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# 50th Anniversary of the Mariological Society of America: Evolution in Mariology, 1949-1999

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## FIFTY YEARS OF THE MARIOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA

*Thomas A. Thompson, S.M.\**

Fr. Juniper Carol, O.F.M., founded the Mariological Society of America in Washington, D.C., in late 1949. But the inspiration for the foundation goes back ten years earlier, when four young priests, then studying at Rome, gathered in Fr. Juniper's room in the Antonianum, the Franciscan college, and, as one later remembered, "planned what we could do for the glory of the Virgin Mary." Shortly after that meeting in 1939, World War II began in Europe, and the priests had to return to their own countries. Fr. Gabriel Roschini, O.S.M., remained at Rome and founded the *Marianum*, which is the name both for the pontifical school of theology and for the prestigious journal of Marian theology. Fr. Narciso García Garcés, C.M.F., founded the Spanish Mariological Society (1941) and the journal *Ephemerides Mariologicae* (1951). Fr. Paul Sträter returned to Germany and edited a three-volumed work on the Blessed Virgin. In 1949, Juniper Carol founded the Mariological Society of America.

The first issue of *Marian Studies* records the events which led to the first meeting. Father Juniper Carol, O.F.M., called a preparatory meeting on October 11, 1949, feast of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the library of Holy Name College, Washington, D.C. Those present favored the formation of a society to be devoted to "the furtherance of that section of sacred theology which deals with our Lady." After receiving the approval of the Archbishop of Washington, and drawing up a constitution (still in use today), the first meeting took place on Tuesday, January 3, 1950, in the McMahon Hall Auditorium of the Catholic University of America. "The first official act of the Society, immediately after the approval of the constitution, was to adopt a resolution that a humble message be submitted to our Holy Father, Pope Pius XII, through his worthy representative in this country, assuring His Holiness of the unconditional loyalty and loving attachment of the members of the Mariological Society of America toward the Vicar of Christ on earth. . . . At the end of the session those present signed the newly adopted constitution and became charter members of The Mariological Society of America."

At the invitation of Bishop John J. Wright, the second meeting took place at Worcester, Massachusetts. Bishop Wright's conference was entitled, "Mariology in the English-speaking World." This meeting began a long association between the Mariological Society and Bishop Wright, who later became the Cardinal Prefect of the Con-

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gregation for the Clergy. In 1969, the Society's Mariological Award was renamed the Cardinal Wright Mariological Award.

A survey of the themes and presidential addresses given at the Society's annual meetings is one way of tracing the Society's history. The first ten years of the Society's meetings were devoted to the study of Our Lady's privileges: Corredemption, Spiritual Maternity, Queenship, Immaculate Conception, Divine Maternity, Virginity, Our Lady's Death, Mary and the Church, the Fundamental Principle of Mariology. At the 1961 meeting, Fr. Walter Burghardt, S.J., described the first ten volumes of *Marian Studies* as "clear, objective, flawlessly documented . . . on the whole erudite, solid and balanced." What more should be done? Fr. Burghardt suggested, that the Society undertake "research in its proper sense." Rather than repeat what is already available, he said, Mariologists should "plumb the depths of a Marian problem until the divine dream for our redemption lies a little more apparent to us."

If the Society appeared to be searching for a future agenda in the early 1960s, little did it realize that the upcoming Vatican II and the winds of change which accompanied it would provide a full plate of issues to be addressed at meetings of the Society. Already in 1962, Fr. Burghardt said that "the temper of our times is ecumenical." Since the Catholic vision of Mary is perhaps the greatest challenge in ecumenical dialogue, Fr. Burghardt suggested that "the theological effort from the Catholic side must center on the problem of development."

