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Editor's Preface

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

*Forty-eighth Annual Meeting
of the Mariological Society of America*

The Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Icon of the Church, Intercessor: Ecumenical Perspectives

The forty-eighth annual meeting of the Mariological Society of America occurred at the Oblate Renewal Center, San Antonio, Texas, May 21-23, 1997. The meeting was devoted to the role of the Virgin Mary in the reunion of the Churches. The focus and title of the program were derived from a suggestion in Pope John Paul II's *That All May Be One* (1995). Among the areas listed in the encyclical "in need of fuller study before a true consensus of faith can be achieved" is "the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ's disciples and for all humanity" (no. 79).

The Virgin Mary has not been the focus of international or national ecumenical dialogues. The World Council of Churches has traditionally avoided the topic for fear that it might be too divisive. However, much has occurred in recent years within both Protestantism and Catholicism to suggest that a new moment has arrived. Scripture studies have produced some initial agreement on the image and role of the Virgin Mary. The recovery of the early Church's witness and the respect and admiration with which the sixteenth-century reformers regarded the Virgin Mary have modified positions held in the past. Chapter 8 of *Lumen gentium*, which Pope Paul VI described as "the most extensive synthesis of the Catholic doctrine ever proposed by an ecumenical council," and *Marialis cultus* (1974) have clarified Catholic teaching. And, as Msgr. Radano notes, in a recent document of *Faith and Order* (the World Council of Churches), Mary is presented as

the model of discipleship for all those who seek to understand the word of God.

A rising liturgical consciousness has caused Protestant churches to include references to Mary in their prayers and hymns, especially during Advent. The recently published study, *Marie dans le dessein de Dieu et la communion des saints* (1997), from the ecumenical Groupe des Dombes, observes that in the Lutheran and Reformed churches of Europe, references to Mary are now found in catechisms, liturgies, and hymns. For example, the leading French Protestant hymnal *Arc-en-Ciel* (1988) contains six settings of the Magnificat, whereas its predecessor (*Sur les ailes de la foi* [1926]) contained no mention of the canticle. Similar changes are occurring in the United States. *The New Century Hymnal* of the United Church of Christ contains the hymn "Mary, Woman of Promise," by Sister Mary Fleishaker, O.P.

Past programs on Mary and ecumenism sometimes quickly proceeded from considering the significance of the Virgin Mary to the two Marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950. Attention was directed to the relation of Scripture and tradition, the development of doctrine, the role of the papacy in defining doctrine. At times, it appeared that the questions underlying the Marian dogmas of the nineteenth and twentieth century posed the greatest challenge to ecumenical agreement.

So, this year's program, "The Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Icon of the Church, and Spiritual Mother: Ecumenical Perspectives," was an attempt to open other perspectives on the mystery of Mary. As can be seen in reading the program, especially the Ecumenical Roundtable/Panel in which a Catholic, Lutheran, and Baptist responded to the program's theme, questions related to Mary touch issues of ecclesial identity. The Groupe des Dombes notes that "The dialogue concerning the Virgin Mary indicates that she is the most-evident focus (*point de cristallisation*) for all the underlying ecclesiastical positions related to soteriology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and interpretation of Scripture. These fundamental differences of understanding show that, in the ecumenical dialogue, the Virgin Mary is a most appropriate place to consider doctrinal disagreements, as well as opportunity to evaluate the life of the

Church with regard to the Virgin Mary." This position echoes that of the *Ökumene-Lexikon*, "Mariology is, now as before, the crossroads (*Schnittpunkt*) where the ecclesiological, Christological, and anthropological problem lines converge" (col. 785).

The restoration of unity among all believers in Christ occupies a central place in Pope John Paul's program of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the year 2,000. In his letter *On the Coming of the Third Millennium* (November 10, 1994), the pope wrote, "Among the most fervent petitions which the Church makes to the Lord during this important time, as the eve of the new millennium approaches, is that unity among all Christians of the various confessions will increase until they reach full communion" (CTM, no. 16). In his presentation, Bro. Donald Boccardi, S.M. (Theological College, Washington, DC), presented the results of a survey conducted among groups of clergy and laity of ten religious denominations in which over ninety per cent of the respondents agreed that there should be a greater unity among the churches.

Once again, the Mariological Society expresses its gratitude to all who participated in the 1997 meeting, especially those who responded to the call for papers on "The Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Icon of the Church, Intercessor." We join in prayer that "the unassuming Young Woman of Nazareth, who two thousand years ago offered to the world the Incarnate Word, lead the men and women of the new millennium towards the One who is 'the true light that enlightens every person' (Jn. 1:9)" (CTM, no. 59).

Thomas A. Thompson, S.M.