Affetto Al Suo Piacer Quel Contemplante

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THEODORE KOEHLER
HIS PERSON AND WORK
"AFFETTO AL SUO PIACER QUEL CONTEMPLANTE"

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Stat Rosa

To introduce this section of the Festschrift dealing with Father Théodore Koehler's person and work we chose an engraving of Our Lady of the Rosary. The abstract use of the rose symbolism led, in the post-Renaissance period, to the expression Rosarius or Rosarium, thus suggesting that the structured form of the 150 Hail Marys represents a precious anthology of spirituality. Father Théodore Koehler's entire work is situated and evolves within the flexible parameter of this anthology. More precisely, his meditation, research and writing revolve around the very person who is not only the main content of the anthology, but is also herself the rose of whom Beatrice said: "Quivi è la rosa in che il Verbo Divino / Carne si fece." For Father Koehler, however, the beauty of Mary, the Mother of God, never becomes the object of narrow exclusivism or mean sectarianism. He knows all too well that even for Dante there exists a still more general use of the rose symbolism: "In forma dunque di candida rosa / Mi si mostrava la milizia santa, / Che nel suo sangue Cristo fece sposa." In similar fashion, the immense rose windows of Gothic cathedrals symbolize the history of salvation unraveled progressively through the Old and the New Covenant. It is Christ, and always Christ, who appears at the center of these stained glass windows, chiefly either in the mystery of the Incarnation (Mary showing forth the child Jesus) or as Judge. Mary is not the central figure of Christian faith, but many lines converge in her and important connections are established at this meeting point of many fundamental Christian doctrines. As the rose symbolism gradually expands to encompass the whole of our cosmos, so the study of Mary – as can easily be observed

1 Domingo de Arteaga, Thesoro de devoción, 1556, p. 24.
2 Paradiso XXIII, ll. 73-74.
3 Paradiso XXXI, ll. 1-3.
in the person and work of Father Koehler — widens the horizon of our minds and bridges the insularity of our lives. In the mystical rose, finally, the rose comes to symbolize the union between God and Mary. Yet, again, Mary is honored as the model of Christ's mystical union with the Church and our own union with God.

The reference to various aspects of the rose symbolism should not be mistaken for some esoteric Rosicrucian ritual or Gilbert Bécaud's mono-maniac rose-nostalgia. We have chosen to introduce this essay in the name of the Rose to “say it with flowers” and so to express the happy and festive occasion of this publication. Moreover, the facets of the rose symbolism we mentioned set forth some of the major articulations of Father Koehler's personality and thought. The field of his scholarly investigations may be termed Rosarium, a precious anthology of spirituality, yet Koehler's loving gaze always dwells on the Rose itself. It leads him on to explore the wider contours of the cosmos and of salvation history, and patterns for him the way to a living union with God. And so the rose stands as symbol for the basic unity of his life: its fragrance is unmistakably marian, its multiple petals open to all of God's living presence in history.

A Biographical Sketch

Théodore Koehler was born in Strasbour on June 23, 1911. After attending grammar school and the Collège épiscopal Saint Étienne in his hometown (1922-1927), he entered the novitiate of the Society of Mary at Rémy-Signeult (Belgium). He professed first vows in 1928 and final vows in 1936. Between 1928 and 1936, he not only laid the groundwork for his vast and solid classical, literary and philosophical education (licence ès lettres, Strasbourg 1934), but also graduated as a reserve officer from Saint-Cyr in the summer of 1936. He was called to active military duty in September 1939, after barely two years of training toward the priesthood in Fribourg. Serving as lieutenant along the Rhine, he was taken prisoner, interned (OFLAG-17A), but fortunately released as early as December 1940. Théodore Koehler eventually returned to the seminary, resumed his theological studies and brought them to a close in 1942 with the licentiate, in 1943 with the doctorate in theology from the University of Fribourg. On July 27, 1941, he was ordained to the priesthood. Father Théodore Koehler subsequently devoted his time and energy during more than two decades to formation work: between 1944-1952 he served as professor of philosophy at the Institution Sainte-Marie in Paris, and from 1954-1969 as spiritual director and professor of mariology and spirituality at the Marianist International Seminary, Regina Mundi, in Fribourg. Koehler acquired much of what could be termed his “mental structure” as a researcher and scholar while attending the Paleographical School of the Vatican Archives (1951-1953) and during the pursuit of biblical studies in Jerusa-
lem (1954). These circumstances, and especially Koehler's reputation as a peritus in marian studies, already well established since the early sixties, led to his nomination and appointment as director-curator of The Marian Library at the University of Dayton in 1969. He served in this capacity through 1987, and he founded, in 1975, the International Marian Research Institute, established as the American branch of the Pontifical Theological Faculty Marianum in Rome and officially recognized by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education in 1983. Although today director emeritus of both institutions, Father Théodore Koehler still actively participates in all their major activities in the domains of research, teaching, and administration.

**The Habits of the Mind**

Except for his days as a young officer with the French army, and perhaps for the short period he served as chaplain of "Le sillon catholique" (1951-52), nothing at first glance seems to distinguish Father Théodore Koehler's life from that of hundreds of priests of his generation who belong to a religious order devoted to education. Salient facts are rare and drowned most of the time in a sea of colorless mentions about typical curricula and stereotypical functions. Should, therefore, the equation be established: Dull life equals dull personality? Giving the biography a "harder look"—as Father Koehler would say—it appears that Koehler's life is far from dull. It spans some of the more galvanizing periods in modern Church history and coincides with a cultural metamorphosis that inspires as much awe as it prods encouragement and elation. Father Koehler has been an impassioned witness of these events, thrilled by new apertures into the unknown and heartily applauding the setting of hitherto unheard of milestones in scientific progress and technological advancement. A critical and compassionate spectator of the theatrum mundi, he considers himself an active and acting part thereof as well. Much of his meditation on the world finds its way into his private and public prayer. He ardently debates political conjectures for a new world order, but even more ardently puts them in perspective and context with history and its many lessons from the past. Scholar he is, but he has a very practical mind as well when it comes to the diligent use of the commodities of high technology. Part of his heart may be with Servasanctus of Faenza and other grands of the Middle Ages, yet there is nothing that will stop him from studying them with the most up-to-date tools of the twentieth century.

Born into a country of two cultures, French and German, Koehler almost naturally outgrew the narrow geographic confines of his native Alsace. Living on and off in international settings from the days of the novitiate, he developed a European mindset that was soon to become cosmopolitan. The roots and deeper strata of his personality are German, but the basic patterns of his life and the mental structure he
acquired over the years seem definitely French. In some, maybe not-so-strange way, Koehler embodies the combined qualities and gifts of Christophe and Olivier, the German and French friends in Romain Rolland's novel Jean-Christophe: "Each enriched the other's nature.... Each brought vast treasures... Olivier the wide culture and the psychological genius of France: Christophe the innate music of Germany and his intuitive knowledge of nature."4 There is in Koehler something of the physical and moral robustness of the German character, the strength of optimism and "the instinctive absorption of all that is great... and making it greater still."5 It took the skillful hand of his uncle, at La Ferté-Bernard, to lay the foundations for what gradually evolved into Koehler's intellectual profile à la française: "his intellectual calmness and mental detachment, his lofty outlook, his silent understanding and mastery of things."6 There exists in both the French and the German intellectual tradition a long-standing and at times tragic acquaintance with what the Germans call Geist and the French esprit. Where the former may indulge in their natural penchant to radicalize the spirit into an absolute system of occasional deadly practicality, the latter delight in shaping "l'esprit" into the brilliant toy for "games people play" or the proud standard-bearer to uphold the ideals of rationality. Koehler has avoided idealism and rationalism, but allocated the spirit a place in his Weltanschauung where it not only reflects the best of both traditions but also serves the best interests of those whom it should oblige:

Une fois oublié le halo affectif des systèmes, on dégage des hypothèses de recherche, et surtout on découvre l'esprit qui les suscite, un esprit humain sans cesse au travail, qui ne chôme pas, qui ne peut chômer. Cet esprit doit toujours lutter contre les durcissements: les systèmes idéologiques qui, au nom d'opinions faussement humanistes, pourraient tuer l'humanisme inlassablement à la recherche de l'homme.7

