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Presidential Address

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THE STATE OF THE UNION

Presidential Address by
THE REV. WILLIAM G. MOST

In recent weeks the President of the United States has, we assume, been working on his message on the State of the Union. He probably doesn't know it, but he has company! For the President of the Mariological Society has also had to work on his message on the state of the union. At the outset he must confess that he cannot put on the optimism of a man of politics; he cannot even say with the angels of Zacharia: "We have patrolled the earth: see, the whole earth is tranquil and at rest."¹ Instead, though regretfully, your president must report that the state of the union in Mariology is closer to disunion, and the land is far from tranquil and at rest.

Lack of unanimity among Mariologists is not, of course, anything entirely new: it is only the degree of disagreement that has grown. Prof. Laurentin would add that Mariologists suffer also, and greatly, from lack of union with dogmatic theologians and exegetes.² He says, namely, that dogmatic theologians simply reject much of the theologizing of Mariologists, while exegetes are dismayed that some Mariologists have even what he calls a "repugnance"³ to the use of Scripture.

While we by no means agree with Laurentin's picture, we do admit that Mariology is under attack from some outside the field. For example, Gregory Baum wrote:

... the two doctrinal positions of Mary's co-redemption and her universal mediation ... have, thanks to the contemporary renewal of theology, largely lost their relevance. ... [formerly] the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus was regarded as concentrated in his passion

¹ *Zach.* 1:11.

² R. Laurentin, *La question mariale* (Paris, 1963) 10.

³ R. Laurentin, *La Vierge au concile* (Paris, 1965) 57.

and death... it then made sense to discuss the possible place of Mary in it. If, however, the redemptive sacrifice... includes his resurrection... then the question of any other person sharing in its execution does not really make sense. Similarly... contemporary theology... tends to regard these encounters in us. In such a context the question of mediation... through any other person than Jesus... does not really arise.⁴

Fr. Baum wrote before the appearance of chapter 8 of the *De Ecclesia*, though after the many papal statements on both co-redemption and mediation. But Fr. Tavard, writing even after the chapter had been promulgated, said: "... one should refrain from pursuing the lines opened by the recent expression, which had no or little theological content, of 'co-redemption.'"⁵

Even on the floor of the Council itself, if one can believe Fr. Tavard, some speakers did not hesitate to accuse several Popes of heresy for having taught that Mary is mediatrix of all graces. They did not, according to Tavard, use the word "heresy," nor did they mention the Popes, but they still made the point clear. In Tavard's own words: "As several speakers have pointed out, the term 'Mediatrix' as applied to Mary is incompatible with the teaching of St. Paul..."⁶ To contradict St. Paul is, of course, heresy.

But not only such advanced theses as co-redemption and mediation have been attacked. According to an article in the Easter 1966 issue of *Newsweek*, Brother Isadore McCarron, head of the theology department of St. Francis' in Brooklyn said that (in the words of the editor): "Catholic dogma has never required the faithful to accept Mary's physical virginity." Or, in a direct quote from Brother Isadore: "Many Catholic theologians feel that Mary only was a moral virgin."⁷

⁴ G. Baum, *The Theology of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Council*, in *The Ecumenist* (March, 1964) 36.

⁵ G. Tavard, review of Laurentin's *The Question of Mary*, in *National Catholic Reporter* (July 21, 1965) 9.

⁶ G. Tavard in a feature article for NCWC News Service (Sept. 24, 1964) 7; also in *Council Daybook*, NCWC, 1, 52.

⁷ See *Newsweek* (April 11, 1966) 73.

Many of our separated brethren have, in recent years, turned to a positively favorable attitude to some parts of Mariology.⁸ A splendid example is seen in our distinguished guest, Dr. Piepkorn. Yet, some have reacted quite differently: as recently as October of 1965 an Episcopalian, Wm. Stringfellow, would not even judge Mary to be an ordinarily decent mother: "If recourse is had to the New Testament, Mary emerges as one who was both extraordinarily possessive toward her Son, and consistently opposed to his vocation."⁹ In fact, before the third session of the Council, the same writer was reported as saying that: "...there is only one serious theological obstacle to organic reunion, and that is the doctrine and cult of Mary."¹⁰ Apparently, such other matters as papal infallibility, human co-operation with grace, and even the cult of other saints present no notable obstacle.

