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THE BLESSED VIRGIN IN MODERN CATECHETICS

There are, in general, two kinds of religion programs in use in Catholic schools and Confraternity classes in the United States at the present time. They may conveniently be classified as experiential and doctrinal. In the experiential type, the stress is on personal experience and each person's subjective discovery of his own identity. "Our task," wrote a spokesman for this approach, "is neither doctrinal instruction nor moral formation; both of them are less than Christian, less than human. The task instead is to try to convey what it means to be a human person in the light of Jesus of Nazareth."¹ On these premises, it is almost irrelevant to ask what the role of the Blessed Virgin might be in catechetics. Her role would at most be that of an ideal or symbol that a Christian might admire and perhaps strive to imitate, much as one might read about Florence Nightingale and be inspired by her selfless generosity. But no more.

In the doctrinal approach to catechetics, we are not only in a different kind of methodology but in a different theology of religious education. In fact, the first kind of catechetics is not really catechetics at all if we understand catechetics to mean that form of the ministry of the word "which is intended to make men's faith become living, conscious and active, through the light of instruction."² The moment you say "instruction" you imply teaching doctrine and training in moral formation, neither of which is acceptable to the experiential, doctrine-less method of teaching religion.

¹ Gabriel Moran, *Vision and Tactics* (New York, 1968) 125.

² *General Catechetical Directory*, II, 17, quoting the Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church (*Christus Dominus*), 14.

The doctrinal method of catechetics begins with the assumption that in the message of salvation there is a certain hierarchy of truths, which means that some truths are based on others as of a higher priority, and are illumined by them. This method further assumes that these truths may be grouped under four basic heads, as follows: 1) the mystery of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, creator of all things; 2) the mystery of Christ the incarnate Word, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and who suffered, died and rose for our salvation; 3) the mystery of the Holy Spirit, who is present in the Church, sanctifying her and guiding her until the glorious coming of Christ, our Savior and Judge; and 4) the mystery of the Church, which is Christ's Mystical Body, in which the Virgin Mary holds the prominent place.

It is seen immediately that on these premises the Blessed Virgin is part of the doctrinal structure of Catholic Christianity. So that to teach Catholic doctrine necessarily means to teach Mary as an essential part of the mystery of the Incarnation and the mystery of the Mystical Body of Christ.

My intention in the present study is to look at both the contemporary approaches in Catholic religious education, and try (however inadequately) to show how the Blessed Virgin figures in each approach. My conclusion will be to point up some practical implications for the future.

EXPERIENTIAL CATECHETICS

There is some problem in identifying really standard sources for the experiential method of religious education. Since it is on its own terms more subjective than objective, there are almost as many expressions of its philosophy as there are defenders of its pedagogy. I have therefore felt it best to concentrate on those writers, sometimes anonymous, who have published in the past decade and a half or so, either as editors of by now widely circulated religion series, or as directors of re-

ligious education programs in dioceses, or as the acknowledged leaders in what is disarmingly called "the new catechetics," or with special emphasis as producers of a number of standard catechisms for adults.

Running as themes through these sources are a number of underlying principles that touch directly on our subject. Among these principles I would select two as fundamental to the rest. They are the claim that revelation is not so much an objective communication from God to man as an interpersonal encounter, going on here and now, between God and mankind; and that in the new approach to the Christian religion the Bible is primary and normative to tradition so that a great deal of what had passed for Catholic doctrine is really dispensable devotion which in our ecumenical age should be demythologized.

On-Going Personal Encounter. Catholics take some things for granted. In catechetics, we presume that Mary is the object of a real historical revelation. Any tampering with this presumption is to undercut the very idea of teaching about Mary as part of divine faith. Yet, as we read the founders of the experiential method, we find not only tampering with an objective, once-and-for-all revelation given to men by God. To ward off naturalistic rationalism, so the argument runs, orthodox theology adopted a supernaturalistic rationalism in which revelation was conceived as a divinely imparted system of universal and timeless truths entrusted to the Church as teacher.

The Second Vatican Council, the argument continues, advanced considerably beyond this narrow view.

