



**OUR LADY AND THE  
ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT  
in the light of her  
maternal patronage**

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**The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

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## **OUR LADY AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT in the light of her maternal patronage**

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### **Mary's maternal patronage in scripture.**

Our Lord's words from the cross to John, the only apostle who had not fled, were, 'Son, behold your Mother', indicating the special relationship that was intended between the infant Church, represented by John, and our Blessed Lady. This relationship ensured that Mary remained a special focus for the church in Jerusalem: indeed, the traditional foundation day of the Church – Pentecost – is usually depicted in devotional art with Mary as a mother-figure surrounded by the apostles, beneath the pentecostal tongues of fire. Mary was already filled with the Holy Spirit, and she became the natural focus as a mother and model of the Church.

Since the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, Mary has been called *Theotokos*, God-bearer or Mother of God. Christ cannot be truly man as well as God unless he is born of a human mother. Mary, in order to be Mother of God, has to be Mother of Jesus, who is truly God. Evidence in Scripture directs us to Galatians 4.4: 'God sent his son, born of a woman', and to St John's Gospel, where Mary is always called 'the mother of Jesus': and in John 20.31 we find the words, 'in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God'. In a fragment of papyrus preserved in the Rylands Library, Manchester, dated no later than AD 270, there is the earliest recorded prayer to Mary, in Greek, which translated reads, 'we fly to thy patronage'. This indicates Mary's maternal role for followers of her Son.

### **Mary's maternal patronage in the Fathers.**

In the writings of the early Fathers, Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 110) records: 'Under the divine dispensation Jesus Christ our God was conceived by Mary of the seed of David and of the Holy Spirit of God; he was born and he submitted to baptism so that by his Passion he might sanctify water (*Ad Eph.* 18. 2). Irenaeus (c. AD 200) claimed that the New

Testament revealed two things clearly: 'that the Son of God was born of a virgin, and that he himself is the Saviour Christ, whom the prophets proclaimed; not as those men [the heretics] say that Jesus is he who descended from above' (*Adv. Haer.* 16. 2, 17. 1). These patristic affirmations which equivalently assert the divine maternity of Mary are summed up in the creeds, the most ancient of which reads 'born of the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary', or, 'born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary'.<sup>1</sup>

### Mary's extended maternity

Mary's maternal patronage implies three aspects, namely Mother of God, Mother of the Church, and Mother of mankind, which presents a very particular perspective. The *magisterium* has taught that as Mother of the Christ, who is the Head of the body, the Church (cf. Col. 1. 18), Mary is also the Mother of the members of that body.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the third session of the Second Vatican Council (1964), Pope Paul VI also proclaimed Mary to be Mother of the Church.

Mary is also the mother of the members of that body; her maternity was first proclaimed at the Annunciation, and then before Christ breathed forth his life upon the cross, he extended this motherhood to the infant Church. Calvary begot the new Israel in the person of John, representing the apostles, and Christ declares Mary to be mother of both the head and members of that body, the Church. Mary is Mother not only of the Church, but also of all believers, for as Christ is the Saviour of the human race he assumed from Mary his human nature that he might be Saviour of all believers. We are all members of Christ's Body, made from his flesh and his bones (cf Eph. 5. 30) and have therefore 'come forth from the womb of Mary as a body united to its head'.<sup>3</sup>

It was Anselm who explained that 'Mary began to bear us all in her womb from the moment of her *fiat*'. This is clarified by *Redemptoris Mater* of Pope John Paul II, in which he explains that since Mary gave birth to Christ, the head of the Mystical Body, she had also given birth to all the members of that one Body. New dimensions of motherhood applied to Mary were particularly stressed by Pope Leo XIII, who in his encyclical *Adiutricem Populi* (5 September 1895) said that when Christ from the cross uttered the words to his mother, 'Behold your son', he 'designated the whole human race', but in the first rank are they who are joined to him by faith.<sup>4</sup> Thus in a couple of lines he extends Mary's maternal patronage to the Church and to the whole of humanity, in this way focusing on Mary's ecumenical role as Mother of the Church, and of the wider Church of all believers and even of the human race. These new dimensions have now received the ratification of the Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium* 54), which describes Mary as 'Mother of Christ and Mother of mankind', but, most of all, of those who believe. Given these aspects of Mary's maternal patronage, she is thus especially concerned for the unity of all believers, and is therefore *par excellence* the patroness of ecumenism.

