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## THE VIRGIN MARY IN THE BREADTH AND SCOPE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

*John Borelli, Ph.D.\**

### ***Interreligious Relations as Catholic Context***

"Interreligious relations today are clearly at the heart of the Catholic Church's life and ministry and will increase in significance as we move into the third millennium of Christianity." With this statement, Bishop Joseph J. Gerry, Episcopal Moderator for Interreligious Relations, National Conference of Catholic Bishops [NCCB], begins a recently published article entitled "The Commitment of the Catholic Church to Interreligious Relations."<sup>1</sup> He shows how this is obvious from events during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. Indeed, serving as an example to the whole church, the pope has converted the initial directives coming from Vatican Council II into concrete instances of pastoral ministry. Besides numerous addresses to multireligious audiences, encounters with peoples of faith, and formal, structured interreligious dialogues during his trips abroad, there are a number of extraordinary occasions we can recall: the first visit of a pope to the synagogue of Rome (1986), the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi (1986), the first address of a pope to a large gathering of Muslim youth (Morocco, 1985), and the opening of the Sixth Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace [WCRP] (1994). In November 1994, Pope John Paul II opened the first session of WCRP's Sixth Assembly in the Vatican's Synod Hall about one week

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<sup>1</sup>*The Living Light* (Winter 1995): 6-12.

after the synod on consecrated life had ended. As he entered the hall and glanced around at the seats filled with representatives dressed in the costumes and habits of their traditions, the pope observed spontaneously, "Ah, the second synod of Rome!" Encounters with peoples of other religious traditions have, as we shall note, influenced him in significant ways.

Under his guidance there have been notable contributions to the official documentation too, including the consequential reflections in the 1991 encyclical *Redemptoris missio* and the extraordinary text "Dialogue and Proclamation," also issued in 1991, jointly prepared and issued by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue [PCID]. Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Tertio millennio adveniente* includes specific guidelines for interreligious dimensions in preparation for the great Jubilee Year and offers important reflections on the place of this special ministry in the future life of the Church. Cardinal Francis Arinze, PCID President, has asserted in reference to preparations for the Jubilee Year: "The Catholic Church wants to enter into contact with the followers of other religions in a spirit of mutual understanding and respect and, hopefully, collaboration, especially in promoting common values and projects, particularly in matters touching justice, peace, development and respect for human dignity."<sup>2</sup>

With Pope John Paul II's emblem bearing the solitary mark of Mary in the shadow of a cross, we are reminded how he has emphasized the role of the Virgin Mary in the life and teaching of the Church. His 1984 apostolic exhortation on religious life, *Redemptionis donum*, concludes with an evocative meditation on the Annunciation; similarly, his apostolic exhortation of 1996, *Vita consecrata*, concludes with an exuberant invocation of Mary. Fr. Frederick Jelly, in the opening pages of his review of Mary in the Catholic tradition, drew attention to statements by Pope John Paul II in calling and concluding the

<sup>2</sup>Cardinal Francis Arinze, "The Holy Year: A Call to Overcome Divisions and Indifference," in *Preparing for the Year 2000* (Rome: Urbi et Orbi Communications, 1996), 239.

Extraordinary Synod of 1985, convened in honor of the twentieth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council, and observed how this pope has endeavored "to synthesize the main features of a Madonna for Catholics today" and "appropriately . . . in close connection with the event in the Church that has the greatest single influence upon the renewing of Mary's portrait, namely, Vatican II."<sup>3</sup> Other examples include Pope John Paul II's 1987 encyclical *Redemptoris mater*, which "develops and updates the Second Vatican Council's teaching contained in Chapter 8 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* [LG],<sup>4</sup> and his 1988 apostolic letter on women *Mulieris dignitatem*, which begins with a reflection on Mary.

There is a definite parallel here that can be explored for fruitful theological purposes, and this paper is only a beginning. The preparation of the schema that would become Second Vatican Council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" signaled a growing consensus, but a somewhat inventive shift, towards a new ministry for interreligious relations. Guidance and encouragement would be offered by Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1964), and then the commitment of the Church would be expressed in the Council's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra aetate*). In the same way, during the preparation of the same important schema on the Church, a vote was taken in the second session of the Council (1963) whether to have a separate conciliar document on Mary or to include the major statement on Mary within the eventual document on the Church. Only a margin of forty votes favored inclusion. This was one of the closer votes taken at the Council! Again, Pope Paul VI played a mediating role in his development of the title "Mother of the Church," bringing about a desired but tentative consensus for a recovery of Marian teaching within

<sup>3</sup>Frederick M. Jelly, O.P., *Madonna: Mary in the Catholic Tradition* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1986), 7.

