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Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ
(ARCIC II)

Essays by the Faith and Order Advisory Group
of the Church of England

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Preface

The papers collected here are intended to resource the General Synod debate in February 2008 on the report of the Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*. In addition members will have the ARCIC report itself and a briefing paper from the Council for Christian Unity.

The papers have emerged from a three-year study process within the Faith and Order Advisory Group (FOAG), which is a constituted body of the Council for Christian Unity. FOAG advises the Council and the House of Bishops on questions of ecumenical theology and ecclesiology. Its members are appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. The membership represents a wide range of personal views and of scholarly expertise in biblical, historical, moral and doctrinal theology. The Chairman is the Bishop of Chichester.

The papers present a variety of perspectives and none of them should be taken as the general view of FOAG or of the Council for Christian Unity. They vary in length and in the degree of specialisation; some are perhaps more accessible than others. They are made available here in order to inform the members of the General Synod of some of the deeper considerations and some of the complexities that the Synod will wish to be aware of, but which cannot be conveyed in a short briefing paper or in an introduction to the debate.

Owing to the shortage of time and pressure on office resources, the papers have been only lightly edited in house and there is not complete uniformity of formatting or of styles of referencing.

I trust that the Synod will find this material informative and stimulating.

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December 2007

Chapter 1

Mary: Mary in the New Testament Tradition¹

Paula Gooder and Peter Fisher²

1 Agreement and the witness of the New Testament texts

Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ is an ‘Agreed Statement’, so it has to be an essay in congruence, fitting things together. The aim of the Commission was to uncover common ground where it was often thought there was only a field of battle. It sought to find a fresh and *harmonious* way of approaching and articulating the place of Mary in the faith and devotion of the (divided) Church.

Part of this ARCIC essay in congruence was, quite properly, a study of relevant parts of Scripture, especially of the New Testament. Here the Commission explicitly avowed an integrative way of reading Scripture (§7), that is to say, a way that seeks to incorporate what is valuable in ‘Typological’, ‘Reformation’ and ‘Historical-critical’ approaches. This reading aimed also to be holistic, ‘seeking to consider each passage about Mary in the context of the New Testament as a whole, against the background of the Old and in the light of Tradition.’ (§7)

Those who grew up with jig-saw puzzles may recollect the strict injunction, ‘Don’t force it!’ And this simple warning offers a fundamental critical vantage-point for examining any exercise in harmonisation. It is a vantage point that biblical scholars are particularly well equipped to adopt, moving as they must, constantly, between the close examination of the particularities of texts and the review of the wider horizons within which the texts find their origins and their applications.

The New Testament study that follows does not put forward a direct critique, but an independent survey of the material in the Bible and in the second century text, the *Protevangelium of James*, which relates to Mary. This survey provides the basis for returning to examine the Agreed Statement in Part 3.

2 Mary in Scriptural and Post-scriptural tradition

The biblical material relating to Mary is brief in the extreme. The first biblical reference to her in Galatians is only an allusion and tells us very little about Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ mother. Galatians 4:4 simply states that Jesus was ‘born of a woman, born under the law’ and tells us that Paul is aware that Jesus’ mother was Jewish but little else. This is true of all other potential references to Mary in Paul (cf. Romans 1:3 and 9:5) but is not particularly remarkable: Paul gives very little detail

¹ This title is a deliberate allusion to Beverley Gaventa’s excellent book: Beverley Roberts Gaventa, *Mary : Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus, Studies on Personalities of the New Testament*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995.

² The Revd Canon Peter Fisher, Vicar of St Peter's, Maney, Diocese of Birmingham (Parts I & 3) and Canon Dr Paula Gooder, Canon Theologian of Birmingham (Part 2).

about any aspect of the earthly life of Jesus since this is not why he was writing. The only other indisputable references to Mary occur in the Gospels, where Mary is referred to by name in Matthew, Mark and Luke and as ‘the mother of Jesus’ in John. Christian tradition has sometimes attempted to make connections between Mary and the Woman who gave birth to a child in Revelation 12, though this association began relatively late (it is found in full form only in the writings of the sixth century Oecumenius)³ and bears little relation to the birth narratives of Jesus.

A much fuller Marian tradition can be found in post-scriptural tradition where Mary began to appear as a character in her own right rather than as an extra in the main story of Jesus. Although most of the Apostolic Fathers contain no reference to Mary at all, the exception to this is Ignatius of Antioch who, in various places, makes reference to Jesus’ lineage from Mary.⁴ The dearth of reference elsewhere makes the *Protevangelium of James* even more remarkable. This early expansion of the birth narratives is thought to date from about 150 CE and contains the traditions that have shaped much subsequent Marian tradition.⁵ The *Protevangelium* gives details about Mary’s family, her birth, her childhood in the temple, her betrothal to an aged Joseph, the annunciation, Joseph’s doubt, Mary’s vindication before the High Priest, the birth of Jesus in a cave outside Bethlehem, the adoration of the magi and Herod’s slaughter of the children.⁶ As Gaventa notes, the major concern of this apocryphal gospel is to stress the virginity of Mary and to provide a host of details omitted in the canonical gospel narratives. This indicates that it was in the mid-second century that attention, and subsequently devotion, to the person of Mary began to grow.⁷ It is interesting to note how early the character of Mary became important within Christian tradition – many other extra-biblical traditions grew up much later than this – and how influential this text has been in shaping Marian devotion.

There is no trace of this level of attention to the details of her life or any hint of the subsequent devotion given to Mary in any of the canonical texts. What is interesting, however, is that the character of Mary changes from gospel to gospel. Outside of the fact that she was Jesus’ mother, there is little agreement among the gospel writers about the role that Mary played in the life and ministry of Jesus. In order to get a full sense of the portrayal of Mary we need to examine each gospel in turn.

³ See discussion in Judith L. Kovacs, Christopher Rowland and Rebekah Callow, *Revelation : The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, Blackwell Bible Commentaries*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004, p. 137.

⁴ See Raymond Edward Brown, Paul J. Achtemeier, and United States Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue (Group), *Mary in the New Testament : A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978, pp. 253-54.

⁵ See discussions in Brown, Achtemeier, and United States Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue (Group), *Mary in the New Testament*, pp. 248-9 and Gaventa, *Mary : Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, pp. 100-25.

⁶ See Brown, Achtemeier, and United States Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue (Group), *Mary in the New Testament*, pp. 253-54.

⁷ For an examination of this see Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary : The Woman and the Symbol*, 1st ed., New York: Ballantine Books, 1996, pp. 59-98. In fact the whole of this book explores the way in which devotion to Mary expanded through Christian tradition.

Mary and the Gospel of Mark

Of all the gospels, Mark's treatment of Mary is the most cursory and least positive. In Mark, Mary is only mentioned once by name (Mark 6:3) and once indirectly (Mark 3:35). The function of Mary in both episodes is to underline the Markan theme that it is discipleship and not family ties that constitute relationship within the kingdom. In Mark 3, Jesus takes little account of Mary and appears to reconstitute his family to include all those who do his will rather than his blood relations. Mark uses Jesus' family members, including Mary, therefore, as a way of stressing the disorientating nature of the Kingdom of God which requires a radical redrawing of families away from blood ties and towards discipleship.⁸ This is underlined by the only other reference to Mary (6:3), where the members of the synagogue ask in surprise whether this is the son of Mary and brother of James, Joses, Judas and Simon and other unnamed sisters. Mark's readers are clearly expected to understand that the answer to this question is no, because of the radical disorientation caused by the coming of the kingdom, where family ties are of no significance. For this reason, then, Mary is far from important in Mark's gospel where there are not even any birth narratives to give her a role. In Mark's gospel Mary symbolises what one gives up for the kingdom and has no positive role of her own.

Mary and the Gospel of Matthew

In Matthew's gospel Mary appears but only as a passive character – in Matthew she never speaks. To a large extent Mary is the foil for the major action that clusters around the male characters of the gospel, particularly Joseph and Jesus. In Matthew the annunciation story is told entirely in terms of Joseph and his angelic vision, likewise the flight into Egypt which ends the narrative about the adoration of the Magi focuses around Joseph and his dream that caused him to save Jesus and Mary. This stands in great contrast to Luke's gospel where Mary is at the centre of much of the action in the birth narratives.

Despite this focus on Joseph, the character of Mary does appear in a few very important vignettes. The first is in the genealogy in Matthew 1:1-16 where in an otherwise male genealogy Mary appears alongside four other women – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah. As early as Jerome, scholars have attempted to work out the significance of the placing of these women in Matthew's genealogy, many modern scholars see their significance not in that they were sinners, nor that they were Gentiles but that they were forebears of Mary in this story, in that they had experienced an unusual sexual union but remained heroes of the biblical narrative.⁹ Their significance seems to lie in the fact that despite the sometimes extraordinary accounts of conception that surround them, they played a vital role in the history of salvation.

Another interesting sketch of Mary appears in the story of the adoration of the Magi, an appearance that is made even more striking by her absence – or silent presence – in

⁸ For a helpful discussion of this point see E. Elizabeth Johnson, "'Who Is My Mother?': Family Values in the Gospel of Mark,' in *Blessed One : Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, pp. 32-46.

⁹ Brown, Achtemeier, and United States Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue (Group), *Mary in the New Testament*, pp. 81-83.

the rest of the birth narratives. Despite the fact that she does not feature much in the annunciation or flight to Egypt, here she, alongside Jesus, is centre stage. Matthew is also the one who quotes from Isaiah 7 (Matthew 1:23) pointing to Mary as the one who will bear 'Emmanuel'.¹⁰

In Matthew's gospel, then, Mary plays a much more important role than she does in Mark's gospel. For the most part she is a silent presence in stories focussed around the male characters first of Joseph and then of Jesus, nevertheless she is painted as having a vital role in the history of salvation for without her Jesus, Emmanuel, would not have been born. For most of the gospel, Mary's role may be that of silent foil but there are few other foils in Matthew as important as she.

Mary in Luke-Acts

It is only in Luke-Acts and John that the character of Mary gains any life or personality. In Luke-Acts Mary moves from being a silent, though important, character to being one of the major figures within the gospel, though, like many of Luke's characters, she comes and goes in the narrative. Gaventa illustrates this Lukan characteristic with reference to the choosing of Matthias in Acts 1. Here Matthias is the centre of the narrative, though he appears nowhere else in the Lukan account.¹¹ In a similar way, when Mary appears in Luke she appears centre stage but at others times she is entirely absent from the narrative.

In contrast to Matthew, Joseph plays very little part in Luke's birth narrative; here the focus is almost entirely on Mary and her relative Elizabeth. Indeed one of the key features of the Lukan annunciation narrative is the way in which it is set up to parallel the annunciation to Zechariah of Elizabeth's conception. Both Elizabeth and Mary conceive in impossible circumstances: the one because she is too old, the other because she is too young and a virgin. Although there is no doubt that the word *parthenos* does mean virgin in Luke - since Mary uses it when she wonders how God's message to her can in fact be true: 'How can this be since I am virgin?' (Luke 1:34) - the contrast that Luke is drawing here is between extreme age and extreme youth. God uses both these women in the history of salvation

The parallels between the accounts become clear in Gabriel's proclamation that they should not fear (Luke 1:13; 1:30). What is unclear from the story is why Zechariah should be punished for his questioning of the announcement ('How will I know that this is so?', 1:18) when Mary is not for hers ('How can this be?', 1:34). It is here, however, that we gain the first glimpse of Mary's character in Luke's gospel because in her acceptance of Gabriel's message Mary becomes a true disciple in that she accepts and follows when she does not truly understand.¹²

It is important to recognise, however, that Mary's acceptance of Gabriel's announcement has two stages: initial acceptance but only later, joy. The Magnificat is only proclaimed when Mary has gone to visit Elizabeth, it is only in the company of her relative that Mary sings forth the song that has so shaped Christian history.

¹⁰ The only other mention of Mary the mother of Jesus in Matthew is in Matthew 13:55 which is the parallel to Mark 6:3 mentioned above.

¹¹ Gaventa, *Mary : Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, p. 49.

¹² See Gaventa, *Mary : Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, pp. 54-55.

Just as Mary takes centre stage in the annunciation stories, she also is the focus of the birth narratives. After the initial account of the census, Luke focuses entirely on Mary. Even the account of the visit of the shepherds is ended with Mary's treasuring of the events and pondering on them. In Luke, alone in all the gospels, does Mary gain the status of a full character with thoughts and feelings of her own. This theme is carried through in the temple scene when Jesus is welcomed first by Simeon and then by Anna. Simeon's rejoicing at Jesus birth ends with a comment directly to Mary about how Jesus life and death will affect her.

The anguish that Simeon prophesies for Mary begins in the very next account when Jesus stays in the temple conversing with the Pharisees. In Mary's expostulation to Jesus that he had caused them anxiety, she uses the verb *odunaomai* a verb which is best rendered as 'to be in great pain'. Here we begin to see that the piercing of the sword that Simeon prophesied began not with the crucifixion but with Jesus' calling as God's son.

After these initial scenes in Luke's gospel, Mary disappears from the pages of the gospel with a few exceptions (Luke 8:19-21; 11:27-28) and only reappears again at the start of Acts when Mary is portrayed as being with the disciples who were devoting themselves to prayer. Here Mary's discipleship, begun in her acceptance of Gabriel's announcement, comes to fruition as the disciples wait for Pentecost. Mary is now truly a disciple of Jesus.

In Luke's gospel, therefore, we gain our first glimpse of the character of Mary. She begins as a young girl who was prepared to risk all for a discipleship she did not fully understand, a discipleship that very swiftly brought her pain and anxiety. Luke does not reveal how this discipleship unfolds throughout the gospel but does provide us with a vignette of Mary praying alongside the other disciples just before Pentecost. Despite the uncertainty, the pain and anxiety, Mary has remained faithful to her calling. In some ways Luke paints her as the very first disciple and a type of what it means to be a disciple.

Mary in the fourth Gospel

In the fourth gospel, Mary also has more of a developed character although she remains unnamed throughout and only appears twice. In the fourth gospel she is simply 'the mother of Jesus' but despite this plays an important role, first in the wedding at Cana and then at the crucifixion. It is at the wedding at Cana that Mary has the most active role that she has in all the gospel accounts because here she takes the initiative and apparently encourages Jesus into his first sign. In all the other gospels Mary appears at best as ideal disciple prepared to follow when she does not understand, here she both perceives the need and understands Jesus' role within it before Jesus appears to understand it himself.

At the crucifixion, she again becomes a more passive character in that her care is passed from Jesus to the Beloved disciple but John stresses here the care and compassion that Jesus feels for her. The fourth gospel's unique portrayal of Mary lies in the fact that she has a tangible two way relationship with her son. Both at the wedding at Cana and during the Crucifixion it becomes clear that Mary affects Jesus as much as Jesus affects Mary, she has power to alter his actions and to receive his love.

In the fourth gospel, Mary has a lesser role than she does in Luke's gospel in that she only appears twice but the way in which she does appear is very much more active than in any other gospel account. Mary is the instigator of action in Jesus' ministry and a particular recipient of his love: both of these features affect our understanding of her.

3 Re-examining Mary

To re-examine *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ* in the light of the foregoing survey is to face a radical question. Is it possible to assemble the distinct glimpses of Mary offered by different New Testament writings into an authentic single 'portrait'? Is it realistic to say, as the ARCIC Commission does, that, 'The Scriptures portray Mary as...' (§64), or to refer in the singular to 'the scriptural witness' regarding Mary (§30)? Whilst it is not difficult – and has been commonplace, historically – to put together a jig-saw picture with pieces taken from all four gospels and elsewhere, the underlying biblical *integrity* of such a portrait remains in question. It seems to involve some 'forcing'. For, on closer examination, it seems that the distinctive traits revealed in the various narratives have to be seen as other than – and more than – complementary facets of a single rounded picture. No, in significant ways they present *alternative* views, and this not only in terms of the history of Mary, but also, importantly, of her theological and spiritual significance. It is not just that Mark 'happens not to mention' the birth narratives or the feast at Cana, but that his presentation of Mary can be seen as a small but consistent part of his whole treatment of the sharp disjunction between ordinary human relationships and the new 'family' inaugurated by the Kingdom. This implies that the theology of Mark's Gospel, at its deepest level, presents a challenge not only to the portrayal of Mary in the ARCIC statement but also to its theological approach to eschatology and the working of divine grace. Not for the first time, biblical scholarship challenges the work of ecumenical theologians with the insistence that the Scriptures are (to borrow Louis McNeice's expression) 'incurably plural'.

Yet there are two observations that may mitigate or qualify this challenge. The first is to note that the claim that *MGH* ultimately makes regarding its presentation of Mary and its reading of her place in Scripture is a modest one. The Commission sets out *a* reading of Scripture¹³ without claiming this to be definitive, and it finally asserts no more than that the two Marian dogmas, 'can be said to be consonant with the teaching of the Scriptures' (§ 60 and § 78). The second is to recall that the Commission openly acknowledges that its approach to Scripture, in common with other readings, is not, 'neutral, but ... is shaped by the context and interest of its readers', which, in the case of this reading, means setting the biblical witness 'in the light of Tradition' (§7).

Giving due weight to both these observations, some unease remains. Jared Wicks, S.J. remarks, in his restrained but probing comments on the statement's use of Scripture in the light of Tradition, that ecumenically fruitful work has to respond to two imperatives in relation to Scripture:

Since participants in bilateral dialogues work as representatives of their churches, their biblical work should be concerned to honour ways in which texts, in their

¹³ *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ* §7 typically refers to 'our reading/use of Scripture, describing it as 'an ecclesial and ecumenical reading' (my italics).

history-of-effects, have been received by the communities of faith in ages past and present. But the churches have also deemed necessary the work of disciplined recovery of the meanings that the biblical authors intended to communicate in their historical setting of the first redaction...¹⁴

This double responsibility, as he notes, makes such work difficult; ‘The difficulty’, he adds, ‘may have been felt by members of ARCIC.’¹⁵ The main target of his critique is the apparent lack of integration between the different methods of interpretation that the Commission claims to employ.¹⁶ But his comments are equally pertinent here. Like other ecumenical dialogues, ARCIC consistently acknowledges the ‘normative’ place of Scripture in Christian understanding and doctrine. More than this, *MGH* takes pains to highlight the central and constructive role that the Commission’s examination and exposition of Scripture plays in the Statement.¹⁷ It is bound to be disappointing to all those who share the Commission’s commitment to the foundational place of attention to Scripture when it emerges that the obdurate divergences of the texts (so critically important to the way in which they witness to the One Lord) are not weighed nor wrestled with, but either pressed into false harmony or passed over without comment.

It may not be fanciful to suggest that this ‘smoothing over’ of divergences is a wider cause of unease about *MGH*. Other essays in this collection certainly imply this. Here, the study of contrasting biblical interpretations (ours and that of *MGH*) prompts some further reflections on this wider issue.

There may be such a condition as ‘bilateral vision’ (by analogy, say, with ‘tunnel vision’). This would be a condition not too different from that experienced by people on the Centre Court at Wimbledon, where a shared preoccupation with the interplay of two parties tends both to intensify attention and to limit its range. It would come as a terrible shock to members of the crowd if they were to discover, on leaving the Court, that a plane had crashed, or a riot had occurred nearby. Returning from sport to ecumenical theology, this condition might encourage a high degree of concentration on everything that either prevents or makes for a successful encounter between our two Communion, whilst, in the very process, fostering an intolerance of other kinds of interplay or confrontation.

Such a condition has, of course, no literal reality. Yet *MGH* does display a surprising lack of responsiveness to a host of theological, political, devotional and emotional areas of debate or disparity around the figure of Mary. In different ways, the papers in this collection by Harriet Harris and Charlotte Methuen both comment on the statement’s failure to take account of many complex and urgent issues – some of them particularly pressing for women – that arise in relation to Mary and her place in Christian traditions. Arguably, the exposition of the history of doctrine and practice

¹⁴ Jared Wicks, ‘The Roman Catholic Commentary’ in *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ, The text with Commentaries and Study Guide*, ed. Donald Bolen and Gregory Cameron, London, 2007 p. 191

¹⁵ Wicks, p. 192

¹⁶ Wicks, p. 189.

¹⁷ See, for example, § 77: ‘We are convinced that any attempt to come to a reconciled understanding of these matters must begin by listening to God’s word in the Scriptures. Therefore our common statement begins with a careful exploration of the rich New Testament witness to Mary, in the light of overall themes and patterns in the Scriptures as a whole.’

relating to Mary in *MGH* similarly filters out much of the energetic, and still living, post-Reformation debate. What is at issue here is a matter both of content and tenor. In content, the statement lacks serious reference to many significant points of controversy; in tenor, it gives little sense of the vitality, colour and passion that characterise the wide range of responses to Mary in the Church. The result is a widely remarked quality of blandness about the text, and a sense that many readers express, that *I* do not recognise myself in this document – much as you might feel on looking at a school photo from which you and your personal friends are missing.

Is too much being asked of such a document? Can a bi-lateral Commission be expected to transcend ‘bi-lateral vision’ and both perceive and engage with the many dissonant voices that *can* be heard, whether in Scripture or in the Church, relating to Mary? It must be acknowledged that *MGH* follows in a long and by no means dishonourable tradition of work by ARCIC and other bi-lateral commissions, work in which the kind of limitations noted here have been more and more remarked. Some will argue that any supposed limitations about these texts are fully justified by – perhaps even necessary for – the progress achieved on the path of reconciliation. But the more people there are, in and beyond both Communion, who cannot see their own commitments reflected in an agreed statement, or the issues that concern them faced up to and resolved, the more fragile its consensus becomes. It is tempting to think that *MGH* represents something very near to the end of one particular road; or, better, of one way of travelling on the road to unity. A more robust vehicle, able to traverse rougher terrain and accommodate a still more challenging range of passengers, looks to be needed.

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Chapter 2

Consonant with Scripture?

Bill Croft¹

Introduction²

This paper seeks to examine to what degree the theology of Mary's preparation and destiny, expounded in MGHC, is consonant with scripture. Two of the advances in agreement claimed by MGHC (78) refer to the idea of consonance with Scripture:

- Thus, given the understanding we have reached concerning the place of Mary in the economy of hope and grace, we can affirm together the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory as consonant with Scripture and that it can, indeed, only be understood in the light of Scripture. (paragraph 58)
- We have agreed together that the teaching about Mary in the two definitions of 1854 and 1950, understood within the biblical pattern of the economy of grace and hope outlined here, can be said to be consonant with the teaching of the Scriptures and the ancient common traditions. (paragraph 60)

The concern for consonance with scripture is an overriding methodological concern of MGHC. Whatever is said about Mary, and claimed as part of Christian truth to be believed, must be consonant with scripture. This approach will reassure Anglicans, many of whom think that the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are, in some way, not consonant with scripture.

What might be the meanings of the phrase 'not consonant'? First, something might be claimed to be Christian truth when in fact it contradicts scripture. In this category one would potentially, at least, place the claim that Mary was, according to the dogma ID, *ab omni originalis culpae labe praeservatam immunem* ('preserved immune from all stain of original sin') although this is qualified by *intuitu meritorum Christi Jesus salvatoris humani generis* ('in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the Saviour of the human race'). *Prima facie* this seems to contradict what St Paul says in Romans 3.23 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'. One might also note 1 John 1.8, 'If we say we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.'

Secondly 'not consonant' might also mean going against the accepted general thrust of the biblical message, rather than contradicting a particular statement of scripture. This sort of lack of consonance could be held against the dogma of the Assumption, which, being silent on the circumstances of the end of Mary's earthly life, implies that Mary did not follow the pattern of death and resurrection which the New Testament sees as the pattern for all the redeemed.

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² Abbreviations:MGHC: Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (ARCIC II); ID:Ineffabilis Deus; MD: Munificentissimus Deus

Thirdly ‘not consonant’ might mean speculating beyond what the scripture can indubitably support, and claiming such speculation to be divine revelation. All theology tests and probes our understanding of God’s nature and purposes, but for it to become generally accepted Christian truth, it must remain within the general witness of scripture. What is claimed in both ID and MD *could* fall into this category, but Scripture is silent on the issue of Mary’s sinlessness, and is similarly silent on the circumstances of her departure from this life.

From this we can identify three meanings of the phrase ‘consonant with’:

Sense 1: there is no contradiction of scripture;

Sense 2: what is claimed goes with the general thrust of biblical witness;

Sense 3: what is claimed, although working in particular areas where the scriptural witness is only indirect, or indeed where scripture is silent, can indubitably be supported by the wider scriptural witness.

Does MGHC successfully demonstrate this consonance with the Scriptures? We try to answer this in relation to each of these three meanings.

‘Consonant with’ (sense 1)

Sense 1 of ‘consonant with’ defines it as not contradicting. It is the sinlessness of Mary that concerns us here and what Scripture says about sin. In MGHC a crucial text is dealt with in a footnote:

12. The assertion of Paul at Romans 3:23 – all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God – might appear to allow for no exceptions, not even for Mary. However, it is important to note the rhetorical-apologetic context of the general argument of Romans 1-3, which is concerned to show the equal sinfulness of Jews and Gentiles (3:9). Romans 3:23 has a quite specific purpose in context which is unrelated to the issue of the sinlessness or otherwise of Mary.

The paragraph in the main text to which this refers is 59. The main text is discussing the potential demerits of using the concept of ‘sinlessness’ since it is both a negative and non-personalist one. Then the reader is referred to the footnote, which does not relate to this issue. Unfortunately, the impression is given that a critical issue, the apparent testimony that all human beings have sinned, which would include Mary as a human being, is being hidden away. It would have been helpful to have had a discussion of this text (Romans 3.23) in the main body of the text.

What is said about this text may be true. Unfortunately for MGHC, it proves too much, because if this type of text, a broad statement of the nature of the human condition, can be shown not to refer to a specific individual, Mary, then it is only consistent to accept that a number of other texts, used by MGHC, also do not necessarily refer to Mary. 57 is the concluding paragraph of the section entitled, *Mary in the Economy of Grace*. A number of New Testament texts are cited which refer to the hope of the redeemed coming to share in the glory of the Lord. None of these texts refer specifically to the Mary. They bear witness to the great Christian hope in a general way. If MGHC were consistent, these texts would have to be treated in the same way as Romans 3.23, with the conclusion that they are unrelated to the issue of Mary’s destiny.

‘Consonant with’ (sense 2)

We now move on to the sense 2 of ‘consonant with’ (‘goes with the general thrust of biblical witness’). Here MGHC is on its strongest ground. The whole thrust of the document is to set its thinking about Mary, in both scripture and the developing tradition, in the context of a firm biblical, indeed Pauline, pattern.

‘This growing convergence has also allowed us to approach in a fresh way the questions about Mary which our two Communion have set before us. In doing so, we have framed our work within the pattern of grace and hope which we discover in Scripture – predestined ... called ... justified ... glorified – (Romans 8:30) (paragraphs 52-57) (77).’

That this is a secure biblical framework cannot be gainsaid. This is what MGHC terms the ‘eschatological perspective’: ‘We now suggest that the adoption of an eschatological perspective may deepen our shared understanding of the place of Mary in the economy of grace, and the tradition of the Church concerning Mary which both our communions receive.’ (63) Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* describes the place of Mary in the whole of God’s plan for salvation (55 – 59) and the Anglican writer, John Macquarrie, takes this eschatological approach in *Mary for All Christians* (1991). In the sense of ‘going with the general thrust of the biblical witness’ the place of Mary in the drama of salvation can be said to be consonant with scripture.

There is a specific issue here with the doctrine of the Assumption. MGHC acknowledges that MD does not use the language of death and resurrection about Mary. Footnote 10 says:

The reference in the dogma to Mary being assumed 'body and soul' has caused difficulty for some, on historical and philosophical grounds. The dogma leaves open, however, the question as to what the absence of her mortal remains means in historical terms. Likewise, 'assumed body and soul' is not intended to privilege a particular anthropology. More positively, 'assumed body and soul' can be seen to have Christological and ecclesiological implications. Mary as 'God bearer' is intimately, indeed bodily, related to Christ: his own bodily glorification now embraces hers. And, since Mary bore his body of flesh, she is intimately related to the Church, Christ's body. In brief, the formulation of the dogma responds to theological rather than historical or philosophical questions in relation to Mary.

