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CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY AND THE ASSUMPTION

At last year's Mariological Convention Fr. George Montague delivered a paper entitled "Our Lady and Eschatology."¹ This paper has a somewhat similar title, but the field has been narrowed down to Christian Eschatology and the Assumption. Many of Fr. Montague's general remarks would form good background material for our subject. My main program in this paper will be to speak in quite general terms about approaches to eschatology in contemporary theology, and to say something correlatively about the end-time of the earthly existence of the Christian community's foremost member and its exemplar, Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

It seems convenient, therefore, to consider two general areas: 1) Current approaches to Christian eschatology; 2) Relationship between Christian eschatology and Mary's Assumption.

I. Contemporary Perspectives on Eschatology

I have had a growing suspicion that Christian theology has openly neglected the whole theological dimension of the future. Furthermore, even what was said about eschatology, that is, the treatise on "the last things", was becoming increasingly less relevant as theology.

One has to be aware of the implications of eschatology to grasp the complexities of this subject. Traditionally, eschatology had to do simply with the last things, death, judgment (particular and universal), purgatory, heaven, hell, the end of the world (*sic*) and final resurrection. Theologically speaking, all of these issues were virtually beyond controversy. Death was seen as the separation of body and soul, at which time all effective salvific action ceased. The body was consigned to

¹ G. Montague, *Our Lady and Eschatology*, in *MS* 17(1966) 65-85.

to the earth whence it originally came; the soul began a forever existence either with God in vision (unless Purgatory or suffering-for-punishment-due-to-sin, an intermediate state, were required beforehand) or separated from God. Something, finally, was said about the end of the world and the final resurrection; but beyond a statement of the *facts* themselves, such questions were of a highly speculative nature.²

Contemporary approaches to eschatology would find this theological structure inadequate on two counts: first, on the meaning of eschatology itself within the context of Christian theology; second, on the out-dated perspectives in the theology of the "last things" themselves. It is in response to these two themes that I would like to develop the first part of my paper.

A. *The Meaning of Eschatology*

Much has been written in recent decades about eschatology. Significant advances toward understanding the whole question were made by various biblical specialists, especially Cullman, Dodd, and Feuillet. Their efforts, however, were concerned primarily with biblical eschatology and especially with the problems of eschatology in the New Testament. There is a suspicion that New Testament eschatology, at least as interpreted by the Christian communities for many centuries, broke radically with the kind of eschatology, or end-time, of which the Old Testament was so representative. It would undoubtedly contribute much to our concern with eschatology were we to spend some time on the notion, as traditionally conceived, of the *parousia*, but there is simply lack of time to discuss it here.

Having said this much, we are able to indicate (perhaps along the same general lines) the direction of eschatology in recent years. One of the most productive insights has been contemporary man's evolutionary view of the universe. That dynamism that characterizes this cosmic vision creates new approaches to the whole theological framework. In the area

² C. Davis, *Theology for Today* (New York, 1962) 269, 294.

of eschatology, the challenging questions resulting from a vision of world-in-process are basically three: Is the universe, and especially the community of man, going anywhere? If so, where? In anticipation of enlightened answers to these questions, a third query jumps out forcefully at the sensitive person: What is my role as an individual in the forward thrust of the human community? Serious reflection on these questions opens up a significantly different interpretation of eschatology. It becomes increasingly less a discussion about the end-time of the individual, as important and necessary as this may be in the religious consciousness of man, and more the shattering awareness of personal responsibility for the New Creation, particularly for the universal community of mankind. That this is a different or renewed (I forego the adjective "new", since there seems to be such an eschatological sense in the Old Testament) approach to the meaning of eschatology is sufficiently evident not to warrant extended discussion in this paper.

But the implications of this view of eschatology are radically challenging. Perhaps certain forceful glimpses of what this might mean are already present in the writings of Metz and Winter.³ The following observations are deserving of serious consideration:

First Thesis. The modern man's understanding of the world is fundamentally oriented toward the future. His mentality therefore is not primarily contemplative but operative. . . .

Second Thesis. The orientation of the modern era to the future, and the understanding of the world as history, which results from this orientation, is based upon the biblical belief in the promises of God. . . . The Christian has the responsibility to develop his faith's relationship to the world as a relationship of hope, and to explicitate his theology as eschatology. . . ."