Koehler has had at his disposal a vast repertoire of cultural values and patterns, which, paired with his instinctive capacity for absorption, greatly facilitated the adaptation to new geographic horizons and different lifestyles. His coming to the United States brought him in contact with the practical consequences of the emergence and increasing importance of the sciences. They strengthened his conviction "that we do not seek to reduce man to the level of our machines, but that we invent machines to serve the human development.... If robots have a future, it is at the service of mankind, the society of persons."8 They also lent wings to his vision about

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5 Loc. cit., 319.
6 ibid.
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the integration of the sciences into "a truly human knowledge." The high hopes of the early seventies have since been cut down to size, and there is little left of the once euphoric faith in unlimited progress. Conversely, the advance of generations of robots is as triumphant as ever, and Koehler no less accurate when he extends this warning: "...purely materialistic hypotheses will make it impossible for us to progress."9 While having a special liking for the integrative and consolidating powers of the human intellect, Koehler also readily advocates its critical function and calls it discernment. Discernment is as difficult as it is necessary:

This difficulty appears especially in the moral field. There, for individuals as well as entire societies, it is crucial to discern what is good and what is evil. The destiny of persons and human societies is constantly in crisis for lack of moral discernment.10

THE PERSONALIST CREED

As strange as it may seem to give precedence to someone's intellectual profile over the psychological contours of his personality, this is, however, what happens to one who meets Théodore Koehler for the first time. The man of the mind shines through and literally envelops the visitor with his présence d'esprit. It is the way most familiar to him in dealing with people, typical of a certain period and culture, the way in which he became who he is. He is a person guided to his own form of life by direct or literary encounters with some important intellectual and spiritual figures in the Society of Mary and the Church. Not without reason did seminarians nickname him "Scheeben"; the map of his mind is staked out with names such as E. Neubert, M. J. Nicolas, Hubert du Manoir, Henri Barré, Gabriel Roschini, Carlo Balic and Charles Journet, to mention only those who are more intimately related to his marian intellectual vocation. Yet the close encounters of the mind never enslaved him. He developed, on the contrary, a healthy scepticism about becoming a "disciple" of any master of the mind. It is his firm belief that scholars who are ardent followers of a particular theologian or school of theology "often entrap themselves in a kind of narrowness that may be harmful."11 Freedom and openness of mind enable Koehler to meet any other mind in all its positive substance and also to bring into play his own position in full identity. An ideal partner in ecumenical roundtables,12 he effec-

9 Ibid.
12 See E. R. Carroll's contribution to this Festschrift.
tively acts out the fundamental Christian attitude, which is to receive everything from the fullness of the Incarnate Word of God, even things well beyond the ecclesiastical area of faith. Ultimately, the gathering of information leads to an encounter with persons — and this has made Koehler into a “migrant scholar,” for there is hardly a new idea or project which he does not put to the test in extensive consultation with close-by collaborators or faraway correspondents. In the end, everything for this seemingly most cerebral of scholars revolves around a deeply engrained personalist world view: his scholarly ethos, the methodology implied, the very object of his scholarship and the effect it has on the scholar himself or herself:

La vera ricerca, di carattere analitico, nemmeno va verso una sintesi che non può essere che personale, integrata nella formazione della persona nella verità e l’amore. La ricerca teologica viene dalla fede: fides quaeans intellectum. Pero la fede in Dio, in Gesù è vita personale trasformata anche dalla nostra confidenza e la nostra carità. Inoltre crediamo nella solidarietà o meglio la comunione dei santi e da prima nei nostri legami colla Vergine Madre di Dio, nostra madre nel ordine della grazia e della carità.13

Yet, similar to Scheeben, there is steel in Koehler’s theology, too, if one digs deep enough: a solid structure of philosophical and theological principles, hidden in layers of historical and spiritual materials. Conceptual distinctions in Koehler’s thinking and writing are assigned the role of “no trespassing” lines; they act as general reference and mental framework. Koehler’s spiritual stature may resemble a lofty Gothic contrefort, but when it comes to his theological method he does not bear resemblance to the builder of cathedrals so much as he imitates the patient weaver of a never finished tapestry, passed down and unfolding through the ages.

At first glance and almost ironically, there seems to exist an unfortunate gap between Koehler’s personalist creed and his psychological profile. There is the proud bearing of the former lieutenant’s still erect and impressive frame; there is the distant look grazing an imaginary horizon and the demeanor of noble distance which comes with the combined effort of French savoir vivre and a certain type of religious education. Obscure to some of his interlocutors and lacking clarity, he can be in fact — especially where persons, their opinions and feelings are concerned — so beautifully oblique, indirect and convoluted that he drives to despair all those for whom the truth can be summed up in a bold statement or expressed in a simple equation. Too deeply steeped in the spirit of finesse, Koehler would never allow himself to cause an affront to anybody by saying out loud what a perceptive mind should be able to intuit in swift anticipation. There are, of course, no simple explanations to human behavioral patterns, yet why could it not simply be the shy respectfulness of a

13 From remarks offered by Fr. Koehler upon reception of his Honorary Degree from the Pontifical Theological Faculty Marianum, 9 November 1988.
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successfully domesticated timidity which marks some of the salient traits of his personality? There is, in fact, in Théodore Koehler a quality of immense respect for all that is human and potentially human, and simultaneously a quality of immense understanding and sympathy for what seems to be all too human. And human he is himself, as will confirm those who have paid a visit to his office or met him clad in an old flyer's cap and worn raincoat: "After all," would Koehler say, "we will find perfection only in heaven." He has a good sense of fine humor and the calm patience that goes with it. This calm patience of his has also been described as "persevering tenacity" and "gracious resilience."\(^{14}\) Thanks to this tenacity the *Mariale* by Serva-sanctus of Faenza († ca 1300) was rescued and returned from oblivion. Graciously resilient he is, because "in the face of reversals and delays, he has the uncanny ability to adjust course... and to continue undaunted."\(^{15}\)

If he has ever entertained any doubt about the importance and usefulness of mariological research, he has never voiced it. Unperturbed and imperial, he leads his platoon – like the dashing French lieutenant he once was – into the midst of action. And where The Marian Library is concerned, "he has no hesitation... in stoutly maintaining that of its kind it most certainly is unsurpassed."\(^{16}\) Koehler is one of the few living mariologists to have experienced preconciliar times; the period of reassessment, decline and rebirth; and the budding promises of the present. This exposure to decades of investigation and contemplation has provided him with the contextual perspective necessary to perceive the past, the present and the future in conspectu aeternitatis: not because of advanced age – Koehler insists on being "present-tensed" – but because of his lifelong experience of living, acting and reacting under the loving eye of God. From this angle appear but as tiny ripples on an otherwise smooth and peaceful surface what for some may sound like the roaring thunder of a revolutionary groundswell. For Koehler, lifestyle, customs and structures – the many trip wires and stumbling blocks of our corporate life – play the subordinate role of ancillary values; for whatever earthen vessels we may carry, they all beg to be filled with God's original blessing. Yet, far from considering the many details of daily life as quantité négligeable, Koehler puts them in perspective with what is essential. Viewed in this "nouvelle lumière," the simple things take on a new existential density: Koehler is able to pay deliberate and tender attention to the nitty-gritty of daily needs and the sometimes inconsequential concerns of people. He never despairs of persons, for he believes in their innate goodness even to the point of being accused of

\(^{14}\) From the citation by Fr. Thomas A. Thompson, S. M., in honor of Fr. Koehler's being named Director Emeritus of The Marian Library, 5 May 1988.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) From remarks offered by Bro. William Fackovec, S. M., at a Roesch Library reception, 24 April 1987, held to honor Fr. Koehler on the occasion of his receiving the degree Doctor of Humane Letters honoris causa from the University of Dayton, MS, 3.
shortsightedness and credulity. And he is always generous with time, as if he were not himself a captive of time.

