

Marian Studies

Volume 48 *The Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Icon of the Church, Intercessor: Ecumenical Perspectives*

Article 13

1997

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Recommended Citation

Jelly, Frederick M. (1997) "Roman Catholic Ecumenical Response to the Theme ("Ut Unum Sint," Pt. 3)," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 48, Article 13.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol48/iss1/13

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ROMAN CATHOLIC ECUMENICAL RESPONSE TO THE THEME ("UT UNUM SINT," PT. 3)

*Frederick M. Jelly, O.P.**

My response to the theme inspired by Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* ("That All May Be One"), the twelfth one of his pontificate, subtitled "On Commitment to Ecumenism" and released in Rome on May 30, 1995, is principally based upon a report about and reflections upon Round VIII of the Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, U.S.A.¹ That theme is found in the papal encyclical (no. 79) where the pope identifies as one of " . . . the areas in need of fuller study before a true consensus of faith can be achieved . . . [namely] 5) 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." This presentation mainly addresses three sections of the Common Statement: The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: 1) "Catholic Perspectives" (nos. 52-69); 2) "Catholic Reflections" (pp.117-24); and 3) "The Problem Reexamined" (convergences and divergences on the ecumenical issues involved) (nos. 70-105).

By way of a few additional introductory comments, it is noteworthy that the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Ecumenical Bilateral, U.S.A., is the first of the official dialogues among our

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¹*The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary: Lutheran and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, ed. by H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992). Cf. *Ecumenism: The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary: A Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue* (Canfield, OH: Alba House Communications Audio Tape, 1993), with presentations by Fr. Fred Jelly, O.P. (Cath.), Dr. John Reumann (Luth.), Rev. Donald Freude (East. Orth.), Rev. John Thomas (U.C.C.).

churches to address directly this topic of Mary and the Saints in relationship to the unique mediatorship of our one redeemer, Jesus Christ. And during the actual dialogue, which began in September 1983 and concluded in February 1990 after a total of fourteen sessions averaging three and one-half days twice a year, we touched upon issues that concerned both our churches but included other Christian traditions as well. Kindly keep this in mind as I share with you the key ideas of this dialogue on which I served both as a consultant and as an active participant in our deliberations and decisions together. This topic, particularly in reference to doctrines about and devotions to Mary and the saints, generally brought to the table much ecumenical conversation that communicated matters of the heart as well as of the mind, precisely because our devotion and piety, though based on doctrine, is not purely cerebral.

Catholic Perspectives: Context of the Communion of Saints

Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* (LG), the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," leaves no doubt in the mind of any reader about its traditional Catholic teaching that Christ and Christ alone is the "Light of the Nations" or the one Mediator of redemption for the whole world. Chapters I and II, "The Mystery of the Church" and "The People of God," particularly emphasize this Christological and soteriological truth of its ecclesiology or theology of the Church. Only when it clearly reaffirms the primary meaning of Christ's mystical body as a communion of faith, hope, love, worship and witness, does Chapter III address the role of the hierarchical structure as the means of building up this communion—with the dynamic role of the laity (Chap. IV), the call of all the members of the Church of Christ to holiness (Chap. V) and the special witness of her religious men and women (Chap. VI).

The stage then is set for a renewal (in Chap. VII) of the ancient article of faith in the Creed about the communion of saints, especially the bond of love uniting the heavenly Church with the Pilgrim Church upon earth and the expectant Church in Purgatory. This chapter must be studied prayerfully and carefully, if we are to savor the Council's teaching about the

marian doctrine and devotion in Chapter VIII: "The Role of Mary, God-Bearer, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church." Fr. Yves Congar, O.P., of happy memory, the great French Dominican theologian and ecumenist who had such a profound influence at Vatican II, pointed out the special significance of the little preposition "in" as part of the chapter title. The only way that we can contemplate Mary in the proper perspective is to behold her as Christocentric and ecclesiotypical, or as the greatest example of what it means to be a member of her Son's body, the Church. Bearing this in mind, let us now look at those sections of *Lumen Gentium's* Chapter VIII, along with the pertinent teaching of its Chapter VII, that make reference to the intercession and mediation of Mary and the Saints.