Third thesis. The relationship between the Christian faith and

³ See G. Winter, *New Creation as Metropolis* (New York, 1963) and J. B. Metz, *The Church and the World*, in *The Word in History* (New York, 1966) 69-85. Of interest also is H. Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, 1963).

the world should be characterized from a theological viewpoint as a creative and militant eschatology... In other words, Christian hope should realize itself in a *creative and militant eschatology*. Our eschatological expectation does not look for the heavenly-earthly Jerusalem as that ready-made and existing promised city of God. This heavenly city does not lie ahead of us as a distant and hidden goal, which only needs to be revealed. The eschatological City of God is *now* coming into existence, for our hopeful approach *builds* this city. We are workers building this future, and not just interpreters of this future...⁴

Similar to Metz's emphasis on theology as eschatology, Gibson Winter specifies "city" as "Metropolis":

"Throughout these reflections we have contended that metropolitan man is also historical man—the one who ponders his future and his personal identity; metropolitan man is the man who raises radical questions about the meaning of the human enterprise. In theological language, this is man reflecting on the *Eschaton*—the Last things, the End... Metropolis is the form of the New Creation to which men are summoned; it is the New Creation as social form which we have called the New Mankind. This New Creation is the final or eschatological reality, but its finality is disclosed through the power which it mediates in the historical present; its ultimacy is disclosed in its power as beginning of coherence and unity for metropolitan man, directing him to the reopening of communication, informing his life with awareness of the humanity to which he belongs—only in this new beginning will metropolis become reality rather than dream. The End is the beginning and source if it is the authentic end of man. The testimony of God's people is that the New Creation to which they belong is, at the same time, the source of their being and existence."⁵

In the context of these statements one catches a relatively new approach to eschatology and one's perspective gains depth in proportion to the validity of the meaning of Christian hope. If "faith" may be said to be openness to all reality, especially

⁴ Metz, *op. cit.*, 71ff, *et passim*.

⁵ Winter, *op. cit.*, 132-33.

the reality of others, the I-thou relationship (ultimately, of course, to the all-pervasive creative action and presence of *the Other*); and if "love" is the personal, creative response in total openness to reality, then truly "hope" represents a glorious sense of the creative possibilities of man for the future. And the explicitation of this hope in theology becomes, as Metz affirms, eschatology.

It might be of interest to note that although both Metz and Winter share a similar avenue of approach to the future, the New Creation, their points of departure are slightly different (a difference that may really be significant). Metz's concern for the radical re-thinking of eschatology stems from a fear of personalist theology ("personalist" as contrasted with the merely objectivistic viewpoint of scholastic theology). He would caution us:

"... However, this theology faces two dangers. On the one hand, this anthropological theology tends to limit the faith by concentrating on the *actual* moment of the believer's personal decision. The *future* is then all but lost. It becomes only another name for the intractable factors of the present decision. On the other hand, this anthropological theology tends to become private and individualistic. It fails to bring into sufficient prominence the social and political dimensions of the believers' faith and responsibility."⁶

For Metz, therefore, as necessary as it may have been to bring Christian faith into a proper relationship to human existence and subjectivity, personalist, anthropological theology was ultimately just another step in the progressive development of human consciousness in the religious dimension. Man becomes aware in a much more sophisticated and challenging sense of himself not only as individual but also as member of the universal community of mankind. But, and this perhaps is the crucial break-through, this awareness is accompanied by a correspondingly developed sense of responsibility not only for his own existence but for the existence and the forward prog-

⁶ Metz, *op. cit.*, 70-71.

ress of the whole universe, and especially, in its social form, the human community. Perhaps it is already evident that I am commenting on Metz's reflections but adapting them to the conclusions of Teilhard de Chardin on the role of the reflective creature at this crucial juncture in the history of the universe and necessarily, therefore, in the history of the human community; I do find the two men arriving at much the same conclusions.⁷

Winter on the other hand suggests that a sober and unbiased understanding of the Scriptures in their authentic, historical, existential "categories" will restore the meaning of eschatology for contemporary man:

"... Moreover, the churches had long treated the myth of creation as a literal account of the process of creation, thus transforming a narrative about man's essential nature into a scientific theory about his temporal existence. Hence, religious leaders felt constrained to defend this theory against the godless forces that were assuring man's continuity with the total evolutionary process of nature. The Churches were clinging to a supernatural creation of man against the biblical affirmation of man's creation from the earth. . . . The Christian theory of a miraculous creation of man, abstracting from the biblical narrative a universal principle, had made man's relationship to nature a confusing problem; his having a body was at the best an embarrassing limitation. Evolutionary theory restored man's relationship to nature but seemed to cast serious doubts upon his eternal destiny. Nevertheless, this secularization of man's scientific knowledge of his past opened the way to an understanding of his destiny in the historical categories of the Bible. Secularized man found himself in nature and history, asking about the ultimate meaning of his existence. He found in the saving history an account of his being chosen and given a future; he found that this contingent, historical life could not be secured against death through any pretensions to a divine substance; he found that the meaning

⁷ This is a central theme in Father Teilhard's works. One might cite as the best summary, *The Future of Man* (New York, 1964) 37-60.

of his life was inseparable from the commitment of that life in responsibility for the future. . . ."⁸

For Winter, then, man's future is the New Creation, which in turn is the final or eschatological reality. But this "finality is disclosed through the power which mediates in the historical present; its ultimacy is disclosed in its power as beginning of coherence and unity for metropolitan man, directing him to the reopening of communication, informing his life with awareness of the humanity to which he belongs—only in this new beginning will metropolis become reality rather than dream. The end is the beginning and source of it in the authentic end of man. The testimony of God's people is that the New Creation to which they belong is, at the same time, the source of their being and existence."⁹ I find Winter's approach to be entirely in accord with what I understand to be the thrust of the creative action and presence of God. In other words, the history of salvation is the history of God's revelational presence and man's response (salvation) or failure to respond (judgment). But God's revelation (Word) is creative, and the direction of His creative presence and action is always toward unity, a unity which is seen finally as community, and so revelation ceases with the full founding of the Christian community. But the community as seen in Revelation is the community as it shall be at the end, and so in Gibson Winter's language we again speak of the "end as beginning."¹⁰

Along the lines suggested by these contemporary theologians, much work remains to be done in the newly projected field of Christian eschatology. Just their key phrases, "explicitation of theology as eschatology" and "New Creation as Metropolis," furnish challenging insights into various possibilities for a restructuring of theology along the pastoral lines that recent conciliar discussions have recommended so urgently.

⁸ Winter, *op. cit.*, 44-45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰ An interesting approach to the idea of "end as beginning" is found also in A. Hulsbosch, *God's Creation* (London, 1965) 31ff.

B. *The Theology of the Last Things.*

Christian eschatology in its traditional treatise form has occupied a hidden corner in the theological storehouse and was only cursorily discussed. In some seminary curricula not more than a week or two are devoted to "the last things" (*de Novissimis*). And yet, the surprising paradox is that the conclusion from the theology of the last things have wielded a powerful influence on the basic structures of Christianity. One would not be too far off the mark in saying that the prospects of his future presence as "separated soul" before the Almighty Judge, with the stark possibility of everlasting damnation, has shaped many a severely-disciplined Christian's life. Simultaneously, it is this gripping vision of the Christian as individual and individually responsible to God (as valid as this basic truth is) that has shaped the questionable direction of Christian eschatology (*and* theology).

It is this futuristic view of Christianity to the individual's end-time that has wrought some highly questionable approaches to the Christian's existence in the world. This view-to-the-future, very different from the "future" as seen by Winter and Metz, has looked out to the things "of the other world," "the world of the spirit", indeed "the only real world." Correlative to this is the view of this world as a mere shadow of the ideal world and of minimal value in comparison with the heavenly city and its realities. There seemed to be an understandable consistency between the tenet about the eventual destruction of the world and the Christian's "rejection of the world." Emphasis appeared to be on mere toleration with earthly, secular, historical reality; renunciation, penance and mortification were the by-words of true perfection. Without stopping long to verify this traditional Christian approach to eschatology, one should note at least in passing that a very important pillar undergirding this long-standing eschatological structure has been the influence of Greek philosophy.