In the 1960s, the focus of the meetings changed from doctrine to Scripture. There were also conferences on Mary and ecumenism, and, since Scripture scholars were writing of Mary's virginity, there were also conferences on that topic. In the early 1960s, no one imagined how deliberations of Vatican II would cause such upheaval in the Church in the United States, especially in areas related to Marian devotion. In 1964, Fr. Edward O'Connor, C.S.C., spoke of the negative effects which "the critical spirit" was having on Marian piety and belief. The advent of the higher criticism in Catholic biblical circles appeared especially directed to the texts related to Mary: the Infancy narratives in the New Testament, and, in the Old Testament, the story of Adam, Eve and the Serpent. "No other sphere of theology is so sensitive to the confrontation of the Catholic with the critical spirit, as the Mariological." In 1967, Fr. William Most sounded an even more ominous warning: "We are living in a time when one could hardly name any important dogmatic error that is not taught within the Catholic Church. In 1970, Fr. Alban B. Maguire, O.F.M., noted the diminution of Marian devotion which had occurred since the Council: "The five years since *Lumen gentium* seem like a century, and the memory of what took place may become a little blurred. In spite of the assurances of the Fathers, there are many who continue to insist that the Council played down our Lady's role in the Church . . . There can be no doubt that devotion to Mary has diminished since the Council, yet it would be well for us not to assign causes for this until we have weighed the phenomenon more carefully."

In the 1971 presidential address, Msgr. (later bishop) Austin Vaughan of New York well described the tension between the traditional Mariology and the theology of Vatican II. The council stressed ecumenism, whereas Mariology represented the doctrines which were most unacceptable to non-Catholics. In its liturgical reforms, Vatican II stressed the uniqueness of Christ as our Redeemer and Mediator; Marian devotion seemed to divert attention to Mary and the saints. Vatican II gave special

importance to the liturgical prayer (Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours); most Marian devotions seemed non-liturgical (rosary, novenas, processions, shrines, etc.). Vatican II urged the involvement of the faithful in the work of sanctifying the world and promoting human development, justice and peace, whereas traditional devotion to Mary—prayer, recollection, and intercession—seemed to lack a social commitment or active involvement.

In 1972, Fr. Charles Neumann, S.M., urged a broadening of focus and a less introspective approach. He cited the eminent Belgian theologian, Msgr. Gerard Philips, who said, "Authentic Mariology runs no risk of fading away; within an enlarged synthesis it will command attention even more forcefully than in the past. A crisis can become beneficial, like a thunderstorm that clears the atmosphere and enables us to breathe a purer air." He concluded with the words of Sir Kenneth Clark (in his *Civilization* television series): "There is no reason to be discouraged . . . Lack of confidence, more than anything else . . . kills a civilization. We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusion just as effectively as by bombs."

At the Silver Jubilee Meeting, 1974, a letter was read from Archbishop Jean Jadot, the apostolic delegate, congratulating the members for their contributions to the Pastoral Letter, *Behold Your Mother*. At this meeting, Fr. Neumann once more urged a greater confidence in the future. "Is part of our trouble not precisely the impression that to Mary and things Marian there too readily clings the image of a past which older persons regret losing, while the younger feel little attraction to something portrayed simply as a past now apparently slipping from grasp? . . . Vigorously defending a grasp of something of the mystery of Mary attained in the past may not always accomplish as much as allowing time for something of that same mystery to dawn on persons who have not had the chance to live in or know the past and who, as do we all, delight more in discovering for themselves than in being taught by others."

After the twenty-fifth anniversary, the format for the meetings included a variety of topics at each meeting. In 1976, Fr. George F. Kirwin, O.M.I., spoke of the challenge which the secular outlook poses for all theologians, but especially for the Marian theologians. At the 1977 meeting, Fr. Fred Jelly urged the Society to be more mindful of the role of catechetics and of the hermeneutics of the Marian dogmas. At the 1978 meeting, Fr. Jelly suggested that more attention be given to the ecumenical role of Mary and that the special relation between Mary and the Holy Spirit be studied.

