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## ECUMENICAL ASPECTS OF *REDEMPTORIS MATER*

Pope John Paul II's sixth encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* ("The Mother of the Redeemer"), the first to be completely devoted to Mary, was made public on the Solemnity of the Annunciation, March 25, 1987. In a statement presented two days later, Bishop William Keeler of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, chairman of the U.S. Bishops' Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee, pointed out several ecumenical aspects of the encyclical.<sup>1</sup> He mentioned that the very subject of the papal teaching is of ecumenical significance, since, in the United States, dialogues between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches have been giving considerable attention to the special place of Mary in Christian faith and doctrine. Bishop Keeler emphasized the importance of the Anglican-Roman Catholic, the Lutheran-Roman Catholic, and the Polish National Catholic Church-Roman Catholic dialogues in our country.

In addition to devoting an entire section of the encyclical to explicit ecumenical reflections, "The Church's Journey and the Unity of All Christians" (2nd of Part II, nos. 29-34), our Holy Father contributes to future ecumenical discussion by presenting in clear and biblical language Roman Catholic teaching about Mary, especially in light of Vatican II. In the first half of the document, he particularly draws upon the Pauline writings of the New Testament by portraying Mary as the woman of faith highly favored by the grace of her

<sup>1</sup>Cf. *Origins*, 9 April 1987, p. 767; also, Franz Courth, "Okumenische Impulse der Enzyklika *Redemptoris Mater*," *Lebendiges Zeugnis* (March 1988): 5-15. All numbers within parentheses in this paper are to *Redemptoris Mater* (RM) or *Lumen Gentium* (LG).

Son and of the Holy Spirit, an approach which Orthodox and Protestants should find very congenial.

The Pope is especially appreciative of the ways in which the churches of the East celebrate their devotion to Mary in liturgies and express it in art. In declaring the Marian Year, he is clearly hopeful that Roman Catholics will grow in their appreciation of the traditions of the East so that "the church can begin once more to breathe fully with her 'two lungs,' the East and the West" (*RM*, 34). He perceives that this would be very helpful to the dialogues taking place between the Catholic Church and the churches and ecclesial communities of the West. His frequent references to Mary's presence to the pilgrim church as the model of faith and to her maternal mediation should also prove to be helpful approaches in dialoging with the Protestants about our special devotion to her. And Pope John Paul II is filled with the prayerful hope that the new millennium will mark the beginning of a new Christian era of unity with Mary, who goes before us in faith as the morning star precedes the dawn of a new day.

The first part of this paper reflects upon those statements in the encyclical which refer explicitly to Mary and ecumenism, and the second part discusses the ecumenical implications of the other aspects of the papal teaching. These principally include its biblical and Christocentric characteristics, its emphasis upon Mary as the woman of faith, her maternal mediation and her special relationship with the Pentecostal Spirit. And these aspects are considered particularly in conjunction with the three *sola*'s, or basic principles, of the Protestant Reformation: *sola scriptura*, *sola fide* or *sola gratia*, and *solus Christus* or *solus Deus*.<sup>2</sup> Finally, this presentation concludes with a brief reflection upon the difficulties which remain regarding Mary and the quest for Christian

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Eamon R. Carroll, O. Carm., *Understanding the Mother of Jesus* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1979), 43-47; also F. M. Jelly, O.P., "An Ecumenical View of Mary," *New Catholic World* (Nov.-Dec. 1986): 266-268.

unity, those which *Redemptoris Mater* did not directly address, but about which it may have something to say, at least by way of implication, e.g., the controversial Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption.

### *Explicit References to Mary and Ecumenism in the Encyclical*

Since we shall refer to various sections of *Redemptoris Mater* throughout this presentation, an outline of the encyclical may prove helpful:

Introduction (nos. 1-6)

Part I—Mary in the Mystery of Christ (nos. 7-24)

1. "Full of grace" (nos. 7-11)
2. "Blessed Is She Who Believed" (nos. 12-19)
3. "Behold Your Mother" (nos. 20-24)

Part II—The Mother of God at the Center of the Pilgrim Church (nos. 25-27)

1. The Church, the People of God Present in All the Nations of the Earth (nos. 25-28)
2. The Church's Journey and the Unity of All Christians (nos. 29-34)
3. The Magnificat of the Pilgrim Church (nos. 35-37)

Part III—Maternal Mediation (nos. 38-50)

1. Mary, the Handmaid of the Lord (nos. 38-41)
2. Mary in the Life of the Church and of Every Christian (nos. 42-47)
3. The Meaning of the Marian Year (nos. 48-50)

Conclusion (nos. 51-52).

