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Presidential Address

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

by REV. MSGR. AUSTIN B. VAUGHAN

Your Excellency,
Fellow-members of the Mariological Society,
Friends and Guests:

The topic I have chosen for this address is "The Relevance of Mariology and the Role of the Mariologist in the Light of Present Conditions in the Church." In a sense, the topic is not a new one for me. Over the years, I have had the opportunity of addressing this Society twice—once on "The Development of Marian Doctrine as an Ecumenical Problem" a few months after the Second Vatican Council had voted to incorporate its teaching on Mary into the Constitution on the Church, largely for ecumenical reasons; a second time last year, on "Interpreting the Ordinary Magisterium on Mary's Virginity." Both of the topics seem at first glance to be highly academic, but both of them have serious pastoral implications, and both cast some important light on the topic I have chosen for today.

In one sense at least, the present state of Mariology and of devotion to Mary in the Church is bad. This may be surprising in the light of the fact that Vatican II strongly reaffirmed the Church's teaching on Mary and devoted a whole chapter to it in the Constitution on the Church; the fact that Pope Paul VI proclaimed her "Mother of the Church" and devoted most of his concluding talk at the third session of the Council to an explanation of this title; the fact that many decrees on the liturgy have stressed a desire to leave Mary's special position intact; and the fact that many statements from hierarchies have reasserted her importance to the Church.

But, aside from official positions (and this very fact constitutes a problem in itself), the signs are unmistakable: not so much that less is being written about Mary by Catholics (although this is true), as that there is an obvious reluctance on the part of many theologians to be identified with Mariology, or to write of Mary in anything but an apologetic tone; not so much that sermons on Mary are bad, but that they are not preached at all or else become polemics on change; not so much that rosaries are not sold (or given) in any great numbers any more, but that many priests and religious no longer own any. (I realize that the last item is partly the result of a more complex problem—a shift in prayer forms that appeal to a new generation—but it also almost inevitably represents a dropping of a key element of Catholic devotion to Mary without its being replaced by any concrete form of prayer at all.) This list could be prolonged, but I do not think that the point needs proving. Despite strong official approval in the documents, devotion to Mary and theological attention to her role in the plan of salvation have declined.—Why and how?

The simplest answer I have found has been provided by Leslie Dewart in the course of explaining why he feels that some aspects of Catholic doctrine that have been divisive, from an ecumenical point of view, in the past will no longer be so in the future:—they will not be formally denied, but they will become peripheral. They will be moved so far out to the margin of Catholics' beliefs that it will not matter much to people whether they are there or not. He seems to regard this as a good and necessary and inevitable process and not something that has to be planned; it happens as the revelation comes into contact with new situations. Whether we regard this process as good or not, I believe it has taken place, without any official approbation or even awareness, in recent years in the Church, in the matters of devotion to Mary, frequent confession, devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, mortification, invocation of the Saints, prayers for the dead, daily Mass, use of the breviary.

(You can add to the list yourself.) None of these things has been forbidden; all of them have become peripheral.

The same thing has happened in the area of theology of Our Lady, but with a somewhat more conscious basis. It happens this way: There are some theologians who see the greatest hopes for reunion of Christians in the declaration of Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism (n. 11) that there is a hierarchy of truths in Catholic teaching, since these truths vary in (the closeness of) their relationship to the foundations of the Christian faith. The decree is not clear on the implications of this statement, and some have interpreted it as meaning that reunion could take place without any insistence on acceptance by other Christians of some elements of Catholic teaching, including defined doctrines, that are not central. A discussion of this matter, which is one of critical importance for our theology and for the Church—how much pluralism is permissible or desirable in the Church?—could lead us into another whole talk, but what is significant for our purposes now is that most of the doctrines on Mary loom large among those regarded as not central, along with infallibility, the jurisdictional role of the pope and a growing list of others. As a result, there is an ecumenical urge at times to make them marginal or peripheral. (There are other authors who suggest that in a time of change, the core-doctrines that we accept should be kept to a minimum. Again, presumably, most of the doctrines on Our Lady would not be a part of this minimum.)