## Mary's role reversal

There is, however, a certain irony in Mary's role in the ecumenical movement, for since the Reformation over 500 years of Marian devotion has contributed more to division than to unity among the various Christian denominations. In this the late Martin Gillett recognized the potential of Mary in a role reversal, as a promoter of ecumenical devotion and a focus for many Christians in their search for unity, rather than as a stumbling-block. It might be asked: How can this be? Martin Gillett founded the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1967. He had been inspired by Cardinal Suenens to work for unity in this way, in using a cause of division as a means of healing the wounds of separation, and as such the Society seeks to study the place of Mary in the Church and among all Christians. Like an inoculation, injecting the bacillus of a disease to produce immunity, this problem of division has been found to have healing properties. Particular advances have been made in a shared liturgy and Marian devotion: it is therefore important for branches of the Society that they maintain this format for their gatherings.

Pope John Paul II has said, 'There is a close and important link' between Mary as Mother and the work for unity (in a letter to the ESBVM). It would nevertheless be naïve to pretend that, as a focus in the search for unity, Mary does not more often, in the wider dialogue, provide a focus for contention and division. In this way there is little chance of our cloaking our divisions in Christendom with Mary's mantle, like Luther's parody of the forgiveness of sin. It is more likely that divisions will be highlighted, particularly on the level of Marian dogma, but then this can be an opportunity to look at the reasons for such divisions in their historical context, and whether or not they can still be sustained in a rapidly changing climate of opinion.

## Development and ecclesiology

The extended titles of 'Mother of God' to 'Mother of the Church' and 'Mother of all believers' provide a certain articulation to Mary as the focus for ecumenical dialogue, as mother of an extended family, seeking closer family union. I would like to add to this vision of emerging familial unity the idea of the development of understanding between the various Christian denominations and the indications of a converging ecclesiology.

Even within the bounds of the Roman and Catholic Church the understanding of Mary's role has been at times contentious. On 8 December 1845 in the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* Pius IX declared that 'from the first moment of her conception the Blessed Virgin Mary was by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, and in view of the merits of Christ, Saviour of mankind, kept free from all stain of sin'. This belief had long been held, but not without its opponents: indeed, the Archbishop of Paris and the Bishop of Evreux protested against the dogma being adopted without a general council. To be fair to Pope Pius IX, he had prior to this announcement consulted the entire hierarchy (*Ubi primum*, 2

February 1849), to avoid such reactions, and had received favourable responses; but more particularly he had wished to know the sentiments of the ordinary people.

### Consulting the laity

This has a precedent for ecumenical dialogue with other denominations, for in canvassing ordinary attitudes to Marian dogma, Pius IX had introduced a major new ingredient in the development of the understanding of doctrine. In this development of understanding, particularly of Marian dogma, the laity acted as a mirror of confirmation for the teaching authority of the Church. Newman, while still an Anglican, had had no difficulty in accepting the Immaculate Conception, twenty years before it was formally declared to be a doctrine of the Church. Newman's journey to Rome ended on 9 October 1845, and directly afterward he published his 'Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine' – a major contribution to the development of understanding. In a fascinating way the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was indirectly made possible by this work on the development of the understanding of doctrine. When Newman came to publish his article 'On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine' (*The Rambler*, July 1859), he used the example of Pope Pius IX's consultation of the laity to demonstrate the preparations for the definition of dogma.

### The consulting for unity

This same principle of consultation could be used in the work for Christian unity, as the same procedure achieved a unity of belief on Marian dogma. Thus the development of understanding of marian dogma could give an example for a context of wider consultation on ecumenism, and be extended across the denominational divide.