Pope John Paul II's section about Mary and ecumenism appears in the very center of the encyclical letter, the middle of Part II, and is titled: "The Church's Journey and the Unity of All Christians." In Part I he has already developed the theme of Mary as the woman of faith, drawing abundantly upon sacred scripture. The first section of Part II introduces his reflections upon Mary and ecumenism by portraying precisely her faith as taking precedence in the quest "to bring all humanity . . . back to Christ its head in the unity of his Spirit" (*RM*, 28).

In this context, our Holy Father comments: "The journey of the Church, especially in our own time, is marked by the sign of ecumenism: Christians are seeking ways of restoring that unity which Christ implored from the Father for his disciples on the day before his passion" (*RM*, 29). He then makes reference to Vatican II's teaching that Mary's "obedience of faith" is the outstanding example for all Christians to follow in the journey towards unity and that many among the separated brethren, especially the Easterners, give due honor to the mother of our Lord and Savior. (cf. *LG*, 68-69).

The Pope proceeds to ponder the considerable differences of doctrine that disrupt the unity of faith among Christians. Such differences concern the mystery and ministry of the Church as well as the role of Mary in the work of salvation. He emphasizes the intimate relationship among the mysteries of Christ, Mary and the Church, as does the teaching of Vatican II (cf. *LG*, Chap. 8):

By a more profound study of both Mary and the church, clarifying each by the light of the other, Christians who are eager to do what Jesus tells them—as their mother recommends (cf. Jn. 2:5)—will be able to go forward together on this "pilgrimage of faith." Mary, who is still the model of this pilgrimage, is to lead them to the unity which is willed by their one Lord and so much desired by those who are attentively listening to what "the Spirit is saying to the churches" today (Rv. 2:7, 11, 17). (*RM*, 30)

The Pope perceives fundamental agreement among the churches and ecclesial communities regarding Mary's motherhood of the Lord and her spiritual maternity in relationship to his disciples. In light of this, he asks: "Therefore, why should we not all together look to her as our common mother, who prays for the unity of God's family and who 'precedes' us all at the head of the long line of witnesses of faith in the one Lord, the Son of God, who was conceived in her virginal womb by the power of the Holy Spirit?" (*RM*, 30)

The remainder of this section is a magnificent tribute to the Marian devotion of the Orthodox Church and the ancient churches of the East, especially as celebrated in their liturgical worship and expressed in their inspiring icons (*RM*, 31-33). John Paul II also pays tribute to the fact that the ecumenical councils which defined the basic dogmas of the Christian faith about the Trinity and the Word made flesh of the *Theotokos* were all held in the East. He is primarily interested, however, in pointing out the beautiful lyrical hymns found in the various Eastern rites over the ages as well as the innumerable other poetic phrases that have found their way into the liturgies of the East. He also mentions that the year of his writing the encyclical, 1987, marked the twelfth centenary of the Second Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (787), which overcame the threat of the iconoclasts and made possible the continuation in the tradition of the inspiring images and icons of Mary. Of these he observes: "She is usually represented with her son, the child Jesus, in her arms: it is the relationship with the son which glorifies the mother" (*RM*, 33).

It is beyond the scope and immediate purpose of this paper to pursue in detail the Holy Father's splendid tribute to the East, but it is important for us to appreciate more fully why he apparently awards such a high priority to our reunion with the Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, he seems to be often misunderstood in this matter, as though he were not adequately concerned about the ecumenical movement in the West. Really, he longs for the reunion of East and West, for "the day when the church can begin once more to breathe fully with her 'two lungs' " (*RM*, 34), precisely because "it would be an effective aid in furthering the progress of the dialogue already taking place between the Catholic Church and the churches and the ecclesial communities of the West" (*RM*, 34). And, in this encyclical, the Holy Father proposes that devotion to Mary, which should inspire all Christians to follow her example in "obedience of faith," will be the way for Catholics to reunite with the East and, through this fuller breath of the Holy Spirit and greater out-

pouring of Marian praise, to find Christian unity with all the churches and ecclesial communities of the West. The further implications of his yearning for the reunion of East and West will be explored in the conclusion of this paper.