The Spiritual Roots

And so we chose goodness and generosity as two of the major traits of Koehler's psychological profile, well aware that the true roots of his goodness and generosity reach beyond the purely psychological to be embodied in the spiritual. To see and observe Koehler one is reminded of a modern liturgical song: "There is a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the Sea / There is a kindness in God's justice which is more than liberty / For the love of God is broader than the measures of our mind."17 He would wholeheartedly agree with the theological contents of this stanza, because it reveals some of the most treasured aspects of his own spiritual beliefs.

God's love is indeed broader than the measures of our mind; this loving God comes to us to become our way of love, the way of mercy. Koehler's spirituality is steeped in Chaminade and Montfort and articulated in categories much like those of E. Neubert, one of his most influential spiritual and theological mentors.

Dieu nous dépasse : infiniment et sans cesse ; mais en nous dépassant, Il entend nous montrer la route, la direction. Il passe et Il est absent ; mais Il est en avant, attirant en son mystère de Vie.

Dieu qui est Amour comble les distances et crée les unions les plus intimes de l'Incréé et du créée : le Christ, Marie, l'Église ; l'humanité pécheresse sanctifiée.18

The specificity of this divine love is what shapes Koehler's spirituality and ultimately his theology: "Un grand maitre de la vie spirituelle, Dom Marmion, nous dit qu'on ne devient un vrai spirituel qu'en comprenant l'amour divin comme miséricorde. Il faut comprendre que Dieu nous pardonne pour vraiment saisir qui est Dieu, pour nous : le Dieu du pardon, le Dieu du Calvaire."19 Thus the Spirit of God is the spirit of mercy, and Mary is the mother of compassion; the Hearts of Jesus and Mary in turn become powerful symbols of God's suffering love for us. Koehler rejects dolorism; he also rejects any spirituality based on self-preservation and protection. Even though marian devotion resorts to the "Sub tuum," there is no reason why spirituality should degenerate into a protectorate of listless piety and fearful passivity.

For Father Théodore Koehler God is the God of liberation and freedom, because he is essentially self-communication and self-giving. To discover his mercy for us means

19 Le Dieu de Marie, St-Maurice 1959, 46.
to experience our own liberation and freedom; that is why we need "a theology of presence to understand better the presence of God in our lives, the presence of Mary, immaculate in her conception and exemplar of our destiny." This presence is an accompanying and dynamic presence experienced in our own spiritual journey toward God: a road traveled in filial piety toward Mary and with active participation in her apostolic mission. Finally, criterion and fruit of a sincerely practiced spirituality is what Koehler calls spiritual joy: "La joie spirituelle... est fruit de l'Esprit qui achève ainsi son œuvre en l'homme devenu docile au dynamisme de la nature et de la grâce: intime à notre personne, il la tourne vers l'unique Autre, et en lui vers tout autre."21

These are some of the more apparent contours of Koehler's personality profile. It presents a high degree of integration, where the habits of the mind take root in the habits of the heart (Koehler's personalist creed) and where mind and heart are united and fashioned by God's mercifully freeing love and many-splendored presence. What at first glance looks like a complex and somewhat forbidding personality, in fact and in depth, turns out to be a man of limpid humanity and burning charity. Not unlike his personality, Koehler's work as a scholar has to be explored in depth before it relinquishes the secret of its purpose and reveals the watermarks of its many pages.

**THE WORKS AND THE WORK**

Koehler's literary production encompasses a variety of works, mainly articles in reference works, journals and periodicals, but also contributions to regular conferences and symposia, monographs, reports, chapters in books, and a few books. A cursory look at the list of more than 160 titles leaves the observer with the impression of an exuberantly growing English garden. There seems to be no set pattern, no red thread, no trace of a French gardener with an engrained sense of the Pascalian esprit de géométrie. Koehler's writings cover a wide range of historical and theological topics, from the rose symbolism to the convergence of sciences, from the crisis of devotion in Erasmus' times back to Bernard's ladder of sinners. They cover a period of almost fifty years, several (original) languages, and at least three different continents. One is tempted to conclude that there are works but no work. However, a more detailed observation conveys a different impression.

Aside from the fact that Koehler's writings are all in some way related to Mary, they also demonstrate a comprehensive approach to marian studies. And there is

20 Homily for Mass held in conjunction with his reception of the President's Patronal Medal from the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 7 December 1976, MS, 6.

The two fundamental articles in *Maria* point out that Koehler is not primarily interested in a historical investigation about a specific marian title, but wants to establish the theological foundations of Mary's relationship with us. He attempts this, for example, in a series of articles specifically directed toward Mary's maternal role in the life of the Church and in our lives. The following chronologically listed writings may document this intent: "Maria, Mater Ecclesiae" (*Études mariales* 11 [1953]: 133-157); "Notre Mère, notre Paradis" (*Cahiers marials* 15 [1959]: 177-185); "Marie et l'Église... peuple de Dieu" (*Cahiers marials* 109 [1977]: 227-234); "Notre Mère l'Église, notre Mère Marie – du Moyen Age à notre époque" (*Cahiers marials* 136 [1983]: 13-24), and "Les titres donnés à Marie notre Mère, aux 19e et au 20e siècles: Avant le Concile Vatican II. Une question de titres" (paper given at the International Mariological Congress, Kevelaer 1987).

Another theme closely linked to Mary's maternal role on our behalf deals with Mary's mediation. Koehler expounded on historical aspects of the subject in 1955 with an article on "La foi du xi° siècle latin en la Médiation de Marie" (*Nouvelle Revue Mariale* 6 [1955/2]: 145-163), again in a more catechetical fashion in 1958 with "Why a Mediatrix?" (*The Marianist* 49, 4 [1958]: 7-10), and most recently in "Mary, Mother of the Church and Her Maternal Mediation" (*Social Justice Review* 79, 5-6 [1988]: 78-81). It is no secret that the aforementioned topics all have their common
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The topics so-far-mentioned again are intimately related to Koehler’s studies on the history and theology of such typically maternal notions as mercy and compassion. We count seven important studies on these and related topics, all produced during the seventies and the first half of the eighties. They investigate the significance and imagery of *misericordia, misericors* from the Vulgate to St. Augustine and in the liturgy between 500-800 (*Studies in Medieval Culture VI and VII*, Kalamazoo 1976, 29-41); the impact of “the ‘Misericordia’ Vocabulary in the Medieval Marian Devotion of the Occident” (*Marian Library Studies* 10 [1978]: 37-63); its occurrence in the marian devotion during the period from Saint Bonaventure to Gerson (*De cultu mariano saeulis XII-XV*, vol. 4, Rome 1980, 313-330); and finally the use of the same vocabulary (*misericordia, misericors, misereri*) in the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas (*Divinitas* 25, 1 [1981]: 34-42). A comprehensive treatment and synthesis of the misericordia theme, covering antiquity, Scripture and tradition appeared in volume 10 of the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* (Paris 1980, cols. 1313-1328). The same encyclopedia published in 1986 a study on the “Planctus Mariae” in which Koehler examined form and use of this literary genre in the tradition of East and West (vol. 12, Paris 1986, cols. 1795-1800). In 1983, he delivered a paper on “La compassione di Maria nei ‘Quindici Sabati del Santissimo Rosario’ di Bartolo Longo” (*Bartolo Longo e il suo tempo...*, vol. 2, Rome 1983, 143-151). We
detect a further development and concretization of the same thematic context in a series of recent studies about the Heart of Mary. Koehler treats this topic in his address to the symposium on the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, at Fatima, in 1986: “Le Cœur de Marie dans la tradition latine: du 8e au 16e siècle” (in progress), and, with an even more specific focus, in several articles: “Godefroid d’Admont et la dévotion au cœur de Marie (Mélanges Charles Molette, vol. 2, Abbeville 1989, 841-847), “La dévotion de sainte Gertrude au Cœur de Marie” (Mélanges René Laurentin, Paris 1990, 439-446), and “Maria, Cor Nostrum. Edition critique du chapitre 83 du Mariale de Servasanctus, OFM († ca. 1300)” (in progress).

