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AN ECUMENICAL APPROACH: THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, MOTHER OF UNITY

PIERRE MASSON, TAIPEI (TAIWAN)

MEANING OF A TITLE

When Paul VI, head of the Catholic Church in Rome, asserted that Mary was the Mother of Unity among Christians, he asserted a very specific conviction of his Church with regard to Ecumenism as a means for reunion of all Christians into the One Church wanted by Christ. As a matter of fact, the Holy Father was issuing a statement of major importance with regard to the Church's stand in the world today and with regard to all other religions.

He meant that the key to our unity as Christians, as disciples of Christ of whatever persuasion, could only be found there. Surely this principle would need explanation, because of the many doctrinal dissimilarities among the churches, especially on this point. But he nevertheless maintained it for two basic reasons, a spiritual one and a doctrinal one. Mary, Mother of Jesus, is the one who presents Him to the world. The very mystery of Christ is therefore enfolded in Mary. Consequences of this fact are innumerable and explain the great development of Mariology as a distinct but integral part of Catholic teaching.

This principle goes so far that in conceiving and presenting itself to the world, the Church could never forget it or set it aside. It is also the Catholic Church's conviction that the same must be said of every other church.

But Christianity is by nature and scope missionary. Christ left His Apostles with the mandate: "Go and teach all nations all that I have taught you, and baptize them." The meaning of this mandate appears all the more evident when we consider the world to which the Christians are sent. They are to contact all people, regrouped in various religions and states. The particular meaning of the Church's ecumenism may appear all the more clearly here: Jesus said He had come not to destroy but to fulfill [the promises]. He also affirmed that those who did as He did were near to

Him, though not knowing Him, and He perceived that some around Him were "not far from the Kingdom," that is, while not knowing or living His way of life, they were still, by good will and scope of life, quite near indeed.

Therefore, in presenting itself to the world and to other religions, the Catholic Church is not precisely searching for intercultural exchanges only, but also to further among all people the progress and evolution towards God.

In that spirit, the meaning which the figure of Mary takes on in the context of the Catholic Church seems very vital and specific. It is also of note within the framework of contemporary mentalities in search of the promotion of women in society. On the other hand, similar figures in other religions show an openness in the deepest recesses of the human heart and mind for divinity and motherhood and the particular qualities attached to them.

Moreover, in examining inter-religious relations, it seems that this particular aspect of Catholicism and Christianity is essential. It may, because of similarities, be a well-chosen means toward mutual understanding among churches and religions.

An examination of the question of Mary within the Christian frame of thought follows, with a mind to underlining progress towards unity in Christendom by way of Mary and the resulting possibilities for encounters with other religions which this affords.

REASONS FOR A DIALOGUE

Doctrinal and devotional differences among Christians of Catholic and Protestant confessions always seem to include a different approach to Mary, Mother of Jesus, Mother of God. It is perhaps the one place where Protestants may seek to respect fully the divine law against idolatry and concentrate on the cult owed to Jesus Christ. And it may seem to be a very good reason to avoid the Catholic Church, where so much space is given to Mary in the thought and life of the Church. Thus, it may well seem to ecumenically minded people, Catholic and Protestant alike, that Mary may not appear at first as a Sign of Unity among Christians, though Paul VI, for one, did not hesitate to call her Mother of Unity!

It is certainly challenging to think of Mary as an ecumenical argument and, all the more so, to hope to find in her a way to reunion of the churches. If anything, ecumenism does not seem to pass through Mary but rather to exclude her. In the effort to redress balance between the adoration due to God alone and the veneration or honour to the saints and the Blessed Virgin, the singular and unique cult conferred to Mary may appear at least excessive.

More deeply the extensive development of Marian thought in the Catholic Church, ever since the division of Christianity (through the Reformation), would seemingly

bring up a heavy and difficult argument that should be solved in order to facilitate new approaches between separated Christians. To say the least, among non-Catholics, Marian thought would not appear to be essential to Christian thought.

