this parallelism Mary soon came to be regarded as immaculately conceived, assumed to heaven with body and soul, and enthroned as queen of heaven and earth. It did not take long for the salvific functions of Jesus as well to be applied to Mary. Thus she came to be celebrated as the co-redeemer and venerated as the mediatrix of all graces.

However, such glorifications of Mary which are the outcome of the Marian maximalism that held sway in Roman Catholic circles, both popular and scholarly, since the middle ages and especially during the so called 'Marian century' that preceded Vat. II, have hardly any basis in the Scriptures. Referring to her possible presence at the foot of the cross and the wedding at Cana where her plea resulted in Jesus' performance of his first miracle in support of such doctrinal claims is certainly far-fetched and does not stand critical analysis. For in the New Testament, having played the central role in realizing God's salvific plan, Jesus alone is presented as "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). Any human person who is associated with his work in whatsoever way has a place and role only with reference to his. Even Mary's role in his salvific work is only supportive and is in no way comparable or coequal to his. That is why Paul claims that "one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all... by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous"(Rom 5:18-19). He also goes on to categorically state that "... there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus..." (I Tim 2:5).

Vat. II not only did not accede to the petitions of countless Marian devotees who had appealed for the dogmatic definition of Mary as co-redeemer and mediatrix of all graces, but teaches that “No creature could ever be counted along with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer” (LG 62). Though it does approve the invoking of her with the title ‘mediatrix’, her mediation is neither a *sine qua non* for human salvation nor is it in any way independent of Jesus’ unique redemptive role and mediation but is only a sharing in His (LG 63). Therefore such models of understanding the Marian mystery, along with those like her queenship, need to be abandoned in so far as they are not only products of Marian maximalism that lack sound basis in Scripture, but are theologically questionable and socio-culturally irrelevant in our democratic societies today.

2. Symbolic Approaches

Christian doctrinal formulas have generally been recognized from the earliest times as symbolic statements. That is why the Christian creeds were spoken of as *symbolorum fidei*. This applies to all religious language including theological statements. By its very nature all religious language is mythopoetic in so far as they seek to express transcendental realities in everyday language of time and place. This applies to the Christian statements about Mary as well. In fact Mary has become a major Christian symbol, next in importance and popularity to only the Christic symbols of the eucharist and the cross. Pious Christian imagination and artistry have been very much at work in every age to fashion images of Mary that would symbolize its ideal of human and Christian perfection.

The lack of even the minimal historical information about her made her the ideal candidate for such symbolization. And Wolfhart Pannenberg makes a virtue of this situation. He suggests that unlike Christology which is the elaboration of the historical events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection,

Mariology is only the symbolization of the new humanity in Christ. Without qualifying his view, which we will do in the next section, we can easily observe that this process of holding up Mary as a symbol started from the first century of Christian history itself with the gospels of Luke and John. Luke presents her as the ideal disciple who listens to, ponders on and believes in “what was spoken to her by the Lord” (Lk 2:45) and is present prominently in the first community of believers (Acts 1:14). In the gospel of John she is the unnamed “mother of Jesus” who figures prominently both at the beginning and end of his ministry symbolizing the Church which gives its children, the believers, Christ’s sacraments, indicated by water turned into wine at Cana and blood and water that flowed from his side at Calvary.

This process of symbolization of Mary was continued by the Fathers of the Church in whose writings she emerges as the new Eve, the archetype of the new and redeemed humanity constituted of the believers in Christ. Later for the monastics she became the ideal ascetic, in the middle ages the Madonna of chaste love, in the age of monarchs and feudal lords the heavenly queen or the humble and obedient maiden, early in the 20th century the ideal wife and mother and late in the century in the context of feminism the liberated woman.

But this contemporizing of Mary by symbolizing her as the perfect embodiment of the ideals of every age, despite having the benefit of keeping her close to the men and women of every age, had also the hidden danger of allowing her to be appropriated by hegemonic forces and dehumanizing ideologies. It is all the more so when such attempts at making her as appealing and fashionable is not based on authentic faith or history. And that is exactly what happened when there took place a proliferation of titles, honorifics, honors and glories attributed to her on the basis of the principle of suitability. Mary, being the mother of His own son, it was considered right and proper that God bestows on her every greatness and glory that he was able to

imagine and was able to confer on a human being. Hence, human imagination was the only limit for inventing ever newer attributes and honors to her. 'One can never praise Mary enough' (*de Marianunquamsatis*) became the slogan of the Marian enthusiasts. In the process what was often forgotten was the truth that the human views of greatness and honor are not necessarily those of God's and He often chooses in his wisdom what the humans consider foolish. Besides, unguided and unchecked imagination, inspired by over emotional piety, ended up by often attributing to Mary titles and honors which had hardly any Biblical and theological basis and little relevance to people's life today such as 'tower of David', 'temple of ivory' etc. Such Marian maximalism reached its crescendo in the so called 'Marian century' of the more than 100 years just preceding Vat. II. The Council, of course, with its agenda of renewal and its concern for ecumenism brought about a sea change in this kind of Mariological reflection.

