

The Society of Mary

By Rev. Theron R. Hughes, S. O. M.

SOME TIME AGO I was asked to provide an article for IMMACULATA pertaining to the history of the Society of Mary. Inquiries into the subject provided only some sketchy material, but resulting from its contemporary activities within the past two decades we shall discover that while its beginnings are somewhat dim, today it is very much alive and well.

The rule of the society states, "The Society is dedicated to the glory of God, and in honor of the Holy Incarnation, under the invocation of Our Lady Help of Christians." The medal of the society has on its back side these words, "Auxilium Christianorum, Ora Pro Nobis." The rule reads as follows:

1. Members shall keep a Rule of Life which will include special devotions as the Angelus, the Rosary, the Litany and Anthems of our Lady.
2. They will pray for departed members of the Society and offer Mass for them.
3. They will take part in the Mass on the principal Feasts of Our Lady.
4. They will engage in Apostolic and pastoral work, according to the opportunity, under the guidance of the local Ward Officers and the General Council.

What Is the Society of Mary?

What is this Society of Mary, you may ask? It is a Society existing within the Anglican Church, worldwide, dedicated to promoting devotion and veneration for the Blessed Virgin Mary among all Christians, but more especially within that part of the ancient Catholic Church known today as the Anglican Communion. One of its principal tenets is to make reparation for all past dishonor and neglect against the Mother of God over the years since devotion to her has been rejected by Anglicans. This includes reparation for dishonor or neglect practiced even in our time. And, within this scope of devotion to Mary, there is included work towards reunion with the See of Peter as well as the See of Constantinople, in the truest sense of ecumenism.

The classic stereotype about Anglicans in the minds

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of most Roman Catholics is that one notable facet in the concept of Catholic teaching: their resistance to Marian theology and devotion. True, many outspoken Anglicans, and perhaps the average Anglican (Episcopalian) encountered by his Roman Catholic neighbor could in some way fit this generalized description. But happily this image is in a continuous state of flux — for the better. Through the agency of the Society of Mary, as well as other Catholic societies within Anglicanism, Marian theology and devotion are spreading so as to help bring into focus a true Incarnational theology which antedates either conciliar or Papal definitions of the place of Mary in the scheme of Redemption.

"Catholics Are Also United with Anglicans"

We read in paragraph 32 of the Apostolic Exhortation, "Marialis Cultus" by his Holiness, Paul VI, these words, "Catholics are also united with Anglicans, whose classical theologians have already drawn attention to the sound scriptural basis for devotion to the Mother of our Lord, while those of the present day increasingly underline the importance of Mary's place in the Christian life."

Following her separation from the Holy See by the Bull of Excommunication, against Elizabeth I and her realm, issued by Pope St. Pius V in 1570, titled, "Regnans in Excelsis," the bark of Ecclesia Anglicana had to steer an uncertain and perilous course in a sea of troubled waters — yea, in a perilous sea, for the forces of political intrigue and secularity succeeded in seizing the wheel of this craft, and steered her increasingly towards an abyss. What the writers of that period and subsequent centuries attempted to create an impression of, was a Church "on the Continent" so corrupt with secular control, that only a reformation was conscionable for the good Christian folk of Great Britain. But, as we now know, what was touted as a "reformation" was in fact more clearly under the control of a grotesque political and economic force than a conscience "cleansed" by a reforming spirit. And thus the end result might more accurately be described as a "deformation" than a reformation. And in that deformation process, Marian theology and devotion were not only jettisoned, but carefully styled by the enemies of true orthodox religion as "Romish superstition," and similar polemical phrases.