New progress in biblical studies does not always, at least at the popular level, help to counteract this attitude. To the contrary, Catholics themselves are seen in the new trends of biblical scholarship, as well as in the historical studies of Church doctrine, to show less attention to the Virgin Mary, though this by no means expresses the main authentic line of thought of the Church. But then, the Marian argument does not appear to be vested with any definite and homogeneous meaning.

WORLD CONGRESSES ON THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

It is all the more worthy of note that the international congresses, organized every four years by the Pontifical International Marian Academy of Rome, have attracted, since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the spontaneous participation of a number of non-Catholic thinkers—Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants of various denominations, especially Lutheran, Reformed and Evangelical.

It seems that the first congress held after the Council, in 1965, with the participation of many experts of the Council, could not but arouse the interest of the "Separated Brethren" of various confessions who had attended the Council as welcome observers. Now there was an occasion to share perhaps more actively in a Catholic world event. That it should be a "Marian" Congress is surely a notable event. Or was this seen as a challenge to continue ecumenical efforts and the practise of the fraternal spirit which animated the Council?

SEPARATED BRETHREN AT THE CONGRESSES

The non-Catholic participants were also welcomed to the Marian events, in that same spirit. They brought with them very openly their own traditions of thought and practise, their own evolution of mind in the matter, and they proceeded respectfully and sincerely. The result, we can see now, has been the cultivation of a new approach in ecumenical discourse about the Virgin Mary. She was gaining more centrality in ecumenical contacts.

At the same time, elsewhere, essential and involving talks were held between Orthodox and Catholic delegates of their respective churches: among Lutheran, Calvinist, and Roman Catholic delegates and between Anglican and Roman Catholic delegates on main questions pertaining to the sacraments. Much has been accom-

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plished; much remains still to be overcome, and questions must be solved at the official level.

In the Marian congresses, on the other hand, the participation of Protestant and Catholic scholars was not of an official nature. This permitted discussions on a larger plane, without involvements which would have called for a discipline in contacts, a control on exchanges unacceptable in a congress. Thus the results also remain unofficial and spontaneous but, they do not lose their inner significance and should be of great help when more decisive encounters take place.

The characteristics of the ecumenical participation in the Mariological (scientific) congresses on Mary (we use the precise word, as opposed to the expression "Marian" which is used for the second type of congress—more pastoral, cultural, and centrally devotional in character) are such that they seem worthy of attention here:

1. Notwithstanding the ecumenical participation, the congresses have maintained, without any curtailment or accommodations, their doctrinal intent and orthodoxy.
2. The non-Catholics have regularly come as personal individual participants, standing by their own doctrines though not officially delegated. Their part has been more and more inscribed within the congress sessions themselves, with their own papers freely given. But the main characteristic of their participation has been, of course, sharing in the ecumenical sessions held with an equal number of Catholic theologians. These sessions have been directed toward the writing of a Declaration expressing an ecumenical outlook on the Blessed Virgin Mary.
3. The theme of each of these unofficial sessions has been chosen freely by the participants, inspired somewhat by the themes of the congresses themselves and oriented towards greater understanding and unity among separated brethren. It was deeply felt that this search in ecumenism was—and is—not secondary, but will gain a meaning within the greater ecumenical context, all the more so because these efforts offer themselves as grassroot or spontaneous theological offerings. This conviction is perhaps one of the most important aspects, as it gives new significance to these encounters.

The participants, first of all, came to these congresses with the concept that Mary, the Virgin Mother of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is quite central in Christian doctrine, though she has been a subject for controversy. This conviction on their part classified them among separated brethren who accept the role of the Virgin Mary and distinguished them from those who do not. For the latter, the representativeness of the participants is doubtful, but they surely opened the way to broader exchanges.

As a matter of fact, this participation has gained publicity for an ecumenical view of Mary which should gradually reach an ever greater harmony with the full Catholic

outlook. This outlook and doctrine expresses a conviction that Mary fulfills a central role in Christian faith.

Already, all the declarations put out by the participants at each congress, if they do not constitute a great step forward, demonstrate what community of thought may be reached about Mary in an ecumenical encounter at this time. They also show how, over time, discussions on a relatively unique theme may bring development and progress in deepening cooperation among separated Christians and on a view of Mary which becomes more acceptable to all. This entails new outlooks and, while it calls for moderation, it also calls for explicit recognition and acceptance of doctrine. At this time, one may say, the fear of overdrawing limits may play a role, but gradually Mary appears to have a role as a factor of unity. To reach her—a goal which gathers momentum—calls for new efforts. Questions remain open which must be solved, either in these sessions or, finally, in more official settings.