In his two presidential addresses (1981, 1982), Fr. Robert M. Charest, S.M.M., warned about making Mariology too abstract. What was necessary was the sense of Mary's presence in the Church. "The more one listens to Pope John Paul II in the light of his Marian approach to the mystery of Christ and His Church, the more one is inclined to describe it as a Mariology based on a Marian Presence, a presence of the Mother of God in our midst. Pope John Paul obviously believes that a Mariology which deals only with theories and abstractions has very little appeal for the so-called 'average' person. On the other hand, a Mariology based on a real presence—the presence of a mother in the midst of her children—is a dynamic force with an irresistible appeal." The next year, he urged the members not to let the organization become a debating society. "Let [our studies] be dynamic and life-giving, as dynamic and life-giving as the Mother of God herself. . . . Doctrine and devotion must go hand in hand. Doc-

trine without devotion is like faith without good works. And devotion without doctrine is like works without faith."

Perhaps the most-sought issue of *Marian Studies* was the 1986 one which was a summary and analysis of the sections of chapter eight of *Lumen gentium*, with an appendix containing the original (1962) schema dealing with the Virgin Mary, the final Latin text showing the original draft and consequent revisions of the text, together with a new English translation.

From 1990 to 1992, the Society made amends for its previous lack of attention to liturgy by devoting three programs to "Mary in the Liturgical Year"—the Advent-Christmas season (1990), the Lent-Easter season (1991), and Ordinary Time (1992). The 1994 program on Mary and religious education presented the results of a survey of the attitudes towards the Virgin Mary from 2,000 high school and college students; also, at that meeting, the results of a survey of the teaching on Marian topics in Catholic seminaries and colleges were given.

The meetings of the 1990s show that the Society was trying to explore the influence of Mary on new topics such as popular devotion, inculturation, the interreligious dialogue, ecumenism, and art. At the 1995 meeting, Fr. Walter T. Brennan, O.S.M., spoke of the need to use the contemporary cultural symbols to express the meaning of the Gospel today, as well as the truths concerning the Virgin Mary. At the 1996 meeting on Marian spirituality and the inter-religious dialogue, Fr. Brennan spoke of the need for knowing the great religions of the world in order to express Gospel realities and "for enhancing the understanding of symbols in Marian theology."

The 1997 meeting, a response to Pope John Paul II's encyclical *That All May Be One*, began with an address from Msgr. John A. Radano of the Pontifical Council for Promotion of Christian Unity on the ecumenical and Marian dimensions of the preparation for the Great Jubilee 2000. At that meeting, Fr. George Kirwin, O.M.I., reminded the members that "in ecumenical dialogue, our motivation is not to prove that we are correct, not to win the argument, certainly not to prove another wrong. In love, one seeks only the truth—God's truth wrapped in mystery."

At the 1998 program on Marian art, Fr. Kirwin compared Mary's confidence that God could bring fruitfulness out of barrenness, to the sense of hope which Christian art should impart: "That sense of hope, however it is portrayed, is the artist's gift to us."

"Magnificat: Remembrance and Praise" was the theme of the 1999 Fiftieth Anniversary meeting. One day was devoted to a review of the Society's history and the contributions it has offered to the Church. The second day was devoted to the study of Mary's Magnificat. A special guest at the fiftieth anniversary meeting was Fr. Aristide Serra, O.S.M., from Rome's Marianum, who spoke on the origins of the Magnificat as found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The topics covered in the the fifty volumes of *Marian Studies* illustrate the adage, "Mariology stands at the crossroads." From an exclusively doctrinal approach at the Society's beginnings, the meetings have explored the relation of Marian devotion and spirituality to Scripture, ecumenism, liturgy, catechetics, ecclesiology, popular devotion, interreligious dialogue, and religious art. For the past fifty years, the Society has been faithful to its founding purpose to illustrate the gifts of God to the Virgin Mary and, through her, to all humanity. It has persevered in this work, convinced that the mystery of God's love and beauty present in the Virgin Mary can never be exhausted.

Before Vatican Council II, many national Mariological societies were founded: Belgium (1931), France (1934), Spain (1940), Portugal (1945), Canada (1949), Mexico (1954), Poland and Colombia (1959). Only the French, Spanish, and American societies continue to meet regularly and publish their proceedings. Fortunately, in recent years, new Mariological societies have begun in Italy, Poland, and Germany. Since 1979, the Mariological Society of America has been based at the the Marian Library of the University of Dayton.