In light of the careful teaching of Vatican II (LG, nos. 49, 50, 60–62), whatever mediation or intercession that might be attributed to the saints or Mary in heaven is the fruit of the grace and merits of Jesus Christ. Their roles as mediators of intercession are derived from—are entirely dependent upon and subordinated to—his unique role as the Mediator of redemption. Now just what does it mean to call Christ a "Mediator"? As in every instance in which we strive to make the revealed mysteries of our Christian faith as meaningful as possible, it is most important that we keep in mind the limitations of even the best of analogies. No analogy that can be drawn between the mystery and the proper object of our human knowledge can ever be more like than unlike the divine reality. One impediment associated with "mediation" (as we ordinarily use it in our society) is that the mediator usually intervenes between hostile parties (e.g., labor and management in their disputes). We must carefully remove this inappropriate connotation from any mediatorship of Christ, because his redemptive activity has already reconciled us and the whole of our fallen human race with the Father. Jesus Christ, true God and true man, did not have to change the will of the Father for the forgiveness of our sins, since it was in accomplishing that very will that he became one of us without ceasing to be the Son of God—through which he redeemed us as the Word-made-flesh. Apart from his saving deeds, there is no grace, no justification, no merit, no possibility of our attaining our supernatural goal of heavenly joy.

How then can our Catholic doctrine apply "mediation" to Mary and the saints? As Vatican II clearly teaches, only in a derivative and dependent sense, adding or subtracting nothing to or from Christ as the sole mediator of our redemption. They are witnesses to Jesus Christ, whose merits alone have made the new creation of his saving grace. In the context of the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Dialogue, U.S.A., the topic of Round VII addressed the central ecumenical issue of Justification by Faith Alone through the grace of Christ. Several times—and in a variety of ways—during the dialogue in Round VIII on the mediation of Mary and the saints in heaven, we were reminded that our Lutheran partners were observing to see just how serious we were about the completely unmerited grace of justification. Here, we should call your attention to the mutual lifting of anathemas between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, since the doctrine that was identified as heretical in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and at the Council of Trent is no longer perceived to be our faith and teaching about justification.

Chapter VIII of *Lumen Gentium* describes Mary's role in the Communion of Saints as "Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix" (no. 62). Immediately following this statement, the conciliar fathers seek to throw light on the analogy of her mediation in comparison with her Son's by appealing to a twofold mystery based upon the new creation in Christ and the first creation:

No creature could ever be counted along with the Incarnate Word and Redeemer; but just as the priesthood of Christ is shared in various ways both by his ministers and the faithful, and as the one Goodness of God is radiated in different ways among his creatures, so also the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this one source. (LG, no. 62)

And so mediating the redeeming love of God in Christ is entirely dependent upon Christ (e.g., Lk. 1:44-45, when Mary mediates the grace of the Holy Spirit during the Visitation, and Acts 16:13-15, the conversion of Lydia through Paul's preaching). Even though there is no proportion between the infinite

and the finite, the ministers of Christ ought not to be reduced to “do-nothings” which brings no glory to the triune God who chooses to mediate his salutary gifts, not only through the conjoined instrument of Christ’s humanity but also through the separated instruments of his ministers and sacraments.

Catholic Reflections: Clarifications and Concerns about the Ecumenical Theme

This section of the Common Statement begins with the clear assertion that we Catholics in the dialogue have become more and more convinced throughout the ecumenical conversation with our Lutheran partners that our intellectual and dogmatic differences over “Christ the One Mediator, the Saints and Mary” are partly rooted in “. . . deeply felt patterns of life and spirituality” (p. 117). After five centuries of ecclesial separation, Lutherans and Catholics have come to express different ways of living out the Gospel.

