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MARY, MOTHER OF GOD AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

It will not be the purpose of this paper to do a survey or overview of various authors and articles inasmuch as they offer a "challenge" to Catholic faith and theology in respect to Mary, the Mother of God. I will presume that the existence of such "challenges" are known to all here. What I should like to do is attempt to indicate some of the origins and consequences of such challenges, using for purposes of illustration two recent works from the fields of dogma and scriptural exegesis: *On Being A Christian* by Hans Küng,¹ and *The Birth of the Messiah* by Raymond E. Brown.²

Hans Küng's explicit treatment of Our Lady appears in the sixth chapter of his work, entitled "Interpretations." He writes there:

Mary is the mother of Jesus. She is a human and not a heavenly being. As a human being and as a mother, she is a witness of his true humanity, but also of his origin from God. Hence, as a result of what was admittedly—as we shall shortly explain—a very problematic development both historically and objectively, she later came to be understood as Christ-bearer and indeed as God-bearer (Mother of God).³

It must be noted that, for Küng, Mary's role as Mother of God is problematic "both historically and objectively." By way

¹ Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, tr. Edward Quinn (Garden City, N.Y., 1976).

² Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, N.Y., 1977).

³ Küng, *Op. cit.*, 459.

of clarifying the historical problematic, he cites "a number of *varied extra-biblical factors*; the cult of the Near Eastern mother divinities and also of the Celtic and Germanic goddesses . . . ; theological rivalries (Alexandrian and Antiochene Christologies); ecclesiastico-political antagonisms . . . ; sometimes very personal interventions by churchmen (Cyril of Alexandria's large-scale manipulation of the Council of Ephesus in 431 and his definition of 'God-bearer' before the arrival of the other, Antiochene party at the council).⁴

Elaborating on what he has just called Cyril's definition of "God-bearer," he continues:

. . . it was in the East in the fifth century—as already mentioned—that Mary, regularly called 'Mother of Jesus' in Scripture, was defined 'Mother of God.' This was a new, post-biblical title, attested with certainty only in the previous century, but—after Cyril's intervention—taken up with enthusiasm by the people in the city of the ancient 'Great Mother' (originally the virgin goddess, Artemis or Diana): a formula (like others of Cyril and that council) which might imply a Monophysite conception of divine sonship and incarnation, hypostasizing God (as if God could be born and not a man in whom as God's *son* God himself is evident to faith.⁵

The words chosen are, of course, redolent with innuendo: "large-scale manipulation," "post-biblical title," "taken up with enthusiasm—in the city of the ancient "great Mother"—"the virgin goddess—Diana," "Monophysite conception." The overall effect of such treatment is, I think, an attack on the credibility of the historical development of the doctrine.

Apart from the reference to the supposed Monophysite implications of the doctrine, Küng does not detail what he has called the objective problems with Mary's role as God-bearer. I would like to suggest, however (as I shall do later in refer-

⁴ Küng, *ibid.* Italics are Küng's own.

⁵ Küng, *Op. cit.*, 460.

ence to Fr. Brown's work) that his treatment of the virginal conception is not at all unrelated to his treatment of Mary as Mother of God. Concerning the former, he writes:

The virgin birth, attested only in the pre-histories of Matthew and Luke, does not belong to the center of the Gospel. As Mark, Paul, John and the other New Testament witnesses prove, the Christian message can be proclaimed even without these theological (aetiological) legends which are marginal to the New Testament. Jesus' divine sonship is not dependent on the virgin birth. He is God's Son, not because God instead of a man effected his origin, but because he is chosen and destined as God's Son. Neither Jesus' sonship nor God's fatherhood can be understood in terms of biological origin. There is no incompatibility between birth from God and human procreation.⁶

The Christological implications of such statements we must, for the moment, leave aside. Küng himself draws out what he implies in reference to "these theological (aetiological) legends."

