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"The Problem of Method in Mariology"

Rev. Rene Laurentin

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor of Theology at the Catholic University of Angers, France, and recently-appointed Consultant to the Twenty-First Ecumenical Council, Father René Laurentin is one of the most renowned and prolific Mariologists of the present time. His monumental work *Marie, l'Eglise, et Le Sacerdoce*, published in two volumes in 1953, earned him universal acclaim. During the last ten years he has been one of the leading lights of the French Mariological Society and has contributed numerous articles to professional Marian publications. Perhaps the best index of his popularity and scholarship is a list of the works which have appeared under his name (in French and other modern languages) during the past decade:

L'Action du Saint Siège par Rapport au Problème de l'Immaculée Conception. In Virgo Immaculata, vol. II, p. 1-98.

Bernadette Raconte les Apparitions. Lethielleux, Paris, 1958.

Compendio di Mariologia. Edizioni Paoline, Rome, 1957.

Court Traité de Théologie Mariale. Lethielleux, 1954.

(Fourth edition published in 1959.)

Kurzer Traktat der Marianischen Theologie. Pustet, Regen, 1959.

Lourdes: Documents Authentiques. Lethielleux, 5 vols., 1958.

Maria, Ecclesia, Sacerdotium. Nouvelles Editions, Paris, 1953.

Meaning of Lourdes. Clonmore, Dublin, 1959.

Message de Lourdes. Bonne Presse, Paris, 1958.

Notre Dame et la Messe au Service de la Paix du Christ. Desclee, Bruges, 1954.

Our Lady and the Mass. Macmillan, New York, 1959.

Procès de Lourdes. Lethielleux, 1959.

Queen of Heaven. A Short Treatise on Marian Theology. Conmore, 1956.

Realta di Lourdes. Coletti, Turin, 1957.

Sens de Lourdes. Lethielleux, 1956.

Structure et Théologie de Luc I-II. Gabalda, 1957.

Le Titre de Corédemptrice. Marianum, Rome, 1951.

Traces d'allusion Etymologiques en Luc I-II. Pontificum Institute Biblicum, Rome, 1957.

With the kind permission of the author and publisher, the selection for this month has been translated from *Maria*, ed. H. du Manoir (Beauchesne, Paris, 1949), I, 695-706. In this article "The Problem of Method in Mariology," Father Laurentin gives us a profound insight into two opposing attitudes of Marian theologians and proposes a possible reconciliation.

The translation is the work of Rev. William J. Cole, S.M., S.T.D., Assistant Professor of Theology at the University of Dayton.



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"The Problem of Method in Mariology"

Rev. Rene Laurentin

I. THE MISUNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THE CRITIC AND THE MYSTIC IN MARIOLOGY

Two tendencies separate those who devote themselves to Marian theology; they are responsible for two conflicting attitudes and periodically give rise to conflicts. In the quarrels like those which took place in the Middle Ages about the Immaculate Conception, in the seventeenth century about the *Avis Salutaires*,¹ today about the subject of the modalities of the coredeemption or the Marian mediation, these two tendencies are the secret source of two impulsions which confront one another . . .

More interiorly, they are the source of interior conflict . . . they are two elements which by their dosage and their balance constitute the temperament of each author.

To obtain a more concrete idea of these two tendencies, one has only to cite the works where one or the other dominates. We have purposely chosen only the best works and we are limiting ourselves to Catholic authors, for we wish to consider this debate only within the limits of orthodoxy, where we find two opposing theological tendencies reunited without difference in dogma. Reread the letter of St. Bernard on the Immaculate Conception or a page of Newman on the coredeemption; in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, page through Theophile Raynaud or Trombelli; close to our own times read an article of Father Lernerz or of Father Congar, of a Rivière or of a G. D. Smith, and you will have a very clear idea of what one may call the "critical Mariologists."² Turn your attention to St. Albert or St. John Eudes, and among the moderns to a Father Bernard or Carol³ and to the majority of Spanish Mariologists⁴ and you will form a rather accurate notion of what one may call the "devout" or "mystical" Mariologist.