The language of death and resurrection, however, does respond to theological concerns. It is the Christological, salvific pattern, and MD, although not denying that Mary died and rose, seems to point to a different way of salvation through Christ, i.e. the way of glorious assumption. It is interesting to note that Macquarrie, in the work referred to above, links the assumption of Mary specifically to the Ascension. The Ascension, however, is part of the Paschal mystery and does not make much sense when taken out of that context. Indeed the unity of the Paschal mystery is now being recognised liturgically in the calendar of *Common Worship*, where Easter is celebrated as a single fifty-day feast within which the particular ‘moments’ of the Ascension and Pentecost are focussed on as the feast progresses.

The resurrection of Christ is the overcoming of sin and death. Even if one accepted that Mary was sinless (and here the doctrine of Glorious Assumption interrelates with that of the Immaculate Conception) and had no need of resurrection from that point of view, then at least, from the point of view of affirming her humanity, she

would need resurrection from her death as a mortal creature, something to be strongly affirmed in order to secure the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Taken together these points form a case that the doctrine of the Assumption, particularly in its Roman Catholic form, is not ‘consonant with’ Scripture in the sense in which it is discussed here.

‘Consonant with’ (sense 3)

MGHC also presents problems when we come to meaning 3 of ‘consonant with’. The concern here is that what is claimed as Christian truth does not go beyond what can be indubitably supported by scripture when exploring areas where the scriptural witness is only indirect, or indeed where scripture is silent.

It must be noted that theology has always worked in such areas. The doctrine of the Trinity, as it is worked out in the patristic period, is a development of Biblical witness. There is, for example, no *homoousion* in Scripture. One should not automatically take a negative view of theological thinking about the role of Mary simply because it goes beyond what is said directly in Scripture. In such areas of theological thought disagreements quickly emerge, however, and this becomes problematic when a particular theological development is claimed to be divinely revealed, as ID and MD claim.

Several of the individual points made in MGHC are open to disagreement. Leaving aside for the moment the relevance or otherwise of Romans 3.23, scripture is silent as to whether Mary was sinless. It may be the case that she was, and MGHC eloquently puts the case showing how Mary is the climatic point in the preparation of Israel to receive its Saviour, and arguing for particular interpretations of biblical descriptions of Mary (esp. *kecharitōmenē* Lk. 1.28).

Several of the individual points which MGHC makes, however, can be argued against. We now look at the biblical argumentation of MGHC in some detail.

The witness of scripture: A Trajectory of Grace and Hope (8 – 11)

The calling of Mary is set in the context of God’s covenant with his people, Israel (8). The role of individuals is noted, and the divine preparation of such persons for the tasks and roles they were called to fulfil. This prepares the ground for the crucial paragraph 11 that speaks of Mary. There is little to quibble about here, except for what seems an overstatement of what is claimed the NT says about Mary. ‘The New Testament speaks not only of God’s preparation for the birth of the Son, but also of God’s election, calling and sanctification of a Jewish women in the line of those holy women, such as Sarah and Hannah, whose sons fulfilled the purposes of God for his people.’ The use of ‘sanctification’ at this point is potentially controversial. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception concerns Mary’s sanctity. It is easy enough to find biblical evidence for Mary’s election and calling, but explicit biblical evidence for her sanctification is lacking.

Mary in Matthew’s Birth Narrative (12 – 13)

These paragraphs are a succinct exposition of Matthew’s theology. In particular they set the birth of the Christ ‘in the providential ordering of Israel’s salvation’. This is part of the trajectory of grace. Paragraph 13 states that the virginal conception

discloses the newness that comes with the birth of the Saviour. This section, which focuses on Mary, comes to the verge of sentimentality ('one quiet moment of reverence'), a constant danger in reflections on Mary. Once again the text slips into overstatement in describing Mary. She is, according to MGHC, Jesus' royal mother, before whom as well as Jesus, the magi kneel. Matthew 2.2, 11 are given in support. But nowhere does Matthew call Mary 'royal'. Also, the text speaks only of the magi kneeling and worshipping Jesus. (2.2 *kai ēlthomen proskunēsai autō*; 2.11 *kai pesontes proskunēsan autō*.)

Mary in Luke's Narrative (14 – 15)

Mary's role in the gospel is briefly described, culminating in a discussion of her description as 'favoured one' (*kecharitōmenē*). This is translated in a somewhat tendentious way as 'one who has been and remains endowed with grace'. It is possible for a perfect participle to be translated in this way, but it is not the only way in this context. MGHC translated it with a view to giving scriptural backing to the high status given to Mary in certain traditions. It could equally well mean favoured in respect of her role of bearing Jesus, rather than being permanently 'endowed with grace'. MGHC gives a possible but not necessary translation. This section also states that the description 'favoured one' 'implies a prior sanctification by divine grace'. This is somewhat tendentious. It is a possible implication, but the Lukan text gives no specific support for this crucial claim. Luke clearly sees the choice of Mary as the culminating moment of Israel's history but this is something more general than the particular claim made for Mary in MGHC.

Mary and the True Family of Jesus (19 – 21)

These paragraphs deal with those texts in which Jesus makes a contrast between his natural and his eschatological family (Mark 3. 31-35). The difficulty of the verse about Jesus' mother and his brothers, which needs interpretation for those who hold the perpetual virginity of Mary, is dealt with rather too easily in a footnote:

3 Although the word 'brother' usually denotes a blood brother, the Greek *adelphos*, like the Hebrew 'ah, can have a broader meaning of kinsman, or relative (e.g. Genesis 29:12 LXX) or step-brother (e.g. Mark 6:17f). Relatives who are not siblings could be included in this use of the term at Mark 3:31. Mary did have an extended family: her sister is referred to at John 19:25 and her kinswoman Elizabeth at Luke 1:36. In the early Church different explanations of the references to the 'brothers' of Jesus were given, whether as step-brothers or cousins.

This discussion does not refer to the precise nature of Mary's virginity, which is a curious omission in MGHC.

Paragraph 20 again is given to overstatement. The claim is made that Mary 'was ready to let everything in her life happen according to God's word'. This may be true, but on the basis of Luke 1.38, given as the scriptural support for the claim, it can hardly be proved. 1.38, in context, surely refers to the coming of the Holy Spirit to conceive Jesus in her womb.

Mary in John's Gospel (22 – 27)

These sections focus on the wedding at Cana and the scene at the foot of the cross. The wedding episode shows us Mary changing in role from being, primarily, the natural mother of Jesus, to being a disciple in the eschatological family. The scene at the foot of the cross is interpreted in accordance with the well-established tradition of seeing here the formation of the Church by the dying Christ. This is expounded in a rather complicated fashion using the image of the side of Christ (*pleura*) which is said to echo the rib of Adam from which, according to MGHC, but incorrectly, Eve was *taken*. In fact Eve was *made* from the rib of Adam. This quibble, however, does not affect the broad argument of MGHC.

MGHC's discussion of the biblical evidence reveals that there is considerably more scriptural evidence available to be used to theologise about the preparation of Mary for her role as mother of the Saviour, than there is about her final destiny. It is only from the woman of Revelation 12, interpreted corporately and ecclesiologically in MGHC (28 – 29), that anything can be said about Mary's final destiny: 'And we may even glimpse in her the final destiny of God's people to share in her son's victory over the powers of evil and death' (30). Apart from the texts which speak of the general hope of the consummation of all things in Christ (referred to at 57), MGHC offers no other biblical support for the Assumption.

MGHC discusses the biblical material carefully, but as can be seen, it has a tendency in parts to go beyond what the scripture can indubitably support, the third meaning of 'consonant with'.

Conclusions

In connection with meaning 1 of 'consonant with' there is only one area of difficulty although it is an extremely important one since it concerns the sinfulness of the human race, of which Mary is a part. The way in which Romans 3.23 is handled is inadequate and inconsistent.

In connection with meaning 2 of 'consonant with' we saw that MGHC is on much stronger ground. However, the pattern of Mary's destiny, as defined in MD, does not explicitly conform to the christological pattern of death and resurrection.

In connection with meaning 3 of 'consonant with' there is a tendency for MGHC to interpret the biblical evidence in a tendentious way. This is not to say that its interpretations are necessarily wrong, but that the biblical material can, quite legitimately, be interpreted in other ways.

Chapter 3

Mary in context: a historical methodological reflection

Charlotte Methuen ¹

The Introduction to *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*² comments that “the freedom to respond in fresh ways in the face of new challenges is what enables the Church to be faithful to the Tradition which it carries forward” (§3). This important recognition of the way in which Tradition is shaped by its context raises an interesting historiographical question regarding the contents of the report, which the report itself neither reflects nor answers. That is: to what extent have doctrines and teachings about Mary *themselves* represented a “response in fresh ways in the face of new challenges”? Or, to turn the question around, to what extent do those doctrines represent a response to the challenges – that is, to the interests and concerns – of a given context? The document virtually ignores the dynamic relationship between doctrine and context and does not explore the consequent inter-relationship between Marian doctrine and the context of that doctrine, which include not only the Church’s own theological and ecclesiological priorities, but also contemporary biological knowledge and theories of womanhood. In this sense the report fails to respond to the methodological challenge which it seems in the introduction to set itself. Clearly this is a vast topic; this brief paper will focus on seeking to contextualise teachings about Mary before the Council of Chalcedon (461), and in particular on the development of the doctrine of perpetual virginity, by examining theological statements about Mary against the background of biological theories, understandings of sexuality, and ideals of femininity and womanhood.

The earliest Christian centuries displayed what many scholars have seen as a remarkable lack of interest in Mary, although this judgement seems partly incorrect. Interest is shown in Mary during the earliest Christian centuries that diverges from later received doctrine to an extent that scholars (particularly those from a Catholic background) often find startling.³ As the ARCIC report notes, reflection on Mary occurred primarily in the context of Christological controversies (§31), in recognition of the fact that statements about Christ both the humanity and the divinity of Christ required related statements to be made about Mary.⁴ In particular, Christ’s humanity was seen to derive from his birth from a human mother and Mary’s humanness was

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² The Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission [ARCIC], *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ – An Agreed Statement* (Morehouse: Harrisburg/London 2005).

³ See, for instance, the comments on Tertullian’s views on Mary in Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, vol 1: *From the Beginnings until the Eve of the Reformation* (Sheed & Ward: London/New York 1963), esp. p. 43, and in Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco 1999), p. 66.

⁴ However, the suggestion that “reflection on Mary served to interpret and *safeguard* Apostolic Tradition centred on Jesus Christ” [*Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, §31, my italics] makes an assumption about an integrity of “Apostolic Tradition” which is difficult to defend from the sources.

thus cited as a demonstrate Christ's full humanity against those who held Docetic or Gnostic views (§32). Similarly, Mary's virginal conception is cited to prove Christ's full and perpetual divinity, in opposition to Adoptionist teachings which suggested that the Spirit came over Jesus at his baptism (§33). Thus for Ignatius, Christ's human birth and his suffering at passion are proof of his true humanity, while his being born of a virgin and his resurrection show his divinity.⁵

The conviction that Christ's physical human body comes to him from Mary is central to those theologians of the first two centuries who oppose Docetic and Gnostic teachings denying Christ's true humanity and suggesting, like Marcion, that his human appearance was rather a shadow or a phantasm (*umbra, phantasma, corpulentia putativa*).⁶ This explanation of Christ's human nature is rooted in contemporary biological theory, which saw the process of conception as involving the implantation by the man of an active, intellectual principle in the woman, who in turn provided the material through which this principle could take shape. Aristotle affirmed that, the male principle contained the efficient cause of generation, and the female "the material of it."⁷ For Aristotle, this was a fundamental characteristic of the distinction between male and the female:

The female provides the material, the male that which fashions it, for this is the power we say they each possess, and this is what it is for them to be male and female. [...] While the body is from the female, it is the soul that s from the male.⁸

For Aristotle, "being male *meant* [having] the capacity to supply the sensitive soul without which ... the body was no better than a corpse or part of a corpse."⁹ The woman's womb was understood to be similar in function to the earth into which a seed was planted. In the case of Jesus, the active principle or "sensitive soul" of Aristotle's biological system was supplied by God rather than a male human being, but the female was nonetheless necessary if the divine principle was to take human, material shape. The association of the male with the intellectual, active principle and the identification of the female with the material made the woman the supplier of the fruitful ground in which a foetus might take shape, but at the same time made her potentially the corrupter of the pure intellectual principle through its association with matter and the material. These biological and philosophical conceptions of gender remained influential on biological – and also on social – conceptions of relationships between men and women until the decline of Aristotelianism medicine in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁰

A second important aspect was that of Mary's experience of conception. Marina Warner points to the concern of early Christian writers to distinguish between the

⁵ Walter Delius, *Die Geschichte der Marienverehrung* (Ernst Reinhardt Verlag: Munich/Basel 1963), pp. 36-37.

⁶ Delius, *Marienverehrung*, p. 40.

⁷ Aristotle, *De generatione animalium*, 2.716.a5-7. See also Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA / London: Harvard University Press 1990), p. 30.

⁸ Aristotle, *De generatione animalium*, 2.4.738b20-23.

⁹ Laqueur, *Making Sex*, p. 30.

¹⁰ As discussed in Laqueur, *Making Sex*.

conception of Christ and that of Apollo or Bacchus, both fathered by gods. Justin Martyr emphasised that Mary's conception through the Holy Spirit was not a voluptuous wooing as in many classical stories of rampant gods begetting half-divine and half-human offspring, but a process which left Mary physically virgin and untouched.¹¹ For Irenaeus and for Origen, the virginal conception was the key to grasping that the birth of Jesus was miraculous, and not of nature;¹² here Origen was explicitly opposing the views of the Gnostic Celsus.¹³ For Origen, who believed that parthogenesis existed in the natural world, "the Creator has shown, by the generation of several kinds of animals, that what He has done in the instance of one animal, He could do, if it pleased Him, in that of others, and also of man himself."¹⁴ Origen regarded these parallels with the natural world as he understood it, and indeed with birth stories in Greek mythology, as a useful rhetorical means to convince opponents of the virgin birth. He himself maintained that Christ's conception was not natural but a miracle, arguing that those who contest the virgin birth, "invent these stories to overturn his miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit."¹⁵ Marina Warner suggest that he "intended perhaps to make a characteristic Alexandrian point, about the conception of wisdom in the soul by the power of the spirit;" however, in the middle ages it increasingly came to be argued that Mary had conceived though her ear, thus preserving her physical virginity from even a spiritual assault.¹⁶

The virginal conception offered a counter to Adoptionist arguments, and for this reason and on the basis of the biblical witness there was considerable consensus amongst those early Christian theologians who affirmed the humanity of Christ that Mary had conceived without losing her physical virginity. However, in the first four centuries there is no consensus about the virgin birth.¹⁷ The idea that Mary's body and womb were not changed by her pregnancy and birth of Jesus is found in the Gnostic *Ascension of Isaiah*,¹⁸ and in the teachings of the followers of Valentinian, who asserted that "Christ passed through the virgin like water through a pipe."¹⁹ This was regarded by many as heretical. Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius all pointed out that scripture portrayed Christ as having been *ek Marias* (of or from Mary) and not *dia Marias* (passing through Mary), and are clear that the virginal conception does

¹¹ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Picador: London 1990), pp. 35-36.

¹² Delius, *Marienverehrung*, p. 60.

¹³ See particularly Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I, 32-40; compare Delius, *Marienverehrung*, 72.

¹⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1, 37; compare Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 36.

¹⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1, 32.

¹⁶ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁷ Mystifyingly, the ARCIC document does not even mention the question of the virgin birth, which is a central question not only for the early church but for subsequent doctrines of Mary, and reveals much about contemporary assumptions regarding not only femaleness and femininity but also physical existence.

¹⁸ Delius, *Marienverehrung*, p. 39.

¹⁹ Delius, *Marienverehrung*, pp. 40-41. The report notes that teachings about Jesus' birth from Mary was intended to counter this understanding ("nor when he was born did he simply 'pass through' his mother"; §32), but is silent on its later adoption.

not imply the virgin birth.²⁰ Tertullian's reasons for this say much about his understanding of virginity and its relations to ideal womanhood. Mary, he says, is:

a virgin as because she abstained from man; non-virgin because she gave birth [...] Virgin when she conceived, she became a wife when she gave birth ... who really opened her maternal womb, if not the one who opened the womb that had been closed? Normally, conjugal relations open the womb. Therefore her womb was all the more opened, since it has been more closed. Consequently it is more accurate to call her non-virgin, than virgin.²¹

Tertullian cites Galatians 4.4 (which affirms that Christ was born of a woman) as evidence that Mary the opening of Mary's womb in birth "meant that she was somehow married", that is, that she had acquired the status of a married woman.²² Moreover, from the accounts of Jesus' encounter with his mother and brothers, Tertullian concludes that after the birth of Jesus, Mary had married and borne further children, making Christ her first-born (*primogenitus*), rather than her only son (*unigenitus*):

She was a virgin who gave birth to Christ, but after her birth she was married to one man, so that both ideals [i.e. virginity and marriage – CM] might be exemplified in the parentage of Christ, in the person of a mother who was both virgin and married to one husband only [*univira*].²³

As *virgo* and *univira*, Mary exemplifies Tertullian's ideal for the women of his church: from a state of untouched virginity, they should either continue as consecrated virgins, or marry once and once only. Additionally, Tertullian suggests that in bearing Christ Mary's role is analogous to that of the still virgin earth from which Adam was born (*virgo erat adhuc terra*).²⁴ For Tertullian, the virgin conception does not necessarily imply Mary's perpetual virginity. Nor does he see Mary as anything other than a sinful human being: she is not always to be numbered amongst her son's followers, and may even be compared to the unbelieving synagogue, rejected by Christ when he "transferred the blessedness of the womb and breasts of his mother to his disciples."²⁵ Tertullian then affirms the virginity of Mary as virgin, whilst at the same time celebrating her as the pattern of human motherhood and of married life, and a woman who needs redemption like all the rest of humankind.

Like Tertullian, Origen argued for Mary's sinfulness: at the very least, Mary must have been scandalised at the passion, for otherwise Jesus would not have died for her sins as well as those of all of humankind.²⁶ Her "lowliness" is marked by her sense of

²⁰ Ignatius and Justin, writing prior to this discussion, used *dia Marias*, but took *dia* in the instrumental sense of "by means of" [Delius, *Marienverehrung*, pp. 40-41].

²¹ Tertullian, *De carne Christi*, 23.1-5:

²² Delius, *Marienverehrung*, pp. 63-64.

²³ Tertullian, *De monogamia*, 8.2.

²⁴ Delius, *Marienverehrung*, p. 64.

²⁵ Tertullian, *De carne Christi*, 8.7.

²⁶ Graef, *Mary*, p. 44.

justice, reasonableness, courage, wisdom, and humility, but she is not perfect.²⁷ Origen also takes a similar view to that of Tertullian in as much that he remarks that it is Mary's role as virgin-mother (*virgo mater*) which is the true sign of Christ's humanness. Nonetheless, he asserts that the virgin's motherhood does not imply that Mary bore her son like every other woman.²⁸ Origen thus asserts not only the virgin conception, but also the virgin birth. Mary's continuing virginity makes her a model and pattern for female virgins:

I consider it to be in conformity with reason that, with regard to the purity which consists in chastity, Jesus was the first among men, while Mary was first among women.²⁹

These interests seem to be reflected in his view of Mary, for argues elsewhere that:

every incorrupt and virgin soul, having conceived by the Holy Spirit in order to give to the will of the Father, is a mother of Jesus.³⁰

Virginity for both men and women is an important ideal for Origen in a way that it is not for Tertullian, for his Platonism means that he tends to regard the material and bodily as corrupt. Virginity and chastity are ways of overcoming that corruption.

It is notable also that those who did not regard virginity as an ideal towards which women should strive also did not cite Mary as the pattern of virginity, as seen in the case of Pseudo-Clement, who affirms Mary's virginity because it makes *Christ* the pattern of virginity; Pseudo-Clement includes only men in his list of great virgins, and Mary is conspicuous by her absence.³¹ In contrast, Clement of Alexandria, like Origen, teaches that Mary after the birth of her son was found "not to be in the state of a woman who has given birth."³² At the same time, there is some ambiguity here, for he asserts that Mary is "a woman in childbed because of her birth of the child, yet not a woman in childbed."³³ Mary is virgin and mother, but as model for the Church she is not a true mother, for it is not she but Christ who provides nourishment: "Virgin Mother, whom I love to call the Church. Alone this mother had no milk, because she alone did not become a woman."³⁴ She remains virgin, just as the Scriptures remain "virgin" in giving birth to the truth.³⁵ Virginity for Clement is spiritualised, representing an expression of Mary's obedience to God's will and her submission to God's command; it marks her chastity, and emphasises that she is left untouched in the essence of her obedience.

²⁷ Delius, *Marienverehrung*, pp. 72-74.

²⁸ Delius, *Marienverehrung*, pp. 72-73, and compare Gambero, *Mary*, pp. 75-76.

²⁹ Origen, *Origen, Commentary on Matthew* 10, 17; compare Gambero, *Mary*, 76.

³⁰ Origen, *Fragments on Matthew* 281, cited by Gambero, *Mary*, 76.

³¹ Pseudo-Clement, *De virginibus*, cited by Delius, *Marienverehrung*, p. 75.

³² Clement, *Stromata*, 7.16.

³³ Clement, *Stromata*, 7.16.

³⁴ Clement, *Paedagogus*, 1, 6, and compare Delius, *Marienverehrung*, p. 67. Clement's image seems to be a play on the biological understanding that breast milk and menstrual blood were two forms of the same fluid.

³⁵ Clement, *Stromata*, 7.16.

Clement is building here on the recapitulation theory of Irenaeus, who taught that Mary's obedience cancelled out Eve's disobedience, contributing to the breaking through and redemption of the cycle of history. For Irenaeus Mary contributes to the work of salvation; she through her obedience she shows herself to be *cooperans dispositioni*.³⁶ The focus on the obedience of Mary to God's will highlights the increasingly important understanding of Mary as *mediatrix*, the human sister who makes it possible for sinful, temporal humankind to know and acknowledge the eternal father in heaven. Athanasius writes against the Arians that the Logos, eternally created:

is born in time amongst us from the virgin, the theotokos, that those born here below might be born above, out of time, that is, from God. He has only a mother on earth, and we have only a father in heaven. And so he calls himself Son of Man, that people can call God Father in Heaven.³⁷

Mary becomes the *mediatrix* of salvation as the type of obedience against disobedient Eve. There is a complex interaction here between teachings about Mary's obedience to God and the view that obedience and submissiveness should govern the behaviour of all women.

It has been seen that views of Mary had from the beginning been closely related to discussions about the nature of Christ. When the Christological debates shifted from a concern to defend the humanity of Christ to a need to emphasise Christ's true and pre-existent divinity against the teachings of the Arians that Christ had been created by the Father this too had consequences for Mary. She must be affirmed to be the bearer of God, not *christotokos* but *theotokos*, a term which despite its use by Arians, allowed Christ to be confessed to be of one substance with the father (*homoousios*, rather than *homoiousios*) and which also made it possible to hold together his status as the "first-born" son of Mary (*primotokos*) and the "only-born" Son of God (*monogenes*).³⁸

At the same time, the Christian ideal of virginity was beginning to shape the wider life of the Church. It is notable that the theologians of the earliest Christian centuries, faced with the challenge of Gnostic and Docetic understandings of the corrupt nature of the material, were in general less positive about the ideal of virginity than were their successors in the fourth and fifth centuries. The development of the Christian ideal of virginity has been chronicled by Peter Brown and others.³⁹ It can be understood in part in terms of a response to the Church's status and the consequent removal of the threat of martyrdom, which was supported by a rise in the influence of neo-Platonism and its associated ascetic lifestyle, particularly within Latin Christianity. The ascetic ideal of Neo-Platonism held exemplified a conviction of the corrupting influence of the material, and especially of human flesh which came close

³⁶ Delius, *Marienverehrung*, p. 66.

³⁷ Athanasius, *de incarn. Dei verbi et contra Arianos*; compare Delius, *Marienverehrung*, 86.

³⁸ Delius, *Marienverehrung*, p. 83. On the term *theotokos*, see David Wright, "From 'God-Bearer' to 'Mother of God'," in: R. N: Swanson (ed.), *The Church and Mary* (Studies in Church History 39; Boydell and Brewer: Woodbridge 2004), pp. 22-30. Wright points to the problematic rendering of *theotokos* as Mother of God. The Greek term has generally been rendered into Latin as *Dei genatrix*, strangely retranslated as *Dei para* in the ARCIC report (§34).

³⁹ See for instance Peter Brown, *Body and Society*.

to the Gnostic or Docetic views which had been rejected in the second century. It rendered attractive the theories of virgin birth which had seemed so problematic to Tertullian and others of his era. Under its influence, Mary had to be shown to be pure, uncorrupted by her own femaleness and thus unable to corrupt Christ.

Associated with the rise of the ideal of virginity came new developments in the understanding of the nature of original sin which associated it with the lack of control experienced in sexual intercourse. These also influenced views of Mary, and in particular demanded an explanation of her sinlessness and freedom from original sin, in order that Christ might also be sinless. Peter Brown has observed that Ambrose of Milan was convinced of the “sullyng nature of intercourse and birth”; the virgin birth was necessary to preserve Christ from the taint of sin, and through the preserving of her virginity, Mary was preserved also from the taint of admixture with the world, her body a hall of chastity, *aula pudoris*. For Ambrose, the virgin state of Mary’s womb stood for “all that was unbroken and sacred in the world,”⁴⁰ and thus for the ideal state of the Church. For women, consecrated virginity was the only way to enter into that ideal.⁴¹ This had practical consequences: “To follow Mary, the *aula pudoris*, was to adopt a state of perpetual, irrevocable virginity. ... With the formal consecration of each virgin, a portion of the wealth of each family found itself frozen, with similar sacralized perpetuity, in the treasuries of the Catholic Church.”⁴² Virginity was coming to be of financial advantage to the church, and the developing doctrines and cult of Mary played a not insignificant role in ensuring the success of this development.

Averil Cameron has argued convincingly that the constellation of the heated Christological debates and the ideal of virginity were the main factors contributing to the growth of the cult of the Virgin after Chalcedon.⁴³ In this context it can be observed that appeal is increasingly being made to works which in earlier centuries had been regarded at least as problematic if not as heretical. Thus the primary source for the perpetual virginity of Mary, not only at conception but during and after the birth of Jesus (*ante, in and post partum*), was the *Protevangelium of James* (probably ca. 150 CE). This apocryphal writing is also the source of much of the information about Mary which shaped later devotion and medieval tradition, including details of her childhood and the names of her parents, Anne and Joachim. Discussing the birth of Christ, the *Protevangelium* recounts how the hand of Salome, the “unbelieving midwife”, withered when she dared to examine Mary *post partum* to discover whether she was still physically virgin. The *Protevangelium* is also the source of the tradition that Mary had been set apart in the temple as a child, never being exposed to the corruptions of the world. Probably a writing of Gnostic origin, it became extremely influential in the context of the rise of ascetic Christianity and the ideal of virginity during the fourth and fifth centuries.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Brown, *Body and Society*, pp. 353-354.

⁴¹ Brown, *Body and Society*, pp. 355-356.

⁴² Brown, *Body and Society*, p. 356.

⁴³ Averil Cameron, “The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth-Making,” in: *The Church and Mary*, pp. 1-21.

⁴⁴ This is true also of other writings generally regarded as having Gnostic origins, such as the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, which privilege a life of virginity, often expressed through ascetic,

It has been seen that even a brief survey of the development of doctrines about Mary and her virginity in the earliest Christian centuries indicates the extent to which these are bound up with biological theory and cultural understandings. Teachings about Mary do indeed represent a theological response to the challenges posed by the theological context of the time. These doctrines are rooted in particular assumptions about female human nature, the physical processes of birth, and ideals of femininity, and it is these which have made much of the Church's teaching about Mary deeply problematic for women. These assumptions are to some extent exemplified by Jerome, who, although an avid advocate of virginity, was not an believer in Mary's post partum virginity for reasons which were quite explicitly related to his distaste for physical humanity:

If every day the hands of God form babies in their mothers' wombs, why blush to think that Mary, after the birth of Jesus, became a real wife? If they find this disgraceful, then they should not believe that God was born by passing through the genital organs of a virgin. According to their view, this would be more shameful than believing that a virgin was joined to her husband after the birth of her child.