In its Dogmatic Constitution on divine revelation, the council depicts revelation as happening in and through the events of history, and particularly in and through the central Christ-event. The principal purpose of revelation is not so much communication of information about God as it is an occasion of interpersonal communication between God and man. (The theological argument for this latter judgment is contained in an article by Gregory Baum,

Vatican II's Constitution on Revelation, in *Theological Studies*, March, 1967).³

What has been the net result of adopting this expanded understanding of revelation? It has led, to use its pronouncements' language, to a "reconsideration of the meaning of dogma." It has prompted the publication of such books as *The Case Against Dogma* by a current professor of theology at the Gregorian University in Rome; and has produced such documents as the drafts of the National Catechetical Directory, to which the American bishops reacted so strongly at their national assembly in 1977.

As the catechetical masters who are shaping the religious education of our Country declare, "Post-conciliar Catholic theology is now calling into question four important features of the Neo-Scholastic notion of dogma: its identity with revelation, its conceptual objectivity (kernel of truth), its immutability (an *unchanging* kernel of truth), and its universality (dogmas are to be accepted by all Christians; the unity of the Church is impossible without such prior dogmatic agreement)."⁴

Needless to say, this is revolutionary thinking. And one of the most salutary bits of advice that anyone can give persons who are concerned about even including Mary in religious education is to tell them frankly to face up to facts. One of the facts of the contemporary catechetical scene is that a considerable number of leaders in American religious instruction, all nominally Catholic and some highly influential, simply do not believe in Mariology in any traditional sense of the term. Indeed they do not accept Christology, I do not say as it was understood before the Second Vatican Council, but as understood by the council itself. The word "post-conciliar" is more than an adjective to describe a period of time; it has become a symbol for a new type of Christianity.

³ Richard P. McBrien, *Who Is A Catholic?* (Denville, N.J., 1971) 56.

⁴ McBrien, *Ibid.*

Where would a religious educator begin to talk about Mary if the great Marian dogmas professed by the Church are no longer part of revelation; if Mary's divine maternity or perpetual virginity are merely conceptual constructs and not objectively true; if therefore what Catholics thought was true, say the Immaculate Conception, is really changeable and could now mean something quite opposite to what Pope Pius IX meant when he defined this dogma; or if a Catholic could pick and choose among the dogmatic teachings about the Blessed Virgin, and select what he wanted and rejected what he did not want to believe?

Priority of the Bible. The second feature of the experiential approach to catechetics is to give the Bible priority over tradition. Different spokesmen for the approach give different weight to this priority, and with some the Bible is all but autonomous.

The whole of God's revelation, therefore, is reflected in the scriptural testimony. This is but another way of saying that the New Testament is the written testimony of the apostolic Church to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Given the present understanding of holy Scripture and revelation, the assertion that Scripture contains only part of revelation must be judged not incorrect but unintelligible.⁵

It is not my place here to try to explain this apparent inconsistency, of writers who opt for an ongoing revelation and declare that dogma is dead, and at the same time talk about the Bible as revelation. What is important is that, having given the Bible priority over tradition, they have paved the way for interpreting the Bible independent of tradition; whether this tradition is considered a distinct font of revelation or is equated with the Church's magisterium passing judgment on the content and meaning of the Bible.

⁵ Gabriel Moran, *Theology of Revelation* (New York, 1966) 109-110.

The implications of this position are far-reaching. Once you reduce tradition to a mere adjunct of the Bible, this leaves the Bible open to the private interpretation of every exegete. And that is precisely what has happened regarding the narratives about the Blessed Virgin in the Gospels.

To illustrate what this means in practice, take the familiar title given to Our Lady at the Annunciation, that in the Hail Mary is "full of grace." Commentators of the Bible-priority persuasion cite this phrase as a classic example of what should not be done, i.e., "eke every drop of theological and even mariological significance from (Luke) 1:28."⁶ If the phrase has theological significance, as it does, the meaning is not that usually associated with the text. It really means that Mary received the grace of conceiving the Messiah.

Such a theological meaning of *kecharitōmenē* which seems entirely justified by the context is to be kept distinct from another interpretation which has come by way of the Latin rendering *gratia plena*, "full of grace."