Much has been said about the issue of Christianity's Greek

roots.¹¹ Suffice it here to note that the nascent Church in its attempt to build up a theology of finality did not emerge unscathed from its encounter with Platonism, especially in the body-soul issue. Tresmontant discusses this topic at length. Within the framework of the body-soul dichotomy it was possible to erect a quite extensive eschatological structure; the foundationstone was the definition of death as the "separation of body and soul." Once this principle had been accepted, further speculation centered with relative ease on the "soul" after death. The question: "What happens to the person," so keenly asked by the existentialist, appeared not to have bothered the earlier theologies of death. Perhaps Cullman has best captured the result of the body-soul dichotomy in its eschatological implications. He says the Christians, severed theologically from their biblical moorings, are more apt to describe their belief in life after death by the formula "I believe in the immortality of the soul," rather than in the traditional credal tenet "I believe in the resurrection of the dead (flesh, body, etc.)."¹²

Any rethinking of individual eschatology, then, must be highly sensitive not only to the theology of finality (the future) of the larger community, but also to the significant contributions of biblical and existential modes of thought to individual eschatology. These latter are principally two: 1) The extensive implication for theology generally (not only for the theology of Redemption) of the resurrection, Christ's and ours; 2) The contemporary discussion about the meaning of death, death as transformation, and death as final option. And here precisely is the point of contact, in my understanding at least, between Christian eschatology and the Assumption of Holy Mary.

¹¹ See, for example, C. Tresmontant, *A Study of Hebrew Thought* (New York, 1960); also Armstrong-Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* (New York, 1960). There is an interesting section on this question, too, in R. Troisfontaines, *I Do Not Die* (New York, 1963) 68ff.

¹² See Troisfontaines, *op. cit.*, 194ff.

II. *Relationship Between the Assumption and Christian Eschatology*

There are certain limits that must be clearly defined before one can address himself to the vast theme of the relationship between Mary's Assumption and Christian eschatology. First, it is not my intention in this paper to enter into discussion on the theme of the Assumption and Christian eschatology as described in the writings of Winter and Metz, that is, eschatology as the future creation of the ideal human community (or the New Creation). However, one can see various interesting possibilities suggested by this theme, especially the aspect of a perduring mediatory relationship of concerned members to the historical, terrestrial community of mankind of which, because of death, they are no longer a visible, concretely tangible part. It is my suspicion that Holy Mary's Assumption, as seen by Christians generally, creates quite the opposite impression: rather than developing the kind of vision that challenges each member of the human community to the joyous task of building the earth, the doctrine of the Assumption has held out the promise to each Christian of eventual liberation from the evil world and of infinite joy in the lap of God. At the same time, however, and positively, the Assumption of Holy Mary does wield a kind of restraining influence on theology (in its present communal thrust of concern for the whole human community) not to lose sight of the individual and his personal destiny. This was always a point of grave concern for Teilhard de Chardin in his projection of supreme consciousness, Omega Point, etc. The only way, in his vision, that one can speak of the immersion of mankind into a kind of ultimate and supreme consciousness is by emphasizing the supreme individuality of each person in relation to every other person. The very force that brings these persons together by that which is deepest within themselves ("center to center") is *the* Personal Center, or Love, or Omega

(Jesus the Christ).¹³ Having said this much, I will say no more about Christian eschatology as the New Creation and Mary's Assumption.

Another possible area of discussion that will not occupy our attention directly is the whole gamut of the individual last things. Though it might be both enlightening and useful to restructure the theology of the last things on the principle—the clearest tenet in the early credal summaries—of the resurrection of the body in its correlation to the end-time of the foremost member of the Christian community, i.e., the Assumption of Holy Mary, such a task is simply too vast for this paper.

I am limiting myself, therefore, to only one aspect of individual eschatology, namely *death*. I would like to search it out in the general framework of Holy Mary's Assumption, that is, the end-time of her earthly existence and her being-taken-up body and soul into heaven. My point of departure, and at the same time general theological principle, is that the so-called privileges of the Mother of Jesus are not privileges in the perhaps too common sense of setting her apart from and almost beyond the community of Christians so that she is only to be admired and praised. Rather, these privileges, clearly seen as the conscious effort of the Christian community to say something perfect about Mary in all the dimensions of her earthly existence, really say something challenging to each Christian about himself. It is within this general framework that I discuss Christian death in relationship to the death of Holy Mary.

A fresh and new approach to the theology of death has been introduced in recent years.¹⁴ Traditionally, the theology of death has been worked out in terms of four general statements: Death is the separation of body and soul; Death is universal;

¹³ See P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York, 1965) 260ff.