**The Methodological Approach**

Without entering into the theological contents of these writings, it would seem appropriate to make three general observations that apply not only to the examined writings but also to the whole of Father Koehler’s work: (1) Koehler’s self-understanding as theologian is not that of a systematician and dogmatician. There are few among his writings that tackle a doctrinal topic in a systematic theological approach. Aside from his doctoral dissertation on the fundamental principle in mariology (1943), and the two studies on the spiritual and mystical maternity (1949 and 1961), there are but a few essays that deal with doctrinal questions specifically. Even his study about the Immaculate Conception (Rome 1963), the evaluation of the Assumption Dogma (*Marian Library Studies* 9 [1977]: 3-17), and his attempt to situate Mary-Theotokos in the context of contemporary christology (*Études mariales* 38 [1981]: 11-35) are rather historical assessments (Scripture, tradition and magisterium) than doctrinal treatments of these dogmas, as is, of course, his “La doctrine mariale à travers les âges” (mimeographed, Marianist Seminary, Fribourg 1956, 78 pp.). Simultaneously, it is easy to notice how deeply steeped in doctrine these works are. Doctrine is their constant point of reference and is, therefore, more than just content or matter from which he worked. (2) Nevertheless, the analysis of Koehler’s works show a clear option for the historical approach to mariology. This applies to a series of publications that deal with the history of mariology as such, and foremost to his five-volume *Storia della mariologia*, composed over a period of five years and covering – in over 1,200 pages – the whole tradition from the first centuries up to 1974 (*Storia della mariologia*, vols. 1-5, Pallanza 1971-1976). A condensed version of this work was published in *Nuovo dizionario di Mariologia* (edited by Stefano De Fiores and Salvatore Meo, Milan 1985, 1385-1405); see also the Spanish translation (*Nuevo diccionario de mariologia*, Madrid 1988, 834-856). He wrote a partial aperçu of marian history for volume ten of the *Dictionnaire de spiri-
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**Theological Dimensions:** "Marie (Sainte Vierge) III. Du moyen âge aux temps modernes" (Paris 1980, cols. 440-459) and historical notes on Christian spirituality for the use of seminarians ("Spiritualité chrétienne: indications historiques," mimeographed, Fribourg 1956, 21 pp.), in addition to composing the aforementioned history of marian doctrine. Apart from these vast historical panoramas, Koehler likes to concentrate on specific topics, periods and authors. As examples, we point out the three monographs he wrote on the "fruitio Dei": in 1964 he researched this theme for the Latin medieval period (Dictionnaire de spiritualité, vol. 5, Paris 1964, cols. 1552-1569) and simultaneously published two articles about the same topic in William of Saint-Thierry (Revue d'ascétique et mystique 40 [1964]: 139-160) and in Ruusbroec (idem, 289-310). He also drew portraits of beloved and revered fellow Marianists, such as Father E. Neubert ("Le Père Émile Neubert [1878-1967], marianiste," in Ephemerides Mariologicae 17 [1967]: 530-532 and elsewhere) and Father René Mougel (a series of articles in L'Apôtre de Marie between 1950-1954), and dutifully redacted numerous reports on the annual conventions of both the French and the American mariological societies. (3) Koehler is essentially a spiritual writer for whom there is no opposition between theology and spirituality (cf. "Notre-Dame dans la Théologie et dans la Vie spirituelle," in: L'Apôtre de Marie 32, 340 [1947]: 35-40). The grand themes mentioned so far are fundamentally spiritual topics per se or stress the spiritual dimension of theological notions and questions. A Marianist spiritual director for all of his priestly life and a teacher of spirituality and mariology during many years, most of Koehler’s more practically oriented writings – course notes and popular articles – touch upon spirituality in conjunction with Mary, on Marianist spirituality or the spiritual dimension of mariology. The mimeographed course notes he produced between 1955-1965: "La dévotion mariale dans la Société" (1955), "La vie spirituelle ou l’union à Dieu" (1960), or "Vocation marianiste" (1965) – to mention only some of them! – and the many articles he wrote for Marianist periodicals, such as L'Apôtre de Marie (1946-1958), Antenne (1958-1971), Vie et fraternité marianistes (1966), Marianistes (1969) and Présence marianiste (1974), all attempt to strike a careful balance and set forth the ultimate unity between the particular aspects of Marianist spirituality and the ecclesial doctrine on Mary, between mariology and theology, between devotion and spirituality and between spirituality and theology.

**Commissioned Scholarship**

It may come as no surprise to learn that Théodore Koehler’s work bears the typical marks of at least indirectly commissioned scholarship. The majority of his writings are contributions to learned journals and proceedings of national and international
councils. An active and faithful member (and at times officer) of the French (since 1946) and American (since 1969) mariological societies, and socius ordinarius of the Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis (since 1973), he was frequently called upon to present papers at various conferences. Thus he made major contributions to the International Mariological Congresses of Rome (1954), Lisbon (1967), Zagreb (1971), Rome (1975), Saragossa (1979), Malta (1983) and Kevelaer (1987). He contributed frequently to the French mariological society’s conferences: 1953 (on the different titles of Mary, Mother of the Church); 1959 (on the traditional interpretations [1st-12th cent.] of John 19,25-27); 1960 (on the western medieval [1250-1500] understanding of the spiritual maternity); 1965 (on Mary’s place in the dogmatic contribution De Ecclesia); 1973 (on the rapport between marian studies and psychological investigation); 1977 (on theology and iconography concerning marian shrines); 1981 (on Mary-Theotokos in contemporary Christology); 1986 (on the significance of marian apparitions and eschatology), and 1990 (on Mary and women according to Mutiliert Dignitatem). Koehler’s contributions to the American mariological society’s meetings seem modest in comparison to the plethora of presentations mentioned: in 1972 he assessed for its participants Mary’s spiritual maternity after the Second Vatican Council (Marian Studies 23 [1972]: 39-68), and only one other time, in 1980, did he present an essay, a tribute to Pope Paul VI’s marian devotion (Marian Studies 31 [1980]: 66-95). However, it should not be overlooked that Koehler served as editor of Marian Studies from 1979 until 1989 and even longer as a member of the society’s Board of Directors.

The focus of the International Mariological Congresses’ studies and research between 1967 and 1992 was (and remains) primarily historical and thus successively examined the different periods of marian devotion from the first documents to the present-day situation. Conversely, the national gatherings in the United States and in France, by choosing a more thematic approach, sought to keep abreast with new developments in marian studies and to entertain an ongoing dialogue with the different theological and other disciplines of human knowledge.

Since 1970 the Mariological Society of America (MSA) covered a variety of topics, giving special emphasis in the seventies and early eighties to dogmatic aspects examined in the light of contemporary theological reflection: Mary’s virginity and the virgin birth (1970, 1973, 1975), aspects of her divine maternity (1978, 1982), problems related to Mary’s “preservative redemption” and Immaculate Conception (1979, 1982), the Assumption and eschatology (1982), her role in salvation as compared to that of her Son – sole mediator – and that of the Church (1974), as well as Mary’s intercession (1981). If 1976 (and 1977) situated the marian dogmas within

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22 See the article of Paolo Melada on Father Théodore Koehler’s relationship with PAMI.
Vatican II's hierarchy of truths and consequently attempted to establish the hierarchy of truths about Mary, so 1982 marked the comprehensive presentation of marian dogmas and their relationship to papal infallibility. The same decade can be characterized as pastoral and ecumenical: several contributions addressed Mary's role in contemporary society (1969, 1971, 1976), in the renewal of catechetics (1977, 1978), in Christian ethics (1977), and in ecumenical dialogue (1975, 1978). Although doctrinal concerns were further reflected in studies about Mary's place in Christology (1981) and Ecclesiology (1982-84), the eighties were directed primarily toward marian prayer, devotion, consecration (1984) and liturgy (1989, 1990, 1991). Important magisterial documents were reflected upon and reevaluated in the light of recent studies: Chapter VIII of Lumen Gentium (1986), Redemptoris Mater (1988), and Marialis Cultus (1989). Old and new stimulating positions were examined, such as the relationship between Mary and the Eucharist; the theology of the body and mariology (both 1983); Mary, the Magnificat and liberation theology (1987); not to mention the monographs on mariological questions in Hans Urs von Balthasar (1980), Bérulle and Maximilian Kolbe (both 1985).