But "full of grace" is too strong... It is open to the interpretation that Mary already possesses the grace or perfection involved, whereas for Luke Mary's special state is to be constituted by the divine favor involved in the conception of Jesus. Later theology stressed the *fullness* of grace and made it a cardinal principle of mariology, so that Mary was thought to possess every perfection possible for a creature. Indeed, it lies at the root of the axiom *numquam satis* (i.e., one cannot claim too much for Mary). No matter what one may think of this theological reasoning (and some within Roman Catholicism today would want to reconsider it), it certainly goes beyond what Luke meant by *kecharitōmenē*.⁷

That settles it. A pious theologian may be excused for reading more into the biblical text than is there, but no intelli-

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York, 1977) 325.

⁷ Brown, *Ibid.*, 326-327.

gent Catholic is expected to say the Hail Mary and really mean that Mary was literally "full of grace."

The trouble with this reductionism is that it goes counter to the Church's universal and unbroken magisterium. Mary's fullness of grace is no mere theological reasoning. It is part of divine revelation; but only for those who still believe that above the Bible stands the Church's authority, which is divinely qualified to tell the faithful what they are to believe.

DOCTRINAL CATECHETICS

Immediately as we enter on a review of doctrinal catechetics we should point out what by now must be obvious. Whatever may have been the place of the Blessed Virgin in the teaching of religion two decades ago, it cannot now be done without full awareness of the issues we have just seen.

The presence of Modernism and Biblicism in contemporary religious education in some sectors of Catholic religious education cannot be doubted by anyone who understands the meaning of these aberrations and is familiar with the present situation. Consequently, it is not enough to describe how Marian doctrine and devotion are being taught. It is also important to indicate how they should be taught, at the risk of teaching without reference to the real world in which the students live.

Methodology. Every level of catechetics that respects Catholic doctrine reflects the teaching of the Second Vatican Council about the Blessed Virgin.

The first evidence of this responsiveness to the council is the way Mary is associated with her divine Son. This does not mean that prior to the council the standard catechisms ignored the relationship. But an examination of the current texts and five years' experience as theological advisor to a widely used elementary religion series verifies the fact that a new dimension has entered Marian catechetics. Our Lady is identified with her Son and associated with His redemptive work more closely than ever before.

In an eighth grade religion book, this relationship is clearly explained.

Because of the incarnation, the Blessed Virgin Mary is truly the Mother of God. In a miraculous way, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God the Son took a human body from Mary and was born of her.

Even though your own mother gave you only your body, not your soul (which came directly from God), she is the mother of the person you are. She is *your* mother. In the same way, Mary (who gave God the Son His human body but not His divinity) is the Mother of the Person He is. That Person is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. He is God. Therefore, Mary truly is the Mother of God.

And this is why the Church honors Mary—because God Himself has honored her by making her His Mother.⁸

Along with a sharpening of theological language in relating Mary to the Incarnation, the new textbooks reflect the warnings of the Second Vatican Council about giving Mary due credit, of course, but also making sure that a clear distinction is kept between piety and faith. In the teacher's manual for a second grade class this caution is expressed in the most forthright terms.

Sometimes teachers with strong devotion to Our Lady find it difficult to speak of her in a way that will be positive, practical, and based on revealed truth.

There has been much negative talk on her, especially on her purity, and her disapprobation has been threatened, even announced categorically, for ways of behaviour that often had no moral malice, but were merely disliked by the teacher.

There has been talk that did not seem to be based on the revealed doctrines of the Church so much as on other sources, private reve-

⁸ *Live the Truth, Give the Truth*, Daughters of St. Paul, (Boston, 1976) 30-31.

lations of canonized saints, the views, opinions, experiences of those who are not canonized.

It is important that we do not give the impression that Mary is a special way to God, almost distinct from the ordinary way of the Church, a way given to certain "chosen souls." Mary is part, and a very important part, of God's plan of salvation for every human being from Adam.⁹

Mary and the Church. If there is one aspect of Mariology brought out by the late council it was Mary's relationship to the Church. Part of the history of the council was precisely where and how the Blessed Virgin should be treated in the conciliar documents. The decision to speak of her in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church marks a turning point in Catholic theology that we are only beginning to appreciate. What do I mean? I mean that we can speak of two eras in the theological history of Roman Catholicism, one following the other as a true development of doctrine, without substantial change and certainly without what followed replacing what preceded.