Vat. II departed from the traditional approach which had ended up exalting her to the status of heavenly queen to the point of almost making her human figure so unearthly, unreal and unbelievable and she became more a heavenly intercessor than a historical human model of faith living. Vat. II, with profound ecumenical sensitivity not only warned against such excesses, especially arising from mere devotional needs, but also carefully stayed clear of deriving elements from the apocrypha and the later apparition experiences on which most medieval and modern Mariological literature and devotion were based upon. Instead it sought to ground Mariology primarily in the more solid basis of the Scriptures and patristic as well as liturgical traditions.

This scriptural point of departure that Vat. II pursued naturally lead the Council to develop its Mariological teachings on the twin axis of Mary in the mysteries of Christ and of the Church, as the title of Chapter eight of *Lumen Gentium* spells out. Thus she is presented as the model disciple and

therefore the symbol of the Church, the community of Jesus' disciples. For, there seems to be a slow progression in the gospels from the historical person to the symbolic figure. For the first gospel, Mark, does not present a very flattering picture of Mary. In it she is not only among the group of his relatives who come to Capernaum to take him away by force but also is described as being *outside* in contrast to those who are inside and sitting around him whom he refers to as "here are my mother and my brothers" (Mk 3:34).

Differing from the Mathean and Markan gospels, that of Luke gives us an idealized picture of Mary as the believer par excellence and in the gospel of John, strategically placed at the beginning and end of his public ministry, she emerges as the perfect symbol of the Church. For, as John van den Hengel points out, "Jesus became the teacher of his mother from the temple to Cana to the cross. Nowhere does Mary refuse to learn, nowhere is she shown as separate from Jesus. She is the face of the follower of Jesus, of the perfect community of disciples, the Church." Luke presents her as the prototype and model disciple who not only listened to the Word of God, pondered it in her heart, questioned it with a view of better understanding it and above all believed it with the total surrender of her whole self. In fact, not only she is openly praised as the one "who believed that there would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Lk1:45) and also is shown as being inside the upper room having a prominent place in the company of his first disciples waiting and praying for the outpouring of His Spirit (Acts 1:14). Taking the cue from this Lukan portrait Vat. II presents her the model believer in so far as she "received the Word of God in her heart and in her body" and therefore was also "redeemed in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her Son and united to him ... she is also the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit" (LG 53).

From symbolizing Mary as the ideal believer Vat. II proceeds to elaborate her relation to the Church which is the community of believers. In so far she is the ideal disciple she is presented by the Council as also the “pre-eminent and wholly unique member of the Church”(LG 53) as well as “a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ” (LG 63). This Marian symbolism is applied by the Council to the various dimensions of the present nature and call of the Church as well as its future glory. Thus the Council sees Mary in her motherhood and virginity as an exemplar of the Church’s vocation to bring forth sons and daughters of God by preaching and baptism while keeping the faith in entirety and purity “pledged to her spouse” (LG 65). Also in her immaculate conception and assumption, one can see symbolized and supremely expressed the grace-filled origin of the Church in the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus and the future it is going to inherit when her Lord establishes His reign in all its splendor. Of course, during its pilgrimage on earth, like Mary, “who shines forth to the whole community of the elect as the model of virtues ... the Church becomes more and more like her lofty type, seeking and doing the will of God in all things, and continuously progresses in faith, hope and charity” (LG 65).