Now add, if you will, the other humiliations of nature: the womb growing larger for nine months, the nausea, the birth, the blood, the swaddling clothes. Picture to yourself the baby wrapped in the usual protective membranes. Do not omit the uncomfortable manger, the crying of the child, the circumcision on the eighth day, the time of purification for declaring pure that which had been impure. We do not blush; we are not silent about these matters. The greater the humiliations he suffered for me, the greater my debt to him.⁴⁵

The physical experience of birth as a demonstration of the humiliation of becoming human: a far cry from Tertullian's affirmation of the role of the Roman *matrona*. At the same time it was biblical knowledge of Jerome and his circle of (often women) exegetes which gave rise to much of the allegorical mariological exegesis of the Old Testament.⁴⁶

Understandings of Mary do indeed show evidence of being responses to the challenges that faced the church down the ages: responses which are inevitably couched according to the knowledge and interests of the time. Late-antique and medieval writings by women demonstrate, however, that these responses in their turn offered a challenge to women, and that they too took up the challenge. These writings abound in images associating virginity with fruitfulness and emphasising the motherhood of Mary. Hildegard of Bingen praises Mary as the soil in which the Saviour could grow, describing of Mary as *virga vividissima*, the life-giving virgin, of *integra viriditas*, the source of all fruitfulness, and as *virgo mater*, source and seat of wisdom.⁴⁷ For Gertrud the Great, Mary is the *mediatrix* of the *mediator*, the priest

chaste marriage. See, especially for the AAA, but also for the use of other Gnostic writings, Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, and for the Protoevangelium, Delius, *Marienverehrung*, pp. 90-91.

⁴⁵ Jerome, *De virginitate perpetua*, 19.

⁴⁶ Almost all the Old Testament section of the ARCIC report derives from the work of Jerome and his circle.

⁴⁷ "Hildegard of Bingen," in: *Marienlexikon*, vol 3, p. 192-193.

who offers the body of Christ to the world.⁴⁸ The teaching of the bodily assumption of Mary which emerged in the thirteenth century largely as a result of the visions of Elizabeth of Schönau, affirmed Mary's corporeal nature both on earth and in heaven, at a time when the theology of the Church was threatened by ascetic Cathar dualism: "can one imagine a more robust challenge to this kind of belief than Mary, glorified in soul *and body* by her assumption?"⁴⁹ There are rich traditions here which are silenced by the bland historical presentation of the ARCIC document. Its historical treatment obscures a complex web of influences and interests, and it serves also to silence a strong tradition of Marian doctrine which could enrich the lives of both our churches if it were better known.

⁴⁸ "Gertrud die Große," in: *Marienlexikon*, vol 2, p. 629.

⁴⁹ Henry Mayr-Harting, "The Idea of the Assumption of Mary in the West, 800-1200," in: *The Church and Mary*, pp. 86-111, esp. pp. 108-110; quotation p. 109.

Chapter 4

The Place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Context of the Doctrine of the Incarnation

Thomas Seville CR¹

The teaching that Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh is central to orthodox Christianity: the second Person of the Trinity has become human and that the same Jesus Christ is born of the Virgin Mary. It is a twofold teaching, that Jesus Christ is born of a Virgin and that the same is the One who is eternally born of the Father. This has been the teaching of the Church of England and put in classical form in the second of her Articles:

Of the Word or Son of God, which was made very Man the Son, which is the Word of the Father, begotten from everlasting of the Father, the very and eternal God, and of one substance with the Father, took Man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin, of her substance: so that two whole and perfect Natures, that is to say, the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one Person, never to be divided, whereof is one Christ, very God, and very Man; who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile His Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men².

The Article echoes the definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451) and the common patrimony of the Western and indeed Eastern Church, and goes on to include in the teaching of the Incarnation the reconciliation of humanity to God by means of the passion of Christ, construed in terms of the sacrifice made by the One born of Mary, for sin. The last is distinctively western in its reference to original guilt but with respect to the incarnation and its salvific import, the article says nothing that would have not been affirmed with one heart by the whole Church.

Leaving aside the details of the last part of the article, I wish to examine the role of the Virgin Mary in the Incarnation. She is not an optional extra and I infer that a Christian faith without her is seriously deficient in doing justice to the twofold birth. I begin with a summary introduction of the formation of the teaching about Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, before a piece of dogmatics and then some observations concerning later developments. I do not touch exegetical questions and there is little scriptural statement or discussion, but that would find its place in a fuller and more extensive treatment. Neither do I treat of the question whether it is appropriate to test later statements about the Mother of God simply by direct reference to the literal sense of scripture, rather than by referring to the divine economy of the Word who is incarnate as well as written. A second section takes up issues which are

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² *The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England* (1562).

directly related to the truth of the Virgin-born and which it was the remit of ARCIC II to discuss and which the commission does in *Mary –Grace and Hope*.³

Historical Theology

There is not the space to give an account of the formation of teaching concerning the Virgin Mary and the Virgin Born. Fortunately there are good introductions to the role of Mary in historical theology.⁴ From Ignatius (c. 35 – c.107) and from Justin (c.100 – c.165) onwards, that Jesus Christ is conceived of the virgin is a fundamental part of the faith. In the earliest centuries this is affirmed against those whose interpretation of Jesus fails to do justice to his being a human being. He is truly *born*, but from the fourth century onwards the emphasis shifts to defending his full divinity. It is not until the fifth century, after the basic lines of Christological orthodoxy have established (though not universally shared or agreed), that the mystery of Mary begins to be treated in depth. Although, indeed there is much devotion to the Virgin Mary, praise, reverence and the like, it is some time, perhaps after the Council of Ephesus (431) or even later, that one can speak of there being a devotion to or proper cult of the Virgin Mary⁵.

It is certain that the decision of the Council of Ephesus to teach that the Virgin Mary is *theotokos* arises from the dispute concerning the Christology of Nestorius, and in defence of the unity of the One who is born of her. Further precision is given to this in the Christological definition of Chalcedon. Although Chalcedon was unable to settle matters Christological, that the Virgin Mary is *theotokos* is common to those who accept the Council and to those who find it unsatisfactory, those misleadingly entitled Monophysite.

The dogma of the Incarnation

In many parts of the Church, both Protestant and Catholic, Orthodox and Oriental, devotion to the Mother of God has developed and to varying degrees. Some have doubted whether this is compatible with the truth of the Incarnation. The warnings of the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) in this regard are famous. For him any independent role for Mary is due to the alleged Catholic misunderstanding of grace and its concern for some easy point of connection between humanity and the

³ *The Malta Report* 1968 Paragraph 20; *Authority in the Church II*, paragraph 30 in *The Final Report*, London: CTS/SPCK, 1982, pp. 95-96. It is strange that *Mary Grace and Hope* has been criticised for focussing on the two Marian dogmas when that was the task it was given to do.

⁴ Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: the Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, San Francisco, 1999, and Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, Yale, 1998, are among the least inadequate surveys.

⁵ See Averil Cameron, *The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth-Making*, in R.N. Swanson, ed., *The Church and Mary (Studies in Church History, Vol 39)*, Ecclesiastical History Society, Woodbridge, 2004, pp. 1-21; *Marian Piety and the Nestorian Controversy*, *ibid.*, pp. 31-38; Emmanuel Lanne OSB, 'Marian doctrine and piety up to the Council of Chalcedon: the Fathers and the liturgy', in *Studying Mary: Reflections on the Virgin Mary in Anglican and Roman Catholic Devotion*, ed. Adelbert Denaux and Nicholas Sagovsky, T and T Clark, London, 2007, pp. 36-59. For a different view, see Ignatius Calabuig OSM, 'Liturgical Cult of Mary in East and West' in *Handbook of Liturgical Studies*, Vol V, ed. Anscar Chupungco, Liturgical Press/Pueblo, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2000, pp. 219-97.

God of Jesus Christ, the ‘analogy of being’ (*analogia entis*), in Barth’s terms⁶. Karl Barth was an eloquent defender of the virginal conception of Jesus Christ.

It is an inalienable part of the orthodox teaching of the Incarnation that the woman who gives birth to Jesus Christ is entitled *theotokos*, God-bearer. Being *theotokos* guarantees the unity and identity of the person of the Incarnate Word. Statements about Mary have therefore Christological import and indeed derive from both the truth and the reality that she guarantees. It is to the credit of the authors of the ARCIC report that the account of controverted teachings is related⁷ properly to the mystery of the incarnation.

The teaching about Christ that the Virgin Mary is truly *theotokos*, the Mother of God is foundational to the classical teaching concerning Jesus Christ, that he is Word made flesh. Indeed it is equally the guarantee of the humanity and the divinity of the Incarnate Word. There is no change or renunciation of the Word being divine, nor is the humanity qualified as in some way less than essentially human. The Word, the Son assumes what he is not, remaining who he is, and ‘becomes’ what he is not.

Twofold generation

The eternal generation of the Son in eternity is in one respect paralleled by that of the Son born of Mary in time⁸. The Incarnate Word is eternally ‘generated’ of the Father and is born of the Virgin; these two mysteries are distinct and inseparable. The One who is eternally of the Father is throughout the life of Jesus, from the moment of his origin to his death, the same as this Jesus. There is nothing in this story, this life, this centre of a web of human relations that does not have the same Son as its subject. This means that it is not correct to push the parallel to extremes; parallel lines do not intersect and in the Christian dispensation Mary is that place where the lines do. Mary is the place or person where God and humanity become wondrously and uniquely one. This has been put in terms slightly different from classical ones by the present Archbishop of Canterbury:

..we believe in a God whose eternal being is constituted by the relation of three distinct and interdependent subsistent realities (a bit misleadingly called ‘persons’ for short); that one of these realities, one moment or dimension of the eternal relation, is embodied as completely as possible in the entire human life of Jesus of Nazareth, so that the way the eternal ‘person’ relates to its source is exactly the way the earthly Jesus relates to this source (as Son to Father or, more abstractly, as mind itself to active intelligence, or more metaphorically, as stream to spring)..

⁶ Barth may have understood well the exaggerated statements of some Mariologists, but whether he understood correctly Catholic teaching on this matter, as on the *analogia entis*, is far from certain. See Andrew Louth, *Mary and the mystery of the incarnation: A paper given to the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Oxford on 25 October 1976 under the title "Karl Barth and the problem of Mariology"*, SLG Press, 2002, and Bernard Sesboué, *La doctrine de l'immaculée conception dans la dialogue œcuménique (Groupe des Dombes et Accord Luthéro-Catholique de 1999)* in ‘Il dogma dell’immacolata concezione di Maria: Problemi attuali e tentativi di ricompressione. Atti de XIV Simposio Internazionale Mariologico (Romas 7-10 Ottobre, 2003)’, ed. Ermanno M. Toniolo Edizioni “Marianum”, Rome, 2004, pp. 395-414, 396-401.

⁷ *Mary Grace and Hope*, paras 31-34.

⁸ This becomes a common place in the Patristic era.

His Grace goes on to speak of the Holy Spirit and the work of salvation:

...and that through this embodiment of the eternal Son or Word, the third 'moment' in the divine life becomes newly active in the world, bringing to life in those who unite themselves to Jesus Christ a relation like his to his divine source, so that we took in dependence upon him, can pray, 'Abba, Father'.⁹

Put directly, the incarnation is the projection in space and time, in our contingency and in our messy finitude, of the eternal Procession of the Son from the Father, so that the human race might be saved. This same Son, by whom all is made is the one who is conceived of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit.

Such a nurture and origin is not an overcoming or denial of humanity, but is understood by Christians as a raising up of the human faculties. There is the anxiety that the language of virgin birth does not do justice to this, especially if the virginal conception is treated primarily as a miracle or as a spectacular incidence of parthenogenesis or a divine freak. This anxiety comes from an honourable motive, namely to defend the humanity of Jesus Christ. Yet it may be argued that this fear arises more from a failure to question the assumptions about fact, reality and value which have shaped post-Enlightenment consciousness and are not the horizon against which the classical teaching is best interpreted.

Person and hypostasis

In the above quotation Rowan Williams hints at the problem posed by the language of person in Trinitarian theology. Because of the risk of suggesting that God is 'three people', some theologians have doubted whether the use of 'person' can be continued with without being systematically misleading.¹⁰

In classical Christology there is no less a problem for it has been no part of orthodox belief that Jesus Christ is a human 'person.' To modern ears this seems to undermine the full humanity of Jesus Christ, yet this is not what the classical language means. In this context, person (*persona*) does not mean what is commonly meant by person; for this later theology would use the term *individuum* (individual). Jesus Christ is a human individual; in the common sense view of the person on the Docklands Light Railway, he is a person. There are obviously problems in talking of Jesus as being both a human 'person' and a divine 'person' (this smacks of the heresy known as Nestorianism), for this would threaten the unity in the divine subject of the Incarnation, which the orthodox deployment of the language of 'person' has always sought to maintain.¹¹ The East has had arguably less of a problem in this respect for the word used of the Person of Jesus Christ is a Greek term, *hypostasis*, in the case of Jesus Christ, the divine *hypostasis* of the Son. That Jesus Christ is properly a divine 'person', the Son of God made flesh, secures the answer to the question 'who is this?' and avoids the reduction of the things about Jesus of Nazareth to states of affairs

⁹ "The Seal of Orthodoxy": Mary and the Heart of Christian Doctrine', in *Say Yes to God: Mary and the Revealing of the Word made Flesh*, ed. Martin Warner, London, 1999, pp. 15-32, at pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ Famously, Karl Rahner and Karl Barth.

¹¹ See Douglas Farrow, 'Person and Nature: The Necessity-Freedom Dialectic in John Zizioulas', in Douglas H Knight, Demetrios Bathrellos, eds, *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church*, Ashgate, 2007, pp. 109-123, esp. p. 114.

with an extrinsic relation to God.¹² None of the classical terms translate easily into modern equivalents, but it is essential to orthodox belief that Jesus Christ is wholly human and that the subject of this life is not a human individual but the Son.¹³ It is the *hypostasis* of the Son, the Word, which makes Jesus Christ who he is. Put simply, there is nothing in this life which is not wholly the energy or act of God. Here is the freedom, the grace, the gift, the act of God expressed in terms, deeds and signs that are wholly human. Jesus Christ is a person among persons.

This has always been difficult to express. There is always a risk of sounding as if the humanity of Christ is not utterly human, or as if he is not fully divine. This has been a constant challenge to the Church since the first century. Yet it is a matter of the Christian task to try to do this and to seek to make apparent that what we are dealing with in Jesus Christ, is also the result of human interactions and practices, but also the Incarnation of the Son of God.

The virginal conception marks not simply a radical new beginning but also a beginning that is divine, the absolute and unconditioned priority of divine initiative. The One born is not an old Adam, but the new Adam, yet born to one who is herself of the old Adam in need of salvation. The nature common to Adam comes from her. He is also the beginning of a re-creation – a new creation to use the Pauline term – and so he is the first born of many sons and daughters. The Blessed Virgin Mary is the one from whom this One is born, on whom he is dependent for his humanity. Here, there is something that is as utterly of God as it is conceivable to be, true God of true God, the result of God the Holy Spirit overshadowing the Virgin Mary and her response.

If the unity of divinity and humanity is not to be compromised, then Christians can only be thankful for a mystery that is divine, that Mary is the Mother of the Incarnate Son, the One both human and divine. She is the *theotokos*, Mother of God, and *Mary – Grace and Hope* expresses the orthodox view.¹⁴ Although some have wondered about alternative translations of *theotokos*, there seem to be few good reasons and many bad for avoiding the *personal* reality which is expressed in the term shared by orthodox Christianity: Mother of God. It is important to note that it does not mean ‘Mother of the Trinity’! The incarnation is a matter of personal and relational realities before it is a matter of ideas or principles and there is a serious risk with the phrase ‘God-bearer’ of the personal being turned into something abstract or of a gap being introduced between the humanity of Christ and that of the Virgin. That would be far from the intent of Christian teaching. There is the question of how to express the quality of being *theotokos* of God and there is no readily or commonly used phrase which is shared by all Christians; the phrase ‘divine maternity’ is common among Roman Catholic writers and the Divine Motherhood is preferred by Orthodox. Unfortunately, it is not a phrase familiar to Anglicans and can sound as though Mary was being described as divine!

¹² For much of this I am indebted to Robert Spaemann, ‘Persons: The Difference between “Someone” and “Somewhat”’, *Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics*, OUP, 2006, esp. pp. 27-8. Thanks are due to the translator of this volume, the Reverend Professor Oliver O’Donovan, for reference to this work.

¹³ This can be put alternatively by saying, as neo-Thomists like Albert Patfoort would put it, that the divine being (*esse*) is the act by which this humanity is. In *L’unité d’être dans le Christ d’après saint Thomas*, Desclée, Paris 1964.

¹⁴ Para. 34.

Mary is chosen to be *theotokos*, Mother of God, enabled to be so through a grace given to her by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of an angel. In terms of the election, of God's plan of salvation, his foreknowledge and promotion, she is elected to divine maternity, statements about her election being consequences of the election and predestination of her Son.¹⁵ If the Son is truly incarnate and this belongs to his predestination from eternity then it is necessary to relate the role of his Mother to this.

She is truly a daughter of Israel; she gives her response to the annunciation of grace, she receives favour to respond and to bear the Son, she who has already been favoured and continues to be so (the meaning of the perfect passive, *kecharitomene* at Luke 1.28). She freely responds in faith to what is promised to her, enabling that which far exceeds the human grasp to begin to become real, human and divine, in her mind, in her body and in her life. No less than the gift, her response is free, a grace wholly unmerited.

However, this is a free and graced response to God, to the Word to become flesh and all that this involves. Although it has been argued that she could have said to the archangel 'no, not today,'¹⁶ that her freedom is here a freedom of indifference, I doubt whether this is consistent either with the biblical text or with the treatment of the Virgin Mary in the tradition. She has a full freedom and that is under grace a freedom of spontaneity, not of indifference.

This in no way devalues the worth or as some would say, the merit, of her response. The response to the annunciation is properly and fully free because it is of spontaneity and not of choice. To speculate what Mary might have done had she other ideas is to misread both the tradition and to misread the context of the Lucan text.

The reality of the Motherhood extends beyond a consideration of the life of Mother and child. The importance of the Virgin Mary lies in being the Mother of Jesus Christ, *theotokos*, not in being a superlative mother.¹⁷ Being *theotokos* does not cease with the passing of Jesus from the scene, for that entails a reduction of the humanity assumed by the Word to something past, a matter of memory, rather than one that is related to the living and ascended Jesus Christ. She remains *theotokos*.

The tradition came to extend the maternity of Mary to those who were adopted sons and daughters of her Son. Just as she conceived and gave birth as a virgin, so she gives birth by the Spirit to the disciples of her Son, and therefore of the Church. Mary has been seen as a symbol of the Church ('ecclesiotypic') as well as of individual believers ('christotypic'). It is common to oppose these views, but it is to be doubted whether choosing one to the neglect of the other can ever do justice to her being *theotokos*, for the one issues in the other. Although the ecclesiotypic view also derives from the Incarnation, there is a risk to be avoided here, namely of replacing a person by a symbol.¹⁸

¹⁵ On this see Gabriele Roschini, *De Predestinazione Mariae* in *Marianum* I (1938), pp. 28-85. The theme of the election of Mary in relation to Christ is taken up in *Mary Grace and Hope*.

¹⁶ E.g. by E.L. Mascall in *The Mother of God*, p. 39.

¹⁷ One thinks of the statue of Our Lady in the Lady Chapel of Ely Cathedral.

¹⁸ A point well made by Joseph Ratzinger in *Daughter Zion*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1984. This is a danger in some feminist readings of Mary. See Marie Farrell, RSM, *Emerging Voices in the World of Marian Theology*, Ecumenical Society of the Virgin Mary, 2007.

‘Mary being *theotokos*’ (the divine maternity) may be considered under three headings:

(a) Physical

Mary’s role is a physical one. She gives of her substance, itself a remarkable reversal of understandings of birth in the early centuries, which regard the male contribution as both active and principle, the woman offering space and a receptacle. The Word Incarnate is born of her humanity. The flesh of Jesus is ‘made’ from that of Mary.¹⁹ The humanity of Jesus is received from the humanity of Mary.

(b) Moral

If this is the case, then the motherhood of the divine humanity is moral; the content of her assent and response to Jesus, her humanity, her freedom and skills at nurture and the transmission of values and beliefs become an issue. This is an unavoidable result of taking the flesh which the Word becomes, with due seriousness. If the humanity of Jesus is taken seriously, then the moral background of his nurture, of being made to be what he will humanly become, will be taken seriously also. The way Jesus becomes what he is a human way, but it is also the gift and communication of God. The humanity of Mary, her identity needs to be taken seriously.

(c) Ascetic

This humanity, a representative of Israel – and by extrapolation of the whole human race – is one who makes free and unqualified assent to God. Her assent issues in the nurture of the Son of God. She brings him up to be the One who he is. It is owing to the Holy Spirit that both the upbringing and what makes for it are wholly open to the communication of God; indeed, to the extent that Jesus Christ is this communication, there is an enabling of the Incarnate One to become what he becomes.

There are various ways of describing this. Howsoever it is done, what underlies it is a uniqueness of human response to God, an unsupported assent and bearing. This is a relation to God which is of a unique kind and has unique results. The virginal character of that response, the lack of dependence on another man and the freedom and the fulfilment that this suggests to some, become the pattern and origin of the essential ascetic in Christian discipleship. It finds a rich treatment in the Patristic era, though this is one that has its difficulties for modern times. Such asceticism is a consequence of her election to divine maternity and not a moral achievement. It does not entail a devaluing of the body or of marriage, even though some Fathers can be read as suggesting that. This is a difficult area²⁰ and touches the abuse of renunciation to which the Virgin Mary has been put over the centuries, but her asceticism is both a model and an enabler of that aspect of following Christ which through letting God guide us without reserve lead us to the end for which the Son took flesh, to save us, that we should be made sons and daughters in him and be known as he is known of his Father.

¹⁹ This would take further exposition to be adequate, but it is a point made beautifully by the Venerable Bede in his commentary on Luke (*In Lucam*), but it is also an important part of the Mariology of St Augustine, that the humanity of Jesus is ‘made’ of the woman: see *De Trinitate*, IV 30.

²⁰ An example of the difficulty found by many may be seen in the publication of the Swiss bishops’ conference (*Maria, kleine Marienkunde*), 1987, in which the Virginity of Mary is interpreted with no reference to anything ascetic; it is an expression of the Christian vocation!

Virginity

This leads to what for Christian teaching is indivisible from Mary being *theotokos*, namely that the Mother of God is the *Virgin* Mary.

Surely it is not absolutely necessary for the taking flesh, the becoming human of the Son of God that he should be born of the *virgin* Mary? This is true, for it could have been the case that this happened in another way, known only to God, and that Jesus Christ could have had two parents or could have been a foundling or some such. The Incarnation is however not a principle which God fulfils or which human beings have put together, but is rather the term of a process of gift, response and reflection and this includes the gospel narratives in Matthew and Luke.

The statement of a respected member of the *Groupe des Dombes* stands for the view of classical Christianity: ‘The virginal conception is an integral element of the mystery of the incarnation’.²¹ This may be agreed upon, even if the *content* of such a statement is not at all self-evident. It is true, however, that the content of the teaching has never been defined either by a Council or by the Roman magisterium. That Jesus is born of the Virgin Mary is in the creeds since no later than the third century, belongs to the creed called the Nicene Creed, is in the Chalcedonian definition and belongs to the praise of the Church from the earliest eucharistic prayers of which we have knowledge. How to interpret the virginity of Mary remains a subject of preaching, discussion and development. The virginal conception is part of the economy of grace and revelation, which is sufficient for humanity to reach its end and for the mystery of God to be known and shared.

Some would treat of the virginal conception in symbolic terms, that it expresses the uniqueness of what God has done and does in Jesus Christ and that the body and person of Mary is uniquely involved. This poses the question of how such a reading relates to the earlier witnesses both of scripture and of the tradition. On the other hand, the way that Mary’s role in the economy of salvation has been understood has often involved the language of symbol. Her role as Mother of God can be related to the earth and to the feminine – not without controversy – but it is doubtful whether a reading of the virginity of Mary which is symbolic alone does justice to her role in the Incarnation of the divine human Jesus Christ. Alternative views, which try to preserve the wonder of the conception of the Word made flesh of a woman while eschewing the virginal conception, can seem face saving. As Rowan Williams remarks, once you have read this as beyond nature, as the story of God as it were, then to look for another way of expressing it, also beyond nature, seems to be more a failure of imagination or nerve than anything else.

For the same reason it is to be doubted whether biblical exegesis alone can assist in determining the truth of the teachings concerning Mary, of which the virginal conception is one. Central to the classical understanding is that belief in the truth of the virginal conception is not capable of examination, is received in faith and that is approached with the awe appropriate to the presence of the eternal God. The often exuberant language of the Fathers in this regard, a language of praise and thanksgiving, is an oblique testimony to this. Details of the virginal conception such

²¹“La conception virginale est un element indissociable du mystère de l’Incarnation” .Bernard Sesboüé in *Études Mariales*, 2003 p.223.

as might be found by the examination of scientific facts are neither accessible nor, it may be argued, relevant, save the statement that there is no earthly father to Jesus Christ and that his Mother is the Virgin Mary, coming with the range of associations and textual references which the Old Testament brings to the New.

The truth that Christ is born of the Virgin and that he is truly God and truly human does entail that he is conceived, conceived in soul, mind and body, of a virgin. If it is possible to state these truths without the virginal conception, it is not clear that such a possibility has been yet realised. Perhaps it may be done, but I see no good reason for supposing that the attempt will either succeed or will be worth attempting.

Section II

In this section I will look at four areas which are not made so explicit by the earliest Christians witnesses, but which have become part of the web of Christian teaching, if more particularly of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Neither of the first two, the perpetual virginity and the holiness of Mary, were in much doubt prior to recent centuries and both were shared in some degree by both Anglicans and Roman Catholics, as well as by historic mainstream Protestants.²² Some of the teachings were not explicit in the early centuries; the Roman Catholic teaching concerning the immaculate conception, come late to history – ‘*storicamente tardiva*’.²³

Perpetual Virginity

For the classical teaching of Christianity, the virginal conception of the Word made flesh is the truth that has a pride of place. It is attested in scripture and taught by other witnesses since the first century. Yet it has been also taught especially by Orthodox and Roman Catholics that Mary is *aeiparthenos*, ever virgin, something which is given authority by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) and is found in the Roman Canon known to Leo the Great (d. 461). The content of the doctrine has never been made specific, but it has been taught and believed from the second century, there being few exceptions before the eighteenth century. Tertullian (c.165- c.225), the exception that proves the rule, doubts that Mary remains a virgin after, but not in, the birth. Jerome (c.345- 420), who defends the perpetual virginity against Helvidius in a devastating polemic, is inclined to give an uncertain voice to the teaching that the Virgin remains a virgin in the birth of Jesus Christ. Jerome, like many Fathers, knows the difference of the virginity during birth (*virginitas in partu*) and for the rest of her life (*post partum*) from that before the birth of Jesus (*ante partum*), and that the scriptural texts are not explicit.

Yet the perpetual virginity of the Virgin, closely related to the Christology of the classical era, has been doubted by more recent theologians. Partly this has been as a consequence of the exegesis of those passages which refer to ‘brothers’ of Jesus; although there is support for the idea that the word for brother has a far wider application than blood brother and can mean various relations,²⁴ this view has not by

²² A point noted in *Mary Grace and Hope in Christ*, 45.

