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Editor's Foreword

Théodore Koehler

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PREFACE

ERASMUS AND THE CRISES OF DEVOTION

The well-known Mariologist, Joaquín María Alonso, C.M.F., has prepared a *Corpus Mariologicum* of Erasmus, which is published in these volumes 11 and 12 of *Marian Library Studies* (1979-1980). The author has patiently gathered all the texts in which the great humanist talked about Mary. He verified them in the first editions of every work cited, by comparing his data with that in the great edition of the *Opera omnia* of Erasmus, which we owe to the book dealer Peter VANDER AA and to the editor Jean LECLERC (10 tomes in 11 volumes, Leyden, 1699/1703-1709). Fr. Alonso used the subsequent critical writings, particularly the *Opuscula Erasmi. A Supplement to the Opera omnia* (ed. Wallace K. FERGUSON, Nijhoff, La Hague, 1933); *The Poems of Desiderius Erasmus* (introduced and collected by Dr. C. REEDJIK); the *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. ALLEN-H. M. ALLEN - H. W. GARROD (12 vols., Oxford, 1906-58). For certain works, the author was able to consult the great critical edition now in the process of publication, *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami, recognita et annotatione critica instructa notisque illustrata* (North-Holland Publishing Co., Amsterdam, 1969-).

J. M. Alonso has divided his study into two parts : 1) a presentation and edition of Erasmus' texts referring to Mary (These are given in chronological order, analyzed and reintegrated into Erasmus' life history.) and 2) a synthesis of the doctrine, of the opinions expressed in these texts (Alonso calls this the *Mariology* of Erasmus, evidently in a very broad sense, since Erasmus never thought of writing a specific treatise on Marian doctrine, nor even of drawing up a synthesis of this kind.).

J. M. Alonso quotes three authors (See his bibliography.) who, in recent years, have studied Erasmus' texts concerning the mother of God; they are: José Ignacio Tellechea Idigoras of Spain (1956); Aidan A. Licari of the United States (1966); and the eminent specialist on Erasmus, Léon E. Halkin of Belgium (1977). In their studies, however, they limit themselves to some quotations from Erasmus, to illustrate the presentation. Alonso wanted to gather

and re-edit all of Erasmus' texts for his own study of the writings of this humanist concerning the Virgin Mary. This *Corpus Mariologicum* is considerable in extent; however, Fr. Alonso did not deem it necessary to edit *in extenso* certain texts such as *Naufragium* (en T 44), *Peregrinatio religionis* (T 47), *Ichthyofagia* (T 48); he retained the essential passages only.

What is the real value of this edition? It is not meant to be a supplement to the great critical edition now in progress, which will provide the best possible knowledge of Erasmus' works, including those texts which we here publish. But we are in an ecumenical age; the dialogue between Christian confessions has been restored. In our studies it is necessary to go back to the times of separation, to the men who lived through them. Erasmus is a witness of the division of Christianity into Protestantism and Catholicism, at the beginning of the 16th century. He knew the deep desire for reformation that animated an elite group of his time. He was in contact with Luther and broke off with him only with regret. He worked with all his genius, all his intellectual and literary capabilities, to promote the renewal of Christianity. Erasmus was guided by his own liking for classic Greco-Roman antiquity; he was initiated into the importance of the Italian Renaissance by other humanists who became his friends (like Thomas More, John Colet); he was formed to employ humanist methods to reevaluate a true knowledge of Biblical and Patristic texts; he was a promoter of the "trilingual college" (Latin-Greek-Hebrew); he became one of the workers for the renewal, at that time, of editions of the Bible and of the Fathers, of commentaries which allowed for a better understanding of the Word of God in its tradition; as an exegete of these texts, Erasmus remains a milestone in the transmission of the Christian heritage.