The development of which I am speaking may be called a 'growth in communitarian consciousness.' Every facet of faith and worship has been affected, as the phenomenal changes in the Liturgy amply illustrate. Even the excesses to which this has given rise really testify to the fact.

Not unnaturally, Catholic doctrine on the Blessed Virgin has also been affected. Mary is and will always remain the Mother of Christ, and since He is God, she is the Mother of God. But Christ has a twofold existence, at once physical and social, personal and ecclesial. Correspondingly, Mary has a twofold relationship to Christ, as His Mother in the flesh and as the Mother of His Mystical Body which is the Church.

As the modern world becomes increasingly aware of man's

⁹ *Catholic Catechism*, Book Two, Teacher's Book, Australia and Hong-kong (Huntington, Ind., 1972) 125.

social existence and corporate responsibility it needs to draw more and more on the resources of Christian revelation to cope with the implications of this new communitarian consciousness. Among these resources is the mystery of the Blessed Virgin Mary in her association with the community of faithful and, through them, with the community of mankind.

That is why the Second Vatican Council made so much of the Blessed Virgin's relationship to the Church. It is also the reason why Pope Paul VI, in the apostolic letter closing the council, declared her to be the Mother of the Church. She is, in other words, not only the Mother of God made man; she is also the Mother of redeemed mankind.

With greater or less emphasis the authors and editors of doctrinal catechetics reflect this conciliar teaching. Two features of this emphasis are the role of Mary as witness by her sanctity, and her trust in Providence that through her Christ would reach all of mankind.

Mary teaches us that by our own holiness we bring Christ to others. In fact, the most effective witness is a holy life.

Mary cooperated with every grace that prepared her to bring Christ to the world. As students we are in years of preparation for that special work that God will ask of us in the future. Sometimes it is hard to see how God is using these years of study to make us better persons. But like Mary, we know in faith that God is using these days and years to transform us into himself so that we may bring him to the world.¹⁰

But once more there is need for caution; not that too much could ever be said about Mary's virtues, but that some single aspect of her moral life will be stressed to the detriment of the whole Marian portrait.

When you speak of Mary's virtues, speak of her faith, her hope,

¹⁰ *The Church: Filled with the Spirit*, Loyola University Press, (Chicago, 1976) 260-261.

her charity, and show by examples in her life. Do not say that her favourite virtue is chastity. What right have we to say that she had any scale of virtues other than that of her Son? And we know that for Him charity is the greatest virtue.

Then we will teach that all this abundance of grace was given her to prepare her for her great work, the special part she was to take in the Redemption. God need never have called her to any active part in the Redemption, but He chose to have her co-operation. Through the grace that her Son won for her, she had the maximum share in the work of redemption that it was possible, according to God's plan, for any mere creature to take. If she is a member of the Church, she is also the Mother of the Church, because she helped to give it life. She is the type of the Church, because her perfect self-giving to God through the grace of her Son is what the whole Church is striving to follow.¹¹

There is a refreshing realism in the devout attention given to Mary, while always keeping before the students' minds the fact that, while she was Christ's Mother, yet unlike Him she was not divine.

Moreover, teachers are reminded to keep the image of Mary in its proper perspective, that without detracting one iota from her dignity, she is not to be made out as a sort of queen regent to the apostles, and much less as a kind of priestess.

Remember that Mary had no part in the active life of the Church. Hers was not the function of preaching, of offering Mass, or of giving the sacraments. Do not picture to your class the apostles going to Mary for advice on how they would teach the truth Christ left with them. Such stories betray a complete lack of understanding of the mission Christ gave to the apostles and of the guiding power of the Holy Spirit.¹²

Given the preoccupation in countries like the United States

¹¹ *Catholic Catechism, Ibid.*, 125-126.

¹² *Ibid.*, 139.

with the women's liberation movement, this is not an idle bit of counsel to teachers. No less than Christ should not be pictured as a first century revolutionist, Mary should not be presented as a model feminist.