I think that there are two reasons why some theologians are inclined to positively ignore teaching on Mary in particular, and they both tie in with the previous reason. Some feel, first, that our teaching on Mary is no longer relevant to our own day, and second, that great attention to it is an indication of our identification with the past and an unwillingness to face the realities of the present. In our day, it is no longer of great significance to say that something is true, unless this particular truth has something to say to me—and in our day, there is a

deathly fear of being caught in the outdated forms of the past and not being "with it." Mariology seems to qualify for elimination on both counts. As a result, many priests and religious and some of the laity have written Mariology off, despite official teaching to the contrary.

Why have official efforts to counter this tendency been ineffective thus far? The Pope has visited Fatima and less well-known shrines of Mary and preached about her often. Various episcopal conferences have issued statements on devotion to Mary—to no avail. I believe the efforts of pope and bishops have failed up till now for two reasons. First, the doctrine on Mary that has been taught has not been clearly related to the problems of the present generation, and so it does not seem to be saying anything salvific to the men of our day; in short, it seems to be irrelevant, and so it is easily ignored. Second, the bishops have not been teaching clearly and well in their own magisterium (often they have said nothing at all on critical issues), with the result that many new theories and ideas that contain some good and some evil have spread far and wide, without ever being directly or effectively confronted by bishops in their statements; the statements that have been made have often been repetitions of the past and not concrete responses to the new ideas and problems of the present.

I think that there are reasons, too, why bishops have been reluctant to exercise their teaching role. They had in the recent past depended on a general consensus of theologians to advise them on essential matters in Catholic doctrine. Ten years ago, a bishop could get advice by turning to one "reliable" theologian; with rare exceptions, all the other "reliable" theologians in the field would agree with the position proposed, except on fine points. Now the same bishop might find five theologians going in very different directions and disagreeing sharply among themselves as to what is really permissible as Christian teaching and practice. It means that all of a sudden bishops have to exercise a pastoral teaching role of discerning what is true

and salvific for their faithful, in the midst of conflicting theories. The role is a traditional one for bishops, but there has been no great need or use for it in the immediate past for bishops who have been busy with the service of God and His people in many other ways. The simple fact is that they will now have to teach in a new way, without the kind of unanimous support from theologians that they had in the past—and this is a new experience.

This explains in part why official efforts to check downgrading of Marian doctrine have been ineffective. But, why have theologians shunned the field in recent years? I think that the answer is, as I have said, that many fear that it is outdated and irrelevant, but it might be well to spell this out a bit. The impression conveyed to many is that Mariology is out of step with many of the *directions* or thrusts of Vatican II (not the documents, which strongly support it) and so has outlived its usefulness. For example, Vatican II was ecumenical in its orientation; Mariology stresses doctrines on which we differ from many other Christians. (It matters little that the ecumenical orientation of Vatican II seemed to the Orthodox to be more Western than universal, as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann pointed out at one of our Conventions a few years ago, and hence too sparing in its stress on Our Lady. The fact remains that doctrine on Mary is regarded as a source of division.) Vatican II laid stress on the uniqueness of Christ as our Redeemer and Mediator, and on the way in which the liturgy focuses on Him; Mariology seems to some to turn aside attention from Christ. (It's true that the major document of Vatican II, the Constitution on the Church, had two whole chapters on the Communion of the Saints and on Mary, but no two chapters have received less attention from general commentators.) Vatican II, in its most pastorally influential document, the Constitution on the Liturgy, seemed to stress worship of God through the Mass, the Divine Office and the Sacraments; in the popular mind at least, Mary has been more

closely associated with other forms of devotion (rosary, novena, processions, special shrines, etc.) which don't seem to be of equal importance, especially since many of them are not shared by other Christians. Vatican II urged involvement of the faithful in the work of sanctifying the world and bringing about human development and justice, especially in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World; the stress in the traditional picture of Mary and in devotion to Mary seems to be on prayer, recollection, intercession rather than active involvement or social commitment, and this does not seem to be enough. Finally, the great appeal of much of what came from Vatican II was that it was new, or at least that it conveyed a fresh outlook (windows were being opened); doctrine on Mary seems old, a repetition of the past, what we had before and nothing more. (Admittedly, it is ironic that a major charge being made against Mariology only fifteen years ago was that it was too new, and not true to Scripture or the earliest tradition, that it was carried along on the waves of new devotions and responses to special historical circumstances,—but the impression remains that Mariology represents pre-Vatican II teaching and pre-Vatican II postures.)

