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A LUTHERAN RESPONSE TO THE THEME OF THE VIRGIN MARY AS MOTHER OF GOD, ICON OF THE CHURCH AND SPIRITUAL MOTHER OF INTERCESSION

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The encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* places the Mariological question in the context of five areas of ecumenical study still in need of further work before consensus in the faith can be reached. In many of these areas, Lutherans and Catholics in dialogue have reached considerable convergence, if not the desired consensus. In terms of Scripture and Tradition, there is a growing recognition that Scripture belongs to Tradition, and that Tradition is a process between the normative Word of God and the context of its interpretation. Perhaps the closest convergence between Lutherans and Catholics is that on the Eucharist, where the trinitarian structure and action of the sacrament reveals the real presence of the Body and Blood of Christ poured out by the Holy Spirit upon God's people for their sanctification. Even in the more controversial issues of ordination and of magisterium, there is convergence between Lutherans and Catholics on the necessity of an ordained ministry, on the desirability of some form of episcopate, on the need for some form of teaching authority in the church, and on the sense of the church as a communion.

In general and as a communion, Lutherans have been less forthcoming in finding convergence with Catholics over how to regard the Virgin Mary (although certain independent movements within Lutheranism have taken their own initiative and moved far ahead of what might be seen as the

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normative or official position). Most of this reticence on the part of Lutheranism does not have to do with Mariology itself, but rather with the two Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Bodily Assumption of Mary, and this not so much for the content of the dogmas (although Lutherans will criticize both as being non-biblical) as much as their being two examples of the exercise of the understanding of magisterium in the Catholic Church to which the Lutheran communion objects. Thus, the debate between Lutherans and Catholics over the two Marian dogmas does not belong to the topic of Mariology as identified in Ut Unum Sint, paragraph 79: “the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God and Icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ’s disciples and for all humanity.”

Ut Unum Sint also brackets the topic of Mariology by two important guiding hermeneutical points. In preparation for this discussion, it states the principle:

This journey toward the necessary and sufficient visible unity, in the communion of the one Church willed by Christ, continues to require patient and courageous efforts. In this process, one must not impose any burden beyond that which is strictly necessary (cf. Acts 15:28).

Lutherans find this encouraging, as it opens up the possibility of a genuine Mariology that can, at the same time, be more simple and less at the center of piety and spirituality than in Roman Catholic Mariology, and not offend or take offense at that Catholic Marian devotion. Lutherans can have an authentic Marian devotion of their own without feeling the necessity of being “burdened” by Catholicism’s more expansive Mariology.

Following its noting of Mariology as a still-outstanding point of ecumenical dialogue, Ut Unum Sint makes this hermeneutical statement:

In this courageous journey toward unity, the transparency and the prudence of faith require us to avoid both false irenicism and indifference to

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2Ut Unum Sint, no. 78 (emphasis added).
the Church’s ordinances. Conversely, that same transparency and prudence urge us to reject a halfhearted commitment to unity and, even more, a prejudicial opposition or a defeatism which tends to see everything in negative terms.³

Lutherans should find themselves both intrigued by and attracted to the phrase, “the transparency and the prudence of faith.” This would seem to be an opening towards the Lutheran understanding of faith as simultaneously the *fides qua* and the *fides quae* of the Christian life, which mutually inform one another so as to bring the Christian into living communion with God as a justified sinner made righteous on account of Christ. The “transparency of faith” is the *fides qua*, the luminosity of the encounter with the Word of God in Jesus Christ through which we see the redemption and new life that he has won for us, our justification before the judgment of God. The “prudence of faith” is the *fides quae*, the ever-cautious way in which we haltingly and failingly attempt to apply human language to express and safeguard the meaning of that luminous vision in faith of justification in Christ. Lutherans thus should find themselves in complete agreement with the hermeneutic expressed here. More specifically, in terms of Mariology, Lutherans can see here a vital link between the christological doctrine of justification by faith and a legitimate form of Marian devotion, in which Mary can play a role in the luminosity of faith by her relation to Christ and in the prudential expression of faith by her role as faithful disciple of Christ.

What, then, would a Lutheran Mariology look like in terms of the three categories of 1) Mother of God, 2) Icon of the Church, and 3) spiritual Mother of intercession? Despite Lutheranism’s historic reticence to say much positive about the Virgin Mary, both Martin Luther in his theology and the Lutheran Confessions found in *The Book of Concord* in their role as defining doctrine offer a surprisingly open, if indeed conservative, possibility for Marian devotion. The strictly christological centering of Lutheran doctrine would not allow for an independent dogmatic place for Mariology, but,

³*Ut Unum Sint*, no. 79.
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precisely because of its christocentrism, Lutheran theology is
open to a high degree of Marian devotion, piety and spiritual-
ity in the three topics of our concern.

