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MARY, THE MOTHER OF UNITY

Presidential Address

By

REV. FREDERICK M. JELLY, O.P.

On February 2, 1965, Pope Paul VI took the occasion of the feast of Our Lord's Presentation to share his hopes for the Fourth International Mariological Congress to be held during March of that year in the city of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. After commenting about his wishes that the Congress would search out the true and fruitful sources of Marian devotion in Sacred Scripture, in the teaching of the Fathers, in the expressions of the Liturgy, in the theological speculations of the masters, and in the traditional doctrine of both the Eastern and Western Church, he expressed his prayerful desire the Mary would help to reunite all as "The Mother of Unity." At the time, many must have considered the Holy Father's wish a pious but unrealistic hope. Even though it was uttered in the wake of Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism issued only a few months before on November 21, 1964, the expectation that Mary could ever become more a help than a hindrance in the quest for Christian unity seemed very unlikely. The intervening years have proved such pessimism to be quite unfounded. In fact, without ignoring the ecumenical problems still remaining in connection with the "Marian question," we can rejoice together that Mary has shown herself "The Mother of Unity" for many of us.

Certain developments have been taking place during the past decade which convince me of this truth. In the first part

of my presidential address this year I should like to trace them very summarily for you. The time appears ripe for the members of our Society to assess the contribution of Marian doctrine and devotion to the ecumenical movement precisely because these developments demand an evaluation for the sake of any progress in the future. Secondly, then, this presentation will offer a few theological reflections upon the ecumenical significance of Mary's role in the dialogue during recent years. Does she truly deserve the title, "Mother of unity," or is she still one of the major obstacles on the path to the reunification of the Christian Churches along with other such stumbling-blocks as papal primacy and infallibility? In light of the response that we make to this sort of question, the third and final section of this address will deal briefly with future prospects of the mariological dimension in ecumenism.

Mary and Ecumenical Developments during the Past Decade

The Fourth International Mariological Congress held in Santo Domingo, March 18-22, 1965, had for its theme "Mary in the New Testament." This fact itself is of ecumenical significance since the biblical revelation regarding Mary's role in salvation history was made the basis of a renewed Mariology. Immediately following upon this scientific congress of biblical scholars and theologians from around the world, the Eleventh Marian Congress, essentially devotional in its orientation, met from March 22-25, 1965 and papers were delivered on the theme, "Mary, Our Spiritual Mother." This devotional theme was to develop and apply the balanced teaching about Mary provided by Vatican II's Constitution on the Church, chapter 8, a document issued along with the Decree on Ecumenism the previous November 21st. The emphasis was upon a Marian doctrine and devotion intimately related to the mystery of Christ and His Church, a definite departure from a privilege-centered Mariology that had become isolated and truncated in theology and spirituality. Three International Mariological-

Marian Congresses have taken place since Santo Domingo: 1967 in Lisbon; 1971 in Zagreb; and, 1975, during the Holy Year, in Rome. And many of us present here this morning have participated in these Congresses. We can testify that the same ecumenical concern has continued by returning to the historical sources that our Christian Churches share in common as well as by the active participation of representatives from the Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant traditions. Not only have their theologians and pastors been invited to give papers at these Congresses, but there has been the opportunity for special dialogue between them and Roman Catholic representatives. The next International Mariological Congress, to be held in Saragoza, Spain, October 3-9, 1979, will be of special ecumenical importance having as its theme the question of Marian cult during the 16th century. This will afford the opportunity for a worldwide gathering of scholars to contemplate and discuss in ecumenical perspective the historical roots of our differences concerning Mary.