But we need not look outside the Church, or even outside our own Society for disunion and dissent on Marian matters. For the sake of charity, we will refrain from any direct quotations. But probably at least some here present will recall proposals that we deliberately choose and promote the minimum understanding of co-redemption, to please protestants. Or they may recall the convention at which, during a discussion period, I was trying to analyze and clarify a problem by a study of the Magisterium, but was interrupted and warned that so much talk about the Magisterium would deter some members from attending in the future.

What comments should be made on this state of the union? What proposals for improvement?

First, we ought to put everything into the perspective of the

⁸ Cf. E. R. Carroll, O.Carm., *Protestant Reaction to the Role of Mary in Vatican II*, in *AER* 155 (May, 1966) 289-301; and Thomas A. O'Meara, O.P., *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (New York, 1966).

⁹ W. Stringfellow, *A Pessimist's Guide to the Vatican Council*, in *Ramparts* (Oct. 4, 1965) 34.

¹⁰ Cf. *The Episcopalian Witness: A Discussion*, in *Jubilee* (July, 1964) 36.

times, as fashionable Existentialists love to do. We are living in a time when one could hardly name any important dogmatic error that is not taught within the Catholic Church. For example, if one can believe the article in the *National Catholic Reporter*,¹¹ a Professor of Moral Theology at the Catholic University of America holds that the Church should not teach anything absolute in moral theology. He is not even sure that adultery is always wrong. Again, many Catholic papers carried a set of syndicated articles the summer before last in which an unnamed Redemptorist moralist in Rome said that teenagers now claim premarital sex is harmless, and can even be helpful, to deepen relations, and then added that at the present there is no answer to such a claim.¹² More recently, a Catholic Bishop in India has taught that Christ imposed no detailed code on behavior. So we should, he says, follow the consensus of people in general, within which there is developing a belief that abortion is sometimes licit. He made, according to the article, similar comments on suicide, masturbation, and remarriage after divorce.¹³ Brother Isadore, whom we already quoted on Mary's virginity, also said, according to *Newsweek*: "The divinity of

¹¹ Cf. *National Catholic Reporter* (Sept. 21, 1966) 2 (on Rev. Charles E. Curran).

¹² James M. Johnson in *The [Dubuque] Witness* (July 29, 1965) 2.

¹³ Cf. *National Catholic Reporter* (Dec. 14, 1966) 4: "The determination of all general moral laws is ultimately not the exclusive task of one cultural or religious group, not even of a large and widespread body like the Catholic Church, but of the whole of mankind. . . . When abortion is performed to avoid almost certain or very probable serious harm to the health of the mother, its licitness is at least arguable. . . . It seems doubtful that for married people who licitly decide to have no [more] children, the choice of sterilization is illicit. . . . [On masturbation:] Early release in circumstances which make one foresee a lengthy battle with doubtful outcome has the same healthy effect which traditional Catholic ethics ascribes to marriage: it takes one's mind off an excessive concern with these matters. . . . The near-consensus of non-Christian and non-Catholic mankind, today and through the ages, makes it appear doubtful whether it really is in accordance with natural law [...] to make all divorce and remarriage impossible whatever the merits of the case." Cf. also *Time* (Dec. 9, 1966) 91-92.

Jesus has never been clarified by the church. I'm sure that Jesus himself was not aware of being God."¹⁴ Again, a prominent Monsignor in Chicago, speaking to Protestant clergymen, said: "I want clergymen like John Calvin, who know that the Lord cannot be . . . conjured up in this place or that by a formula . . . and dismissed mechanically by digestion."¹⁵

Alongside of such almost incredible statements, whatever deviations Mariologists may have perpetrated seem tiny indeed. Of course, Laurentin was referring chiefly to the time before the present storm arose. But even if we confined our view to that period, we must say that Laurentin has distorted the picture by not pointing out that it is not only Mariologists who had or have some disagreement with other specialists: dogmatic theologians have long charged that exegetes tend to ignore the Magisterium; and exegetes have similarly charged dogmatic theologians with trying to establish a proof from out-of-context snippets from Scripture. We must, of course, give due credit where it is due by adding that these mutual recriminations of dogmatists and exegetes are much less valid today than they were, say, ten years ago when, for example, dogmatic scholars hurled texts at each other to prove or disprove such things as reprobation *ante pre-visa demerita* while both factions blissfully ignored the context, a context which actually showed that the inspired writer they cited was not dealing with this question at all.

