

Marian Studies

Volume 20

Article 6

1-22-1969

Presidential Address

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Recommended Citation

Maguire, Alban A. (1969) "Presidential Address," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 20, Article 6, Pages 24-28.
Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol20/iss1/6

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

If one can judge from the typical presidential address in our society, the purpose of this talk should be to take a look at the state of the union by surveying the immediate past and trying to point out some direction for the future of Mariology. We ask where we stand and then inquire whether we should be making some moves to change our position. I think I know where we are, in a general way, I am not sure where we are going—but I should like to make a few suggestions

Within this small group gathered for the annual meeting of the Mariological Society I feel we can almost presume a common resolution to work for a more meaningful place for our Lady within the general field of theology and within the Church. We may not agree on details, but I believe we have a type of consensus about the general status of Marian doctrine and devotion, and about our task for the future. It may be difficult, if not impossible, to introduce any new ideas. At the same time it may be possible to act as a catalyst to crystallize our notions and to solidify our purpose.

In the days when this society was founded, our age was known as the *Age of Mary* or *The Marian Era*. Since then we might note the climate has changed. Even at that time there were some who insisted that there was no reason for a Mariological Society, for Mariology should be dealt with in the Theological Society. The debate was resolved then by the interest shown in a separate body organized to study the theology of our Lady. It could not be solved the same way today.

The question of a separate Mariological Society is not the point here—it was introduced as an example of the change in climate. This is not the problem we face. The basic problem seems to be whether our Lady herself is being abandoned. There is evidence in some theological writings of a cleavage with the Catholic past, and there is considerable evidence of

a deep chasm between this type of writing and the faith and piety of a large number of the Catholic faithful. The rift between theology and devotion has taken a new turn.

Breast beating about mistakes of the past has always seemed to me to be an exercise in futility, nevertheless, it is probable that each one of us by consulting his memory can recall incidents wherein he was hard put to demonstrate some theses proposed within Mariology. Our fellow priests were usually the most difficult to convince. Nor should we have any hesitation in confessing that there were excesses connected with certain types of Marian devotions. To understand the present, we should admit the difficulties of the past in Mariology, as well as excesses in the manifestation of devotion to our Lady.

It is extremely important that we understand this time because at present we are told there is a crisis in Mariology. I do not believe that we have to be reminded of the crisis in Mariology or of the crisis in Marian devotions. Before the figure of the Mother of God there is tension and there is confusion.

To try to understand the confusion is essential for our purpose. We see priests and teaching religious who are themselves confused, passing on their confusion to the laity. In part they, together with many educated lay people, have fallen under the spell of the publicists of the secular and religious press who have spread the word that the Blessed Mother was downgraded by the Council. More than that, they have seen fundamental Marian doctrine undermined by theologians who certainly have a good press.

In considering these two sources of confusion, namely, the allegation that the council downgraded our Lady and the bizarre opinions of some theologians, I intend to spend only a moment or two on the latter. It would be impossible to treat these ideas in detail right now. I think, however, that we should not panic in the face of what appears unorthodox; we should first of all try to listen and understand what is being taught, and if we cannot reconcile the new opinions with Catholic doctrine we should do our best to propose the Catholic

doctrine with all the theological skill at our command. It is imperative that we listen, that we be sure of our grounds; and that we explain the contested doctrine clearly and persuasively.

The place of Vatican II in the present state of Mariology has to be considered with more care. We can quickly dismiss the motion that the Council had anything to do with the present confusion by quoting from what it had to say about Our Lady and from the statements of the Fathers of the Council, particularly from such as Cardinal Suenens whose credentials as a liberal are above reproach and who might have been considered as an architect of the so-called downgrading.

Our principal concern is not what the Council did not do wrong; not how it was not responsible for the present regrettable situation. Rather our concern is what the Council did in a positive way to promote the development of Mariology. In other words, we cannot be simplistic (if you'll pardon the expression) by concentrating on what the Council did or did not do to preserve the *status quo ante*. In many respects, because of the Council, the Church has changed and will continue to change. We should try to understand these changes to see whether the Council in giving new directions to the Church has not also given us the material for the renovation and enrichment of Marian doctrine.