The value of these ecumenical meetings appears thus in its full significance: a challenging and courageous effort in sharing approaches to Mary by various Christian churches on the occasion of congresses held by the most Marian-minded of the churches. The product achieved each time has been a Declaration, modest in results but significant as an expression achieved by conjoined efforts of separated brethren and Catholics in the space of time of a Mariological Congress. Such results have been seen possible without doctrinal renunciation on the part of any. The Catholics themselves have found there a great occasion to express, within the limits of ecumenical search, their own conviction and belief in a way which has opened new vistas for cooperation. The declarations were signed by all in their own names, but with the conviction that they had remained faithful to the tenets of their own confessions.

What may seem at first a limitation, may thus turn out to be an advantage. The fuller Marian doctrine of Catholicism may gain in expressiveness by taking into account some of the fears of Protestantism, while the very doctrines and dogmas of ancient tradition may attract more serious and confident examination.

At the first ecumenical meetings during the 1965 congress, rules were established to avoid confusion among the Catholics, themselves involved in a new and alluring field of endeavor, as well as among all; it was arranged that fully involved participants would be in equal number non-Catholics and Catholics. Observers were also admitted, as well as any congress member who desired to attend without intervening, and, gradually, a space for larger participation was left to the decision of the participants themselves.

Members of the ecumenical sessions have been regularly attending through the years, while some new faces have joined at this or that congress. Though, as already stated, these sessions were in no way vested with official warrants and though no official contact was established with ecumenical commissions in the Church and

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among the churches, the work already accomplished in them appears quite valuable and may be a first setting for further ecumenical endeavors which would include the person and function of Mary in doctrine and church life.

THE ECUMENICAL SESSIONS

To further demonstrate these points, it seems called for at this time to expound briefly the themes of these sessions and the various Mariological Congresses held since the Second Vatican Council (1965). These congresses were held at or near to world-renowned Marian shrines: in 1965 at Santo Domingo, in 1967 at Lisbon and Fatima, in 1971 at Zagreb and the Sanctuary of Maria Bistrica, in 1975 at Rome, in 1979 at Saragossa in Spain, in 1983 at Malta, and in 1987 at Kevelaer in Germany, near Münster.

While the theme of the Mariological Congresses was Marian devotion in the history of the Church, divided into historical periods, the ecumenical sessions followed their own pattern (decided by the participants themselves):

1. Santo Domingo, 1965: There was an accounting of the diversity of approaches to the doctrine about the Virgin Mary and an expression of a will to develop exchanges among the churches on this topic. A common aspiration was voiced to further progress towards a common Marian doctrine.
2. Lisbon, 1967: Evangelical participants especially wished to promote ever more serious examination of the doctrines pertaining to Mary and of the devotion and cult proffered to her, in closer connection with Sacred Scripture. The Catholics wished to express their thanks for this participation and intended to submit these outlooks for further study.
3. Zagreb, 1971: The early Marian cult (object of that congress) was founded on the unique place of Mary in the plan of salvation, her place in the Church and the Communion of Saints. These aspects of early Marian cult might well serve to clarify the contemporary situation which is much evolved in terms of honoring Mary in their regard.
4. Rome, 1975: The focus was Mary's role in redemption, a specifically unique role, which continues through time.
5. Saragossa, 1979: The bases for Marian cult in the various Christian traditions—Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant—were studied.
6. Malta, 1983: Mary in the Communion of Saints was the topic for an exploration of a new way towards achieving an ecumenical understanding of Mary—through the communion of all the disciples of Christ, here below and in the hereafter.
7. Kevelaer, Germany, 1987: A further reflection was made on Mary in the Communion of Saints. Since the very expression of this communion of love between the

departed and those still on earth is shown in prayer and intercession, this is especially true of that member of the Communion of Saints who is Mary. Mutual love is exchanged with her through this mutual intercession of prayer.