The French mariological society (SFEM), which Koehler joined in 1946, was even more systematic and structured in its methodological approach of the thematic under scrutiny. As a rule, and especially in the forties, fifties, and sixties, each of the topics chosen was assessed from the exegetical, patristic, historical and theological angles and covered over a three-year period of time. Some of the themes treated with great thoroughness anticipated important theological developments: Munificentissimus Deus (1950) was preceded by a three-year cycle on the Assumption (1948-1950); the ecclesiotypical orientations of Lumen Gentium and the return to a patristic setting of mariological studies were mirrored – ante factum – in themes such as “Marie et l’Église” (1950-1953) and “La Nouvelle Ève” (1954-1957). Likewise, the concentration during the sixties on ecumenism (1962-1964), intercession (1966-1967), and the Holy Spirit (1968-1970) reflected the willingness to engage in an ongoing dialogue with the theological discourse at large. The theme of the Spiritual Maternity (1959-1961), a cornerstone of Koehler's marian theology and a typically French thematic during the pre-conciliar period, disappeared as such from mariological debates after the early sixties. The conventions on apparitions – true and false (1971) and Mary and Women (question féminine) (1977) – identified problem areas and delimited fields of scholarly research which to this day are far from being exhausted or outdated. After a marked devotional orientation during the better part of the seventies (especially 1971, 1972, 1976, 1977, 1978), the attention returned to doctrinal questions with “Mary and the Eucharist” (1979-1980) and Marian dogmas (1981), whereas 1982 stressed again the place of Mary in the prayer of the Church. Since 1984 the SFEM
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has reverted to the three-year pattern with "Mary in Eschatology" (1984-1986) and "Mary, myth or model for contemporary women?" (1988-1990).

Koehler, as active participant and driving force in many of these ventures, was thus exposed to a considerable wealth of information on both the long and fruitful tradition as well as the contemporary challenges of the marian discourse. Yet, maybe as important as the abundance of information was Koehler's regular exposure to a systematic and comprehensive methodology where research never departed from five ironclad principles: (1) the Scriptural foundations, (2) their patristic assimilation and articulation, (3) the historical character of tradition, (4) the need for systematic theological reflection, and (5) its existential relevance. No wonder, therefore, that one of the typical features of his theological methodology lies in the quasi-perichoresis of past and present, where contemporary interrogations are measured against answers of earlier periods and new and better insights lead to a reevaluation of past positions. Being steeped in both the present and the past, Koehler became an "aficionado" of the great tradition of the Church, able to treasure it intensely because he understands it so well.

**Research as Service**

It goes without saying that Koehler contributed also to other learned periodicals and publications specializing in marian theology: *Ephemerides Mariologicae* (1967, 1970); *Marianum* (1979, 1981); *Collana mariana"* "Fons signatus" (1970, 1971-1976); *Nuovo dizionario di mariologia* (Italian 1985; Spanish 1988) and, of course, *Marian Library Studies*, whose editor he has been since 1969. Koehler is a frequent contributor to the prestigious French *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire* (vol. 5 [1964]; vol. 10 [1980]; vol. 11 [1982]; vol. 12 [1986]; vol. 13 [1988]; vol. 14 [1990]), and has published some of the results of his scholarly endeavors in such learned journals as *Cahiers Eudistes* (1952: "L'Oraison dans la spiritualité Eudiste"); *Revue d'ascétique et mystique* (1964); *The University of Dayton Review* (1968, 1970, 1975); *Seminarium* (1975: "Blessed from Generation to Generation: Mary in Patristics and in the History of the Church [Outline of an evolving image]"); *Studies in Medieval Culture VI and VII* (1976) and *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* (1990: "Onze manuscrits du Mariale de Servas sanctus de Faëns, O.F.M. [† ca. 1300]"). Ever available to give service, Koehler cooperated in several Festschrifts (Balić, 1971; Bertetto, 1988; Molette, 1989; Laurentin, 1990), but did not refuse the humbler task of writing in a more popular vein and for a broader audience. Thus, he has been, as previously mentioned, a regular contributor to Marianist periodicals. For many years he wrote essays for the semi-scholarly French magazine *Cahiers*
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marials (1958-1983) and made occasional contributions to a host of more popularly-oriented publications such as Our Lady’s Digest, Queen of All Hearts and Voix de Saint-Paul.

Koehler considers these commissioned writings as a part of his priestly ministry and Marianist vocation. His articles are never narrowly doctrinal, moralizing, or of cheap inspirational sentimentality. However, he does not sacrifice the sacra doctrina to sensationalism or pastorally inspired conformism. When for a short period of time a columnist to L’Ame populaire in the early fifties, he always succeeded in combining sensitivity to the signs of the times with a solid rootedness in doctrine and courageous action-orientation. His lucid and comprehensive reading of social reality led him to the following assessment: "Arrière les mystiques prometteuses de paradis terrestre: trahison démagogique. Arrière les satisfaits qui ‘s’installent’ sur terre. Jésus a maudit sans équivoque ces ‘riches.’” 23 The fundamental Christian orientation is different and is called to make a difference: "Les chrétiens sont faits pour des triomphes ‘humains’ intérieurs, qui ne se calquent pas sur les triomphes spectaculaires et passagers des puissances trop terrestres.” 24 The breadth of Koehler’s historical perception of events and situations is reflected in the following statement about the true significance of the East-West relationship: “Devant l’incurie générale, la scission sanglante du rideau de fer, les peuples sont mal à l’aise: ils comprennent que l’on perd un temps précieux, que les minutes perdues ne se retrouvent plus.” 25 Again, it is the Christian’s call to make a difference: “Nous sommes le sel de la terre, si nous révélons aux hommes la miséricorde de Dieu.” 26 To be truly efficacious, human action has to transcend the superficial dimensions of reality: “Les odalisques d’Ingres sont un exercice sur le corps; la Bethsabee de Rembrandt a un regard qui mène au-delà.” 27 There is no quick and easy success in human life, for “la victoire ne sera définitive qu’à sa mort, où la Miséricorde divine nous aidera à mettre la dernière main à la tâche ‘d’homme’ que nous aurons accomplie.” 28 Finally, Koehler was not afraid to remind the militant members of the “sillon catholique” that there is only one model for human solidarity, that of the Trinity: “C’est donc dans la ‘solidarité’ trinitaire que se nouera un jour notre solidarité.” 29

In Koehler’s understanding, then, knowledge and research are not something to be jealously guarded, an artificial barrier to be erected between the initiated few and the

23 L’Ame populaire, juin 1952, 2.
24 L’Ame populaire, novembre 1952, 2.
25 L’Ame populaire, avril 1953, 1.
26 L’Ame populaire, mars 1952, 1 (emphasis provided in original text).
27 L’Ame populaire, mai 1953, 1.
28 L’Ame populaire, juin 1953, 1.
29 L’Ame populaire, janvier 1952, 2.
common people. Truth, goodness and beauty – as everything in Christianity – are for giving away. Thus, Koehler’s joy as a scholar and researcher is the sharing and giving out of the treasures he himself has so joyously received through hard work, the grace of the moment or in inspiring debate and dialogue. He firmly believes that goodness – as the scholastics put it – is *diffusivum sui*, that knowledge, especially the revealed truth, attracts and convinces the hearts and minds provided we do not stand in its way. He does not seem to be overly concerned with methods of teaching and educational skills. Conversely, he has the spiritual profile of the icon-painter, who believes that it is God who guides his hands, the hand being the instrument of the Holy Spirit. Says the monk in Rilke’s *Book of Hours*:

> We do not paint you in our own ways,  
> Thou twilight out of which the morning rose.  
> We haul out of ancient color-bowls  
> The same strokes and the same radiant light  
> With which the Holy worked, thy beauty to enclose.  