Curiously enough, it was John and Charles Wesley

who began to realize that the Church of England was badly deformed and in fact chronically ill from the secularity forced down her throat under a long captivity by crown and parliament. One might discover that a man kept prisoner in a dark damp dungeon for a number of years would upon release be found to suffer from some chronic lung-illness as well as impaired vision. The Wesleys and others of their day saw this and began a process which got things moving, but unfortunately due to bad theology it miscarried. Yet these efforts were not snuffed out entirely, for in the next century at the University of Oxford, some men (including the great John Henry Newman) began what has come to be known as "The Catholic Revival." Its inception date is generally taken to be the year 1833, although below the surface things had been stirring for some time. By the latter half of the nineteenth century this movement was causing the Established Church in England some considerable discomfort, to say nothing of the raising of the eyebrows of "proper" Episcopalians in the United States. English priests were being "brought to trial" for such "Popish practices" as using unleavened bread in the Eucharist, wearing a colored stole over a surplice, and teaching that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist. "No-Popery" riots were staged by hired ruffians to discourage such "dangerous" teachings and practices. But the yeast would not stop working.

The Confraternity of the Children of Mary

In the year 1880 at Madras, India (of all places) a devotional society was founded by General H. C. Barnett of the British Armed Forces stationed there. It was titled "The Confraternity of the Children of Mary." And for a while later it became known as "Our Lady Help of Christians"; thus this motto is still in Latin on the official medal. By 1903 it enlarged its scope (now back in England) under the title of "The Confraternity of Our Lady." By 1920 the "Union of the Holy Rosary" (founded in 1886) was amalgamated with the Society.

In 1902 a parallel Marian group came into being under the direction of the late Lord Halifax. This group of like-minded friends undertook to recite the Angelus at appointed times and "to strive for purity of life in honor of our Lady's perpetual virginity." The original group included some very notable personages both clerical and lay in Britain. And early in 1913, they began publication of a new magazine entitled "AVE," which had the effect of increasing membership by leaps and bounds. The official magazine to this day is still AVE. By 1931 the League of Our Lady (founded by Halifax and friends) and the Confraternity of Our Lady, begun in India (as noted above) in 1880, merged into one society with a unified purpose, and took the name of "The Society of Mary" which it bears still. Thus, in reality, from its humble beginnings in



Madras, the Society had come a long way to 1980, when centennial observances are being kept around the world by Society of Mary members.

While individual members of the Society of Mary (gaining membership through correspondence with England) existed in the United States for some years, it was not until after World War II that any form of Ward (local unit) was formed, and then only in some distinctly Anglo-Catholic parishes along the Eastern seaboard. However, within the past two decades the Society of Mary in the United States has grown rapidly. The American region is headed by a parish priest in Washington, D.C. as its Provincial Superior, and today boasts fifteen wards, numerous cells and a general membership not otherwise affiliated with a local unit. This membership also includes six bishops as well as many priests, both diocesan and religious. Canada is now an autonomous region, and the

Society is taking hold in Mexico and Columbia, South America as well. The American region recently presented a gift of Marian Eucharistic vestments to the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul in Washington, D.C. to be used in the striking Lady Chapel which stands to the left of the choir and main altar of this magnificent building. A very active Ward of the Society is found in the Midwest, centered largely in the Diocese of Milwaukee, and called Our Lady Queen of Apostles Ward. It sponsors annually a round of Marian observances which include a Walsingham Pilgrimage in May (to a parish church within its area); a summertime Anglican Pilgrimage to Holy Hill (Carmelite shrine to Our Lady Help of Christians near Milwaukee); support of Corpus Christ and Assumption Festivals (Anglican) in Milwaukee including street processions; and ecumenical dialogue.

In England, the Society is divided into many wards which are active and growing. Among a number of things which they do is the sponsoring of the annual Dowery Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Westminster each year in September. In 1980 it will begin at Westminster Cathedral (Roman Catholic) in London with Latin Vespers sung by an Anglican choir from Brighton; be presided over by an Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster, and preached to by an Anglican bishop. Later in the evening the group will move to nearby Westminster Abbey for Compline sung in English, and preached to by a Roman Catholic bishop. The emphasis will be reunion of the separated parts of the Church through the intercession of our Blessed Lady.