Although the virgin birth cannot be understood as a historical-biological event, it can be regarded as a meaningful symbol at least for that time.⁷

No one can be obliged to believe in the biological fact of a virginal conception or birth.⁸

Thus, for Küng, Jesus' "divine sonship is not dependent on the virgin birth," and that birth "cannot be understood as a historical-biological event," and the divine maternity is a "very problematic development both historically and objectively."

⁶ Küng, *Op. cit.*, 456.

⁷ Küng, *ibid.* Cf. also *A New Catechism* (Herder and Herder, New York, 1967) 74ff; and *Correcciones al Catecismo Holandés*, tr. by C. Pozo (Madrid, BAC, 1969) 51ff.

⁸ Küng, *Op. cit.*, 457.

If the first statement is true in its implications, namely that Jesus is divine Son even apart from a virginal conception, then why is Mary's motherhood of a divine Son problematic objectively? It should not be, unless what is rejected between the first and the third statements, namely, the virginal conception, be, at least for Küng, the link between the two doctrines.

Raymond Brown does not explicitly treat the doctrine of the divine maternity in his recently published *The Birth of The Messiah*. In what is, as far as I can determine, his one direct reference to it, he writes:

The virginal conception quickly became locked into a larger picture of Mary the (Perpetual) Virgin. . . . The result is that those churches which have a strong Marian tradition tend to regard any questioning of the virginal conception as a threat to the theological position of her who has been designated the 'Mother of God' since the Council of Ephesus (431).⁹

I wish to call attention to the terminology—and it may be that no more is involved than a matter of terminology—used by Brown when referring to the divine maternity. He refers to Mary as she "who has been designated the 'Mother of God' since the Council of Ephesus." Why, I ask, the word "designated"? Are we dealing in this case with an ontological reality or with only a title, a designation, a use of language? Is she, in fact, what the words say? Or are they honorific and no more?

Allow me to explain why I wonder whether my problem with Brown on this point may be more than terminological. Brown posits what he calls a "backwards development"¹⁰ of Christology to explain the origins of the Infancy Accounts—this without ruling out all other possible influences. Thus:

In a pre-Gospel period, as attested by Paul and the sermons in

⁹ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 530.

¹⁰ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 313.

Acts, the *resurrection* was the chief moment associated with the divine proclamation of the identity of Jesus. When God raised Jesus from the dead and/or elevated Jesus to His right hand, God made or proclaimed him Lord, Messiah and Son of God.¹¹

Further reflection on the part of the Christian community, however, revealed this view to be inadequate. That community came to realize that Jesus was Son of God and Messiah not merely from the point of resurrection/exaltation, but even during the period of the earthly ministry. This development is reflected in the earliest of the Gospels, Mark.

Mark tells *the reader* that already at the *baptism* Jesus was the Son of God.¹²

With time, even this was seen to be inadequate, and Jesus is recognized as being Son of God at conception and even in his preexistence. As Brown puts it:

... the question of Jesus' identity is pressed back beyond the baptism in different ways. The Johannine Prologue presses it back to pre-existence before creation, while Matthew and Luke press it back to Jesus' *conception*.¹³

The footnote which Brown adds to the above citation is indicative, I think, of the strict logical progression which he envisions this historical development to have taken. He notes:

In the commentary I shall stress that Matthew and Luke show no knowledge of pre-existence; seemingly for them the conception was the becoming (begetting) of God's Son. The harmonization whereby John's pre-existent Word takes on flesh in the womb of

¹¹ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 29-30.

¹² Brown, *Op. cit.*, 30.

¹³ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 31.

the Virgin Mary (spoken of by Matthew and Luke) is attested only in the post-NT period.¹⁴

It is, as we have said, this “backwards development” of Christology which is the main source for the infancy narratives since, as Brown writes, “in fact we have no real knowledge that any or all of the infancy material came from a tradition for which there was a corroborating witness.”¹⁵

This lack of knowledge on our part concerning a corroborating witness to the infancy narratives is repeated several times by Brown when he deals with the material on the virginal conception. Thus, he writes:

What the silence of the rest of the NT does call into question is the theory that the memory of the virginal conception was handed down by the family of Jesus to the apostolic preachers and was universally accepted as fundamental Christian belief.¹⁶