To some extent, in isolated examples, this has already been going on, but more specifically, each congregation represented at meetings of ESBVM could instruct their representatives to canvass members on attitudes, beliefs and objections. Some meetings are missing opportunities by simply handing over the format to local parochial evangelical considerations. Similar debate has been going on in the Catholic Church over many centuries before a unity of belief has been reached. Such great luminaries as Bernard of Clairvaux, Anselm of Canterbury, Albert the Great, Aquinas and Bonaventure, even opposed the acceptance of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. However, a local Benedictine monk, Eadmer of Canterbury (1055–1154), pointed out that the feast of the Immaculate Conception had been kept by the people of England since before the Norman conquest, adding that God who kept the good angels sinless could hardly do less for his Mother.

In the end the tide was turned by a practice that has been particularly prominent in ESBVM – the consistent devotion and liturgical celebration of a Marian order among the faithful. In this, a swelling and broadening tide of devotion eventually produced a unifying

influence in the development of understanding which came to overthrow all objections (cf *Lumen Gentium* 12). If liturgical influence can guide unity within the Roman communion, as a principle for wider applications its benefits are obvious. The fact of our meeting here today [Canterbury, 27 September 1997] is evidence of this development of understanding through Mary across the denominational divide. Duns Scotus in the thirteenth century stressed the love and the will, and these two factors must be uppermost in the desire for Christian unity: they were certainly the main characteristics of the laity who finally influenced Pius IX to declare the Immaculate Conception as a dogma in 1854. Eadmer had already given evidence of the consistent devotion of the faithful, but Duns Scotus was finally to break the theological deadlock in furnishing the idea of 'preservative redemption' in our Lady. This overcame the conflict in isolating Mary from universal redemption; moreover Mary, even when preserved from original sin, would not be freed from dependence on Christ's redemptive work, for she would have contracted original sin had the grace of the Mediator not preserved her state.

### Mary as model

In the growth towards unity, prayer and devotion must come first, and theological explanations will follow later. Mary as a model as well as a mother gives us the example in accepting the will of God despite its remaining mysterious for her: she simply pondered such things in her heart (Luke 2. 19). The mystery of the Immaculate Conception took centuries of pondering before the development of understanding enabled Pope Pius IX to declare it a dogma. Christian unity is similarly a mystery which we ponder and strive after without fully comprehending its implications (just like Mary at the Annunciation). Like Mary, moreover, with prayer and devotion we grow in understanding; by our fellowship and discussion we grow in our understanding of each other, and develop in that understanding towards the mystery of Christian unity. In her own faith journey, Mary displayed this development of understanding: for example, the angel's words 'Hail Mary, full of grace' were a cause for puzzlement as well as for pondering, until the revelation at Pentecost, when understanding was given.

### The Marian principle in ecumenical development

If Mary is Mother of the Church, she is also a model for the Church in the institutional sense, and in the wider sense of all believers. We have already seen that she is a model for the Church's development of understanding, and that of all Christians. André Feuillet, the Roman Catholic Scripture scholar, has described how Mary's maternity and mediation have presented her as the 'archetype of the Church ... she is the perfect model of the Church. Only by becoming more and more like Mary, does the Church realize more and more fully the intentions of her founder.'<sup>5</sup> Lev Gillet, an Orthodox priest, stresses Mary's role in quoting Acts 1. 14: 'All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with

the women and Mary the Mother of Jesus'. This scene, he stresses, is an authentic image of the continuing Church, as the Church today must claim an unbroken continuity with the infant Church gathered around Mary on the Day of Pentecost. He emphasizes that 'this accord' must be seen in terms of agreement with Mary's role and intentions. Her intentions of course were the 'perfect assent to the will of God; therefore it is only the conformity of our will to the divine will that will effectively unite us with Mary'.<sup>6</sup> This unity with Mary is thus the means of growing in Christian unity.