If, after this panoramic view, one wishes to proceed to a more precise analysis, he immediately encounters an obstacle. Even though a clear idea of these two opposing tendencies is possible, it is almost impossible to describe them objectively and from the outside — we might say that it resembles the impossibility of describing objectively and from the outside the attitude of the believer and the unbeliever. These are living things; one cannot speak about them without a center of reference which presupposes that one is involved. The only possible method for studying this mystery with which every Marian work is impregnated is to demonstrate how each of these two attitudes is considered by the one who holds it and by his opponent: how the critic considers the devout, how the devout considers the critic, and how each one considers himself. Thus we may be able to rise above their misunderstanding and to discover, after the example of modern physicians, objectivity in relativity.

The critic is an objective historian, even scientific. One of the most famous critics told me, "I had a biological formation; I know only the facts, and I detest extrapolations and inventions." The critic takes pride in the care that he exercises to keep the heart from intruding in that sanctuary of rigorism and detachment which is theology. He is a man of tradition; he weighs the texts justly according to their context.

He often finds himself obliged to denounce the blunders of the devout who have departed from sound theology. Why is there a deformation of texts among men of good will? This is easily explained by three essential deviations: a failure to recognize the divine transcendence, the enthusiasm of visionaries, and some dangerous principles.

1. Failure to recognize the divine transcendence — thus in the matter of coredemption, Christ and the Virgin are considered almost as equals, whereas between God and a simple woman the distance is infinite. . . .
2. Failure to recognize the abyss which separates the action of the God-man from the action of His mother springs from a lack of recognition of the essence of God or an abusive divinization of Mary. It is only the wave of an enthusiasm and of imagination without limits which bridges this abyss.
3. This enthusiasm is supported by some propositions which are appropriate for proving anything one wishes to prove, such as "de Maria nunquam satis!" (an exclamation point elevated the dignity of a rational principle!) . . . Garriguet has declared that Mary "has paid so dearly for this title (of coredemptrix) that one should not think of denying it to her."⁵ With such a line of reasoning is there anything that could not be proved?

To sum up the position of the critic, it can be said that he rises up against "a Christianity of the Virgin where St. Paul would not be at home." He calls upon theologians worthy of the name to fight on behalf of the theology menaced not only by the scorn of unbelievers but by heresy itself.

Let us now consider the theologian of the opposite camp. After having heard him described in such somber terms, the reader will be surprised to find in him values which infallibly earn one's sympathy. Often we find in him, as a powerful and permanent spiritual characteristic, the Marian presence. The formula of his life and of his thought is "in Mary, with Mary, through Mary." It is in order to deepen this characteristic of his soul and to discern the theological bases for it that he has given himself to the study of Marian theology. He divines in the midst of darkness of faith a constant action of the Virgin. It is by her and in her that he has learned to know Christ.

Must one lose all of this and cease to love in order to pursue theology? In that case it would seem better to abstain from this theology. . . . Unfortunate is that knowledge which is devoid of love. Unfortunate is the one who destroys mystery by human reasoning. The mystic theologian is sufficiently convinced of the value of Mariology to be certain that the critics destroy it. . . . He cannot restrain himself from comparing the critics — *mutatis mutandis* — to unbelievers who unconsciously minimize the word of God which they understand very well materially and even

scientifically. He denounces an evident error in perspective: the critic is too analytic. He considers the stream of tradition drop by drop, but does not understand the current. Like the biologist, in dissecting a living thing, he kills it. . . . He destroys whatever he touches. To this unfortunate tendency, there is often added another: a fearful spirit, which cannot decide on a conclusion which historical enquiry and theological reasoning logically call for.^{5bis} One often finds mixed with this timidity a fear of displeasing Protestants. Against this tendency the devout rises up, for one should pursue theology for those inside the Church and not for those who are outside. . . .