The interest of Erasmian studies is also due—and for some scholars, above all—to the man himself, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, to his rich and extremely sensitive temperament, which made him a caustic writer to his attackers, a remarkable friend to his friends, a great man known through all of Europe, as can be seen from his correspondence. Erasmus was a genius, and genius escapes all definitions. One can understand his replies (without approving his sarcasm) to those who wanted to place him on one or the other side in discussions. For Erasmus lived during difficult times which demanded taking sides, even by those who—like him—desired peace most of all. It is curious to see that Erasmus in his turn has provoked taking sides, even until now. Richard G. Villoslada (DSp 4, 934/5) warns:

The literature concerning Erasmus . . . is often sullied by a serious fault: it reflects the ideological positions of the writer, whether historian or

theologian. Erasmus is, in fact, a rationalist for some, a modernist for others; or also, for some he is a Protestant who is very careful not to admit it, for others he is a renegade Catholic, or even the good Christian with no malice other than that of saying what he thinks as he thinks it.

Roland H. Bainton (*Erasmus of Christendom*, N.Y., 1969), who favors Erasmus, wanted to open the way to a better interpretation. He underlines the merits of Erasmus as one who knew how to unite the two great heritages of the West: the Greco-Roman and the biblical Judeo-Christian. He also indicates the importance of Erasmus today as regards the ecumenical dialogue between Protestants and Catholics, for Erasmus did not wish to see this dialogue closed off by a break between reformers and Rome; he saw that non-violence was the method for an open dialogue. Bainton thinks, from a historical point of view, that in his struggle for a true reform, Erasmus ended as a "battered liberal" and that the problem for our times is precisely one of discovering if there is a better solution (pp. vii-viii).

Therefore, it is not so much the positions taken by Erasmus which are of importance to us, but the comparison between the difficulties into which he was hurled and those which we meet in the dialogue between Protestants and Catholics today, so that we move toward that union of the Church which Erasmus wanted to preserve at all costs. In his *Enchiridion* (1503), which sums up the Christian ideal, he appears, of course, essentially as a moralist; but one should note that Christianity, for him, is centered on Christ, on the divine charity and peace revealed by Christ; everything rests on, everything must converge on the *omnes unum in Christo* (5th rule, LB V, 35).

Marian doctrine and devotion are part of the past and present difficulties in the dialogue between Protestants and Catholics. Halkin locates well the effort of Erasmus anent the difficulties of his time:

If (Erasmus) believes that hyperdulia is legitimate, he wants to cool down its expression and, better than most of his co-religionaries, he denounces the dangers of superstition and of that which we call mariolatry. However, he abhors all radicalism and struggles to save the essential in Catholic piety. His success is in stigmatizing the abuses without ceasing to honor and venerate Mary.

However, Halkin acts a little hastily when he talks of the "Mariology" of the time of Erasmus: "Witness and judge of his time, Erasmus reacted against the confusions of a Mariology which was anachronistic, abounding, ambiguous and inadequate." One should certainly denounce the "miseries" of the devotion of the early 16th century, however, one should not fail to recognize its "grandeurs." Also, a distinction should be made between doctrine, liturgy and popular practices. Nor should the term "Mariology"

be employed in a sense that confuses these different domains, for this term, strictly, signifies the systematization of doctrine and nothing else. That is why—let it be said here—we should also criticize the use of the term by Halkin and Alonso to designate a subject that others have preferred to call simply “Mary in the Writings of Erasmus” (Tellechea) or “Some Writings (of Erasmus) concerning the Mother of God” (Licari).

