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Presidential Address

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By

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

At the conclusion of last year's presidential address Father Charles Neumann asked: "Is not our challenge now to make the image of His Mother and ours so beautiful that the person alive today finds himself wanting to see with his own eyes who she is, and in the process feels himself being led to her Son?"¹ With these words Fr. Neumann touches upon an issue which I would like to make the subject of this year's presidential address. I suppose I could best express it as the relevance of Mary. Hesitant as one should be in using an overworked phrase, still it does open up the possibility of discussing a problem which needs attention.

During this past year I have given a series of talks on Our Lady to various groups: priests, sisters, laity, younger and older people, and I found on the one hand a real ignorance about Mary, and on the other hand a valid interest in her role in our spiritual lives. The ignorance may well stem from the fact that in the past we simply accepted Mary without much critical reflection, while in recent years many have rejected her out of hand perhaps because of the confusion and the negativism which seem to be by-products of radical change. The vivid interest in Mary and in her spiritual role seems to me to be a sign of a deep-seated uneasiness, an awareness that something needs to be clarified. It is the relevance of Mary that is at issue.

In explaining what he calls "The Blondelian Shift," namely

¹ *Marian Studies* (Proceedings of the Mariological Society of America, 25 (1974) 28.

Blondel's rejection of extrinsicism in matters of grace, Gregory Baum says:

"In all the Churches theologians now realize that the irrelevant cannot be believed. It is no longer possible, they say, to regard divine revelation as information about heavenly realities that are added to human life from outside."²

He goes on to say:

"In any case, the task of the theologian is to show how the Gospel ties in with human life, how on the one hand it offers a critique of human life and thus manifests its transcendence, and how on the other hand it transforms human life and thus demonstrates its relevance."³

Blondel's reflections contributed to the development of a new method in theology which has been characterized by more recent theologians as the transcendental method. It is based upon the realization that there is a certain normative pattern immanent in our conscious and intentional operations which by a process of introspection can be determined.

According to Bernard Lonergan:

"...transcendental method is the concrete and dynamic unfolding of human attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness and responsibility. That unfolding occurs whenever anyone uses his mind in an appropriate fashion. Hence, to introduce transcendental method introduces no new resource into theology, for theologians have always had minds and always used them. However, while transcendental method will introduce no new resource, it does add considerable light and precision to the performance of theological tasks."⁴

² Gregory Baum, *Man Becoming* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970) 9.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 24.

This is precisely the area which should concern us members of the Mariological Society of America, that, namely, of explicating the meaning of Mary within the historical context of salvation. As Pope Paul so beautifully expresses this in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*,

"Mary, the New Woman, stands at the side of Christ, the New Man, within whose mystery the mystery of man alone finds true light; she is given to us as a pledge and guarantee that God's plan in Christ for the salvation of the whole man has already achieved realization in a creature: in her."⁵

To engage ourselves in this theological task will demand of us that we be in touch with the needs of our contemporary world both in terms of knowledge and personal concern, and that we take seriously our faith-experience of Mary as the "highly favored one" in order to integrate its meaning into our own lives so as to share this with our contemporaries.

In his book *Philosophy of God and Theology*, Bernard Lonergan states that the definition of theology as the science about God is no longer sufficient; today it must be defined as reflection on the significance and value of a religion in a culture. He says:

"Theology is reflection on religion. It mediates between a religion and a culture. Its function is to bring to light the significance and value of a religion in any given culture. It follows that, even though the religion remains unchanged, still a theology will vary with cultural variations."⁶

Whether or not one agrees with his definition of theology, his insights are instructive. Our tendency in the past to con-

⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* published by the United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1974, 40-41.

⁶ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *Philosophy of God and Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973) 22.

struct a theology through a strictly deductive process, rooted as it might have been in the scriptural message, has perhaps contributed to a malaise, a feeling of irrelevance, an inability to respond to the needs of our contemporaries because answers were being given to questions which were not being asked. It might seem that this approach through transcendental method would not allow for a systematic grasp of God's revealed word because of a tendency to be eclectic. Yet continuity and development are two of the major concerns of theologians who devote their attention to transcendental method. Doctrinal continuity is, of course, absolutely essential and it is precisely the mysteries of God revealed by Him and defined as such by the Church which become normative. It is these which the theologian seeks to understand. Systematic continuity is based upon the realization that there has been and shall continue to be genuine theological achievement within the schools and that this cannot be overlooked or rejected without serious consequences for the faith itself. The systematic theologian pursuing understanding of the truth through transcendental method is himself a product of a theological tradition, the important achievements of which form the basis for any development to which he might hope to contribute.

