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MARY AND ECUMENISM

Hopeless Conflict or False Dilemma?

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Mary's role vis-à-vis the tenuous relationship between Roman Catholics and other Christians may be likened to the proverbial image of a double-edged sword—the figure of the Mother of Jesus can serve as a common reference or rallying point among believers of various denominations, on the one hand, yet also act as an added obstacle to understanding and harmony between them, on the other. This paper explores the evolution of Marian doctrine and devotion in relation to the pursuit of ecumenical agreement and fellowship among the followers of Christ.

Before anything else, however, it must be reiterated that we are not dealing with monolithic realities when it comes to engaging with Christian churches today. Such is the basic problem in this field as articulated by Weeden, for whom "it is impossible to write about Mary from *the* Protestant point of view because there is no one Protestant viewpoint."[1] There is no uniform Orthodox, Evangelical, or Lutheran stance on Mary even when we speak of Orthodox Christians, Evangelicals, or Lutherans in particular. Except for the Roman Catholic Church which enjoys a relative degree of uniformity, at least when it comes to official doctrine and practice, Christian churches often

[1]T. Weeden, "Mary: A Protestant Perspective," *Chicago Studies* 27:1 (1988): 80.

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vary within and among themselves with regard to both beliefs and practices. It is for this reason that we deal with issues rather than with relationships in this study. Moreover, for the sake of focus, we shall confine the discussion further into two areas: doctrine and devotion.

Mary from Protestant Standpoints

Gaventa and Rigby expressed well the multiplicity of Protestant viewpoints of Mary in the plural title of their anthology, *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*.[2] In her foreword to this book, Norris makes an insightful observation: "I think that many Protestants, if they think about Mary at all, get hung up on what they are *supposed* to believe about her."[3] She even goes on to share that the "church in which [she] was raised had a curious attitude towards Mary, an odd mixture of hubris and bashfulness. We dragged Mary out at Christmas, along with the angels, and placed her at center stage. Then we packed her safely in the crèche box for the rest of the year."[4] She laments thus: "We effectively denied Mary her place in Christian tradition and were disdainful of the reverence displayed for her, so public and emotional, by many millions of Catholics around the world."[5]

Unitatis Redintegratio, the Second Vatican Council's decree on ecumenism, also points to Mariology as one of the key areas of disagreement among modern Christians:

> We are aware indeed that there exist considerable divergences from the doctrine of the Catholic Church concerning Christ Himself, the Word of God made flesh, the work of redemption, and consequently,

[2]B. Gaventa & C. Rigby, eds., *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

[3]K. Norris, Foreword to Gaventa & Rigby, eds., *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, ix (emphasis added).

[4]Norris, Foreword, xi–xii.

[5]Norris, Foreword, xi–xii.

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> concerning the mystery and ministry of the Church, and *the role of Mary in the plan of salvation*.[6]

As Aureada says, "Mary has been a controversial girl, a pain in the neck, a stumbling block … in ecumenical discussions especially!"[7] There seems to be, inasmuch as Catholics are so attached to Mary, a corresponding aversion to her on the part of some Christians from other churches.

Connelly makes a similar observation, remarking that "other Christians have ignored Mary. They aren't interested in looking seriously at her life or character. For many of us Mary is little more than a figurine in the nativity set that we dust off each year and put away."[8] Nonetheless, he articulates that the reality of the figure of Mary is not so easily swept under the rug; to do so would be ironic, if not tragic, given her prominent role in the life of Jesus himself:

> How can we simply ignore her when the Bible tells us so much about her godliness and courageous obedience to God? One part of the Christian community lifts Mary almost to the level of deity while another part finds it easier to confine her to Christmas pageants and sentimental Christmas cards. I'm afraid that if most of us were asked to name the great women of faith in the Bible we would quickly picture Ruth gleaning in the fields of Boaz or Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus with precious oil, but we would not even think of Jesus' mother.[9]

Whether at the Nativity or at Calvary, the central role of Mary cannot be denied without doing injustice to the Gospels themselves, where we often find her next to her Son. In fact, as Butler notes, there are actually more verses about Mary in the Bible than there are about

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[6]Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio* [Restoration of Unity] (November 21, 1964), no. 20 (emphasis added). Hereafter referred to as UR.