The real difficulty about a preserved family (Marian) tradition of the virginal conception of Jesus is the failure of that memory to

¹⁴ Brown, *ibid.*, note 17. Brown later notes: “Conception christology and pre-existence christology were two different answers to adoptionism” (p. 141). His remarks and exegesis here are quite in conformity with that of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Pannenberg, however, draws a dogmatic conclusion, not drawn by Brown, when he writes: “In its content, the legend of Jesus’ virgin birth stands in an irreconcilable contradiction to the Christology in the incarnation of the pre-existent Son of God found in Paul and John” (*Jesus—God and Man*, tr. by Wilkins and Priebe, [Philadelphia, 1968] 143). Granted Paul’s theology of pre-existence, Brown’s “stress” that Luke shows no knowledge of it seems rather a-historical and methodologically doubtful if the generally accepted relationship between the two is accurate. Moreover, the rather strict logical progression which he envisions for the development of Christology is disputed. Cf., for example, Martin Hengel, *The Son of God* (Philadelphia, 1976), esp. 59 ff. All of this, of course, raises questions of an exegetical and historical nature for Brown’s work—questions quite beyond the bounds of this paper.

¹⁵ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 33.

¹⁶ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 521.

have had any effect before its appearance in two Gospels in the last third of the first century.¹⁷

The family tradition thesis is not impossible, but it faces formidable difficulties.¹⁸

To be sure, Brown is not willing to rule out the possibility of a family (Marian) origin altogether. An "ingredient of family tradition" may have been "auxiliary"¹⁹ in accounting for the virginal conception described in Matthew and Luke. Nonetheless, his conclusion on what is historically verifiable in respect to the virginal conception is clear.

In my book on the virginal conception, written before I did this commentary, I came to the conclusion that the *scientifically controllable* biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved. The resurvey of the evidence necessitated by the commentary leaves me even more convinced of that.²⁰

I should like at this point to re-focus the question. What relation does all the immediately preceding have to Brown's reference to the divine maternity? Or better—and more accurately—what relation does the above have with my concern with Brown's use of terminology (she "who has been *designated* the 'Mother of God' since the Council of Ephesus") in respect to the divine maternity? I hope that will become clear when I have presented one more element in Brown's treatment of the Annunciation scene.

Fleshing out what he sees as a "backwards development" in Christology as found in the Lucan infancy narrative, Brown writes:

¹⁷ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 526.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Brown. *Op. cit.*, 527.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Italics are Brown's

Thus, when the christological moment was moved back from the resurrection to the beginning of the ministry, the christological language of 'called Son of God, power, Holy Spirit' was also moved back. And in the Lucan infancy narrative where the christological moment has been moved back still farther to the conception, the christological language has quite consistently been moved back too. This is what I meant when I maintained that the angelic message in 1:35 is simply the Lucan version of an early Christian christological formula. However, whereas the declaration of Jesus as God's Son at the resurrection or enthronement in heaven or at the baptism involved a figurative begetting . . . the association of the christological formula with the conception involves a more literal begetting. The 'coming' of the Holy Spirit in 1:35b . . . and the overshadowing by the power of the Most High in 1:35c . . . *really* beget the child as God's Son—there is no adoption here.²¹

Thus, according to Brown, Luke is saying that, because of the virginal conception, Mary will beget this child as God's Son. However, Luke, according to Brown, shows no knowledge of the pre-existence of this Son, and the historicity of the virginal conception upon which Luke pins his view of sonship remains "unresolved," according to Brown, because of the nature of the "scientifically controllable biblical evidence."²² What has become "problematic" is the precise content of the "conception christology" of Matthew and Luke (as presented by Brown) in relation to the eternal divine Sonship of Jesus, and the historical value of the event on which they ground their "conception christology." This difficulty is heightened, for me, by Brown's past approval of a work by a fellow Catholic exegete

²¹ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 313-314.