In the Reformed tradition David Carter has said that Mary pondering on the word of God 'sets a model for future disciples'; her 'whole-hearted reception of the Word is an eloquent commentary on the Reformation principle of the sole sufficiency of Scripture'.<sup>7</sup> These three models, Catholic, Orthodox and Reformed, have a compatibility that admits of a definite convergence. The Catholic emphasis on Mary as the perfect model of the Church stresses that in becoming more like Mary the Church realizes the intentions of her founder. This image retains the characteristics of development, as does the Orthodox view, with the continuing Church claiming unbroken continuity with the focus on Mary around whom the apostles were gathered at Pentecost. The Reformed tradition, with the image of Mary pondering the Word, is a development principle which has already been explained. These ecclesiologies may not always be consistent within the different denominations: nevertheless, there is already evidence of convergence and potential for its continuance.

## Conclusion

Mary as a model disciple exercises a maternal example to her children, and is also an exemplar in her obedience to the will of God. As our Lord declares in Mark 3. 35, 'whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister and mother'. This, far from diminishing Mary's maternal patronage, enhances it, for as an exemplar she is pre-eminently the instrument of God's will. This obedience is part of her maternal role, as she tells the servants at the marriage feast at Cana: 'Do whatever he tells you'. As a mother she is also a reconciler in bringing us together, and in bringing together our various theological traditions. As the ancient prayer states: 'We fly' to her patronage in our need to be reconciled with our Mother.

Her pondering role prefigures the process of development in the pondering Church. This process is outlined in the Second Vatican Council (*Dei Verbum* 8): 'The Church is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her'. Mary's maternal patronage over an extended family of believers also places her in the role of chief intercessor of that extended family, and in obedience to her Son she prays 'that they all may be one'. In Anglicanism since the seventeenth century there has been a gradual development in the understanding of Mary's part in God's plan of redemption, fanned by the Oxford Movement and the subsequent Tractarians, who in their study of the Fathers rediscovered Mary as *Theotokos*. Newman was the great agent

of this early development, and A. T. Wirgman's classic *The Blessed Virgin Mary and the Whole Company of Heaven* was a natural successor to Pusey's *Eirenicon*. In more recent years Dr Eric Mascall edited a symposium entitled *Mother of God* (London, 1949), which was a collaboration with the Orthodox, and he went on to become a founder-member of this Society.

This brief evidence confirms how Marian devotion has spread to every denomination, but for the Roman communion the turning-point came in 1958 with the first Mariological-Marian Congress at Lourdes. There was a departure from old exaggerated opinion that had made Mariology so contentious a matter with other denominations, and Mary was considered within the context of Christology and ecclesiology.<sup>8</sup> The second turning-point was the exhortation of Pope John Paul II in *Mariialis Cultus* in which the future of Mariology was declared to be liturgical, biblical and ecumenical: and now we are gathering the fruits of our mutual development in understanding, our converging ecclesiologies, and our shared devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, the Mother of the Church, and the Mother of all believers.

## Notes

1. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (Longmans, London, 1972), pp. 144–8.
2. A. B. Calkins, 'Mary's Spiritual Maternity', in *Mary is for Everyone*, ed. W. McLoughlin and J. Pinnock (Gracewing, Leominster, 1997), p. 69.
3. cf. Encyclical of Pius IX, *Ad Deum Illum*, 2 February 1904.
4. *Acta Sanctorum* 28 (1895–6).
5. A. Feuillet, *Jesus and his Mother*, trans. Maluf (St Bede's Publications, Massachusetts, 1984), p. 117.
6. L. Gillet, 'The Veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God' in *Mother of God*, ed. E. L. Mascall (Dacre Press, 1949), pp. 79f.
7. D. Carter, 'Mary, Servant of the Word', in McLoughlin and Pinnock, op. cit. p. 161.
8. C. O'Donnel, 'Growth and Decline in Mariology', in *Mary in the Church* ed. J. Hyland (Veritas, Athlone, 1989), p. 39.

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