The devout hurls back at the critic his reproach of a failure to recognize the transcendence of God. If one fails to recognize the most intimate and perfect kind of association (unbelievably close) that God has willed to confide to His mother in the work of redemption, does not one badly conceive of God and injuriously limit the divine power? Finally, the devout brings forth an interesting proof. In Marian theology the timid spirits have been wrong ever since the deniers of the unbelievable *Theotokos* up to the adversaries of the Immaculate Conception. He will cite St. Thomas and even St. Bernard, so enthusiastic for the Virgin, who sinning by the excess of this famous critical sense have slipped "into a characteristic material heresy."

The development of Marian dogma effectively disconcerts all rationalism. To this the critic will reply (without embarrassment) by giving a list of exaggerations regarding Mary condemned by the Church. He will underline the fruitfulness of the reticence of St. Thomas Aquinas which obliged his successors to intensify their studies, and he will conclude that it is better to share with St. Thomas an excess of strictness than to be involved with the numerous mediocre theologians condemned for their embellishment of Marian doctrine.

From the above, one can well understand the complexity of the debate; however, it is more involved than our exposition intimates, for we are isolating two opposing tendencies in their pure form; in fact these tendencies interiorly divide each theologian according to an interior dialogue full of surprises. The arrival at a spontaneous position is often complicated by "secondary reactions." "How we have to defend ourselves," writes Father Paris, "against the rationalistic spirit which would diminish the prerogatives of Mary!"⁶

Inversely, the devout force themselves to submit their Marian intuitions to the scrutiny of criticism. Often one passes from one extreme to the other. Father Garrigou-Lagrange describes his interior itinerary (which corresponds to the experience of many others) under the form of a dialectic in three stages: "The theologian in the first period of his life is under the influence of piety and admiration; a second period follows when the doctrinal difficulties come home to him more forcefully and he is more reserved in his judgment; finally in the third period, if he has had time to study the question in its positive and speculative aspects, he returns to his first position, now not because of his sentiment of piety and admiration, but because of his more profound understanding. . . . Then the theo-

logian no longer affirms something only because it is beautiful and generally admitted, but because it is true."⁷

II. ELEMENTS OF SOLUTION

There is no ready-made solution to the problem which we have described in the previous pages. This "mystery" is subject to the law of a slow interior maturation. No one can be dispensed from the effort of resolving it for himself. This would be our conclusion, and perhaps the more prudent course would be to stop here without coming to grips with the problem which will touch upon some delicate points. However, in order that this essay may be useful, we have to proceed further and elucidate certain elements of the problem: 1. two points in common which unite the critic and the devout. 2. three-fold opposition. Taken together they constitute the total mystery. Such an analysis, even if it is not definitive, at least provides a basis of reflection and of discussion.

The critic and the devout are united in two essential points: concern for the truth and love of the Virgin. Both would subscribe to the aphorism of Suarez: "Est enim sine veritate pietas imbecilla et sine pietate veritas sterilis et jejuna."⁸ The difference is this: the devout places the accent on the glory of Mary and his desire to see it progress; for the critic the glory of the Virgin is to be sought in truth pursued as rigorously as possible in utter detachment from the concern of advancing her glory. Thus in the practical order the hierarchy of ends differs. This difference can be resolved in the three elements or alternatives of "distinguish" or "contemplate," "see" or "do," objectivity or involvement.