<sup>4</sup>These are the words in *Mulieris dignitatem*, which Pope John Paul II used to describe *Redemptoris mater*.

Christology and Ecclesiology.<sup>5</sup> Pope Paul VI would subsequently develop a fuller view in his 1974 apostolic exhortation *Marialis cultus*.<sup>6</sup>

I do not want to belabor the relationship between the two sets of teachings as exactly parallel, because Marian teaching has been clear and universal in the life of the Church from very early times, while interreligious understanding—though proposed by astute teachers and argued by adept defenders from ancient times through every age—has only recently been broadened to an explicit teaching with universal status.<sup>7</sup> But, to echo Fr. Jelly's observation cited earlier, the Catholic community entering the third millennium is the Catholic Church shaped by the Second Vatican Council. In both Marian teaching and interreligious understanding there were definite steps taken over thirty years ago. In these intervening decades, how have theologians taken account of developments in interreligious understanding when reflecting on the role of Mary in Catholic life and teaching, and how have Catholic historians of religions taken account of Marian teachings, particularly those from the Second Vatican Council, and in exploring the rich traditions of the peoples of faith who inhabit our cities, towns, and earth?

The official publication of the Holy See in the field of interreligious relations is the PCID's journal *Pro Dialogo*, which first appeared in 1966 as the *Bulletin* of the Secretariat for Non-Christians (the current issue is no. 92). A quick glance at the indices reveals very rare references to Marian teaching. Similarly, one finds a dearth of sources in Marian literature about the role of Marian teaching in interreligious dialogue. Only now are these two broad questions being asked in a single conference. I applaud the Mariological Society of America

<sup>5</sup>This overview of Marian teachings and the Second Vatican Council is offered as the subject of an entire chapter in a recent book by George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, A Michael Glazier Book (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 202-17.

<sup>6</sup>See also: Jelly, *Madonna*, 7-8.

<sup>7</sup>For an account of the history of the Catholic response to the question of salvation outside of the Church, see Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Salvation Outside the Church?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992).

for beginning what will hopefully prove to be a worthwhile investigation for theologians and historians of religions within Christian circles and for the meeting of Christians, Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, and others in interreligious dialogue. Thus, this conference is only one of several first steps. My general remarks about how a Catholic may view the ministry of interreligious relations with confidence and fervor will conclude with some specific examples of certain Marian themes for positive discussion in interreligious dialogue. (We anticipate other papers at this conference to give more detailed analyses of Marian doctrines and interreligious relations.)

### ***Interreligious Dialogue in the Life of the Church***

As we have noted, *Nostra aetate* cannot be taken by itself as marking a revolution in Catholic teaching on interreligious relations that the Second Vatican Council inaugurated. Given an appropriate name, "In Our Age," and approved in the Council's final session when eleven of sixteen conciliar documents received final approval, *Nostra aetate* resulted from a somewhat complex process. *Lumen gentium* made initial significant advances in interreligious understanding a year earlier (1964); and *Ecclesiam suam*, the seminally important encyclical of Pope Paul VI, promulgated also in 1964, contained numerous passages that foreshadowed lines in *Nostra aetate*.

One must look at the whole context of the Second Vatican Council, with its reorientation to mission, its commitments to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, its careful examination of the nature and mission of the Church, its document on religious liberty, the revitalization of the liturgy and the life of the Church through inculturation, the elevation of the role of the laity in the Church, the speeches and encyclicals of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, and the establishment of secretariats to handle the new ministries, especially to put into practice the new orientations towards separated Christians, all peoples of faith, and all of humanity who respect the principles of religious liberty and cultural advancement.

The development of *Nostra aetate* might well have originated when a French Jewish scholar, Jules Isaac, met with Pope John XXIII in 1960, and asked him to do something at the

upcoming council about the attitudes of contempt for the Jews.<sup>8</sup> That private meeting between scholar and pope was indeed a moment of grace. Pope John asked Cardinal Augustin Bea, who had already been charged to begin the official work of the Holy See towards the restoration of unity among Christians, to look into what could be done. *Nostra aetate* began as a draft on relations with Jews to be appended to "The Decree on Ecumenism"; during the sessions of the Council, it became a separate document, specifically naming Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus, as well as noting the "deep religious sense" among all peoples who follow a religious way of life.

