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REPORT, 1988-89: NEW ENGLAND REGION

On Saturday, 29 October 1988, the annual meeting of The New England Region of the Mariological Society of America was held at Providence College, Providence, Rhode Island. The Reverend Matthew Morry, O.P., director of the New England Region, opened the meeting at 10:00 A.M., with the Most Reverend George H. Pearce, S.M., giving the opening blessing. Fr. Morry introduced the keynote speaker, the Reverend Robert J. Hennessey, O.P., S.T.D., professor of Systematic Theology, Mt. St. Mary's Seminary, Emmitsburg, Maryland. "Mary and Faith: Must One Believe in Mary?" was the title of Fr. Hennessey's talk.

As the foundation to develop his talk, Fr. Hennessey presented the interconnectedness of the truths of faith. Examining the notion of faith, Fr. Hennessey noted that when we speak of "what we believe" such an act of the believer concerns the Reality Itself—God—and not a proposition about God, though we express the truth of such a reality in propositions. Within this context of faith there are elements which are *central* and those which are of *secondary* or peripheral importance. Vatican II stressed this point in its Decree on Ecumenism: "... in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith" (no. 11). Note, however, that the distinction of central truths and those more peripheral is based not on the degree of truth that each possesses—for both kinds are revealed truths—but on their proximity to the mystery of God the Savior.

Further, the centrality of the teaching is not measured by the explicitness of scriptural data or the date when the truth was clearly affirmed in the Church. So, the most central of

Marian dogmas—Mary is the Mother of God—was explicitly and officially proclaimed only in the fifth century. And, this came as the Church was responding to attacks upon the real nature and identity of her Savior, Jesus Christ.

What is more, the distinction between central and peripheral does not flow from the *formality* with which the doctrine has been defined. Thus, for example, the virginity of Mary—so important to understand the connection of Mary with the Church, Virgin and Mother—has been affirmed by believers through the centuries, but it has not been the precise object of solemn conciliar or papal teaching. Indeed, there are some very important truths never officially defined and yet universally accepted, for example, Jesus Christ is Savior. And, so, the question about the role of Mary in the Saving Act has not been definitively proposed. Accordingly, problems arise when one attempts to affirm her special role in the redemptive work of her Son.

In this classification of central or peripheral, Marian doctrines are peripheral. They are not dispensable, however. These Marian doctrines unfold the meaning of the central affirmations, giving concrete and practical application to the central truths, and they are inseparable from the central truths about Christ.

Now, the Divine Maternity of Mary rests upon the fact of the Incarnation. Mary's consent is not merely a detail of her personal spiritual biography; rather, it is her insertion into the history of salvation of all human beings. Likewise, the Immaculate Conception is closely connected with our understanding of the redemptive work of Christ: Mary's graced but free act opened the way for the Eternal Word into our flesh of sin; her assent is the response to God's call. By a free but definitive act, God determined that human beings are to be redeemed by the Incarnation of the Word. Mary's role, then, as the Incarnation itself, was willed absolutely and prior to human decision—in the very predestination of Christ. So, Mary's holiness in the Immaculate Conception is not just a question of time but also of the way that it was willed. Mary already stands—in the eternal decree of God—in the circle of Christ's own predestination.

Marian doctrines emerge from more central truths of our faith. Yet, they help us, also, to penetrate the meaning of these central truths. The Church's teaching on the role of Mary sheds light on the communal character of our discipleship; Mary's intercessory role is closely linked to the doctrine of the Communion of the Saints; the Assumption reminds us of the destiny that is ours in body and soul.

Can we believe in Mary? We are to believe in Mary, as the truths about her are true but secondary objects of our belief, intimately connected with the central event of Jesus Christ. Nor may we ignore belief in Mary, since the understanding of Marian doctrines helps us penetrate central truths and guards us from error in these great mysteries.

After a discussion period, the audience of 130 joined in the Marian Liturgy which followed. Archbishop Pearce, S.M., was the principal concelebrant. At this liturgy, the Reverend John Peter Cameron, O.P., director of the National Catholic Theater, delivered the homily. In his homily Fr. Cameron examined the resistance to devotion to Mary and the cool response to talk about Mary. He identified their basis to be a lack of understanding of Mary (her role in salvation history) and pride. To alleviate the lack of understanding, Fr. Cameron proposed a preaching ministry which highlights God's graciousness, goodness, providence, solicitude, compassion and sanctification as they are revealed in and through Mary. In this way what impedes us from a love for Mary will be stripped away, and the relevance of Mary for our faith will become evident: we will be able to call upon Mary with trust.

A luncheon, with a brief business meeting, followed the liturgy. The region's annual meeting adjourned at 2:00 P.M.

REV. MATTHEW F. MORRY, O.P.
Director, New England Region, MSA