²³ ‘late historically’ ;Luigi Gambero *La Santità di Maria contesto in cui si sviluppa la Dottina dell’Immacolata concezione: il contributo dei Padri della Chiesa* in Toniolo , p271-308, p272

²⁴ *Mary Grace and Hope in Christ* 19 n3.

any means found universal support among contemporary exegetes. To others, the ascetic stress on virginity has seemed, if not exactly to deny goodness of the body, certainly to make it a more refractory quantity than is meet to a properly Christian anthropology. Some Fathers seem not only to argue for the superiority of virginity over marriage, but also to suggest that marriage is not a very good thing and this renders the perpetual virginity of Mary a suspect doctrine. However it is superficial to argue that all the Fathers or even many of them had problems with the body; many treated the perpetual virginity as oriented not only or even primarily to sustaining the virtues of the pious virgin, but to the dependence on God, the dignity and consistency of orientation of the Virgin Mary as well as the integrity of her body.²⁵ It would be a partial position to argue that the Fathers of the Church, in defence of the Virgin, were to be commemorated primarily for their championing of the dignity of women, but it is a theme from the Patristic era that the Incarnation of the Word of the Virgin serves not only to save humanity, but to raise up women and to restore their dignity.²⁶

Although there is evidence of difficulty in belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary in later centuries, from the earliest texts (such as the *Protevangelium of James* 19.3-20.4)²⁷ which survive it would appear that popular belief in Mary ever virgin becomes established by the mid second century and is soon regarded as a given.²⁸ It is not a teaching that is invented to promote a form of asceticism, but is part of a belief about the mystery of Christ and His Person. This does not solve the problem of how to interpret the teaching or whether to regard it as a dogma, but it does make it necessary to do justice to a teaching intimately connected with the reality of the Incarnation from even before the time of Christological definition began.

This same Christological concern lies behind the defence of the teaching by the Reformers, even to the point of making it something by which the faith stood or fell, a point made by Oecolampadius (1482-1531) and possibly echoed by Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556).²⁹

The Holiness of Mary

From her assent, from her role under the Spirit in the communication of the divine salvation, the sharing of the divine and incomprehensible God, the holiness, the being set apart, of the Blessed Virgin Mary is derived. This is a statement about the conditions from our side of there being such as Jesus Christ; what was there such that there could be a human being capable of being the unqualified and unique communication of God to the world, of which God himself is the subject? No Father teaches otherwise than that the Virgin Mary is holy.

²⁵ Fathers who speak this purpose include St Ephrem, St Gregory of Nyssa, Amphilochius of Iconium.

²⁶ Origen, St Gregory of Nyssa, Proclus.

²⁷ Tertullian is the exception of teachers who doubt; Jerome opposes one who also doubts which shows that fuller perception of this aspect of the faith presented challenges.

²⁸ See J.Keith Elliott *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives* Brill 2006, p76-77; and also *The Apocryphal Jesus* Oxford 1996, p13-16

²⁹ Diarmaid McCulloch *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* Yale University Press; 1996, p634-6, cited in Denaux and Sagovsky p103. For Oecolampadius in Walter Tappolet *Das Marienlob der Reformatoren: Martin Luther, Johannes Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger* Tübingen 1962, p246

I am unaware of any study done concerning the understanding of the holiness of Mary in the early tradition, but it is clear that there are various understandings, some concerned with models for asceticism and for religious, others with fostering the faith. Yet from the time of Origen (c.185-c.254), the holiness attributed to Mary is proportionate to her singular status and her service owed to the mystery of the Word made Flesh. She is ‘all holy’ (*panagia*), ‘holy through and through’.³⁰ On the other hand, there is a long line of teachers who make critical comments on the Virgin Mary, often in reference to the sword which shall pierce her heart, some of which (e.g. in John Chrysostom (c.347-407) or Cyril of Alexandria (d.444)) is startling to modern eyes. Some of this is due perhaps to an element of misogyny in these writers.³¹ In the West this critical strain has faded away by the time of Hilary (c315-367), but it has never been the case in the East, which has always been content to allow Mary to have a few defects, while attributing to her a higher dignity than is common in the West.

The holiness is not predominantly moral, but is related to the One who is without sin by nature, unlike the Virgin Mary. We do not commemorate Mary because she is a saint, but because she is *theotokos*. Indeed, the setting apart, as the place for wondrous exchange between God and humanity, is where we find the key to treating of the holiness of the Blessed Virgin. Holiness is not a reward because she has done marvellous things, but because of the grace of God, because of Jesus Christ.³²

In the East, Fathers acknowledge a purification brought about by grace in Mary, either in anticipation or at the annunciation. Lacking the understanding of sin and election that shapes the West, the language of immaculate conception did not find a fertile ground in which to take root, even though the East does not stint in its praise of the one without stain. The East has no less commitment to the holiness of Mary, but has eschewed definition.

The distinction between original sin and personal sin is not one that is made systematically, yet it is from the former that the Roman Catholic teaching states the Virgin Mary is redeemed by the power of Christ’s cross. Two points may be worth making here. That Mary is redeemed and needs redemption is not controversial; the *how* is not so clear. However, it is arguable that the Roman Catholic teaching does secure a closer dependency on Jesus Christ on the part of the Virgin than simple emphasis on her personal holiness. Second, if justice is to be done to the humanity assumed by the Son, then as we have argued, justice needs to be done to the humanity from whom he is ‘made’ (to put it in older terms), by which he is nurtured (to put it in a modern way). How such grace is to be expressed, how to be talked off fruitfully is not easy, but it needs to be done.

One of the issues of any future re-reception of the teaching by non- Roman Catholics in the West is that the background of the understanding of grace, largely indebted to

³⁰ The phrase is Charles Sherlock’s. See *The Journey: An Anglican Perspective* in ‘Mary Grace and Hope in Christ. The Text with Commentaries and Study Guide’, edited by Donald Bolen and Gregory Cameron, Continuum, p204-231, p222.

³¹ For this, see the excellent Rosa Cali, *I testi antimariologici nell'esegesi dei Padri da Nicea a Calcedonia. Per una mariologia in prospettiva ecclesiale* Caltanissetta Edizioni del Seminario Caltanissetta 1999.

³² St Augustine *De natura et gratia*, 36.42.

Augustine, is no longer the background against which Christian thinkers or teachers work and think. This ought to make a common engagement a realistic possibility. The doctrine of the immaculate conception has been one way of expressing the grace prepared for the *theotokos*, the Mother of God before all ages with respect to the Incarnation of the Son, but it is unlikely that this is the only way.

Mary and the last things

The Fathers before Chalcedon have little to say about the end of the life of the Mother of God. The concerns of the early Church were with the questions of the person of Christ and of the Trinity among other things, not with the Mother of the Son. However, there is no doubt that she is saved, but there is little witness to her life or her significance after Pentecost. There is a remarkable absence of cult, however much devotion and affective writing may be found, especially after Ephrem in the fourth century. Famously there are no relics or grave sights that are known. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 Emperor Marcian asked the Patriarch of Jerusalem to bring the relics of Mary to Constantinople so they could be placed in a shrine, receiving the surprising reply that there were no relics of Mary in Jerusalem: 'Mary had died in the presence of the apostles; but her tomb, when opened later . . . was found empty and so the apostles concluded that the body was taken up into heaven.'

The origins of the teachings concerning the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary and her Assumption are not particularly clear and the diversity of the texts presents considerable problems and contrasting interpretations.³³ Shoemaker traces the earliest text to no later than the fourth century and probably earlier, possibly from among a Syrian or Jewish Christian group.

Arguments concerning the end of the Virgin, like those concerning the perpetual virginity, are ones from fittingness, *convenientia*: e.g. that she is taken to heaven since it was not fitting that the flesh that had given life to God himself should ever undergo corruption; and that she is greater than Moses or Elijah and if they are taken to heaven, then so should she.

Perhaps the lateness of the teaching should not be a cause for anxiety; though the feast is universal in the West by no later than the eighth century it takes a while for the belief in her *bodily* assumption to become widespread in the West, in contrast to the East.³⁴ There is little doubt that Mary does in some manner share in the glory of the heavens, but there is little concern over details.

Problems perhaps arise when definition is brought to a reality concerning a human person that has been always expressed properly in terms of symbol and in the mode of

³³ See Martin Jugie, *La mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge. Étude historico-doctrinale*, Studi e testi 114 Rome 1944); Simon Claude Mimouni, *Dormition et Assomption de Marie, histoire des traditions anciennes* Théologie historique, no. 98. Beauchesne, Paris: 1995; Michel van Esbroek *Aux origines de la Dormition de la Vierge* Variorum, Aldershot, 1995; and Stephen J. Shoemaker *The Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* Oxford University Press 2003

³⁴ Henry Mayr-Harting in *The Idea of the Assumption in the West, 800-1200* in *The Church and Mary*, p 86-111, for the reasons for the lateness of the teaching.

praise and worship.³⁵ On the other hand, if the Incarnation is truly revealed through the person of Mary and her history in Israel, then it is consistent with the way that the economy of God's revelation works for our salvation that the Mother of God shares in divine glory. It is important to note that though it is about an identifiable historical person, the assumption is not about 'facts' that are simply the matter of recordable events. This is the area of symbol and praise as much as it is about the persons of Christ and his Mother. *Mary Grace and Hope* chooses to use the phrase 'fullness of her person' rather than 'body and soul' with respect to the sharing in the final fulfilment.

Conclusion

Some would argue that a different kind of Christology is needed now than that based on what both Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches have received, fit for purpose. I have much sympathy with this, but if Christianity is to be faithful to her calling, then we must pay attention to how she has come to be what she now is. Part of this is the testimony of the working of the Spirit in time and space, in persons and social environments, what is called tradition, and in the Christian Church, at the head of which stands Christ, and in relation to him, the person of the Virgin Mary.

Two omissions need remarking. I have said nothing concerning the nature of that praise or the nature and place of intercession and the Virgin Mary. *Mary Grace and Hope* treats of this well (paras. 67-71), noting that while to call on saints to pray for us is not directly taught in scripture, it is not 'unscriptural', with the important proviso that the unique mediatorship of Jesus Christ is not obscured. It is not of course obligatory for Roman Catholics and the report does not suggest that it should be for Anglicans. More crucially, I have confined attention largely to the Virgin Mary and the Incarnation, leaving to one side the relation of the Virgin Mary to the Church. I admit that does leave the picture unbalanced, for the One who is borne by Mary *theotokos* is also the One who is 'first born' (*protokos*) of many and she is the mother of many individuals and of the Church.

That Jesus Christ is born of the Virgin Mary is a matter of wonder. It is not something that can be 'caught' or 'matched' by human thought. Devotion, dogma and life belong together, and there is a serious loss to those Christians for whom the separation of these matters in the West has made the access to the Virgin Mary so hard. It is my submission that this has been very harmful and that the decline in an orthodox understanding of the person and position of Jesus Christ goes hand in hand with this loss of access. There is often the risk of behaving like the White Knight in Lewis Carroll's *Alice through the Looking Glass*.³⁶ In that sense, 'unless we are good Marianists, we shall never be good Christians.'³⁷

³⁵ Liam Walsh notes that there is deliberate vagueness over historical details in the bull defining the assumption. *The definition of the Assumption of Mary into Heavenly Glory* in Denaux and Sagovsky, p165-192, pp182

³⁶ The White Knight put spikes on his horse's legs, just in case he should be attacked by sharks. TM Parker (in E.L Mascall ed, *The Mother of God*) made the comparison between this figure from Alice and those Protestants who were exaggeratedly wary of shewing anything than minimal attention to the Virgin Mary.

³⁷ Anthony Stafford, *The Female Glory: or the Life and Death of our Blessed Lady, the Holy Virgin Mary, God's own Immaculate Mother*. London 1635

Chapter 5

A feminist response to ARCIC's Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ

Harriet Harris¹

Introduction²

Generally, the higher the Mariology, the worse things are for women. At least, it is hard to counter this view, and ARCIC's Statement on Mary, whilst not compounding this view, would not dissuade anyone from holding it. The Statement barely addresses the range of feminist concerns raised by Mariology. Its cursory comment, that the witness of Mary's obedience has sometimes been used to encourage passivity and impose servitude on women [74], comes late on, and the issues that lie behind this comment are themselves unaddressed. I am told the Commission did not think to consider the impact of Mariology upon women until its penultimate meeting. Significantly, only two of the 21 members of the Commission were women, and the secretariat, observers and consultants were all men. Whatever the reason, the Commission has not sufficiently acknowledged the problems that Mariology has, and can, create for women, nor does it consider the potential consequences of a re-reception of Marian devotion for women in our churches.

Of course, no statement can do everything. But an awareness of the effects of Mariology upon the lives of women is not an additional topic that would take up more time and space. It is, rather, something that should shape and infuse Mariology from the outset. All theology concerns our salvation, and good theology is needed to correct any oppressive consequences of previous theological developments (for example, women being encultured into passivity, even to the point of accepting violence from male authority figures). Good theology takes all relevant factors into account, including the salvific and unsalvific effects that doctrines can be observed to have caused. There is nothing to fear from frank engagement with the difficulties that traditional conceptions of Mary have created for women, except the hard graft of brutal honesty. But such engagement would also reveal the various positive ways in which women have identified with Mary, and the requisite honesty is serviced by adopting Mary Gordon's stance of 'forgiving vigilance'.³ Forging vigilance looks for what is empowering within a heritage that has also been oppressive, and it is with this attitude that the following thoughts have been written.

In the 1970s, Marina Warner denounced Mary as a myth whose reality is over. She attacked the ways that Mary has been used to advocate women's fulfillment in the

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² This paper incorporates aspects from a joint response to *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, that the author wrote with Alana Harris, a Roman Catholic ecumenist and church historian. See Alana Harris and Harriet Harris, 'A Marian Pilgrimage: Reflections and Questions about ARCIC's *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*', *Ecclesiology* 2/3 (2006), pp. 339-56.

³ M. Gordon, 'Coming to Terms with Mary', *Commonweal*, 15 January 1982, p. 12.

home and the family, and provide a model for passivity, humility and obedience.⁴ Since then, feminist theologians have offered more complex assessments of ‘the blessing and bane’ of Mariology.⁵ Some feminist theologians see the function of Mary within historic Christianity as a corrective to misogynist, masculinist interpretations of God, and a resource for greater appreciation of the feminine in the divine,⁶ or the persistence of the goddess.⁷ For other female commentators, Mary’s role in the biblical narrative and the Catholic imaginative landscape has provided an inspirational, compassionate and strong maternal figure, offering a site for emotional allegiance and spiritual support within their daily lives.⁸ For yet other feminist theologians, especially those writing outside first world, post-industrial contexts, Mary is an empowering symbol of liberation,⁹ acting as a subversive advocate endorsing female agency and functioning as a corrective to an imposed cultural hegemony;¹⁰ a development from which ARCIC seeks to gain capital, as discussed towards the end of this paper.

Marian Imagery

Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ employs a wide range of Marian imagery, including second Eve, mother of all the Church, and hope of the oppressed, but it promotes two images in particular: a maternal image related to Mary's traditional title of *Theotókos*, and a newer emphasis on Mary as Christ’s foremost disciple.

The appellation, *Theotókos*, which the Commission translates as ‘Mother of God’ rather than ‘God-bearer’, is central to the theological rationale offered in the document. It reflects a fully incarnational theology, in which God was human and Jesus divine even in the womb. ‘Anglicans and Roman Catholics agree,’ the document states, ‘that the doctrines of the Assumption and Immaculate Conception must be understood in the light of the more central truth of her identity as *Theotókos*, which itself depends on faith in the Incarnation’ [63].

⁴ M. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Vintage, [1976] 2000), p. 338.

⁵ E. A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. xiv. Cf. G. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of Mary* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1996); E. Maekelberghe, *Desperately Seeking Mary: A Feminist Appropriation of a Traditional Religious Symbol* (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1991); T. Beattie, ‘Redeeming Mary: The Potential of Marian Symbolism for Feminist Philosophy of Religion’, in P.S. Anderson and B. Clack, eds, *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 107-22.

⁶ E. Schussler Fiorenza, ‘Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision’, in C. P. Christ and J. Plaskow (eds.), *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 136-48.

⁷ See R. Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁸ S. Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996). See also C. Halkes, ‘Mary and Women’, in H. Küng and J. Moltman (eds.), *Mary in the Churches* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983; *Concilium* 168 (8/1983): Ecumenism), pp. 66-73.

⁹ M. P. Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 171-7.

¹⁰ J. Rodrigues, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

The title *Theotókos* was declared at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, in distinction to *Christotokos*, as signifying Christ's divine nature. While it was a contested title in the fifth century, by the sixth it had become universal in eucharistic prayers of East and West.¹¹ But despite its genuine orthodoxy, and historical evidence that both Mariology and the Cult of the Virgin developed in subordination to Christological issues,¹² it continues to cause discomfort. The Church of England's Common Worship liturgies, for example, prefer instead 'ever-blessed Mother of Christ our Lord' (Antiphon to the Magnificat for Marian feast days).

The Commission makes good use of *Theotókos* in reminding us of the implications of an incarnational theology: if Jesus was fully divine, Mary bore God. But in assuming the translation 'Mother of God' rather than the more literal 'God-bearer', it has missed an opportunity to allay fears, especially, but not only, from Reformed quarters, of over-interpretations of Mary as Jesus' mother, according to which Mary's intercessions are needed to provoke mercy in her son.¹³

Interestingly, in other ways, the Statement moderates focus on Mary's maternal role, particularly by emphasizing the image of Mary as Christ's foremost disciple. This image is central to the eschatological thrust of the document. Mary is seen as the fullest example of the life of grace, whose Assumption is a sign of hope for the resurrection of all believers. Mary has frequently been cast as a disciple since 1950s, and not without feminist concern, for it is a presentation of a female under domination.¹⁴ Yet, Mary as foremost disciple is a potentially radicalizing image, for example, in considering matters of female ministry as discussed later in the paper. Compared to the prominence given to Mary as mother in pre-Conciliar Catholicism and popular Marian piety (cf. Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), art. 68-9), the emphasis on Mary's primacy of discipleship invites greater focus on her paradigmatic response to God, and less interest in her bodily fitness. Mary's eschatological function is still portrayed maternalistically, in terms of hastening the gathering of all people into the one people of God [28-29, 47]. Maternal emphases are not negative *per se*, but they work detrimentally against women when Mary's motherhood is idealized in passive or servile ways, or in conjunction with characteristics that no other mother can possess, viz., virginity and the benefits of immaculate conception. This is most apparent where women are cast as whores and temptresses insofar as they are not like Mary, but there are levels upon levels of difficulties, many of them quite subtle and diffuse.

¹¹ For a history of the term, see J. Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 55-65.

¹² A. Cameron, 'The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth-Making', in Swanson (ed.), *The Church and Mary*, pp. 1-21 and R.M. Price, 'Marian Piety and the Nestorian Controversy', in Swanson (ed.), *The Church and Mary*, pp. 31-8.

¹³ Consider examples supplied by J. Baun, 'Discussing Mary's Humanity in Medieval Byzantium', in Swanson (ed.), *The Church and Mary*, pp. 63-72, and S. J. Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: on Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Cassell, 2000). See also the objections made by D. F. Wright, 'From "God-Bearer" to "Mother of God" in the Late Fathers', in Swanson (ed.), *The Church and Mary*, pp. 22-30.

¹⁴ See S. J. Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: on Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Cassell, 2000).

Mary According to the Scriptures

The eschatological imagery shapes, to some extent, the Commission's hermeneutical method. The Commission moves beyond the 'tantalizing glimpses' of Mary in isolated biblical passages, and, since 'no reading of the text is neutral' [7], challenges Anglicans and Catholics to read Scripture theologically. It views Mary, as indeed ourselves, as enfolded in the whole sweep of salvation history centered on 'Creation, election, the Incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Christ, the gift of the Spirit in the Church, and the final vision of eternal life for all God's people in the new creation' [6]. As the Catholic commentator Jared Wicks SJ has observed, this holistic approach is a biblical interpretation that is also attentive to the 'analogy of faith' advocated by the Second Vatican Council as a guide to reflective scriptural studies.¹⁵ Such a methodology operates from a conviction about the overall unity of the diverse New Testament works, divinely revealed but humanly interpreted, and filtered through the living tradition of the Church.

However, within this understanding, unacknowledged priority is given to the Lukan narrative, and in particular the song of Mary (the *Magnificat*), as 'provid(ing) the scriptural basis for an appropriate devotion to Mary, though never in separation from her role as mother of the Messiah' [15]. A leading reason for prioritizing the Lukan narrative, presumably, is to make a connection with the Statement's subsequent claim that there is a tradition of reverence for Mary in Anglicanism due to 'continued use of the Magnificat in Evening Prayer' [46]. This may be claiming too much on the part of Anglican heritage. As Reformation historian Judith Maltby writes: 'Evening Prayer is an exquisite scissors and paste job uniting the monastic hours of Vespers and Compline and arguably one of Cranmer's greatest liturgical inventions....[I]t is unlikely that the generations who have benefited from said Evening Prayer or Choral Evensong, thought of themselves as engaging in a devotional exercise with a reverential Marian component, however modest'.¹⁶

Mary's virginity

The Statement affirms belief in the virginal conception, not only as a sign of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, and hence of Christ's divine sonship, but as pointing to the new birth of every Christian as an adopted child of God - each born again from above by water and the Spirit. This is a key way in which the Statement reinforces Mary as mother of all the Church. Two potential objections to belief in the virginal conception are swiftly dismissed in a footnote¹⁷: that it derives from an over-literal reading of Isaiah 7.14 is rejected, for that is not how the idea is introduced in the Lukan account; that it arose in response to accusations of Jesus' illegitimacy is also

¹⁵ Jared Wicks SJ, 'A Commentary on *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission - 2005' - http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20050516_commentary-wicks_en.html. See Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, art. 12.3 - N. P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II* (London, Washington: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), p. 976.

¹⁶ J. Maltby, 'Anglicanism, the Reformation and the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission's Agreed Statement on *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*', *Theology*, May/June 2007, vol CX no 855, p. 172.

¹⁷ *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, footnote 2, p.18.

rejected, for these accusations could have come afterwards, in response to rumours of Jesus' unusual birth. That only these questions are raised, and then so swiftly and cursorily disregarded, renders treatment of this theme superficial and unhelpful to women and men concerned about its legacy.

Another footnote suggests that what we may think of as plain or straightforward reference to Jesus' brothers, may mean kinsman, relative or step-brother [19 n. 3]. If this is accepted, the door is kept open for espousing Mary's perpetual virginity. This dogma is discussed in a further note documenting the development of devotion to Mary in the Patristic writers. Leo, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Ambrose and Augustine are all cited to lend their weight to the tradition of Mary's virginity '*ante partum, in partu, post partum*' [37 n. 7]. Later in the Statement it is concluded that 'Our two communions are both heirs to a rich tradition which recognizes Mary as ever virgin' [51], which is technically the case; the Magisterial Reformers of the Sixteenth Century were committed to this teaching.¹⁸ As Maltby explains, this is to be understood in light of their struggles with radical protestants whose reliance on the 'plain meaning' of the text led them in heterodox directions concerning core Christian doctrines, including the Trinity and the Son's equality with the Father. The Magisterial Reformers thought that the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity protected the case for Christ's divinity: if Mary was a virgin throughout her life, there really could be no question over Jesus' paternity. But, as Maltby wryly comments, 'one cannot but think that this rather surprising example of sixteenth century ecumenical agreement reveals the way a deep unease about female sexuality cut across confessional boundaries and made the 'plain meaning' of the text so easy to set aside'.¹⁹ She goes on to raise a related suspicion about the almost entirely male make-up of the ARCIC membership that worked on the Mary Statement, and the discussions of female virginity that it thereby reflects.²⁰

The Statement proposes a range of possible readings of Scripture [7], but it barely considers the historic, symbolic and cultural overlays that condition interpretation of the scriptural witness to Mary, and which can neutralize or counteract Mary's role as an icon of 'grace and hope' for contemporary Christian women.²¹ Its own approach is not broad enough to address adequately the complex issues that Mariology raises for women; the skirting references to Mary's perpetual virginity [19; 37] being a case in point. The Statement fails to examine robustly the biblical references to Jesus' 'brothers', as already noted. More fundamentally it offers no critique of the historic suspicions about the sinfulness of human sexuality, and unease

¹⁸ D. MacCulloch, 'Mary and Sixteenth-Century Protestants', in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *The Church and Mary* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004) p. 211.

¹⁹ Maltby, 'Anglicanism, the Reformation, and the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission's Agreed Statement', p. 176.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

²¹ For example, the image of Mary as 'second eve' developed by Irenaeus in the second century, against the background of the contemporaneous writings on Eve (and women), most notoriously by Tertullian: 'Do you not believe that you are [each] an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives on even in our times and so it is necessary that the guilt should live on, also. You are the one who opened the door to the Devil...' – Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*, trans. R. Arbesmann, Sr. E. J. Daly and E. A. Quain (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), p. 118.

about female bodies in particular, which accompany the doctrine of perpetual virginity.

How many miracles need to be performed in Mary's body? And are these miracles deemed necessary in order to set her apart from other women, who cannot have children whilst remaining a virgin, and who are not protected from defilement by immaculate conception? Is it at all possible to defend the doctrines concerning Mary's body in ways that are not detrimental to other women? Or are these doctrines inherently alienating of womankind?

Mary within the Pattern of Grace and Hope

The most awkward differences, the contentious dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption, are discussed in Section C. of the Statement, in the context of a theology of grace and hope. Both dogmas are read back from the exalted Christ: viewed eschatologically, Mary can be seen to be glorified, justified, called, predestined [54]. The Statement also asserts that both dogmas can only be understood in the light of Scripture [58, 59].

Mary's Assumption into Heaven

The dogma of the Assumption is key to the Statement's image of Mary as foremost disciple. Mary is seen 'as the faithful disciple already present with God in Christ' [56], and so as a sign of hope for all humanity. Given this, the Statement's attempt to base the dogma on analogies with four biblical figures is thin [56]. There is potential for a more forward-looking theology that focuses on all of our futures, and which is beginning to be explored in some Catholic circles following the Council,²² although this raises the question of why Mary should go before us, and whether she undermines the sufficiency of Christ. The Statement is careful to clarify that Mary's Assumption is made possible only because of Christ's redeeming work.

In the re-expression of Mary's Assumption, the Statement moves away from the dualistic wording of the dogma, that Mary was taken 'body and soul into heaven', to speak instead of God taking Mary 'in the fullness of her person into his glory' [58]. This is in keeping with trends in modern theological anthropology, which in seeking to escape the legacy of a Platonic body-soul dualism, are beginning to explore Eastern understandings of deification to stress a theology of the human person as embodied souls and be-souled bodies. As the Statement hints [58, n.10], not only is Mary intimately and bodily related to Christ, so that his bodily glorification embraces hers, but in this sense she also 'bears' us – the Church, Christ's body. There are profound and exciting Christological, ecclesiological and soteriological consequences to be unpacked here, and more sustained exploration of these implications would be welcome, for example, in re-exploring issues of the human nature and enfleshment of the God-human, our new creation in Christ, and the making of a new heaven and new earth.

²² See for example, S. De Fiores, 'Mary in Postconciliar Theology', in R. Latourelle, *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives. Twenty-five Years After (1962 – 1987)* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 469 – 539; E. Schillebeeckx and C. Halkes, *Mary, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (London: SCM Press, 1992); and the early reflections of K. Rahner, *Mary, Mother of the Lord: Theological Meditations* (London: Catholic Book Club, 1963).

The Immaculate Conception

What then of Mary's Immaculate Conception, which affirms that Mary's sanctification took place at the very first moment of her conception [59 n.11], and which of course predates the birth of Christ? This is the most problematic doctrine at issue. Some believe that the incarnation is diminished by it; a corollary of the suspicion that womankind, and thereby humankind, being diminished by it. As Penny Keens, in correspondence to the *Church Times*, contested: 'If Mary was sinless, then she wasn't properly human, and nor was her son.'²³

The Commission works hard to rearticulate the 1854 dogma that Mary was 'preserved immune from all stain of original sin from the first moment of her conception' in a way that will be palatable to contemporary Anglicans and post-conciliar Catholics. The Commission rests heavily on Rom. 8.30 to illustrate that the saving work of Christ's Passion is preventive as well as antecedent, encompassing the time before the Annunciation so that Mary is saved by, as well as prepared for, the Incarnation.

The Commission posits that Mary's sinless state is, like her Assumption, dependent on 'Christ's redeeming work [which] reached "back" in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings' [59]. A theological side-effect of taking this eschatological perspective could be to allow the significance of Christ's work in uniting us to God to reach backwards for others, and so overcome the dilemma of how those who lived before Christ are saved. This possibility seems the stronger given the Commission's Pauline understanding of Mary as embodying an 'elect' Israel – a chosen people who have been predestined, called, justified and glorified (Rom. 8:30).