The Council fathers first agreed to this refreshing way of understanding the salvific mission of the Church in *Lumen gentium*:

For the Church is driven by the Holy Spirit to do her part for the full realization of the plan of God, who has constituted Christ as the source of salvation for the whole world . . . The effect of her work is that whatever good is found sown in the minds and hearts of men or in the rites and customs of peoples, these not only are preserved from destruction, but are purified, raised up, and perfected for the glory of God, the confusion of the devil, and the happiness of man. (17)<sup>9</sup>

In the preceding paragraph (16), there is mention of specific believers in a certain order of relationship to the Catholic Church: 1) the Jews, "a people most dear for the sake of the fathers," 2) Muslims, among those in the first place "who acknowledge the Creator" and "who profess to hold the faith of Abraham," and 3) others who "in shadows and images seek the unknown God."

The overall attitude resulting from the Council and directing the first fifteen years of formal relations was aptly summarized

<sup>8</sup>This story is told by Claire Huchet Bishop in her biographical introduction to Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 13ff.

<sup>9</sup>All texts of the Second Vatican Council are quoted from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1975).

by Msgr. Pietro Rossano, the second person to serve as Secretary of the Secretariat for Non-Christians:

At this point a query arises on the relationship of the church to other religions. *Nostra Aetate* represents the first time in its history that the Roman Catholic Church has faced this question in such an official way. This declaration in many ways implies a new mentality, and in it we can distinguish two approaches. There is, first of all, a global approach to the world religions. In comparison with the attitude prevalent in many past centuries, this approach is certainly new and uses such terms as *esteem*, *respect*, *dialogue*, *proclamation*, *witness*. Second, there is a differentiated approach to the individual religions according to the nature of each; this had already been delineated in *Lumen Gentium* (n.16).<sup>10</sup>

Pope Paul VI wrote eloquently on this topic in *Ecclesiam suam*, issued about three months before the third session when *Lumen gentium* was approved by the assembly. Pope Paul VI presented a lengthy meditation on the "dialogue of salvation" and then, in the spirit of his predecessor's monumental encyclical *Pacem in terris*, sketched "a series of concentric circles around the central point in which God has placed us" (96). These were: first, the immense circle of the whole of humanity, the earth community, and including in particular those of goodwill who do not profess God (104); second, another circle "vast in its extent, yet it is not so far away from us" of Jews, Muslims, and "the followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions" (107); and then "the circle which is nearest to us, the circle of Christianity" (109).

This open attitude towards other religions was a significant facet of the spirit of renewal and change that would distinguish the work of the Church in future decades. *Nostra aetate* begins with the notion of the unity of the human community and the openness of every human person to the experience of the divine: "Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence" and "throughout history even to the present day, there is found among different peoples a certain awareness of a hidden power, which lies

<sup>10</sup>Pietro Rossano, "Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism in Roman Catholic Perspective," in *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), 106.



behind the course of nature and the events of human life" (1 and 2). Then there is the famous "ray of divine truth" passage:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2 Cor 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life. (2)

The approach of the Council clearly was influenced by Karl Rahner. Thus a certain anthropological approach pervades much of the documentation. The Catholic focus during the early phase of this ministry was on the relationship of peoples of faiths and their religious traditions to the Church, and this attitude was founded on a positive theological anthropology, namely, humanity's orientation towards God.

In 1994, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (established as the Secretariat for Non-Christians in 1964) produced an 875-page volume in Italian, *Interreligious Dialogue in the Pontifical Magisterium (Documents 1963-1993)*. The texts specifically on interreligious relations are excerpted from the Second Vatican Council and comprise nearly forty pages by themselves. Passages taken from the magisterial teachings of Paul VI and John Paul II account for sixty pages. In addition, there are over 500 pages of speeches, letters, and communications of the popes in the past thirty years and 150 pages of texts issued by offices of the Holy See. We therefore are not talking about a single seminal document which is referred to in subsequent addresses and statements. No, this is one of the significant new ministries that the Catholic Church has taken up vigorously as the renewed church of the Vatican Council II.

Catholics around the world set themselves to the task of promoting interreligious relations. Episcopal conferences, especially where Christians represented a small minority (for example, in India and Japan), established offices, held conferences, and added the study of religions to the curricula of their

institutions. In these situations, interreligious activity went noticeably hand-and-hand with inculturation of liturgical and other forms of Christian life. In Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific, the interaction between indigenous cultural and religious traditions is characteristic of the personal experience of many Catholics. Dialogue is for them an internalized experience, for they often do not feel distinct from their traditional ways. Elsewhere, encounters with representatives of other faiths became more and more frequent for the Catholics, especially as the numbers of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs grew in Europe and North America.