First, Mary as the Mother of God. One of the defining char-
acteristics of Lutheranism as expressed by Luther and the Con-
fessions is its conservative nature in regard to its reverence for
and devotion to the Fathers and Councils of the ancient
church. Albeit much is usually made of the degree to which
Luther (in particular) criticized and contradicted the Fathers
and the Councils in the name of fidelity to Scripture, this must
not be seen as a rejection of the Fathers and the Councils, but
rather as the new hermeneutic of Scripture and Tradition be-
ing worked out by Luther and the Wittenberg Theology that
he fathered.

Nowhere is this more true than in Mariology, and particularly
in the doctrine of Mary as the Mother of God. Typically, the
Lutheran Confessions approach this topic christologically. What
the Lutherans wish to defend and confess as their own faith is
the faith of the ancient church defined at the councils of Eph-
esus (431) and Chalcedon (451) regarding the divinity of Christ
and the two natures in Christ. Here, they simply continue the
confession of Mary as Theotokos—"God-bearer" or "Mother of
God." Numerous citations can be found in the Lutheran Con-
fessions to this effect. The chief Lutheran confession, the Augs-
burg Confession of 1530, states, "Our churches also teach that
the Word—that is, the Son of God—took on man's nature in
the womb of the blessed virgin Mary. So there are two natures,
divine and human, inseparably conjoined in the unity of his
person, one Christ, true God and true man... "4 Luther, in the
Smalcald Articles, holds as an undisputed point of doctrine "that
the Son became man in this manner: he was conceived by the
Holy Spirit, without the cooperation of man, and was born of
the pure, holy, and ever-virgin Mary."5 The Formula of Concord
says that Lutherans "believe, teach and confess that Mary con-

4The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,
after cited as: BC.

ceived and bore not only a plain, ordinary, mere man but the veritable Son of God; for this reason she is rightly called, and truly is, the Mother of God;6 the Formula goes on to say that Christ "demonstrated his divine majesty even in his mother's womb in that he was born of a virgin without violating her virginity. Therefore she is truly the Mother of God and yet remained a virgin."7 Martin Luther took Mary's role as Mother of God with great seriousness and reverence, cautiously maintaining that it was appropriate and not too much on that ground to call her "Queen of Heaven," so long as that did not "make her a goddess" in theology or piety.8

"Mother of God" is the role of the "historical Mary" in the biblical history of salvation, and so the aspect of the Virgin Mary with which Lutherans have had the least difficulty in identifying. That Mary fulfilled God's purpose in the sending of his Son for the redemption of the world, that Mary was the operative human means, the select human vessel, of the incarnation of the Son of God, that Mary was the faithful Israelite who embodied in her fiat the whole faith of Israel, so that in Jesus Christ, the Spirit-conceived Son of Mary, God and his people might be reunited in the person of the Incarnate One, gives to Mary such a unique and unsurpassable place in salvation history that Lutherans hold her in highest reverence and as specially united to the will of God in the saving work of her Son.

The second description, Mary as "Icon of the Church," in the words of Ut Unum Sint, is an unusual expression in its use of the term "icon" to describe Mary—at least for Lutherans, who would expect to find rather the title, "Mother of the Church." Something special is meant here, but something that is not part of Lutheran piety: the spirituality of the icon as found in Eastern Christianity. It would therefore be presumptuous for a Lutheran to attempt an authoritative examination of this title. An Orthodox interpretation is needed here to inform our understanding.

6BC, 488.
7BC, 595.
Lutherans are not devoid of understanding here, however. No doubt in an overly simplistic sense, "icon" means "holy image," the visible sign of the presence of God's holy realm among us and surrounding us. If this is an adequate interpretation, then Lutherans can look to the theology of Luther for a way of understanding Mary as the "Holy Image of the Church."

Luther described the church as "the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God." All Christians are brothers and sisters of Christ, then, through the motherhood of the church, and the church is "a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ." The first among the flock, the most pure of the saints or disciples of Christ that make up the flock, and so the chief model and inspiration for the flock—the one closest to Christ among the flock—was, for Luther, the Virgin Mary.