Just prior to the Mariological Congress in Spain, many of us who are members of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary are planning to hold a conference in England. The General Secretary and founding father of this society is H. Martin Gillet who organized it along with a few other daring spirits there in the face of many very gloomy forecasts about its future. Established in 1967 to promote ecumenical devotion and the study at various levels of the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Church, under Christ, it has provided eloquent testimony to the truthfulness of Mary's title, "The Mother of Unity." This Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary has sponsored three international conferences in England during the years 1971, 1973 and 1975 in which a number of us in the Mariological Society of America have been invited to give papers. Over the years several of the papers delivered both at the international and regional meetings have been published on a wide range of topics touching on the prin-

cial points in Marian ecumenism. This Society has rendered a great service in bringing together more closely many English Christians, particularly Anglicans, Methodists and Roman Catholics. It has prospered both by growing in the number of its members individually and by gaining several new Branches including an American Branch just organized during the past two years. Once again I am gratefully pleased to acknowledge that many members of our MSA likewise belong to this American Branch of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To date we have had four meetings in two years in which several fine presentations have been made by Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant Reformed and Roman Catholic speakers. At our last meeting in November, officers were elected which means that we are well under way. We hope to be blessed with the ecumenical success of our parent Society in England witnessing to Mary's role as the Mother of Unity and to the essential place of devotion in any progress toward organic reunion.

So much now for the developments during the past decade with reference to Marian societies and ecumenism except to call your attention to the consciousness within our own Society of its ecumenical responsibilities. You are well aware that in recent years both the topics of the papers on the program as well as the speakers from other Christian Churches have reflected our concern to participate in the quest for unity. This has helped revitalize us as an association of mariologists. But let us glance ever so briefly at other forms of development in which some of us may be participants as members of theological faculties, ecumenical dialogues, etc. In recent years, for the first time, courses and special workshops have appeared presenting Mary in ecumenical perspective. Often these are offered by teachers and guest lecturers from different Christian traditions. Frequently they are interdisciplinary as well as inter confessional bringing together the biblical, historical and systematic aspects of Mariology and ecumenism. This allows an integral approach and an opportunity for students to witness

and take part in the dialogue between their professors. Even when a particular course in Mariology is not team-taught, the individual who is teaching it has become very conscious of its ecumenical dimension as has been evidenced by various course-descriptions. Those of us who have been participating in the bilateral conversations during the past decade have seen the "Marian question" move toward a more prominent place in the dialogue. The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Bi-Lateral has set up a task-force of biblical scholars from various confessions to study Mary in the New Testament. Having completed their consideration of Peter in the New Testament, they agreed that Mary should receive the same treatment in order to determine whether or not developments in Marian doctrine and devotion are faithful to their biblical roots. The members of this task force, among whom are Dr. Reginald Fuller of the Anglican Communion, who is a speaker on this year's program, have been meeting monthly since the Fall of 1975. We look forward to seeing the fruits of their labors in book-form as was done in their excellent ecumenical work on Peter in the New Testament.

During the past decade Fr. Eamon Carroll's annual contribution to *Marian Studies*, "A Survey of Recent Mariology," has kept our members well informed of the several fine works on Our Lady and ecumenism. May I call your special attention to one book written by John de Satgé, an Evangelical Anglican clergyman and a member from its inception of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary in England: *Down to Earth—The New Protestant Vision of the Virgin Mary* (or the English title, *Mary in the Christian Gospel*). I have found this book most enriching not only from an ecumenical point of view, but one that has made me take a fresh look at Mary's personal place in my own Christian life and ministry. This is really the result of all authentic ecumenism,—the experience of rediscovering and deepening the best in our own traditions which can only make us more at-one in Christ. John de Satgé's

book is an excellent example of the way in which Mary can and should be the Mother of our unity in Christ.¹

Theological Reflections upon Mary's Role in Ecumenical Developments

As for all of her roles in salvation history, the theological foundation for Mary's title, "The Mother of Unity" is based upon the New Testament revelation of her unique vocation to be the Mother of the Lord. Developments in Marian doctrine and devotion during the patristic era brought out the implications of this revealed truth in terms of Mary's spiritual motherhood of the faithful in her Son's Church. And over the ages the reflections of systematic theologians have been attempts to appropriate these implications for particular cultures. We are indeed fortunate that the first three papers on our program for this year will be presenting us with the opportunity to discuss these Marian developments in light of their New Testament roots and early patristic witness. In this part of my presidential address I hope to help set the scene for these discussions.

