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## Marian Studies--Doctrine

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## MARIAN STUDIES—DOCTRINE

Johann G. Roten, S.M.\*

It is nearly impossible to pinpoint the exact configuration of doctrinal mariology. Is doctrine synonymous with dogma? Can it be best described as dogmatic theology? Is its sole purpose to define tradition by contrasting it with Scripture? The description of doctrine used in this doctrinal retrospective aims for a somewhat nondescript comprehensiveness, where dogma meets methodology and current trends confront the more fundamental principles and issues of mariology. There is no serious retrospective on doctrine without a critical note; sifting through past accomplishments with the eyes of the present, we grope for new horizons—as is the ambition of any and all science.

### The Challenges of Theological Autarchy

The Mariological Society of America (MSA) was founded in 1949 “to promote an exchange of views on Marian doctrines and to further research in Mariology.”<sup>1</sup> It was in its beginning one of *two* theological societies in the United States; the other being *The Theological Society of America* (founded only a few years prior to the MSA). Is it not remarkable and amazing to note that all other theological disciplines found a common home in one (and only one) society, whereas mariology needed its own and very special association? At the time of the foundation of the MSA, Marian theology was prominent and important enough to request and deserve a separate learned society. However, in doing so, the MSA accepted the separation from other theological disciplines and may have promoted unwittingly a splendid isolation and a privilege mentality. Some of the difficulties inherent to mariology have their origin in this separation. There exists, generally and historically speaking, only modest concern among mariologists regarding the ways, means and contents of other theological disciplines. Consequently, in the eyes of not a few theologians, the very existence of a mariological society amounts to a measure of mere self-protection without which mariology would be absorbed by other more important strands of theological discourse and would cease to exist altogether. Still others, applying the principle according to which the organ creates the function, would agree that mariology is over-sophisticated in a simplistic way. Feeding on itself and theologizing in a closed circuit, it amasses data but generates few new insights and/or loses sight of theological proportionality; it escapes integration and participation in the overall theological discourse.

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<sup>1</sup>Juniper Carol, ed., *Mariology* (3 vols.; Milwaukee: Bruce, 1955–61), 3:278.

Looking back in joy and gratitude on fifty years of existence, we are forced to admit that some of these critical remarks are not without merit. According to the goals set by the founding members, the MSA was to promote an exchange of views on Marian doctrines and to further research in mariology. Again, it is interesting to note that, according to the mind of the founding members, a distinction is to be made between the exchange of views on Marian doctrines and the promotion of research. Without saying so explicitly, the exchange seems not to be a necessary component of research. "Exchange" may be interpreted as being of the domain of opinion, tolerable and tolerated, probably with the intent to delimit an area of free discussion situated outside the consecrated space of Marian dogma. On the other hand, "research" may suggest theological discourse meant to be heading for a definitive and unalterable formulation as infallible dogmatic statement. Our reading of these objectives—and some reading *into* it may be involved (*eisegesis*)—suggests a strong privilege-oriented understanding of doctrine, closely connected with an inherent thrust (in the sense used by Newman) toward dogmatization. Indeed, the beginnings of the MSA are marked by a high-minded self-understanding of mariology as scientific and systematic theological discipline (1950), and the annual themes of the 1950s were clustered around Mary's prerogatives (1951), such as her spiritual maternity (1952), queenship (1953), Immaculate Conception (1954), divine maternity (1955), virginity (1956) and immortality (1957). The close connection between mariological discourse and *dogma-oriented* understanding of doctrine was part of the identity as *learned* society. It excluded or ignored the explicit reference to the devotional and popular dimension of Marian discourse. Exchange of views on Marian doctrines and promotion of research did not seem to be welcome or compatible with theological reflection on the various expressions of Marian devotion.

Thus the self-understanding of the beginnings has marked the MSA and its work in three ways:

1. As a separate theological society, its discourse leads to a certain exclusion and isolation along with a high degree of intra-disciplinary specialization. This seems to be a permanent characteristic not only of the MSA but of most other mariological societies.
2. The formulation of purpose suggests a strong dogma-oriented understanding of doctrine, based in the beginning on a marked privilege-centered mariology. This, of course, is no longer true, as subsequent developments will show.
3. Due probably to the self-understanding as learned society, the reference to Marian devotion as subject matter for theological reflection is absent.

### Markings Along the Way

The history of doctrinal reflection of our society shows a rich variety of themes treated with love and competence. Compared with the work of other mariological societies, the MSA's approach to Marian studies seems to be more pragmatic, but without losing sight of major developments in the field. Frequently, the selection of themes seems to cater to the genius of individual members at least as much as it pursues an overall schema—especially in the late sixties, the seventies and early eighties. Some of

the mariological societies—the Spanish and French ones in particular—applied, and still do apply, a systematic and very detailed methodology to the annual themes which are systematically examined according to Scripture, patristics, the history of theology, liturgy and spirituality.