The Pauline emphasis on predestination and the celebration of Christian election is a mixed blessing. The passing reference to Mary's *fiat* 'given in faith and freedom to God's powerful Word communicated by the angel' (Luke 1:38) [16] does not displace the implicit interpretation of the Annunciation as an exemplar for feminine obedience, servility and passivity in some quarters of the Catholic tradition. Nor does it provide sufficient theological tools to engage and challenge a more Reformed interpretation that minimizes human agency to emphasize divine election. For those within the Protestant tradition, the themes of predestination and election may seem to temper the Statement's emphasis on Mary's *fiat*. In the Roman Catholic tradition, it is important that Mary could have said 'no', and that history could have been otherwise. She is seen as co-operating with God to a degree that offends Reformed emphases on divine sovereignty. The Statement skirts the potentially divisive issue of Mary's co-operation with, or participation in, the life of the Trinity at the Incarnation. This is a missed opportunity to emphasize and explore the agency and radical receptivity of Mary as 'the supreme instance of a believer's "Amen" in response to the "Yes" of God' [5].

On the other hand, that Mary embodies an elect Israel is an approach consonant with the insights of many feminist theologians, with its play on embodiment and re-apprehended female ministry, on which, more below. But before a notion of Mary's Immaculate Conception could work positively for women, it must

²³ P. Keens, 'Mixed Reception for ARCIC agreement on the Blessed Virgin', *The Church Times*, 27 May 2005, p. 13.

first overcome objections that, by stressing Mary's sinlessness, it implies and highlights the sinfulness of all other women, and in particular the unclean condition of women's bodies; their wombs unfit to receive seed sown by God. The Commission repeats the wording of the Dogma that Mary is 'preserved immune from all stain of original sin', but changes its emphasis in two ways.

First, it draws attention not to an absence of sin in Mary, but to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit within her: 'It is not so much that Mary lacks something which other human beings "have", namely sin, but that the glorious grace of God filled her life from the beginning' [59]. Nonetheless, the dogma cannot avoid the implication of lack and unfitness in womankind, or humankind, which special divine grace needed to make good.

Second, the Statement emphasizes Mary's holiness, which is also 'our end in Christ', so that Mary is our 'prototype of the hope of grace for humankind as a whole' [59].

The question becomes whether eschatology can bear the weight of the dogma and the problems it incurs. It could become deeply significant for women, and so for the healing and wholeness of the Church, that Mary is our forerunner in the fullness of grace that she has received. But that she needed to receive the fullness of this grace so as to conceive, in order that both she and others might receive the fullness of this grace through Christ as Redeemer and Saviour, involves a circularity that throws the problem back upon the site of conception. Must a human body be especially prepared to receive God? That is one question, which itself has multiple ramifications: could not the presence of God transform the places it inhabits, without need of some further preparatory work?; must Mary's reception of the divine be on so different a level from the rest of humanity's invitation to receive Christ? Another matter, which the Statement does not address and therefore does not relieve, is that women's bodies specifically remain under suspicion wherever the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception is upheld.

Mary in the Life of the Church

In pre-conciliar Catholic devotions and piety there was a considerable emphasis on Mary's femininity and maternity which could be simultaneously empowering and constraining for women. Perhaps cognizant of this mixed legacy, the Commission rarely speaks of Mary's femininity, or role as a natural mother, outside the doctrinal formulation of *Theotókos*. In the life of the Church, Mary is recognized as the first disciple in a new, eschatological family [64] or, where the maternal metaphor is maintained, a type of Church – mother of the faithful or a new humanity [72]. Redirecting the discussion from biological ontology and maternity to personhood and agency is potentially helpful. However, the Commission could be more proactive about this, and less evasive than it is in the Statement, where it circumvents the complexities of a direct engagement with the varying constructions of Mary's femininity.

The Statement also makes it difficult to explore, in a substantive way, issues surrounding her ongoing ministry, which have been expressed in liturgical and private prayer through an intuitive attraction to her enduring, personalized, maternal role. Because Mary is 'the exemplar of redeemed humanity and icon of the Church...she is believed to exercise a distinctive ministry of assisting others through her active prayer' [71]. But this is stated rather than discussed. As it stands, the Statement barely

engages with the perplexities of those Anglicans for whom a Marian spirituality is unknown, and those post-conciliar Catholics who have not developed as intense or commonplace a connection to Mary as held by their grandparents. Although doctrinally the dogmas of the Assumption and Immaculate Conception are hurdles to reconciliation between Anglicans and Catholics, fundamentally Mary's presence or absence in the prayer-life of believers presents the most difficult and contentious area requiring agreement, and the greatest challenge to each communion's efforts at reception. The great pity is that the prayer-led, devotionally shaped nature of the Commission's process and discoveries is not obvious in the writing of the Statement.

A great measure of the creative work of *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* lies in its exploration of the possibility that the two communions can come together through prayer-driven theology informed by liturgical practice. The members of the Commission undertook their task 'aware that our subject had personal implications; that it was bound up with our traditions of prayer and our own devotional life', and that 'Marian doctrine is the fruit not only of theological reflection but also of contemplation, of liturgical celebration, and of love'.²⁴ They celebrated Marian feast-days together and used readings for the daily offices from pre-Reformation texts that spoke of our Lady's place in the plan of salvation. They argued from the experience of their own prayer lives over the practice of calling on Mary's intercession, and, at least in Sr Sara Butler's perspective, discovered 'together the springs of [Marian] devotion..., feeling its waters wash over us and refresh us in a shared experience of Christian prayer'.²⁵

Yet, essentially they have produced a rather cerebral doctrinal Statement that communicates some unease over devotion to Mary. It conveys very little of the devotional, practical, cultural and ideological richness of Mariology, or considers these dimensions cautiously, by way of guarding against florid excesses in popular piety [40-43, 77], and calling for 'careful discernment in assessing the spiritual value of any alleged apparition' of Mary [73]. Those, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, for whom Marian devotion is central to their spirituality, may feel that most of what one would want to express about Mary has been left unsaid. Others may feel that the Statement is an appropriately theological document, but that the theology is too driven by Rome.

Underlying this wariness is the unresolved issue of teaching authority in the Church, and the insecurity evident in some condemnatory Anglican responses that ARCIC's 'capitulation to the Roman Catholic position on Mary' bends to Rome's desire for 'submission'.²⁶ The Statement makes oblique acknowledgment of the breadth of opinion within the Anglican communion on Mary, whilst stating Catholic difficulties in envisaging a restoration of communion in which 'acceptance of certain doctrines would be requisite for some and not for others' [63]. Divergent understandings of ecclesiology continue to underlie these areas of difference around prayer, and most especially clerical ministry.

²⁴ Sr Sara Butler, 'Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ – How Those Involved see it: The Catholic contributor's view', *The Tablet*, 21 May 2005, p. 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Robert Leach, 'Mixed Reception for ARCIC agreement on the Blessed Virgin', *The Church Times*, 27th May 2005, p. 13

Implications for female ministry

Section D is the most pertinent to questions of female ministry in the Church. The recognition of Mary as ‘a model for every disciple and for the life of the Church’ [64] emerges as one of the strongest and potentially most controversial aspects of the Statement. Mary is lauded as the ‘fullest human example of the life of grace’ and a ‘foremost disciple’ [65], an ‘exemplar of a redeemed humanity (and) an icon of the Church.’ [71]. These appellations resonate with the insights of some feminist Mariologists, who see in Mary’s life and ministry a challenge to the Church to enable women to play a full and proactive role, encompassing leadership as well as service.²⁷ They also resonate with Christians who are used to having women minister at the highest levels of their own communions, and who are looking at ARCIC's work from that vantage point. In responding to the Statement, Methodist local preacher, Kathleen Kinder, asks whether the Roman Catholic hierarchy will also ‘come to accept that the ordination of women to the priesthood is “consonant with” scripture’.²⁸

However, the Vatican over the last two decades has, in valorizing Mary, come to a different conclusion about the role and function of women in the Church. In his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), Pope John Paul II lauded the dignity and ‘feminine genius’ of women and the two dimensions of women’s vocation which find their ‘loftiest expression ...in the “woman” of Nazareth: The Virgin Mother.’²⁹ Addressing the issue of the ordination of women in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), the Pope reaffirmed his earlier teaching that in calling only men as his Apostles, Christ reserved leadership and ministerial priesthood for men. He drew specifically on the example of Mary to conclude:

The fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, received neither the mission proper to the Apostles nor the ministerial priesthood clearly shows that the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them.³⁰

Devotion to Mary has been used to discourage women from hearing certain vocations, by suggesting that women should be satisfied with being like Mary, and asking why women would wish to be like an Apostle, or like Christ. The Statement offers Mary as a powerful and positive exemplar of female receptivity and agency, but its reinforcement of her discipleship, particularly if differentiated from an ‘apostolic’ function, may continue to stymie women’s aspirations to fuller ministry in the Church.

Overall, the Statement alludes too lightly and superficially to the complexities of the figure of Mary for women. It gives nodding recognition that the *Magnificat* has inspired women and men to work for justice and empowerment of the oppressed [74].

²⁷ See the discussion in Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, p. 7.

²⁸ Kathleen Kinder, ‘Indigestible opinions about Mary - but not just from ARCIC’, *The Church Times*, 3 June 2005, p. 11

²⁹ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_15081988_mulieris-dignitatem_en.html (7)

³⁰ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_22051994_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html (3)

On the one hand, more could be said about why it is women in particular who invoke Mary as a liberationist icon, and how Protestant women in Africa and Latin America are developing devotion to Mary as liberator. On the other hand, the Statement could have reassured readers that it would not make capital out of liberationist invocations of Mary, to justify more oppressive uses of Mariology. Silence on this front could be read as complicity, as could the Commission's failure to consider that Mary's invocation in support of liberationist causes, arguably displaces the desire to challenge larger structural inequalities.

Closing reflections

The Commission's experience of working on the Statement suggests that if the two communions are to come together on Mary it will be through being embedded in liturgical practice. However, evangelical Anglicans who may not immerse themselves so fully in the liturgies of the daily offices and Marian feast days may just need to be able to accept what is said scripturally, and this may mean for them a more cerebral apprehension of Marian doctrine.³¹ Could the Commission have done more to help both communions apprehend the role of Mary in supporting a more affective spirituality that is inclusive of feminine metaphors and conducive to prayerful theology? It is devotion to Mary that drives Marian doctrine, more than the other way around. The Commission has recognized this in its method, but not conveyed it in its conclusions.

On a more positive note, ARCIC has undertaken to produce the first international bilateral Statement on Mary, and has done so prayerfully and produced a theology of eschatological hope and energy. The metaphor of the pilgrim Church, re-articulated in the context of the Second Vatican Council,³² is woven throughout the document, and is consonant with its realised eschatology. This metaphor encourages us to look for on-going *metanoia*, which necessarily involves us taking risks. Each communion has taken risks in offering this Statement for consideration. For Roman Catholics, to emphasize Mary as foremost disciple, acknowledging the place of this woman in the context of the Gospel, has potential to reanimate questions about the adequacy of recognition for other women, and their role in the Catholic Church today, as witnesses and ministers of the Gospel message. For Anglicans, engaging as a communion with Mariology at all takes us to the heart of deep-seated divisions amongst us, and requires that some members move from an absence of or resistance towards Marian reflection, to some sort of discovery. The Statement itself provides considerable breadth in trying to incorporate the different levels of reception that people within the two communions may feel able to make: from those in both communions seeking to curtail all excesses that cannot be justified in the light of scripture, to those asking Mary to pray for us and the life of the Church. But it also provides an invitation for movement in this personal reception – in discovering more about Mary, we are drawn deeper into the mystery of her Son, and into communion with each other as the Body

³¹ See for example the concluding discussion in D. Longenecker & D. Gustafson, *Mary: A Catholic-Evangelical Debate* (Eastbourne:Gracewing, 2003), pp. 209-23.

³² See Chapter VII, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* in Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, pp. 887-891.

of Christ. In this space for theological rumination and prayerful, personal reflection, there is the room for the play of the Spirit (despite the Statement's thin Pneumatology), who breathes life into airless places and makes all things anew.

Chapter 6

Mary – Grace and Hope in Christ – An Evangelical Anglican Response

Martin Davie¹

Introduction

In the Preface to his book *Mere Christianity* C S Lewis writes as follows about his reasons for not discussing the doctrines concerning the Virgin Mary:

...surely my reason for not doing so is obvious? To say more would take me at once into highly controversial regions. And there is no controversy between Christians which needs to be so delicately touched on as this. The Roman Catholic beliefs on that subject are held not only with the ordinary fervour that attaches to all sincere religious belief, but (very naturally) with the peculiar and, as it were, chivalrous sensibility that a man feels when the honour of his mother or his beloved is at stake. It is very difficult so to dissent from them that you will not appear to them a cad as well as a heretic. And contrariwise, the opposed Protestant beliefs on this subject call forth feelings which go down to the very roots of all Monotheism whatever. To radical Protestants it seems that the distinction between Creator and creature (however holy) is imperilled: that polytheism is risen again. Hence it is hard so to dissent from them that you will not appear something worse than a heretic – a Pagan. If any topic could be relied upon to wreck a book about ‘mere’ Christianity – if any topic makes utterly unprofitable reading for those who do not yet believe that the Virgin’s son is God – surely this is it.²

Mere Christianity was first published in 1952, and today, over half a century later, the kind of intense feeling generated by the topic of the Virgin Mary to which he refers have not gone away.

In the CCU office we get publications from the whole range of the ecclesiastical spectrum and among these are *New Directions*, which for the most part expresses the views of Anglo Catholic traditionalists in the Church of England and *English Churchman*, which describes itself as ‘A Protestant Family Newspaper.’ In their most recent editions both of them comment on *Mary – Grace and Hope in Christ* and their comments reflect strongly held but diametrically opposed positions.

Thus the June edition of *New Directions* declares:

We welcome ARCIC II’s final report Mary; grace and hope in Christ. We shall discuss what it says in detail in next month’s issue, but for the moment it is worth pausing and recognising that, as we look back over the past half

¹ Dr Martin Davie, Theological Secretary, Council for Christian Unity and Theological Consultant to the House of Bishops.

² C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952, p. vii .

millennium, perhaps the greatest accusation that can fairly be levelled against our church is (to use a current buzz word) our lack of respect for Mary, Mother of God.

We can be proud of our holy men and women in every century, whose devotion to Our Lady has been a gift to the wider Church. We can be proud of our Anglo-Catholic churches across the land, where thousands come to share in Marian devotion week by week. We can be proud of what many of our number have done to restore her shrines, at Walsingham and elsewhere.

We must also feel shame that our church as a whole can be so cold towards Jesus' own mother. Of course there are legitimate differences of theology and devotion, but to suppose that it shows honour to Our Lord to be disrespectful of His Mother is a most horrible perversion. This often casual negativity is unbecoming to our Christian calling, and until it is more properly restrained it remains a mark of shame upon the Church of England.³

By contrast the headline in the *English Churchman* reads 'ARCIC statement embraces blasphemous Marian Dogmas' and the subsequent article goes on to attack Roman Catholic teaching on Mary in unmeasured terms. Thus on praying to Mary it declares that: 'The Roman dogma is pure superstitious twaddle and takes away from the glory of God' and on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception it states that it:

...takes attention away from the saviour Christ and puts it on the saved sinner Mary! So Rome leads folk away from Christ and leaves them in superstition and under the wrath of God.⁴

Having responded to all the doctrines about Mary in similar fashion it then asks:

Are we anti women! Not at all! The reverse is the case as, if Mary could hear it, she would not be happy with all this nonsense and with the attention being taken away from her Saviour. She would be grieved to think that people were not content with Christ. As her present state of bliss in the presence of Christ her Saviour cannot be spoiled by the folly of men, we can only conclude that she does not hear any of this nonsense. The true Mary of the Bible was a redeemed sinner but the fantasy 'superwoman' Mary invented by Roman Catholicism and accepted by many Anglicans does no favours to either men or to women.

The timing of this atrocity, just before the heretical Spring Bank holiday pilgrimage to 'Our Lady of Walsingham' in Norfolk, will no doubt add to the numbers who devote themselves to this disastrous piety of idolatry or mariolatry.⁵

In view of the fact that discussion of Mary throws up these kinds of polarised attitudes we can see why many people involved in ecumenism tend to follow Lewis' lead on the matter and try to avoid discussion of Marian theology. It is just too divisive so why not discuss something less contentious instead?

³ *New Directions*, vol 8, No. 121, June 2005, p.3.

⁴ *English Churchman*, No. 7663, 27 May and 3 June 2005 p.1.

⁵ *Ibid* p.1.

However, although it is tempting to take this approach, as the wonderful American phrase puts it, in the end we have to ‘name the elephant’. That is to say, if we are to make any serious long term progress with ecumenism we have to address at some stage precisely those difficult issues which everyone knows are there, but which everyone is tempted to avoid.

In the context of Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue Roman Catholic teaching and practice with regard to the Virgin Mary is one of those kinds of issues. Everyone knows that this is a difficult and sensitive issue for precisely the reasons outlined at the beginning of this paper, but unless it is tackled there can never be full theological agreement between the Catholic and Anglican traditions and therefore no liturgical or ecclesial agreement either.

The publication of the ARCIC II report *Mary- Grace and Hope in Christ* is therefore to be welcomed. The 1981 ARCIC document *Authority in the Church II* noted a significant degree of agreement between Anglicans and Roman Catholics about Mary, but it also noted the specific difficulties raised for many Anglicans by the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption. The new ARCIC document looks in detail both at the areas of agreement previously noted and at the question of the Marian dogmas. It is to be hoped that what it says will spark off the wider debate in both traditions about these issues that is necessary if there is to be further ecumenical progress between Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

Welcoming this report, as a stimulus to necessary debate and discussion, is not, however, the same as welcoming everything that it says. As I shall now go on to explain, although I welcome many aspects of the report, as an Evangelical Anglican there are also aspects of it with which I have serious problems.

What is welcome in this report?

From an Evangelical Anglican perspective there are seven welcome aspects to this report.

(1) It is welcome that the report explicitly endorses the normative role of Scripture as in Christian theology. In the words of paragraph 6:

We remain convinced that the holy Scriptures, as the Word of God written, bear normative witness to God’s plan of salvation.⁶

(2) It is equally welcome to see the explicit acknowledgement that the normative role of Scripture in Christian theology means that:

...doctrines and devotions which are contrary to Scripture cannot be said to be revealed by God nor to be the teaching of the Church.⁷

(3) It is welcome that the report follows up its formal acknowledgement of the normative role of Scripture with an extended engagement with the text of Scripture, both in terms of a general exploration of the biblical pattern of ‘grace and hope’ and in terms of a specific exploration of the Biblical texts relating to the Virgin Mary.

⁶ *Mary – Grace and Hope in Christ*, Harrisburg Pa.; Morehouse Publishing, 2005, p.7.

⁷ *Ibid* p. 80 (Para 79).

(4) It is not only the fact of this engagement with Scripture that is welcome, but also much of what is said in the course this engagement. Thus, from an Evangelical viewpoint it is good to see in paragraph 10 of the report a clear emphasis on the prevenient grace of God:

The Scriptures also speak of the calling by God of particular persons, such as David, Elijah, Jeremiah and Isaiah, so that within the people of God certain special tasks may be performed. They bear witness to the gift of the Spirit or the presence of God enabling them to accomplish God's will and purpose. There are also profound reflections on what it is to be known and called by God from the very beginning of one's existence (Psalm 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:1-5). This sense of wonder at the prevenient grace of God is similarly attested in the New Testament, especially in the writings of Paul, when he speaks of those who are "called according to God's purpose," affirming that those whom God "foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son ... And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Romans 8:28-30; cf. 2 Timothy 1:9). The preparation by God for a prophetic task is exemplified in the words spoken by the angel to Zechariah before the birth of John the Baptist: "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15; cf. Judges 13:3-5).⁸

Thus also, it is good to see a clear summary of the meaning of the miracle at the wedding feast at Cana in paragraph 23:

John gives a prominent position in his Gospel to the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12), calling it the beginning (arche) of the signs of Jesus. The account emphasizes the new wine which Jesus brings, symbolising the eschatological marriage feast of God with his people and the messianic banquet of the Kingdom. The story primarily conveys a Christological message: Jesus reveals his messianic glory to his disciples and they believe in him (2:11).⁹

(5) It is welcome that the report unequivocally affirms the virginal conception of Christ in spite of the way in which this is called into question in much liberal theology:

The divine initiative in human history is proclaimed in the good news of the virginal conception through the action of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20-23; Luke 1:34-35). The virginal conception may appear in the first place as an absence, i.e. the absence of a human father. It is in reality, however, a sign of the presence and work of the Spirit. Belief in the virginal conception is an early Christian tradition adopted and developed independently by Matthew and Luke. For Christian believers, it is an eloquent sign of the divine sonship of Christ and of new life through the Spirit. The virginal conception also points to the new birth of every Christian, as an adopted child of God. Each is "born again (from above) by water and the Spirit" (John 3:3-5). Seen in this light, the virginal conception, far from being an isolated miracle, is a powerful

⁸ Ibid pp.11-12.

⁹ Ibid p.22.

expression of what the Church believes about her Lord, and about our salvation.¹⁰

(6) It is welcome that the report affirms the teaching of the Council of Ephesus that Mary is rightly to be called *Theotókos*. This is welcome because rightly understood this description of Mary upholds the core biblical teaching summarised by the Council of Chalcedon and Article 2 of the *Thirty Nine Articles* that Christ is one person who is both fully human and fully divine.

(7) It is welcome that in discussing the propriety of seeking the intercession of the saints and of forms of devotion to the Virgin Mary the report stresses:

The unique role of Christ as the one mediator between God and humanity and the way in which we are enabled to pray through the work of the Holy Spirit within us¹¹

that any idea of seeking the help of the saints in prayer:

...must not obscure believers' direct access to God our heavenly Father, who delights to give good gifts to his children (Matthew 7:11).¹²

and that doctrine and devotion that focuses on Mary:

...must be moderated by carefully expressed norms which ensure the unique and central place of Jesus Christ in the life of the Church, and that Christ alone, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is to be worshipped in the Church.¹³

What are the problems with this report?

As I have already indicated, in spite of these welcome aspects of the report there are also a number of aspect with which I have serious problems.

The first of these is the uncritical way in which the report handles the development of Marian theology and devotion in section B. Apart from some critical comments on the theology and popular piety of the late Middle Ages in paragraph 43, what we have a

¹⁰ Ibid pp.18-19 (Para 18) What is also welcome is the way in which footnote 2 rejects the various suggestions that have been made to try to explain away the story of the virginal conception as a non-historical story invented on the basis of pagan or Jewish ideas or the need to combat accusations of illegitimacy :

Given its strongly Jewish matrix in both Matthean and Lucan versions, an appeal to analogies with pagan mythology or to an exaltation of virginity over the married state to explain the origin of the tradition is implausible. Nor is the idea of virginal conception likely to derive from an over-literal reading of the Greek text of Isaiah 7:14 (LXX), for that is not the way the idea is introduced in the Lucan account. Moreover, the suggestion that it originated as an answer to the accusation of illegitimacy levelled at Jesus is unlikely, as that accusation could equally have arisen because it was known that there was something unusual about Jesus' birth (cf. Mark 6:3; John 8:41) and because of the Church's claim about his virginal conception.

¹¹ Ibid p. 68 (Para 68) .

¹² Ibid p. 70 (Para 70).

¹³ Ibid p. 80 (Para 79).

simply a record of doctrinal and devotional developments unaccompanied by any kind of appraisal of them.

The reason for this seems to have been that the authors of the report decided that developments before the late Middle Ages were not the source of current divisions between the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions and therefore did not require detailed consideration.

This decision is understandable, but it is arguably mistaken. This is because those ways of thinking about Mary that have been the cause of division between Roman Catholics and Anglicans have their roots in theological developments in the Patristic and Medieval periods.

This means that anybody seeking to make an informed judgment concerning later thinking about Mary has to be able to make an informed judgement about these earlier developments as well. What is needed in order to make this possible, and what the report does not provide, is an explanation of the theological and historical reasons why these developments took place. What is also needed is an explanation of why these developments have been, and still are, viewed negatively by sections of the worldwide Church and then an explanation by the authors of the report as to why they nevertheless think these developments are defensible. A bibliography outlining sources for further study would also have been helpful in enabling those who want to learn more about these matters to do so.

The second is the account given in the report of the place of Mary in Anglicanism from the Reformation onwards. No one reading this report and lacking other sources of information would be aware of the fact that during the history of Anglicanism since the Reformation there have been a large number of Anglicans, arguably the majority, whose beliefs about Mary have been strictly limited to what is explicitly taught about her in Scripture and who have regarded asking Mary to intercede for them as completely impermissible. Furthermore, this position continues to be held by a very large number of people today both in the Church of England and in the Anglican Communion as whole. Indeed, given the growth of Evangelicalism within Anglicanism it may well be the case that the proportion of Anglicans taking this position is increasing.

Therefore, to talk about the 're-appropriation' of Marian theology and devotion within Anglicanism in the way that the report does without giving attention to this other point of view is to distort both history and current reality. The intention of the authors of the report is to use the development of Marian devotion in seventeenth century Anglican writers in the Oxford movement and in the Anglo-Catholic movement to show that such devotion is part of the permissible range of Anglican theology and spirituality and that therefore the gap between the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions is not so large as is often thought. However, what this line of argument fails to reflect is the fact that the development of Marian devotion in the writers and movements just mentioned has also been challenged by other Anglicans who have argued (often strongly) that it has no basis in either Scripture or the Anglican formularies. The place of Mary in Anglican theology and spirituality has been (and still remains) contested¹⁴ and the report should have been honest about this fact.

¹⁴ The contrasting attitudes of Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics to re-establishment of the Marian shrine at Walsingham clearly illustrates this point. Anglo-Catholics have tended to see its re-

Neither the seventeenth century writers mentioned in the report, nor the Oxford movement nor the Anglo-Catholic tradition that grew out of it can rightly be seen as typical of Anglicanism as a whole.

The third is the account given in paragraph 49 of the ‘re-reception’ of the place of Mary in Anglican corporate worship. Whatever may be true in other Provinces of the Communion, in the Church of England at least, the liturgical developments that took place during the twentieth century did not result in any forms of officially authorised liturgy that reflect the understanding of Mary set out in the report.

For example, as the report indicates, August 15 is now celebrated in the Church of England, as in other Anglican churches, as the feast day for the Blessed Virgin Mary, but if we look at the Collect and Post Communion prayer set for the day in *Common Worship*, the Church of England’s official contemporary liturgy, we find that what they say is extremely restrained:

The Collect reads:

Almighty God, who looked upon the lowliness of the Blessed Virgin Mary and chose her to be the mother of your only Son: grant that we who are redeemed by his blood may share with her in the glory of your eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.¹⁵

The Post Communion Prayer reads:

God most high, whose handmaid bore the Word made flesh; we thank you that in this sacrament of our redemption you visit us with your Holy Spirit and overshadow us with your power; strengthen us to walk with Mary the joyful path of obedience and so to bring forth the fruits of holiness; through Christ our Lord.¹⁶

Furthermore, apart from mentions of Mary as the one from whom Christ was born the only provision for mentioning Mary in the Eucharistic prayers in *Common Worship* lies in the option to include Mary alongside the other saints in phrases such as: ‘so that we, in the company of [N and] all the saints may praise and glorify you for ever’, ‘Gather your people with [N and] all your saints at the table in your kingdom’ and ‘Bring us at the last with [N and] all the saints to the vision of that eternal splendour for which you have created us.’¹⁷ The important thing to note here is that such prayers do not commit the Church of England to any specific form of Marian doctrine other than the belief that she is a part of the communion of saints.

establishment as the recovery of something that was wrongly lost from the Church of England and a hopeful sign of the possibility of ecumenical rapprochement with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions while many (if not all) Evangelicals see it as a betrayal of the Reformation and a sign of a departure from biblical religion.

¹⁵ *Common Worship*, London: CHP, 2000, p.438.

¹⁶ *Ibid* p.439. It has been suggested that the reference to ‘glory’ and ‘obedience’ in these prayers are intended to be capable of being interpreted in ways that are consistent with Medieval, Orthodox and Roman Catholic understandings of Mary, but it is difficult to derive such an interpretation from the prayers as they stand and there is no evidence that General Synod authorised these prayers with the intention that they should be so interpreted.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, Eucharistic prayers B, F and G, pp190, 200 and 203.