The centrality of Mary as the *Theotokos*, particularly in ecumenical dialogue about her, is clearly expressed in magisterial statements of the Roman Catholic Church during the post conciliar era. It is important to note that these statements always contain a significant section on Mary and ecumenism. Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, "For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary," issued February 2, 1974, has this to say in the matter:

Because of its ecclesial character, devotion to the Blessed Virgin reflects the preoccupations of the Church itself. Among these especially in our day is her anxiety for the reestablishment of Chris-

¹ John de Satgé, *Down to Earth: The New Protestant Vision of the Virgin Mary* (Wilmington, No. Carolina: Consortium Books, 1976).

tian unity. In this way devotion to the Mother of the Lord is in accord with the deep desires and aims of the ecumenical movement, that is, it acquires an ecumenical aspect. This is so for a number of reasons.

In the first place, in venerating with particular love the glorious Theotokos and in acclaiming her as the "Hope of Christians," Catholics unite themselves with their brethren of the Orthodox Churches, in which devotion to the Blessed Virgin finds its expression in a beautiful lyricism and in solid doctrine. Catholics are also united with Anglicans whose classical theologians have already drawn attention to the sound scriptural basis for devotion to the Mother of our Lord, while those of the present day increasingly underline the importance of Mary's place in the Christian life. Praising God with the very words of the Virgin (cf. *Lk.* 1:46-55), they are united too with their brethren in the Churches of the Reform, where love for the Sacred Scriptures flourishes.²

At the conclusion of his remarks on Mary and ecumenism, the Holy Father shares his prayerful hope that a better mutual understanding of her place in the mystery of Christ and the Church and her intercession as at Cana will help lead the disciples of Christ once again to full communion in faith. Here he appeals to Pope Leo XIII who taught that the cause of Christian unity "properly pertains to the role of Mary's spiritual motherhood. For Mary did not and cannot engender those who belong to Christ, except in one faith and one love: for 'Is Christ divided? (I Cor. 1:13)'"³ Mary as *Theotokos* and spiritual mother of all in Christ is also taught by the American Bishops when they speak of her in the context of Christian unity in their Pastoral Letter, *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith*, issued on November 21, 1973:

² Pope Paul VI, *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Washington, D.C.: USCC Publications office, 1974), no. 32, pp. 23-24.

³ *Ibid.*, no. 33, p. 25.

No sound ecumenism can ignore the question of Mary. "Marian truths cannot be pushed to one side, because there are no such things as isolated Christian truths which concern Mary alone." She no more stands alone without Christ now than she did in the Scriptures or at Ephesus or in the liturgy, as it has been celebrated through the ages in the Eastern and Western rites. Christ is at the center of our faith; but He did not come among men without the *Theotokos*. Nor is He in glory now without His Mother, *Theotokos* still.⁴

Marian dogmas must be seen in the setting of the doctrine on the "hierarchy of truths" as taught in Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism.⁵ The revealed truth about Mary as the virginal *Theotokos* is primarily Christocentric in character, while that about her Immaculate Conception and Assumption is ecclesio-typical in its emphasis. The biblical revelation itself and the dogmatic development at the Council of Ephesus testify that her virginal motherhood of the Incarnate God is essentially a testimony to the revealed truth about the mystery of her Son. John de Satgé sums this up quite nicely when he says that a fuller recognition of Mary's place in the Gospel

... leads to a more adequate way of speaking about Christ, human and divine. The emphasis today is quite rightly placed upon his real humanity; but when that stress is combined with modern reluctance or embarrassment in face of the transcendent, the result too often is either to speak of Jesus as human to the point of excluding his divinity, or to add a quasi-magical dimension to his humanity. Both ways of speaking are reversions to an Arian type of understanding and, as Cardinal Newman so aptly pointed out,

⁴ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith* (Washington, D.C.: USCC Publications Office) no. 109, p. 41.