There exists a certain parallelism among the various mariological societies as to the general trend in selecting and treating their annual themes. After a widely privilege-oriented mariology in the 1940s and 1950s, there is a paradigm shift in favor of Mary and the Church in the late 1950s and early 1960s, usually marked by strong biblical accents. The 1960s center on the assimilation of Vatican II, followed by much soul-searching and a great variety of themes in the 1970s, including Mary's importance and role for contemporary Christians. During the late 1970s and 1980s, there is a greater thematic unity, highlighted by anniversary studies on *Lumen gentium*, reflections on *Marialis cultus*, and commentaries on *Redemptoris Mater*. The last fifteen years suggest a broader impact of mariology on liturgy, devotion, catechesis and culture.

At this point, I would like to make some specific observations and suggestions with regard to our own society and its doctrinal endeavors in past and present:

1. It is surprising to note how often the theme of Mary's virginity is treated. However, only little is said about *how* we can believe in the virginity. I would consider it as one of our tasks to formulate a *pastoral theology* of all four Marian dogmas, showing their anthropological relevance and spiritual significance.
2. The study of our doctrinal history is related to names of individual scholars who are no longer among us but are still active and have left their mark on other theological disciplines or have engaged in popular Marian movements. I would like to raise the question: Where are the biblical and patristic scholars, ecclesiologists, medievalists, anthropologists who have a genuine Marian interest? Or, on a different level, are we far too remote from where the *real Marian action* is? Are scholars leaving the MSA for associations where they can be more immediately useful?
3. Some of the mariological societies in Europe have shown great interest in local, regional and national Marian traditions of past and present. So far, we have shown only little interest in Marian traditions in the United States of the past 200 years. Should we become more local and engage in monographic studies about the many strands of our ethnic Marian heritage? For example, what is the importance of our national patroness—Mary Immaculate—for mariology and Marian devotion in this country?
4. There exist a series of Marian themes we have dealt with rather marginally: for example, Mary and the Holy Spirit, Mary and the Trinity, recent *in-depth* studies on Mary and Christ, Mary and the Church. Looking back in time, do we have to admit that there are missed or wasted opportunities in the history of our doctrinal reflection? I am thinking of (1) the absence of serious dialogue with the charismatic movement and with feminist theology, (2) the failure to report the Brown/Laurentin controversy, (3) our handling of the various new-old forms of Marian devotions, and (4) our recent silence with regard to the co-redemption movement. Should we have been more articulate with regard to Mary's role in evangelization? These are not accusations, but questions which impact our purpose and identity as a mariological society.

5. Are we aware that an important part of information on Mary and discourse about her is carried on and disseminated no longer by way of the written word but through film, video and, in a highly interactive way, by the *Internet*? How do we deal with these means and the hermeneutical problems they present?
6. Mariology of the past was frequently the prerogative of a variety of religious orders and congregations. Where have all these religious and their inspiring mariologies gone? And where are the mariologies of new ecclesial movements, secular institutes and committed laity? I am convinced that personal or corporate commitment and consecration to Mary is a major driving force for the promotion of mariology.
7. Let me say a word on behalf and in favor of *anonymous mariology*. The term is evidently misleading, but it covers an important reality. There are people who do not recognize an explicit affinity and personal relationship with Mary. However, they understand and cherish fundamental Christian attitudes such as faith, receptivity to grace, self-oblation, intimacy with the Word and conformity to Christ. All of these attitudes are expressions of anonymous mariology—the next best thing to a beautiful personal relationship with Our Lady, and are sometimes more *existentially* grounded than many a devotion which specifically bears her name. It would seem important and helpful to thematize this indirect mariology and to make more explicit *what it is* and *how it is* embodied in people.
8. The reflection on our past shows very clearly that the MSA has both a bridge-building and balancing function, not only in regard to Marian theology and Marian spirituality, but also in relation to the popular and academic approach to Mary. Further, there is always a need to bridge the gap between the scriptural and the doctrinal tradition of Mary. Today—more than ever—a rift seems to open between these two worlds. It is one of our tasks to be mindful of the complete picture of Mary as offered in scripture and tradition.
9. A comparative study of the Marian themes treated by various mariological societies shows a high degree of similarity or affinity. Geography and language frequently limit these affinities to simple juxtaposition and repetition of the same efforts. Are there ways to overcome this juxtaposition and potential repetition of the same? Should we more frequently invite members of other national societies as speakers and observers? Should we go a step further and engage in a collaborative effort of international scope, perhaps to ponder the publication of an international journal (similar to *Concilium* or *Communio*) or, more modestly, to pool the bibliographic information available in various cultures?
10. We may want to take into consideration the possibility of a more systematic and comprehensive methodological effort in studying the annual topic or theme. As mentioned earlier, some mariological societies apply a rigorous schema comprising scripture, patristics, historical theology, liturgy and spirituality or devotion. Our doctrinal reflection would most certainly gain in breadth and depth.