THEOLOGICAL CONTENTS OF THE DECLARATIONS

As one can readily see, these declarations began in a dialogue on method; the scriptural approach was seen as a privileged norm of validity, but at different levels, by all participants. A first approach by non-Catholics entailed a prejudice against the Magisterium (considered abusive and non-scriptural, to say the least); thus, any ecumenical dialogue seemed to call for some other basis. The Catholics did not discuss the point at that time, but rather hoped that the conclusions reached through the scriptural argument would also demonstrate the correctness of the Magisterium's stand, whatever the differences of outlook between the churches on this point. Moreover, the Catholics also showed and argued for their traditional right to further their scriptural studies, not only in the large areas left open to free research but also in those already interpreted authoritatively, where research carried out in fidelity helps to clarify and explicate those interpretations. Nevertheless, it is true that the Catholics maintained the authority of the Magisterium in interpreting the Scriptures, while the Protestants retained that right for the individual. It may be too crude and simplistic to conclude anarchical liberty in the churches on this point.

In the case of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the extensive Catholic cult of the Mother of Jesus caused embarrassment to the non-Catholics, because this cult seemingly endangered the true worship due only to God. They found no sufficient basis in Scripture to justify it. Even more, Marian cult appeared directly contrary to all the biblical teachings and warnings against idolatry.

The Catholics were far from feeling these fears, since their cult of Mary, understood without excess, is a veneration, well-earned and pleasing to God, for the privileged Mother of the Saviour. This cult is seen to enhance that rendered to God, expressing the singular, unique character of Mary and her cult, one which involves no idolatry in any possible way. In these respects, the meetings of Catholics and non-Catholics have involved many questions which must be solved before the actual Marian doctrine is analyzed. These questions were always felt in the sessions but were never fully addressed, though their weight perhaps played a decisive role in orienting the debates.

The request expressed in the first session for Scripture as the basic reference was a definite methodological proposal which requested the Catholics to set aside their own definitive reference to the Magisterium. The solution was to admit reference to

Scripture as basic, leaving for further consideration the question of the Magisterium, whose interpretation remained basic for Catholics. Of course, for Catholics, Scripture is and has always been their first source, presented so by the Church.

Another question or principle involved was the prejudice against Marian cult; this might or might not be overcome by showing the true nature of the Catholic Marian cult, which neither detracts from worship due to God nor is equal to it in any way. The burden of proof here remained on the Catholic side.

Still another question was that of the figure of Mary herself, quite dependent upon new interpretations of Scripture as well as on those traditionally accepted among Protestants. On this point, the Catholics have had a long tradition about Mary, not only from biblical data but also from very early tradition. The true worth of the sacred writers of antiquity and following centuries, into medieval times and so forth, remains to be evaluated in relation to Scripture. Those early and major writers of Christendom are held in great honour in the Church, and their tradition shows a continuity that is equivalent to inspiration—not equal to that of biblical and New Testament-inspired writers, but by all means that of very authentic teachers.

But the weight of this long tradition of cult to Mary, which has grown through time with the approval, encouragement, and guidance of the Church itself—before as well as since the Reformation—could be considered an obstacle to the Catholic understanding of Protestant demands. As a matter of fact, the extraordinary expansion of Marian devotion in this century, up to the Council and even since, could seem to Protestants as a departure—and a complete one—from non-idolatrous cult. On this very delicate point, the Catholics had to show how this Marian cult is legitimate.

The recent dogmas of this century have also had an indirect influence in that they cause Catholics to be seen in a stance which is considered dogmatic and non-disputable. These dogmas are the Immaculate Conception (which expresses that Mary was conceived without sin, through the universal redemption accomplished by Christ and applied especially to her in advance) and papal infallibility (which declares the infallible assistance of the Spirit in all solemn dogmatic pronouncements of the Pope directed to truths of faith and morals, within the framework established in the Decree itself).

On the Protestant side, one may easily see how their privileged and sole reference to Scripture is also a stance which could render dialogue difficult, since it somewhat disputes if any decision of the Magisterium is binding in interpretation. Various stands are held by various confessions on this point. Thus any effort at understanding is made that much more difficult.