We must add too, that far from all dogmatic theologians and exegetes commit today such errors as those we cited above.

Of course, we admit that Laurentin's complaints do have some validity. But they apply much less to the United States than to his own France. For here, some of the best exegetes have given splendid papers at our past meetings, and are to do so also at this present session, while, in turn, some of our members are also active members of the Catholic Biblical Association of America and have given papers at its conventions.

¹⁴ See *Newsweek* (April 11, 1966) 72.

¹⁵ Msgr. D. M. Cantwell, in *The World Parish* (Maryknoll, N.Y. Aug., 1965) 1.

Similarly, not a few of our own past Presidents have been Presidents of the Catholic Theological Society of America; in fact, the current Theological Society President is one of our own distinguished members, and a past President of ours.

If time permitted, we would, and should, show that Gregory Baum cheerfully ignored the teaching of a solemn dogmatic constitution¹⁶ in his remarks that co-redemption no longer makes any sense, and that he did not even know the state of the question in Mariology when he wrote that in the context of "encounter theology," the question of Marian mediation does not even arise: for Mariologists have generally taken the minimum content of Mary's mediation to be intercession—for which there is ample room even in an encounter framework. We might point out, too, that Fr. Tavard attacked the Council itself when he declared co-redemption of "no or little theological content."

Unfortunately, time does not allow us to go into the lurid details of these distortions. For we have more constructive work to do, namely, to attempt to find some guidelines for charting our course in the future.

We need to note, first of all, that in each field of knowledge, it is of prime importance that proper methodology be followed. A brilliant object lesson appears in the area of the natural sciences. In the 6th century B.C., Greek scholars in that field could not agree whether to work in science by the method of philosophy, i.e., sitting down in one's armchair and trying to reason out what could cause various natural phenomena, or

¹⁶ Cf. Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, Nov. 1, 1950, in *AAS* 42 (1950) 768: "Quamobrem, sicut gloriosa Christi anastasis essentialis pars fuit ac postremum hujus victoriae tropaeum, ita Beatae Virginis commune cum Filio suo certamen virginei corporis glorificatione concludendum erat..." According to Baum, it makes no sense to speak of Mary when the Redemption is presented as involving the Savior's Resurrection. Note that it is precisely in that context that *Munificentissimus Deus* establishes the necessity of the Assumption as Mary's sharing in the glorification with Christ, a glorification brought about by the fact that the "struggle" (the work of Redemption) was the action of both, Son and Mother ("commune cum Filio suo certamen").

whether to follow what is today considered true scientific method. Unfortunately for science, the armchair men won out, with the result that science produced more fables than facts for over two thousand years. It was only after scientists finally began to follow strict and true scientific method that the brilliant explosion of scientific progress began to produce a profusion of fruits which are still today far from exhausted.

Theology, too, has gone through a period of suffering from malaise of method. While we do not, of course, blame St. Augustine for all unfortunate method in theology, yet we cannot help recalling that he, following an invalid technique of reasoning from etymology, said that philosophy means love of wisdom, and Christ is the wisdom of the Father, therefore philosophy is love of Christ.¹⁷ And thus he contributed to the confusion of philosophical and theological method whose unfortunate fruits have not yet been all eradicated.¹⁸

The prime tool in philosophy is human reason, and authority means little if anything. On the contrary, the prime tool in theology is revelation *as interpreted by the Church*.

Laurentin proposes a sort of principle for settling our problems: "Mary is entirely relative to God; Mary is entirely correlative to the Church."¹⁹ Now it is obviously true that she is relative to God, correlative to the Church. But the trouble is that this "principle," if it may be so called, falls far short of being a means of deciding where truth lies in a debate. For example, which view of co-redemption, if any, would one adopt if he were to follow that principle? Or again, when confronted with a statement such as that of Brother Isadore, where would this principle lead us?

