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MARY IN THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II

Presidential Address by

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

Now that the Second Vatican Council has completed its monumental labors, it remains for the entire People of God to assimilate and implement the Synod's teachings and directives. In the discharge of this sacred duty special tasks will necessarily fall to the many learned societies which flourish within the Church, our own among them.

Hence the members of the Mariological Society of America may welcome, in preparation for their particular contribution to the Church's post-conciliar endeavors, a review of the pronouncements of Vatican II on Marian doctrine and devotion. Since noteworthy passages are to be found in several of the 16 documents which issued from the Council, our review must be rapid, almost cursory, but, even so, one may hope that it will yield some guidelines as well as inspiration for the future labors of this Society.

Taking up the relevant documents in the chronological order of their promulgation, we begin with the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, promulgated Dec. 4, 1963. In its chapter on the Liturgical Year (Ch. 5), after treating of the primary object of the annual cycle of feasts, which is "the whole mystery of Christ" (n. 102), the Constitution dedicates a special article (n. 103) to the liturgical cultus of Mary, before turning, in article n. 104, to the feasts of the other saints. The Marian articles reads:

In celebrating this annual cycle of Christ's mysteries, holy Church honors with especial love the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, who is joined by an inseparable bond to the saving work of her Son. In her the Church holds up and admires the most excellent fruit of

the redemption, and joyfully contemplates, as in a faultless image, that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be

This text incorporates and adds to the best elements of two earlier formulations. In presenting it for the approval of the Council Fathers, the Conciliar Commission on the Sacred Liturgy explained that the revised wording met the requests of those Fathers who wished the passage to stress the unity of the mystery of Christ with the cult of the Blessed Virgin, and to proclaim clearly and aptly this cult itself. To vindicate this especial love and veneration which the Catholic Church accords to Mary, the passage adduces three reasons: (a) the Mother of God is inseparably linked with the saving work of her Son; (b) she is the most excellent fruit of the redemption (whence the honoring of Mary redounds to the glory of the Savior); (c) she is the prototype and most perfect exemplar of the Church, whom all should imitate.¹

One may, then, quite justly say that the liturgical Constitution exhibits the mystery of Mary in its Christological, ecclesiological, and eschatological perspectives.² These same perspectives found notable development in the final chapter (Ch 8) of the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, of which chapter Pope Paul VI remarked, in promulgating the Constitution on Nov. 21, 1964: "It is the first time . . . 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"

Surely all here present are so familiar with this Marian chapter of the *Lumen gentium* that even a summary would be superfluous. In any case, it seems more useful to set forth the major factors which led the Council, after considerable con-

¹ Cf. M. Peinador, C.M.F., *De rationibus cultus erga B. Virginem Mariam iuxta Constitutionem Vaticanam II de Sacra Liturgia*, in *EphBM* 15 (1965) 84; F. Zauner, in *Constitutio de Sacra Liturgia cum Commentario* (Bibliotheca "Ephemerides Liturgicae"), (Roma, 1964) 178

² Cf. M. Peinador, *art. cit.*, 93.

troversy within the Aula and much misunderstanding in the world outside, to elaborate its Marian synthesis and incorporate it in the Constitution on the Church, as the crowning chapter, entitled *On the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and of the Church*.

Before the Council began, some 600 Bishops had petitioned that Vatican II speak of the Blessed Mother; what is more, not a few Protestant leaders had asked for a clear exposition of Catholic doctrine on the role of the Virgin, her privileges, and the cult that is due her.³ To meet these desires a preparatory commission worked up a draft for eventual consideration by the Council Fathers. This Marian draft was conceived and presented to the Council as an independent schema, distinct and separate from the one on the Church, and it maintained this autonomous status until Oct. 29, 1963, when the bishops voted, by a small margin, to integrate it into the schema on the Church, as the final and climactic chapter of the latter document.

To understand this somewhat belated decision, and also the reluctance of the 48 percent of the Council Fathers who voted against the proposal, one must recall that the preeminently pastoral and ecumenical orientation of Vatican II did not really become crystal-clear until the discourse with which Pope John XXIII opened the Synod on Oct. 11, 1962. Moreover, not until almost the close of the first session did the bishops begin to perceive that the Church would be, not just one of the Council's themes, but rather *the* theme. This realization was driven home more deeply by the discourse with which Paul VI inaugurated the second session on Sept. 29, 1963.

As a result of all this, the conviction grew that if Vatican II were to treat of Mary, it should be in relationship to the Church, in order to be true to the finality of the Council and to its pastoral and ecumenical orientation. Hence it was that 52 percent of the bishops opted on Oct. 29, 1963, for inclusion of the

³ Cf. Giuseppe Besutti, O.S.M., *Note di cronaca sul Concilio Vaticano II e lo Schema "De B. Maria Virgine,"* in *Mm*, 26 (1964) 4.

Marian schema in that on the Church. The Council Fathers who voted against this did so mainly because they feared—not without reason, as it turned out—that now to deprive the Marian schema of the autonomous status which it had enjoyed for so long would be widely interpreted, erroneously to be sure, as a downgrading of the Blessed Mother and of devotion to her. Another consideration which influenced the minority to vote “no” was the fact that, at the time, the schema on the Church did not yet have its present seventh chapter, on the eschatological nature of the Pilgrim Church and its union with the Heavenly Church. Lacking this chapter, the *de ecclesia* schema did not as yet offer a suitable basis for the proposed transition to Mary as the eschatological crown of the Church.