3. Liberational and Feminist Approaches

Vat. II in its effort to renew Marian doctrine and devotion had also strongly urged that “theologians and preachers of the word of God ... to refrain as much from all false exaggerations...and from whatever might by word or deed lead the separated brethren or any others whatsoever into error about the true doctrine of the Church” (LG 65). It also reminded the faithful that “true devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in certain vain credulity...” (LG 67). Instead, it called for a renewal of the Marian Cult on the basis of Sacred Scripture, teaching of the Fathers,

doctors, liturgy and magisterium of the Church. This call for reorienting and restructuring the Marian cult in the Church resulted in the widespread abandoning of many traditional Marian devotional practices and in some places for a brief period almost in the eclipse of Mary. Of course, in many shrines and centers of Marian devotion most traditional practices continued as though Vat. II had not happened at all. However, within a couple of decades fresh waters with new questions and insights started to flow into Mariological reflection. And one such potent current of thought came in the form of liberation theology. Standing in solidarity with the majority of the population of their countries who were mostly poor and oppressed some South American theologians, partly also influenced by Marxian analysis, started re-reading of the Scriptures from the perspective of the poor and raised questions as to whose socio-economic-political interests did the traditional religious doctrines and practices promoted – that of the rich ruling minority who were the oppressors or the majority who were the disposed and victimized poor? When scholars started to raise such questions with regard to Marian doctrines and devotional practices they discovered that many of them were more other worldly and alienating than truly liberative. Many forms of them, including the characterization of Mary and her manifold qualities, virtues and her mode of conduct, instead of challenging oppressive structures and motivating action for transformation, were found to be legitimizing the status quo and often promoting virtues and models of conduct that helped to perpetuate oppressive ideologies and structures.

With this realization, when the liberation theologians re-searched the New Testament gospels, they were surprised to discover that the profile of Mary presented in them differed significantly from the portrayals in the liturgical, theological, devotional as well as artistic traditions of the Church. Certainly, the Mary of the New Testament was a member of the poor of Yahweh, *anawim*, and had no semblance and similarity to the popularly

depicted queen of heaven and earth who was richly attired and regally crowned. She was, like rest of the rural masses of Palestine, a victim of the exploitive and repressive socio-political-economic and cultural order imposed there by the colonial rulers of Rome and their local collaborators, the high priests and their elders. However, she did not remain helpless and resigned to her condition but drawing inspiration from her religious faith, remembered and proclaimed the hope that the liberator God of her ancestors continues to act in her times too as in the past: “He has shown strength with his arm... scattered the proud ... brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly... has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Lk 1: 51-53).

But this hope of hers did not make her to wait passively and helplessly for God to act but rather inspired her to actively collaborate with God’s work of liberation. This she did not only by rushing to the aid of the poor and needy people as exemplified in her hurried and perilous journey to the Judean hill country village to help her kinswoman Elizabeth during her old age pregnancy (Lk 1:39-40) and coming to the rescue of the newly weds and their family during the wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2: 1-11) but primarily by raising her son Jesus with the faith attitude of listening to God’s will in the need of the poor and carrying it out and persuading him to launch his mission, as she did in Cana, and above all standing by him till Calvary. Her participation in his mission of establishing the reign of God on earth did not cease with his death but continued even after his resurrection, as evidenced by her presence and prayer with the disciples as they were waiting for the empowerment by his Spirit to re-launch His mission.

Thus, for liberation theology Mary becomes the model and symbol of authentic liberation which is offered by God to all human beings through the grace of Christ and of the faith that does justice which is the right human response to God’s offer. Liberation theologians also interpret the

Marian dogmas of immaculate conception, virginal divine motherhood and assumption as symbolic expression of the various dimensions of holistic liberation attained in Christ.

Feminist theology, building up on the insights of liberation theology, proceeded to examine the role of the cult of Mary in the lives, growth and struggles of women for their full development and gender equality. Deeper analysis of the beliefs and the cult of Mary, especially with the tools of social sciences, brought to their awareness that the exalted but exceptional status accorded to her particularly in the Catholic tradition did not prove to them to be an unmixed blessing. For she was the lone woman who was solitarily glorified to a status which others could neither aspire for nor ever attain. Consequently they were consigned to the status of "the sinful children of Eve" who though being the mother of all humankind was also the gateway through which sin and all misery entered the world.

Feminist theologians also found the popular image of Mary and the virtues and qualities ascribed to her and which women were exhorted to imitate were more reflective of and reinforcing the kyriarchal gender stereotyping of women. Many radical feminists found Mary of traditional Catholic doctrine and devotion so irredeemably vitiated by kyriarchal outlook and values that they saw little in them of value for promoting women's as well as human liberation at large. However, some moderate feminist theologians have recognized the power of this long persistent and widely prevalent Marian symbol and are more sanguine about retaining the Marian symbol and reinterpreting it to serve the cause of women's full freedom and equality. For despite its kyriarchal associations which it later acquired due to the impact of the imperial and feudal societies where it flourished, the original portrait of her as presented in the New Testament gospels lends itself to be so reinterpreted as to serve women's liberation. For, the persona of Mary as presented in the gospels is not that of a subservient and servile woman.