### *Ecumenical Implications of Other Themes in the Encyclical*

In the subsequent sections of this paper, we shall consider other aspects of *Redemptoris Mater* which may be regarded as ecumenical by implication. And, generally speaking, such ecumenical implications are connected with the difficulties raised by the three *sola*'s, or basic principles, of the Protestant Reformation: *sola scriptura*, *sola fide* or *sola gratia*, and *solus Christus* or *solus Deus*.

According to *sola scriptura* or "scripture alone," the Church of Christ cannot propose a dogma or a truth as revealed by God and necessary for salvation unless it can be found clearly in the sacred scriptures. Concerning Marian matters, this indeed has raised difficulties about the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, and even Mary's perpetual virginity, which seems to be contradicted by the New Testament references to the "brothers" and the "sisters" of the Lord. *Sola fide* or *sola gratia*, which means that believers are justified only by the gift of divine faith or grace, appears to go contrary to the Roman Catholic interpretation of Mary's cooperation with God's grace in giving the free consent of her *fiat* at the Annunciation. And *solus Christus* or *solus Deus* is apparently opposed to Mary's mediation of her Son's graces, since Christ alone is the Mediator of redemption between the triune God and the human race. Likewise, the attributing to Mary of such functions as the forming of Christ in our souls seems to contradict this third *sola* by making her a surrogate for the Holy Spirit as well as for her Son.

Let us turn to other dimensions and themes of *Redemptoris Mater* to inquire whether they have any ecumenical implications that might help to resolve these difficulties, at least in some measure.

*Biblical Reflections upon Mary's  
Pilgrimage of Faith in the Encyclical*

Part I of *Redemptoris Mater*, "Mary in the Mystery of Christ," is a beautiful biblical meditation upon what Vatican II called her "pilgrimage of faith" (*LG*, n. 58). Our Holy Father, in his introduction to it, asserts: "Her exceptional pilgrimage of faith represents a constant point of reference for the church, for individuals and for communities, for peoples and nations, and in a sense for all humanity. It is indeed difficult to encompass and measure its range" (*RM*, 6). Of course, his special guide here is the conciliar teaching of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium*, "The Blessed Virgin Mary, God-Bearer, in the Mystery of Christ and of the Church," particularly its section on "The Role of the Blessed Virgin in the Economy of Salvation" (*LG*, 55-59).<sup>3</sup> There is the same Christocentric and ecclesiotypical emphasis in his Mariological reflections as at the Council, which judged it to be of ecumenical value to contemplate the mystery of Mary in close connection with the mysteries of Christ and his Body the Church. We cannot have a balanced Marian doctrine and devotion while isolating Mary from her Son and ourselves, since we then do not behold her in light of God's revealed plan of redemption. This tends to distort her place in that plan and to put her prerogatives into apparent competition with those of Christ and the Holy Spirit. She is not seen with sufficient clarity as uniquely redeemed by her Son to be the Immaculate Conception or as a member of his Church, albeit the preeminent one and the Archetype of all, that God intends for the final fulfillment of the Church of Christ.