¹⁷ Cf. Etienne Gilson, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin* (Paris, 1943) 5.

¹⁸ For example, the debates on the problems of predestination and the efficacy of grace have been hampered by a tendency to use metaphysical methods to solve the problem. Cf. W. G. Most, *De gratia et praedestinatione* (Rome, 1963) 19.

¹⁹ R. Laurentin, *La question mariale*, 101.

Could we solve our problems by adopting a policy proposed a few years ago at our convention, namely: Let us, in all debated matters, hold to the minimum, so as to promote ecumenism? We would suggest two comments: 1) Such a policy is contrary to sound scholarship. Scholarship in any field aims at finding the truth, letting the chips fall where they may. To propose to settle on, or even to lean towards a minimum solution, simply because it is considered of a certain practical utility—that is to deny scholarly method. It is, in effect, to erect prejudice into law. 2) The present Holy Father has pointed out that such a policy is not even good for ecumenism. For he warns against a “temptation to put aside controversial points, to hide, to weaken, to modify, to render vain, to deny, if needs be, those teachings of the Catholic Church which are not today accepted by the separated brethren . . . this view deludes not only those who are ignorant of the theological questions, it also insinuates itself among those who are experts. . . . The intention is good, the method is not. [. . .] To pretend to resolve doctrinal difficulties by seeking to discredit or disregard or conceal affirmations which the teaching authority of the Church declares binding and definitive is not a good service. . . . It creates diffidence in the separated brethren. It creates the suspicion of being tricked, or else it generates the notion of fallacious possibilities.”²⁰

It will be objected that the Pope was referring to doctrines which the teaching authority of the Church declares binding and definitive, which we are considering things still freely debated among theologians. Granted; but the papal comment applies also, in a lesser but still strong way, to our specific case. For to adhere to a lesser position simply in order to please the separated brethren also can “create diffidence” and arouse the “suspicion of being tricked.” Protestants do not lack sound scholarship. If they see us following such a procedure, they will easily recognize it as a temporary behavior followed during a sort

²⁰ Paul VI in a weekly audience address reported in *The [Denver] Register* (Jan. 31, 1965) 6.

of courtship period, as it were. They may well fear things would be different after the marriage. Such disillusionment, in fact, has already taken place. Laurentin reports that during the papal speech declaring Mary Mother of the Church "a chill was cast"²¹ over Protestants present, and that the mass of Protestant observers drew more or less clearly the conclusion that dialogue always involved "a certain deception." They would not have been so disillusioned if Catholic ecumenists had not followed a policy of minimising, so that they failed to mention the clear statement of Pius XII that Mary, by the very fact of becoming the Mother of Christ, became "the mother of all who . . . would be made one under the Headship of her divine Son. The Mother of the Head would be the mother of the members."²² That is, she is the Mother of the whole Christ—which means the Church. Or again, they should have admitted that even Pope John XXIII called her Mother of the Church.²³ Similarly, the official teaching on other aspects of the Mystical Body had been strained long ago, as we learn from the instruction on ecumenism issued by the Holy See in 1949.²⁴

What should be our method? The Council itself, fortunately, has told us. Not, indeed, that it gave us a new method. But it formulated an excellent restatement of what always has been true.

Theology is the science of revelation. Its task is not, basically, to find truth by means of human reason; that is the method of philosophy. Theology rather seeks to find what revelation, as found in Scripture and Tradition, teaches us. In studying revelation, one should not seek for isolated, out-of-context quotations which may at first sight seem to state a given doctrine. Rather, as the Council points out, we must, so far as possible, follow

²¹ Laurentin, *La Vierge au concile*, 44.

²² Pius XII, *C'est avec une douce*, June 19, 1947, in *AAS* 39 (1947) 271.

²³ Cf. Laurentin, *La Vierge au concile*, 173-174.

