

Marian Studies

Volume 51 *With the Mother of the Lord: On Pilgrimage to the New Millennium*

Article 15

2000

Report, 1999-2000: New England Region

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Recommended Citation

Morry, Matthew F. (2000) "Report, 1999-2000: New England Region," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 51, Article 15.
Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol51/iss1/15

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REPORT, 1999–2000: THE NEW ENGLAND REGION

The New England Region of the Mariological Society of America held its Annual Meeting on Saturday, October 23, 1999. The Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas, on the campus of Providence College, Providence, Rhode Island, welcomed members and guests to the Meeting. Reverend Matthew Morry, O.P., S.T.D., Director of the New England Region, called the Meeting into session at 10:05 a.m. The Most Reverend Ernest Bertrand Boland, O.P., D.D., offered the opening prayer and blessing. The Very Reverend A. Philip Smith, Ph.D., President of Providence College, welcomed the one-hundred and forty members warmly, with an acknowledgment of the value of these meetings for the Catholic identity of the Providence College family.

The Very Reverend James Boniface Ramsey, S.T.D., Prior of St. Vincent Ferrer Priory in New York City and Professor of Theology at Seton Hall University, delivered the Keynote Address: "Mary in Ancient Christianity: Some Leading Themes." In his address, Fr. Ramsey discussed the reality of Mary in Ancient Christianity as developed by the Fathers of the Church. This earliest period is evidence of the accent upon the mystery of the identity of Jesus the Christ, and demonstrates how the identity of Mary is developed in that era along with the deeper understanding of Jesus her Son.

In this early period of the Church, certain errors arose questioning the true identity of Jesus: Docetism, Gnosticism, Monophysitism. Still, Mary's Motherhood of Christ is taught with emphasis and certainty, especially by St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Irenaeus and Tertullian. Thus, Mary is seen as truly mother and Jesus as truly human. The teaching of the Motherhood of Mary is complemented, in this early period, by the teaching that Mary is Virgin. Mary's Virginity *Ante partum* is clearly presented and accepted. Some reticence is evident when the teaching of her Virginity *In partu* is expressed. As a blanket affirmation of Mary being *semper virgo*, no problems arise (e.g., as cited in St. Ambrose); questions arise relative to making the teaching more explicit. Mary's Virginity *Post partum* is presented by the majority of the Fathers, with Tertullian a possible exception.

Using antithetical parallelism, Saints Irenaeus and Ephraem, in particular, presented Mary as complementing or superceding Eve in the work of the New Adam: Mary became the advocate of the first virgin. Further, the early Fathers identified Mary as a natural symbol of the Church in its virginal maternity. The relationship of Mary and the Church is deepened in the reality of their being disciples of Jesus. Yet, even within that relationship, Mary stands prominent as the model Christian for all Christians. Athanasius and Ambrose present Mary as the ideal model, while Augustine sees Mary-the-disciple as the model for Christians. Fr. Ramsey noted how the Fathers would reflect upon the virginity of Mary and see her there as the model Christian, and especially as a "model nun"—the ideal virgin (St. Athanasius, St. Ambrose).

As the knowledge and understanding of the Mystery of the Incarnate Word developed, the recognition of Mary's true role and reality also deepened in clarity. She was hailed as Mother of God for many years, but was formally enunciated as the *Theotokos* only at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Divine Maternity had been acknowledged

among the People of God, now it was solemnly declared. And this declaration offered the insight that, to be worthy of and prepared for Divine Maternity, Mary was free of all sin; as St. John of Damascus noted: she is conceived free of sin. Also in this era, the question was raised that if she is truly handmaid of God in His Saving Act, is she not then also to share the fruit of the Redemption in being lifted up by God into His eternal presence—the Virgin, the Mother, the Handmaid, the Disciple Assumed?

In support of the written records of the teachings of the Fathers concerning Mary in Ancient Christianity, Fr. Ramsey then made a presentation of slides showing various tombs, caves and ceilings from those early times (2nd century), in which scripts, frescoes, carvings, drawings and mosaics presented additional evidence of the belief and teachings of the Primitive Church about Mary, as highlighted in the talk. The artistic representations of Mary during this early period constantly portray Mary always with her Son, Jesus.

After the talk and slide presentation, there was a spirited and long discussion examining and reflecting upon the themes that had been developed.

With the conclusion of the discussion, the Marian Liturgy was celebrated. The Most Reverend Robert E. Mulvey, D.D., J.C.D., Bishop of Providence, was the chief celebrant. The homilist in the Liturgy was the Reverend Vincent T. Euk, of the New York Archdiocesan Chancery and member of the Mariological Society. His homily was entitled "Woman Most Blessed."

Within the context of the divinely inspired words of Mary, Fr. Euk presented the role of Mary as Handmaid in God's Saving Act. God prepared Mary for Divine Maternity by preserving her free of sin. And, with the fullness of grace to hear, accept and respond in faith to God's call, Mary uttered her *fiat* in humility and total confidence. She is the "woman" who reflected upon the revelation of God's presence in her and with her, as she witnessed her faith in her Divine Son at Cana and Calvary; she is the "woman" upon whom the Holy Spirit came in her conceiving of Jesus and who gave herself to the Divine Will in fulfilling the Saving Act in her own pain and agony. She is the "woman"—Mother of the Church—raised up by God into His eternal presence. God places Mary before all of us as the model to use for our full humanity—body and soul—to express the love in the Trinity as the healing of our world; she is the model for us to use our free will as a power to communicate peace. By God's will, Mary is united to Christ in accomplishing the work of Redemption in her love and suffering. Fr. Euk underlined the many and diverse ways in which the Spirit of God continues to speak to us in and through Mary: the voices of the Fathers still echo the reality of Mary; the witness of St. Catherine Labouré, St. Bernadette, and the three children of Fatima present Mary as the driving force calling us to her Son—not merely in the prayer of the Rosary, but in lives surrendered to and living in the love of the Trinity, which Mary lived with such fullness and depth. Her quiet message thunders into our beings: "Do whatever He tells you!"

Following the Marian Liturgy, luncheon was served in the dining room of the Priory. The Annual Meeting of the New England Region was adjourned after the brief Business Meeting at 2:45 P.M.

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