Rather, she shows up as a faith inspired, hope-filled believer who is at the same time assertive, reflective, questioning, independent, strong, socially aware, to profoundly committed to social justice and above all playing an effective leadership role. Such a woman, these moderate feminist theologians believe, can be an inspiring ideal and powerfully motivating model for contemporary women and men in their quest for holistic humanness and authentic liberation.

4. Ecumenical Approaches

In the wake of Vat. II, many Catholic theologians boldly criticized the excesses in traditional Marian theology and devotional forms and started articulating Mariologies that were more Christocentric and ecclesiotypical. There were also some Protestant theologians who called upon their colleagues to undertake an unprejudiced rethinking about Mary. One such pioneer is Max Thurian of Taize who in as early in 1963 suggested that Christian reflection on Mary, instead of being a source of division should be a cause of joyful unity in prayer. He also pointed out that “too often, through fear and contrariness, Protestants have not dared to meditate freely on what the Gospel tells us about the mother of God.” And in 1978 a group of Catholic and Protestant theologians, headed by Raymond Brown, brought the book, *Mary in the New Testament*, in which basic agreement was arrived at in interpreting the Marian texts of the New Testament. A decade later John Macquarrie, an Anglican theologian, in his book *Mary for All Christians* (1990), presented Mary as a pre-eminent example of what God’s grace can achieve in a human person who in trustful faith cooperates with it. And more recently B.R. Gaventa has argued that the Protestant “unwillingness to talk about Mary is also not scriptural.” Challenging the Protestants to take seriously Mary’s own prophecy in the New Testament, “All generations will call me blessed” (Lk 1:48), she argues that Mary is Jesus’ disciple par excellence. She also

points out that if the Protestants can accept Mary, the sister of Martha, and the Syro-Phenician woman “as our predecessors in faith, then perhaps, we can also see Mary as the mother of all believers.”

Meantime Mary came up as one of the major themes in the ecumenical dialogues. Most of these point to a growing consensus at least on some basic approaches to Marian issues that still divide the Churches. The first of these areas of consensus is with regard to the place of Marian doctrines in the hierarchy of Christian truths. Today there is broad agreement that Marian beliefs are secondary truths which are not as fundamental to the Christian faith as, for instance, the Christological doctrines of incarnation and resurrection.

The second area of consensus is that Mary is an eminent symbol of Christian discipleship. She is seen as the supreme example of the wondrous fruitfulness of God’s grace in a human person when he or she accepts it in trustful and obedient faith. The third approach that is acceptable to almost all is that such symbolization of Mary needs to be grounded in the authentic Miriam of Nazareth presented in the New Testament. Though the image found there is already very much the product of religious symbolization, at the core of it can be discerned certain basic features of the historical Mary which though few are definite.

The fourth and fifth approaches of ecumenical consensus are Christocentrism and Ecclesiotypicality. Mary is first and foremost an eminent model of Christian discipleship and it from this basic reality flow all her other privileges and functions. Such Christocentric approach necessarily leads to an ecclesiotypical understanding of her place and role. She is the exemplary member of the community of believers in Christ which is the Church. And as such eminently realized in her are its graced origins, mission and its final glory.

Conclusion

Another more recent approach that has significantly contributed to the understanding of Mary is the historical one. This followed the third quest for the historical Jesus that has been popular from the last decades of the twentieth century. Though many valuable insights have been gained by the researches by scholars pursuing this approach the wide variety of the portraits of Jesus they paint and the lack of even minimal consensus as to what really was the historical Jesus have not made them very beneficial to the Christian faith. The finding of the studies on historical Mary have proven to be even less beneficial for the simple reason that the New Testament books offer us very little on Mary that is of historical value and other reliable historical sources simply do not exist.

Anyway Mary continues to fascinate men and women of every age. She has inspired millions of lives during the past 2000 years and continues to do so even today. Many aspects of her cult, of course, do not correspond to the aspirations of contemporary men and especially women in their quest for authentic humanness in their individual selves and social lives and symbol structure. But such an enduring and appealing symbol, if rightly reinterpreted, can serve as a powerful means to bring tenderness, gentle strength, compassion and justice, unity and harmony to a world which is so much in need of them. The never ending task of Mariology is to discover and articulate ever anew the call and grace that the memory of her person and life which was lived out as her *magnificat* in action.