There are three sections to Part I of *Redemptoris Mater*: "Full of Grace"; "Blessed Is She Who Believed"; and, "Behold Your Mother." These very titles manifest the rich scriptural basis of Part I. It requires careful and prayerful reading

<sup>3</sup>Cf. *Marian Studies*, 37 (1986): 239-257 for a fresh translation of *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 8.



to savor the Pope's reflections about Mary's pilgrimage of faith. To Vatican II's texts from the Synoptics, John, and Acts, he adds a number of references to the Pauline writings that mainly have to do with the mystery of our redemption as predestined by God from all eternity. Thus Mary is seen as having a special, indeed unique, relationship with God's incarnate Son in this mystery of predestination. The Pope applies it to her in the Annunciation and Visitation:

If we wish to meditate together with Mary on these words, and especially on the expression "full of grace," we can find a significant echo in the very passage from the Letter to the Ephesians quoted above [Eph. 1:3]. And if after the announcement of the heavenly messenger the Virgin of Nazareth is also called "blessed among women" (cf. Lk. 1:42), it is because of that blessing with which "God the Father" has filled us "in the heavenly places, in Christ." (*RM*, 8)

The ecumenical implications of this approach in the encyclical, while far from removing all the Marian difficulties involved, do offer a biblical portrait of Mary which would be much more congenial to the faith-understanding of our Christian brothers and sisters in the other churches and ecclesial communities. It is much more than the mere fact that the Pope refers to numerous New Testament texts. More significantly, his entire meditation on Mary's pilgrimage of faith is suffused with the inspired word of God from the New Testament, and the themes of salvation history therein revealed are intrinsic to his verbal portrait of the Madonna. Also, the use of the Pauline notion of mystery and of predestination as popular biblical concepts is very helpful, especially for many Protestants, in presenting Mary's special place in the divine plan of redemption through Jesus Christ.

As our Holy Father develops his meditation on Mary's pilgrimage of faith further, he reflects:

Mary uttered this fiat in faith. In faith she entrusted herself to God without reserve and "devoted herself totally as the handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her son." And this

son—as the fathers of the Church teach—she conceived in her mind before she conceived him in her womb: precisely in faith! (RM, 13)

This brings us from the *sola scriptura* principle to that of *sola fide* or *sola gratia*.

As John Paul II indicates, the common teaching of the Fathers of the Church during the great period of the undivided Church was that *Maria concepit Christum in corde vel mente priusquam in carne vel ventre*: “Mary conceived Christ in her heart or mind (through faith) before doing so (physically) in the flesh or in her womb.” There is no doubt that they believed with Augustine that her genetic motherhood would have availed her nothing unless she had been graced by faith to be a worthy *Theotokos* or God-Bearer. This is no instance of debating what is the primary principle of Mariology or the main Marian idea as an abstraction. Rather it is a call to contemplate Mary concretely as revealed by the word of God in salvation history through scripture and tradition. And there does seem to be a proper Catholic understanding of Mary as *sola gratia* or *sola fide*, since everything about her is grace or gift of God’s redeeming love in Christ.

When meditating upon Mary’s faith-filled *fiat* at the first joyful mystery of the Annunciation, our Holy Father reflects:

She responded, therefore, with all her human and feminine “I,” and this response of faith included both perfect cooperation with “the grace of the God that precedes and assists” and perfect openness to the action of the Holy Spirit, who “constantly brings faith to completion by his gifts.” (RM, 13)

The papal teaching puts very nicely the perfect harmony between grace and freedom as found in Mary’s *fiat* of faith. The fact that her wholehearted “Yes” flowed completely from the divine grace of faith did not inhibit her freedom of consent, but made it possible, indeed actual and total. John Paul II here seems to sum up very succinctly the doctrine of the great Fathers of the Eastern Church concerning syner-

gism, or the cooperation between human freedom and divine grace.

The acute ecumenical issue involved here seems to be that Catholics look upon Mary's *fiat* as though it were the meritorious cause of the Incarnation. St. Thomas epitomizes the authentic Catholic Tradition when he teaches that no one, not even Christ himself, could merit the Incarnation.<sup>4</sup> The simplest and most profound reason is that the Word made flesh, an entirely gratuitous gift of God's redeeming love, is the source of all grace, and grace is the principle of merit. And if it is impossible to merit the grace that justifies us, then indeed the very source of all grace in the redemptive Incarnation cannot itself be merited in any strict sense of the term. Christ would have had to pre-exist himself as the Word made flesh to merit the redemptive Incarnation. Catholics believe, however, that once justified (*gratia operans*) it is possible for us to merit growth in grace (*gratia cooperans*) and the full flowering of grace in the light of glory in heaven where God "crowns his own gifts," as the eucharistic preface I for the feasts of holy men and women aptly puts it. And so, while we cannot say that Mary merited, in any strict sense of the term, the Incarnation or the grace of her calling to be the *Theotokos*, we can say that, thanks to the grace of her Immaculate Conception in view of the foreseen merits of her Son and her growth in grace, she did merit to become a *worthy* mother of the Word incarnate.