One very fundamental theological and liturgical conviction of the Catholic tradition is that “Jesus Christ alone is never merely alone” but is always found in the midst of his many friends, the saints, both living and dead—based upon the article of our Creed, “the Communion of Saints”—who show us in a very concrete and inspiring manner how the grace of Christ may work in our life and who make intercession on our behalf. As mysterious as the eschatological doctrines might be, we who are still living in the Pilgrim Church are bonded with our brothers and sisters in the heavenly Church from throughout space and time, and are helped on our pilgrimage of faith by our liturgical and private devotions in relation to the intercession and mediation of Mary and all the saints, as well as by the inspiration of their holy lives in Christ, the Crown of all the saints.

We Catholics in the dialogue also acknowledged the need to avoid a disordered faith of superstitious beliefs and pious practices that can make Mary and all the saints a substitute for the unique mediatorship of Christ our one Redeemer. Popes and ecumenical councils of the Catholic Church, including Vatican II, have often tried to counteract the excesses of some forms of popular piety. Pope John Paul II has called for

"the evangelization of popular piety" (p. 118). Ten years after Vatican II, Pope Paul VI addressed very effectively the purification of popular devotions in his *Marialis Cultus*, especially by stating principles and guidelines primarily applicable to marian devotion but also helpful to reform and renew devotion to any or all the saints (for the details, cf. pp. 118-19 of the Common Statement). We Catholics in the Dialogue made a special appeal to our bishops, priests, pastoral leaders, preachers, teachers, and catechists to apply these principles and practical guidelines to the renewal of liturgical devotion and popular piety in our Church.

Some special explanation was given to Catholic claims regarding the alleged apparitions and messages of Mary and the heavenly saints. Such phenomena as Lourdes or Fatima (etc.), while receiving the requisite approval of the authorities in the Catholic Church as being worthy of our pious belief, are never elevated to the status of public revelation as are dogmas of our faith. They are never to be viewed as adding anything necessary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the sake of our salvation, but may be fruitfully used as aids to live that Gospel today (cf. pp. 120-21 of the Common Statement for the details provided regarding this ecumenically sensitive issue, but one that ought not to be considered as church-dividing in our quest for unity).

The most neuralgic problem, in this ecumenical topic seems to stem from the Lutheran concern about justification by faith through the grace of Christ alone. We Catholics in the dialogue with them have become much more alert to this fact. At the same time, we have also been encouraged by what we do share as common ground for paying tribute to Mary and the saints. Martin Luther's hymns and meditations (e.g., his "Commentary on the Magnificat") and the Lutheran Confessions in part are compatible with Catholic sensibility in the matter. Apology 21 also gives some positive direction about devotion to the saints—such as thanking God for them, being edified by their faith, and following their example where fitting. In the third and final section of this response, we can consider our many convergences on this ecumenical theme, as well as how we might face the divergences.