[7]J. Aureada, "Mary: A Paradigm in Ecclesiology," *Quarens: Journal of Theology and Pastoral Life* 8 (2013): 1.

[8]D. Connelly, *Mary: What the Bible Really Says* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 11.

[9]Connelly, *Mary: What the Bible Really Says*, 11–12.

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the Eucharist, something Protestant Christians cannot just overlook.[10] As Padgett puts it, "Mary is imperative to ecumenism because she is central to the story."[11]

Indeed, the relationship of other Christians with Mary has not always been an antagonistic one. As the Second Vatican Council acknowledged,

> It gives great joy and comfort to this holy and general Synod that even among the separated brethren there are some who give due honor to the Mother of our Lord and Savior, especially among the Orientals, who with devout mind and fervent impulse give honor to the Mother of God, ever virgin.[12]

Eastern Christians in particular have always been very devoted to Mary. They have remained united with Catholics in the belief in her divine motherhood and perpetual virginity, and the Council recognized in *Unitatis Redintegratio* the manner in which they

> pay high tribute, in beautiful hymns of praise, to Mary ever Virgin, whom the ecumenical Council of Ephesus solemnly proclaimed to be the holy Mother of God, so that Christ might be acknowledged as being truly Son of God and Son of Man, according to the Scriptures.[13]

John Paul II also affirmed the peculiar closeness of Eastern Christians with the Mother of the Savior, commenting that "it does not surprise us therefore that Mary occupies a privileged place in the worship of the ancient Oriental churches with an incomparable abundance

[10]D. Butler, "The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Protestant Tradition," in W. McLoughlin & J. Pinnock, eds., *Mary is for Everyone: Papers on Mary and Ecumenism* (Wiltshire: Gracewing, 1997), 56.

[11]C. Padgett, *Wholly Mary, Mother of God* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011), 60.

[12]Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* [Light of Nations] (November 21, 1964), no. 69.

[13]UR no. 15.

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of hymns and feasts."[14] Thus, while the Virgin has at times been a bone of contention among Christians, she can also be seen as a ray of hope for Christian reconciliation and unity, "a Marian light cast upon ecumenism."[15]

Many of the original Reformers, too, were themselves devoted to Mary, or at least respected her as an exemplary disciple of Christ. As Migliore attests:

> The Reformers were, of course, deeply respectful of Mary. They accepted the patristic designation of Mary as theotokos, "the bearer of God," a name whose primary import both for the patristic church and for the Reformers was christological rather than mariological. Luther often spoke of Mary as the "blessed Mother of God" and wrote a beautiful treatise on the Magnificat (1521). Calvin discussed the stories of Mary with characteristic insight and balance in his commentaries on the Gospels, saying that Mary should be held in high regard. He referred to her not only as the holy Virgin but also as our teacher in the faith, remarking that even the apostles were her students in certain matters.[16]

This respectful or even reverent attitude toward Mary, however, was markedly qualified and already growingly distinct from the Catholic veneration of the Virgin. Migliore is quick to add thus: "For Calvin, however, Mary was accorded appropriate honor not by bestowing high-sounding titles on her but by following her simple obedience and her witness in praise of the grace of God."[17] Nevertheless, O'Meara wisely recalls that aversion to Mary is not integral to the Reformation itself:

> It was the times with their changes in intellectual and cultural outlook, it was the very history of the Reform with its forgetfulness of the fullness of its Lutheran and Calvinist inheritance, which caused a religion to

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[14]John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater* [Mother of the Redeemer] (March 25, 1987), 31. Hereafter referred to as RM.

[15]RM no. 50.

[16]D. Migliore, "Woman of Faith: Toward a Reformed Understanding of Mary," in Gaventa & Rigby, eds., *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, 117 (emphasis added).

[17]Migliore, "Woman of Faith," 117.

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> come into existence without any place for Christ's mother. We should remember that this was not the view of the Reformers, nor is it intrinsic to Protestantism.[18]

Roots of the Conflict

So where is the discord about Mary, which has persisted until today, coming from?