¹⁴ Among other writings, one might consult L. Boros, *The Mystery of Death* (New York, 1965), K. Rahner, *The Theology of Death* (New York, 1961), and R. Troisfontaines, *op. cit.*

Death is the consequence of sin; Death seals man's pilgrim state (*status viae*) once and for all (all merit and demerit cease for the individual). There are a significant number of "why's" and "how's" that have gone by unnoticed in our traditional theology.¹⁵ Our interest is centered specifically on the question of the universality of death. It is a universal declaration from the Christian community's reflections on Revelation that all men, save Jesus, the Christ, and His holy Mother, Mary, are subject somehow to first or primordial sin. In other words, all men begin their earthly existence under the mark of sin. Furthermore, it has been understood traditionally that the cause of death from the biblico-theological point of view is sin. Death, therefore, in the Christian understanding of reality, is the result of sin. Sin is universal; death is universal. Yet, in this statement is contained the sharply delineated tradition that Jesus, the Christ, and Holy Mary were entirely free from sin, by right and by privilege respectively.

In this framework we might like to conclude that Jesus and Mary did not die—or should not have died. And yet Jesus' death-resurrection event is the central happening in His saving-action, our redemption. Therefore, Jesus made death-resurrection an indispensable moment in His redemptive sacrifice. And so in Pauline theology it is the death-resurrection event of Jesus which has destroyed universal death, since man is alive now in faith and love, and glorification (individual and communal) is his *hope* ("Death where is your sting?"). It is simply beyond question, then, that Jesus's death be the consequence of sin-as-personal. Still, one may ask, was it in any way a consequence of His human condition, His perfect human reality? In other words, was there anything in Christ's death that could be said to be characteristic of man generally, that is, as a natural phenomenon? Or, was everything about His death a consequence of original sin and, therefore, of sinful humanity? This is the crux of the problem. And yet, there appears to be an

¹⁵ See Rahner, *The Theology of Death*, 16-17.

aspect of death generally which characterizes it as a *natural phenomenon*. Both the scientist and the philosopher (this latter with some reservations) certainly see death from their perspective as the natural condition of man. And so, in view of this, our attributing immortality to the first man raises a question: would we not be presumptuous to imply that he would have lived on endlessly in this life?

... Rather can it be said with certainty that he would surely have experienced an end to his life, but in another manner; maintaining the integrity of his bodily constitution, he would have conducted this life immanently to its perfect and full maturity...¹⁶

In other words, the "gift" of immortality, based primarily on our ideal of mortality, could mean that there would have been no separation of body and soul, so that in the language of the Councils, "man would not have departed from his body."¹⁷ This, then, in the traditional framework could have been the end of the first man's earthly existence, living as he did in the friendship of God. Through sin, however, the first man wilfully severed himself from God and God's creation, and so the end of his existence was not lived to its perfect and full maturity. He then fell prey to all the external forces that create man's mortal condition. In accord with these suppositions, it might be more correct to describe death as a two-fold event. Death is firstly a natural phenomenon, insofar as man never would have lived on endlessly in this life. And this really is the essential element of death. It is a *transformation* of the *person* for his new existence, and therefore the positive reality of union with God and God's creation, especially His holy people. Death, secondly, as a consequence of sin, signifies in man's consciousness the violent dissolution of his actual bodily constitution, implying all those negative elements of fear and terrifying mystery which strike us so deeply. This second aspect of death, however bold a stroke it may draw across hu-

¹⁶ Rahner, 42.

¹⁷ Troisfontaines, *op. cit.*, 194-5.

man consciousness, is really accidental to death and identified with it only because of the first sin and subsequent personal sin.¹⁸

From this two-fold description of death, death-as-transformation and death-as-separation, one can see plainly enough the possibilities of a quite new approach to the discussion of death as a consequence of sin. Perhaps an initial generalization might be suggested: death indeed is the consequence of sin, but not every aspect of death would be included. Accordingly, then, one would be at liberty to say that the sin-death relationship does not really strike the essential note of death at all. If the generally accentuated aspects of death (break, etc.) are the results of sin, yet death is essentially and primarily a transformation and a rebirth to new and continually more meaningful and fuller human existence. And this undoubtedly would have been the lot of the first man, had sin not marred his relationship with Creator and creation.