But why should doctrine on Mary be important or be worth an ecumenical effort? Perhaps here lies the most intimate question about the whole endeavor.

A first reason might be the very attention paid to Mary in the Catholic Church, attention which calls for a stand by Protestants. Since this stance was taken more or less negatively in the past, a new approach would be more open to a greater sense of the meaning and person of Mary in Christian doctrine. In any ecumenical effort, the question of Mary in cult becomes essential. No rapprochement can be ensured without it.

The Second Vatican Council itself opened many eyes among Protestants, with its contemporary approach to doctrine and cult. This renewal in approach and presentation, held to be true through the extensive work of a Council, was sure to bear on ecumenism. How much of a departure from traditional Catholic stance was it? What could it mean for Christianity? We might summarize by saying ecumenism could mean a greater opening for the desired and most essential reunion, a greater sobriety in biblical approach and for the authoritative care of the Magisterium, a greater esteem for cultural tradition among Christians. It could mean greater involvement in a new approach to the historical Christ, a new respect for and understanding of the complex reality of His coming.

It is interesting to know that the ecumenical sessions of the Mariological Congresses chose gradually to concentrate on the theme of the Communion of Saints, in order to decipher the meaning of the role of Mary. It was a Church-oriented solution or key. The fruitfulness of this line of thinking was demonstrated by the participants' readiness to dwell upon it in two consecutive sessions.

A second reason, equally important to these ecumenical efforts, is the recognition of the role of Mary in begetting and educating Christ, which inclines believers to accept doctrines based on that fact. All Christian churches accept the birth of Jesus from Mary. A consensus on this basis (her motherhood) does not involve by far all the doctrine about Mary, but is a general platform used by all churches. We see here a factor of unity. It might call for greater clarification, but it is here apparent.

Thus, the Marian question becomes all the more crucial if some understanding is to be reached among Christian churches. It is gradually more evident that Mary might be now the right path towards reconciliation. It seems all the more urgent that Christian churches dedicate themselves to the study of Mary. This question cannot be discarded or evaded. From these simple data, and against some currents among Catholic scholars, the doctrine about Mary cannot be considered optional or superfluous; it remains very intimate to the core of Christian doctrine and reality.

A third reason is that the ecumenical effort requires efforts in mutual concessions, but not at the expense of the doctrines of each church. This means, though, some silencing of certain data or, at least, a concentrating on points of accord which leaves entirely open the need for discussion on other points also necessary before full understanding can be reached.

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It seems—since ecumenism cannot hope to reach its goal through concessions which disfigure doctrine, but rather through efforts at reaching more transcendental accords—that here, in the Marian field, lies a basic road to understanding. Discussions and discord on the Eucharist and on the Magisterium remain very serious, but the accord on Mary may help towards simplifying the questions in other fields.

The very effort at finding common grounds for mutual understanding brings and has brought about interesting results. The declarations of the Mariological Congresses in this area have been significant; they have shown that no immediate and full reconciliation is possible, but that some paths of entry can be found, have been found. They have fostered the suspicion that other paths may also be found, paths that may very well be a help towards full accomplishment of the aims.

Through three congresses, the same theme was recurrent in the ecumenical sessions: the Communion of Saints. This theme became central in the last two. Nothing called for it in the theme of the congresses themselves; it grew out of an effort to find a common basis of dialogue. It is remarkable that it was precisely the broader field of cult of the saints—in the guise of an acceptable approach, that of the Communion of Saints—which should have been selected.

That is, a place for Mary was found once the larger company of saints was called into presence. Other saints are in the company of God's elect, all the more Mary. They are exchanging mutual love with us, all the more so Mary. They are concentrated upon rendering the final full cult of glory to God, all the more Mary.

This approach is meaningful under many aspects, and it strengthens the place of Mary in the Church, with Christ, before God. If in Catholic thought all this goes without saying and seems to make demands for recognition of the saints and the elect before anything is spoken of Mary, it does offer a reassuring platform in ecumenism; however, it does not affect in any way the fullness of honour and glory the Catholic Church has always rendered to the first among the saints, she who is "nearer to Christ, nearer to us," as Paul VI said.