During the third session of the Council (1964), the bishops of the United States established the committees that would constitute the blueprint for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops [NCCB]. Among these was the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs. Two years later, in 1966, with some ecumenical dialogues already in progress (e.g., with the Orthodox and with Anglicans), the commission was reorganized into the committee it is today—the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs [BCEIA]. The work of the BCEIA was expanded to include other concerns of the Holy See, for example, relations with the Jewish people. Bishops of dioceses appointed ecumenical officers to handle locally these new sets of relations, and diocesan workers soon organized themselves into a support group—the National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers [NADEO]. In certain dioceses (e.g., Detroit, Los Angeles, Honolulu, San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, New York, Newark), populations of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others were increasing significantly. Relationships and, in a few cases, formal dialogues were being established. In 1982, NADEO formed a committee of ecumenical officers and historians of religions to provide support and information to the dioceses. So effective was the work of the committee in promoting the growth of interreligious contacts that in four years (1986) the NCCB, responding to its own perceived needs, voted to expand the staff of its BCEIA so that interreligious relations could be started formally. In 1994, the NCCB voted again to expand BCEIA staff so that even more time could be devoted to interreligious relations.

Less than one month before the U.S. bishops approved funding for the first staff expansion, a significant event took place in Italy that demonstrated the genuine commitment of the Catholic Church to interreligious relations and cooperation. If the Second Vatican Council was an epochal step for Catholics in interreligious relations, then the World Day of Peace in Assisi in 1986 was its boldest implementation. It was an event that joined the ecumenical, the interreligious, and the social missions of the Church, as initiated by Vatican Council II, and displayed them to the world. The generous response of Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and other religious leaders to join Pope John Paul II to fast, to walk together, and to come together to pray for peace made October 27, 1986, an historic date in the history of interreligious relations. At the end of 1986, the pope described how much that single day influenced him personally, calling it the greatest religious event of the year, a moment when the hidden and radical unity of humanity found visible expression, and an event so significant that it invites deep reflection.<sup>11</sup> In the same place he noted the lessons of Assisi, among which was the reassurance that "we can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person" (11). The World Day of Peace in Assisi has become both an encouraging sign and a model for Catholics that it is possible to come together to pray silently with peoples of faith, each in their own traditions, while respectfully listening deeply to one another.

Those who were present at Assisi have offered convincing testimonies. A few who spoke to the pope or observed him that day have related how much he seemed personally moved by the happenings. This is an experience repeated countless times to those who have engaged wholeheartedly and faithfully in interreligious encounter. In the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (1990), the impact of these experiences is apparent in

<sup>11</sup>"Pope's Christmas Address to the Roman Curia: The World Situation Constitutes a Pressing Appeal for the Spirit of Assisi, 22 December 1986," published in *Bulletin*, Secretariat for Non Christians, 64 (22/1, 1987): 54-55. See also: *Origins* 16, 31 (January 15, 1987): 561-63.

several places. Not only does Pope John Paul II quote the passage on authentic prayer from his Assisi reflections, but also there is this interesting passage in the penultimate paragraph:

The missionary must be a "contemplative in action." He finds answers to problems in the light of God's word and in personal and community prayer. My contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation.<sup>12</sup>

This same experience also is reflected in the way he presents the teachings of the Council: "[God] does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression . . ." (55). This last passage of 1990, in my view, represents a major development in papal teaching, a step beyond *Nostra aetate* and *Ecclesiam suam*.

Engagement in interreligious activity has transformed Catholics. Certainly this personal transformation and conversion is one result for interreligious dialogue, but we may ask what are our specific goals? Reciprocal communication in dialogue leads to friendship, trust, respect, and at a deeper level, interpersonal communion. Mutual understanding and respect are stock-of-the-trade expressions which we often use without dwelling on how profound these two terms are. Everyone forming relationships with people of other faiths—from those who encounter one another as neighbors, to scholars meeting to study religious traditions together, to those motivated profoundly for the spiritual encounter of religious experience—have mutual understanding and respect as their goals. We can recall another line from *Nostra aetate*: "Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral good found among non-Christians, as well as their social and cultural values" (2). We have another goal, one that has been reaffirmed in several important texts by Pope John Paul II,

<sup>12</sup>*Redemptoris missio*, published in *Origins* 20, 34 (January 31, 1991): 565.