The Protestant difficulty concerning Mary does not seem to be due to her *in se* but to some differences with the Roman Catholic Church regarding both doctrine and devotion. As John Paul II acknowledges, "Many Protestant communities, because of a particular conception of grace and ecclesiology, are opposed to Marian doctrine and devotion, maintaining that Mary's co-operation in the work of salvation prejudices Christ's unique mediation."[19] This is especially true with regard to certain teachings and titles, such as the novel doctrine of Mary as Mediatrix, Co-Redemptrix, and Advocate that was being proposed for definition as dogma since the 1950's, or even the solemnly defined dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption, to which even some Orthodox denominations take exception.[20]

Another point of disagreement is the fact that some manifestations of Marian devotion are characterized by excess and exaggeration—a valid concern that has been acknowledged even by Catholics. For Paul VI,

> the ecumenical aspect of Marian devotion is shown in the Catholic Church's desire that, without in any way detracting from the unique character of this devotion, every care should be taken to avoid any

[18]T. O'Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 137.

[19]John Paul II, General Audience (November 12, 1997).

[20]For a thorough and very erudite discussion of these recent disputes, see A. Blancy, M. Jourjon, & the Dombes Group, *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 96–109.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> exaggeration which could mislead other Christian brethren about the true doctrine of the Catholic Church.[21]

For instance, we find a rather curious reprobation, in the acts and decrees of the First Plenary Council of the Philippines, of images of Mary vested as a priest.[22] The Catholic Church has always certainly distinguished between the worship due to God alone, referred to in Latin as *latria*, the honor accorded to the saints, called *dulia*, and the unique reverence accorded to Mary, known as *hyperdulia* and which is above that accorded to any other saint.

Paul VI likewise said that "the Church desires that any manifestation of cult which is opposed to correct Catholic practice should be eliminated."[23] The 1975 CBCP pastoral letter *Ang Mahal na Birhen*, for example, explicitly disapproves of specific local abuses such as multiplying images of Mary and pitting them against each other as rivals, using Marian sacramentals as magical and superstitious objects, and obsessing over visions and "strange announcements, threats and practices," among others.[24] The subject of invoking Mary's intercession is also particularly problematic for other Christians since the Protestant tradition promotes direct access to God with Christ as the One Mediator.[25]

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[21]Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* [Marian Devotion] (February 2, 1974), no. 32. Hereafter referred to as MC.

[22]"Reprobata est imago B. Mariae Virginis vestibus sacerdotalibus indutae." See Plenary Council of the Philippines, *Acta et Decreta Primi Concilii Plenarii Insularum Philippinarum*, Caput VI, 570, 3.0 (Manila: Typis Pontificiae Universitatis Sancti Thomae, 1956).

[23]MC no. 32.

[24]See Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Ang Mahal na Birhen: Mary in Philippine Life Today* (Manila: Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, 1975), 80.

[25]See, likewise, the discussion of Blancy et al. regarding differences in the aspects of the Marian cult in *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 109–113.

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Migliore elaborates on this quandary from the Protestant side, also attributing the problem to certain Catholic doctrines and devotions:

> Unlike Roman Catholic theology, Reformed theology has never given much attention to Mary, the mother of Jesus.… The reason for this eclipse of Mary in Protestant theologies in general and Reformed theologies in particular [is] not difficult to identify. The profuse growth of Mariology in the Middle Ages met with strong criticism at the time of the Reformation. Since the Reformers held with Scripture that there could be only one mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5), *exaggerated Marian titles and exuberant Marian devotion* seemed to them to threaten the clarity of the gospel message of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.[26]

Weeden traces the conflict and identifies the crux of the Protestant problem about certain Marian doctrines:

> The Reformers and Wesley rejected the Catholic position that grace is a power that can be bestowed or dispensed. Consequently, for them, as well as Protestants today, Mary could not be an agent of grace and cannot have played any contributory role in God's redemptive plan except to be a vessel for the fulfillment of the incarnation. The Marian theses of coredemptrix, mediatrix and dispensatrix have no theological meaning for Protestantism.[27]

Indeed, it is interesting to note that although the so-called fifth Marian "dogma" has never been officially declared as such, there are at least two dioceses in the Philippines—Digos and Kidapawan—whose cathedrals carry the title of *Mary, Mediatrix of All Grace*. There are movements in the other direction, though—in April 2017, a Vietnamese congregation with the name *Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix* was renamed *Congregation of the Mother of the Redeemer* at the instance of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples to avoid the "theological ambiguity" of the title.