²² For the sake of brevity, I have dealt only with Brown's treatment of the Lucan account. For the doctrinal purposes of this paper there is no significant difference, however, in his exegesis of the "conception christology" of Matthew as found on pp. 138-143 of his work. The questions raised in relation to his treatment of Luke and the relation of that treatment to his "designated the 'Mother of God' since the Council of Ephesus" are identical.

which, having presented the pre-existence ideas held by Piet Schoonenberg, refused to pass judgment on them.²³

I indicated at the beginning of this presentation that it was my intention in using the works of Küng and Brown to illustrate some of the origins and consequences of contemporary challenges to the mystery of the divine maternity. I hope that it is understood that I do not consider the two examples chosen to be challenges of equal nature, extent, or danger. They are, nevertheless, not unrelated. I should now like to indicate what I consider to be their common theological relationships and their consequences in relation to the divine maternity and other aspects of Christological doctrine. This I shall endeavor to do under four points: (1) The present status of the Alexandrian-Antiochene viewpoints in theology. (2) The role of a Catholic exegete. (3) The use of language, specifically the importance of the "communicatio idiomatum," and (4) the relationship between the virginal conception and the divine maternity. Each one of these is, of course, material for a full thesis in itself. Hopefully, by confining myself to the point at hand, the divine maternity, and the examples chosen, Küng and Brown, I shall be brief.

If, in a very broad stroke of the brush indeed, one can classify the School of Antioch as being that which concentrated on the importance of a literal exegesis of the Scriptures and strove to defend the true humanity of Christ—even the autonomy of that humanity—whereas the Alexandrian School was famous for its more "spiritualizing" or "allegorizing" interpretation of the Scriptures and its stress on the unity and divinity in Christ, then we may conclude that, generally speaking, Antioch has come to full flower in our own time. Nearly all writing since the late 1940's on Christology in Catholic circles manifests the preoccupation for safeguarding the autonomy of the Lord's

²³ Cf. Bruce Vawter, *This Man Jesus* (Garden City, N.Y., 1973) 170-171; and the review of same by Brown in *America* (Sept. 22, 1973) 195-196: "...there is nothing new or theologically risky here."

humanity. Karl Rahner's warning in the 1950's against the dangers of implicit Monophysitism or Monothelitism,²⁴ i.e. against the excesses of the Alexandrian School, has taken such root that even a Küng is able to use it to advantage—as we have seen—when wishing to discredit the doctrine of the divine maternity.

The Antiochean tendencies in the writings of the dogmatists have been greatly aided by the dominant position held by the proponents of the historico-critical method of exegesis. It is the method which Raymond Brown calls "critical scholarship" and which he defines thus:

By 'critical scholarship' I mean a study of the Bible which employs scientific historical and literary methods. Such biblical criticism implies the recognition that, as a set of written documents, the Bible is open to the same methods of study as any other collection of literature. To many scholars who maintain a religious faith, such a recognition does not detract from the belief that the Bible is the word of God. Nor does it necessarily deny the inspiration of the Bible, unless inspiration is equated with divine dictation and seen as the basis of a simple theory of inerrancy in all matters.²⁵

His own cautious use of "many" and "necessarily" in the above explanation is indication enough of the dangers involved—and not always successfully avoided—in this method.

The conjunction of the anti-Alexandrian tendencies in modern dogmatics and exegesis has helped lead to the current clash between "ascending" and "descending" or "high" and "low" Christologies—and to the efforts to overcome that clash. Both from a dogmatic and exegetical point of view the doctrines of the divine motherhood and the virginal conception pose a true stumbling block to the extremes of a "low" Christology, as

²⁴ Cf. Karl Rahner, *Current Problems in Christology*, in *Theological Investigations*, I (2nd ed., Baltimore, Md., 1963) 156, note 1.

²⁵ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 26, note 2.

Brown himself has noted in an earlier work.²⁶ The extremes of the present Antiochene dominance in the Christology of Catholic theologians have already been condemned by the Church's Magisterium in the 1972 Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.²⁷ (That declaration, however, has not prevented Küng from repeating what was therein condemned.) The Antiochene tendencies of Catholic exegetes still await critical observation. Which brings us to our second point: the role of a Catholic exegete.