namely reconciliation. As we approach the third millennium, reconciliation is a necessary step in which we acknowledge our failures and shortcomings and resolve to follow the way of the Gospel more closely.<sup>13</sup> Finally, there is a very profound goal, one that can be reached by those willing to apply themselves rigorously to a spiritual discipline. This is the encounter on the profound level of spiritual experience. Here I wish to cite "Dialogue and Proclamation," issued jointly in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples:

Interreligious dialogue does not merely aim at mutual understanding and friendly relations. It reaches a much deeper level, that of the spirit, where exchange and sharing consist in a mutual witness to one's beliefs and a common exploration of one's religious convictions. In dialogue, Christians and others are invited to deepen their religious commitment, to respond with increasing sincerity to God's personal call and gracious self-gift, which, as our faith tells us, always passes through the mediation of Jesus Christ and the work of his Spirit. (40)<sup>14</sup>

I encourage everyone to study "Dialogue and Proclamation" for the summary it provides of the forms and goals of dialogue and for the inspiration that can be gained from passages such as this.

Greeting peoples of faith and incorporating interreligious outreach as part of the office of bishop are more and more typical of the bishops of the Catholic Church. Nowadays greetings are sent to Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus from the Holy See. These are shared with all episcopal conferences, and in the United States these greetings are forwarded to bishops to share with the religious leaders in their communities. Every diocese is expected to have an ecumenical officer who often serves as an interreligious officer. Jewish-Catholic relations are firmly rooted in our ministry in the United States, where the largest Jewish population in the world exists. As the Islamic population approaches the same number as Jews, and as the Buddhist

<sup>13</sup>See, e.g., *Tertio millennio adveniente*, published in *Origins* 24, 24 (November 24, 1994): 34-38, 49-58.

<sup>14</sup>The text was published in *Origins* 21, 8 (July 4, 1991): 121, 123-35.

population is not far behind the Muslims, more and more interreligious councils and events are engaging Catholics. Finally, in the area of spirituality, any number of Catholic authors are giving evidence of the mutual enrichment of interreligious encounter and more and more centers of spirituality thrive in the religious pluralism of the American scene. Those of us who are fortunate to travel in India, Japan, throughout Asia and Africa, marvel at the achievements of numerous Catholic minorities who are serious about inculturation and engagement with the surrounding religious majorities.

In November 1995, the PCID held a plenary, which it has usually called every three years. Present were bishops from around the world and a few consultants. The American member, Bishop Joseph Gerry, BCEIA moderator for interreligious relations, and I were both present. The first observation for me, a newcomer, was that this is largely a meeting of bishops from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. We heard excellent presentations on the idea of holiness in traditional religions, in Hinduism, in Buddhism, and in Islam. In addition there was a summary of Christian spirituality and a reflection on the spiritual encounter of Christian monastics with Buddhist and Hindu monastics. In small groups, members and consultants discussed the mutual enrichment of traditions. The plenary was a workshop for the bishop members who are encouraged to take leadership in interreligious relations in their national and regional episcopal conferences. For those who engage in interreligious dialogue on a regular basis, there is an explicit awareness that dialogue gives rise to a richer spiritual life. *Redemptoris missio* says this too: "Dialogue leads to inner purification and conversion which, if pursued with docility to the Holy Spirit, will be spiritually fruitful" (56).

### ***The Place of Mary in Interreligious Dialogue***

Rereading *Lumen gentium* through the lens of interreligious dialogue, we can note certain insightful descriptions of the Blessed Virgin. Because of the sublime grace she received, "she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth" (53). St. Augustine calls her "the mother of the members of Christ (53)." Our Jewish origins are recalled through her

epithet, "exalted Daughter of Sion" (55). Her Abrahamic character is noted with the words, "she devoted herself totally, as a handmaid of the Lord" (56). Her sublime religious appeal is fostered from the description of how "the Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith" (58).