[26]Migliore, "Woman of Faith," 117 (emphasis added).

[27]Weeden, "Mary: A Protestant Perspective," 85.

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Describing these doctrinal debacles as "an ecumenical interlocking deadlock,"[28] Aureada avers that

> Protestants have reread these dogmas, in the light of up-dated biblical narratives on her and have found them inaccurate and empty doctrines or complex jargons. Protestants have been criticizing Catholic Marian piety as bordering on idolatry—if not outright, plain and simple Mariolatry—because Catholic Marian devotional practices seem to "deify" her.[29]

Barth even goes as far as to say that

> in the doctrine and worship of Mary, there is disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains the rest. The "mother of God" of Roman Catholic Marian dogma is simply quite the principle, type and essence of the human creature co-operating servant-like (*ministraliter*) in its own redemption on the basis of prevenient grace.…[30]

In the interest of fairness, however, it must be pointed out that Protestants are not the only ones objecting to these novel dogmas—Catholics are as well. In his review of *Mary is for Everyone: Essays on Mary and Ecumenism*, Hurley narrates what happened in the Commission tasked by the Vatican to examine the proposed fifth Marian dogma:

> The commission consisted of eighteen Catholic mariologists and five other theologians: three Orthodox, one Lutheran and one Anglican.… The advice was unanimous as well as negative. The titles, it was submitted, are ambiguous and, even if given a minimal content, their definition would be inopportune.[31]

All these notwithstanding, O'Meara suspects that there are deeper reasons for the Protestant opposition to Catholic Marian doctrine and devotion. For him,

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[28]Aureada, "Mary: A Paradigm in Ecclesiology," 7.

[29]Aureada, "Mary: A Paradigm in Ecclesiology," 4.

[30]K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 143.

[31]M. Hurley, "Mary is for Everyone: Essays on Mary and Ecumenism (review)," *The Month* 31:5 (1998): 203.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> Luther calls to his aid the authority of Scripture in dealing with Mary, for instance, when he abolishes the feast of the Assumption. This may be a strong factor, but *sola scriptura* is not the guide in his dealings with Mary. Rather it was Luther's dislike of what seemed papist superstition, his desire to make the pardon of God through Christ unique and freely accessible to every Christian; this stands behind his considerations of Mary.[32]

The Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* has what George calls the "pruning effect of the scriptural principle."[33] For him, this is one element that accounts for the curious phenomenon whereby evangelical Protestants "remember the Reformation critique of Marian excess but not the positive appraisal of Mary's indispensable role in God's salvific work." He keenly observes, for instance, that

> Luther closed his commentary on the Magnificat with a prayer of intercession addressed to the Virgin Mary. But already in Zwingli's Sixty-Seven Articles of 1523, it was claimed that, because Christ is our only mediator, no mediators other than Christ are needed beyond this life. Luther too gave up Marian intercession when he could find no explicit scriptural warrant for it in the Bible.[34]

As the conflict between them escalated, Protestants and Catholics eventually weaponized the figure of Mary. On the Protestant side, there was a Marian iconoclasm that O'Meara describes as "a byproduct of the Reformation which Luther strictly forbade."[35] On the Catholic front, there was what Blancy et al. called a Counter-Reformist "triumphalist Mariology"[36] characterized, as if to spite the Reformers, by the multiplication of Marian titles and feasts and an unprecedented growth in Marian devotional practices: "Beginning with the Thirty Years War (1618–48) and the fierce interconfessional struggle associated with it,

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[32]O'Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 122.

[33]T. George, "Evangelicals and the Mother of God," *First Things* (February 2007).

[34]George, "Evangelicals and the Mother of God."

