

Marian Studies

Volume 12

Article 4

1-24-1961

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Recommended Citation

Burghardt, Walter J. (1961) "Vision for a New Decade," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 12, Article 4, Pages 8-14.
Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol12/iss1/4

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VISION FOR A NEW DECADE

Presidential Address at the Twelfth Annual Convention of The Mariological Society of America, Pittsburgh, Pa., January 2, 1961.

by

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In mid-1960, the eminent Mariologist René Laurentin surveyed the work of the various Marian societies for the French periodical *La Vie Spirituelle*.¹ In the course of that survey he dealt graciously and frankly with the Mariological Society of America and with *MARIAN STUDIES*,² both of which had barely turned their first decade. His critique, in translation, runs as follows:

The volumes of *MARIAN STUDIES*, clear, objective, flawlessly documented, are on the whole erudite, solid, and balanced—nicely edited, too. In consequence, the English-reading public has at its disposal today a respectable aggregate of Marian theology—something it did not possess before. With Volume 10, however, the cycle of large-scale topics would seem to be exhausted. . . . Rather soon, therefore, the American society will have to enter on a new phase. The logical phase, I should think, is the field of research in its proper sense. To date—and this was an appropriate beginning—the energies [of the MSA] have been directed essentially to this objective: to gather, and to present in synthetic fashion, a mass of data, scattered yes, but

¹ René Laurentin, *Travaux et recherches des sociétés mariales*, in *VS* 55 (1960) 222-243.

² *Ibid*, 229-231.

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in substance already acquired. This is an admirable venture, and it calls for far more labor than is commonly suspected: sorting, checking, synthesis, etc. Further steps, beyond this framework, would involve, for example, in the field of positive theology, exploring unpublished material, advancing the attribution and dating of anonymous works and unidentified apocrypha, enriching the file of texts relative to different questions, in the speculative sphere, tackling a fair-sized problem until its unrecognized dimensions have been grasped and progress is made toward its solution.³

Some effort in that direction, Laurentin admits, we have already made: he instances Gerald Van Ackeren's suggested solution to the problem of the permanent foundation of the divine maternity.⁴ His conclusion: "the fruits of the Mariological Society's efforts are substantial; they are filled with even richer promise."⁵

In essence, I find myself in harmony with Laurentin. On the one hand, there is no place here, no need, for a jeremiad. The first decade of the Mariological Society, if not glorious, has been respectable. In plodding fashion we have achieved much.

First, the Mariological Society of America exists—no small achievement. We have a well-knit organization dedicated to the task of stimulating theologians to productive work in Mariology, of organizing their scattered and isolated efforts, of assisting them to the final birth of their projects.

Second, we have annual conventions and more frequent regional meetings, where the Mariological research of competent American scholars is intelligently presented, modestly modified, frankly assailed, enthusiastically seconded.

³ *Ibid.*, 230

⁴ Cf. Gerald Van Ackeren, S.J., *Does the Divine Maternity Formally Sanctify Mary's Soul?* in *MS* 6 (1955) 63-101; cf. especially pp. 99-101.

⁵ Laurentin, *art. cit.*, 231

Third, we have a yearly publication, *MARIAN STUDIES*, which records the fruits of the annual convention for the guidance of interested students and for the appraisal of other scholars in the field. The material therein is, to echo Laurentin, "clear, objective, flawlessly documented, erudite, solid, balanced."⁶

Fourth, we have produced a multivolumed *Mariology* which has drawn general approval from the Old World as well as the New, several books of high caliber; a handful of significant articles.

This, I submit, is respectable. But it is, I insist, a prefatory phase. To this point, our efforts have been devoted in large measure to exploiting, in praiseworthy but pedestrian fashion, data and ideas already in market. To this point, the New World is largely debtor to the Old. The time has come, in the estimation of sympathetic critics, to make a more momentous, ceaseless contribution of our own. With this in mind, I dare to make three calls on your competence, three challenges to your Marian conscience.

I call you, first, to a magnetic scholarship. A high proportion of the MSA membership fall under the heading of scholar-teachers. But a scholar is not simply a man who has done graduate work; a teacher is not simply a man who has students. A scholar is a man who is master of a discipline through mastery of its methodology, a teacher is one who effectively communicates the values of scholarship, the values of his discipline.

Mariological scholarship, like all scholarship, demands an ever-increasing mastery not of textbooks but of sources; a frequent reappraisal not simply of the data but of personal preferences; an effort not purely to preserve but to progress; a yearning to share discoveries and insights and knowledge

⁶ *Ibid*, 230

not only through the spoken word but on the printed page. The Mariologist, like any other ologist, should be enlightened, not blinded, by his piety; humbled, not exalted, by his hard-won convictions. He will not impute less love of our Lady to a Lennerz for his limited coredeemption; he will not condemn philology as a luxury, distrust the exegete as a minimizer.

