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THE MARIOLOGIST AS ECUMENIST

Presidential Address at the Thirteenth Annual Convention of The Mariological Society of America, New Orleans, La., January 2, 1962.

by

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The temper of our times is ecumenical. Unity is in the air—the reunion of Christians. Catholic efforts to promote unity and reunion operate on several levels. There is the pontifical level: from the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, through the presence in New Delhi of five Catholic observers at the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, to the warm but noncommittal meeting of John and Geoffrey at the Vatican. There is the episcopal level: for example, the committee for Christian unity under Archbishop John Carmel Heenan. There is the theological level: centers like Istina and Chevetogne, periodicals like *Unitas* and *Irenikon*, colloquia between Catholic and non-Catholic theologians. And there is the grass-roots level: such is surely one aspect of the *Una Sancta* movement in Germany, whose function is to fashion an atmosphere of friendliness and mutual understanding, whose methodology is love and mutual affection, whose dynamism is confidence in God, who alone can bring unity out of diversity.

For the theologian, the ecumenical level of keenest concern must be the theological. Not that he misprizes the pontifical or the episcopal or the popular; rather that the theo-

logical is the level on which he operates as a profession, and so this is the level on which he should make his specific contribution. On this level the ecumenical effort has for function to restudy those doctrinal themes which have proved divisive, to determine to what extent division is inevitable, in what measure a matter of misunderstanding; in a word, an effort at theological clarification: where do we really differ, and why?

More specifically, the theological effort from the Catholic side must center on the problem of development. For the bone that sticks in the Protestant throat is Scripture versus dogma, the original message of salvation from the mouth of God and the promulgation of infallible propositions from the lips of men. It is this passage, this seemingly lyric leap, from Scripture to dogma, and from dogma to dogma, that scandalizes the Protestant theologian—its historical past from Nicaea to *Munificentissimus Deus*, and its unpredictable future.

The non-Catholic is scandalized by our dogmatic past. He knows that, in our theology, public revelation, God's self-manifestation to the whole people of God, came to a close with the death of the last apostle; nothing can be added to it, nothing taken from it; there it is, and it is unchangeable. And yet, some change has obviously taken place—significant change; something new has been added. For all his good will, the non-Catholic scholar does not see that any of the sacred authors speak of the Assumption of our Lady; and yet the Assumption was declared revealed truth in 1950. He is quite certain that *homoousios* was never employed by the evangelists, by the apostles, by Christ, by the Holy Spirit; and yet *homoousios* was the bone of contention at Nicaea, and those who refused it were suspect of heresy.

At this juncture the non-Catholic hurls his dilemma. You cannot have your cake and eat it. You must choose between unchangeableness and change, between immutability and de-

velopment. You must, in the graphic alternatives posed by Owen Chadwick,¹ choose either Bossuet or Newman. You can, if you wish, elect immutability with Bossuet:

The Church's doctrine is always the same. . . . The Gospel is never different from what it was before. Hence, if at any time someone says that the faith includes something which yesterday was not said to be of the faith, it is always *heterodoxy*, which is any doctrine different from *orthodoxy*. There is no difficulty about recognizing false doctrine: there is no argument about it: it is recognized at once, whenever it appears, merely because it is new. . . .²

Or you can, with Newman, recognize that over the centuries the Church's doctrine has in fact suffered drastic changes and drastic additions, and you can invent a theory to justify the changes and additions—new analogies like the growth of the child into the adult or the overtones of poetic expression. The point is, you cannot have both. If you choose immutability, you exclude evolution. If you elect evolution, you sacrifice immutability. Change is corruption—and the evidence is there for all to see: infallibility, Immaculate Conception, Assumption.

And if our dogmatic past scandalizes the non-Catholic theologian, our dogmatic future baffles him. For, as Father Frederick E. Crowe will say in the next issue of *Theological Studies*:

. . . the rational Protestant will be concerned not only about what we now hold but about what we are likely to be holding in the year 2500; and since there is no predicting the particular

¹ Cf. Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge, 1957) *passim*. For a lengthy critique of this trenchant study, see Anthony A. Stephenson, S.J., *The Development and Immutability of Christian Doctrine*, in *TS* 19 (1958) 481-532.

² Bossuet, *Première instruction pastorale sur les promesses de l'église*, 28; quoted by Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 17.

dogmas that the Church under the Spirit of God will bring to light in future ages, the one possible way of meeting his question is to show him the forces at work, the principles operating in the genesis and conservation of doctrine. Thus we are forced back to the nature of dogma, the principles that lead to its emergence, the factors that govern flexibility and inflexibility in this field. If I were a Protestant, I would be satisfied with nothing less. . . .³

For the Mariological Society of America, it is surely significant that, save for the Catholic concept of the Church, the single theological issue which most effectively strangles the ecumenical dialogue is the Catholic vision of Mary. She is "the wall"—if only because she is, for the Protestant, the visible symbol of Catholic idolatry: the Roman abandonment of Scripture, of history, of Christ. Here, too, our dogmatic past scandalizes him, our dogmatic future baffles him. Divine maternity and perpetual virginity, an immaculate conception and a glorious assumption—these are already stones of stumbling. But the end is not yet: will Vatican II define, as part and parcel of God's public revelation, that the Virgin helped redeem the world? In this context it is not surprising to read an Anglican editorial which synthesizes non-Roman fears in a single sober sentence: "Without apologizing for the Mariological vacuum so often found in Anglican thinking and devotion, it seems to us, at least, that there is an acute danger of the elevation of the Mother of God to a position out of accord with her status as a creature, as one of those whom her Son came to redeem."⁴

Oh yes, the Catholic answer is simple enough. How do I justify Catholic dogma from *theotokos* to *assumpta*? By a charism whereby the Church of Christ, perpetuating the

³ From a probing article on dogma and development which will appear in the March, 1962 issue of *TS*.