The first alternative separates the devout and the critic in the measure in which the former is a mystic and the latter is a scholastic, in the narrow sense of the term. The mystic is characterized by a vision of unity which is reminiscent of St. Paul⁹ or St. John.¹⁰ For the mystic Mariologist, the fundamental impression is that "Christ and the Virgin are but one." This simply means that in his life the mystic senses that the desires and actions of Jesus and Mary are so intimately joined together that he would not know how to separate them. The work of grace seems to him to be all of Him and all of Her, in much the same way that the meritorious act of each Christian is all of God and all of the Christian. He has renounced an analysis which appears to him as impossible as it is unfruitful. . . . The following meditation which Olier has left us in his memoirs is characteristic of this sentiment:

"It is wonderful to see how the divine mother is universally animated by the sentiments and dispositions of her Son, doing everything which He does at the right hand of God for the Church. These two hosts are but one; they share a common way of life whether in heaven or on earth, and just as it is said of Christians that they are but one heart and one soul, so too the heart and the soul and the spirit, in short, the entire being of Jesus and Mary are but one same thing . . . a being, a movement, an operation and a common life, in such a way that what one does the other does at the same time."¹¹

Many other examples could be cited. This one suffices to show the contrast between those who understand everything in a vital unity and those who are careful to distinguish the modes of being and their qualities . . . even to the extent of losing the total view of the ensemble. One can easily see the danger of each alternative pushed to the extreme: confusion in one case, complication . . . and the obscuring of the essential in the other. The solution of this dilemma is found in the middle course. . . . The Mariologist must always preserve an acute awareness of the unity of the mystery and of the essential distinctions which are called for. (We say essential distinctions, for beyond a certain degree the abuse of distinctions simply obscures the exercise of understanding – which sometimes happens in the matter of coredemption.) . . .

The first alternative is encountered in all theological work and even in all intellectual undertakings. The second alternative is more intimately associated with the Marian problem. It opposes the devout, inasmuch as he is a promoter of the triumph of Mary, and the critic, inasmuch as he is a speculative theologian. Even when he enters the distinterested sanctuary of theology, the devout in many cases is not able to put aside his practical purpose. For example, many authors at the end of the nineteenth century strove to promote a new title for the Virgin and this led to many strange notions which forced the Holy Office to intervene.^{11bis} Another manifestation is the concern to have a dogma defined. Numerous works on the Immaculate Conception in the seventeenth century, as well as a recent book on the Assumption, are rather contentious works for obtaining—one might almost say for extorting—a definition of this truth, rather than an objective effort to see if it should be defined, and then in what sense and under what conditions.

At times the devout proves to be rather erudite; he moves heaven and earth to uncover documents, but his erudition is partial and unilateral; he has taken his position before starting his work. He is ready to recognize in any text at all the thought which seems to him to glorify the Virgin, to write a hundred pages on the coredemption according to . . . St. Paul. The rule here seems to be an excessive sense of the connection among dogmas. (All is in all and reciprocally.) Often more solicitous about the number than the quality, he especially strives to crush the adversary under the weight of texts.

The same tendency is manifested in a third way: a solicitude for the realization of progress in the development of Marian dogma. "It is the honor of the Spanish Mariological Society," writes Father Sauras, O.P.,¹² "to have realized the progressive character of Mariology as a true science and – what is better still – to have studied Mariological problems with open and progressive criticism." To this constructive concern for the promotion of the glory of Mary there is opposed the more speculative concern of the critic. For him, in matters of truth, there is question of seeing and not of doing. Every other concern except that of discerning truth is a dangerous breeder of error, a solicitation of extrapolations. Knowledge ought to separate itself from every end extrinsic to the truth under pain of perversion. "Seek ye first the truth; the glory of God and the Virgin will be added besides."

In this second dilemma (without opposing the preoccupation for the development or the explication of dogmas), we would rather favor the critic. With St. Thomas we believe that it is necessary to separate as much as possible the domain of "understanding" and "doing," the speculative order and the practical order. (For the theologian, the practical order must come second.)