Let us now turn our attention to more concrete matters—to some of the areas of concern having a specific relationship to the Marian theologian. Let us seek to listen to some of the questions being posed by our contemporaries insofar as these become catalysts for serious reflection upon the meaning of Mary within the Christian tradition.

In the December 20th issue of the *National Catholic Reporter* there is reference to a statement made by Father Avery Dulles, S.J., concerning the dogmas of Mary's Immaculate Conception and Assumption.⁷ According to the report, Fr.

⁷ Cf. *Origins*. December 16, 1974. Full Text carried in this issue.

Dulles advocates the lifting of the ban of excommunication from those who would not accept these two Marian dogmas defined by Popes Pius IX and Pius XII. The reason for the desirability of this move is proximately that it would contribute to the cause of unity among Christians and remotely or fundamentally because it may well be that these dogmas are not central issues of faith in relation to salvation. Whether or not one agrees with Fr. Dulles' solution, the problem he seeks to deal with is a very real one. It involves the vital issue of the so-called hierarchy of truths. This same issue forms the basis for discussion between Catholics and non-Catholics on the question of papal primacy and infallibility and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The very notion of a hierarchy of truths implies that there are some defined doctrines which are less meaningful, less significant, less relevant than others and that therefore these might well be put aside in a given cultural context. Rather than hurl additional anathemas in the direction of those who would make such a suggestion, the Marian theologian must contribute to the discovery of new insights which will aid an appreciation of the providential nature of these two papal definitions.

The question of Mary's Immaculate Conception and Assumption reaches to the core of the ever-present problematic of the efficacy of Christ's redemptive work in this present world. Consequently, it touches the most sensitive nerve-endings in the debate over man's intrinsic worth as he stands before God. In addition, the historical circumstances of these definitions bring to the fore the theological questions of tradition, of collegiality, of the so-called *sensus fidelium*, three subjects which have since developed and which give us a broader perspective on important theological principles. For the first time in history the definition of revealed doctrine originated in an inquiry concerning the teaching of the bishops and the belief of the faithful. Each of these Marian dogmas was fostered by a "faith-perception" which was eventually mirrored in the

liturgy. In a passing allusion to these two dogmas, Fr. Lonergan writes:

"In closing this brief section, I note Prof. Geiselmann's view that the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of our Lady differ from those defined in ecumenical councils. The latter settle controverted issues. The former repeat what was already taught and celebrated in the whole Catholic church. Accordingly they are named by him 'cultic.' Their sole effect was that the solemn teaching office now proclaims what formerly was proclaimed by the ordinary teaching office. Perhaps I might suggest that human psychology and specifically the refinement of human feelings is the area to be explored in coming to understand the development of Marian doctrines."⁸

Following up the suggestion of Fr. Lonergan, we come to an awareness of the relevance of these Marian dogmas in terms of the realistic situation of man born into this world. While the exceptional character of Mary's Immaculate Conception underlines the sinfulness of the rest of humanity born of Adam, still it brings us an appreciation of man's intrinsic value in God's eyes; it stimulates confidence in the power of God's grace in the face of discouragement and even despair. It would seem that man wants to esteem his own worth as a human person and the doctrine of Mary's intrinsic holiness helps him to do this. And her Assumption is ultimately a source of profound hope in the face of the realistic struggle with sin and death man experiences in this present state of pilgrimage.

In an article which appeared in the periodical *Continuum*, Rosemary Reuther sees a conflict between history and doctrine in regard to the question of the virginity of our Lady. The virginity of Mary, she says, is only a symbol pointing to the transcendental character of the Incarnation. It must always

⁸ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 320.

remain within a Christological context in the sense that it is not an historical fact but merely a sign relating to the significance of Christ. Reuther says:

"Its illegitimacy development (i.e., the doctrine of Mary's virginity) began when its Christological reference was misunderstood and the attention was shifted from Jesus as the one born from Heaven, who has source in God, to Mary's status as 'virgin.' The reference came to be seen as Mary, rather than Christ, and with this came the whole illegitimate development of Mariology as a topic of doctrine in itself."⁹