We can all cite the passages from the conciliar documents which demonstrate the importance given to Our Lady by Vatican II. At the same time, I think that we are all aware that the debate on a separate schema devoted to Mary produced in the minds of many, priests as well as lay people, the notion that somehow or other the Council Fathers wished to minimize Our Lady's place in the Church. This is not the only case of apparent misunderstanding, but it is an egregious example. Cardinal Suenens had this to say about the unfortunate misunderstandings which have developed in the Church with special reference to the Blessed Mother: "I think it is correct to say that after the Council we had to face some unbalanced

attitudes . . . In the Council, for instance, we stressed—and it was necessary—the Christocentric aspect of Marian devotion; however, in some quarters this was interpreted to mean that opposition against our Blessed Lady had developed, which was exactly the contrary to what the Council Fathers had in mind” (*Jubilee Magazine*, April, 1968).

We may lay to rest the notion that Vatican II or those who voted for its decisions had the slightest intention of downgrading Our Lady, but we still have a problem in the present *malaise* in the Church about Mary. A quotation does not settle a problem. What should we do about it and how should we proceed? We will find that the old ways will not accomplish our purpose. For example, what I have said about the teaching of the Council itself will not particularly impress the younger generation of seminarians. I am not at all sure that the words of Cardinal Suenens will correct false impressions that some have about the intention of the Council Fathers. Our task is to draw from the teachings of the Council to produce an enriched Mariology that will speak to the people of our day.

This task may not be as difficult as we might imagine. To some extent we have been engaged in the process in our meetings in the past. I can remember at one of our meetings a few years back hearing the remark: “I had thought that Mariology or the Mariological Society would have no purpose after the Decree on the Church, but now I see that it is at the heart of the theology of the Church and the problems of ecumenism. It has a big job to do.”

Since the Decree on the Liturgy we have known that Marian devotion should be a liturgical devotion. I do not think that the liturgists or the Mariologists have done enough to develop this point of view although we have made a beginning. Perhaps Father Schmemann, in explaining the Orthodox approach to Our Lady in the liturgy, helped us more than anyone else in realizing what we should be thinking about.

Certainly the Council has directed us back to the sources in every respect of theology. It has further led us to be imme-

diately concerned with the life of the people of God when we concern ourselves with the elucidation of doctrine. As we progress in our penetration of Marian doctrine we should be trying to see its relation to the liturgy, to the missionary activity in the Church, and to the ecumenical movement. All of these things we have begun to do, but there is much that remains. By starting to work from the orientation given to us by the teaching of Vatican II, I think that we shall give Mariology a luster never before realized and restore Marian devotion to its rightful place in the hearts of the faithful.

We have been told to return to the sources—we can all remember in some of our deliberations in the past how a completely fresh approach to Our Lady's place in Salvation History was developed from biblical themes. An outstanding instance of this kind was the explanation of the semitic notion of the Queen Mother as presented by Father Barnabas Ahern. Other biblical themes have been shown to present a new and much more profound insight into our Lady's place in the life and work of her Son. This can be done and it has been done. Will it be one of the ironies of history that Catholics will lose interest in our Lady just when Protestants are beginning to become interested because of this new scriptural orientation?

As I stated in the beginning, I had no hope of introducing any new ideas in these remarks. I hoped and I hope, by what has been said, to spark us to renew our determination to deepen our studies of our Lady because the Church needs these studies today more than ever in the past. I think we should take our themes from the climate that exists in the Church today in order to speak to the Church of today. We can admit false emphasis in the past; we can admit abuses. But this will not help us too much; rather we should be determined to start from within the teaching of Vatican II in order to grow from what may have been a splintered theology into a view of Our Lady that puts her in her rightful place in the Church and with her Son.

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