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Presidential Address

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

In the last Presidential Address, I tried to make the point that the Letter from the Congregation for Catholic Education, March 25, 1988, on "The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation" was extremely important and deserved special treatment.

First of all, it seems to me that the Letter is addressed to us here as its logical implementers. It faces us with a question: Who, if not we, should be especially interested in the progress of Mariology?

The Letter assumes (and I think justly) that the "present state of Mariology" is due to the education of our priests in seminaries. This letter is no perfunctory treatment of this important subject, which would be the case if it were written solely in deference to John Paul II, who is well-known for his Marian devotion; the same would be true if it were written as a complement to the Marian encyclical which opened the Marian Year. No, it is a straightforward exposition of the problem and the means to deal with it. This is not to say that Pope John Paul II and the Marian Year have had no influence upon the Letter. In the very introduction, Pope John Paul II is referred to at length; this shows the influence the pope and the previous council had on the document, particularly its publication at this time.

The Second Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops which was held in 1985 for "the celebration, verification and promotion of Vatican Council II" affirmed that "special attention must be paid to the four major Constitutions of the Council" in order to implement a programme "having as its object a new, more extensive and deeper knowledge and reception of the Council."

On his part, His Holiness Pope John Paul II has explained that the Marian Year is meant "to promote a new and more careful reading of what the Council said about the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and of the Church."¹

The Congregation for Catholic Education itself, in the same introduction, declares that "in the light of these developments . . . [it] addresses this present Circular Letter to theological faculties . . . , and to other centres of ecclesiastical studies." And it even gives the reason for writing, which it puts gently thus:

. . . to offer some reflections on the Blessed Virgin and to emphasize that the promotion of knowledge, research and piety with regard to Mary of Nazareth is not to be restricted to the Marian Year, but must be permanent since the exemplary value and the mission of the Virgin are permanent. The Mother of the Lord is a "*datum* of divine Revelation" and a "maternal presence" always operative in the life of the Church.²

Our own Society thinks very highly of this letter. It was given the honor which is accorded to very few episcopal or papal documents. For the benefit of all the members of the Mariological Society of America, it was reprinted in full for the Marian Year (and all other years, too) in the thirty-ninth volume of *Marian Studies* (1988): 203-221.

I think it useful to have an outline of the Congregation's work. The Letter strikes me as something that you and I would have done if we were composing the letter for our brothers and sisters engaged in communicating the truth about Mary. The Letter logically is divided into two parts: "I. The Virgin Mary: An Essential *Datum* of the Faith and the

¹ *Letter*, Intro., no. 1.

² *Ibid.* The last two citations of this footnote are from the pope's encyclical on Mary entitled *Redemptoris mater*, with which he inaugurated the Marian Year on March 25, 1987. The Bishops' Synod citations are from the last talk of Pope John Paul II concluding the Synod.

Life of the Church" and "II. The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation." The entire letter is centered on *what* should be taught. Although some may have looked for the *how*, the *how* is missing, since this is a letter for the entire world. It is up to each country to explain how the doctrine is to be transmitted. Incidentally, this may perhaps be a task left to us for our country.

The *what* concerns the entire history of Mariology from its earliest days. Therefore, logically, Part One is subdivided into five sections:

- 1) The Wealth of Marian Doctrine
- 2) The Marian Teaching of Vatican II
 - a. In Relation to the Mystery of Christ
 - b. In Relation to the Mystery of the Church
- 3) Post-Conciliar Marian Developments
- 4) The Encyclical *Redemptoris mater* of John Paul II
- 5) The Contribution of Mariology to Theological Research.

The very first section of this part is appropriately named "The Wealth of Marian Doctrine" since it attempts to show how Mary is involved in the life and doctrine of the Church from the earliest times. As the Letter itself says:

The history of dogma and theology bears witness to the Church's faith about, and constant attention to, the Virgin Mary and to her mission in the history of salvation. Such attention is already evident in some of the New Testament writings and in a number of pages by authors in the sub-apostolic age. (no. 2)

One could wish for a fuller treatment here. How can the wealth, the "glories" of Mary be confined to less than two pages? Similarly, the treatment of the Vatican Council II is not adequate. The Letter really waxes eloquent when it discusses post-conciliar developments which influenced Paul VI to write his justly-renowned *Marialis cultus* (1974). Would that the previous two sections were so thoroughly developed.