In his Foreword to *The Birth of the Messiah*, Brown writes:

... the infancy narratives have been an area in which Roman Catholic writers have shown considerable interest because of their devotion to Mary; and from such detailed research this commentary has profited. However, historical criticism of the New Testament is relatively new on the Catholic scene, and many of those studies were written at a time or with a mentality that I shall have to reject as uncritical. As a Roman Catholic myself, I share their faith and their devotion; but it is my firm contention that one should not attempt to read later Marian sensibilities and issues back into the New Testament. (I do not mean that there is no need to relate the NT to later theology, but one must respect historical development.) I see no reason why a Catholic's understanding of what Matthew and Luke meant in their infancy narratives should be different from a Protestant's.²⁸

How, I wonder, can such a stance be maintained without ultimately divorcing faith and understanding, or without making the written Word of God the only source from which one draws the truths of Revelation? *Dei Verbum* of Vatican

²⁶ Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York, N.Y., 1973) 46.

²⁷ Cf. *Declaration for Safeguarding the Belief in the Mysteries of the Incarnation and of the Most Holy Trinity Against Some Recent Errors*, issued by The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on Feb. 21, 1972.

²⁸ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 9.

II contains the following paragraph which speaks of the mutual relation between Scripture and Tradition:

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit. To the successors of the Apostles, sacred tradition hands on in its full purity God's word, which was entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. Thus, led by the light of the Spirit of truth, these successors can in their preaching preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently, it is not from sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed.²⁹

If that text is saying anything at all, it is saying that, because of their mutual relationship, Catholic tradition—as expounded by the successors of the apostles—must contribute to the Catholic's (be he layman or exegete) understanding of the written word of God. To the extent that it does, a Catholic's understanding of what Matthew and Luke mean in their infancy narratives cannot be the same as a Protestant's, unless and to the extent that the Protestant shares the Catholic tradition. To defend the opposite is to deny the objective and historical value of the Tradition as a contributing factor to a fuller understanding of Revelation. It is likewise, a position that separates or tends to separate dogma from fact or history. Let me illustrate.

A Catholic knows, through faith, that Mary is truly the Mother of God and that Jesus was virginally conceived in the historical and biological sense. These are astounding realities which shaped the lives of two historical people. One of these

²⁹ Const. *Dei Verbum*, #9; in W. Abbott and J. Gallagher (eds.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York, N.Y., 1966) 117.

events is recorded explicitly in two documents written at least within forty or fifty years of the death of the two persons concerned. Yet we are asked to presume that the knowledge of the event recorded by those who wrote the two documents comes primarily from a "backwards reading" of Christology and not from remembered testimony of one or another of the two persons involved. Granted the historical truth of the fact in question, the presumption is contrary to common sense, a backwards reading of history. Brown defines "scientifically controllable biblical evidence" as "the type of evidence constituted by tradition from identifiable witnesses of the events involved, when that tradition is traceably preserved and not in conflict with other traditions."³⁰ What he is in fact saying, then, when he writes that he comes to the conclusion "that the scientifically controllable biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved" is, I suggest, the following: As a believing Catholic, I know that the virginal conception is historically and biologically true; that this fact is recorded in Matthew and Luke; but I do not know the source of their information, since there is no other evidence that the obvious sources of the information (Christ, His Mother, St. Joseph) are the actual sources. Therefore, it is more likely that the actual sources or source is a "backwards development" of Christology. In short, the most astounding biological conception in human history must be presumed to be known by us chiefly through theological retrospection.