In addition it also needs to be noted that there is no provision in Common Worship for the saying of the 'Hail Mary' or any other prayers that ask for the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

What all this means is that, at least so far as the Church of England is concerned, the claim that liturgical developments with regard to Mary are 'highly significant' cannot be justified.

The fourth is what is said in paragraph 51 about the way in which the Roman Catholic and Anglican communions: '...are agreed that Mary and the saints pray for the whole Church.' The meaning of this phrase is then specifically said to be further explained in Section D. This section of the report teaches not simply that Mary and the other saints pray in general terms for the fulfilment of God's purposes for His people (an idea that is possibly defensible on the basis of Rev 6:10 and 8:3-4), but that they give specific assistance to individuals who ask for their help. It follows that what we are being told here is that the Anglican tradition now agrees with the practice of seeking the intercession of the saints that was specifically rejected by the Church of England at the Reformation.

As far as I am aware this claim is untrue. There has been no Anglican agreement on this matter, and to suggest that there has been is misleading.

The fifth and final aspect of the report with which I have problems is the list of advances in agreement at the end of the report. In order to explain why I find this problematic I shall look in each of the items on the list in turn.

The first item is:

...the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory as consonant with Scripture, and only to be understood in the light of Scripture

The phrase 'the fullness of her person' is nowhere defined, but there are three reasons for thinking that it must mean something broadly similar to the Roman Catholic teaching that Mary was assumed into heaven in both body and soul.

- In Christian anthropology the fullness of someone's person necessarily includes their body.
- The appeal made in paragraph 56 to the translations of Enoch and Elijah as biblical precedents for what is believed to have happened to Mary imply that what is being thought of is something that involved Mary's body as well as her disembodied self or soul.
- The claim in paragraph 58 that this Roman Catholics will be able to recognise this teaching as that which is contained in the Roman Catholic dogma of the Assumption as defined by Pius XII in 1950 implies that what is being taught here is the assumption of Mary in both body and soul.¹⁸

¹⁸ The attempt in footnote 10 of the report to argue that the Roman Catholic dogma leaves open 'the question of what the absence of her mortal remains means in historical terms'. *Munificentissimus Deus* is explicit that we must believe that God preserved Mary 'from the corruption of the tomb' and that at the end of her life Mary was 'assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.' What is meant here in historical terms is not open to doubt.

What we are being told therefore is that the belief that at the end of her life (either before or after death) Mary was taken up into heaven in both body and soul is 'consonant with Scripture.' In the absence of any biblical statements about what eventually happened to Mary the only justification that is offered for this claim in the report is the appeal to the biblical stories about Enoch, Elijah, the penitent thief and St Stephen which are said to: '...offer hints or partial analogies that may throw light on the mystery of Mary's entry into glory.'

The problem with the appeal to these stories in the cases of the penitent thief and of St. Stephen is that in the case of both of these what we are dealing with is a case of individuals entering into a state of disembodied blessedness where they will await the resurrection of their bodies on the last day. There is nothing to suggest that they were taken up into heaven in the 'fullness of their person'.

The cases of Enoch and Elijah offer a better analogy with what is supposed to have happened to Mary, but there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that what happened to these two individuals provide a precedent for the fate of either Mary or any other Christian believer. It is also important to note that in the Bible Enoch and Elijah ascend but did not die. The model of someone dying and ascending is provided not by the Biblical text but by apocryphal material such as the ascent of Adam in the *Testament of Levi / Apocalypse of Adam*.

In the New Testament the only person who enters into glory in body and soul is Christ Himself and there is no suggestion that this will be true of anyone else until the general resurrection on the last day.

The suggestion that these examples show that a belief in Mary's assumption into heaven is 'consonant with Scripture' is therefore unsustainable. In normal English usage 'consonant' means 'consistent with' or 'harmonious with' and the fundamental problem with the report's argument at this point is that there is no general biblical pattern of especially godly people being assumed body and soul into heaven that could then apply to Mary. As I have already suggested, in the Bible itself what happened to Enoch and Elijah is seen as exceptional rather than normative.

We are also told that the idea that Mary was assumed into heaven must be understood in 'the light of scripture.' In terms of the argument developed in the report what this means is that it must be understood in the light of the biblical teaching that Christians have already been raised with Christ and therefore already participate in the glory of heaven. The problem is that the report overlooks the fact that in Scripture this belief exists in tension with the belief that the full manifestation of our resurrection with Christ will only happen when Christ returns and the bodies of those who have died are raised to new life (see 1 Cor 15: 1-58, 1 Thess 4:13-18). Living the Christian life means living in the tension between these two realities, the reality that we have been raised with Christ already, but that we shall only experience this fully at the end of time (Rom 8:18-25, 2 Cor 5:1-5). What the report does is to distort the biblical pattern of grace and hope by suggesting that in Mary at least this tension has already been overcome.

A further problem is the fact that the report appeals to New Testament texts such as 2 Cor 5:17 ('if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come') as pointing us to the meaning of the tradition about Mary's assumption without acknowledging that in the New Testament such language is used

in the context of the conviction that thus far the new creation has only been fully manifested in Christ Himself. Therefore when the report declares that:

The pattern of hope and grace already foreshadowed in Mary will be fulfilled in the new creation in Christ when all the redeemed will participate in the full glory of the Lord.

it is giving Mary a role that in the New Testament belongs solely to Christ. In the New Testament it is Christ and not Mary or anyone else who foreshadows what will be when the new creation is revealed.

The second item is:

...that in view of her vocation to be the mother of the Holy One, Christ's redeeming work reached 'back' in Mary to the depths of her being and to her earliest beginnings.

As in the case of the previous item, what we have here is a statement that is phrased in vague language, but what it seems to be saying is in line with the 1854 doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. That is to say, what the words seem to imply is that in the case of Mary the redeeming work of Christ had a retroactive effect in that from the beginning of her existence Christ dealt with sin in every area of her life. It is because this is what is being said that the report is able to say that:

Roman Catholics can recognize in this what is affirmed by the dogma – namely 'preserved from all stain of original sin' and 'from the first moment of her conception.'

There are two problems with case that the report makes for believing that Mary was preserved from all sin¹⁹ in this way.

The Lucan text which is appealed to as direct biblical justification is Luke 1:28 where we read that the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and said: 'Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you.' The report argues that the underlying Greek here: '...implies a prior sanctification with divine grace prior to her calling'²⁰ and it later goes on to gloss this by saying that what it means is that: 'We can thus see that God was at work in Mary from her earliest beginnings, preparing her for the unique vocation of bearing in her own flesh the new Adam.'²¹

The problem with this argument is that it is a classic example of what is known as 'eisegesis', that is, reading in to biblical passages that which is not there. Nothing is said in Lk 1:28 or anywhere else in the New Testament about Mary being prepared in some special way to be the mother of the Messiah, let alone this meaning that she was miraculously preserved from sin. As George Caird notes in his commentary on St Luke's Gospel in Lk 1:28: 'Mary is addressed simply as the favoured one, the recipient of a privilege, the beneficiary of God's sovereign and unconditioned

19 Although the dogma only talks about 'original sin' this does not mean that Roman Catholic theology is open to the idea that Mary then went on to commit actual sin. The idea is rather that being preserved miraculously from original sin Mary was as a result free from the actual sin that results from it. See Catechism of the Catholic Church, Para 967.

20 Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ, p.17 (Para 16).

21 Ibid p.52 (Para 55).

choice.²² In the context of Luke 1 Mary is said to be favoured by God because she has been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah (Lk 1:30-33) and she is chosen simply because she is chosen, not because she has been prepared in advance for the role by some miraculous work of God earlier in her life.

What the report has in fact done (whether intentionally or not) is to perpetuate the theology reflected in the traditional Latin translation of Lk 1:28 as '*plena gratia*' – 'full of grace'. What this (mis)translation (which has been rejected by all modern versions of the New Testament including the Roman Catholic *Jerusalem Bible*) embodies is the idea that grace is a quality in human beings. In the case of Mary what this means is that she is fit to be the Mother of God because of her total sanctity. She is, as the report puts it, 'graced', that is to say made holy, by the work of God in her from the earliest moments of her existence and as such prepared for the vocation of being the Mother of God.

The biblical idea of grace, however, is that grace is not a quality with which human beings, in this case Mary, are endowed. It is the gift of God's merciful favour to those who in and of themselves are totally undeserving (see for example Eph 2:1-10, Tit 3:3-7).²³ In the case of Mary this means that she has nothing in her that makes her fit to be the Mother of God, but God chooses her anyway. As so often Martin Luther gets the point exactly:

'O Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, you were nothing and all despised; yet God in his grace regarded you and worked such great things in you. You were worthy of none of them, but the rich and abundant grace of God was upon you, far above any merit of yours. Hail to you! Blessed are you from henceforth and forever in finding such a God.' Nor need you fear that she will take it amiss if we call her unworthy of such grace. For, of a truth, she did not lie when she acknowledged her unworthiness and nothingness, which God regarded, not because of any merit in her but solely by reason of his grace.²⁴

The second problem is the way in which the report appeals to the general teaching of Scripture. The report correctly declares that:

The Scriptures also speak of God's care for all human beings, even before their coming to birth (Psalm 139:13-18), and recount the action of God's grace preceding the specific calling of particular persons, even from their conception (cf. Jeremiah 1:5, Luke 1:15, Galatians 1:15).²⁵

²² G B Caird, *Saint Luke*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, p.53.

²³ For explanations of these different understandings of grace see for instance P S Watson 'Grace' in A Richardson (ed), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, London: SCM, 1969, pp.147-149 and R Kearsley 'Grace' in S B Ferguson et al (eds), *New Dictionary of Theology*, Leicester: IVP, 1988, pp 280-281. It is true that in texts such as Acts 4:33, 11:23, 13:43, Rom 5:21 and 1 Cor 15:10 grace seems to be described in terms of the activity of God in the life of believers, but in context it is clear that what is being talked about is the effects of grace rather than grace itself.

²⁴ M Luther *Das Magnificat*, cited in W Hollewegger, 'Ave Maria: Mary, the Reformers and the Protestants', *One in Christ*, 4, 1977, p.287.

²⁵ *Mary Grace and Hope in Christ* p 52 (Para 54).

and that

According to the New Testament, being ‘graced’ has the connotation of being freed from sin through Christ’s blood (Ephesians 1:6-7). The Scriptures point to the efficacy of Christ’s atoning sacrifice even for those who preceded him in time (cf. 1 Peter 3:19, John 8:56, 1 Corinthians 10:4).²⁶

However, in neither case does this biblical teaching point to the idea either that Christians in general or Mary in particular are preserved in holiness and kept free from sin by the action of God from the earliest moment of their lives. On the contrary, the explicit biblical teaching is that ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Rom 3:23) and there is no suggestion that this is not true of Mary as well.

The report attempts to get round this by stating in footnote 12 that:

The assertion of Paul at Romans 3:23 - “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” - might appear to allow for no exceptions, not even for Mary. However, it is important to note the rhetorical-apologetic context of the general argument of Romans 1 – 3, which is concerned to show the equal sinfulness of Jews and Gentiles (3:9). Romans 3:23 has a quite specific purpose in context which is unrelated to the issue of the “sinlessness” or otherwise of Mary.²⁷

The difficulty with this argument is the fact that in Rom 1:18-3:23 the way that St. Paul goes about showing that both Jews and Greeks are in equal need of the gospel is precisely by arguing that each and every individual whether Jew or Greek is a sinner. Rom 3:9 for example specifically declares:

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; *for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin.*

In the words of F F Bruce in his commentary on Romans, what St Paul is saying is that: ‘all men, as individuals, have sinned.’²⁸ This being the case, his teaching is clearly related to the issue of the sinlessness or otherwise of Mary. It tells us that she too was a sinner.

What all this means is that we have to say that the report’s contention that what they say about Mary in this second item of agreement is ‘consonant with Scripture’ is unsustainable. What is said in this item is not only not built upon Scripture, but is in fact contrary to it.

What this in turn means is that the next item on the list, the claim that:

...the teaching about Mary in the two definitions of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, understood within the biblical pattern of the economy of hope and grace, can be said to be consonant with the teaching of the Scriptures and the ancient common traditions.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid, p.57 (Para 59).

²⁷ Ibid, p.57.

²⁸ F F Bruce, *Romans*, Leicester: IVP, 183, p.102.

²⁹ *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, p.79 (Para 78)

is also unsustainable. What the report attempts to do is to show that the two definitions can be seen as consonant with Scripture, but as we have seen this argument simply does not work. Even when interpreted within the theological framework of ‘grace and hope’ suggested by the report they are not in line with what Scripture teaches. What is more they cannot rightly be said to be consonant with the ‘ancient common traditions’ either.

The phrase ‘ancient common traditions’ means the traditions of the Patristic period and what is clear is that these traditions show only qualified support for the beliefs reflected in the definitions.

In the case of the Immaculate Conception, although there were those like St. Augustine who were reticent about acknowledging Mary’s sinfulness, nevertheless, as the report itself acknowledges (Para 38) there were also Fathers who held that she was a sinner. As John Kelly notes, even after the Council of Ephesus in 431 had declared that Mary was *Theotókos*:

...the old doubts about her sinlessness and moral perfection continued to be widely held. In the East the tradition going back to Origen which stressed her human frailties and lack of faith in her Son was remarkably slow in dying; in the West the conviction that only Christ has been ideally good, and Augustine’s more recent teaching about original sin, remained as stumbling blocks for even longer.³⁰

In the case of the Assumption we are dealing with a belief that only seems to have arisen in the Fourth century and even then took some time to be generally accepted. It therefore cannot be said to be a belief that is representative of the Patristic period as whole. It is not part of the most ancient common tradition.

It also needs to be noted that, as J K Elliott comments, it was a belief that ‘originated in apocryphal literature,’³¹ and that if one looks at the samples of this literature contained in Elliott’s edition of *The Apocryphal New Testament*³² it is clear that the literature in question is entirely legendary in nature. No one has ever succeeded in showing that this material is based on reliable historical tradition concerning what happened at the end of Mary’s life.

If the argument that the definitions are consonant with Scripture and Patristic tradition fails then the argument in the next item on the list necessarily fails as well. This item states that the agreement about the definitions contained in the report

...when accepted by our two Communions, would place the questions about authority which arise from the two definitions of 1854 and 1950 in a new ecumenical context.³³

The argument in paragraphs 61-63 of the report on which this statement is based is that if the approach to Marian doctrine set out in the report were to be accepted by the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches as an authentic expression of the faith they share, then this would provide a way through the ecumenical impasse currently caused by the existence of the two Roman Catholic dogmatic definitions concerning

³⁰ J N D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5ed, London: A&C Black, 1980, pp. 498-499.

³¹ J K Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford:OUP, 2004, p. 691.

³² *Ibid* pp. 691-723.

³³ *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, p.79 (Para 78).

Mary. It would do this because Anglicans would be able to recognise the substance of the Roman Catholic dogmas as based not simply on the authority of the Pope and the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church (which has been the standard Anglican critique of them) but as a legitimate expression of the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Early Church.

The problem with this argument is if it can be shown that the approach to Marian doctrine that it proposes cannot be seen as consonant with Scripture and the teaching of the Early Fathers then the whole basis for ecumenical rapprochement which it puts forward then collapses. The problem for Anglicans of dogmatic definitions rooted solely in Roman Catholic tradition and Papal authority would remain.

The final item on the list states:

...that Mary has a continuing ministry which serves the ministry of Christ, our unique mediator, that Mary and the saints pray for the whole Church and that the practice of asking Mary and the saints to pray for us is not communion-dividing.³⁴

The first problem raised by this item is the claim that 'Mary has a continuing ministry which serves the ministry of Christ'. As we have seen, the argument is that biblical passages such as Jn 2:1-12 and Jn 19:26-27 indicate that Mary has a continuing maternal role in heaven caring for the faithful and bringing their needs to the attention of her son. The problem is that the passages in question do not provide an adequate basis for such beliefs. There is nothing in them to suggest that what St. John wanted his readers to understand was that Mary had a continuing maternal role in heaven. In the absence of any evidence that this was his intention we cannot simply take incidents from the fourth Gospel and use them as the basis for seeking to decide what is currently happening in heaven.

The second problem is the more general issue of whether it is legitimate to ask the saints to pray for us. As Article XXII indicates, after long debates about the matter the English Reformers eventually came to the view that the invocation of the saints was theologically illegitimate³⁵ and, at least as far as the Church of England goes, this still remains the official Anglican position.

The argument put forward by the report for invoking the saints is that if we can ask people on earth to pray for us we can ask the same of the saints in heaven. This is not a new argument. It was a standard argument on the traditionalist side at the Reformation and was explicitly rejected by the English Reformers. We can see this if we look at the *Second Book of Homilies*, described in Article XXXV as containing:

'...a godly and wholesome doctrine'. The Homily 'Of Prayer' declares:

Christ sitting in heaven, hath an everlasting Priesthood, and always prayeth to his Father for them that be penitent, obtaining by virtue of his wounds, which are evermore in the sight of God, not only perfect remission of our sins, but also all other necessities that we lack in this world (Matthew 6.33, James 5.15, Colossians 4.12), so

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp.79-80 (Para 78).

³⁵ The use of the adjective 'Romish' in Article XXII can be a red herring on this point. It does not mean 'that particular version of the invocation of saints practised in the Roman Church', but rather 'the invocation of saints, which the Roman Church practices.'

that this only Mediator is sufficient in heaven (1 Timothy 2.5), and needeth no others to help him (Hebrews 7.25).

Why then doe we pray one for another in this life, some man perchance will here demand? Forsooth we are willed so to do, by the express commandment both of Christ and his disciples, to declare therein as well the faith that we have in Christ towards God, as also the mutual charity that we bear one towards another, in that we pity our brothers case, and make our humble petition to God for him. But that we should pray unto Saints, neither have we any commandment in all the Scripture, nor yet example which we may safely follow. So that being done without authority of Gods word, it lacketh the ground of faith, & therefore cannot be acceptable before God (Hebrews 11.6). For whatsoever is not of faith, is sin (Romans 14.23). And as the Apostle saith, that faith commeth by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10.17).

Yet thou wilt object further, that the Saints in heaven do pray for us, and that their prayer proceedeth of an earnest charity that they have towards their brethren on earth. Whereto it may be well answered. First, that no man knoweth whether they do pray for us, or no. And if any will go about to prove it by the nature of charity, concluding, that because they did pray for men on earth, therefore they do much more the same now in heaven: Then may it be said by the same reason, that as oft as we doe weep on earth, they do also weep in heaven, because while they lived in this world, it is most certain and sure they did so. And for that place which is written in the Apocalypse, namely that the Angel did offer up the prayers of the Saints upon the golden Altar: it is properly meant, and ought properly to be understood of those Saints that are yet living on earth, and not of them that are dead, otherwise what need were it that the Angel should offer up their prayers, being now in heaven before the face of Almighty God ? But admit the Saints do pray for us, yet do we not know how, whether specially for them which call upon them, or else generally for all men, wishing well to every man alike. If they pray specially for them which call upon them, then it is like they hear our prayers, and also know our hearts desire. Which thing to be false, it is already proved both by the Scriptures, and also by the authority of Augustine.

Let us not therefore put our trust or confidence in the Saints or Martyrs that be dead. Let us not call upon them, nor desire help at their hands: but let us always lift up our hearts to GOD, in the name of his dear Son Christ, for whose sake as GOD hath promised to hear our prayer, so he will truly perform it.³⁶

What the report is suggesting is therefore that Anglicans should accept an argument that was explicitly rejected by the English Reformers and is still explicitly rejected by one of the Church of England's official doctrinal standards, without giving us any new or cogent reason why we should do so. That is not a good basis for ecumenical agreement.

Finally, the report suggests that the issue of asking Mary and the Saints to pray for us is 'not communion-dividing.' This is a problematic suggestion because (a) the term

³⁶ Text in *The Homilies*, Bishopstone: The Bynmill Press, 2006, pp.236-237.

‘communion-dividing’ is never defined and, as we know, what it means to be in or out of communion with someone is a much debated issue and (b) if communion dividing means that which divides the visible Church then it is communion dividing in the sense that there is no prospect of the Roman Catholic Church being in full communion with a Church that did not officially permit and practice the invocation of the Saints and equally no prospect of Evangelical Anglicans ever agreeing to be part of a Church that did.

What then can we say?

For the reasons given above, as an Evangelical Anglican I could not endorse the conclusions of *Mary Grace and Hope in Christ* as expressing what I believe or what I think my church should accept. However, I do not want to end this paper on this negative note. I know that what I have said will be inevitably seen by many Christians as dishonouring to Mary, but that is not my intention. I want to say with Huldrych Zwingli:

The more honour and love grows amongst humankind, the greater honour and respect will grow towards Mary because she has borne us the great and merciful Lord and Saviour.³⁷

Therefore, in order to honour Mary I want to finish by saying what I think we can rightly say about her on the basis of the witness of Scripture.

Firstly, on the basis of Mt 1:23 and Lk 1:35 we can say that Mary was the *Theotókos*, the God bearer, the Mother of God.

Secondly, on the basis of Lk 1:28 and 1:30 we can say that as such she is a person who has been highly favoured by God, someone who has been privileged by being given a uniquely significant place in God’s economy.

Thirdly as the one who was the Mother of God it is legitimate to describe her with many of the Early Fathers as the ‘new Eve’. In the words of St Irenaeus:

And just as through a disobedient virgin man was stricken and fell into death, so through the Virgin who was obedient to the Word of God man was reanimated and received life. For the Lord came to seek again the sheep that was lost; and man it was that was lost; and for this cause there was not made some other formation, but in that same which had its descent from Adam He preserved the likeness of the [first] formation. For it was necessary that Adam should be summed up in Christ, that mortality might be swallowed up and overwhelmed by immortality; and Eve summed up in Mary, that a virgin should be a virgin’s intercessor, and by a virgin’s obedience undo and put away the disobedience of a virgin.³⁸

Fourthly, we can rightly say that in spite of her human frailty and sinfulness Mary is a model for Christian discipleship. She is the one who was obedient to God’s word (Lk 1:37), who praised God for His mighty works of salvation (Lk 1:46-55), who pondered in her heart the things she learned about Christ (Lk 2:51), who brought

³⁷ *Zwinglis Werke*, 1:426, quoted in Hollewenger, art cit, p.289.

³⁸ Irenaeus *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 33, in I M Mackenzie, *Irenaeus’s Demonstration of the apostolic Preaching*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002, p.11.

people's needs to Christ and told people to be obedient to Him (Jn 2:3-4), who stayed with Christ to the end when other disciples had run away to hide (Jn 19:25-27), and who devoted herself to prayer with other members of the first Christian community as they waited for the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:14).

For all these reasons we can glorify God for the life and witness of Mary and join with all generations in calling her blessed.

Chapter 7

Scripture and authority in the Roman Catholic Church – with reference to the two Marian teachings regarded as dogma

Thomas Seville CR¹

It may confidently be asserted that the Roman Catholic Church teaches with authority. Yet how that is perceived differs and indeed has differed over the centuries and within the last century. In the nineteenth century the Lambeth Fathers rebutted the recently promulgated teaching of *Pastor Aeternus* on the infallibility of the Pope, on the grounds that, in so doing it had invaded the attributes of God;² one of the bishops³ at that gathering of Anglican bishops had had the doubtful honour of being the last bishop of the Church of England to treat in writing of the Pope as Antichrist. More recently, the bishops of the Church of England have given serious and largely positive attention to the role of the Pope in any future united church⁴. There has been a change of some moment.

In this essay I wish to take a view of the kind of the authority with which the Roman Catholic Church teaches. In a second part I remark on the question of the status of what are known as the two Marian dogmas, the teaching that through the merits of Christ the Blessed Virgin Mary was preserved from all taint of original sin and the teaching that after the end of her mortal life she was taken body and soul to glory, defined with authority, infallibly, in *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854) and *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950) respectively. If the Church of Rome does aim to teach on the basis of the scriptures – which I argue she does – I will suggest that, if these two teachings do not contradict the gospel of Christ, there is a way forward which does justice to both the Anglican churches and to the Church of Rome, and does so as churches in times of separation. It is important to note that these teachings are binding on the faith of all the faithful, must be believed with a full assent, with divine faith; these teachings are matters, in other words, understood to be revealed by God. Even if Anglicans may find much in these teachings to impress and indeed to agree with,⁵ the

¹ Fr Thomas Seville CR, Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, Yorks.

² Lambeth Conference 1878 in *The Six Lambeth Conferences*, London, 1920, p. 94.

³ Bishop Christopher Wordsworth of Lincoln.

⁴ *Authority in the Church II*: 31. ‘Anglicans and Roman Catholics can agree in much of the truth that these two dogmas are designed to affirm. We agree that there can be but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, and reject any interpretation of the role of Mary which obscures this affirmation. We agree in recognizing that Christian understanding of Mary is inseparably linked with the doctrines of Christ and of the Church. We agree in recognizing the grace and unique vocation of Mary, Mother of God Incarnate (Theotokos), in observing her festivals, and in according her honor in the communion of saints. We agree that she was prepared by divine grace to be the mother of our Redeemer, by whom she herself was redeemed and received into glory. We further agree in recognizing in Mary a model of holiness, obedience and faith for all Christians. We accept that it is possible to regard her as a prophetic figure of the Church of God before as well as after the Incarnation,’ *ibid.*, II 30; *Final report*, para 30.

manner in which this is declared at least and at most the authority by which the declaration is made are issues which remain unconcluded.

Part I

Scripture and tradition

To some it seems that the Roman Catholic Church does not accord normative status to the holy scriptures, but adds an equal weight to 'tradition'. It is to be doubted whether this is the case; the ARCIC agreements between Roman Catholics and Anglicans have consistently worked on the basis of the scriptures as the uniquely authoritative norm, taken with the ancient traditions, which Anglicans have respected and used since the Reformation.

The Second Vatican Council addressed the problem of divine revelation (*Dei Verbum*), in which the relation between scripture and tradition was addressed. In the background was the text of Trent, which had avoided the question of the supremacy of scripture in saying the truth and discipline of the gospel.

... that this truth and instruction are contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions, which have been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or from the apostles themselves, at the dictation of the Holy Spirit, have come down even to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand, [the Council] following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and holds in veneration with an equal affection of piety and reverence all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament, since one God is the author of both, and also the traditions themselves, those that appertain both to faith and to morals, as having been dictated either by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Spirit, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.⁶

This is echoed by the Constitution on divine revelation of the Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*:

Sacred Tradition and sacred scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them flowing out of the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move together towards the same goal.... Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence. Sacred Tradition and sacred scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church.⁷

⁶ contineri in libris scriptis et sine scripta traditionibus, quae ab ipsius Christi ore ab apostolis acceptae, aut ab ipsis apostolis Spiritu Sancto dictante quasi per manus traditae ad nos usque pervenerunt, orthodoxorum patrum exempla secuta, omnes libros tam veteris quam novi testamenti, cum utriusque unus Deus sit auctor, nec non traditiones ipsas, turn ad fidem, turn ad mores pertinentes, tanquam vel ore tenus a Christo, vel a Spiritu Sancto dictatas et continua successione in ecclesia catholica conservatas, pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia suscipit et veneratur. *Concilium Tridentinum: diarium, actorum, epistularum, tractatum*, edited by the Societas Goerresiana, 7 vols. in 13 (Freiburg in Breisgau: B. Herder, 1901-), V.91.

⁷ *Dei Verbum* 9, 10, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1975), p. 755.

A great deal is left unsaid and untaught in both decrees. Scripture and traditions are not antithetical, but form a unity, though the exact relation is not defined by Trent or indeed by Vatican II. They are one and have the same source. They do not oppose one another. The question of the sufficiency of scripture is not decided, though many commentators have thought that this is what is expressed in *Dei Verbum*; it is equally clear that the source, the God Who gives Himself for salvation, is not solely to be found in the texts of the scriptures; the Word of God written and the Word of God are not identical. To this reader, supported by commentators on the text, it seems that the view that *Dei Verbum* favours the material sufficiency of the scriptures is that to be preferred⁸. They are a norm than which there is no higher. In the ARCIC dialogues this is clearly acknowledged and moreover in response to accusations that it is not. The scriptures are ‘a normative record of the foundation of the faith’.⁹

For the Church of Rome the answer to the question of who is to interpret the scriptures and who is to teach is given also by God in a clear way. Someone is needed to interpret and that is something that Anglicans also acknowledge. In the case of the Church of Rome this is found in the church, assisted by the Spirit promised to her. Scripture is read within the church and the church is the place and the subject of its true interpretation. Anglicans may agree,¹⁰ for without taking note of the role of the church interpreting with authority – the church, which has the task of both teaching and guarding the revelation of Christ, the body helped by the Spirit – talk of the sufficiency of the scriptures becomes dangerously abstract. The Spirit is needed, must be prayed for, must be trusted and this finds expression in those entrusted with the charism of teaching, supremely but not exclusively the teachers of the church – for Roman Catholics the ecclesiastical *magisterium*, with the Pope at its focus.