These statements would tend to cause the ire of the Mariologist who sees in them an attack not only on his field of competence but even on his spiritual mother. But here again, our attention must focus on the real issues being raised in order that fire, real fire which will light up the way of God's salvific intentions for us, will be seen rather than smoke which tends to becloud the issues and makes little contribution except for an unpleasant odor. The issue is Christ and Mary in their interrelationship with the need to guarantee the absolute primacy of Christ, without, however, reducing it to an either/or situation. The issue is the relationship between symbol and doctrine or between "historical" fact and belief, something which goes far beyond the boundaries of Marian doctrines. As Ms. Reuther herself says:

"The discussion, in this author's opinion, should be very helpful as a paradigm for discussing the conflict between history and doctrine, a topic which has remained largely a closed room for Roman Catholics since the doors were slammed upon it in the anti-modernist reaction of the early twentieth century. There are many areas where traditional doctrine conflicts with present historical knowledge, although few conflicts are as relatively simple and clear cut as that between the dogma of the perpetual virginity of

⁹ Rosemary Ruether, *The Collision of History and Doctrine: The Brothers of Jesus and the Virginity of Mary*, in *Continuum*, (1969) 104.

Mary and the historical fact of the brothers of Jesus. We can conclude from this that although Christianity undoubtedly arose from historical experience, doctrine is primarily to be understood as theological symbol rather than historical 'fact.' Doctrines such as the virgin birth, the crucifixion, and the resurrection are theological statements about the relationships between God and man. It is here that their significance for faith lies."¹⁰

One must not draw the conclusion that she is *a priori* denying the facticity of the crucifixion, the resurrection or even of Mary's virginity. She wishes to submit them to what she calls historical scrutiny and only then does she deny the perpetual virginity of Mary. But the whole topic of history, its meaning and method has become complicated to the point where there is no easy solution to questions about historical fact. As Lonergan says, "No less than hermeneutics, contemporary historical thought and criticism, over and above their specific tasks, have become involved in the basic philosophic problems of our time."¹¹

The issue is, finally, the specific question of the relevance of consecrated virginity and in particular the meaning of Mary's virginity. Fr. Laurentin credits Saints Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine with having raised Christian awareness to its faith-perception of the meaning of Mary's virginity in terms of her exclusive consecration to God.¹² It would seem to them that such a total consecration to God by an individual would demand an absolute abandonment, even in the physical order, to the power of God. The notion of transcendence towards which the biblical message of Mary's virginity points might more clearly be symbolized if in actuality it was the "power of the Most High" which literally overshadowed her.

¹⁰ Rosemary Ruether, *ibid.*

¹¹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *op. cit.*, 128.

¹² René Laurentin, *Court Traité sur la Vierge Marie*, 5th ed. (Paris: Lethielleux, 1967) 47.

Whatever our conclusions to these questions might be, it is well for us to hear the question themselves.

The relevance of Mary in psychological-sociological terms raises the question of the feminine element in religion, a vast area for research. This becomes the focal point of an article by Andrew Greeley appearing in the December 15th edition of the *New York Times Magazine*. He writes: "Mary represents the insight that whatever is absolute or ultimate must be feminine as well as masculine."¹³ Greeley is attempting to respond to the need for a clarification of the meaning and significance of specifically feminine characteristics found in the worship of various religions. Is this not at the same time an opening to the discussion of the liberation of women, something which has profound implications for a Christian Anthropology? In his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Mariialis Cultus*, Pope Paul devotes a significant section to the anthropological dimensions of Marian devotion, and his observations indicate his awareness of the urgency of responding to the aspirations of the woman of every age. Nor is it a question of manipulating Marian doctrine to fit the occasion. The Holy Father cites the theological principle which must rule over the process of development in doctrinal-devotional matters concerning our Lady. He says:

"Finally, we wish to point out that our own time, no less than former times, is called upon to verify its knowledge of reality with the word of God, and keeping to the matter at present under consideration, to compare its anthropological ideas and the problems springing therefrom with the figure of the Virgin Mary as presented by the Gospel. The reading of the divine Scriptures, carried out under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with the discoveries of the human sciences and the different situations in the world today being taken into account, will help us to see how

¹³ Andrew Greeley, *Hail Mary*, in *New York Times Magazine* (December 15, 1974) 98.