I think that the question that has been raised, and answered negatively in the minds of many theologians and even more seminarians and priests and religious—Is Mariology relevant?—is of vital concern to us, because if it is not relevant to the future of the Church, we should turn our attention and energies elsewhere, and if it is relevant and important, we are failing, at the moment, to communicate this to many people, to their own loss and that of all mankind. I am becoming more and more firmly convinced each day, in the light of developing events, of its relevance and importance, and I would like to point out *why* in terms of four points: a) The importance of being relevant; b) The overall relevance of Mariology; c) The relevance of specific doctrines; d) Our own role in proposing the doctrine of Mary in the Church.

First, is it important that a doctrine be relevant at all? If it has been revealed by Christ and is true, we must accept it, even if we do not see any particular application of this doctrine to our own lives at the moment. At any given moment, and in any given person's life, there are many doctrines that will not appear to be of vital importance. All this is undoubtedly true, and a cult of relevance becomes ridiculous if it leads to the conclusion that I can ignore any part of revelation that does not seem particularly meaningful to me, if only because what has not been important at one point in my life may prove to be so later on, and what did not loom large in one age in the Church may prove vitally necessary in another. (I found it hard to explain the relevance, not the doctrinal basis, Pius XII's definition of the Assumption to a largely Protestant audience in 1955; I would find it much easier to do so now, when the future life, communion of the Saints, resurrection of the body, role of the Church and of tradition in the interpretation of Scriptural doctrine in an ecumenical age are all more seriously questioned.) In God's providence, the relevance of some of the things that we hold now may lie in the future.

But Christ's doctrine was intended to be salvific. This means that it is not a set of abstract principles or remote truths, but His guidance on how we are supposed to live. On this basis, I can accept some things on bare faith, even when I don't see any relevance in them, but I should not accept that this (relative) irrelevance is really the case, as long as there is a real possibility of finding what they have to say about how I should live. It is not vitally important that every doctrine be relevant now, but *ultimately* all doctrine will be.

Second, is Mariology as a whole relevant? I touched on this in a paper before the Society six years ago and will mention it briefly now. It struck me very much then that just as Mary was not, *in herself*, necessary for our Redemption, and yet God had freely chosen to involve her in every critical step on the way, so too doctrine on Our Lady was ordinarily not,

in itself, central to the Christian faith (the Assumption was not as important as the Resurrection of Jesus, the Immaculate Conception not as important as Jesus' role as Redeemer, etc.), and yet for reasons best known to God, our doctrine on Mary kept cropping up at the critical points of discussions with Protestants and (since then) with the rest of the world around us. Immaculate Conception brought you straight into the matter of the existence of a supernatural order and the nature of man's fall from grace and need for redemption. The Assumption faced you with the whole question of how dogma develops in the Church. The mediation of Mary raised the question of the nature of the Church's role in salvation. And so forth. In the intervening years, the number of these instances where Marian doctrine serves as a focal point for a critical issue has multiplied. It seems to me unmistakable that, in divine Providence, this area of study *is* of vital importance to a proper understanding of the most fundamental truths of our faith, even though *in itself* (theoretically) it did not have to be.

So much for a general principle. My main aim here is to indicate briefly some areas in which Marian doctrines are tremendously relevant to the present situation in the Church, in the hope that it will lead others to expand the list and to work on some of these matters.

