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REPORT, 1995-96: NEW ENGLAND REGION

On Saturday, October 28, 1995, the New England Region of the Mariological Society of America held its annual meeting at Providence College, Providence, Rhode Island, in the Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The meeting was called into session at 10:00 a.m. by the Reverend Matthew F. Morry, O.P., S.T.D., Director of the New England Region. After the opening prayer, the Very Reverend Philip A. Smith, O.P., Ph.D., President of Providence College, welcomed the members and guests and brought the greetings of the College.

The Keynote Address was delivered by the Most Reverence Nicholas J. Samra, D.D., Auxiliary Bishop of Newton and Vicar General of the Melkite-Greek Catholic Church, who presented "Mary in Byzantine Tradition." Bishop Samra called attention to the fact that in the Byzantine Tradition "Mary is not so much an object of devotion as an all-pervading presence—one intimately linked with God's *economia*." So, through Mary, the Incarnation burst into human history and, ultimately, led the early Church to Ephesus (in 431), to proclaim Mary *Theotokos*—not *Christotokos*.

In the Byzantine Tradition, as Bishop Samra pointed out, there are special and frequent places in which Mary is present in the liturgical services. One finds images of Mary from the Old Testament: New Eve—disobedience/obedience; Ark of God—holy dwelling; Burning Bush—unconsumed; three Hebrew children—untouched by fire; Gideon's fleece—preserved from sin. And in the New Testament, Mary is presented as the greatest woman who ever lived: she is blessed; she is the model for Christian service; she is the Mother of God.

Mary's pervading presence is a reality highlighted (1) in the feasts of Mary based on events reported in Sacred Scripture (March 25—Annunciation; August 15—Dormition; December 26—Maternity) and the feasts based on apocryphal writings (September 8—Birth; December 9—Conception); (2) by the very colors (blue, red) used in the iconography to express Mary's distinctive role and presence (as a sign—*orans*; as the guide who leads the way—*Hodigitria*); (3) in the piety of the Eastern Church, where her name and role pervade all liturgies (the *Akathist* Hymn—relating Sacred Scripture and Tradition; the *Paraclesis*—consolation); (4) in her title as the *Platytera* (she is the image of the Church; she is our model: "Blessed are they who hear the word of God and live it"); and (5) in shrines throughout the Eastern Church, especially in villages throughout Lebanon, and in the monasteries.

Bishop Samra noted the difference between the notions of East and West about Mary's sinlessness. For the West, Mary is venerated as *unique*, since she alone is untainted by Original Sin. In the East, prior to Ephesus, some Fathers considered Mary as not totally sinless. Although the Council of Ephesus declared Mary all-holy and all-pure, Original Sin was not an issue. Though Mary was viewed as being subject to weakness—in a special way, to death (as a curse and punishment), still she was regarded as sinless. The East rejects the proclamation concerning Mary's freedom from Original Sin as a one-sided dogma. Myendorff notes: "The Mariological piety of the Byzantines would probably have led them to accept the dogma [of the Immaculate Conception]

if only they had shared the Western dogma of Original Sin." Yet, in the Byzantine Tradition—as her icons proclaim—Mary is *Theotokos*, always with Christ, Virgin and Mother, model for us all.

The discussion following the address singled out various aspects of Marian spirituality among Melkites: the pronounced presence of Mary in the Melkite Rite, the significance of the colors used in the icons of the Eastern Church.

Following the discussion, the Most Reverend Nicholas Samra presided at a Marian Liturgy of the Melkite Rite in the Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary in St. Thomas Aquinas Priory. The Rt. Rev. Archimandrite, Joseph S. Haggar, J.C.L., delivered a homily on "The Spirituality of Mary." He noted that the Gospels summon us to recognize the special place the Mother of Jesus has in God's plan for human salvation. Even as the Church seeks to adapt herself to widespread social and cultural changes, she finds herself fulfilling Mary's prophecy: "All ages to come shall call me blessed." The Eastern Church still confidently and purposefully holds Mary's place intact in its Divine Liturgy, in which it praises Mary above all creatures. Likewise, the Eastern Church is one with Second Vatican Council in responding to the inspired texts of Sacred Scripture, the teachings of early Christian writers, and the practice and prayer life of the Church—since Chapter Eight of the "Constitution on the Church" is "in reality a beautiful spiritual shrine in which the Mother of Jesus is honored and from which she continues to speak to us with a mother's loving concern."

The Eastern Church, Archimandrite Haggar remarked, loves and venerates Mary as she stands in the place of honor at the side of Our Lord, especially as portrayed through various types of icons: the Praying Virgin, the Virgin of Intercession, the "Virgin Who Shows the Way," the Virgin of Compassion (or, rather, of "Caresses")—as she is shown playing with her Child, the Virgin of Passion, and others. The *Theotokos* represents the entire Christian Church, and "the knowledge of her role is not only a duty but also an honor." It is our privilege "to know her mission, to imitate her example of life, and to communicate with her, who is the highest personality of [our] race."

Through the centuries, the faithful of the Eastern Church have repeated Mary's prophetic utterance, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . ."; daily, they sing the hymn of the Divine Liturgy which begins: "It is truly right to call you blessed, O *Theotokos*." Our homilist concluded his remarks by stating that all of us are to honor Mary as Mother of Jesus Christ; recognize her unique and exalted role in the act of Redemption of Jesus; love her, imitate her virtues of faith, purity, humility, and conformity to the will of God; and proclaim her preeminent position in "the mystery of Christ and the Church."

The Byzantine Choir and musicians of the Melkite Church of St. Basil the Great (Central Fall, RI) assisted in the Liturgy with music, choral chant and singing of the Melkite Rite. Following the Melkite Episcopal Liturgy, luncheon was served in the dining room of the Priory. The Very Reverend Robert J. Hennessey, O.P., S.T.D., Prior, greeted and welcomed the members and guests. The Annual Meeting of the New England Region adjourned, after the Business Meeting, at 3:00 p.m.

Matthew F. Morry, O.P.
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