⁵ Austin Flannery, O.P. (Gen. Ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Pub. Co., 1975) no. 11, p. 462. Cf. Frederick M. Jelly, O.P., *Marian Dogmas within Vatican II's Hierarchy of Truths*, in *Marian Studies* 27 (1976) 17-40.

much of what Arius said improperly of Christ could be said properly of his mother. She is the human being who is caught up into the purposes of God in a uniquely intimate manner but who remains entirely on the creaturely side. She is in a sense . . . the crowning point of human evolution, the point so far developed that through her womb God entered into the human process. We glorify Mary in order to give more appropriate glory to her Son, our Brother and at the same time, the Other.⁶

This kind of theologizing continues the Christian wisdom of the ages epitomized by the medieval theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas, who said that the Incarnation and the Theotokos "... are so intimately related that he who errs about the one must be mistaken about the other."⁷ Since the truth about Christ is at the very heart of our unity in Christian faith, we might say that the basic theological justification for Mary's title, "The Mother of Unity," is her divinely appointed role to foster our faith in Christ by reason of her unique relationship to Him. But at once we must contemplate the implications of her being the virginal *Theotokos* for her special relationship as our spiritual mother.

In proceeding from the Christological meaning of Mary as the virginal *Theotokos* to the ecclesiotypical significance of her spiritual motherhood of all the faithful, we must meditate for a moment upon the spiritual symbolism of her virginity in conceiving Christ. Rev. Donald Dawe, the first President of the American Branch of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in a brilliant prayer which was given at one of its meetings and is entitled, *From Dysfunction to Disbelief: The Virgin Mary in Reformed Theology*, draws upon the teaching of Karl Barth and brings out this symbolism very succinctly and clearly:

⁶ John de Satgé, *op. cit.*, 136.

⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Com. in Sent.*, III, d.4, q.2, a.2.

The virgin birth is the disclosure that salvation in Christ is all of God. Even our response to salvation is in a humility granted only by God the Holy Spirit. Mary is not simply the one who once bore Christ, so that the event of *vere Deus vere homo* could be a fact in our history. She is still the one, who in the miracle of her virginity, protects the mystery of the Christ from the alien religion that replaces him with another Christ created by human powers and made accessible by human reason.⁸

And so, outstanding exponents of the Reformed tradition hold that the historicity of Mary's virginity in conceiving and bearing Christ is a witness to the complete gratuitousness and divine transcendence of the Incarnation. In fact, her very ability to say "yes" at the Annunciation was a grace of the Holy Spirit. Here we are introduced into her blessedness, that divine favor which fitted her to become the virginal *Theotokos*. This touches upon the truth that she is the firstfruits of her redemption. It is the grace of her "pilgrimage of faith," as Vatican II so fittingly calls it,⁹ that makes her our spiritual mother, which is the more proximate theological reason for her title, "The Mother of Unity." Certainly we cannot separate her motherhood of Christ and of His members, the Church. Were Mary not called to be the *Theotokos*, there are no grounds in revelation for saying that she would have been so highly favored by His redeeming grace and so a preeminent exemplar for our life of faith in Christ Jesus.

Thus the stage is set for further dialogue upon the thorny ecumenical problems surrounding the papal definitions of the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception by Pius IX in 1854 and of the Assumption by Pius XII in 1950. We Roman Catholic mariologists must be especially sensitive to the pro-

⁸ Donald G. Dawe, *From Dysfunction to Disbelief: The Virgin Mary in Reformed Theology* (National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, D.C.: Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary) 9.

⁹ A Flannery, *op. cit.* *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, no. 59, p. 417.

found difficulties of our brothers and sisters in other Christian confessions regarding the lack of biblical evidence for and even of early patristic testimony to these two dogmas. The Orthodox themselves, with whom we share so much on Mary, view them as unnecessary dogmatizations. At the same time we should act with ecumenical authenticity by being true to what appears essential in our own tradition. And it would seem that our best approach in the dialogue is to discuss our understanding of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption within the context of the "hierarchy of truths" as being ecclesiotypical. Rightly interpreted they may then be proposed as legitimate developments of the "New Eve" image of Mary from the early Fathers. (We'll be hearing much more about this in Dr. Ross Mackenzie's paper tomorrow morning.) My purpose here is not to enter into the dialogue in any detail at this time on the topic, something which I did in a presentation before this Society two years ago.¹⁰ Rather it is to recall your attention to the ecumenical possibility, indeed ecumenical necessity at this point, of discussing the relevance of these two Marian dogmas to the central mystery of our faith which is the redemption in Christ of all humanity. It seems to me that, were one to reject them on the grounds that God's redeeming love in Christ could not accomplish such mighty deeds at the very outset of a person's spiritual odyssey (the Immaculate Conception) or at the finalization of a redeemed person's salvation in glory (the Assumption), then we must review our mutual faith in the central mystery of redemption. Paradoxically, Mary is the Mother of unity even where she seems to present problems. For as the Archtype of all that the Church hopes to become in the fulfillment of the Lord's promises, Our Lady confronts us with the necessary questions about the integrity of our evangelical faith upon which alone true organic unity can be built.