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Koehler’s ethos as scholar is totally “work”-oriented, his self-understanding that of a facilitator. What matters is not to be remembered as the godfather of a grandiose project or a new theological current, but to humbly assist God’s endless coming into the world he wants to make his kingdom. Théodore Koehler has never fallen victim to the pursuit of easy success, treacherous brilliance and the short-lived moment of glory. He most certainly would approve of Luther’s advice: “If you feel or imagine that you are right and suppose that your book, teaching or writing is a great achievement... then, my dear man, feel your ears. If you are doing so properly, you will find that you have a splendid pair of big, long, shaggy asses’ ears.”  

31 Barth put this quotation in his own copy of the second edition of *Romans*; it could be written in big letters all over Koehler’s work – a stern warning for those who are tempted to value scholarly ethos too lightly and who weigh instead their own name and reputation too generously.

**Chronological Concentrations**

Looking at Koehler’s opus from a chronological perspective it becomes apparent that the major themes of the beginning of his career as a marian scholar (1943) run like a red thread all through his subsequent writings. No theological or psychological revolution or conversion ever threatened the even keel of his slowly but surely deve-

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oping work. The nomination to the directorship of The Marian Library in 1969 may have been a major ceasura in Koehler's personal life, but it affected his scholarly output and orientation only slightly. Between 1943 and 1969 he produced a total of fifteen major articles (and books) and sixty-three writings of somewhat lesser importance. During the period of time between 1970 and 1990 the number of major scholarly contributions (and books) increased (25), whereas the number of minor writings decreased (49). As already mentioned in a different context, Koehler’s major theme is that of Mary’s maternal relationship with humanity and each one of us. It is unraveled from the beginning of his scholarly career, but gradually takes on different facets: the broader thematic of Mary’s relation with the Church becomes more specific in the research about the Calvary episode, in the misericordia and compassion studies and in the investigations about the Heart of Mary.

Aside from this fundamental thrust, various minor concentrations can be identified. There is a specifically Marianist period in Koehler’s work, which surprisingly starts out with a reflection on the "Spiritualité ouvrière dans notre société" (L’Apôtre de Marie 31 [1946]) and reaches its high point in a synthesis on Marianist vocation in 1965 ("Vocation marianiste," mimeographed text, Fribourg 1965, 86 pp.). The latter is an attempt at highlighting the basic structure of Chaminade’s spiritual and apostolic charism, its christological and ecclesiological rootedness, and the dynamism of its marian vocation and mission. Koehler situates what he calls the "marianist creation" within the context of a living tradition and evolution, when he affirms:

Le Fondateur a été toujours soucieux d’une exacte et audacieuse adaptation aux volontés divines de l’heure et aux besoins apostoliques des temps nouveaux. Il n’est pas une borne au-delà de laquelle aucun progrès n’est possible. Sa pensée est une orientation donnée, ou mieux un germe fécond confié à la terre des générations qui se suivent. Il nous faut porter fruit ; il nous faut doctrinalement développer, expliciter, préciser.32

The Marianist vocation leads to the strongest possible empathy with Mary — “la Mère du Christ total” — an expression that reflects Koehler’s understanding of what comes closest to a fundamental principle in mariology. It also takes us right into the heart of the Christian vocation: “C’est pourquoi notre foi à la Révélation trouve sa perfection, c’est à dire la sincère acceptation de tout le Révélé, quand nous nous unissons au Cœur de la Mère de Dieu....”33 The single most important feature in Koehler’s treatment of Marianist spirituality concerns mental prayer, as illustrated, for example, in Un Maitre d’Oraison, le Bon Père Chaminade (Fribourg, 1963), "L’Année de la foi et notre oraison sur le credo" (Antenne 48 [1967]), or The Prayer of Faith or Theocentric Mental Prayer (St Louis, 1973).

32 "Vocation marianiste," 5.
33 Ibid., 86.
A second minor concentration deals with commentaries on magisterial documents and is chronologically coextensive with the publication of such major ecclesial writings as Chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium*, *Marialis Cultus*, *Redemptoris Mater* and *Mulleris Dignitatem*. Koehler has done extensive publishing on the Council’s text about Mary. For the French Mariological Society he prepared a study on Chapter VIII of the dogmatic constitution “De Ecclesia” (*Études mariales* 22 [1965]). In a lengthy contribution to *La Madonna nella Costituzione “Lumen Gentium”: Commento al capitolo VIII della Costituzione dogmatica sulla chiesa* (Milan 1967, 88-136), he situated Chapter VIII within the general context of the dogmatic constitution on the Church. In a series of six articles for *Cahiers marials* he successively examined the general development of mariology that led to the redaction of Chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* (“La conclusion d’une prise de conscience,” No. 54 [1966]), Mary’s place within the theological hermeneutic of salvation history (“A l’écoute du dessein de Dieu sur Marie,” No. 56 [1967]), her double relationship to the Son and for the Church (“La Mère unie au Fils en vue de l’Église,” No. 57 [1967]), our relationship with Mary (“Nos relations avec Marie,” No. 58 [1967]), the understanding of Mary as type of the Church (No. 59 [1967]), and our devotion to Mary (“Notre dévotion envers Marie,” No. 61 [1968]).

On several occasions Koehler commented upon Paul VI’s marian teachings: in 1976 he wrote a series of three articles for *Cahiers marials*, covering Pope Paul VI’s marian teachings from 1967-1969 (Nos. 101, 102, 103 [1976]). Three years later he undertook the chronological study of some typical marian texts and events to demonstrate the evolution in Paul VI’s understanding of the ecclesial character of marian devotion (*Marianum* 41 [1979] 445-460); in 1980 he presented “Homage to a Great Pope and His Marian Devotion” (*Marian Studies* 31 [1980]), and again, in 1980, prepared a general presentation of Paul VI’s marian teachings (*Mary in Faith and Life in the New Age of the Church*, Ndola 1983, 149-185). Aside from treating the special emphasis on the marian doctrine of the Second Vatican Council and the renewal of marian devotion under Paul VI, the two pillars of balanced contemporary marian theology, Koehler delivered a paper at the 1990 meeting of the French Mariological Society in Blois on the mystery of woman in the light of the mystery of Mary according to John Paul II’s *Mulleris Dignitatem*. Furthermore, Koehler was no doubt instrumental in bringing about the American Mariological Society’s retrospectives of *Lumen Gentium’s* Chapter VIII in 1986 and of *Marialis Cultus* in 1989, as well as the reflection on *Redemptoris Mater* in 1988. Always the loyal and faithful Son of the Church, Father Théodore Koehler has turned to these magisterial documents for guidance and confirmation. They compensate for the frequently partial or limited character of theological research by pointing out the complementarity of viewpoints and the continuity of theological inspiration.
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A third minor concentration in Koehler's work deals with critical and interdisciplinary assessments, an attempt to ascertain the “state of the union” of marian theology and its place within the concert of theological and non-theological disciplines. This series of writings coincides chronologically to some degree with the temporary devaluation and hibernation of part of the marian consciousness in the Church during the late sixties and the first part of the seventies. Koehler, instead of frightfully sounding the retreat, patiently built bridges to other disciplines of human knowledge, thereby demonstrating that marian theology was neither dead nor outmaneuvered.

Theology – Marian theology – is seeking its integration into a true human knowledge, without losing sight of either exigency, cosmological or anthropological.... Mary.... is part of the cosmic evolution in which we are all living. She is the daughter of Sion, in whom Israel heard the word of God and began to accept the full impact of God in our evolution. This evolution is part of the history of mankind, conceived as a part of, or perhaps as the axis of the cosmos. Vatican II stresses the liberty, the conscious Fiat of Mary; in her person mankind met God and God met mankind; the Son of God became man through Mary's free decision; and by the grace of God, she became the glory of God.34

The interdisciplinary approach of this period is further highlighted in “Les premiers documents connus de la dévotion mariale. Pour une étude de spiritualité et de psychologie religieuse” (Acta Congressus Mariologic-Mariani, Lisbon 1967, vol. 4, Rome 1970); in “Études mariales et recherches psychologiques” (Études mariales, 30-31 [1973-74]) and in “Réflexion théologique sur les liens entre les Sanctuaires marials et leur iconographie” (Études mariales, 34 [1977]). These are but some examples pinpointing a constant concern:

For Father Koehler, Mariology is not a field closed off from other areas of intellectual endeavor. His principle of integrating Mariology with the rest of human knowledge is evident in Marian Library Studies....

