

News Watch Article: DC160

## NEW MARIAN DOGMAS FOR ROMAN CATHOLICISM?

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In *Mary: A Discussion of Catholic and Protestant Views* (Logos Ministries, 1997), Roman Catholic Bible teacher Dr. Bill Creasy writes, "Few topics reflect the deep division between Catholics and Protestants more than the role of Mary in the Church." Recent developments in Catholicism underscore the truthfulness of this observation.

**Historical Development.** Mention of Mary in the New Testament is primarily limited to the birth narratives in the Gospels; during Christ's public ministry, she remains in the background. Her last appearance is in the Upper Room in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14). Mariology has principally been built on information found in the *Book of James*. Not to be confused with the New Testament's *Epistle of James*, this is an apocryphal work that was never given canonical status. From it we get the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anne.

It comes as a surprise to evangelicals (and some Roman Catholics) that Roman Catholic dogma states that Jesus was born in such a fashion that Mary did not suffer any violation of her virginal integrity. St. Thomas Aquinas put it this way: "Mary gave birth in miraculous fashion without opening of the womb and injury to the hymen, and consequently also without pains."

It was at the Council of Ephesus (A. D. 432) that the cult (or *cultus*) of the Blessed Virgin Mary received official sanction. The term *Theotokos* (Greek: "the God-bearer"; Latin: "the Mother of God"), which had been applied to Mary by the early Greek Fathers, was formally ratified at this Council. The purpose of the term *Theotokos* was to protect the humanity of the fruit of the Virgin's womb; in other words, to say more about Jesus than about Mary. Unfortunately, things got out of hand and — for a variety of reasons, some cultural, some theological — the Virgin Mary began to attract more and more attention.

For example, the fourth century saw the rise of a cult, the Collyridians, that was devoted to Mary. The members, mostly women, paid idolatrous worship to her involving the offering of cakes. St. Epiphanius (ca. A. D. 315–403) condemned the practice of the group. "Mary should be honored, but the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost should be adored. Nobody should adore Mary."

The designation "Mother of God" was central in the development of Mariology, which reached its apex in the Middle Ages. Worship of God was termed "adoration" (Greek: *latría*); "veneration" (Greek: *dulia*) was paid to the angels and saints. By virtue of her exalted position, Mary was honored with "hyperveneration" (Greek: *hyperdulia*), which, while a higher form of veneration, at least theoretically does not rise to the level of adoration, the worship due God alone.

At Constantinople in A. D. 553, the Fifth General Council declared Mary was "ever-Virgin." The belief in Mary's "Immaculate Conception" (that she was born without the stain of original sin) can be found since the seventh century. Unanimous consent was not forthcoming, and in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a number of theologians, including Thomas Aquinas, rejected the doctrine. Eastern Orthodoxy also takes exception to the Immaculate Conception, believing that it threatens Mary's status as a creature, albeit an exalted one. In 1854, Pope Pius IX declared the dogma *de fide* ("must be believed"). The "Bodily Assumption" of Mary into heaven was the subject of speculation early in church history and was finally declared *de fide* in November 1950 by Pope Pius XII. The East accepts the Bodily Assumption and celebrates it as the "Feast of the Dormition" ("Falling Asleep") on August 15.

**The Current Situation.** Among recent developments in Roman Catholicism is a renewed interest in the person and work of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Marian devotion has grown. In "Hail Mary," an article appearing in *Newsweek* (25 August 1997), religion editor Kenneth Woodward addressed Mary's position in Roman Catholic theology. Among the questions Woodward raised are: Is Mary a Co-Redeemer? Will the Pope declare her so? Should he?

While not officially declared *de fide*, three doctrines that call for the Pope's attention are present in much Marian piety. According to Woodward, they are the beliefs "that Mary participates in the redemption achieved by her son, that all graces that flow from the suffering and death of Jesus Christ are granted only through Mary's intercession with her son, and that all prayers and petitions from the faithful on earth must likewise flow through Mary, who then brings them to the attention of Jesus." John Paul II is said to have received over four million signatures supporting these doctrines.

