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George W. Shea

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POPE PAUL VI AND THE "MOTHER OF THE CHURCH"

Presidential Address

by

THE RT. REV. MSGR. GEORGE W. SHEA, S.T.D.

Among all the events of the past year, certainly the one of most abiding importance for Catholics was the promulgation by Pope Paul VI, on Nov. 21, 1964, of the Second Vatican Council's masterwork, the dogmatic constitution "On the Church."

Specialists in the field of Mariology are particularly grateful for the constitution's eighth and last chapter, "On the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and of the Church." But they are hardly less grateful for the Holy Father's personal completion, as it were, of the doctrine of that chapter, when, in his discourse concluding the third session of the Council, he made explicit something which the chapter says only implicitly, namely, that Mary is "the Mother of the Church." On this subject Pope Paul said, in part:

"By the promulgation of today's constitution, which has as its crown and summit a whole chapter dedicated to Our Lady, we can rightly affirm that the present session ends as an incomparable hymn of praise in honor of Mary.

"It is the first time, in fact . . . that an ecumenical council presents such a vast synthesis of the Catholic doctrine regarding the place which the Blessed Mary occupies in the mystery of Christ and of the Church.

"This corresponds to the aim which this council set itself of manifesting the countenance of the Holy Church, to which Mary is closely linked. . . .

"Truly, the reality of the Church is not exhausted in its hierarchical structure, in its liturgy, in its sacraments, in its juridical ordinances.

The intimate, the primary source of its sanctifying effectiveness are to be sought in its mystic union with Christ; a union which we cannot conceive as separate from her who is the Mother of the Word Incarnate and whom Jesus Christ Himself wanted closely united to Himself for our salvation. Thus the loving contemplation of the marvels worked by God in His Holy Mother must find its proper perspective in the vision of the Church. And knowledge of the true Catholic doctrine on Mary will always be a key to the exact understanding of the mystery of Christ and of the Church.

"Meditation on these close relationships between Mary and the Church, so clearly established in today's conciliar Constitution, makes us feel that this is the most solemn and appropriate moment to fulfill a wish which, after we mentioned it at the end of the preceding session, very many council Fathers made their own, pressing for an explicit declaration at this council of the motherly role of the Virgin among the Christian people. To achieve this aim, we have felt it opportune to consecrate in this very public session, a title which was suggested in honor of the Virgin from various parts of the Catholic world and which is particularly dear to us because it sums up in an admirable synthesis the privileged position recognized by the council for the Virgin in the Holy Church.

"Therefore, for the glory of the Virgin Mary and for our own consolation, we proclaim the Most Blessed Mary Mother of the Church, that is to say, of all the people of God, the faithful as well as the pastors, who call her the most loving Mother. And we wish that the Mother of God should be still more honored and invoked by the entire Christian people by this most sweet title. . . ."

Thus Pope Paul. Some Protestant and even a few Catholic commentators have since charged that, in proclaiming Mary the Mother of the Church, the Sovereign Pontiff offended against the doctrine of collegiality which is so notable a part of the dogmatic constitution "On the Church." For example, the Lutheran theologian Martin E. Marty, an associate editor of *The Christian Century*, wrote in the Dec. 9 issue of that journal: "Since (the bishops) had chosen deliberately not to bestow this title on Mary, why did he . . . act against collegiality?" In the same issue, the Catholic writer Michael Novak

rebuked the Pope for "his use of the title 'Mother of the Church' after the Council had specifically rejected it."

To dispose of these unwarranted charges, and to put the papal proclamation of Mary as Mother of the Church in the right perspective and light, it will be useful to recall some events and circumstances from the history of the Second Vatican Council.

During the second session, on the Feast of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Oct. 11, 1963, Pope Paul and the council Fathers assembled in the basilica of St. Mary Major to commemorate the first anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. In his allocution on that occasion, the Holy Father declared that he wished to "bring to Mary, with our humble presence, with our devout prayer, the homage of our Council, in the moment in which, resuming its labors in the present second session, it is on the point of pronouncing in the great vision of the Church the most sweet and most holy name of the Madonna, the Mother of Jesus Christ, and therefore Mother of God and our Mother. . . ."