This... journal promotes the renewal and development of scientific studies in Mariology by integrating them with other areas of research, such as theology, psychology, and religious anthropology.35

Simultaneously, the period mentioned and more recent times come as a welcome opportunity to reassess the present and to measure it against the progress of the past and the challenges of the future. Koehler’s confidence in the present and future of marian theology has always remained unshaken and culminated in the 1969 battle cry: “La dévotion Mariale... pas morte” (Marianistes 51-52 [1969]). However, various positions, research methodology and results have to be subjected to ongoing

evaluation. In 1971 Koehler pointed out that the recently rediscovered theology of the Spirit would have to be an important factor in the shaping of mariology’s future (“Pour l’avenir de la doctrine mariale: la théologie du Saint-Esprit et la mariologie,” in Antenne 62 [1971]). In 1973, “L’état actuel de la recherche en mariologie” (Cahiers marials 88 [1973]) gave rise to a thorough assessment of the accomplishments from before and since the Second Vatican Council and a comprehensive approach for future developments according to what Koehler calls “une théologie des ensembles”:

L’Esprit n’a pas terminé sa tâche parmi les enfants des hommes: il nous force à renouveler nos conceptions, nos images de la Vierge Marie, pour une meilleure théologie, un plus bel humanisme où Adam et Eve trouvent leur idéal de régénération dans le Nouvel Adam et la Nouvelle Eve: l’Homme-Dieu et la Theotokos.\[30\]

More specific and limited in scope were Koehler’s evaluations of Mary’s place in post-conciliar catechetics (U.S.A.) (Marianum 43 [1981]) and in recent currents of Christology (Études mariales 38 [1981]).

The three minor concentrations identified – Marianist spirituality (1955-1965), magisterial documents (1965-1980), critical and interdisciplinary assessments (1970-1975) – reflect major, although not constantly apparent, lines of force traversing the whole of Koehler’s work. They not only confirm his rootedness in the Marianist tradition and the French school of spirituality, they also speak for his spontaneous and congenial attachment to the Church. Yet neither of these is considered an obstacle or an impediment to a truly critical and interdisciplinary approach to marian studies.

**THE THEOLOGICAL WATERMARK**

Théodore Koehler counts among the sins of his youth “a doctoral dissertation which forced me to study the speculative question of the first principle of Mariology.”\[37\] In opposing the history of doctrinal and devotional tradition – the true love of his life as a marian scholar – and speculative theology, Koehler does not reject altogether the conclusions of his thesis “La Bienheureuse Vierge Marie dans le plan divin: Étude sur le principe fondamental de la doctrine mariale, d’après la Mariologie contemporaine” (Fribourg 1943, 181 pp.). Not only are they by and large still valid, they also constitute the watermark of his own marian theology. When he opted for “Marie, Mère du Christ total” as a first principle in mariology, he not only rejected

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36 Loc. cit., 254.
formulations of abstract and metaphoric character but also attempted to shape a fundamental principle based on the three basic marian truths of divine maternity, spiritual maternity and Mary's intimate association with Christ's redemptive work ("intime association au triomphe rédempteur"). In doing so, he sought conformity with a long tradition going back to Augustine's double maternity (divine and spiritual) and the even more ancient one, beginning with Irenaeus, on behalf of Mary's universal maternity: "Marie est mère de la Vie, de la régénération, Mère des vivants donc." The integrity of Mary's divine maternity, which is "le grand principe concret, vital de toute la mariologie," takes on its full meaning only with respect to the total Christ (Augustine), who constitutes with his social body "una mystica persona." In Koehler's understanding, therefore, Mary's maternity of the total Christ expresses "la foi en la maternité spirituelle de Marie fondée sur sa maternité divine." The concrete and practical character of this principle has to be underscored, for Mary's maternity of Christus totus strengthens and deepens in us the intimate knowledge of God's merciful love, our vocation as sons and daughters of a living and trustworthy heavenly Father, our vital insertion into the Mystical Body, and also the expression of our love for Mary as filial piety. At this early stage already, he conceives Mary's role as essentially one of mercy and depicts her personality as the "miséricordieuse réparation du plan primitif." Koehler explores the theme of the spiritual maternity more thoroughly in a major article entitled "Maternité spirituelle de Marie" (1949). The mystery of her maternity in the order of grace evolves along the three fundamental articulations: the Annunciation, where she conceives us in the Spirit; the Passion, where she gives birth to the children of God; and her role in the formation of the Mystical Body, identified with the Mystery of the Assumption. Various other aspects express her spiritual maternity: her prayer, her suffering, her compassion (as source of life), and her role and vocation as "mère, modèle de toute perfection." The common denominator of all these different aspects resides in Mary's mission of life-giving love: "Ce service est proprement charité: une parfaite charité qui n'existe que dans le cœur de l'Immaculée." Mary's role as "coredemptrix" is described in very cautious terms; it takes up and reflects her self-giving Fiat: "Son amour et sa permanente oblation au service messianique suffisent à son œuvre coréemptrice." Similarly, her spiritual maternity "n'est pas créée par les paroles de Jésus [at Calvary], mais dépend directement

39 Loc. cit., 175.
40 Loc. cit., 177.
41 "Maternité spirituelle de Marie," in Du Manoir, Maria I, Paris 1949, 599.
42 Ibid.
de la douloureuse compassion de la Mère du Dieu crucifié." Mary’s maternal love is thus no facile love, her compassion no condescending mercy, but the expression of suffering self-oblation and so the purest human rendering of Christ’s self-emptying for us.

The christocentric emphasis of Koehler’s thesis was broadened and complemented in subsequent studies, especially in his essay about the relationship between Mary and the Church ("Maria, Mater Ecclesiae," Études mariales [Marie et l’Église, III] 11 [1953]) which culminates in the statement: "Marie n’a pas à passer de la Maternité divine à la Maternité envers l’Église. La Mère de Dieu, dans le plan divin qui nous régénère, est aussi bien Mère de Jésus, notre Chef, que Mère des membres. Mater Dei est Mater ecclesiae."

Though expressed still in terms of causality ("... l’activité de Marie comme vraie cause... de l’Église"), the main argumentation nonetheless rests with the witnesses of tradition on Mary’s maternal activity in the formation of the Church: "...en tant que la maternité divine comprise intégralement dans sa réalité physique et spirituelle et dans sa portée corédemptrice enfante dans le Christ et avec Lui l’Église des pécheurs réconciliés par la croix." There is therefore no need for Scheeben’s double principle or any other theory based on the idea of Mary as the sponsa Christi, because: "... on peut se contenter du fait très sûr de la maternité virgilne et divine qui instaure dans l’ordre ontologique une relation réelle de Mère, en Marie, envers le Verbe fait chair pour nous sauver."

Mary’s role of mercy cannot be properly grasped and situated without an accurate understanding of salvation history and its redemptive character. It is not without reason that Koehler summarizes the great marian prayer of the Church in these simple words: "Mater Dei ora pro nobis peccatoribus." Mary is the true mother of the living given to us by God: "elle est la manifestation de l’extrême Miséricorde Divine." In her, God’s redemptive grace becomes maternal mercy. It is not Mary’s role to add anything to that grace; yet she reveals it: "...elle signifie par son rôle propre la vérité de notre régénération: le Père nous régénère vraiment comme les fils de Sa Miséricorde." In this perspective of divine redemptive economy the Church imitates Mary and partakes in the same mission, which is "l’œuvre de la Miséricorde, de l’unité dans la charité et le pardon." Without Mary the Church would not be what she actually is, namely "une réalité spirituelle, la miséricorde actuelle de Dieu,