Convergences and Divergences on the Ecumenical Issues Involved in This Theme

Among the many Church-uniting convergences pertinent to our topic may be included the following (cf. pp. 60-70 or no. 103 of the Common Statement): 1) we reiterate our agreed conclusion from Round VII of the Dialogue that "our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus..."; 2) Jesus Christ is the "sole mediator of God's plan of salvation" (1 Tim. 2:5); 3) the risen Christ continues for us an intercessory role in heaven (Rom. 8:34, 1 Jn. 2:1, Heb. 7:25); 4) the Holy Spirit both intercedes for us with God (Rom. 8:26-27) and is God's advocate with us (Jn. 16:16-17, 15:26, 16:7-15); 5) the grace of Christ the Mediator is mediated to us as ongoing communication of the Gospel, through the Spirit, in ministry of word and sacrament; 6) the Holy Spirit acts in those who minister, as, through the means of grace, sinners are brought to faith, justified and sanctified in Christ; 7) granted in Baptism, holiness is confirmed, preserved and deepened by word and sacrament; 8) in both our traditions the term "saint" is used for all those who are justified by the grace of Christ, and, to one degree or another, for certain individuals among them, marked by holiness, who live the life of faith in devotion toward God and love toward the neighbor in exemplary ways; 9) all those sanctified, together with the One who sanctifies (Heb. 2:11), constitute a communion of saints in Jesus Christ; 10) the fellowship of saints includes believers both living and dead and so there is a solidarity of the church throughout the world with the church triumphant; 11) it is in this community of saints that we are promised through Christ forgiveness, communion with God, and eternal life; 12) this fellowship includes the hope of resurrection, Christ being "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20); 13) in the fellowship of the living and departed saints, believers are inspired by others, as examples of God's grace, to greater faith, to good works, and to thanksgiving for one another; 14) Christians honor saints in at least three ways: by thanking God for them, by having faith strengthened as a result of the saints' response to God's grace, and by imitating in various situations their faith and other virtues; 15) among the saints who have played a role in God's

plan of salvation for humanity, Mary, who bore Christ, is in particular to be honored, as God-bearer (*theotokos*) and as the pure, holy, and "most blessed Virgin" (*laudatissima virgo*); 16) prayer to God—as doxology and thanksgiving, as confession of sin, as petition and intercession, and as submission to God's will—has divine command and promise and is an integral part of the Christian life; 17) saints on earth ask one another to pray to God for each other through Christ and are neither commanded nor forbidden to ask departed saints to pray for them; 18) devotion to the saints and Mary should not be practiced in ways that detract from the ultimate trust that is to be placed in Christ alone as Mediator; and, 19) doctrine (*lex credendi*), on the one hand, and liturgy and devotion (*lex orandi*), on the other, belong together and shape each other, and both our traditions, while differing at various times on the application of the axiom, do agree that doctrine and worship together should promote the unique mediatorship of Christ.

The mere listing of these nineteen convergences indeed manifest that we Catholics hold much in common with the Lutherans and many other Christians, especially when they are compared and contrasted with the three divergences between both our traditions in this ecumenical theme. The latter include the two Roman Catholic dogmas: the Immaculate Conception and the glorious Assumption of Mary into heaven in her complete human personhood. While their status as defined dogmas of our faith in the Catholic Church did not permit us to dispense with them as requisites for oneness of faith, the third difficulty—over the direct invocation of saints—does seem negotiable, since such a devotional practice as calling upon the saints and Mary for their intercession and mediation is not required by the Council of Trent. And so we do continue our dialogue with the Lutherans, confident that there are many signs of hope for reunion with them as well as with other Protestants, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican brothers and sisters in Christ.

Before concluding this rather brief ecumenical response to our theme, I should like to call your attention to the fifteen "Background Papers" that appeared with the Common Statement. It is beyond the scope of my presentation to address

them in detail. Suffice it to say, however, that they are very helpful reading for any who wish to enter more deeply into the ongoing dialogue on the topic. Fr. Carl Peter, of happy memory, one of the participants in the bilateral conversation with the Lutherans who contributed significantly out of his theological expertise, proposed the idea of the need for another critical principle to balance that of justification by faith through the grace of Christ alone. This principle might be called one of Catholic substance (as I reflect upon it). To appropriate Paul Tillich's position on the mutual need of the Protestant principle and the Catholic substance for each other, I would suggest that the prophetic critique of justification requires more attention from a transformationist model of Catholic substance in which the effects of grace within the justified received greater consideration. This ought to help maintain the proper balance of the dialectical tensions of referring all glory to God, including effective roles played by his human instruments in salvation history under Christ.

As members of the communion of saints, may we pray for even greater witness to the one Mediator through our reunion with the churches from which we have been separated—for the past millennium, from the Eastern Orthodox; for about five centuries, from the Lutherans and Anglicans—and from other sisters and brothers in the Lord with whose churches we have never before been united.