In 1973, fully four months before Pope Paul VI issued *Mari-  
alis cultus*, the Catholic bishops of the United States themselves issued a lengthy pastoral letter, "Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith." In a key section, "Spiritual Mother," they reflect on her prototypical act of faith as an essential aspect of her spiritual motherhood:

First came Mary's faith, then her motherhood. Faith is the key also to the spiritual motherhood of Mary. By her faith, she became the perfect example of what the Gospels mean by "spiritual motherhood." In the preaching of the Savior, His "mother" is whoever hears God's word and keeps it. (71)<sup>15</sup>

As an exemplar of faith, she is bound experientially to masses of believers in the poverty and loss she knew so starkly as a mother. Pope John Paul II offered this concluding meditation in *Redemptio-  
nis donum*:

How poor she was on Bethlehem night and how poor on Calvary!  
How obedient she was at the moment of the annunciation, and then—at the foot of the cross—obedient even to the point of assenting to the death of her son, who became obedient "unto death!" How dedicated she was in all her earthly life to the cause of the kingdom of heaven through most chaste love. (17)<sup>16</sup>

So, in the first place, when we share views with believers from other religious traditions about the act of faith itself, we can offer to them a biblically-based, spiritual portrait of Mary which cannot be presented apart from her condition as a poor woman of Nazareth living in a subjugated territory within the empire of Rome. From Christians in India, for example,

<sup>15</sup>*Pastoral Letters of the United States Bishops* (vol. 3: 1962-74; Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1983), 429.

<sup>16</sup>Published in *Origins* 13, 44 (April 12, 1984): 731.

where religious pluralism and minority status among Hindus and Muslims are a matter of everyday experience along with inescapable reminders of poverty, we often hear that interreligious dialogue is a dialogue with the poor. One Indian theologian has written that "interreligious dialogue is thus part of a larger project, namely that of nurturing relationships among the communities in equality, justice, and in the spirit of genuine pluralism."<sup>17</sup>

In John's Gospel (19:25), there is a universally compelling image of Mary at the foot of the cross, contemplating her suffering son, being the lowliest of the low, one whose son has been made to endure the worst of humiliations by the oppressors of her people, and struggling to retain a glimmer of hope in the promises of God. Cardinal Carlo Martini, uses this powerful image at the beginning of a reflection he entitles "a woman among her people." He writes: "the woman is first of all Mary as symbol of every woman who wishes to attain full self-realization, not alone but among her people."<sup>18</sup> The cardinal offers two other meditations which may be fruitful for interreligious sharing. First, he dwells on the image of Mary at the Wedding Feast at Cana (John 2:1-12), who perceives the whole, who shows her involvement with the surroundings, and who is courageous to take the lead. He offers this reflection:

Mary must help us to detect what is missing, not in order to accuse or recriminate but in order to suffer and to love. Above all, she must help me to discover what is lacking in myself, that *certain something* which produces the extra.<sup>19</sup>

Cardinal Martini also draws on the picture of Mary pondering all the events of the Nativity in her heart (Luke 2:19), and shows how Mary serves as a model of contemplation.<sup>20</sup> Not only does this call to mind the concluding comment of

<sup>17</sup>Felix Wilfred, *From the Dusty Soil: Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity*, Asian Theological Search, vol. 4 (Madras: Dept. of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 1995), 268-69.

<sup>18</sup>Carlo M. Martini, *Women in the Gospels* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 13.

<sup>19</sup>Martini, *Women in the Gospels*, 36.

<sup>20</sup>Martini, *Women in the Gospels*, 39.



*Redemptoris missio* (91), that every "missionary must be a contemplative in action," but also certain images throughout Pope John Paul II's earlier encyclical, *Redemptoris mater*. For example there is this passage:

For in Mary's faith, first at the Annunciation and then fully at the foot of the Cross, an interior space was opened within humanity which the eternal Father can fill "with every spiritual blessing." (28)<sup>21</sup>

There is much to be shared here. First, we are honest about how little we know exactly from Scripture about Mary. To note one theologian's reflection, "the very paucity of the historical record regarding her is a point of identification with all women, whose history has been largely hidden and unremarked."<sup>22</sup> As a church community entering dialogue, we can make a special commitment to insure that women are represented among us, that they have the opportunities to share their scholarship and experiences, and that they play an equal role in forging a spirituality for a pluralistic society. This is a matter of honesty for us if we look to Mary as a prototype of faith and as the Mother of the Church. Mary's exemplarity as a disciple emerges from the Christian community's veneration of her and does not overly rely on a strict interpretation of her personal history.<sup>23</sup>

The Gospel portrayal of Mary as a faithful hearer of the word of God, as a representative of the poor of Israel, and as one who grows in faith as the mystery of salvation is opened to her can connect Christians and Jews, at least thematically, for theological dialogue.<sup>24</sup> Mary, who had her place in the apostolic community (Acts 1:14), reminds us of the Jewish origins of

<sup>21</sup>Published in *Origins* 16, 43 (April 9, 1996): 757.

<sup>22</sup>Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., "The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women," in *Horizons on Catholic Feminist Theology*, ed. Joann Wolski Conn and Walter E. Conn (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 99.