Although the third alternative seems to resemble the second, actually it is far different and will lead us to greater depths. This is the alternative of objective knowledge and the knowledge of one engaged in practice (*engagée*). The critic accuses his adversary of subjectivity and invention, principally in his method of understanding the documents of tradition. Inversely, as we have seen, the devout considers his antagonist as a blind man who touches the letter while the spirit escapes him. Certainly one must recognize among the devout errors in the order of subjectivity. However, this is far from saying that the critic is always right. As in other theological domains, one can justify here, if reasonable precautions are taken, the superiority of knowledge involved in practice. Faith is not an ensemble of purely speculative truths; it is an ensemble of vital truths which lead us to salvation. It is an ensemble of mysteries, in the existential meaning of the word. These truths do not possess an objectivity of a kind found in the physical sciences, a positive objectivity, but they possess a "super objectivity" which presupposes as a condition the perception of an ensemble of values inaccessible to one who does not live these truths. The perception of a moral truth presupposes the moral rectitude of the subject; the knowledge of faith presupposes the habit of faith, in much the same way as the understanding of esthetic value presupposes a musical or architectural formation.

Thus in the Marian domain the theologian who lives the Marian presence in an authentic and profound manner will understand the Virgin more exactly. If this presence is considered in the lives of the great mystics (the Oliers, the John Eudes, the Grignon de Montforts, the Chaminades, and many others), then there is no question of a merely sensible impression; it is a fact of the order of faith, of hope, and of charity. It is Marian dogma integrally lived, i.e., lived fully with the awareness (obscure as every fact of faith is) of a personal contact. This contact is an intermediary one if we compare it on the one hand with the presence of Christ and on the other with the presence of a saint in our life. Without having the divine transcendence of the first contact, it has something of the permanence and the universality which is proper to the divine contact; moreover, like that of Christ, it is the presence of a person who is in heaven body and soul.

Without insisting at greater length on the nature of the Marian presence, it seems apparent that without it the theologian would be deficient. The exact meaning of certain texts will escape him; lacking the interior experience necessary to comprehend them, he will have the tendency to minimize them, even to destroy them. He will have an unreasonable fear of giving to Mary the place demanded by the documents and by reasoning. He simply will not penetrate this intimate unity of Christ and Mary, so spontaneously attested to by Olier in the text cited above

Please do not mistake our meaning. If in this alternative we are in essential agreement with the devout Mariologist, or better with the mystic, we must recall the necessary reserves and precautions. It is certainly true that Marian experience ought to aid theological work, but in no manner ought it to be considered a substitute for this work. Such experience gives a connaturality which permits one to understand more fully the meaning of texts, and thus the meaning of tradition. It is in no manner an intuitive knowledge of a prophetic type, which suffices in itself. . . . It is the intellectual light which results from an intimate union with the object of knowledge.

In the abstract several rules for this debate between the devout and the critic can be given: 1. balance erudition and speculation (necessary distinctions, but a vision of unity) 2. limit Marian theology strictly to the speculative domain, seeking its advancement by truth alone 3. go beyond a pseudo-objectivity, which is really a materialistic certitude, by understanding the Virgin with a living and "engaged" knowledge, which is objective and not subjective.

Concretely the problem is not so simple. Each one will have to feel his way in looking for a synthesis, taking inspiration from those who have best realized it, like St. Alphonsus Liguori,¹³ Scheeben,¹⁴ and the contemporary models, Bittremieux in Belgium,¹⁵ Dillenschneider in France,¹⁶ Garcia Garcès in Spain,¹⁷ Feckes in Germany.¹⁸ The solution remains a personal affair and in the final analysis is incommunicable. It is not simply deduction from principles, but a delicate choice guided by the Holy Spirit.