That type of reasoning is, I suggest, possible only when one separates the reality from the recorded testimony to that reality, or separates the recorded testimony from the understanding that the Community which produced the testimony has always had both of the reality and the testimony to it. Brown has let his concern for the tracing of traditions obscure the event itself simply because he will not use the Catholic tradition as

³⁰ Brown, *Op. cit.*, 527.

an objective element aiding his exegesis of the text.³¹ And yet, that Tradition is *the only scientifically controllable evidence we have to the canonicity of the documents with which he is working.*

What is at stake finally is the reality itself. Because of the virginal conception, Matthew and Luke teach that the One born of Mary is Son of the Most High, Emmanuel. That Son is recognized even within the New Testament itself as being Himself God, and developing Christian faith preserved that recognition by hailing Mary as *Mother of God*. What happens to that understanding if one's methodology leaves the historicity of the foundation event unresolved?

As said of Mary, "Mother of God" is a dogmatic formula. It is an example—the most striking and common example—of that use of language traditionally called the "*communicatio idiomatum*." Its purpose is to express simply and concretely the truth that the One begotten of the Father before all the ages and the One begotten of Mary in time is One and the Same. It is Catholic faith that to call Mary "Mother of God" is both true and literally so.³² Given his Christology, it is little wonder that Küng finds this formula "a problematic development both historically and objectively." No further comment on his dif-

³¹ At this point, it might be important to note Father Brown's terminological shift in the manner of stating his conclusion concerning evidence for the virginal conception. In the already-mentioned book, *The Virginal Conception* . . . (p. 66), he wrote: "My judgment, in conclusion, is that the totality of the *scientifically* controllable evidence leaves an unresolved problem. . . ." The same wording appears in *The Problem of the Virginal Conception of Jesus*, in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 27 (1971-1972) 134. In *The Birth of the Messiah*, it has become, as seen frequently above, "scientifically controllable biblical evidence." The insertion of "biblical" certainly narrows the scope of his earlier conclusion. One can only wonder at the reason or reasons for this narrowing, and whether it signifies a change in his evaluation of the non-biblical evidence. If it does indicate a change in his evaluation of the non-biblical evidence, that is not reflected nor made use of in *The Birth of the Messiah*.

³² Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 16, a. 1, c.

faculties can be made here. Raymond Brown's reference to the formula as a "designation" raises another and slightly different question: namely, that of the use and ability of formulas to express transcendent realities.

That language is symbolic or representational we may presume as an established fact. The particular problems of the mediatorial or symbolic use of language as expressive of the Transcendent is not a new one, but has taken on new importance in our day, and has been the partial subject of an official declaration of the Magisterium. That Declaration contains the following paragraph:

In view of the above, it must be stated that the dogmatic formulas of the Church's Magisterium were from the very beginning suitable for communicating revealed truth, and that as they are they remain for ever suitable for communicating this truth to those who interpret them correctly. It does not follow that every one of these formulas has always been or will always be so to the same extent. . . . it has sometimes happened that in this habitual usage of the Church certain of these formulas gave way to new expressions which, proposed and approved by the Magisterium, presented more clearly or more completely the same meaning.³³

The document draws the distinction between the formula and the meaning expressed by the formula, teaching that the meaning may never change, but indicating, as it does in the above citation, that the formula itself may, in the course of time, be replaced. The formula with which we are dealing, however, is a healthy reminder that the separation of meaning from formula—at least in some cases—is not as easy as some might think, and may even raise the question as to whether—again in some cases—it can be done at all. There is a tendency to think abstractly on this matter, almost as if the terminology can be changed easily while retaining the same meaning or

³³ Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, #5.

perception of reality. Such is not the case. The terminological expression of meaning is intimately bound up with the meaning itself, much the same way as body and soul make the complex reality of the human person. Only those who persist in thinking dichotomously will insist that meaning may be expressed in any form. The importance of the formula for the doctrine is expressed well by St. Augustine when he calls for linguistic vigilance in respect to the Christian doctrines, "lest a lack of restraint in speech give rise to an irreverent opinion about the realities represented by the words."³⁴