#### Four Fruitful Antinomies

Examining the doctrinal aspects of our theological activity in past and present, we discover a certain number of *constants*, meaning basic doctrinal realities difficult to thematize yet omnipresent in our presentations and discussions. Most of these doc-

trinal constants are double-faced: they present us with the harsh reality of antinomic difficulties but, at the same time, offer inspiring challenges. We are speaking here of realities we *have* to live with, but without which no genuine mariology can exist. I would like to mention some of them:

1. Unlike other theological disciplines, mariology or Marian studies is essentially relational, meaning radically dependent on christology, ecclesiology and anthropology for its existence. Take a look at these questions: Where does mariology begin, where does it end? Or, would there still be enough theological matter left for an independent mariology if both christology and ecclesiology fully recognized and integrated the person and mission of Mary? These are no idle considerations. The true mariologist lives a *threshold* existence. He/she is by vocation, if not by specialization, not only mariologist but also ecclesiologist, christologist or anthropologist. The one practical conclusion we can draw from this is that the mariologist who respects himself/herself as scholar needs a *second* or even a primary specialization to make his/her mariology fruitful.
2. More than most theological disciplines, Marian studies are either the result of or have contributed to shape culture—Christian culture in particular—on all levels, from popular to academic. The relation between Marian theology and culture is a very complex one. But there are reasons, two in particular, why Mary is such a powerful cultural figure. The first of these reasons has to do with the scarcity of historical information about her person. Historical figures without a strong biographical profile tend to become mystic entities or mythological realities. Due to the so-called “marshmallow effect,” they can be pressed into almost any cultural schema. Thus, Mary can be regarded as successor of the nursing Isis, the *alter ego* of the Byzantine empress, the ideal of courtly love or the militant Queen of Heaven of the Counter-Reformation. There is a second reason why Mary presents a strong cultural profile: We find in Mary a powerful reflection of one of the most foundational human archetypes, that of *the mother*, with all its connotations of generation, survival, protection, acceptance, growth and affection.

Evidently, the two reasons mentioned here are *pre-theological* ones; in other words, Mary's cultural popularity is only marginally determined by the theological discourse about her. This creates a dilemma: as devotees of Mary we want her to be as incorporated into the culture as widely as possible, but as mariologists we have to safeguard Mary's theological identity and integrity. The question is: How cultural can we allow Mary to be? Culture, even Catholic culture (I am not saying Catholic theology), has a tendency of consecrating her as a godlike entity—as Protestants frequently remind us. On the other hand, without culture Marian theology remains purely theological speculation. We need culture to bridge the delicate passage between theology and spirituality.

Based on our dealings with Marian doctrine in past and present, some considerations of a more practical nature may be appropriate here. Special attention, it seems, should be given to the following areas: the MSA's role as information pool and mariological clearing house; the importance of interactive theological discourse and genuine research, and a possible redefinition of the MSA's public role.

3. A further challenge and difficulty lies in the amazing discrepancy between the narrow scriptural basis of mariology and the broad and expansive doctrinal reflection

that developed from it or in spite of it. Of course, we are in possession of a methodological device which allows us somewhat to avoid a major clash and bridge the frequently perceived discrepancy between scripture and dogma. We call it the *comprehensive* meaning of scripture. I will not pursue this further, but would like to draw the attention of the reader to some practical consequences for mariology. A theological discipline with a narrow scriptural infrastructure and a generous doctrinal superstructure is like a gothic cathedral, especially its nave, which needs—for its stability—two powerful buttresses. This is the case for mariology. Marian studies are (in my opinion) more dependent on the *magisterium* and the *sensus fidelium*—the two stabilizers of its construction—than are some of the more scripturally based related disciplines.