Only the passage (of the first man to glory) would have occurred in an entirely different manner, without rupture or suffering. Death would have been the herald of happiness; it would have appeared in joyful resplendence, free of gloom and anguish, and free of all those aspects that now make it so fearsome: untimely break, decay of the body, disruption of all relationships.¹⁹

The question of death as a consequence of sin is understood, therefore, only if one grasps the reality of sin. It is because of sin that death loses its positive sense of transformation, of the last truly human action, the final option,²⁰ and becomes negatively death-as-break-and-separation. All those aspects of death, therefore, that surround it with fear and uncertainty

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of this twofold notion of death, see Troisfontaines, 196ff.

¹⁹ Troisfontaines, 193.

²⁰ The subject of death as "final option" has been discussed at length by Boros, *The Mystery of Death*. Troisfontaines has some interesting considerations on this subject also (pp. 140-188).

are in the *full* Christian view the result of man's sin—original and personal.

The relationship between sin and death as a violent break stems precisely from this murderous will of the sinner. We find it easy enough to understand why death under this aspect has saddened the heart of Jesus Christ, and why it should terrify or revolt us: it is not "natural" and it is not what God had in store for us. Everything we find horrible and hateful in death has its sole source in sin.²¹

Returning, then, to our original question about Jesus' death, and death as a natural phenomenon and/or a consequence of sin, one would have to say that Christ has taken that aspect of death which is the lot absolutely of all men, i.e., ending their earthly existence, and fitted it into His redeeming salvific action, so that once again death reacquires its fundamental characteristic of transformation (resurrection-glorification). And so we affirm that Christ has destroyed sin and death, since through Christ's life, death and resurrection, all of human existence makes sense, and the true and essential meaning *even* of death is restored. At the same time, however, the secondary and accidental aspect of death seemed to be present also in Jesus' death, despite his sinlessness. Even though there was no decay, corruption, etc. in the case of Jesus' death, since transformation is the essential element of death, yet Jesus certainly approached death as any sinful man might. He was afraid (sweat of blood, etc.). Perhaps this is explained if we remember that Jesus, the Christ, becoming truly man, became subject to the conditions of man in his sinful existence—this is the dimension of St. Paul's *kenosis*. But through the death-resurrection of Jesus death is destroyed, that is, death-as-break, while death-as-transformation is restored. If the fear of death, its terror, etc. are still present among men, it is the result of man's sinful condition, traceable as much to his own personal sin as to any primordial condition that affects him in the present. The more

²¹Troisfontaines, 207.

one realizes the profound effects of the Christ-event, especially His death-resurrection happening, the more clearly and challengingly does he see death-as-transformation. Indeed, if Jesus becomes the Christ for me it might appear unintelligible how death could be anything else essentially but a transformation to a new and more glorious existence, since Jesus has destroyed radically the sin-death relationship (Death where is your sting?).

That takes us to the final point of this paper, the end of Mary's earthly existence. There are several generalities that must be prefaced before any positions of preference can be established. Our frame of reference thus far has been the sin-death relationship. The general conclusion was that not every aspect of death is a consequence of sin; indeed the essential elements of death, or the end of historical earthly existence and transformation for new and glorious human existence, would always have been present for man as created by God. And this was the aspect of death restored in its reality by Christ, while simultaneously the accidental aspects of death as a painful and mysterious separation ought gradually in the individual's life to be diminished. In the case of Jesus these latter characteristics of death seemed to be demanded since "by becoming man, the Son entered the world of sin and death. He could not be touched by the moral guilt of sin, but He took upon Himself the condition of sinful existence,"²² and so Himself underwent that experience of death which is the consequence of sin, primordial and personal. The more, then, one approaches that profound union in faith and love with God and His creation in Christ, the less does death-a-consequence-of-sin rule one's thoughts, and the more one sees death for what it really is, a *transitus*, according to the primordial sense of the paschal mystery.

The second point to be emphasized is that the Christian community of Rome believes as revealed truth that Mary, the

²² Davis, *Theology for Today*, 213.

Mother of Jesus, was entirely sinless, both in her conception and throughout her life. The logical conclusion (which might not necessarily be the correct one) is that Mary should not have been subject to the consequences of sin. Shall we assert, therefore, that Blessed Mary did not die?