Pillaged Under the Infamous Thomas Cromwell

Without detailing the history of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, we know that it was desolated in 1538 under the hammer of the infamous Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's "gestapo chief." Our Blessed Lady had appeared at Walsingham in 1061 A.D.; there a shine developed and flourished until 1538, attracting peasants, clerics, religious, knights and even crowned heads, or a true cross-section of God's people. It represented the devotion of the People of God and his Holy Church which her enemies (in the name of religious reformation) were out to destroy and plunder. From 1538 until 1922 the shrine lay desolated and largely neglected. In that latter year a devout and determined priest of intense and somewhat eccentric temperament was assigned to the parish Church of St. Mary, Little Walsingham.

Fr. Alfred Hope-Patten in his unrelenting manner changed not only the face of this tiny Norfolk village in the flat country near the North Sea, but he succeeded in helping to change the face of the Anglican Communion by what he began. The beginnings of the restoration were simple. Through careful research, it was possible to have an image carved of Our Lady of Walsingham that fairly

resembled that destroyed in 1538. It was set up in the Guilds chapel of the parish church. Soon pilgrimages began to develop at a spot not more than a quarter of a mile from where the renowned shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham once stood.

Father Hope-Patten was an exceedingly serious member of the Society of Mary, as most of his colleagues were. Together they worked hard and fast to gather friends of our Lady who had the means to help restore Walsingham for what she once was. The results are clear evidence that our Lady helped immensely. An Anglican Benedictine monk (from England) once stated to me that many of the religious of England came to pray on the spot where the original shrine had stood, and "literally prayed it back into existence." Ultimately a new shrine complete with the Holy House was built, and the image moved from the parish church to its proper place. And while the restoration was never solely the focal point of the Society, one may be certain that the Society of Mary has had an important part in the restoration process, so that today as one enters the beautiful shrine church (built in the 1930's) one is confronted by the striking della Robbia affixed to the outer wall of the Holy House over the altar of the Annunciation, the official altar of the Society of Mary at Walsingham. I might point out that there are a total of fifteen altars within the Shrine Church, each one dedicated to a mystery of the Holy Rosary. The focal point of Walsingham is, of course, the Annunciation and the Incarnation, manifesting the vital role played by the Immaculate Virgin who said very simply to Gabriel, "Be it done according to thy word."

Coming down to 1980, the centennial year for the Society, a highlight in the developing return of Anglicans to Mary and the fullness of the Incarnation was this year's annual National (Bank Holiday) Pilgrimage to Walsingham held always on Whit-Monday, the day after Pentecost. This year His Grace, the Most Rev. Robert Runcie, 102nd Archbishop of Canterbury, led this great pilgrimage. While it is usually the largest of the year, attracting thousands of pilgrims, this year the throng numbered somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 — a vast throng for such a tiny mediaeval village to cope with — surely greater than anything that ever came prior to its dissolution in 1538. For, as we know, transportation of that time could never begin to approach twentieth century capacity.

The Archbishop made history as the first occupant of the Throne of St. Augustine since before the reformation to lead such a pilgrimage, and in all likelihood the only one in this succession to lead such a throng.

Reports which this writer has received from a variety of sources indicate that scores of bishops, hundreds of priests and an array of religious came among the thousands of cheering enthusiastic pilgrims to share the joy of

the day. Not the least of the ordinary pilgrims was the Duchess of Kent, a member of the Royal Family, herself a known client of our Lady, all of which lent considerable assent to the proceedings. In addition to the six bishops concelebrating with the Archbishop, 240 priests vested to concelebrate, as together they offered the Holy Mass at a temporary altar on the site of the original priory church. The Primate's homily dealt with Mary's response to Gabriel at the Annunciation, and our response as modern Christians to the will of God. A spectacular procession followed the Mass through the streets of the village and back to the present shrine church, where benediction was given. Numerous Marian hymns were provided in the program, and the day was a distinct triumph over the evil day in 1538 when the image was removed to London, hacked to pieces and burned publicly in a frenzy of iconoclasm.