43 Ibid., 582.
45 Ibid., 156.
46 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 633 (emphasis provided in original text).
49 Ibid.
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à l’image de Marie.”^50 Thus, there exists the perichoresis between Mary and the Church, “entre l’active régénération par Marie et celle par l’Église,” undergirded and held by the constitutive unity of Christ’s Ecce venio: “la charité d’oblation miséricordieuse, infusée par le Père dans le vouloir de son Fils.”^51 In this carefully crafted theological statement about the relationship between Mary, the Church and each member of the Mystical Body, we once more admire the timeless quality of Koehler’s theological reflection and writing. The vocabulary he used in 1961 – and before that – has barely aged; fads and fashion have gone by without even so much as scratching the contours of his mariological thinking, and few and minor are the positions that could not be held honorably even today. There is always room in his theological construction for new developments and precious additions, precisely because the basic structure is solid and spacious enough to assimilate new facets of an ever-dynamic tradition.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Koehler has called for a new theological elaboration, based on recent developments in biblical and systematic scholarship as well as on the contribution of the human sciences. The understanding of Mary’s spiritual maternity has to be enriched with elements of pneumatic theology. “In the theology of the Holy Spirit, we can conclude that Mary is our mother through that Spirit of Love. Mary is the archetype of the Church and of the Woman; she manifests the salvific activity of the divine Love as a maternal activity, bringing forth the children of God. That maternity is better called a maternity by the Holy Spirit.”^52 More than ever convinced that “tradition is richer and more complex than speculative theology,”^53 Koehler views the recent pneumatic orientation as an excellent means to refocus the attention on the person of Mary instead of studying abstractions: “It is good to study the privileges and functions of Mary, but it is better to see first the person and life of Mary, and consequently her relations with God, Christ, the Church, and in general with all mankind under the salvific work of the Holy Spirit.”^54

Claiming personalist categories is no infallible antidote against a new and even more insidious abstractionism. Salvation history is an ongoing event among real and active persons of which we are a part. “We must come to realize that our true life must be rooted in the relations of love which unite this woman, Mary, woman of faith, with this man who is God our Savior and her Son.”^55 Again, these “relations of

^50 Ibid., 632 (emphasis provided in original text).
^51 Ibid.
^52 “Mary’s Spiritual Maternity after the Second Vatican Council,” in Marian Studies 23 (1972): 66.
^54 “Mary’s Spiritual Maternity…,” in Marian Studies 23 (1972): 56.
^55 Homily for Mass held in conjunction with his reception of the President’s Patronal Medal from the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 7 December 1976, MS, 4.
love” are grounded in the concrete reality of both those who constitute them and those who are the recipients of their love: “Husbands and wives, parents and children, religious societies, nations for their own progress and for the peace of the world, all must look to this woman given by God as the immaculate example of what He prepares for each member of the mystical body of Christ: a complete removal of all evil, of all sin, of all the divisions which are the causes of war and destruction.”

One of the key words and key concepts in Koehler’s theological reflection is “regeneration,” our regeneration in Christ. Sin may have destroyed the power of Adam and Eve to generate children of God, but God’s plan was not destroyed. In his motherly love, God the Father prepared a new creation in Christ, and so the generation of the children of God became a regeneration. It is against this backdrop that Koehler develops his most recent reflections on Mary’s spiritual motherhood: “Motherhood in the new creation is no longer the motherhood of one mother. Our earthly mothers, the Mother of Jesus, the Church are associated, complementing one another in this regeneration. There is no opposition between these mothers.”

Our earthly mothers prepare the family of God, but they are not able to transmit God’s own life. “Their children are saved by God, regenerated through Mary and through the Church.”

And here is how Koehler articulates Mary’s maternal role in 1990:

Mary received the grace to give life to Jesus through the action of the Holy Spirit. She is the true physical mother of the Son of God made man. But she is his mother first through her loving, obedient consent and therefore the spiritual mother of all those who are to be saved by Jesus. This motherhood was achieved through her union with the redeemer till the fulfillment of the Paschal Mystery and through her Assumption, eternal union with the Mediator. This motherhood is completed by the action of the Church, our mother through the sacraments and the communion of all saints with Christ Head of this Mystical Body.

The other key notion in Théodore Koehler’s living theological synthesis is that of mercy. As pointed out on several occasions, this is Koehler’s way to capture and express the wonderful reality of God’s crucified and healing love for us. Mercy means both the accomplishment of spiritual growth in the perfection preached by Jesus and the renewal of the human race disfigured by sin.

Au plus profond de la compassion pour ceux qui souffrent dans leurs corps, leurs besoins, leur psychisme ou leur dignité d’homme, la miséricorde est, bien plus qu’une vertu, une béatitude, une grâce de participation au cœur miséricordieux du Père de tous les hommes manifesté en Jésus. Pharisaïsme, dureté, inconscience sont les ob-

56 Ibid., 5.
57 “Mary, Our Mother in the Order of Grace,” IMRI Summer School 1990, mimeographed, p. 28.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 29.
stables les plus répandus à l'expansion de rapports fraternels et donc aussi miséricor- 
dieux entre les hommes, sans parler des structures de la société, et tout chrétien 
connaît les limites de son propre cœur : "Laissez descendre le Christ jusqu'aux pro- 
fondeurs de nous-mêmes, dans ces régions de notre personne qui ne sont pas encore 
habitées et qui refusent ou qui sont dans l'impossibilité d'adhérer au Christ. Il péné- 
trera les régions de l'intelligence et du cœur, il atteindra notre chair jusqu'aux 
entrailles, en sorte que nous aussi nous ayons un jour des entrailles de miséricorde 
(Col. 3, 12)" (R. Schutz, Unanimité dans le pluralisme, Taizé 1966, p. 72).60

And who is Mary within the context of regeneration and misericordia? Mary is the 
"Icon of the New Creation": "Le beau visage de Marie, le visage triste de Marie, c'est 
une esthétique, c'est une dramatique, qui nous révèlent ce que nous sommes pour 
Dieu."61

"AFFETTO AL SUO PIACER QUEL CONTEMPLANTE"

Early on already Koehler referred to Saint Bernard as the contempleateur aimant in 
Dante's Divina Commedia,62 an expression which most adequately applies to his own 
profile as theologian and mariologist. It is the profile of a spiritual theologian, who 
has "engaged in what delighted him" – in Dante's words: "affetto al suo piacer quel 
contemplante" – and who translates into words of wisdom the bare facts of centu- 
ries-old contemplation. It has never been these bare facts alone that caught Koeh- 
ler's attention, but the living contemplative tradition of Mary which they carry: 
"The texts we study are not simply writings of the dead : they are the voices of 
witnesses."63 And Koehler goes beyond the strictly historical and linear meaning of 
tradere, to make it into an expression of the "Communion of Saints," when he adds: 
"Our research is a questioning of persons by persons, all within the Communion of 
Saints."64 This is then what has ultimately delighted him: to pass on to others what 
he has so intimately experienced. At this point, the professional activity as a scholar, 
researcher and teacher is no longer only a matter of performance and result; it takes 
on the significance of an act of religion and becomes the cantus firmus to which the 
other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. "Where the cantus firmus is clear 
and plain" – says Dietrich Bonhoeffer – "the counterpoint can be developed to its

61 "Derniers temps, temps nouveaux. Un 'pourquoi' des apparitions de Notre-Dame à la charnière 
des temps," in Études mariales, [Marie et la fin des temps, III. Approche historico-théologique] 43 
62 Paradiso XXXII, 1.1, cited in his article in Du Manoir, Maria I, Paris 1949, 575.
64 Ibid.
limits."65 This may be the secret of Théodore Koehler's life, the reason why, in spite of the humble and seemingly narrow concern of his scholarly endeavor, all of his work and personality breathe the wonderful freedom of the children of God.

Albeit, keeping in mind the French caution "comparaison n'est pas raison," we nonetheless would like to apply to Father Théodore Koehler what Dante said about Saint Bernard and call him "... colui, ch'abelliva di Maria, / Come del sole stella matutina" (he in whom Mary brought to the fore some of her own beauty, the way the morning star is illumined by the sun).66 As Dante turned to Bernard for instruction about Mary, so we too will benefit from Théodore Koehler's marian wisdom, from the depth and breadth of his science, and from his experience as a *contemplateur aimant*. And we may then say, again with Dante: "He turned his own eyes to her with such love that / He made mine burn even more to look again."67

66 *Paradiso* XXXII, ll. 107-108; my translation.