INTO THE FUTURE

It would be naive to suppose that the foregoing description of the state of affairs is an adequate one. There is no practical way of telling how deeply the experiential kind of catechetics that minimizes doctrine where it does not ignore it has penetrated the teaching of religion in our Country. The excellent study published by the United States Catholic Conference recently on *Where are the 6.6 Million?* is revealing in the extreme. It shows that in the past ten years there has been the most phenomenal drop in formal religious instruction in the history of the Catholic Church in America. Over six million Catholic children and youth who should be getting instruction in their faith under Church auspices are not getting it. No attempt is made in this admittedly statistical study to ferret out the causes, beyond a casual parenthesis.

I submit that one of the main causes has been a massive secularization of the whole spectrum of what was once professedly Catholic education. And among the most telling symptoms of this secularization is the downgrading of devotion to the Blessed Virgin, with its underlying premises in Catholic doctrine.

It is in this context that I would like to quote from the much-neglected Pastoral Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The letter says some profound and beautiful things about Our Lady. But it also says some strong things about the neglect of Our Lady in American Catholic life.

In writing this Pastoral Letter, our concern about our Lady is most keenly felt in the area of devotion. No survey is needed to

show that all over the country many forms of Marian devotion have fallen into disuse, and others are taking an uncertain course. In an age avid for symbols (the peace medals and other signs of the young are evidence of this), the use of Catholic Marian symbols, such as the scapular and the Miraculous Medal, has noticeably diminished. Only a few years ago use of the rosary was a common mark of a Catholic, and it was customarily taught to children, both at home and in courses in religious instruction. Adults in every walk of life found strength in this familiar prayer which is biblically based and is filled with the thought of Jesus and His Mother in the "mysteries." The praying of the rosary has declined. Some Catholics feel that there has even been a campaign to strip the churches of statues of our Lady and the saints. Admittedly, many of our churches were in need of artistic reform; but one wonders at the severity of judgment that would find no place for a fitting image of the Mother of the Lord.

We view with great sympathy the distress our people feel over the loss of devotion to our Lady and we share their concern that the young be taught a deep and true love for the Mother of God.¹³

To anyone familiar with the scene of American Catholic religious instruction, this concern "that the young be taught a deep and true love for the Mother of God" borders on anguish. Those who know what is going on have no illusions. No mask of theological rhetoric can hide the fact that millions of our Catholic young are not being taught a deep and true love for the Mother of God. When a stout volume is being published under the guise of scholarship, casting doubt on the historicity of the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels; when priest-writers are telling the faithful that doctrines like the Assumption are not required to be a professed Catholic; when authors writing with an *Imprimatur* are claiming that Christ never identified Himself with the Father, is it any wonder that the youth are not being taught a deep and true love for the

¹³ *Behold Your Mother*, United States Catholic Conference (Washington, 1973) num. 92-93, pp. 34-35.

Mother of God? Love for the Blessed Virgin must be based on sound doctrine about the Blessed Virgin. In the absence of true doctrine there cannot be true love; and without love there can be no devotion.

I do not wish to conclude, however, without pointing out that the future is hopeful, indeed more hopeful, I think, than at any time since the close of the Second Vatican Council. Not the least evidence of improvement is the fact that many members of the American hierarchy are urging the faithful to a greater devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Among the proposed amendments to the National Catechetical Directory approved by the bishops was the need for the children to learn and memorize certain forms of Catholic devotion, including the Hail Mary and the Mysteries of the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Only God can read the future, but of this at least we can be certain. The strength of the Catholic faith in the United States in the next generation will be in direct proportion to the youth of today receiving a sound instruction in what they are to believe and how they are to put their belief into practice. Part of this instruction must be in the mysteries of Our Lady, who first gave Christ to the world and who still gives her Son to those who believe in Him and tells them, as she told the servants at the wedding feast in Cana, "Do whatever He tells you."¹⁴

One closing sentence: Unless catechetics pays due respect to Mary it will not give due honor to Christ, and without Christ there is no Christianity.

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¹⁴ John 2:6.