²⁴ Holy Office, *Instructio: De motione oecumenica*, Dec. 20, 1949, in *AAS* 42 (1949) 144.

the entire development of revelation. Hence the Council prescribes that in seminaries: "Dogmatic theology should be so arranged that the biblical themes are presented first. Students should [then] be shown what the Fathers of the Eastern and Western Church contributed to the fruitful transmission and illumination of the individual truths of revelation, and also the later history of dogma and its relationship to the general history of the Church."²⁵ When, in this way, one has exhausted the explicit content of the sources of revelation, he should move further out to reasonings in which, if presented in syllogistic form, one premise would be a revealed truth, one a non-revealed truth. Still later we arrive at a more fully speculative area in which we have no revealed truths as premises, but only the guide of the analogy of faith. In this area, the Council adds, we "should learn to penetrate more deeply with the help of speculative reason exercised under the tutelage of St. Thomas."²⁶

But—and this is of still higher importance—since Catholic theology relies not just on natural means, but on the divinely promised guidance given to the Church, at some point—before, during, or after the process just described—we must check our conclusions with the teaching of the Magisterium. Hence the Council adds: "The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ."²⁷ In other words, as Pius XII once stated: "The work of investigation, as far as Mariology is concerned, will proceed the more safely and the more fruitfully, the more all keep before their eyes that which is the proximate and universal norm of truth for every theologian in matters of faith and morals: the sacred Magisterium of the Church."²⁸

²⁵ *Decree on Priestly Formation*, 16; cited from W. M. Abbott, S.J. (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York, 1966) 451-452.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 452.

²⁷ *On Divine Revelation*; *ibid.*, 117-118.

²⁸ Pius XII, *Inter complures*, Oct. 24, 1954, in *AAS* 46 (1954) 678.

We need to be sure that we give more than mere lip service to this Magisterium. For it is so easy to first form one's opinion, relying on one's own lights and reason, and then later, to turn to the Magisterium statements and declare, after a brief, uncritical reading of the texts, that all statements are ambiguous. A careful exegesis of texts is needed, an exegesis made preferably *before* one has formed a judgment by other means.

Such a criterion as we have proposed, which is nothing other than strict theological method, will provide us with a means of distinguishing truth from error. We might add that it is not only Mariologists—nor even chiefly Mariologists—who need such a criterion. All theologians and exegetes need this methodology. We regret to say that not all today follow it. Rather, the complaint of Fr. Greeley seems to us well justified:

Intellectual fads and fashions combine with the catchwords to create an unstable ideology that is not only a substitute for scholarship and for thought, but actually a pretext for rejecting precise scholarship and serious intellectual investigations. . . . These instant experts need no more evidence than their assertions and no more credentials than their names. He who dares to produce research evidence against such infallible teaching authority is accused of dishonesty and conservatism or of having "sold out."²⁹

Cf. Paul VI's address to the closing session of the International Congress on the Theology of the Second Vatican Council: "Therefore, by the will of Jesus Christ, the immediate and universal norm of this unfailing truth can be found solely in the authentic magisterium of the Church, whose task is to safeguard faithfully and to explain infallibly the Deposit of Faith [. . .] Divine truth is preserved and made know in the Church by the Holy Spirit chiefly through the work of the sacred magisterium. Therefore, you especially will more surely possess that truth the more wholeheartedly you are joined with the Church's magisterium. If in your search for truth you wander away from this magisterium . . . it might even expose you to the danger of deviating from the right path, choosing your own judgment, not the thinking of the Church, as the criterion of truth. This would be an arbitrary choice—*airesis*, the road to heresy." Quoted from *The [Davenport] Catholic Messenger* (Nov. 10, 1966) 7.

²⁹ A. Greeley, *Adolescent American Catholicism*, in *Sign* 46 (Nov. 1966) 16.

Mariology has nothing to fear from scientific method: it must fear only charlatans who prate: "Thus saith the Council," and then contradict the Council. Let us cast the light of truth and scientific method on such fakery. Then renewal in the Church will not be a mockery that rejects precise scholarship and accuses of dishonesty those who produce research evidence: renewal will be true scientific progress. We stand at a great crossroads today: not only Mariologists, but all theologians and exegetes must choose between quackery and true scientific renewal.