After reading Vatican II's teaching about Mary, Karl Barth is quoted as saying that it continues the Roman heresy of *gratia cooperans*. In many ways, the difficulties concerning Marian doctrine make more concrete the more basic issues in the ecumenical dialogue, as, in this instance, the relationship between grace and freedom in working out salvation. Although we have no intention of trying to settle this issue here, we do wish to point out another truth of the Catholic Tradition according to St. Thomas Aquinas that might shed

<sup>4</sup>Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, Part III, Question 2, Article 11.

some additional light on the problem.<sup>5</sup> He clarifies the question by asserting that there is no difference between what flows from grace and from free will in a graced human act, as though the same reality were not the effect of both. In terms of causality, the grace of God is primary and our freedom is secondary. Neither does grace vitiate freedom but rather fulfills it, nor does the voluntary cooperation of the free human being deprive God's grace of its gratuitous and hypothetically necessary character if good is to be done. Finally, the grace of final perseverance, just as the initial grace of justification, cannot be merited in any strict sense of the term.

*Mary's Presence in the Pilgrim Church  
and Her Maternal Mediation*

In his encyclical letter, our Holy Father speaks frequently to us about Mary's *presence* in the Church today. For example, in the first section of Part II, where he meditates upon "The Mother of God at the Center of the Pilgrim Church," he teaches us: "This presence of Mary finds many different expressions in our day just as it did throughout the church's history" (*RM* 28). And further on he teaches us:

Mary is present in the church as the mother of Christ and at the same time as that mother whom Christ, in the mystery of the redemption, gave to humanity in the person of the apostle John. Thus, in her new motherhood in the Spirit, Mary embraces each and every one in the church and embraces each and every one through the church. (*RM*, 47)

The context of this passage from *Redemptoris Mater* is the middle section of Part III, "Maternal Mediation," which is titled: "Mary in the Life of the Church and of Every Christian." We note that the Pope speaks to us of Mary's maternal relationship to the Church in terms of her "presence" in

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, Part I, Question 23, Article 5.

the Church, an image and idea that he is fond of using to describe the mystery of her mediation and inspiration. He used it in his Marian meditation at the conclusion of the first encyclical of his pontificate, *Redemptor Hominis*. It may indeed be inspired by his own philosophy of Christian personalism, since it does place Mary in a profoundly personal relationship with each of us.

The ecumenical implications of his approach to Mary's mediation seem to safeguard our belief in her salutary influence upon each one of us, without placing her in any competition with the unique mediatorship of Christ or the *solus Christus* principle of the Protestant reformation. *Redemptoris Mater* carefully calls our attention to Vatican II's teaching that clearly reminds us that Mary's mediation is entirely dependent upon the sole mediatorship of her risen Son and only manifests his power, without adding to or detracting from him or interfering with the direct encounter between the faithful and Christ (cf. *RM*, 38). The fruits of the redemption that she shares with us come completely to her from her Son. This makes her mediation a motherhood in relationship to us in the life of Christ's grace. It is only because she has been uniquely called to the motherhood of God incarnate that Mary is continually called in heaven to be our spiritual mother. And the same Holy Spirit who came upon her at the Annunciation, to transform her into the Birth-Giver of God, constantly sustains her motherly concern for the salvation of her spiritual sons and daughters in the pilgrim Church upon earth.