In his only extended theological treatment of Mary, his commentary on the Magnificat from the year 1521, Luther interpreted Mary's song of praise as an expression of her own experience of the grace of God in the miracle of the incarnation, in being taken up into the fellowship of God and the work of God. In this, Luther saw in Mary the revelation of the church as the people of God led and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

In contrast to the exaltation of Mary in the practice of his own time, Luther focused on the lowliness and humility of Mary as the defining characteristics that made Mary the image of the church. In the experience of the great thing God was doing in her in the work of the incarnation, said Luther, "the Holy Spirit taught her this deep insight and wisdom, that God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalts those of low degree and puts down the mighty from their thrones...." In this, Mary is the type of the true church—not the church of worldly pomp and power, but the church of the seemingly powerless and humble, as Luther said: "For even now to the end of the world, all [God's] works are such that out of that

9"Large Catechism," in BC, 416.
10"Large Catechism," in BC, 417.
11LW 21:299.
12LW 21:299.
which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dead, he
makes that which is something precious, honorable, blessed,
and living. . . . "13 Mary's experience of being chosen as the
vessel to bear the Son of God precisely because of her humble,
lowly, poor and wretched state is the first and revelatory ex­
perience of the church as being that body chosen by God to
be the vessel to bear Christ to the world, and especially to the
poor and lowly of the world. The church thus learns and is
formed in its vocation by God's actions regarding the first
member of the church, Mary.

It is by faith alone that Mary understands her experience to
be the blessing of God, and not the result of her own work or
desire or achievement; and the praise that Mary renders in her
Magnificat is the praise of God that comes through faith alone,
a firm confidence in the promises of God that only the Holy
Spirit can give, a faith that assures us that our life and work are
not in vain, but, by the work of God, will be raised up from
seeming insignificance to be the presence of Christ.14 For
Luther, what is said of Mary is the founding word for what is
to be said of the church; thus the church, too, lives by faith
alone, trusting only in the promises of God, confident that its
mission is not in vain despite all appearances, but sure that
God is at work in the church to bring Christ to the world. This
is the church's own "magnificat."15 Mary thus embodies a key
element in Luther's ecclesiology of justification by faith:

The bare goodness of God is what ought rather to be preached and
known above all else, and we ought to learn that, just as God saves us out
of pure goodness, without any merit or work, so we in our turn should
do the works [of God] without reward or self-seeking, for the sake of the
bare goodness of God.16

This is the image of Mary which is to be the image of the
church. Mary shows the church how to live the paradoxical

13LW 21:299-300.
14LW 21:305-6.
16LW 21:309.
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life of a disciple—in, but not of the world; for the only thing that matters to Mary is that God has turned to her with his grace and salvation, and bestowed on her both his gifts and his calling.\textsuperscript{17}

Lutherans thus would be able to understand Mary as “Icon of the Church” in terms of the faith of the church, the obedience of the church, the worship of the church, and the mission of the church. The Virgin Mary, as first and model of the living body of disciples that makes up the church, shows all the disciples that follow after her the faith which alone turns one in trust to the grace of the God who chooses the lowly and humble; she shows the willing obedience of that faith in surrendering herself to the purposes and will of God, trusting in God’s goodness and promise of mercy; she shows the proper praise and thanksgiving that is the worship to be given to God, a worship that looks to God for all things and offers all things and all of oneself to God; and she shows the proper mission of the church by her own poverty, humility, lowliness and powerlessness, pointing the mission of the church away from worldly glory to Christ, in the place where Christ himself would go, down to the suffering and dying of all humanity.

The third description of the Virgin Mary in \textit{Ut Unum Sint}, “the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ’s disciples and for all humanity,”\textsuperscript{18} is problematic for Lutherans. The question of the intercession of Mary and the saints has been a point of division between Lutherans and Catholics since the Reformation. The division is not entirely clear-cut. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, in responding to the Catholic rejection of the Lutheran position on the invocation of the saints, tersely grants “that blessed Mary prays for the church,” but in the same breath seems to take back any positive implication of this acknowledgment by noting that “in popular estimation, the blessed Virgin has completely replaced Christ.”\textsuperscript{19} Here the Lutheran position on the primacy of Scripture comes into play, as Lutherans hold that there is no clear Scriptural evidence as

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{17}LW 21:321.
\textsuperscript{18}\textit{Ut Unum Sint}, no. 79.
\textsuperscript{19}BC, 232-33.
to whether Mary and the saints intercede for the church or should be invoked in prayer. Scripture points only to Christ as our intercessor before God and the object of our invocation and prayer.