Dei Verbum goes on to treat of the living tradition in which the canon comes to us:

Through the same tradition the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and unceasingly made active in her; and thus God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, and through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them (see Col. 3:16).¹¹

⁸ As Congar notes, there have been many theologians of good repute who have defended such a view. Thomas Aquinas, for example, makes precisely this point: *sacra Scriptura ad hoc divinitus est ordinata ut per eam nobis veritas manifestetur necessaria ad salutem* (*Quaestiones duodecim quodlibetales*, ed. Petri Marietti, in *Quaestiones disputatae*, 5 vols. in 3, 2nd ed. Taurinensis (Augustae Taurinorum: Ex typographia Pontificia et S. RR. Congregationis, 1914), vol. 5, *Quodlibetum VII*, q. vi, a. 14). For further references see Congar, *Tradition and traditions*, pp. 111-116.

⁹ Authority in the Church 1976: ‘To these the Church has recourse for the inspiration of its life and mission; to these the Church refers its teaching and practice. Through these written words the authority of the Word of God is conveyed’, para 2. *The Scriptures are the uniquely inspired witness to divine revelation; the Church's expression of that revelation must be tested by its consonance with Scripture. Elucidation* (1981), para 2

¹⁰ As instanced in the statement in the Malta Report (1967): ‘We agree that revealed Truth is given in holy Scripture and formulated in dogmatic definitions through thought-forms and language which are historically conditioned’: para 5.

¹¹ *Dei Verbum* II, 8.

The model of the interpretation is that of God's speaking and the Church responding, a model of tradition as conversation between the Word addressed and the receivers of the Word, the church.

Three questions

This prompts an Anglican to ask three questions.

(i) First, does this present a problem to a church which has among its authoritative sources Article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion?

Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation. Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.

In the article nothing is said about who is to prove or who is to read or indeed whether there is such an instance and this the article leaves open. This may have been deliberate; yet by claiming the authority to prescribe the Articles, the Church of England posits the church as the organ by which such proving and reading could take place.

It may be argued that only those things that are clear may be so proved or read. In the second of the two ARCIC document on Authority this is given a high position in the response to authoritative teaching by the Pope: 'If the definition proposed for assent were not manifestly a legitimate interpretation of biblical faith and in line with orthodox tradition, Anglicans would think it a duty to reserve the reception of the definition for study and discussion.'¹²

Yet this seems to neglect the complexity by which essential teachings have often come to find expression. Rarely are they '*manifestly* a legitimate interpretation of biblical faith' (italics mine). At one level there are things commonly accounted essential to orthodox Christian belief and practice which are not prescribed by the letter of Holy Writ, such as the *homousios* of Nicea, the double *homousios* of Chalcedon, or the liturgy of the Church.

The Church is the locus for the teaching and testing of the good news, the faith, in the light of scripture. This raises the question of how the Church can be said to be the 'bearer' of the saving message of Christ to which the scriptures bear witness and through which Christ speaks to his Church. Expressions of the faith of the Church, such as the *homoousios*, in response to the Word, have entered into the content of the faith of the apostles, that faith which is handed on by the Spirit. Scripture, on the other hand, insofar as it concerns the question of faith, is the source and norm of the Church's teaching, something unique. Scripture remains the norm. As *The Gift of Authority* puts it, the Church 'regards this corpus alone as the inspired Word of God written and, as such, uniquely authoritative' (19). One of the strengths of the ARCIC report,¹³ shared by both sides, is the concern for a faith which is 'consonant' with the

¹² Authority in the Church II, 29.

¹³ In *The Gift of Authority* 19, echoing *Authority in the Church. Elucidation 2*.

scriptures and this is taken up in *Mary Grace and Hope*,¹⁴ though the understanding of consonance is not made explicit. This is welcome, and the attention given to the scriptures, which is not untypical of the contemporary approach to theologising about the Blessed Virgin Mary both in the Roman and Anglican communions, should please.

The approach of the Roman Church to the scriptures, then, is an ecclesial one, namely that the church, in the language of Article VI is *testis* and *conservatrix*, witness and guardian, that she has been given by God the sense of their meaning, the gift to respond to the truth of the God who loves and saves, attested in them; in the church it is that believers receive the faith and with the church that they say respond to God's word. Rome claims that she has been given the authority to interpret and to do so, in certain confined occasions with the certainty or infallibility which Christ wishes his church to be given.

In an important article,¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, commented on the state of the dialogue between Rome and Canterbury and argued that the main issue between the churches was the issue of the authority of Tradition.¹⁶ That scripture is the norm is undisputed, 'the central authority through which Christ exercises authority over the Church and within it. For this reason all teaching in the Church is ultimately exposition of scripture, just as scripture is exposition of the living word of Jesus Christ.'¹⁷ Ratzinger goes on to describe our relation to the scriptures in terms of 'conversation'. 'The Church is the place in which the Bible is lived and interpreted in a way that binds.'¹⁸ Ratzinger argues that tradition, before it is a matter of texts, is a way of co-ordinating the living Word of the Church and the *decisive* written word of Scripture (italic mine).¹⁹

Anglicans should not see in the Church of Rome's understanding of scripture a body which has a completely different approach to the scriptures than the Church of England. The Church is the place where scripture is expounded and only the whole Church can be properly that locus. She is a *testis* and *conservatrix* of the scriptures (Article VI). It does not seem to be a misreading of the Roman Catholic Church, to say that scripture is indeed a norm which knows no higher and that all that is necessary to salvation may be found in it, but the witness and guardianship of the church, through no intrinsic power other than that of the Spirit in her communion, is the necessary context to read, mark and inwardly digest the content of that salvation. Though balances given may vary, there does not seem to be reason for not agreeing that 'Word of God and Church of God cannot be put asunder' (23)

¹⁴ Paras 58, 59, 78.

¹⁵ *Anglican-Catholic Dialogue: Its problems and its hopes* in 'Church, Ecumenism and Politics', St Paul Publications, Slough 1988, pp. 65-87.

¹⁶ Esp. p. 96-8.

¹⁷ P. 71.

¹⁸ P. 79-80.

¹⁹ P. 79.

(ii) This leads to a second question.

How is tradition to be regarded? Ratzinger usefully regards tradition as a practice and a communion before being a text.²⁰ Tradition is not about supplementary texts. Although the very concept of tradition has been regarded by some Anglicans with reserve, it would be fair to note that the fidelity to the faith received, God being its author, in the realities of space and time, calls for the handing on of the same message and the life which attends and arises in response. A conversation between the Word now preached in the community of faithful, who now call on the Spirit, and the gospel transmitted through time and space by means of the Word written, is necessary, part of the good that is the church. Tradition is for a church in time and space, subject to the exigencies and failures of participated finitude, is a corollary and accompaniment to the work of the Spirit in the people of Christ, expressed in the present life of the Spirit and the interpretation afresh of the gospel. This calls for expressions that are not the same formally as those of other ages and cultures.²¹ Anglicans have been wary of thinking that every custom, howsoever repeated, amounts to something that is always to be held, for 'there was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted'.²² Christians make mistakes and some that are grave. The church in her response to the gospel and in her journey of faith through time, is however enabled by the gift of the Spirit, to teach and to listen, to rely in prayer on the Spirit so that she may remain faithful or return to faithfulness or express less inadequately the witness of the apostles, to confess and to repent, so that she may also be holy. Such a view may be held to underlie the expansion of the understanding of apostolic succession, to be found in many recent dialogues, to include the apostolicity of the whole church, of which the succession of bishops is an effective sign.²³ This process in time and space may be properly called 'Tradition', 'dynamic process, communicating to each generation what was delivered once for all to the apostolic community' (as *The Gift of Authority* puts it), rather than 'a storehouse of doctrine and ecclesial decisions' (14). As its content, it has 'the witness of proclamation, the sacraments and life in communion', which is also that to which, by the Spirit, it leads and issues. (18) Tradition thus becomes the living interpretation of the Scriptures, digging deeper wells into a prime source of the Church's life and it does this by unpacking what is read in the texts, but also the life of the Spirit which is the life of the communion of the church. It is the Word, written and incarnate and given in the Spirit to an undeserving Church, that is the well of life.

(iii) This leads to the third question.

Is the view of the Church of Rome with respect to the bearer of teaching too narrow? More fully, if it is the church that is the carrier of the tradition, the succession of faith and life which depends on the Spirit promised, does the Roman Church view the

²⁰ Robert Jenson notes that Ratzinger has to use the language of Orthodoxy to make his point: *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 108.

²¹ A good treatment of Tradition is found in the *The Church of the Triune God - The Cyprus Agreed Statement of the the International Commission for the Anglican - Orthodox Theological Dialogue*, London: Anglican Communion Office. 2006.

²² *Concerning the Service of the Church*, Book of Common Prayer (1662).

²³ *ARCIC Ministry and Ordination*, 1973, paras 9, 16; *Elucidation*, para 3; *Authority I*, para 20. See *Apostolicity and Succession House of Bishops' Occasional Paper*, GS Misc 432, 1994.

focus of the teaching office which articulates and has the authority to judge this life too narrowly? To put it bluntly, is it just Pope and bishops, or indeed just Pope?

Although this is a popular view, to this reader it is not the case and this is borne out by the ARCIC documents. Certainly, the testimony of the ARCIC documents on the role of the Pope and bishops in relation to the church do not support the popular view.²⁴ For Anglicans and Roman Catholics on the party which prepared *The Gift of Authority* it is the 'people of God' that is 'as a whole is a bearer of the living Tradition ... the discernment, actualisation and communication of the Word of God is the responsibility of the whole people of God' (28). They take an essential part in the testing of teachings where there has been doubt or novelty: 'loyal criticism and reforms are sometimes needed, following the example of Paul (cf. Galatians 2.11-14)' (*The Gift of Authority* 41, 42; 48). 'The Church in all its members is involved in such a definition which clarifies and enriches their grasp of the truth,²⁵ part of what is involved in that aspect of episcopate which is communal. 'It is the whole Church that learns, it is the whole Church that teaches, but in different ways.'²⁶ This does seem to find echoes both in Roman Catholic theology and in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Believing is not a matter of passive reception, but is something that engages the whole of the faithful and is active. The whole church can be said to deepen in understanding (and so find new expressions of the faith). 'There is growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers ... For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her.'²⁷ Debate and conflict occur and it is not always those competent to judge and determine matters of teaching who see the truth.²⁸ The whole church, laity and clergy and councils and Pope, all take part in the response to the Word and have a role in the formation of teaching.

For Roman Catholics and also in terms less stringently expressed for Anglicans, this means that the church is preserved from grave error²⁹. Roman Catholics believe that this is because the Word has been received by the Church and the Church has been anointed by the Spirit:

The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cf. 1 John. 2:20 and 27) cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, when 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful'

²⁴ Authority in the Church I and II; *Gift of Authority*, 49.

²⁵ *Authority in the Church*, II 24.

²⁶ Yves Congar, 'Towards a Catholic Synthesis in the Church' in *Who has the say in the Church*, eds Moltmann and Kung, Concilium 148/8 (1981): 68-80, at p. 70.

²⁷ Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, 8, in Vatican Council II: *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1975), p. 754.

²⁸ *Authority* I 19: 'This mission involves the whole people of God, among whom some may rediscover or perceive more clearly than others certain aspects of the saving truth. At times there result conflict and debate. Customs, accepted positions, beliefs, formulations and practices, as well as innovations and re-interpretations, may be shown to be inadequate, mistaken or even inconsistent with the gospel.'

²⁹ *Authority* I 19.

they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals. By this appreciation of the faith, aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, guided by the sacred teaching authority (magisterium) and obeying it, receives not the mere word of men, but truly the word of God, the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The people unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply with right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life.³⁰

The capacity to bring the assent is therefore a matter of the work of the Holy Spirit in the faithful. This is recognised in the role given to the *sensus fidei* – the name given to the sense of perception by the faithful of the Christian truth and indeed its expression, something that is the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The content of this is often called the *sensus fidelium*. It may be asked how the Roman Catholic Church understands the significance of the recognition of the presence of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, in non-Roman Catholic bodies, not only the Orthodox and the Orientals, but also the Anglicans and the Protestant communions. Although these expressions (*sensus fidelium* and *sensus fidei*) are not common in use by Anglican theologians, they have proved very useful in interpreting the role of the Christian people in responding to and believing realities of the faith, especially those that have found corporate expression at particular and sometimes critical times.

As this quotation indicates, the teaching authority, with its focus in the Bishop of Rome, has been crucial and, even before Vatican I, the utterances of a Pope, teaching matters pertaining to faith and morals, called for religious assent and submission, as they do now. When speaking infallibly, it is not a matter of an individual, but of one person, in virtue of what has been entrusted to him for the service of truth, in a matter of faith and morals, in consultation with bishops (not *absolutely* necessary), and aware of what he is doing, speaking in a way that the matter so defined can be trusted utterly to be part of divine teaching, revealed. He is not inspired nor is the teaching an addition to revelation.³¹ It is also a ministry exercised by a frail sinner: ‘I carry out this duty with the profound conviction that I am obeying the Lord, and with a clear sense of my own human frailty. Indeed, if Christ himself gave Peter this special mission in the Church and exhorted him to strengthen his brethren, he also made clear to him his human weakness and his special need of conversion: “And when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:32).’³² ‘This authority is exercised by fragile Christians for the sake of other fragile Christians’ (*Gift of Authority* 48). It is subordinate to the mercy of God: ‘The authority proper to this ministry is completely at the service of God’s merciful plan and it must always be seen in this perspective’ (*Ut unum sint* 92). Though some Anglicans see the reason and the fittingness for such a ministry as exercised by the Bishop of Rome, no consensus has emerged on the status of the teachings that establish his position in the church universal.

³⁰ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, 12, in Vatican Council II: *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1975), p. 363.

³¹ ‘We are agreed that doctrinal decisions made by legitimate authority must be consonant with the community’s faith as grounded in Scripture and interpreted by the mind of the Church, and that no teaching authority can add new revelation to the original apostolic faith’: *Authority in the Church*, 23.

³² Pope John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, 4, cited *Gift of Authority*, 48.

Church or not church?

Yet in a time of separation this raises the issue of ‘church’, for where there is church there is *sensus fidei* and *sensus fidelium*, there is perception and there is judgment of the truth taught and addressed, howsoever faulty or weak in its articulation. However, where is the church? In two recent³³ documents the see of Rome has appeared to teach a measure of identification between the Catholic Church and the church in communion with Rome that has been profoundly offensive to ecumenical partners, not least because it seems to bypass the understanding of the Church as *mystery* in Vatican II.³⁴ These utterances by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have not encountered a welcome without reserve and indeed have met with criticism and dissent from Roman Catholic bishops.

It does not seem, even if these are authoritative utterances, that the presence of elements of the Church is being denied to those bodies not in communion with Rome. If it is the *whole* Church, not just those parts in communion with the Holy See, which is the place for the response to God’s Word, as suggested above, then it is of significance that ecclesial reality, whether properly or only in some sense, is accorded to churches not in communion with her. The significance of such churches for the reality of the perception of Christian truth, the importance of the reception and the teaching of the faith, should not be ignored; it means that the *sensus fidei* and the *sensus fidelium* exist in ecclesial realities. These are both ‘senses’ that are due to the Holy Spirit and to the theological reality of the Church. It is consistent therefore to attribute such a sense to those Christian bodies which Rome, with some hesitancy, has been able to regard as churches in a proper sense, such as the Orthodox and the Orientals.

Yet does it apply to those bodies which Rome has had difficulty in regarding as churches in the proper sense?³⁵ If the Holy Spirit is present in those bodies – as Anglicans would certainly wish to say – then they have a part in the response to God’s saving Word, his revelation and so share in the *sensus fidei*. It would seem that the Roman Catholic Church has no difficulty in recognising that the Holy Spirit is indeed present in bodies which do and do not at present express the Christian faith in different ways.³⁶ They enjoy a communion, though imperfect, with her.³⁷ The Church is present in them: ‘the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them.’³⁸ This

³³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, 2000; Responses to Some Questions regarding certain aspects of the doctrine of the Church, 2007.

³⁴ Nicholas Lash, ‘Churches Proper and Otherwise’, *The Tablet*, 21st July 2007.

³⁵ *Unitatis Redintegratio* 2, 3.

³⁶ In *Lumen Gentium* it is taught in relation to the Catholic Church that ‘many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure’: LG 8; and of non-Catholics ‘we can say that in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them too He gives His gifts and graces whereby He is operative among them with His sanctifying power. Some indeed He has strengthened to the extent of the shedding of their blood’: LG 15; also *Ut unum sint* 10.

³⁷ LG 15. Cf. ‘the elements of sanctification and truth present in the other Christian Communities, in a degree which varies from one to the other, constitute the objective basis of the communion, albeit imperfect, which exists between them and the Catholic Church’: *Ut unum sint* 11.

³⁸ *Ut unum sint* 11

would seem to entail that the *sensus fidei* cannot be confined just to the Roman Catholic Church and that the process of reception and proving of the truth of teachings is also to be recognised in bodies which, in Roman Catholic understanding, lack part of the fullness of the means of salvation.³⁹ Indeed is it not a presupposition of the moving question addressed by Pope John Paul II to Christians who are not in full communion with Rome:

Could not the real but imperfect communion existing between us persuade Church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church and allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by his plea "that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (*Jn 17:21*)? (*Ut unum sint 98*)

It would seem that according to RC self-understanding, the Spirit which is given to the church is present and also effective in a churches like the Anglican churches and they take part in the *sensus fidei* and therefore the business of reception. That is not a process that is left unaffected by the teaching of the decree on ecumenism or indeed the history of its application since.⁴⁰ Some modern Roman Catholic theologians would seem to recognise this, but the consequences are not fully drawn.

The Church of England believes herself to be part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, and to be able, through the gift of the Spirit, to come to some statements on the meaning of God's will and to interpret and to preach His Word. Although the reluctance to regard her as a sister church is a cause of pain, it is clear that it is possible to see in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church a theological role for the Church of England and her fellow churches, in reception of which some teachings are either in general, poorly understood or have been regarded as 'another gospel'.

Learning to read the scriptures in the context of the community of faith is an urgent ecumenical desideratum, something that we hardly know how to do.⁴¹ Ratzinger himself acknowledges the importance of this insight for the reading and responding to the Word in the Church. A hermeneutics of unity together is called for: 'unity is a fundamental hermeneutic principle of all theology, and we must learn to read the documents which have been handed down to us, according to the hermeneutics of unity, which shew up much that is new and open doors where only bolts were visible before.'⁴²

Part II

In part I, I observed that the Church of Rome aims to teach on the basis of the scriptures, that the whole church is the bearer of that teaching and shares in its authority. Yet for the bishop of Rome there is claimed the gift, a gift for the whole church, which enables truths to be declared and truths to be assented to with faith. In

³⁹ Francis Sullivan 'The Sense of Faith: The Sense/Consensus of the Faithful', in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church, Theory and Practice*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2002, pp. 85-94, at p. 92.

⁴⁰ See Luis Bermejo, *Church, conciliarity and communion*, pp. 210, 320.

⁴¹ See Jenson, p. 117.

⁴² *Church*, p. 82.

two cases regarding Mary, both since the separation of the two communions, this has taken place at the level of the articulation of dogma, of revelation.

What would be an appropriate way in a united church for these teachings to be placed? What is the status of the two dogmas?

Hierarchy of Truths – a way forward

Ratzinger noted that the two Marian dogmas were ‘the most tangible symptoms of the overall problem of authority in the church.’⁴³ Although the ARCIC document regards these as consonant with scripture, no way is offered to seeing how they may figure, as teachings authoritatively defined as revealed and compelling assent, for a church that had no part in their formulation or indeed in the life and time in which a perception of their binding character became apparent. For most Anglicans it would seem hard to imagine as regarding them as essential to salvation. Yet they are not regarded as essential beliefs for those outside the church, in the sense that without them hope of salvation is imperilled.

Help in understanding the role of the dogmas concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary is to be found in a phrase, originally in citation marks, in the Second Vatican Council’s decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Here there is a phrase that has had a major role in ecumenical discussions that have taken place during the last forty years and that has been taken up by *Mary Grace and Hope*:⁴⁴ ‘When comparing doctrines with one another, they (meaning Catholic theologians) should remember that in Catholic doctrine, there exists an order or “hierarchy of truths” (Article 11).’ This means that in order to understand the weight of a teaching it needs to be understood in ordered relation to others. This order is not arbitrary, but is determined by the relation of doctrines to ‘their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith’, in other words to the reality of Christ, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, true God and true man, the Saviour of the world, and therefore to the Trinity. Without wishing to relegate other teachings to the level of *adiaphora* or matters that are not binding on the conscience, this seems to say that ‘not all truths possess the same status and value in the faith as a whole’ and that ‘attention should be paid in the first instance to the foundation and centre of the Christian faith that all other truths should be seen and evaluated in the light of the fundamental and central truths of faith.’⁴⁵ Recently Cardinal Walter Kasper echoed this thought when he said, in St Paul outside

⁴³ P. 69.

⁴⁴ See in relation to the subject matter of this collection, Groupe des Dombes, *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, ed. Alain Blancy and Maurice Jourjon, Paulist Press, New York, 1999. For a discussion see Joseph Feiner ‘Commentary on the Decree’, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Volume II, edited Vorgrimmler, p. 57-164. Also Charles Morerod, *The question of the authority of the recent Marian dogmas* in Denaux and Sagovsky, ed., *Studying Mary: Reflections on the Virgin Mary in Anglican and Roman Catholic Theology and Devotion*, T and T Clark, London, 2007, pp. 201-215.

⁴⁵ Feiner, p. 119-120: ‘the “hierarchy of truth” does not mean “a principle of subtraction,” as if faith could be reduced to some “essentials” whereas the “rest” is left free or even dismissed as not significant. The ‘hierarchy of truth . . . is a principle of organic structure.’ It should not be confused with the degrees of certainty; it simply means that the different truths of faith are ‘organized’ around a center” (Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 42).

the Walls that “Jesus Christ is not only the foundation but also the goal of our ecumenical commitment. In Him we will be one.”⁴⁶

This does not mean that teachings that do not immediately touch the centre or have been discerned as relating to the centre in the life of the Spirit through the ages are however things insignificant; the assent called for is the same. Roman Catholic teaching is that if something is divinely revealed and has been said to be such by those entrusted with making such a judgment, the response of the faithful is to give fullest assent, assent moreover which is given under and through the work of God, by the Spirit, the assent *fides divina*. While allowing distinctions and varied relations to the foundation or centre, the faith as revealed remains whole. This presents an issue, for the teachings of the two Marian dogmas are not easily or obviously read from the pages of scripture, even though, as ARCIC has done, they may be understood as not being repugnant to it. This Anglican writer – and the scholastic distinctions of kinds of faith and assent are not natural to most Anglicans – would be worried that despite the distinctions that may be made between these dogmas and the undoubtedly central truths, it is not possible to treat of them as requiring the same intensity of assent. A distinction needs to be made, out of recognition that these are teachings that are not such as to be provable from scripture alone⁴⁷ and have risen to the status of dogma in but one part of the Church catholic. In the light of what has been said about the *sensus fidei* outside the walls of the Roman Church, *sensus fidei* does belong to the churches not now in communion with the Holy See.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the hierarchy of truths is much easier to treat of in general terms, than as a piece of systematic theology. It has been of service in presenting the Christian faith as articulated by the Roman Catholic Church as a whole, but with a variety of shades and colours and removing the appearance to many non-Roman Catholics that no distinction is made in the weight given to elements of faith and practice.⁴⁹ Again, it has been the practice of the Church of England to mark out elements of the faith that have greater weight than others.⁵⁰ It is something that does need to be used in treating of the role of the two dogmas, which though they may relate to the foundation of faith, do by no means constitute it. Roman Catholics believe these may be said to be divinely revealed and that the course of the apostolic faith in the Roman Catholic church has led her to define them as such. Most Anglicans, although they may appreciate the relation of these teachings to the salvation wrought by the one mediator Jesus Christ, would find it difficult to assent to

⁴⁶ Homily to conclude Christian Unity Week, Tuesday, 25 January 2005

⁴⁷ Noted by Ratzinger in ‘Revelation and Tradition’, in Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, tr. W. J. O’Hara, vol. 17 of *Quaestiones disputatae* (New York: Herder, 1966), p. 34.

⁴⁸ It is hard not to see this acknowledgment implicitly in the great encyclical *Ut unum sint*, in which Pope John Paul II asked help from the separated brothers and sisters for a deeper understanding of the office of the Pope, with a view to unity.

⁴⁹ As in *Mortalium Animos*. The WCC study *The Notion of “Hierarchy of truths” : An ecumenical interpretation A Study Document Commissioned and Received by the Joint Working Group; Appendix to the Sixth Report of the Joint Working Group for relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, 1990.*

⁵⁰ E.g. The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral and the ecumenical agreements made with Moravians, Methodists and the EKD all attest to what may crudely be regarded as prioritisation without marginalising.

such a view. They might, properly unpacked and related to the foundation of Christ, assent to them as true, but what about the language and authority of the teachings? Not without relevance is what one might call the Marian deficit since the Reformation. Since the Reformation, that aspect of the life of faith and response to Christ that has included the Mother of Jesus, the subjective devotion of the church, that has fostered, not without fault, the *sensus fidei*, has been, if not actually absent, certainly, subdued.

Positively however, the concept does allow elements so troubling to some Anglicans to be related to the foundation, which is Christ, and the understanding of scripture to be related to more foundational elements. This is explicitly endorsed by the *Groupe des Dombes* and the ARCIC reports.

The hierarchy of truths offers a useful way of relating to teachings that have emerged since the time of separation and which have claimed a status as binding doctrine in one part of the Church. The dogmas have been related to the person of Christ and to Mary, *Theotókos*, in *Mary Grace and Hope*, which places them in the hierarchy of truths. Leaving aside the major question of the teachings concerning the authority of the bishop of Rome, it will be useful finally to bring this paper to a close by looking at how these two dogmas may be placed in a re-united church.⁵¹

Howsoever the two dogmas are viewed, their position in the whole faith is put into a context of relations with other matters and the explicit return to an incarnational focus for the understanding of Mary; the attempt to find a scripturally based hermeneutic to understand matters not explicitly treated of by the scriptures can be seen as an example of the hierarchy of truths applied. Although these are not the only matters which call for assent and obedience by Roman Catholics, not are they the only matters to which infallibility is associated, they are two instances which reflect the way the Roman Catholic Church understands the assurance that something is true and so assuredly true that it cannot change. In the case of the latter dogma, it is a case, so far the unique case, of such a teaching proclaimed, with the extraordinary authority given to the Pope, as taught by Vatican I, 'in virtue of his office... as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful – he proclaims in an absolute decision a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals.'⁵² In both cases – the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the Assumption in 1950 – the Pope consulted the bishops.

Yet other bodies that are now recognised as being ecclesial and indeed as sister churches in some cases (the Orthodox) were not consulted. It is worth noting that Vatican II recognised that such bodies, such as the non-episcopal churches of the Reformation and also the Anglican Communion were recipients of the Spirit and had found God, a major change in the language used by the Roman Catholic Church in treating non-Catholics.

Although the *Gift of Authority* and the earlier *Authority in the Church II* have offered a measure of agreement on the role of the Pope and the House of Bishops have made the most positive response to *Ut unum sint* of any Christian body, the issue of the status of the dogmas remains.

⁵¹ Literature on the dogmas is enormous. See the papers in Denaux and Sagovsky, ed., 2007.