[35]O'Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 124.

[36]Blancy et al., *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 46.

https://publications.lst.edu/

these tendencies developed further and were strengthened both in their importance and in their exaggerations.…"[37]

Such reactive attitudes make no positive contribution to ecumenism and lead only to the development of hardline positions that make dialogue exceedingly difficult, if not almost impossible. George compares this, on the part of Protestantism (although it is certainly true as well for certain segments of Catholicism), to the medical condition of atherosclerosis, which of course is extremely dangerous and potentially fatal. He says that

> beyond the theological constraints of a biblical religion, however, there was also what might be called an *ecclesiological hardening of the arteries* within the Protestant and evangelical traditions. To be an evangelical meant not to be a Roman Catholic. To worship Jesus meant not to honor Mary, even if such honor were biblically grounded and liturgically chaste.[38]

Indeed, there are those who continue even today to oppose initiatives toward mutual Mariological self-examination and dialogue that aim for greater ecumenical understanding, as is the case with the Southern Baptist theologian Mohler, of whom Biema writes:

> He is underwhelmed by the Scripture-based reconsiderations of people like Gaventa. "Insofar as Evangelicals may have marginalized Mary's presentation in the Bible, it needs to be recovered," he concedes. "But the closer I look at the New Testament, the more convinced I am that it does not single her out for the kind of attention that is being proposed. We have not missed the point about her. To construct a new role for her is simply overreaching."[39]

Mohler was also quoted in the same article as saying, in rather absolute terms, that

> Mary is held forth as the maternal face of God, some dimension that is fundamentally absent from Scripture. God's love is presented in biblical terms without any need for Mary as an intermediary. To suggest that

[37]Blancy et al., *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, 37.

[38]George, "Evangelicals and the Mother of God" (emphasis added).

[39]D. Biema, "Hail, Mary," *Time* (March 21, 2005).

https://publications.lst.edu/

> need, even as "symbolic" instead of doctrinal … is the Reformation in reverse. It's simply profoundly unbiblical, and it leads to the worst excesses of Marian devotion.[40]

No dialogue is possible with such a disposition.

In Search of Balance

Paul VI already recognized the importance of these divergences in Marian doctrine and devotion as early as 1974:

> We realize that there exist important differences between the thought of many of our brethren in other Churches and ecclesial communities and the Catholic *doctrine* on Mary's role in the work of salvation. In consequence there are likewise differences of opinion on the *devotion* which should be shown to her.[41]

At the same time, he expressed hope that these differences would not remain insurmountable and eventually be resolved:

> Nevertheless, since it is the same power of the Most High which overshadowed the Virgin of Nazareth (cf. Lk. 1:35) and which today is at work within the ecumenical movement and making it fruitful, we wish to express our confidence that devotion to the humble handmaid of the Lord, in Whom the Almighty has done great things (cf. Lk. 1:49), will become, even if only slowly, not an obstacle but a path and a rallying point for the union of all who believe in Christ.[42]

Such a move to recognize rather than deny the presence of a problem is a decisive first step toward its resolution.

Around the same time, and curiously enough, O'Meara observed an interest on the part of Protestants to rethink their position on Mary. He remarked—and this was as early as the 1960s—that "in our time,

[40]Biema, "Hail, Mary."

[41]MC no. 33 (emphasis added).

[42]MC no. 33.

https://publications.lst.edu/

we have seen the reaction: a call by Protestants to reconsider Mary."[43] The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary (ESBVM) was thus established in 1967, and continues until today. Hence, within the move propitious ambient of a more sober time that followed the intense and heated reactions immediately after the Reformation, there has been growing room for openness and dialogue, even on what has been the highly contentious and divisive topic of Mary. As O'Meara says by way of an invitation, "Today we should drive away the clouds of polemic and mistrust. Theology may appear only to clarify and to deepen radical cleavages between Christians, but eventually it will unite."[44]

As a starting point or common ground for ecumenical dialogue about the Mother of Jesus, an International Mariological Congress initiated by Roman Catholics was held in Santo Domingo in 1965 with the very apropos theme "Mary in the New Testament." Since then, twenty-three other International Congresses on Mary have been held every four years at various centers of Marian devotion across the globe, the last one being at Fatima in 2016. Jelly highlights the import of these congresses, particularly of the ones held in Zaragoza and Malta:

> At Zaragoza (1979), there was agreement that: 1) all Christian praise, including that of Mary and the saints, is praise of God and Jesus Christ; 2) imitation is an important aspect of devotion to Mary, particularly of her spiritual attitude in responding with complete openness to the Word of God; 3) the distinction between the veneration due the Mother of God and the adoration due to God alone remains vital for all of us; and 4) while the precise meaning of invocation, not practiced in all the Christian churches, is in need of further elucidation, there is a common belief that those in the communion of saints in glory, among whom Mary holds the first place, do pray for us sinners upon earth—which intercession in no way affects the unique mediatorship of the risen Lord. At Malta (1983), there was added in the ecumenical statement the consensus that Mary prays *with* the Church, as she once

[43]O'Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 137.

[44]O'Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 12.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> did in preparation for Pentecost (Acts 1:14), and we are to unite our prayers with those of the heavenly liturgy, especially *with* Mary's prayer.[45]

John Paul II, in light of these developments in Marian ecumenical dialogue, taught in his catechesis on November 12, 1997 that "Mary's universal motherhood, even if it makes the divisions among Christians seem all the sadder, represents a great sign of hope for the ecumenical journey."[46] The Pope even went as far as to say that disagreements about Marian doctrine are, at least when it comes to the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, "perhaps more a question of formulation than of content and must never make us forget our common belief in Mary's divine motherhood, her perpetual virginity, her perfect holiness and her maternal intercession with her Son."[47] Indeed, it is not impossible to find significant common ground even when it comes to other Christian denominations.

A new and more recent resurgence of interest in Marian ecumenical dialogue has also been observed as of late. The March 21, 2005 cover of *Time* magazine, for instance, carried an image of Mary with the headline "Hail Mary: Catholics have long revered her, but now Protestants are finding their own reasons to celebrate the Mother of Jesus," and an extended article by Biema inside that particular issue surveyed recent developments in the ongoing Mariological conversation among Catholics and other Christians. George also noted in 2007 what he described as "growing evidence of fascination with Mary among evangelical Protestants."[48] This is demonstrated, according to him, by a widening celebration of Advent among evangelicals, the publication in 2006 of two books dealing with the subject—Tim Perry's *Mary for Evangelicals* and Scot McKnight's *The Real Mary*, the enthusiastic reception of the film *The Nativity Story* among evangelical audiences,

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[45]F. Jelly, "Mariology and Ecumenism: Reflections Upon 1965–1990," *Marian Library Studies* 17:1 (1990): 551.

[46]John Paul II, General Audience.

[47]John Paul II, General Audience.

[48]George, "Evangelicals and the Mother of God."

https://publications.lst.edu/

and the establishment of a study group known as *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*.

Using the modern imagery of television, Butler compares Catholics and Protestants in terms of display and sound:

> The Catholic seems to Protestants to be wholly in technicolor with no commentary, or at least if there is commentary, it is highly uncritical, with little reference to Scriptures as they have been interpreted in the Protestant tradition. The Protestant seems to the Catholic to have been concerned only with commentary, usually being a totally biblical and totally critical commentary with no regard for the history of the Church down the centuries, nor for the worship life of the Church which is its very lifeblood.[49]

Nevertheless, he concludes that "as far as the Blessed Virgin Mary is concerned, we Protestants have not yet managed to have her in full color but at least we are beginning to see a black and white picture, which is better than having no picture at all and far superior to just having the sound."[50] Indeed, such an attitude of epistemic humility and openness to growth can move the dialogue forward.

This is the "rapprochement" proposed by Weeden. It necessitates, first of all, an honest self-examination of the underlying causes of our conflicts which, as we have said earlier, may not actually be intrinsic or fundamental. He writes that

> a path toward *rapprochement* lies in looking deep beneath the surface features of our Marian theological differences to examine the subterranean theological forces that drive those differences and, then, to determine whether those forces are as crucially significant and possess the same determinative power and relevancy as once was the case.[51]

More concretely, he advocates the possibility of this deeper *rapprochement* of Marian theological differences between Catholics and reformed Christians from a double vantage point—first, a hermeneutical

[49]Butler, "The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Protestant Tradition," 72.