The full text of the most recent Marian Ecumenical Declaration of the Mariological International Congress (Kevelaer, 1987) here follows, translated from the original German text by members of the Ecumenical Commission. (The preceding Declarations were published in the Acts of the Congresses—by the Pontifical International Marian Academy, 124 Merulana, Rome 00185, Italy.)

ECUMENICAL DECLARATION

"Common Statement"

As at the congresses of Saragossa (1979) and Malta (1983), Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Orthodox and Catholic theologians have met at Kevelaer in order to

consider again and to pursue further the ecumenical conversation already begun at Saragossa and Malta concerning the role of Mary in the Communion of Saints. The conversation took place in brotherly unity. On the foundation of our common Christian heritage, the following joint statement was able to be drawn up. For this all participants thank God from whom is "every good endowment and every perfect gift" (James 1,17). We are aware of the differences that remain; to consider these more in the future is an urgency placed on us by the prayer of Jesus for the unity of his disciples (John 17,21).

1. Our setting-out point was that love of God and love of neighbor are the "way of Life" [*Lebensraum*] of every Christian, which must admit no limits. Because we are all infinitely loved by God we must love the brethren (1 John 3,16). We have recognized the love of God in Christ and received it in faith (1 John 4,16). Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit we receive the grace to respond to this love of God and to live in accord with this love. The Holy Spirit, who calls out in us: "Abba, Father" (Gal. 4,6; see also Rom. 8,15), obliges us also to work for the unity of the body of Christ and forms us into a single community of love. To love and to be loved is our spiritual "way of life" [again "*Lebensraum*"] (1 Cor. 13,13).

2. Love of God and neighbor as the basic Christian attitude is not destroyed by bodily death. "Love never ends" (1 Cor. 13,8). This love determines our everlasting existence in unending communion with the Triune God and with all who belong to him. There we shall live as loving and beloved.

3. In the bond of the indestructible love of God, the pilgrim people of God recognize their unity with those who have achieved final perfect union in Christ. The head of all is Christ "from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph. 4,16).

4. Those who have received completion in Christ and his Mother belong to that glad company—loving in him and with him all who are still on earth. An expression of this love is their prayer for us. We should be grateful for this.

5. Holy Scripture bears witness to the dealings of God in saving history to and with persons, his servants in the Old Testament and the New: patriarchs, prophets, John the Baptist, Mary and the Apostles. A loving esteem for them is an ingredient of our Christian faith and contributes to its vigor and vitality. For this reason the confession formulas of our churches bear witness to Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Reflection about Mary indeed serves to strengthen our belief that God shows his mercy "on those who fear him" (Luke 1,50, the Magnificat).

6. Our attitude as believers with respect to Mary and all the saints is essentially directed to the praise of the Eternal Father, with the Son, in the Holy Spirit. We recognize that Christ is the One Mediator to the Father (1 Tim. 2,5). Mary, the

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Mother of God, and the saints are subordinate to him. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the people of God on earth desire to unite their praise with Christ and with all who, as the perfect ones, belong to him.

All the participants of the ecumenical commission have been impressed by their experience here in Kevelaer of the lively devotion of Christian people from far and near. This has encouraged us in our efforts to seek anew and to express our common Christian heritage with respect to Mary, the Mother of God. As at the previous congresses, the members of the ecumenical commission sign this declaration as individuals in their own names. They hope that this text can be a positive contribution to ecumenical dialogue.

Kevelaer, 17.9.87.

W. Borowski, Evang, Luth.; Henry Chavannes, Evang. Ref.; Hans Düfel, Evang. Luth.; Johannes Kalogirou, Orthod.; Howard Root, Angl.; Eamon Carroll, O. Carm.; Franz Courth, S.A.C.; Théodore Koehler, S.M.; Charles Molette, Mons.; Cándido Pozo, S.J.; Pierre Masson, O.P., sec.

EFFECTS ON INTERRELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

One very important remark this Declaration calls for, in the context of our research here, is surely that the Christian world has to come to grips with its divisions in this field of Mary's meaning and function, as well as in those other now well-known fields of papal authority and sacraments, if it wishes to enter truly and homogeneously in contact with other religions.