The history of Marian doctrine and devotion at the time of Erasmus is becoming better known. Studies such as that of J. Toussaert, *Religious Feeling in Flanders at the End of the Middle Ages* (Paris, 1963), and the recent works of the French Mariological Society (1978) show that we must have monographs based particularly on a documentation as close to the life of the people as possible. The recent International Mariological Congress of Saragossa (October 1979) was dedicated entirely to the 16th century. But how can the facts be judged? Dom Jean Leclercq,¹ a fine connoisseur of the Middle Ages, gave the title “Grandeur and Misery of Marian Devotion in the Middle Ages” to a section of his study *Liturgy and the Christian Paradoxes* (Cerf, 1963), and he proposed the question: “Is the extreme sobriety of Marian cult at the end of the Patristic age preferable to the exuberant religion of the end of the Middle Ages?” He immediately added,

The Church does not answer the question and private judgments may legitimately differ. Let us then stop judging the evolutions in the Church in terms of decadence or of progress. The Holy Spirit is at work in every age... It is better to recognize with Newman that at each epoch there is grandeur and misery: grandeur because God inspires the religion that we have for Him. He acts through it and saves us through it. Misery, because this religion continually runs the risk of our degrading it, more or less, into superstition. Who can say which periods have perfectly avoided running into this reef? But supposing that this historical judgment were possible, would it be valuable in the eyes of the “spectator of the centuries?” God, to whom Scripture bestows this admirable title (Sir 36:19), is eternal, He is patient. (p. 171)

Prudence is thus necessary, and judgment is not up to us. Even the criticisms of the time—those of Erasmus, of Luther—do not allow us to render value judgments. The very general criticism of vows, of pilgrimages, of votive candles offered at shrines, does not lead us to a just appreciation of mentalities; this criticism simply makes us realize a certain danger: the routine of exterior practices tends to eliminate the interior life, a danger that Erasmus saw very well. But the human being needs to express his interior life, his devotion, his love. Moreover, the Incarnation responds to this symbolic nature of our race.

Alonso will seem severe towards Erasmus. Halkin is undoubtedly closer to the truth. However, from this historical point of view, Alonso has demarcated Erasmus' evolution in the expression of his Marian devotion, an evolution that is very useful to know: his first Marian texts show a traditional medieval devotion, conforming to the mentality of the time, with, however, a presentation inspired by humanist tastes. After his contact with the English humanists, and the decision to dedicate himself to exegetical works, to reread the Bible and the Fathers, Erasmus changes his attitude: his humanism criticizes the manifestations of popular devotion. He was even accused of not being devout. Bainton and Halkin are of the opposite opinion. In short, neither the faithful nor the critics should dramatize. In the Middle Ages, religion was sometimes dramatized, in a kind of opposition between a God of wrath and a Mother of mercy, a real caricature of Redemption. But the critic should not so focus on the "miseries" to the point of forgetting the "grandeurs" of popular devotion.

Finally, the two successive devotional attitudes of Erasmus make us reflect on the opportunities as well as the dangers that arise in the religious domain, in cultural transformation, in intellectual options. Nowadays, we should be attentive to the devotion of the masses at Guadalupe, Fatima, and Lourdes, as well as to the efforts of those who request (like Erasmus in his time) a transition, a passing from superabundant devotions to a devotion that is more ecclesial, more liturgical, more sober, centered on Christ and his call to evangelization. Erasmus opened the way for intellectuals to follow: a rigorous exegesis of texts so as to transmit the authentic Word of God. Erasmus, however, did not speak in the name of the masses, the mystics, or the saints. The Church, though, remains the Church of the poor, even if it reveres the enlightenment given to geniuses. A Saint Augustine, a Saint Thomas Aquinas, furthermore, knew how to unite all these, but they are rare. Saints such as Berulle, Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort, and Saint Alphonsus Liguori found the ways of Tradition amid the tensions between intellectualistic critics—like Erasmus in the 16th century, Widenfeld in the 17th, Muratori in the 18th century—and the popular devotion of their times. Nevertheless, in comparison with the saints of his time—like Ignatius of Loyola or Peter Canisius—Erasmus keeps his place as a good laborer of Tradition. He went to the Father with a final prayer, in which he expressed his trust in Mary: "O Jesu, Misericordia! Domine, miserere mei! O Mater Dei, memento mei! Lieve God!"

Théodore KOEHLER, S.M.