Preliminary to any direct answer to this question it might be interesting to recall the various reactions of theologians to this terse logical conclusion.²³ It is not possible here to dig up again the whole controversy that surrounded the issue of Mary's death. In short, the "mortalists," as their tag indicates, asserted that Mary died, and based this claim both on the fact of Jesus' death, though He was sinless, and the voice of tradition. The "immortalists" asserted that Mary did not die, resting their claim on logic, her sinlessness, and challenged the "mortalist" interpretation of tradition. Reactions were so strong that Pius XII in *Munificentissimus Deus* evaded the question entirely in the definition of the Assumption. He simply asserted that Mary's Assumption body and soul into heaven followed the end of her earthly existence (*expleto terrestri vitae cursu*).

Both of these positions presented themselves as quite definitive, and it was unlikely, on the grounds it was being discussed, that the question ever would have been resolved. Fortunately, the issue was forgotten by most serious-minded theologians in the face of much more relevant and demanding issues surrounding Vatican II. My purpose here is to suggest a different approach to death along the lines described above which answers almost incidentally this earlier dispute on Mary's death. And so it is not my intention to say anything about the dispute between mortalists and immortalists, but to affirm once again that to say something real about the foremost Christian is to say something real about every Christian, and vice versa. Accordingly, consistent with the conclusions from our previous theology of death, if we speak of death as that natural phenom-

²³ See *M.S.* 8 (1957).

enon which seals man's earthly, historical existence and transforms him into a different and glorious existence, we would surely affirm that Mary died, since this seems to be the true meaning of the Assumption. In other words, in keeping with our previous discussion of the essential meaning of death, we would be inclined to say not only that Mary died, but that she died the perfect Christian death, passing to immediate glorification.

The remaining question concerns itself with the other aspects of death which serve to describe it in the traditional theology as a consequence of sin, original and personal, namely death-as-break or separation. We have suggested already that these are only secondary and accidental aspects of death, and *in themselves* without harmful consequences after the death of Jesus. This is not to say that they are not real aspects that surround Christian man's approach to death. We expect these to play on human consciousness since all men are subject to the sin of the world and each personally has at various times refused total and complete commitment (because of selfishness, unlove, unconcern, and possibly hatred) to God through Jesus present in His Spirit in the community of Christians and of all mankind. It is particularly this sense of sin and unworthiness that draws out these secondary and accidental aspects of death—death in this sense truly is a consequence of sin. To corroborate this point one might ask the question about the holy people of God, the saints, whose intense love has enable them to give meaning to human existence in all its dimensions. Through their effective response in faith to themselves, to others and ultimately to God, shall death mean anything else for them but transformation and rebirth to eternal glory with God and God's people in the New Creation? There has always been a tradition similar to this, variously represented by St. Paul's *cupio dissolvi* and by the view of resurrection as transformation for those people living "at the end of the world." A further question in this same direction has been on the minds

perhaps of many of us, but has been raised explicitly by Troisfontaines:

Is the Virgin the only person who, together with Christ, already enjoys the benefit of resurrection? We are in no position to say that she is. The feeling of being torn asunder by death-as-a-break will certainly be much less intensive for the saints who on this very earth have conquered sin and spiritualized the flesh. Nothing forbids us to think that God will call them earlier to total participation in the victory of Christ.²⁴

If we are led to these conclusions for Christians generally from our theology of death, what shall we say of that Perfect Christian, the most perfectly redeemed, the foremost member of God's Holy People? Is it possible in this context to think of Mary, who was entirely sinless, undergoing those secondary and accidental aspects of death that we have come unfortunately to identify with death, forgetting so often the essential and primary meaning of death? The Christian community has responded "no", and has definitively sanctioned its response in the Assumption doctrine. Perhaps in saying all this about the model member of the Christian community, its type and exemplar, we were really saying something about ourselves.

Conclusion

Despite the range of issues that present themselves under the heading of Christian eschatology and Assumption, it is hoped that the basic issues of eschatology as communal and individual have been opened up, if only slightly. Further, within the context of individual eschatology much can be gained from seeing the end of Mary's earthly existence as characteristic in some real sense of every true Christian. We have tried to point up this truth from the theology of death; the same could be done for the other final realities.

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²⁴ Troisfontaines, 294.