The meaning and function of Mary appear, upon perusal of the ecumenical sessions of the International Mariological Congresses, to be significant for the unity of the Christian world. They may also render this Christian world attractive precisely because of the presence of Mary, of her wholly human and solely human figure, of her unique role in the coming, the begetting, the life of the Saviour. Her special figure makes her an example and a beacon conducive to Christ.

The texts of the Declarations show also that the purpose and scope of these meetings is not the coexistence of churches dedicated to Christ but a unity of doctrine commanded, not by the various churches, but by a search for the basic truth. On this point also, other religions might consider with interest these ecumenical steps within which the churches of Christian persuasion demonstrate a common profound aspiration to unity. However, no one considers that this would mean eradication of any church or confession, but rather enrichment in the one Church of the future.

Again, in approaching the other religions, the Christian world seems to express also a view of world religions which invites beyond specific characteristics to a consider-

ation of the possibility of a world vocation of humanity toward the one God. Perhaps this proposition would suggest a dialogue which would go beyond specific rights, towards world and human views of the future. While preserving valid rights and traditions, such a dialogue would suggest an evolution towards fulfillment.

All the while, the figure of Mary—human and feminine, godly and motherly—may also beautifully suggest itself as a key to Unity.

CONCLUSION

This paper was first presented to an international (“wider-ecumenical”) congress held in Istanbul.¹ It was not read—none of the papers were—but was rather distributed in photocopied form among members of the participating group. Discussion was led by one reporter and others shared in the debate.

It is interesting to note the non-Catholic reactions. For some, it was not sufficiently “biblical” in framework. Could the thesis here presented have any chance of being accepted by Protestant scholars? Worse still, was there any intention behind it of imposing on the Christian world its outlooks? Another reaction admitted the large place—too large—given to Mary in Catholic thought, but questioned whether Lutherans, for one, were not too stringent. It seemed also to some that the Catholic viewpoint would learn much by heeding the Protestant reaction.

Finally, from a Protestant scholar came appreciation: If there is an afterlife, does not this thesis hold, and do we not even have good motive to pray to the Virgin Mary for her intercession in the Communion of Saints, for our safe journey into everlasting glory? And is not the Catholic rosary devotion a salutary form of prayer to God through Mary, in the Communion of Saints?

This was ecumenical debate *within* the Christian communions, as a step towards the wider ecumenism among all religions. It seemed that Mary was Mother of Unity, in the very moment when this unity appeared more in danger, less possible. That is, it would be through understanding her role in the communion of all Christians that the meaning of Christianity could take full validity when encountering other religions.

True, some would affirm inter-religionary encounters cannot be held in a spirit of evangelization, but in perfect and permanent tolerance. However, Christianity, and especially Catholicism, is by essence and nature missionary, evangelical, and apostolic. It presents itself respectful of others, but also with a mission received from

¹ Conference sponsored by the Council for the World's Religions, held in Istanbul, Turkey, May 8-14, 1988.

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Christ: "Go, teach all nations..." to which, in this context of religions, we may add the soothing word of the Lord: "If they are not against you, they are for you."

Even here, the very structure of the Gospel and the Church invites one to recognize and profit from the role of Mary, Mother of the Son of God made Man. Through her, humanity finds itself willfully receiving God's presence. All philosophies, all religions, should find in this a point of arrival. But it is a complex question.

To our mind, the existential aspect of the Church of Christ—through the role of Mary as Mother of Christ—exercising, because of this motherhood, a spiritual motherhood on all Christians, appears an effective approach. While respecting the great and small religions of the world—as Pope John Paul II did at Assisi, praying with all—Christians are sent to announce the religion of the Father. It would be failing their duty not to confess this as they meet other religious persuasions. But it would not be Christian, either, to deny to men of goodwill the right to pray and believe according to their present conceptions and convictions. However, we cannot affirm that we are not, as Christians, bearers of the Good News. In this, the humility, strength of soul, and fidelity of Mary are exemplary. That is why it seems well-justified to present to an inter-religious meeting—as *the* great factor of Unity—Mary, Mother of the Saviour.