



From A Bishop's Journal (616)

Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (1)

This is the title of a 33-page document published by the Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) on the Virgin Mary. I want to share with you this ecumenical reflection, during this month dedicated to the Virgin. The Anglicans and we share many points in common. In the not too distant past we were used to saying that the Anglicans did not believe in Mary and the Pope; we now discover through dialogue that the Anglicans are acknowledging more and more the gift of authority and of unity through the ministry of Peter's successor, and the great truths passed on through Tradition. Following are excerpts from the common Anglican-Roman Catholic declaration.

Blessed Among Women

In honouring Mary as Mother of the Lord, all generations of Anglicans and Roman Catholics have echoed the greeting of Elizabeth: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42). The Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission now offers this Agreed Statement on the place of Mary in the life and doctrine of the Church in the hope that it expresses our common faith about the one who, of all believers, is closest to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Pope John Paul II identified as one area in need of fuller study by all Christian traditions before a true consensus of faith can be achieved "the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God and Icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ's disciples and for all humanity". We agree that there can be but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, and reject any interpretation of the role of Mary which obscures this affirmation. We agree in recognising that Christian understanding of Mary is inseparably linked with the doctrines of Christ and the Church. We agree in recognising the grace and unique vocation of Mary, Mother of God Incarnate, 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.

Reservation

The same document, however, points out remaining differences: “The dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption raise a special problem for those 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.” These reservations in particular were noted in the official *Response of the Holy See to The Final Report* (1991, para. 13). Having taken these shared beliefs and these questions as the starting point for our reflection, we are now able to affirm further significant agreement on the place of Mary in the life and doctrine of the Church.

The present document proposes a fuller statement of our shared belief concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary and so provides the context for a common appreciation of the content of the Marian dogmas. We also take up differences of practice, including the explicit invocation of Mary. This new study of Mary has benefited from our previous study of reception in *The Gift of Authority* (1999). There we concluded that, when the Church receives and acknowledges what it recognizes as a true expression of the Tradition once for all delivered to the Apostles, this reception is an act both of faithfulness and of freedom. The freedom to respond in fresh ways in the face of new challenges is what enables the Church to be faithful to the Tradition which it carries forward. At other times, some element of the apostolic Tradition may be forgotten, neglected or abused. In such situations, fresh recourse to Scripture and Tradition recalls God's revelation in Christ: we call this process *re-reception*. Progress in ecumenical dialogue and understanding suggests that we now have an opportunity to re-receive together the tradition of Mary's place in God's revelation.

Theological Research

We have sought to understand Mary's person and role in the history of salvation and the life of the Church in the light of a theology of divine grace and hope. Such a theology is deeply rooted in the enduring experience of Christian worship and devotion. God's grace calls for and enables human response. This is seen in the Gospel account of the Annunciation, where the angel's message evokes the response of Mary. The Incarnation and all that it entailed, including the passion, death and resurrection of Christ and the birth of the Church, came about by way of Mary's freely uttered *fiat* – “let it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). We recognize in the event of the Incarnation God's gracious 'Yes' to humanity as a whole. This reminds us once more of the Apostle's words in 2 Corinthians 1:18-20: all God's promises find their 'Yes' in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. In this context, Mary's *fiat* can be seen as the supreme instance of a believer's 'Amen' in response to the 'Yes' of God. Christian disciples respond to the same 'Yes' with their own 'Amen'. They thus know themselves to be children together of the one heavenly Father, born of the Spirit as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, drawn into the communion of love of the blessed Trinity. Mary epitomizes such participation in the life of God. Her response was not made without profound questioning, and it issued in a life of joy intermingled with sorrow, taking her even to the foot of her son's cross. When Christians join in Mary's 'Amen' to the 'Yes' of God in Christ, they commit themselves to an obedient response to the Word of God, which leads to a life of prayer and service. Like Mary, they not only magnify the Lord with their lips: they commit themselves to serve God's justice with their lives (cf. Luke 1:46-55).

According to the Scriptures

We remain convinced that the holy Scriptures, as the Word of God written, bear normative witness to God's plan of salvation, so it is to them that this statement first turns. Indeed, it is impossible to be faithful to Scripture and not to take Mary seriously.

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