¹⁰ Frederick M. Jelly, *art. cit.*

Prospects and Proposals for the Future of Mary's Place in the Dialogue

During the concluding moments of the Eucharistic Liturgy celebrating the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception in the crypt church of the National Shrine last month, Dr. Ross Mackenzie honored all of us his fellow members of MSA by being awarded the President's Patronal Medal for his outstanding work in promoting interest in Mary, mother of Christ. It was an event of great ecumenical import. In his address after receiving this much-deserved honor from President Walton of The Catholic University of America, Dr. Mackenzie shared with us present there many inspiring thoughts about our deeply personal relationship with Mary. One of the statements that he made in the context of praising Mary the Immaculate Conception for the transformation of our human nature that is accomplished in her, indeed points us in the right direction for future dialogue:

John Macquarrie has asked for a "more up-to-date and personal" way of understanding sin than that which is presented by the language in which the dogma is stated. The formula used in the 1854 dogma stated that the Virgin Mary was "in the first instant of her conception preserved untouched by any taint of original guilt, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God." In the ecumenical encounter where we seek together to know the mind of Christ, how may this dogma deepen our insight into the meaning of our redemption? And how do we re-think the way in which it is presented, without turning the dogma into what it does not clearly mean?¹¹

John Macquarrie has already made a good beginning in the direction of responding to Ross Mackenzie's provocative ques-

¹¹ Ross Mackenzie, *Let Us Now Learn To Praise The Holy Virgin* (Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.: Administrative Bulletin, Vol. X, No. 8—Supplement, Dec. 12, 1977) 2.

tions when he says in reference to Mary's Immaculate Conception: "The moment had come when alienation was at an end, when mankind had been brought to the condition of being *capax Dei*, capable of receiving God in the gift of the Incarnation."¹² One prospect then is that the dialogue will continue along these lines.

Another prospect and proposal is that the members of our Society continue to make contributions to the mariological dimension of the ecumenical movement. This we should strive to do not only individually and as members of other organized groups exclusively dedicated to the cause of Christianity unity, but precisely as members of this Mariological Society of America. For we cannot even come close to attaining our stated goal "... of promoting a more theological appreciation of Our Lady's prerogatives and to further scientific research in the field of Mariology" unless we continue consideration and discussion of ecumenical questions regarding Mary as well as doing this in active dialogue with other Christians who together with us are seeking the mind of Christ about Mary.

In conclusion, I should like to make a few more specific proposals for your consideration and discussion about our future involvement in Marian ecumenism: (1) that we further the dialogue about the special relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary with the special help of our Orthodox colleagues; (2) that we explore more deeply the relationship between Sacred Scripture and Tradition with a particular view toward determining the criteria for valid development of Marian doctrine as well as responding to such questions as, "Is the New Eve Image in any sense found in the New Testament? Can we say that early patristic witness to it as well as related themes in the Bible would make it part of the revelatory patrimony of the Apostolic Church?"; (3) that we widen the hori-

¹² John Macquarrie, *Christian Unity and Diversity* (Philadelphia, 1975) 94.

zons of Marian ecumenism to include what is authentic in the Women's Liberation Movement so as to offer Mary as a realistic model for the fulfilled Christian woman today; (4) that we relate Mary's exemplarity to all the ministries in her Son's Church; and (5) that, in the spirit of praying together for organic reunion, we plan to have at each convention an ecumenical worship service celebrating our common faith in Mary "The Mother of Unity."