At the end of this allocution the Pope pronounced the following prayer:

"O Mary, behold the Church, behold the most responsible members of the mystical Body of Christ, assembled round about you to recognize and celebrate you, their mystical Mother.

"Bless, O Mary, the great assembly of the hierarchial Church, which itself is likewise the Mother of Christians, brothers of Christ. . . . Bring it about, O Mary, that His Church, which is also yours, in defining herself, recognize you as its mother, its daughter and eminent sister, its incomparable model, its glory, its joy and hope. . . ."

At the time when these words were spoken, the draft on Our Lady was entitled "On the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church," and it had the status of an autonomous schema. A few weeks later, in the famous vote of Oct. 29, 1963, the council Fathers voted, by a small majority, to incorporate the

draft on Our Lady in the schema "On the Church." But the above-mentioned title of the Marian draft remained unchanged by this vote.

In his address to the Council Fathers on the closing day of the second session of the Council, Dec. 4, 1963, Pope Paul expressed the hope that the third session would produce, in the schema on the Blessed Virgin Mary, "the unanimous and loving acknowledgment of the place, privileged above all others, which the Mother of God occupies in Holy Church—that Church which is the principal subject matter of the present Council. After Christ, her place in the Church is the most exalted, and also the one closest to us, so that we may honor her with the title 'Mother of the Church' to her glory and to our benefit."

During a general audience in St. Peter's Basilica on May 27, 1964, the Sovereign Pontiff declared: "Thus also by this title Our Lady can be considered and honored as the mother of the holy Church, which is also marked by the very sweet and very exalted title of mother—mother Church. . . ."

Relevant to our topic is also the following passage from *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul's first encyclical, Aug. 6, 1964:

"In this encyclical we are deliberately refraining from passing any judgment of our own on doctrinal points concerning the Church which are at present under examination by the Council itself over which we have been called to preside. It is our desire to leave full liberty of study and discussion to such an important and authoritative assembly. In virtue of our office of teacher and pastor, and placed at the head of the Church of God, we reserve to ourselves the choice of the proper moment and manner of expressing our judgment, most happy if we can present it in perfect accord with that of the council Fathers."

Early in the third session of the Council, on Sept. 16, 17 and 18, 1964, the council Fathers discussed the schema on Our Lady, which now constituted the eighth chapter of the schema on the Church. The Marian draft which lay before the Fathers had been much revised by the Theological Commission, and its

earlier title, "On the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church," had been changed to read: "On the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and of the Church."

This new title was destined to become the definitive one, despite the urgent pleas, voiced during the September debate in the name of over 200 bishops, that the earlier title be restored, or at least that the text of the chapter make explicit mention of Mary as "Mother of the Church," and despite repetition of these pleas by several of the 521 bishops who, on Oct. 29, 1964, voted for the chapter "*juxta modum*."

In rejecting these proposed emendations and "*modi*," the Theological Commission argued that the new title was more consonant with the Marian chapter's role of conclusion and crown of the constitution on the Church; further, that compromise was necessary, since a number of bishops had opposed, chiefly on ecumenical grounds, any express mention of Our Lady as "Mother of the Church"; and finally, that the chapter implicitly acknowledged Mary as "Mother of the Church," by its several references to her spiritual maternity, especially by the following words, which synopsise a statement in Benedict XIV's Bull *Gloriosae Dominae* (Sept 27, 1748): "The Catholic Church, taught by the Holy Spirit, honors her with filial affection and piety as a most beloved mother."

The controversial chapter, still devoid of any express mention of "Mother of the Church," finally obtained definitive approval in the general congregation of Nov. 18, 1964, when 2096 voted "*placet*," 10 "*non placet*," with one vote null and void.