This scholarship, if magnetic, compels imitation. A palpable attitude in all too many students today is an admirable yearning to make the definitive synthesis, and a disturbing unwillingness to pay the price of detailed, meticulous, methodical analysis. It is a perennial delight to fashion an article on "The Meaning of Mary for the Contemporary Christian." It is surely more difficult, perhaps less satisfying, but ultimately more productive, to add a single patristic or medieval text to the dossier that will ultimately reveal the meaning of Mary down the ages, to plumb the depths of a Marian problem until the divine dream for man's redemption lies a little more naked to us. Is our students' attitude a reflection of their teachers'? Does it stem from the fact that the teacher has not quickened to life in his own teaching the stark necessity, the romance and the agony, the Christian vocation, the obligation of relentless research in Mariology? Are we producing students whose memory is stocked with the right answers, or students whose minds are intelligently occupied with the sources of those answers? Here lies the function of a scholar-teacher, here his magnetism: that he can attract his students to do in their own small way what he is doing as a profession.

In the second place, I call you to collaboration. A striking feature of our times is the institute, the academy, the study group, the seminar, the workshop, the convention. This is true in politics and in science, in business and in scholarship, in military matters and in the search for peace. It is not just a fad. It has its roots in a humbling realization: in today's world no one man can control all the facets of his

discipline, his special interest. The day of omniscience is gone. Oh yes, there is still room for the incandescent idea, the blinding insight, the individual discovery in laboratory or library. But, for the most part, the frontiers of a science are worn down by an assault carefully plotted, systematically organized, inflexibly pursued.

In the MSA we have biblical scholars and speculative theologians, patrologists and philologists, medievalists and historians; we have experts in Mariology, Christology, Trinitarian theology, ascetical and mystical thought. And yet, apart from annual conventions, we work in baffling isolation. I suggest that the Mariological Society could dispense with every committee save the one committee we do not have: a committee on collaboration. It would be the fourfold task of this committee (1) to uncover what resources of manpower we have, in minute detail; (2) to itemize the untouched areas, the unresolved problems, the crying needs of our time in Mariology; (3) to organize the efforts of members, and even non-members, toward the solution of these problems; and (4) to provide stimulus, to keep badgering, to harry and to hound

It took five years and a French Mariologist to tell us that at our 1955 convention in St. Louis Father Gerald Van Ackeren had made a new, theologically significant, intellectually exciting suggestion toward a fruitful synthesis on our Lady's maternity. Apparently no one in America, Van Ackeren excepted, could have cared less. We have tremendous possibilities of a theological break-through here, but no one breaks through. Here, as in so many other situations, the combined resources of the MSA should be called into play: there should be conferences, letters, and dialogue; there should be articles on the several aspects of the problem; there should be argument—affirmation and denial; there should be thesis, hypothesis, and synthesis; there should be high interest. But what do we have? Silence. We go on to something new, something different,

something more interesting. In any other science this would be treason, a betrayal of the basic reason for a group's existence. Funds would be withdrawn, investigations launched, hearings instituted, reputations lost. But we—we have nothing to lose. Unfortunately, we have nothing to lose.

Third, I call you to courage. The theological enterprise often demands a heroism unsuspected below the ivory tower. The day-in, day-out sacrifice which scholarship entails is axiomatic; but I am thinking of a more uncommon courage. One instance must suffice. Intelligence from Rome reveals that the Holy Office is concerned over excesses in the treatment of Mary's virginity in parturition, treatment at variance with traditional interpretation and with the delicacy of the subject. Access to all the pertinent documents is so difficult at the moment that I cannot formulate with confidence the exact censorship involved: who must submit what to whom. That will be clarified in time. But one basic fact lies beyond dispute: the eyes of the Holy Office are focused on this facet of Marian doctrine.

The typical reaction is the ultraconservative reaction: do nothing, say little; quote the textbooks, stay off the theological limb, shout gleefully that Mitterer and Galot have been caned. I would summon you to just the opposite. There is still work to be done, essential research, on Mary's virginity in childbirth. The problems are not being solved or dismissed by the Holy Office; a limiting framework is apparently being set up in which alone the discussion may be carried on: respect for tradition, propriety of language, and in certain instances top-level censorship. But the discussion must be carried on, if the problems are to be brought to solution. Will it involve misunderstandings, harsh words, reprisals? Possibly. Will it mean frustration for individuals, a disheartening *negative* from high up? Probably. Is it worth it in the long run? Certainly.

This is not a call to defiance; it is a call to respectful courage. Any other approach—the silent treatment, for example—may be understandable, but it is hardly admirable. It will slow the progress of Mariology; it may harden unjustifiably certain textbook treatments which will never be condemned only because they are not worth condemning.

Magnetic scholarship, ceaseless collaboration, intellectual courage—with these three we may inaugurate a new era in American Mariology. With these three we have an outside chance of refuting the recent assertion of a 1960 Nobel prize-winner, chemist Willard F. Libby: “We scientists are the only people who are not bored, the only adventurers of modern times, the real explorers—the fortunate ones.”⁷

⁷ Quoted in *Time* 70, no 1 (Jan 2, 1961) 40