<sup>23</sup>Johnson, "The Marian Tradition," 101.

<sup>24</sup>See *Mary in the New Testament*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press/New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 285-86.

Christianity and the essential reality of the act of faith in God for both traditions. Thus Christians and Jews can look together at how Christians have presented Mary within the context of the whole of church doctrine and at how Jews have responded to such presentations. The cooperation of scholars for understanding biblical literature, archeology, and the cultural context out of which Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity emerged is an obvious example of this. Such cooperation assists both communities in reaching clearer understandings of their ancient faith traditions and for acknowledging what is shared by both. In the past, however, matters seem to have followed a different course. It is true that because Mary the Jewess, on the one hand, lived at a time that focuses the attention of both Jews and Christians—usually for different reasons, she represents to a certain extent what unites the two traditions. On the other hand, she is symbolic of the parting of the ways in doctrine, practice, and values. To a certain extent, Jews have remained silent about what Christians profess about the Blessed Virgin, and the reasons for that silence need to be addressed.<sup>25</sup>

A quick glance at references to Mary in the *Qur'an* shows that more details are offered there about her personal life than the New Testament holds.<sup>26</sup> Among these images in the *Qur'an* is an emphasis on the singular importance of Mary as the one chosen by God to be mother to Jesus the Messiah. It might be interesting to compare these accounts of the selection of Mary with the opening genealogy of Joseph in Matthew's Gospel and the curious features of the four women named: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba). George Tavard suggests that in Matthew "the sovereign initiative of God in choosing a mother for the Messiah" seems to be a case of a certain unconventionality.<sup>27</sup> This topic alone—God's selection of Mary—would be a fruitful topic for discussion with Muslims.

<sup>25</sup>See Avital Wohlmann, "Why the Silence of Judaism?," *Service International de Documentation Judeo-Chretienne* 20, 2 (1987): 9-14.

<sup>26</sup>For example, see: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Chosen of All Women: Mary and Fāṭima in Qur'anic Exegesis," *Islamochristiana* 7 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto de Studi Arabi e Islamici, 1981): 19-28.

<sup>27</sup>Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 6-7.

On December 8, 1995, Cardinal William Keeler of Baltimore received the Mahmoud Abu Saud Award for Excellence from the American Muslim Council. For the ceremony he spoke on "How Mary Holds Muslims and Christians in Conversation."<sup>28</sup> After noting how Christians and Muslims revere Mary as grace-filled and blessed, chosen of all women, pure and saintly, and the mother of the Messiah, the Cardinal observed that she is a symbol of what divides Christians and Muslims too. Christians confess that Mary is the God-bearer, the mother of God, while Muslims speak of her as the mother of Jesus who was no more than God's apostle: "While this radical difference in faith forever separates us, it paradoxically also holds us forever in conversation with one another."<sup>29</sup> This conversation will be a mutual effort at understanding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom.

When we Christians present Mary in interreligious dialogue, we might want to emphasize her lowliness and how she can be our constant link with the poor, the oppressed, those who suffer injustice. Growth in understanding, enrichment of our faith and that of our partners in dialogue, is not separable from the daily moral questions that arise in the dialogue of life and of social concerns. This is the rich imagery of "the Cantic of Mary" (Luke 1:47-55) which we can pray at interreligious dialogues. It is a song of blessing, beseeching us to exalt the lowly, protect the weak, fill the hungry with what they need, and remember the faithful with mercy. Mary is portrayed as a strong character in these passages, acting beyond her years and state, the active agent of salvation.<sup>30</sup> Interreligious dialogue requires a considerable amount of engaged listening, patient questioning, and responsible learning. We need to bring many voices of the Christian community to this dialogue, who would otherwise be the overlooked "Marys" in our community, and listen to them pray the Magnificat—from Asia, from Africa, from Latin America, from the suburban neighborhoods, from the islands, forests and valleys of our earth.

<sup>28</sup>Published in *Origins* 25, 36 (February 29, 1996): 610-12.

<sup>29</sup>*Origins* 25, 36 (February 29, 1996): 611.

<sup>30</sup>Johnson, "The Marian Tradition," 102.

In keeping with the presentation of Mary in *Lumen gentium*, all of us, Christian men and women of faith, can look to her advancement in her pilgrimage of faith as the exemplar of every believer seeking God amidst the doubts and adversities of the human condition. As Mother of the Church, she more faithfully represents the growth and advancement in faith through which each member is called to pass. Thus, she represents essentially what it means to be "religious" in a Christian understanding of that term.

