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MARY AND SECULARITY

Presidential Address

By

REV. GEORGE F. KIRWIN, O.M.I.

Though the descriptive resumé of books which one finds on their jackets are often overly optimistic, a sentence describing the contents of a recent book by the Protestant scholar, Langdon Gilkey, seems to do justice to the work of the author. It reads: "In the face of premature autopsies of Catholicism today a distinguished Protestant theologian here offers an affirmative, less panic-stricken analysis of what is happening to the Church."¹

Some Catholic readers may not be too happy with either his analysis of what is happening or with his unfeigned pleasure that it is happening, but the book entitled *Catholicism Confronts Modernity* would seem to be an important one for at least two reasons. First of all, it manifests a sincere concern for the future of the Catholic Church, and secondly it raises the issue of secularity and its relationship to Catholic, Christian theology.

Catholic theologians are turning their attention ever more frequently to the phenomenon of secularity.² I believe a valid case has been made for a distinction between secularity and secularism.³ Without offering a scientific definition of secularity, I would describe it as a commitment to the secular to the degree that the secular represents a human experience common

¹ Langdon Gilke, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).

² David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).

³ *Ibid.*, and *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 29 (1974) 68-69.

to all men, whether believers or unbelievers. It is that commitment to the secular for the purpose of developing a theology which will be meaningful for secular man while remaining faithful to Christian revelation which has led many contemporary Christian theologians to speak of what they call the "revisionist model" for theology. In the words of David Tracy, "... the revisionist theologian is committed to what seems clearly to be the central task of contemporary Christian theology: the dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible reconciliation between the principal values, cognitive claims and existential faiths of both a reinterpreted, post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity."⁴

In more simple terms, Tracy is calling for a critical reflection upon what he calls the two principal sources for theology: Christian texts and common human experience and language. The revisionist model admittedly has many difficulties attached to it and it is not my intention to defend it either as viable or desirable. Yet the issues raised by this discussion are important ones and the insights on theological method can prove helpful to the Catholic theologian, even more specifically to the Catholic Marian theologian who perhaps more than many of his colleagues faces not only an unbelieving world but an unsympathetic audience of fellow theologians.

Schubert Ogden's definition of Christian theology as "the fully reflective understanding of the Christian witness of faith as decisive for human existence"⁵ seems to me to express quite well the task faced by every theologian, that of explicating Christian revelation in such a way as to help his fellow man understand it and embrace it as decisive for his salvation.

Since in our view as Marian theologians part of that "Christian fact," as it is called, involves a woman from whom in the

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32

⁵ Schubert Ogden, *What is Theology?* in *The Journal of Religion* 52 (1972) 22.

fullness of time God's Son was born,⁶ it becomes necessary for us to submit our theological reflections to the rigorous scientific criteria demanded in the contemporary situation. In this present convention we have committed ourselves to serious, scientific reflection upon at least two aspect of this problem, namely the place of Mary within the Christian fact and the meaning and meaningfulness of various so-called "Marian truths" inasfar as they are interrelated. These are indeed "core" questions for the Marian theologian and in fact for any serious practitioner of Christian theology, if only because Mary has meant so much to so many generations of Christian believers. She has been and continues to be for many part of the Christian experience and more than a passing notice must be taken of this fact.

In no way is it my place here to enter into a discussion of the particular issues that are involved in each of these questions. May it suffice for me to underline something which I think is especially significant for the Marian theologian who, like his colleagues, seeks to correlate in a critical way his human experience (which he shares in common with all men) and the Christian texts which are available to the investigation of all who are so inclined. Our perspective, it seems to me, must be Christo-centric.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, issued in 1974, Pope Paul clearly emphasizes this aspect of Marian doctrine and piety. He says: "In the Virgin Mary everything is relative to Christ and dependent upon him. It was with a view to Christ that God the Father from all eternity chose her to be the all-holy Mother and adorned her with gifts of the Spirt granted to no one else. Certainly genuine Christian piety has never failed to highlight the indissoluble link and essential relationship of the Virgin to the Divine Saviour. Yet it seems to us particularly in conformity with the spiritual orientation of our time which is dominated and absorbed by the 'question of Christ,' that in

⁶ Cf. Gal. 4:4; Luke 1:22ff; 2:1ff; Mt. 1:18ff.

the expression of devotion to the Virgin the Christological aspect should have particular prominence."⁷

Without implying that the proponents of the revisionist method would accept my conclusions regarding the meaningfulness of Mary within God's plan of salvation, I would like to take as a point of departure for a brief reflection upon Mariology and Christocentrism one of the conclusions relative to Christology drawn by David Tracy employing his revisionist model. He says: "For Christians, christological language suffices because it fulfills certain factual understandings of human and divine reality: the fact that our lives are, in reality, meaningful; that we really do live in the presence of a loving God; that the final word about our lives is gracious and the final power is love."⁸ I submit that this statement can be made in an analogous way about Mariological language. I emphasize: the validity of the statement is utterly unique when it is applied to Christological beliefs; that while it is simply different when made of Marian beliefs, it is in some way the same.