It is significant that on that very date, not many hours after the vote, Pope Paul announced in his weekly general audience that he would end the council's session on Nov. 21 by "acknowledging to Our Lady the title which she well deserves of Mother of the Church." True to the promise he had made in the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, the Holy Father, having allowed the council ample liberty in its deliberations, chose the proper

moment and manner of expressing his own judgment, as was his right in virtue of his God-given office of teacher, pastor, and head of the Church. The Sovereign Pontiff's words at that general audience deserve to be quoted:

"The doctrine of the Church presents itself as an exaltation of mankind. And you know where it reaches its summit: in the human creature who possesses within herself, through divine privilege, the fullness of human perfection and who was chosen to give to the Word of God, when He becomes man for our salvation, our flesh, our nature; to be, that is to say, the Mother of Christ—God-man—according to the flesh, and our spiritual Mother through the mystical union which makes us brothers in Christ. As we know, Mary has a most singular position. She, too, is a member of the Church; she is redeemed by Christ, she is our sister, but, by virtue of being chosen to be the mother of the Redeemer of mankind, and because of her perfect and eminent representation of the human race, she has the right to be called, morally and typically, the mother of all men, and especially ours, of us, the believers and the redeemed, the Mother of the Church, the mother of the faithful.

"For this reason, beloved sons and daughters, we are happy to announce that we will end this session of the council, which has traced the doctrine of the Church, with the joy of acknowledging to Our Lady the title which she well deserves of Mother of the Church.

"It will be this title which will help us to celebrate the most Holy Mary as the loving queen of the world, the maternal center of unity, the pious hope of our salvation."

Such, briefly, is the background of the Pope's proclamation, on Nov. 21, 1964, of Our Lady as "Mother of the Church." It is not true that this proclamation ran counter to the wishes of the episcopate as a whole. It was received by the bishops in St. Peter's with thunderous applause. And it is a matter of record that at least some hundreds of bishops had ardently desired that the conciliar text itself acknowledge Mary expressly as "Mother of the Church," whence it is clear that their vote for

the text, despite its failure to make this acknowledgment, was given in a spirit of compromise.

Further, even if the bishops by and large had been opposed to the title "Mother of the Church," there is nothing in the doctrine of collegiality which would forbid the Sovereign Pontiff to override them. Paul had intimated as much, in advance, in the passage already quoted from the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, when, in alerting the bishops to the possibility that he might feel called upon to express his own judgment at the proper time, he expressed the hope that this judgment might be in full accord with that of the bishops. To say this is to intimate the possibility that the papal judgment might not be in accord with the bishops.

What is more, Paul's proclamation of the "Mother of the Church" did but explicitate doctrine which is implicit in the Marian chapter of the constitution "On the Church." Then, too, the Holy Father was but repeating a title which had been used several times by Popes before him, from Gregory XVI to and including John XXIII, and which Paul himself had used previously on more than one occasion. This title has been, therefore, a teaching of the ordinary papal magisterium, to which we owe, as the dogmatic constitution "On the Church" itself says, religious assent.

Finally, that Mary is the "Mother of the Church" is implicit in the general doctrine of the Second Vatican Council's constitution "On the Church." For, according to the second chapter of that constitution, God does not save men "merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather it pleased Him to bring men together as one people," the People of God, and to this People all men are called, and with this People all men are related in various ways. If we bring these teachings to bear on the avowals in Chapter VIII of Mary's spiritual maternity, it follows that Our Lady's maternity in the order of grace is not exercised first on individuals and then only by way of consequence on the Mystical

Body which is the Church, the People of God. "It is exercised on the Mystical Body and members simultaneously, and on the members as integrating the Body" (Cyril Vollert, S.J., in *MARIAN STUDIES*, 3 [1952] 177). Whence it is clear that Mary's spiritual maternity in regard to the faithful means indeed that she is "Mother of the Church." The concept of Our Lady as "Mother of the Church" embodies a deep ecclesiological truth.

Further, from the above-mentioned teachings of Chapter II it also follows that Mary's spiritual maternity in regard to those who are not fully incorporated in the Church orients them toward and relates them to the Church. Thus the concept of Mary as "Mother of the Church" embodies a deep ecumenical truth, ignorance of which impoverishes, rather than promotes, the ecumenical movement.

It is to the great credit of Pope Paul VI that, exercising his office of "confirming" his brethren, he focussed attention on these precious ecclesiological and ecumenical truths by solemnly proclaiming, on Nov. 21, 1964, that the Blessed Virgin Mary is truly the "Mother of the Church."