Which brings us back to starting point. In choosing to illustrate some of the origins and consequences of contemporary challenges to the doctrine of the divine maternity with the help of Hans Küng and Raymond Brown, I have tried to indicate that a contemporary imbalance in the traditional Antiochene-Alexandrian outlooks in theology and a tendency among some Catholic exegetes to bracket the objective value of the Tradition while they do a supposedly critically scientific exegesis, are partial origins for the challenges to the dogmatic truth of Mary's divine motherhood. One of the consequences of the challenges to the divine maternity I have tried to indicate by pointing to the relationship between reality and its linguistic expression in a time when it is too often presumed that the two are readily separable. In the case in question they are obviously not. As long as human motherhood is understood to be what it is, and as long as the Church believes that her Savior is truly God, then "Mother of God" will be no mere designation or honorific title, but rather the expression of an ontological and historical fact.

There is one final consequence of contemporary challenges to Mary as Mother of God. The current challenges should make us re-think the connection between the virginal conception and the divine maternity. We should ask ourselves again

³⁴ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 10, 23.

—within the context of the analogy of faith and the light that controversy can throw on that faith—whether Mary would be truly Mother of God if she were not also Virgin Mother of God; whether indeed Jesus would be Son of God in the Chalcedonian sense of the word if His Mother were not a Virgin. Let us leave aside the disputed question as to whether any one of the Three Divine Persons could have become man³⁵ and start from the actuality that, from all eternity, God decides that the Second Person become man. His earthly existence reveals that aspect of His relationship to God which we call filial and we presume that this relationship to God is true not just of the humanity but of the divine Person. If this be not the case, then the formulae which we use to express the mystery of the Incarnation and the Trinitarian relationships need to be changed, for the very simple reason that they are not communicating the real. Now the fundamental reason for the reality of the “Mother of God” formula is the fact that parenthood is predicated between subjects. Mary is the Mother of This Person Who is God. She is not simply the begetter of a nature. If there were, then, a human father of Jesus, would that father not be, by the same reasoning, Father of God, thus positioning two real Fathers for the same subject?³⁶ To say *Yes* and then introduce the distinction based on the differing relationship to the two natures (an “ontological” relationship existing to the one, a “biological” relationship to the other) is either to make the human father progenitor of a nature alone (thus contradicting the Church’s understanding of the subject-

³⁵ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 3, a. 5.

³⁶ Some would see no difficulty, since they are apparently able to separate the ontological from the biological in this type of relationship. Cf. R. Brown, *The Problem of the Virginal Conception of Jesus*, in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 27 (1971-1972) 134: “Nor is belief in virginal conception any longer equated with belief in Jesus’ divinity; for Catholic and Protestant scholars alike have recognized that bodily fatherhood of Joseph in begetting Jesus would not have excluded the fatherhood of God, which is an ontological and not a biological concept.”

to-subject relationship when affirming the divine motherhood) or to court some form of adoptionism or a Christology along the "Presence" lines of Schoonenberg and Küng.

The argumentation is neither new nor conclusive. What makes it worth reconsidering is the nexus which exists between the two doctrines—a nexus I believe to be implicit in the works of Brown and Küng. The latter explicitly finds the "Mother of God" formula objectively problematic and does so having previously rejected the necessity for faith in the virginal conception. The former refers to the formula as a "designation" and, having exegeted Matthew and Luke as affirming Jesus's relationship to God as filial *because* of the virginal conception, states that the historicity of the virginal conception is an unresolved problem because of the nature of the scientifically controllable biblical evidence. I believe that the nexus is real and necessary, that to deny the one should lead logically and necessarily to the denial of the other, and that the denial of both is a denial of the mystery of the Incarnation as the Church understands it.³⁷ To weaken belief in one should lead logically and necessarily to a weakening of belief in the other, and a weakening of belief in both is to weaken belief in the mystery of the Incarnation as the Church understands it.

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³⁷ For the teaching of the Fathers of the Church on the intimate nexus between Mary's virginity and her divine motherhood, see the exhaustive dissertation by J. M. Bover, S.J., *Cómo conciben los Santos Padres el misterio de la divina maternidad: La virginidad, clave de la maternidad divina*, in *Estudios Marianos*, 8 (1949) 185-256.

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