Mary can be considered a mirror of the expectations of the men and women of our time."¹⁴

We could hardly find a clearer expression of what we have been advocating. The Scriptures and the developing awareness of Mary's significance in salvation history as discovered in liturgical, patristic and ecclesial tradition should form the basis for our response to the personal and communal problems facing our contemporaries. Having raised the level of our faith awareness through study, reflection and contemplation, we can make a real contribution to our world. Two of the most beautiful resources at our disposal are the pastoral letter of the American Bishops issued last year, a letter which, unfortunately, has not received the attention it merits, and the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul on Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, a thorough treatment of the liturgical, pastoral and theological import of Marian devotion. We should take the lead in helping our people to appreciate the profound implications of these two documents for their spiritual lives.

One final reflection upon the Pentecostal movement. In a time when humanistic secularism is rampant it seems as though God has responded by sending His Spirit again to His people to enlighten, to guide, to console them, to teach them as Christ promised He would. The charismatic movement continues to grow and to influence profoundly the lives of thousands of people. A certain sign of its authenticity is the remarkable spiritual growth which is visible in its members: prayer, reception of the sacraments, charitable works abound, and a tangible spirit of joy and peace seems to reign in their lives. Like every movement, it is fulfilling a need which is deeply experienced by many; this movement seeks to promote a more intimate, personal union with God. Another characteristic of this movement is a love for our Lady and an often

¹⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, published by the United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1974.

expressed desire to hear more about her. Those who are deeply involved in the Charismatic movement freely admit, and in fact they openly fear, that the gravest danger lies in an inadequate understanding of the faith. The temptation is strong, in the fervor of this new spiritual experience, to neglect doctrinal accuracy; and yet there is at the same time a great love for the word of God coupled with an ardent petition for theological assistance. It seems to me that the Marian theologian must be willing to give of his time and expertise to come to the aid of those who want and need him.

It is not true that this more tangible presence of the Spirit in our midst stimulates us to investigate more fully His relationship to Mary? Alexander Schmemmann said three years ago at our meeting in San Antonio, when speaking of the vital relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Church:

"The danger here, however, is that of a new divorce, a new dichotomy: the 'spiritual' versus the 'institutional'; the Holy Spirit versus the Church; the individual subjectivity of the spiritual experience versus Catholic faith and discipline. It is at this point, it seems to me, that the need for Mariology becomes obvious. For, indeed, Mary, being in the tradition and experience of the Church the very 'epiphany' of spirituality, being herself the first, the highest and the most perfect fruit of the Holy Spirit in the entire creation, reveals to us by her very presence the true nature and the true effects of that Descent of the Holy Spirit which is *the* source of the Church's life. To put it somewhat differently, Mariology properly understood, is a kind of 'criterion' for Pneumatology, a safeguard against a demonic confusion of spirits."¹⁵

We have been accustomed in our Western tradition to view authentic Marian doctrine as a touchstone for Christological orthodoxy; it is rather significant to hear an Eastern theologian proclaiming Mariology a criterion for authentic Pneumatology—significant and yet not surprising because Mary exemplifies,

¹⁵ *Marian Studies* 23 (1973) 72.

better still, "personalizes" the graced state of those in whom the Spirit dwells. The implications of this fact as a means for responding to the crisis created by secularism should be the object of our attentive study.

From these examples, which are but a few of the many which could be cited, we can understand the urgency of our scholarly involvement in the development and dissemination of Marian theology. We are not on the periphery of theological relevance because we are attuned to the basic problems experienced by our contemporaries. The issues always center around man and his meaning and his relationship to God; and Mary, to whom He who is mighty has done great things, is the one who helps us to appreciate better how the riddle of human existence is solved in Christ.

In his short introduction to the question of the virginity of Mary, the author points out that this question has been debated for a long time. In some quarters it has been settled with a negative response about historicity (p. 33). As for Roman Catholicism, Brown feels that "after Vatican II the solid front (on this issue) is cracking in many places" (p. 33). So he decided to undertake a discussion of the problem because "no one has yet discovered a protection against the calamity of overstatement" (p. 33).

The author points out that his only concern in regard to Mary's virginity is the bodily virginity of Mary as she conceived Jesus. The implication is that he does not consider the way in which Jesus emerged from the womb nor the problem of whether Mary bore other children after Jesus. Brown also warns—and this should be carefully noted—that his concern is not primarily theological; it is *historical*; namely, to explore whether the Catholic belief in Jesus' virgin conception by Mary rests in a sound historical basis. Such an analysis is