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REPORT, 1997-98: NEW ENGLAND REGION

The New England Region of the Mariological Society of America held its annual meeting on Saturday, October 18, 1997, at Providence College, Rhode Island. The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by the director, Reverend Mathew Morry, O.P., S.T.D. The Most Reverend George H. Pearce, S.M., D.D., offered the opening prayer and blessing. Then the Very Reverend Philip A. Smith, O.P., Ph.D., President of Providence College, graciously and warmly greeted the 135 members present and brought greetings of the College.

Fr. Morry introduced the Keynote Speaker, the Reverend George F. Kirwin, O.M.I., S.T.D., President of the Mariological Society of America. Within the context of Pope John Paul II's encyclical on Ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* ("That They Might be One"), Fr. Kirwin offered his insights on "Mary in the Context of Conversion." He noted that the approach of the Third Millennium offers a concrete opportunity to seize the moment for a worldwide evangelization. Yet, what better way to understand and realize unity in the faith-response of all believers than to clarify that "the Virgin Mary as Mother of God and Icon of the Church [is] the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ's disciples and for all humanity" (*UUS*, no.79). This is a challenging issue.

The question regarding the identity and role of Mary in relation to God's Saving Act remains a sensitive one on issues of faith. Biblical scholarly reflection, the insights of our Eastern co-religionists, and the concerns of the Protestant community sharpen this concern. In ecumenical discussions, the reality who is Mary may not be separated from that of the Christian community. Indeed, "for any truly ecumenical venture, conversion is basic." Conversion will be achieved through fidelity to "the gospel," to Jesus and His Spirit. Citing Fr. Bernard Lonergan, S.J., Fr. Kirwin remarked that conversion is to be characterized by attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility that we be in love. Certainly, human beings "are constantly searching for meaning." Meaning, in the context of conversion, embraces truth, fact, and faith, with the precisions of the various cultures. Any lack in these qualities occasions differences in the manner of a "transformation of the subject and [one's] world." So there may be intellectual, moral and religious conversions.

In an intellectual conversion, "what one affirms to be true in a judgment is grasped as real": God Himself. How relevant this is may be gleaned in the consideration of the truths of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Are they symbols or realities? As symbols they may denote that in following Jesus we may "achieve the fullness of the victory over sin and death," but not that (as realities) they have "already occurred in the personal history of . . . Mary." As realities, these truths are "facts of faith": God has intervened in the life of Mary.

"Moral conversion deals with values." While aligned with truth, moral conversion reaches out to a decision, to the struggle for authenticity. Still, it is open to input from dialogue with others, to a critique to eliminate self-bias. Rooted in humility, its aim "is not to prove oneself correct . . . to prove another wrong . . . rather, one seeks only the truth—God's truth wrapped in mystery."

Within the context of the intellectual and moral conversions lies the religious conversion. This is the moment when one is grasped by God Who is Mystery, "when one falls in love with God." Being grasped by God, one now focuses upon the truth of God wherever it is to be found, and thus suffers—from diverse sources—for that truth of God.

Fr. Kirwin emphasized: this religious conversion is fundamental! It is the pure gift which transforms, actualizes and defines the individual—the image of God. Dead to self, we live now in God to be faithful to His word. God's word to Mary made her the God-bearer. Mary's response to that word "will perhaps lead us to understand . . . the will of the Father of Jesus and our Father"; it will perhaps lead us to conversion!

An enlightening and dynamic discussion followed the Keynote Address. Then a Marian Liturgy followed in the Rosary Chapel of the Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas. The Eucharist was celebrated by the Most Reverend Ernest Bertrand Boland, O.P., D.D.

The Reverend Albino Barrera, O.P., Ph.D., professor of theology at Providence College, delivered the homily, "Mary: Paradigm of Virtue." Fr. Barrera pointed out that God inspired St. John to communicate to us the will of God: Mary is our Mother also. Still, why did God not ask Mary if she willed to be our mother, as He had asked her if she willed to be the Mother of Jesus? "Between friends, words are often unnecessary. What is unspoken carries far greater weight than what is spoken. Friends know each other so well, they can discern each other's mind; but, more importantly, friends can read each other's heart." And, Calvary is the moment of the blossoming of the friendship with God. That friendship "was steadily nourished over the years." Now Mary treasured it all in her heart. That friendship, that love, expressed so exquisitely the Divine Will. For that is where it all started: the will of God is to make us participators in His image, of His being. As Aquinas indicated, who and what we are is the expression of Him Who is love.

Mary is the exemplar for us: Mother of God, the Immaculate Conception. She was the loving, willing handmaiden for God's word: in giving birth to Jesus, in sharing His pain and suffering, in sharing in the fruits of His Resurrection glory. With what awe the words of Mary enfold us: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord . . . The Lord has done great things for me and Holy is His Name. . . ." Indeed, Mary recognized and gave praise to the great things of God. So God gives us Mary as our personal model, that we too may give witness to the goodness and loveableness of God in us. Mary wants us to communicate, to share with everyone, the "friendship with God"!

At the conclusion of the eucharistic liturgy, the members gathered for lunch in the dining room of the Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas, with the Very Reverend R. Justin Hennessey, O.P., S.T.D., as host. Fr. Morry conducted the business meeting: he reported on the National Meeting of the Mariological Society in San Antonio, Texas, and announced the meeting scheduled for May 1998 in Waukeshau, Wisconsin. The Meeting adjourned at 2:55 P.M.

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