The fourth section of the first part—the commentary on *Redemptoris mater*—is, of course, in deference to the magisterial Marian teachings of the present pope. This may seem to some to be something superfluous, but I think it is integral to the present letter.

The fifth and final section of Part One concerns the contributions of Mariology to theological research. Here again, the same objections can be leveled against the Letter. It is far too short to properly develop the subject.

I now give the main sections of the second part of the Letter:

II. The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation

1. Research in Mariology
2. The Teaching of Mariology
3. Mariology and Pastoral Service.

The second part, which concerns the actual purpose of the Letter, "The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation"—is from the very beginning concerned with research in Mariology. It is here, that some may be most critical of this letter.³ The words of Vatican Council II do apply here: as the Letter [second part] says.

"Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred Tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word." The study of the sacred Scriptures, therefore, must be the soul of Mariology.⁴

³Is the object of intellectual and spiritual formation of the student to prepare him or her to be a master of all Marian theory? Incidentally, it is in this part that we find the reference to the International Marian Research Institute (IMRI). The purpose of intellectual and spiritual formation is not to make every student an expert in Marian research.

⁴It is likewise true, that the emphasis should not be on the solving of moot questions, but on what is certain from previous statements of the Magisterium of the Church or of the most eminent Marian doctors.

It is interesting to note that the Congregation for Catholic Education does take the position of Vatican Council II. Since the Letter defines *organic* as "inserted adequately in the programme of studies of the theological curriculum," one can argue from the Letter's own definition of *completeness* that any Marian statement cannot truly be organic if the statement does not take Mary into account in all of the various treatises. The completeness about which the Letter is speaking has as its purpose the following considerations:

b) *complete*, so that the person of the Virgin be considered in the whole history of salvation, that is in her relation to God; to Christ, the Word incarnate, Saviour and Mediator; to the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier and Giver of life, to the Church, sacrament of salvation; to man—in his origins and his development in the life of grace, and his destiny to glory . . .⁵

Finally, with the quality "*suited*," the Letter ends its characterization of Marian teaching. (By "*suited*," I think the Congregation means that the teaching should fit the occasion.)

So we are told by the Congregation that our teaching on Mary must be systematic, organic, complete, and suitable. So be it.⁶ We are forcefully reminded in the *conclusion* that the Congregation wishes all who treasure adherence to the Church, especially priests, to:

a) acquire a *complete and exact knowledge* of the doctrine of the Church about the Virgin Mary . . .

b) nourish an *authentic love* for the Mother of the Saviour and Mother of mankind . . .

c) develop the *capacity to communicate* such love to the Chris-

⁵Letter, no. 28.

⁶Again this teaching is connected with research. And again, I pose the question: Does the Congregation for Catholic Education ask that all who teach or are taught become researchers? It would seem from the prominence given to research (at the end of Part One and the beginning of Part Two) that such is the case, but we are reminded that the object of the Letter is teaching.

tian people through speech, writing and example, so that their Marian piety may be promoted and cultivated.⁷

And this can be done by all without the necessity of lengthy research.

So in the final analysis, we must say that the Congregation, in this letter, asks all of us to include Mary in the integral practice and teaching of the Catholic faith, which we are doing and which we will continue to do. I conclude now with the idyllic passage with which the Letter ends and which depicts the fruit of our labor if we follow its prescriptions:

The study of Mariology holds as its ultimate aim the acquisition of a sound Marian spirituality, an essential aspect of Christian spirituality. On his pilgrim way to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13), knowing the mission which God has entrusted to the Virgin in the history of salvation and in the life of the Church, the Christian takes her as "mother and teacher of the spiritual life" (68); with her and like her, in the light of the Incarnation and of Easter, he impresses on his very existence a decisive orientation towards God through Christ in the Spirit, in order to express by his life in the Church the radical message of the Good News, especially the commandment of love (cf. Jn 15:12). (no. 36)

As I have implied, this is the end. Last year, partly as result of the Presidential Address (I like to think), the MSA Board decided on topics for the next three conventions, topics which were a consequence of the letter on Mary issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education. The convention of 1990 is the first in this new series.

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⁷Letter, no. 34.