On the other hand, if what we have said about Mary as first and model disciple in her role as Icon of the Church is true, then Lutheranism must re-think this rigid christological exclusivism. For are not all Christians intercessors for one another as the Body of Christ, the church? And do not Christians invoke, that is, ask for the prayers of, other fellow Christians in time of need? The Virgin Mary is not only included in this intercessory and invocation role of the church; she is the model and beginning of it, the Icon or Image of the Church, the Mother of the Church. The evidence of the church's own practice of prayer should be evidence for the intercession of Mary and the saints, and the legitimacy of their invocation. Just as the church's practice of prayer does not circumvent Christ or ignore Christ, but goes through Christ and takes all its power and authority from Christ, so it is with the intercession and invocation of Mary and the saints.

While this is by no means the conventional Lutheran position, there is evidence that it was Martin Luther's position. In his "Personal Prayer Book" of 1522, Luther included among the prayers the "Hail Mary" as a good and useful prayer for spiritual meditation and contemplation. In this commendation, Luther typically emphasizes Mary's obedience and faithfulness toward God as the object of our meditative and contemplative prayer to her, so that we do not become fixed on Mary, "but through her penetrate to Christ and to God himself." Luther holds up the same theology of Mary as a sort of mediator in prayer in his commentary on the Magnificat, where he writes:

What do you suppose would please her [Mary] more than to have you come through her to God this way, and learn from her to put your hope...

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22LW 43:39.
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and trust in Him, notwithstanding your despised and lowly estate, in life as well as in death? She does not want you to come to her, but through her to God.23

While this aspect of Mary as intercessor and mediator in the theology of Luther still requires further research, it does open up the possibility for Lutherans of finding some intercessory role for the Virgin Mary in terms of the formation of Christian spirituality.

Lutherans thus have in their tradition the possibility of a positive reception of the veneration of the Virgin Mary in the terms of Ut Unum Sint, "as Mother of God and Icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ’s disciples and for all humanity."24 This would be possible in the light of the hermeneutical brackets noted at the beginning that surround this definition of the Virgin Mary: on the one hand that "one must not impose any burden beyond that which is strictly necessary," and on the other hand the commitment to genuine dialogue that rejects false irenicism, indifference, prejudice, and defeatism.

Lutherans believe that where the Word of the gospel is truly spoken, the Spirit of Christ is at work to convert the hearts of the hearers of the Word to faith, to continually deepen and enlighten that faith by understanding and insight given by the Spirit, and to sanctify the faithful in obedience to Christ to whom they are continually converted to ever-new faith by ever-new encounter with the Word of the gospel. This is the hermeneutic that Lutherans bring to ecumenical dialogue. When ecumenical dialogue is in fact the true speaking of the Word of the gospel among and between dialogue partners, there will happen, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the Spirit’s own good time, the work of conversion and enlightenment and sanctification that will be the constant deepening and enriching of the faith in Christ shared by all Christians. Ecumenical dialogue is not about brokered agreements or nego-

tiated settlements, as tempting as these might be. It is about the speaking of the Word and the patient waiting on the Holy Spirit to bring mutual conversion.

This is how Lutherans will approach Mariology. Historically, the Lutheran tradition has paid little attention to Mariology, and largely left the Virgin Mary out of its speaking of the Word of the gospel. Lutherans need to hear a true speaking of the Word of the gospel that is rich in its appreciation of the Virgin Mary, and in that hearing appropriate to itself, in its own terms, a Mariology that is consonant with Lutheranism's tradition of speaking the Word of the gospel. In doing this, a conversion will happen; the Lutheran tradition will change, expand and be reshaped by its appropriation of Mariology. But in the same way, Lutheranism's dialogue partners will also experience a conversion in their appropriation of the Virgin Mary in the gospel message, as these partners will hear converted Lutheranism speaking its Word of the gospel now with a Marian dimension that was not there before. Thus, both dialogue partners will be converted in such a way that will bring them closer together in the mutual confession of the faith.

This process in faith of appropriation and conversion, guided as it is by the Word and Spirit of God and not by human negotiating techniques, does not impose any burden beyond what is necessary in how a tradition will take into itself a vibrant Mariology, while at the same time maintaining "the transparency and the prudence of faith" that avoids the mortal sense of impatience and urgency that lead humanly contrived negotiations into the pitfalls warned against in Ut Unum Sint.

Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession teaches that to obtain justifying faith, that is the inspired faith of the whole truth of the Word of the gospel of Jesus Christ which is to be believed and lived, "God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel." 25 It is indisputable that the Virgin Mary is part of that gospel narrative recounted in Holy Scripture. To what degree and in what

way Mary belongs to the justifying and saving faith that the Spirit works through that gospel is still a matter for dialogue. The resolution of that question will come "when and where he [the Spirit] pleases." But it will come to "those who hear the Gospel." And so our continuing dialogue on the Virgin Mary cannot be superficial, but must be a dialogue about the very Word of the gospel itself.