[50]Butler, "The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Protestant Tradition," 67.

[51]See Weeden, "Mary: A Protestant Perspective," 85.

https://publications.lst.edu/

rapprochement from the mutual acknowledgement that both Scripture and Tradition are important, leading to the sharing of even more common ground, and second, a reexamination from both sides of the ontology of sin and grace, paving the way for a new paradigm with Mary as the symbol, being as she is the "prototype human, the re-presented *imago Dei*."[52]

In line with this, Carter upholds the "Scriptural 'balance' of teaching about Mary" as a possible model for ecumenical dialogue that can be emulated today. He observes that "Scripture implicitly warns about making too much or too little of her; it could be argued that it testifies both against Protestant tendencies to ignore her and tendencies in popular or Orthodox piety to overexalt her."[53] Such a pursuit of balance can pave the way for the growth of both sides in becoming more faithful to the Gospel. Indeed, George was on point when he asked,

> So why should evangelicals participate in and celebrate the Marian moment that seems to be upon us? The answer is: *Precisely because they are evangelicals, that is, gospel people and Bible people*. Mary has a pivotal and irreducible place in the Bible, and evangelicals must reclaim this aspect of biblical teaching if we are to be faithful to the whole counsel of God.[54]

All Christians, for that matter, are called to be evangelical and can only profit from an ecumenical Mariological dialogue. As O'Meara succinctly put it: "It is not a matter of Christ or Mary, but of both in proper balance."[55]

Conclusion

Before his death on the Cross, Jesus entrusted Mary to his beloved disciple (cf. Jn. 19: 25–27). Yet he was not simply entrusting his mother

[52]Weeden, "Mary: A Protestant Perspective," 94.

[53]D. Carter, "Mary, Servant of the Word: Towards Convergence in Ecclesiology," in McLoughlin & Pinnock, eds., *Mary is for Everyone*, 158.

[54]George, "Evangelicals and the Mother of God" (emphasis added).

[55]O'Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 346.

https://publications.lst.edu/

to his one friend for practical purposes because he stayed behind; rather, he was bequeathing his own Mother to become the Mother of his disciples. All Christians, while contemplating the figure of Mary today, are thus invited by the Gospel to do likewise: "Behold your mother."

Christians themselves, then, often sense the absence of someone important, if not essential, to their faith when they omit the figure of Mary. As Miller-McLemore says, "with Mary, Protestants experience powerfully the presence of an absence. That is, Mary is most present in her absence."[56] Pope Francis expressed this on a similar note:

> When a Christian tells me that it's not that he doesn't love Our Lady, it is just that he does not seek out Our Lady or pray to Our Lady, I feel sad. I remember one time, almost 40 years ago, when I was at a conference in Belgium, there was a couple who were catechists, both university professors with children, a beautiful family. And they spoke about Jesus Christ so well. At one point I said, "And devotion to Our Lady?" "But we have passed that stage. We know Jesus Christ so well, that we have no need of Our Lady." And what came to mind and into my heart was "Oh … you poor orphans!" Am I not right? Because a Christian without Our Lady is an orphan.[57]

May the ongoing ecumenical dialogue today help clarify misunderstandings and correct excesses so that present and future Christians need not feel estranged from Mary, she whom the Gospels uphold not only as a model of faith but as a mother for all believers. As John Paul II rhetorically inquired,

> Why should we not all together look to her as *our common Mother*, who prays for the unity of God's family and who "precedes" us all at the head of the long line of witnesses of faith in the one Lord, the Son of God, who was conceived in her virginal womb by the power of the Holy Spirit?[58]

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[56]B. Miller-McLemore, "Pondering All These Things," in Gaventa & Rigby, eds., *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary*, 110.

[57]Francis, Address to the Young People of the Diocese of Rome Involved in Vocational Discernment (June 28, 2014).

[58]RM no. 30.

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