This makes of mariology a very *ecclesial* discipline—for some people, too “Roman” and too dependent on the magisterium. But it is good to keep this close connection between Mary and Peter in mind, for it symbolizes the deeper meaning of theology. Theology is and remains an intellectual discourse on faith, through faith, for the sake of a lived faith that is both personal and communal. Mariology expresses the *faith* dimension of theology with greater immediacy and urgency than other theological disciplines, not least because of its greater dependence on the magisterium as the human and historical embodiment of God’s will. But here again, Marian studies are confronted with a dilemma, meaning the possible clash between the magisterium and the *sensus fidelium*. Indeed, the *sensus fidelium* is the second buttress of mariology. As we know, it has played an important role in the history of Marian doctrine and devotion. We are not allowed to ignore it. On the contrary, it is a task of mariology to labor for the convergence between the two, between magisterium and *sensus fidelium*. This means, among other things, that mariology will have to take into serious account the various expressions of popular devotion and explore their theological potential.

4. In the fourth place, I would like to highlight the double character (or valence) of Mary as historical figure and her universal significance. The rejection of this double character or the reduction to either *historical* or *universal* leads to misunderstandings regarding the full reality of Mary and the proper role of mariology. Is Mary of Galilee compatible with the Queen of Heaven? Strictly scripture-based mariologies tend to reject the second characteristic, that of Queen of Heaven. On the other hand, those in favor of a more universal reading of the figure of Mary frequently lean toward a somewhat, or even purely, symbolic notion of Mary. One of the consequences of both historical and universalist reductionism is Mary’s absence from the life of the Church in the *present*. Where Mary is presented as a historical figure, she remains a reality of the past, preferably the disciple of Christ. Her active presence in the Church till the second coming of Christ is not, or not sufficiently, reflected and articulated. Where Mary’s universal significance evaporates in pure symbolism, the same absence can be noted.

Therefore, one of the most pressing questions of mariology in the present deals with the cluster *intercession—mediation—spiritual maternity*. How can Mary’s role on our behalf be articulated? Which are the theological categories that best express her maternal role? These and other fundamental questions need to be considered, keeping in mind that it is our call to view them as windows of opportunity rather than unsurmountable difficulties.

#### Four Practical Suggestions

1. The MSA needs to be aware of the various developments in the field of Marian studies. The annual bibliographical survey fulfills this task up to a certain point. More should and could be done with regard to *contents*: more nuanced presentation of issues, their *status quaestionis* and potential developments. This concern not only applies to strictly Marian topics but also to related topics; for example, how do new developments on original sin impact the theology of the Immaculate Conception?
2. The MSA of the future needs to engage in more active, interactive and immediate theological discourse. At the present time, there exists little exchange, discussion and debate on doctrinal and related issues. We know that presentations eventually become articles and can be read in *Marian Studies*. They do not ask for a special meeting. And, in fact, some members do ask the question: Why should I attend the annual conference if little opportunity is given for real exchange and participation? Exchange occurs where different points of view can be presented. The MSA needs to be open to representatives of other theological disciplines, cultures, religions and differing opinions. It goes without saying that more interactive theological discourse will depend on the interest, competence and actual contribution of members present at our gatherings.
3. More space should be given to reports concerning genuine research conducted by MSA members or other persons. Most of the presentations given at our meetings are solid and well-founded. However, they mainly fit the category of surveys and summaries on topics already known to many members. They serve as reminders rather than meet the requirements of genuine contributions to the field. We probably all agree that it is only seldom possible to do genuine research for our annual meetings. Thus, the MSA should encourage and even commission genuine research of foundational, monographic and comparative nature, the results of which could be presented by their authors at our meetings.
4. The MSA should assume a more public role on issues directly and sometimes indirectly related to Marian theology. I am thinking in particular of two ways to deal with this issue:
  - a. The MSA should establish and cultivate contacts, and engage in collaborative efforts with Marian movements which share the same Marian interest and concern, albeit not from an academic point of view.
  - b. The same efforts should be made with regard to societies promoting academic theology. We should be more present and active in those societies and promote seminars and study groups dealing with Marian theology during their annual meetings.

On a different level, the question of a more critical public role should be raised. Is it not our task to be more actively present in some of the more prominent debates regarding Mary? I am thinking of Marian apocalypticism, the co-redemption question, abortion and other issues involving public morality.

#### Concluding Reflection

The text here presented gives the impression of a number of free-floating ideas without solid roots in the history of the MSA. In fact, these ideas reflect more thoroughly the critical note alluded to in the introduction rather than a comprehensive



retrospective on doctrine. However, the preliminary quantitative analysis<sup>2</sup> of articles published in *Marian Studies* during the elapsed fifty years—on principles, dogmas and doctrinal currents—was used and served as the point of departure and necessary source of inspiration in crafting these observations. The quantitative analysis was not included here, among other reasons, to better highlight the present and future perspective of a learned society which draws on the past in order to be able to confidently face the future.

<sup>2</sup>This quantitative analysis exists as a manuscript of some 40 pages. Readers interested in its contents may obtain a copy through the MSA Secretariat.