I would find the meaningfulness of my life authenticated or verified in the Incarnation, i.e., the fact that God became man in Jesus Christ. The realism of the Christ-event, howsoever contingent as a fact, indeed precisely because contingent, helps me to understand my own conviction that my human existence is something good, something meaningful. And the realism of that Christ-event, the fact that this Person whom I encounter in the Christian witness is truly man is verified for me by the fact (howsoever contingent) that He was born of Mary; the fact that He is at the same time truly God's own Son is verified for me by the interpretation of the infancy narratives as indicating transcendence and in a more definitive way by the conciliar decision at Ephesus in 431 that Mary is the *Theotokos*, the God-

⁷ Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (U.S. Catholic Conference, 1974) 18.

⁸ David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975) 223.

bearer. The appreciation I have of my own worth is deepened when I more fully understand the Incarnation event: humanity as a whole is called to dialogue with God. I find this exemplified in a striking way in Mary's faith-response: "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say."⁹ Humanity as a whole is called to collaborate with God. As one writer has expressed it, "Mary's fruitful virginity is the type of the creature's possibilities under the movement of the Holy Spirit, and of its radical sterility without grace."¹⁰

In regard to the second element mentioned by Tracy, namely, that we really do live in the presence of a loving God, this is verified for me by Jesus' own words in John's gospel: "Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life."¹¹ The total reality of the Christ-event can be subsumed under the heading, "love," God's love for me to the point where He wills to send His Son to death to free me from the power of evil which I experience from within and from without. Through Mary God's Son has become one with sinful humanity. It is not a question of a substitution but rather, as the third Preface for Christmas in the Roman Missal expresses it, "... so marvelous is this oneness between God and man that in Christ man restores to man the gift of everlasting life." God's saving love is welcomed by humanity in the person of the Virgin of Nazareth, by the one who for this very reason is called, "the highly-favored" one. Mary's maternity is part of God's redeeming action in Jesus Christ.

Tracy's third reflection upon the validity of Christological expressions is that the final word about our lives is gracious and the final power is love. This conviction flows from his perception of the meaning of Christ's cross-resurrection. Through

⁹ Luke 1:38

¹⁰ Remy Lack, *Mariologie et Christocentrisme* in *Etudes Mariales* 21 (1964) 32.

¹¹ Jo. 1:38

God's gracious love in Christ we have achieved the final victory over sin and death. We are not imprisoned by our own pride or sensuality nor are we doomed to a meaningless, tragic end. Through God's benevolent love we have been liberated from sin and empowered to achieve final fulfillment.

The meaningfulness of God's decisive action for humanity in Christ is also symbolized and concretized for me in Mary, specifically in what Catholic Tradition has called her Immaculate Conception and her Assumption. I experience the effective presence of God's powerful love in the person of Mary who for that reason has been called, "the highly-favored daughter" and who has herself sung God's praises: "God who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is His name."¹² I perceive more fully in God's love for her the fact of His "sin-destroying," "death conquering" love for humanity and thus for me.

In each of these three aspects of my human situation it is to the Christ-event that I turn for meaning, for significance. In each of these aspects I perceive that meaning, that human value not only in the Person of Jesus the Christ but also in the person of Mary, His human mother. It is in contemplating her within the context of her Son's presence in our world that I understand why she could have predicted: "All ages to come shall call me blessed."¹³

In this bicentennial year, when we are celebrating our nation's two hundredth anniversary we shall undoubtedly hear much about freedom and justice and truth. May it be our resolve, as members of the Mariological Society of America, to make each his own contribution towards the promotion of true freedom among our brothers and sisters in the Lord by praying, studying, writing and speaking about our Father's liberating action in Jesus Christ with the cooperation of the woman who in the fullness of time became the God-bearer.

¹² Luke 1:29, 49

¹³ Luke 1:48b