⁴ From an unsigned editorial in the *American Church Quarterly* 1 (1961) 74.

prophetic function of Christ, presents to the flock of Christ the revelation of Christ committed to her keeping.

But this is a dogmatic answer—valid of course, pertinent yes, but not adequate to the ecumenical situation on the theological level. On that level the answer must be theological. How do I justify on theological lines, on the level of faith in quest of understanding, how do I justify the transition from the biblical mode of enunciation to the conciliar, the pontifical, the dogmatic? From the humble maid of Nazareth, bringing forth in a stable, deeply perplexed at one moment and highly confident at another, silent beneath a cross and articulate in common prayer, seeking her Son in sorrow as boy and as man—how do I explain the transition from this descriptive mode of expression to the articulated, technical, definitive propositions which make of Mary mother not merely of a finite man but of a timeless God, virgin not only before Gabriel but days without end, sinless not simply from the age of reason but from the very womb of Anne, glorious before the face of God not simply in soul but in body incorruptible?

Here the heart of the matter is the problem of development. On this problem there is a challenge to Catholic theological scholarship, a challenge to you, in at least four areas. Until we have resolved these issues to our own satisfaction, it is not quite fair to ask the non-Catholic theologian to be still and see that we are of God.

The first unsettled area is a theory of development. Admittedly, development in a Catholic sense can only be a question of making explicit in a dogma what was merely implicit in revelation, or making explicit in new dogmas what was merely implicit in old dogmas. Only such a movement can save evolution *and* immutability. But precisely here the controversy among Catholics rages. How is a certain dogma implicit in revelation, and how do I make it explicit? How,

for example, is the Nicene *homoousion* implicit in St. John's "only-begotten Son," and how do I go about making it explicit? Is a dogma always *logically* implicit in revelation or in another dogma, and do I always make it explicit by human logic: by conceptual analysis, or by immediate inference, or by mediate inference? Or is it more accurate to affirm that at least some truths are contained *vitally* within God's revelation, because they are part and parcel of a dynamic, living, total self-manifestation which can never be reduced to a static catalogue of definitions, axioms, immediate inferences, and logical conclusions?

And this first problem stirs up a second—hotly discussed in theological circles. The far terminus in any theory of development is that which gives rise to the whole process: revelation. But what is revelation? Is it possible to confine the blinding illumination which is God's self-manifestation to a two-word definition, *locutio Dei*? What justification is there for limiting revelation to propositions, for excluding from God's "word" the Person who *is* the Word? Can I divorce from revelation nonlogical signs like the gestures of Christ or the person of Mary with all its relationships?

And this second problem stirs up a third: is all of God's revelation discoverable in Scripture? Am I forced to confess, or am I free to deny, that the total Catholic conception of Mary is somehow, in some authentic fashion, contained in the Old Testament and the New? If the total vision *is* in Scripture, just how is it there? In clear propositions? In logical implications? In vital implicits? In the person of our Lady? If only part of Mariology is biblically based, where is the remnant revealed? Can I touch that revelation as palpably as I touch the Bible, or must it, in the nature of things, fade into a valid but vague, a grandiose but gossamer, reality called apostolic tradition?

These three problems—theory of development, concept of

revelation, relation between Scripture and tradition—are the province of all Catholic theologians. But there is a fourth facet of doctrinal development which has a special claim on Mariologists, on us. I mean the *de facto* development of Marian doctrine, the factual evolution whereby the Church has read progressively in the initial deposit the full truth which the revealing God intended to include in His message to mankind.

In the first place, we are uncommonly competent to accomplish this task; for the Mariological Society of America holds within it exegetes and biblical theologians, patrologists and Scholastic theologians, masters of dogma in general and of Mariology in particular—all of them interested in, even fascinated by, Marian dogma and doctrine. In the second place, much of the spadework has been done; for most of our conventions have concentrated on a prerogative of Mary and have treated that theme on the four levels of expression that are of concern for doctrinal development: the biblical, the patristic, the Scholastic, and the dogmatic. In the third place, what has not been done, what clamors to be done, is to harness these resources and orientate this spadework specifically to the problem of development, to tracing the stages that lead from Palestine to Rome, from the maid of Nazareth to the Queen of heaven, from “Hail Mary, highly favored” to “Hail holy Queen, our life, our sweetness, and our hope.” Fourthly, and finally, it is in this area that we can make our distinctive contribution to ecumenism.

Unless we confront the problem that is of prime concern to non-Catholic theologians, we shall go on talking to ourselves. Not a bad thing, this talking to ourselves; a generation ago we did not even do that. Not a bad thing, but not adequate to the contemporary crisis, to the temper of our times, to the ecumenical situation. This new concentration will involve intellectual agony; for doctrinal development is a

tortuous trail, in theory and in fact. It may well involve spiritual agony; for our discoveries may shake our complacencies. But the experience should be intellectually and spiritually stimulating—for ourselves, and for those not of our number to whom we say so insistently that the function of our Lady, in the twentieth century as in the first, is to bring God down to men and men up to God.