Catholic apologists contend that terms such as "Coredemptrix," "Comediatrix," and "Advocate" in no way challenge the ontological integrity of the Trinity or the supremacy of Jesus as Savior. Yet the large body of Marian literature is replete with troubling language. For example, in the 1891 Encyclical "Octobri Mense," Pope Leo XIII wrote that "nothing is imparted to us except through Mary... so, just as no one can approach the highest Father except through the Son, so no one can approach Christ except through His Mother." Catholic apologist Karl Keating says, "Mary is the Mediatrix of all graces because of her intercession for us in heaven. What this means is that no grace accrues to us without her intercession" (*Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, Ignatius Press, 1988).

Roman Catholic theologians agree with Protestants in condemning idolatry. Yet distinctions between adoration, hyperveneration, and veneration seem to do little to guard the theologically unsophisticated person in the pew from this most serious error.

Reaction from Protestant and Eastern Orthodox communities to the questions discussed in the Woodward article has been almost universal condemnation. In the words of one Orthodox leader quoted by Woodward, "Calling Mary a Co-Redeemer is a heresy in the simplest sense."

While avoiding terms such as heresy, much Catholic thinking has agreed. In June 1997, a commission of Mariologists at the Vatican advised against accepting this dogma, arguing that it was contrary to the spirit of Vatican II. Dominican theologian Frederick Jelly of Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, is one of the world's preeminent Mariologists. He states, "The theological problem with 'mediatrix'... is that it tends to put Mary almost in a position of rivalry with her son... the Protestant reformers were correct in reacting against excesses in piety, in which Mary became more important than Christ" ("Petition Urges Pope to Proclaim Mary as a 'Co-Redeemer,'" *The Los Angeles Times*, 21 March 1998). Jelly argues that "despite the pope's well-known devotion to Mary, he will not do this on whim without careful consideration and broad consultations."

The Vatican's *Catholic News Service* responded to the *Newsweek* article by stating, "The Pope will not solemnly proclaim Mary 'Coredemptrix'... 'Mediatrix'... and Advocate... This is crystal clear" (August 1997). Fr. Richard John Neuhaus is concerned that declaring these new dogmas would cause "considerable anxiety among ecumenically inclined Protestants and not a few Catholics" ("While We're At It," *First Things*, November 1997).

Recent denials by official Roman Catholic sources have not dampened the more enthusiastic Marianists. A leading voice in the movement and a lay theologian at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, Mark Miravalle, has stated, "There remains one final doctrinal pillar of the Marian mystery... that only the Church can provide... It is the Christian revelation of Mary as Coredemptrix with the Redeemer, as well as the resulting roles of Mediatrix and Advocate for the People of God" (*Mary: Coredemptrix, Mediatrix, Advocate*, Queenship Publishing, 1993). Books in the 1998 Queenship Publishing catalog address subjects such as the apparitions of Mary, along with various proposed Marian dogmas. Such commitment to elevating Mary is not about to fade away.

While predisposed toward Marian devotion, many Roman Catholic leaders (including the Pope) are hesitant to embrace the new dogmas. Doing so would certainly curtail most ecumenical activity toward Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestant groups. Ecumenism is very important to the contemporary Catholic Church.

Some Mariologists who are presently against any pronouncement feel that the situation may change in the future. This is similar to the position taken by Henry Cardinal Newman concerning the dogma of the infallibility and universality of papal authority, proposed and ratified by Pius IX at Vatican I in 1870. Newman was opposed at the time. Some Catholic apologists claim that his opposition came not because he thought the promulgation was “inaccurate,” but “inopportune.”

Evangelicals are guided by Scripture alone and not extrabiblical traditions and papal decrees. They are convinced that the Marian proposals are not only “inopportune” now but also “inappropriate” at any time. Creasy accurately sums up the evangelical position: “To Protestant thinking, the Catholic Church has elevated Mary far above what Scripture allows. For Protestants, Mary is an extraordinary, lovely woman. God chose her for a pivotal role in the salvation of the human family... She was truly ‘blessed among women.’”

— *Ralph E. MacKenzie*