So, besides our Abrahamic family of faiths, there is the larger context of all religious traditions in which a more systematic exploration of the topic of Mary and interreligious dialogue is possible. The outline of chapters which Fr. George H. Tavard presents in *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* may prove to be very helpful.<sup>31</sup> His first three chapters raise the topic of Mary in the three Abrahamic traditions, including the apocryphal literature of the early centuries of Christianity. Then he offers glimpses of Mary—from the unified conciliar tradition of Christianity, from the divided perspectives of the Christian East and Christian West, Protestant and Anglican traditions, and then from poetry, visions, and recent developments from a Christian cultural context.<sup>32</sup> Finally, he opens up the general questions raised in the history of religions under three chapters that address the topics of a great mother paradigm, archetypal wisdom, and the symbol of goddess. We see how comprehensive a discussion ought to be if all aspects from a multireligious perspective are to be noted.

An even greater array of topics actually surfaces when we consider the fundamental nature of religious experience itself. A productive way for broadening understanding of religious

<sup>31</sup>An example of another approach would be Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), which is adequate as an example of how psycho-social methodology can be employed, but in the end does not tell us much that is compelling for the spiritual life and edifying to the faith.

<sup>32</sup>Another recent study of Mary, based largely on biblical study, is Beverly Roberts Gaventa's *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1995). She distinguishes various emphases among Christian traditions and seeks to present a series of similar themes that would be of interest to all Christians.

experience occurs when women of faith from various traditions come together to discuss how sacred experience operates within their lives and how they live particular spiritualities.<sup>33</sup> There are other traditions where women represent the first disciple, the devout follower, or the religious ideal. For example in Islam, Khadija, the wife of the Prophet Mohammed, was the first to believe that God was speaking to her husband, and Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet and wife of the Caliph Ali, is equally esteemed with Khadija and Mary, mother of Jesus.<sup>34</sup> In Mahayana Buddhist traditions, the Bodhisattva ideal of compassion and wisdom takes on a feminine form in East Asia—*Kuan-yin* (Chinese) or *Kannon* (Japanese).<sup>35</sup> In the variety of spiritualities within the Hindu tradition, devotion to God stands out as the most prominent path. Everywhere in India one finds shrines to goddesses and heroines, and many Hindus describe themselves as devotees of a goddess. Outstanding among the heroines is Sita, the wife of the hero Rama; she eventually became identified with an incarnation of a goddess. Sita and Rama are ideals for Hindu women and men, and Sita is revered because of her virtuous conduct and her faithful commitment to her spouse. She is venerated as the ideal devotee of God. Hindu-Christian dialogue could contrast the veneration of Sita and Mary by Hindus and Christians.

The recommendations I offer for fruitful exchange, mutual learning, and growth in spirituality through interreligious dialogue are only a few examples of the place of Mary in interreligious dialogue. First, she represents the ideal follower of Christ, the bearer of God's word, and the agent of the grace of the Spirit. Thus, Mary is fully emblematic of what it means to be a Christian, and introducing her into interreligious dialogues can lead to exploration of fundamental questions about the nature of religion and religious experience. Second, her portrayal in the New Testament opens up comparisons about

<sup>33</sup>See, for example, Maura O'Neill, *Women Speaking, Women Listening: Women in Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990).

<sup>34</sup>See the article by Jane Dammen McAuliffe cited in n. 26 above.

<sup>35</sup>See Maria Reis-Habito, "The Bodhisattva Guanyin and the Virgin Mary," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 61-69.

the view of Mary with Muslims and exchanges with Jews about authentic Jewish life at the time of Jesus. Third, Mary can be a focus for Christian women in a special way as they explore with women of other faiths the depths of their spiritualities. Finally, there is the plethora of holy women, heroines, and goddesses in various religious traditions who are embodiments of ideal devotion and virtue. Devotion to these ideal figures, by religious persons in the variety of traditions we encounter around us, signifies that there is a broader religious context in which devotion to Mary can be raised in dialogue. Incompatibilities and differences will be discerned. These do not shut the door to interreligious dialogue, but challenge us to honest and sincere dialogue. I conclude with the following paragraph from "Dialogue and Proclamation":

... while entering with an open mind into dialogue with the followers of other religious traditions, Christians may have also to challenge them in a peaceful spirit with regard to the content of their belief. But Christians, too, must allow themselves to be questioned. Notwithstanding the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, the way Christians sometimes understand their religion and practice it may be in need of purification. (32)