These reflections on the history of the last chapter of the Constitution *Lumen gentium* serve to dispel the already mentioned impression of perhaps many that Vatican II wished to de-emphasize Marian doctrine and devotion. How grossly mistaken is this impression can be gathered, moreover, from the frequency with which other conciliar documents return to the theme of Our Lady. Consider, to begin with, the two decrees which were promulgated together with the Constitution *Lumen gentium*—the Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches, and the Decree on Ecumenism.

The former earnestly asks (n. 30) all Christians, Eastern as well as Western, “to pour forth constant, even daily, fervent prayers to God so that, with the help of the Most Holy Mother of God, all may become one.”

The Decree on Ecumenism acknowledges with satisfaction that in their liturgical worship the separated Eastern Christians “pay high tribute, in beautiful hymns of praise, to Mary ever Virgin, whom the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus solemnly proclaimed to be the Most Holy Mother of God, so that Christ would be acknowledged as being truly and properly Son of God and Son of Man according to the Scriptures” (n. 15).

Then later, in turning its attention to Protestant beliefs, the

same decree notes (n. 20) "that there are considerable divergencies from the Catholic Church's doctrine on Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, and on the work of redemption, and hence on the mystery and ministry of the Church and the role of Mary in the work of salvation." This statement focusses attention on the important fact that the indispensable prerequisite for agreement of Protestant with Catholic about Mary is agreement at the deeper level of Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology.

Our review of Mary in the documents of Vatican II brings us next to three of the five decrees and declarations which were promulgated on Oct. 28, 1965. The Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of the Religious Life expresses the hope (n. 25) that, with the benevolent intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, whose life is, in the words of St. Ambrose, "a model for all," the number of religious may daily increase and their salutary work be more effective.⁴ The Decree on Priestly Training proclaims (n. 8) that seminarians "should love and venerate with a filial trust the most blessed Virgin Mary, who was given as mother to the disciple by Christ Jesus as He was dying on the cross." The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions records among the reasons why the Church esteems the Moslems the fact that these revere Jesus as a prophet and also "honor Mary, His virgin mother, at times they even call upon her with devotion" (n. 3). Then, in urging us to special esteem and love for Jews, the same Declaration recalls (n. 4) that "'from them is the Christ according to the flesh' (*Rom.* 9, 4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary"

On Nov. 18, 1965, Pope Paul promulgated the Council's Decree on the Lay Apostolate. In its chapters *On the Vocation of the Lay to the Apostolate* (Ch. 1), this document takes pains to extoll the importance of Our Blessed Mother for the lay apostolate. The Decree states (n. 4):

The perfect example of this type of spiritual and apostolic life is the most Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles, who while

leading the life common to all here on earth, one filled with family concerns and labors, was always intimately united with her Son and in an entirely unique way cooperated in the work of the Savior. Having now been assumed into heaven, 'with her maternal charity she cares for these brothers of her Son who are still on their earthly pilgrimage and remain involved in dangers and difficulties until they are led into the happy fatherland' (cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, nn. 62, 65). All should devoutly venerate her and commend their life and apostolate to her maternal care.

We have already heard the Council exhorting seminarians to venerate Our Lady with filial love and trust. That this devotion should continue after ordination is inculcated in the Synod's Decree of Dec. 7, 1965, on the Ministry and Life of Priests. The chapter dedicated to *Priestly Life* (Ch. 3) has a section *On Aids for the Life of Priests*, in the course of which we read (n. 18):

(Priests) will always find a wonderful example of such docility (docility to the mission they have assumed in the Holy Spirit) in the Blessed Virgin Mary, who was led by the Holy Spirit to dedicate herself totally to the mystery of man's redemption (Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogm. Constit. on the Church, n. 65). Let priests love and venerate with filial devotion and honor this mother of the Eternal Highpriest, Queen of Apostles and protector of their own ministry

Finally, in concluding their Decree of Dec 7, 1965, on the Church's Missionary Activity (n. 42), the Council Fathers professed themselves to be united "in prayer with all the Christian faithful that, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Queen of the Apostles, all nations may soon be led to acknowledge the truth (1 Tim. 2, 4) and that the glory of God which shines in the face of Christ Jesus may through the Holy Spirit shed its light upon all men (2 Cor. 4, 6).

To sum up, ten of the sixteen conciliar documents occupy

themselves with Mary to some degree.⁴ This abiding attention of the Council Fathers to Our Lady thoroughly explodes the curious view of some that Vatican II sought to thrust the Blessed Mother into the background of Catholic life and thought. By the same token, it should inspire and encourage this Society to pursue with revived energy and zeal the purpose for which the Society was founded—"the study and dissemination of theological doctrines relating to the Virgin Mary."

Moreover, by its concentration on the Christological, ecclesiological perspectives of the mystery of Mary, the Synod has offered us guidelines for the course our Marian studies should take in this post-conciliar era, an era of pastoral and apostolic renewal and of ecumenism. As Pope Paul indicated more than once during the past year, the efforts of Mariologists should correspond to the intention of Vatican II, which was to give to our doctrine and devotion toward the Virgin Mary a Christ-centered and Church-centered direction. It is Paul's hope that, thus oriented, the study and piety of Catholics concerning the Mother of God will have the merit of gathering around Mary, the Mother of Unity, not only Catholics but, God willing, also the Christians still separated from us.⁵

⁴ Two others either mention the Blessed Mother or allude to her; cf. the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Dec. 7, 1965), n. 22, and the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Nov. 18, 1965), n. 8.

⁵ Cf. the Holy Father's allocution of Feb. 2, 1965, in *AAS* 57 (1965) 250ff.