Although the belief that Mary is the mediatrix of all her Son's graces—distributing the fruits of his redemptive act—is not a dogma of our Christian faith, it is founded upon a sound theological tradition in the Catholic Church. And it is a belief which draws many to practice the devotion of invoking Mary's intercession in heaven. This pious practice is another thorny problem in our ecumenical dialogues with Anglicans and Protestants, but not with the Orthodox. Like us, they have been invoking saints in heaven ever since the days of the early martyrs, who were so venerated a millen-

nium before the Reformation. But the Reformers and their spiritual descendants look upon such invocation as a practice that has no basis in scripture. And, while they can tolerate as *adiaphora* certain pious beliefs and practices that are not explicitly found in the Bible, they are opposed to such practices when these seem to go contrary to the scriptures; and the invocation and mediation of Mary and the saints seem to them to oppose the *solus Christus* principle, and to make the unique mediatorship of Christ superfluous. Besides, they find no biblical basis for calling upon or "praying to" the saints, since there is no sound doctrine that they can "hear" us in heaven. Also, the Reformers wished to purify the superstitious beliefs and practices of popular devotion, whereby the people had recourse to the merciful mother in order to gain the pardon of her Son, the just judge. Our Holy Father's explanation of Mary's mediation appears to help preclude such offensive connotations, since her personal and motherly presence in the pilgrim Church always has the salutary influence of directing us toward more intimate and immediate encounters with Christ.

### *The Remaining Difficulties Regarding Mary and Ecumenism*

Concerning the *sola scriptura* principle in the context of Marian ecumenism, there are the controversial dogmas of Mary's Immaculate Conception and her glorious Assumption, body and soul, into heaven. Here the Orthodox Church might serve as a bridge to formulate the dogmatic content of these two revealed truths about Mary more meaningfully for the Anglicans and Protestants. Although the Orthodox do not accept them *qua* dogmas, they seem to believe in the same Marian mysteries that these dogmas seek to express. In reference to the Immaculate Conception, they seem to share the Catholic faith that Mary is the all holy one, filled with grace from the first instant of her human existence. But they do have problems with the Augustinian *theologoumenon* of original sin, according to which the defined dogma of 1854 is formulated. Perhaps in our di-

alogues with the Orthodox we shall be able to reach a consensus on the reformulation of the mystery of original sin that would clarify the mystery of Mary's Immaculate Conception. Regarding her Assumption, the Orthodox apparently believe in the total glorification of Mary's human personhood, but do not think that it should have been declared a dogma. With Pope John Paul II, we prayerfully hope that ecumenical progress towards reunion with the Orthodox in such Marian matters will help in our dialogues with the Anglicans and Protestants in the West, particularly in relating Scripture and Tradition more dynamically to allow for the authentic development of dogma.

We have already considered the ecumenical difficulties that remain regarding the relationship between grace and freedom as well as between Christ's unique mediation and the subordinate mediation of Mary and the saints in glory. Once again, we hope and pray that our ecumenical dialogues with the great churches of the East will help open new routes on the road to Christian unity. We have the distinct advantage of sharing ecclesiologies with the Orthodox that are the same *de jure*, if not *de facto*, in the catholic substance of understanding the Church as a "sacrament" mediating the redemptive fruits of Christ efficaciously. Mary's mediation points toward this more profound aspect of the mystery of the Church in her mediating ministries of word and sacrament. My experiences of sharing in the dialogue between our Catholic Church and the Lutherans in the United States have more deeply convinced me that the difficulties over *sola fide* and *solus Christus* are imbedded in our ecclesiological differences, which are *de jure* and not simply *de facto*. And I become more and more convinced of Fr. Yves Congar's thesis that these ecclesiological differences reflect deeper differences in Christology and Mariology that we must address ecumenically.<sup>6</sup> The mysteries of Christ, Mary and the Church are intimately related in the "hierarchy

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Yves Congar, *Christ, Our Lady, and the Church* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957).

of truths"; different conceptions of one inevitably lead to different understandings of others.

In conclusion, I call your attention to the many places in Pope John Paul II's *Redemptoris Mater* that provide enlightening and inspiring meditations upon the special relationship between Mary and the Holy Spirit. He exhibits this relationship by linking Mary and the Spirit at the conception of Christ during the Annunciation and the birth of the Church of Christ at Pentecost. It is my fervent hope that the ecumenical implications of this special relationship between the Seal of Unity in the Trinity and the mother of Christ—through whom, with whom, and in whom we seek our true oneness—will be developed for the enrichment of the ecumenical dialogues.

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