FOOTNOTES

1. See on this subject P. Hoffer, *La Devotion a Marie au Declin du XVIIe siecle. Les Avis Salutaires* ... Paris, 1938
2. We may cite the following revealing samples of the positions of these authors: T. Raynaud, *Dyptica Mariana* (I ed., 1654, dans les Opera omnia de 1664, tome VII); J. C. Trombelli, *Mariac sanctissimae vita ac gesta* (I ed., 1761, Bourrassé, tome II.) For the moderns: Gregorianum, 28 (1947), p. 574 to 597 (criticism of the book of Fr. Dillenschneider by Fr. Lennerz). *Revue des sciences phil. et theol.*, 27 (1938), p. 647-648 (P. Y. Congar); *Revue des Sciences religieuses*, 19 (1939), p. 332 to 341, (article de J. Riviere, *Marie Coredeptrice*). Canon G. D. Smith, *Mary's part in our Redemption*, London, 1938, faithful to the critical tradition of Newman in matters of coredeption. Cf. A. Janssens, *Ephem. Lovan.*, 14 (1937), p. 344 et suiv. W. Goossens, *de Cooperatione Immediata*... Desclée de Brouwer, 1939, etc. ...
3. R. Bernard, *Le Mystere de Marie*, Paris, 1933. J. B. Carol, numerous articles in *Marianum*, I (1939), p. 283 et suiv., 361 et suiv., etc. Cf. Mgr. Lebon, *Ephem Lovan*, 16 (1933), p. 653 et suiv. H. Borzi, *Maria Hominum Coredeptrix*, Bruges, 1931, etc. ...
4. See the eight volumes which have appeared of *Estudios Marianos* (I to VIII), Cf. in Italy, the review *Marianum*.
5. L. Garriguet, *Mois de Marie*, Paris, 1923, p. 239.
- 5 bis. See for exemple R. Bernard, *La Maternité Spirituelle* in the Bulletin de la Société Française d'Etudes Mariales, Juvisy, 1935, p. 99-100, criticising the *De Mediatione* of J. Bittremieux: "When the moment for the conclusion arrives... the author seems to draw back and to depart from his own premises. We regret to see this."
6. Spiritual notes cited by M. Leherpeur, *L'Apotre de l'Universite, Monsieur Paris*, Paris (Beachesne), 1941.
7. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Mariologie, La Mere du Sauveur at Notre Vie Interieure*. Lyon, 1941. Forward, p. VII.
8. *De mysteriis vitae Christi, in monito generali totius operis ad lectorem* (Ante praefationem). Cf. L. Leloir, *La Mediation Mariale*, Bruges, 1933, p. 120: "In Mariology more than in other branches of theology there are two elements which complete one another and need to be balanced harmoniously in a very delicate unity: theological knowledge and filial piety. The person who does not possess in an eminent way these qualities is exposed to lose his way." (The italics are ours.)
9. I Cor. 3:3. Eph. 4:5.
10. John 17:11.
11. Olier, *Memoires Autographes* (manuscript preserved at the Seminary of Saint Sulpice, rue de Regard, Paris), t. IV, p. 352.
- 11 bis. On January 13, 1875 a decree of the Holy Office took to task those authors "qui ingenia sua acuunt super argumentis quae novitatem sapiunt ac sub pietatis specie insuetos cultus titulos etiam per ephemerides promovere student."
12. *Estudios Marianos*, VII, 389.
13. The famous *Glories of Mary*, the Marian work which has possibly had the greatest number of editions.
14. M. J. Scheeben, *Mariologie*, in *Dogmatik*, III, Fribourg, 1882, p. 455 to 629.
15. *De Mediatione Universali*, Bruges (C. Beyaert), 1926, and the article cited above by P. E. Druwe, *Marie et la Mediation Mariale*.
16. *Marie au Service de la Redemption*, Hagueneau, 1947.
17. E.g. *Mater Corredemptrix*, Rome, 1940.
18. *Das Fundamentalprinzip der Mariologie*, collection *Scientia Sacra*, Dusseldorf, *Das Mysterium der Heiligen Kirche*, p. 187 ff., etc.

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83. AUGUSTINE CARDINAL BEA, S.J.

"Mary and the Protestants," translated from Enciclopedia Mariana "Theotokos" (Genoa, Bevilacqua et Solari, 1958), 342-348.

84. PIUS XI

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