The Roman Catholic Primate of Great Britain, His Eminence George Basil Cardinal Hume, O.S.B., was in Walsingham three to four weeks prior to this event, leading his flock (some 9,000 strong) in similar ceremonies at the same site. In a warming climate of ecumenism, the Anglican authorities invited the Cardinal to vest in the sacristy of the Shrine Church, thus allowing him and his sanctuary party the opportunity to omit the mile-long trek into the old priory grounds (site of the Mass) from the present Roman Catholic Shrine at the Slipper Chapel. Prior to vesting, Cardinal Hume prayed at length in the Holy House using a set of prayers to be found in both the Holy House and the Slipper Chapel that asks for unity. On the day of the great National Pilgrimage, His Grace, Archbishop Runcie visited the Slipper Chapel for prayer, and using the above form of prayers, lit a candle for unity. Thus it must be seen that our Lady is indeed working to bring Catholics of the Anglican and Roman obediences back together, when both at the grass-roots and at the level of Archbishops Runcie and Hume, prayers and acts of devotion in her honor are being offered for this very intent.

The Fruition of Much Labor

Little did General Barnett realize in 1880, when at Madras he began a rather tenuous effort to restore honor to Mary among a few Anglicans, that the day would come in one century when a triumphant return to Walsingham would become a reality. For in 1880 Walsingham lay as she had for 350 years, merely an obscure Norfolk village that once contained the great and noted shrine of our Lady to which pilgrims from the British Isles and the Continent had flocked for nearly five centuries, but which now had little to distinguish it from any of its neighbors.

Surely this society in its century of life has had some striking influence on the life of Anglicanism, to the sum that the clients of Mary have increased immeasurably. Not only has Walsingham been restored to the extent, that except for the bitter winter months, it has virtually a

twelve month schedule of pilgrimages ranging from individuals to special groups, to parishes, to dioceses, etc. And now pilgrims come from around the world as opposed to merely around Europe.

More Than Walsingham Is Being Restored

Not alone has Walsingham been restored, but Anglicans are finding their way once more to some of the lesser known mediaeval shrines of Mary as Our Lady of Haddington in Scotland; Our Lady of Egmont in Nottinghamshire; Our Lady of England in Storrington; Our Lady of Nance in Cornwall, and Our Lady of Willesden. Moreover, parochial Marian shrines are being set up in parishes around the country.

Today the Society of Mary publishes an outstanding small magazine for its worldwide membership called AVE (as previously noted), which is edited by the Chaplain General, Fr. John Milburn, Vicar of St. Paul's in Brighton, England. Father Milburn has been invited not only to give papers before Mariological Congress meetings on the Continent, but he has led several Anglican pilgrimages to Lourdes, where a special altar is available to such pilgrims for their Mass. The Superior General of the Society is The Rt. Rev. Graham Leonard, Bishop of Truro (in Cornwall). The Vice Presidents are Bishop Westall (retired Bishop of Cretidon), the Bishop of Morray, Ross and Caithness, Fathers Crusha and Whittaker, Mrs. Joyce Coombs and Sir John Betjeman (Poet Laureate of Britain).

We note with great joy that the new Archbishop of Canterbury (spiritual center of unity for all Anglicans) is a known client of our Lady. Not only did he choose the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (March 25) as his enthronement date, but he frequently led the annual diocesan pilgrimage to Walsingham from the Diocese of St. Alban's (his jurisdiction until elevated to Canterbury).

We know that Pope John Paul II is an avowed client of the Blessed Virgin Mary, having incorporated the letter "M" into his papal coat of arms. These two — Pope John Paul and the Archbishop of Canterbury — met recently in Africa to discuss the Christianization of that continent in danger of becoming dominated by both a militant Islamism as well as a seditious Marxism.

With these two great prelates all seems to bode well for efforts at both reunion and ecumenism, and for efforts at combatting the ancient enemy of man, Satan, who greatly fears our Blessed Lady.

I would end this article with an appeal to my brethren of the Roman Catholic Church to *reach out* to your separated brethren who honor and serve Mary as our Mother and Mother of the Church, that together we may seek the will of her Divine Son in carrying out the dominical mandate to evangelize the world with the "Faith once for all delivered to the Saints."