First, we have moved into a period in which many Catholic writers are embracing personalism (with its stress on freedom and the importance of each individual's developing his talents) and humanism (with its stress on the goodness of the world God created and man's capacity to build it into something better); the goal of Christian living is sometimes described in terms of liberating man's powers to achieve his full potential to "be himself." At the same time, original sin has been described in terms that seem to identify it with an external environment. But, people who have been liberated to be themselves often find themselves frustrated by their powerlessness to cope with their own weakness, not to speak of an environ-

ment that overwhelms them. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception strongly reasserts a radical internal need for redemption (even on the part of someone who has never consciously sinned) and a radical internal dependence on Christ if we are to attain our ideals, right at the moment when Christians are suffering from an obscuring of this need and being frustrated as a result. The Immaculate Conception is a strong reassertion of the existence of a supernatural order bursting in upon a world that cannot produce it on its own, of the divinization of the human race (as Athanasius described it), of the importance of being a Christian at a time when this notion has become fuzzy to many people.

Second, we live in an age in which, for the first time in Christian history, serious question has been raised within the Church about the value of celibacy and virginity, the value and possibility of permanent commitment, the relationship between sex and married love, the relationship between sex and the origin of human life. Is it an accident that the virginal conception of Jesus is being challenged for the first time within the Church at the same moment? Much remains to be explored in this matter, but it is not irrelevant to ask what the virginal conception and even more the permanent virginity of Mary have to say about these vital issues.

Third, Mary's life was for the most part a hidden one, devoted to ordinary tasks and to her own contemplation. In an age of critical discussion over the respective values of prayer and social action, what is the significance—if any—in saying that the greatest human person who ever lived was someone who lived this kind of life?

Fourth, the source of all Mary's greatest dignity is her motherhood, a role that is characteristically feminine,—one that clearly sets her apart from her divine Son, but one that just as clearly sets her apart in a *complementary* role that no man could fill and that God made more significant in the plan of salvation than that of any other human person. Does this

say anything about Mary's influence in conveying a picture of Christianity as compassionate? Does it have something to say about the critical questions raised on the role of women in the modern world?

Fifth, a critical question in our theology in the last five years has been the matter of eschatology—should we stress the future life, or accomplishing things in this life? Is the Assumption a linking of the two, not just for Christ, who is unique, but for all of us, by its strong assertion that those who have been part of this life remain alive and concerned about it, in and with and through Christ, when they move into the life beyond the grave?

Sixth, a critical question in our day is the role of the institutional Church in salvation, with many people coming to regard it with indifference or even as an obstacle to their own union with Christ—in any case, something that is not to be regarded as vitally important to salvation. The Church is regarded more as the community of the redeemed than as an active instrument of salvation; missionar activity has suffered enormously from this new view, and strong official reactions have begun to appear in the last year, with the Pope's stress on evangelization, in contradistinction to development, his Mission Sunday message being one expression of them. Is it an accident that this has happened at the same time when an active role of Mary in the mediation of salvation has been played down, when her role has been more closely assimilated to that of the Church than to that of Christ, and the role of the Church has seemed to become more passive in the plan of salvation or less orientated toward salvation? (Asking these questions seems to prejudice the question by expecting a "yes" answer; I don't want to do that, but the relevance of these matters needs to be explored.)

My list is partial and brief, but still my talk has grown too long, and so I will conclude with these observations. If making Mariology relevant to our day means that we are to look

for some artificial means of making a doctrine attractive when it has lost its importance or usefulness, we should not waste our efforts. But if Mariology is objectively relevant to the critical religious problems facing the Church and individual Christians today—and I think that the evidence in this direction is mounting, whether theologians pay much attention to it or not—then it is enormously important to the salvation of our world and the people in it, and enormously important to the effective carrying on of the mission of the Church for us to bring the riches and insights of God's revelation in and about Mary, which is, by His will, a vital element in His full revelation of Himself in His Son, to the people who need these insights. This work is new and it can be hard although I suspect that it will get easier as the need for it becomes more apparent, but it is the only way in which we can be true to our mission of making the everlasting message of Christ genuinely salvific in our own day.