⁵² It is just that such doctrine cannot be defined accidentally, for according to RC Canon Law 'no doctrine is understood to be infallibly defined unless it is clearly established as such (canon 749.3).'

Anglicans (as in the ARCIC report) would find it hard to treat of these dogmas, defined independently of a general council; 'it would be the consent of an ecumenical council which, teaching according to the scriptures, most securely demonstrates that the conditions for a teaching *de fide* had been met' (62). Would it be possible indeed for one part of a reunited or a reuniting body to teach that matters are divinely revealed and that this may also be known with full certainty, and a far smaller part to reserve judgment? Neither of the dogmas was a dogma when the two communions separated from one another. From an Anglican point of view, to make assent to the dogmas a precondition of communion, could look as if the life of the Spirit since 1534 was not simply defective, but radically so. Matters defined since the Reformation need to be the subject of dialogue, to be sure, but it does not seem a way forward, to a new understanding of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is settled before the way is even embarked on. Would it amount to treating one of the partners as something less than a partner together on the same way?

Conversely, from a Roman Catholic point of view, to admit to full communion, without the nature of the relation to a truth revealed being recognised and understood by a church coming in, would be temerarious and treating of revelation as something less than whole. More modestly put, 'Roman Catholics find it hard to envisage a restoration of communion in which acceptance of certain doctrines would be requisite for some and not for others.' (63)

The ARCIC report uses the concept of re-reception, the process of responding by the church to a teaching already delivered in an open and obedient way. This is a concept that owes its development to Congar, but is not a concept that enjoys unambiguous usage. Does it mean simply the acceptance of a teaching in a wider context, such as envisaged by the strictures on some traits of Catholic piety and the teaching to be found in some theologians by the *Groupe des Dombes*, a reintegration of teaching on Mary into the witness of the scriptural texts (such as ARCIC tries to do), or does it entail, as reception by the church surely must, the possibility of restatement or indeed amendment?⁵³ Anglicans might want to know whether the role of the *sensus fidei* now has too high a place in discerning truth, especially if confined to one of the churches and whether it needs to be related more essentially – it is clearly related to the Word of God – to the revelation of God in Christ, the Word which is ever new and ever fresh? Roman Catholic teaching is that the church is constant need of conversion and repentance,⁵⁴ but it is apt to see in retrospect a continuity that seems to be in tension with clear realities. Discontinuities and failings have occurred in the teaching of the faith, some major; does the language of reception not risk understating the cost to the Bride of Christ for the sake of a unity which is ideally conceived? Reception rather calls for an acknowledgment of the sins that arise

⁵³ It is worth noting that Ratzinger in one of his major writings remarks that the historical significance of a conciliar teaching 'can only be determined as a result of a process of clarification and *elimination* which is carried on in the Church subsequently': *Prinzipienlehre*, Munich, 1982, p. 391 [*Principles of Catholic Theology*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco], cited in Luis Bermejo, M. S.J., *Church, conciliarity and communion*, Jesuit Theological Forum Studies, Pune, India, 1990, p. 186. Italics by Bermejo.

⁵⁴ 'Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth. Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in church discipline, or even in the way that church teaching has been formulated-to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself – these can and should be set right at the opportune moment': *Unitatis Redintegratio* 6.

through false teachings, or practices at variance with the Christ known through the scriptures and in the church. Repentance and conversion are part of re-reception.

Two recent suggestions – Sesboüé and Perrella

It is highly unlikely that the Anglican Communion will at once embrace the dogmas and at the same time agree on the status of the authority which promulgated them. Until now at least the church of Christ of which we are a part has not in fact ‘received them’ and so for many Anglicans a criterion of a definition of a teaching as free from error is absent. Yet we recognise that our Roman brothers and sisters have and do. These are teachings defined without us and apart from us. Happily now, we are in a process of discernment, which is not of course helped by the experience of the problems concerning sexual matters, authority and the ordination of women in the Anglican Communion. What the ARCIC report does, is to open, not to close a discussion, to begin a drawing closer on a sensitive issue. On the basis of the unique mediation of Jesus Christ, issues such as asking the Mother of Jesus to pray for us are not regarded as communion dividing.⁵⁵ The hope is expressed that the response to the report ‘points to the possibility of further reconciliation, in which issues concerning doctrine and devotion to Mary will no longer be seen as communion dividing’ (80). The differing practices of devotion and piety in the two communions are to be seen in the context of their relation to ‘the more central truth of her as Theotókos, which itself depends on faith in the Incarnation’ as ‘authentic expressions of Christian belief’ (63), that is, both expressions of the Spirit in the Church (80). The statement seeks a renewed relation of these teachings to the scriptures and is confident that it is offering such a view. The position of the teachings for Anglicans is not settled, but they are placed in the context of the interpretation of the teaching office of the Church and the Pope as developed in *The Gift of Authority*: ‘Any such re-reception would have to take place within the context of a mutual re-reception of an effective teaching authority in the Church, such as set out in *The Gift of Authority*’ (63). The ARCIC report is itself a part of that re-reception (80).

The distinguished French ecumenist Bernard Sesboüé, a member of the Groupe des Dombes, has suggested a way forward.⁵⁶ In the light of the *Groupe des Dombes* report on Mary, he argues that, provided it is recognised that the Roman Catholic teaching is recognised as legitimate and not contrary to the gospel, that acceptance of the two dogmas concerning Mary should not be made a precondition of communion. The famous lines from Joseph Ratzinger are cited with respect to the Orthodox: ‘Rome should not apply the doctrine of Roman primacy of Vatican I to the East because this “dogma” was formulated and practiced after the separation of 1054: it can only oblige the East to maintain what was practiced during the first millennium.’⁵⁷ This is his answer to the question: “quelle foi est absolument nécessaire à la reconstitution de la pleine communion entre les Églises?”⁵⁸ It is a way

⁵⁵ Paras 75; 80.

⁵⁶ Bernard Sesboüé, *La doctrine de l'immaculée conception dans le dialogue œcuménique (Groupe des Dombes et Accord Luthéro-Catholique de 1999)* in *Il dogma dell'immacolata concezione di Maria: Problemi attuali e tentativi di ricomprensione. Atti de XIV Simposio Internazionale Mariologico (Romas 7-10 ottobre 2003)*, ed Ermanno M. Toniolo, Edizioni Marianum, Rome, 2004, pp. 395-414.

⁵⁷ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, originally written in 1976. Cited with approval in *Church*, p. 81.

⁵⁸ P. 411.

which the Roman Catholics on ARCIC did not find easy to envisage.⁵⁹ Avery Dulles seems to have suggested this, but changed his mind, and it is not hard to see why: if a teaching is regarded as revealed, then how can it be possible to say that it is not, unless one is regarding ‘revelation’ as something at human disposal? On the other hand, for another church to be required to assent to a teaching, where such assent was unknown in the time of separation and where the context for its articulation has not been shared, will seem arbitrary at best. Now other Christians are not, in the light of recent Roman Catholic thinking, necessarily subject to the anathemas attached to the two definitions – not judged to be heretics.⁶⁰

This is an important point; Anglicans are *bona fide* in communion with the *una sancta*, and are ecclesial. Both communions have been open to the working and the gift of the Spirit in responding to the Word born of the Virgin since the Reformation era. But as Ratzinger argues, it is in the whole Church that the tradition is read and responded to. An ecumenical reading of the scriptures is required for this and that is a major requirement. He wrote with respect to the ARCIC *Final Report*: ‘Such a hermeneutics of unity will entail reading the statements of both parties in the context of the whole tradition and with a deeper understanding of scripture.’⁶¹ This applies in no less measure to *Mary Grace and Hope*. There is a need for a common and shared ecumenical reading of the scripture in the Church, if the truths in these teachings are to be made accessible and recognizable by Anglicans, if indeed there is to be ‘re-reception’. This would presumably make a distinction between the way in which these teachings have been expressed and the essence of the dogma, itself to be read as dependent on that of the person of Christ.

Such a reading is a Christological reading of the Word written. The response to the mystery of Christ, at the determining height of the hierarchy of truths, allows for a reading of the tradition that will be open to such truth as may have found expression in the two dogmas. This is something that *Mary Grace and Hope* has begun. There is a way that does justice to both to the ecclesial *bona fides* of both parties and the idea that truth can be expressed in different ways even at the level of dogma.

Salvatore Perella, an Italian Mariologist of some eminence, would seem to be open to such an approach. He takes issue with Sesboüé.⁶² He proposes rather a process of re-reception, not dissimilar from the way suggested by ARCIC, noting that the question of reception is *delicate*.⁶³ He gives an account of the provisional character of the forms in which unchanging truths of the faith find expression, a distinction made famous by John XXIII. For this treatment he appeals to the discussion of on the interpretation of dogma of the International Theological

⁵⁹ *Mary Grace and Hope* 63.

⁶⁰ Morerod, esp. pp. 205-211.

⁶¹ Ratzinger, *Church*, p. 82.

⁶² Salvatore M. Perrella, ‘*Tota pulchra es Maria. L’immacolata: Frutto segno e rivebbero deall bellezza dello splendore di Cristo redentore dell’uomo. Dogma ed estetica nel magistero di Giovanni Paolo II*’, in Toniolo, pp. 463-625. He has given an appreciative, if not uncritical response to the Groupe des Dombes in his *La madre di Gesù nella coscienza contemporanea Saggi di teologia*, PAMI 2005, pp. 564-611, and a far more welcoming one to the ARCIC report, forthcoming.

⁶³ *La madre*, p. 627.

Commission.⁶⁴ Here the definition of dogma does not close off possibilities, but is rather ‘a new beginning’ which opens to truth, through a reception which is *vitale* and an entering deeper into the truth to which it testifies.⁶⁵ The church is to serve the interpretation and the re-interpretation of the truth. For Perrella, if this nature of the expression of dogma is taken seriously – dogma as *affermazione eternamente futura* – in ecumenical encounter it allows an avoidance of prejudice and rejection of those utterances made by churches apart, as long as their quality as containing something basically true is respected and with respect to ultimate unity. Quoting De Fiores, he writes with respect to the Immaculate Conception that nothing prevents the Church of Rome from ‘a new understanding and a reformulation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, as a fruit of a deepening with other sister churches, which remains faithful to the content of the definition of Pius IX, and with gives it a profounder theology and translates it into terms meaningful for today’s world.’⁶⁶

Perrella’s suggestion allows the concept of re-reception to be expanded to allow for reformulation, to be taken on by the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Anglican Communion. In this respect it goes further than the agreement in *Mary Grace and Hope*. Although the report, in discussing the two dogmas, has already echoed the *Groupe des Dombes* (‘Such a re-reception would mean the Marian teaching and devotion within our respective communities, including differences of emphasis, would be seen to be authentic expressions of Christian belief’), it does not offer pointers to how that might be realized. It goes on to say: ‘Any such re-reception would have to take place within the context of a mutual re-reception of an effective teaching authority in the Church, such as that set out in *The Gift of Authority*’ (63). This may be true, but a distinction needs to be drawn between the question of the authority of the Pope and the truth, the intrinsic weight, of the teachings formulated in the time of separation. The issue of the authority of the two dogmas does not depend simply on the teachings concerning the Pope. If there is matter in them that is ‘revealed’, then surely the teachings have an authority which is intrinsic.

A shared reading of the scriptures would be no easy matter, but in the light of the response to *Mary Grace and Hope* it remains more essential than ever. It requires conversion and a readiness to be changed by the Word and by the Word as responded to by other Christians. Anglicans start with an indisputable Marian deficit, Roman Catholics arguably with some measure of excess. Anglicans have not been used to engaging with the tradition in this regard and are perhaps more cautious in their use of ancient witnesses in addressing the faith now.

The principle of the hierarchy of truths has enabled creative work to be done in *Mary Grace and Hope*. Yet the possibility of expressing matters of high status in significantly different ways (such as the agreements with churches which differ from

⁶⁴ *De Interpretatione Dogmatum*, International Theological Commission.

⁶⁵ P. 593. The text of this document is given in Italian; I have not been able to source either the Latin or any translation.

⁶⁶ P. 594; from Stefano De Fiores ‘Percorsi per una ricomprensione dell’Immacolata Concezione di Maria’, in Stefano De Fiores, *Emannuele Vidau, eds, Maria santa e immacolata segno dell’amore salvifico di Dio Trinità. Atti del 28 colloquio internazionale di mariologia, Ascoli Piceno, 5-7 ottobre 1998*, Edizioni monfortane, Roma 2000, pp. 11-23 .

Rome and Anglicans on the person of Christ) and the return to the scriptures do suggest that it is the way offered by Perella, rather than by Sesboüé, that is likely to be the more fruitful way.

Chapter 8

Scripture, Authority and the Marian Dogmas: An Evangelical Perspective

David Hilborn¹

Context

My task here is to provide a some comments on Fr Thomas Seville's paper 'The Teaching Authority in the Roman Catholic Church'. Specifically, I have been asked to consider its account of the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception as proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854), and of the Assumption as defined in Pope Pius XII's apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950). I do so having served for nine years as Head of Theology at the Evangelical Alliance (UK), but as an evangelical committed to dialogue and co-operation with Roman Catholics: indeed, I am pleased to have represented the World Evangelical Alliance in its recent consultation with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity – a process which led to the publication of the joint report *Church, Evangelization and the Bonds of Koinonia*.²

Reformation Background

Fr Thomas' point (p.6) that there has been a 'Marian deficit' since the Reformation is well taken. Protestant reaction to the Mariological abuses of that era has indeed often unduly subdued 'that aspect of the life and faith and response to Christ which has included the Mother of Jesus'. The same point is made in the ARCIC report *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (Para. 45). No doubt, John Knox's story of the persecuted Scots Calvinist who, when forced to kiss a carved image of Mary by his captors, cast it disdainfully into the river, still stirs the blood of many Evangelicals.³ Yet it is worth recalling that Luther maintained a high Mariology and was congenial towards the immaculate conception, if tentative about formally endorsing it.⁴ It is notable, too, that Hugh Latimer promoted the 'universal' and 'constant' tradition that Mary was in fact free from sin, even if he rejected any notion of her impeccability.⁵ Calvin himself might have challenged Trent's exemption of Mary from the taint of original sin, but in practice he typically called her 'the holy Virgin' and seldom referred to her as sinful.

¹ The Revd Dr David Hilborn, Director designate, North Thames Ministerial Training Course

² Available online at:

http://www.eauk.org/theology/wea/upload/church_evangelization_and_the_bonds_of_koinonia.pdf.
Also at: http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/e-rc/doc/e_e-rc_report2002_printable.html

³ John Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, cit. Timothy George, 'The Blessed Evangelical Mary', *Christianity Today*. 42.12 (December 2003), 34-9.

⁴ David Wright, 'Mary in the Reformers', in David Wright (ed.), *Chosen by God: Mary in Evangelical Perspective*. London: Marshall Pickering, 1989, 175-6.

⁵ Latimer, *Works*, Vol. 1, pp. 383-4, 515; Vol. 2, pp. 117-8, 156-7; 225-8.

Likewise, Zwingli readily thought of Mary as ‘pure, holy, spotless’ and saw no need specifically to attack notions of her immaculate conception or sinlessness.⁶ As David Wright points out, the magisterial Reformers produced no single treatise on Mary distinct from their sermons and commentaries: Roman devotion to her did not provoke them as much as it provoked some of their successors.⁷

However historians construe the precise debt owed by the self-conscious, self-identifying Evangelicalism which emerged in the Eighteenth Century to the Reformation, it is clear that an increasing number of present day Evangelical theologians are seeking to integrate these more positive and perhaps more neglected Reformational approaches to Mary with insights gained from modern ecumenical dialogue and hermeneutical work on her person and role. Among a glut of recent work in this vein one might cite the papers contributed by various Evangelical scholars to David Wright’s *Chosen by God: Mary in Evangelical Perspective* (1989), to Kathleen Norris’ *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (2002), and to Carl E. Braaten & Robert Jenson’s *Mary, Mother of God* (2004). Dwight Longenecker’s dialogues with John Martin and David Gustafson respectively cover the same terrain in *Challenging Catholics* (2001) and *Mary: A Catholic-Evangelical Debate* (2003). And just in the last year substantial monographs have emerged from Tim Perry (*Mary for Evangelicals: Toward an Understanding of the Mother of Our Lord*) and from Scott McKnight (*The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus*). Of course, none of these books endorses Rome’s dogmatic formulations of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption, but while rejecting them as such, they are generally more sympathetic to the theological and devotional focus on Mary which they represent.

Insofar as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are critiqued by the Reformers and by later Protestant and Evangelical theologians, they are critiqued on three main fronts: their lack of biblical authority; their relatively late doctrinal development, and their potential to detract from devotion to Christ. I shall address each of these three long-standing objections in turn, and shall conclude by suggesting the outlines of a more constructive Evangelical account of Mary based on those recent sources I have mentioned.

Objection 1: The Dogmas’ Lack of Biblical Authority

Fr Thomas is surely right to identify the chief point of contention in Catholic-Protestant debate on the Marian dogmas as the issue of authority, and specifically the proper relationship between the authority of Scripture and the authority of the Church. For all the reforms of Vatican II, he helpfully highlights the emphasis placed in *Dei Verbum* on the thoroughgoing interdependence of Bible and tradition – an interdependence which Protestants have typically contrasted with their own assertion of the ‘supremacy’, ‘self-attestation’ and ‘sufficiency’ of Scripture. Thus as Fr Thomas summarises the Roman position: ‘Without a note of the church who has the

⁶ Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, Vol. 1, pp.22, 26-7, 31-3, 89. Wright, ‘Mary in the Reformers’, 174-6.

⁷ Wright, ‘Mary in the Reformers’, 161.

task of both teaching and guarding the revelation of Christ, the body helped by the Spirit, talk of the sufficiency of the Scriptures becomes misleadingly abstract' (p. 2).

Against this background, Fr Thomas' acknowledgement that 'the teachings of the two Marian dogmas are not easily or obviously read from the pages of Scripture' (p.5), and that in any case those dogmas need only to be 'consonant' with Scripture (p. 2) or even 'not repugnant' to it (p. 5), would be taken by most evangelicals as reason enough to reject them. Whereas the ARCIC report affirms the rather vague language of 'consonance', this would be regarded as a quite inadequate by most Evangelicals. Its more recent bilateral work on *koinonia* might be more conciliatory in tone, but on this question of biblical authority few present-day members of the World Evangelical Alliance would demur from the blunt assertion of its 1986 study *A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism*: 'We as evangelical Christians are deeply offended by Rome's Marian dogmas because they...lack all support from Scripture.' That report continues with an appeal to cardinal Reformation principles:

As Evangelicals we understand that our position is in conflict with the Roman Catholic acceptance of tradition and the so-called 'living voice of the Church' as sources of revelation and authority alongside of the Scriptures. To such acceptance we attribute the development of dogmas contrary to what we see as explicit and consistent teaching of Scripture...

[The Roman Catholic Church] is now more now more open to Scripture in daily life and in theology. But when it comes to the question of authority, [she] still reserves to herself as an institution a power which according to official teaching is subordinate to Scripture, but which in practice is superior to it in the final instance. This position is based upon the role of the Church in the process of the transmission of Scripture. Consequently we must still affirm, with the Reformers of the sixteenth century, the unique authority of Scripture. The words of Calvin are clear and relevant: "Paul testifies that the Church 'is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets' (Eph. 2:20). If the doctrine of the apostles and prophets is the foundation of the Church, the former must have had its certainty before the latter began to exist. Nothing therefore can be more absurd than the fiction that the power of judging Scripture is in the Church, and that on her nod its certainty depends. When the Church receives it and gives it the stamp of her authority, she does not make that authentic which was otherwise doubtful or controverted, but acknowledging it as the truth of God, she as in duty bound, shows her reverence by an unhesitating assent.'" (*Institutes*, 1, 7, 2).

Good evangelical theology recognizes that the Spirit judges and corrects both the traditions and the teaching authority of the church on the basis of Scripture. Though the *Constitution on Divine Revelation* makes room for Scripture in Roman Catholic life in a way that contrasts with Trent and the Vatican I, it is still clearly different from the principle of *sola Scriptura*.⁸

Fr Thomas suggests that though Anglicans 'may find much' in the dogmas of the immaculate conception and the assumption 'to impress and indeed agree with', they

⁸ World Evangelical Fellowship, *A Contemporary Perspective on Roman Catholicism*, World Evangelical Fellowship, 1986, pp. 21, 24-5. The World Evangelical Fellowship changed its name to the World Evangelical Alliance at the turn of the millennium.

are likely to have more reservations about the manner in which they have been declared and ‘the authority by which’ those declarations have been made (p. 1). For Anglican Evangelicals, however, as for other Evangelicals, the problem concerns not only promulgation but also substance. Indeed, for Evangelicals this is not chiefly a matter of papal infallibility or the relationship between the magisterium and the *sensus fidei*; it is about the priority of the written Word of God over what are perceived to be flawed, human institutions. In passing, Fr Thomas wonders whether the ARCIC report stands in tension with Article VI on the sufficiency of Scripture (p. 2). Yet in respect of the Marian dogmas, it would be as pertinent to ask from an Evangelical point of view whether the same report undermines Article XX’s warning that the church ‘ought ... not to enforce anything to be believed for necessity of Salvation’ ‘besides’ (that is, in addition to) what Scripture requires.

More specifically in terms of biblical exegesis, the main Evangelical objections to the immaculate conception and the assumption have been widely rehearsed.⁹ They can be briefly summarized as follows:

Immaculate Conception

- The ‘seed’ and the ‘woman’ in Genesis 3:15 are taken by traditional Catholic teaching to refer respectively to Christ and Mary, with Mary cast as a ‘New Eve’ whose own generation and lineage must be free from sin. Yet the woman here is clearly the original Eve, and the offspring are clearly her natural offspring. Mary is among these, but there is no suggestion that she must conceived without sin in order to bear the Redeemer who will defeat the serpent.
- Luke 1:28 does not imply that Mary was sanctified with divine grace prior to her calling; she receives that grace as a beneficiary of God’s sovereign and unconditioned choice at the time of the annunciation. In this sense, she is in the same position as all who receive grace as God’s unmerited favour (cf. Eph 2:10; Tit. 3:3-7). The traditional translation which casts Mary as ‘full of grace’ (*plena gratia*) is a mistranslation, and has in fact been recognized as such by the Catholic Jerusalem Bible.
- There is no indication in Scripture that Mary is preserved either from original sin or from subsequent sinful action. She is among all those ‘who have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory’ (Rom 3:23). The context here may involve a rhetorical equivalence between two groups of people – Jews and Gentiles – but there is also a clear concern with sinners as individuals. In her great song, she rejoices in God as her Saviour (Lk. 1:47), which indicates that she is a sinner in need of salvation like everyone else apart from Jesus.

⁹ E.g. Norman L. Geisler & Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995, pp. 304-308; 311-16. Dwight Longenecker & John Martin; T.J. German, ‘Immaculate Conception’, in Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic/Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001, pp. 595-6; W.N. Kerr, ‘Mary, Assumption of’, in Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic/Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001, pp. 745-6; Martin Davie, ‘Mary – Grace and Hope in Christ: An Evangelical Anglican Response’, *Anvil* 23.1 (2006). Previously presented to the Churches Together in England Theology and Unity Group.

The Assumption

- Elijah and Enoch are ‘taken up’ into heaven body and soul, so it is at least possible that Mary could have experienced something similar. However, there is no comparable reference to her undergoing what they underwent.
- In 1 Corinthians 15:23 Mary is identified with those “who belong to Christ”, but the context is almost certainly that of final resurrection and any inference of assumption is mere speculation.
- Matthew 27:52-3. Some OT saints appear to have risen from their graves immediately after Jesus’ resurrection, but there is no indication that they are taken into heaven body and soul; indeed, they might simply have been revived temporarily, like Lazarus. In any case, Mary is not identified with them.
- Revelation 12:1-6. The ‘woman’ here seems much more likely to be a corporate personification of Israel than Mary assumed into heaven. Christ is ‘caught up to God and his throne’, but not the woman.

Objection 2: Relatively Late Doctrinal Development

Not only do Evangelicals object to the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption on the grounds that they lack biblical warrant; they also resist them because they appear to have been developed relatively late in the tradition of the Church, and even then without strong consensus. Early references to the Immaculate Conception in the 4th century are characteristically deemed ‘weak, scant and indecisive’, and the point is often made that no conciliar reference exists to support it until the twelfth century.¹⁰ Indeed, even Trent left the matter unresolved. In addition to this, it is often emphasized that various major theologians dismissed it, including Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great and Bonaventure. As for the Assumption, its earliest origins in legendary apocryphal literature are often cited against it, while Anglican Evangelicals note that Cranmer consciously omitted it from the *Book of Common Prayer*.¹¹

Of course, these sorts of arguments are obviated in formal Catholic understanding by the facility of the Pope to declare such traditions, however disputed their development might have been, as dogmas. But clearly this facility is itself a major stumbling-block for Evangelical-Catholic relations, and means that the dogma of the Assumption is particularly likely to remain an obstacle to rapprochement between the two communities.

Objection 3: The Dogmas as Detracting from Focus on Christ

This third key objection to the Marian dogmas is well represented by David Wright. Citing Calvin’s insistence that our primary concern with Mary should not be the fact that she bore and gave birth to Christ but that she herself was reborn into newness of life by the Spirit of Christ, he stresses that ‘honour paid to Mary should hinge solely

¹⁰ Geisler & MacKenzie, p.308

¹¹ E.g. Kerr, pp.745-6.

on her role in the incarnation' and that 'her honour should never threaten that of the incarnate Lord himself.'¹²

More Constructive Ways Forward

Although this warning would be echoed firmly by Evangelicals, many of those whom I mentioned earlier as writing in a more constructive fashion about her are seeking to demonstrate how Mary might be appreciated precisely insofar as she illuminates Christ and his gospel of justification by grace through faith. For our purposes here, it will be sufficient to precis Timothy George's summary of the most suggestive ideas currently being proposed by Evangelicals in this area:

- *Mary as Spotless Bride and Pilgrim Sinner.* Both George himself and David Steinmetz reflect in depth on Mary's status as one who, like John the Baptist, stands 'at a unique intercession between Old and New Covenants'. As such, she fulfils the role of an archetypal 'Daughter of Zion', recalling and bringing to culmination a 'prophetic lineage of pious mothers' including Sarah, Rachel and Hannah, while also representing the 'eschatological and redeemed people of God'. Just as this people has stumbled and will stumble again, she signifies not only Israel's triumphs but also its struggles – as she fails to grasp God's purposes, intervenes when she should not, and clings to filial affection rather than to faith in God (cf. Mark 3:21; 31-35).
- *Mary as Nurturer.* Inasmuch as Evangelicals have emphasized Mary at all, it too often been purely as 'the point of Christ's entry into the world – the channel through which he passed as water flows through a pipe.' This overly mechanistic view of her is being mitigated in newer Evangelical studies by an exploration of her nurturing of Jesus and her biblical instruction of him in his earlier years. Obviously much of this process has to be inferred from her later, ongoing relationship to him as an adult, but it offers a salutary corrective to the somewhat dehumanized depictions of her in many earlier Evangelical apologetics for the doctrine of the virgin birth. Of course, much in this approach finds parallels and precedents in Roman Catholic representation of Mary at the heart of the 'Holy Family'.
- *Mary as Faithful Exalter of Jesus.* Mary can authentically be revered by Evangelicals as the one whose discipleship and faithfulness towards Jesus uniquely endured through the whole of his earthly life, from his infancy to his death on the cross. This perseverance, suggests George, can be taken as a sign of solidarity 'with all believers in Jesus who also live under the shadow of the cross, including many whose lives are at risk today because of their witness for Christ.'¹³ As G.A. Studdert-Kennedy put it in his poem 'Good Friday Falls on Lady Day': 'She claims no crown from Christ apart / Who gave God life and limb / She only claims a broken heart / Because of him.'

At least some of these lines of exploration are suggested in *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*. While it is clear that Evangelicals will maintain fundamental objections to many of its proposals, and to its apologetics for the Immaculate Conception and the

¹² Wright, p.177.

¹³ Timothy George, 'The Blessed Evangelical Mary', *Christianity Today* 47.12 (December 2003), 34-9.

Assumption in particular, it is to be hoped that recognition of the common Mariological concerns identified by Timothy George and other progressive evangelical scholars will mean that they do not reject the report out of hand.