

THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AND ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

LECTURE TWO: MARY IN THE SECOND CENTURY AND BEYOND

As we saw in Lecture One, the focus of the NT is on Jesus - His identity and His message. References to Mary are rare and always in relationship to the identity of Jesus (the Infancy Narratives) or His message (defining the eschatological family of the Kingdom).

The Church, then as now, continued to focus on Jesus. The question of the identity of Jesus was at the heart of the great controversies of the Church well into the fifth century. The great councils of Nicaea 325, Constantinople 381, Ephesus 431, and Chalcedon 451 all concerned themselves with the identity of Jesus. Finally, at Chalcedon in 451 it was defined that Jesus was one person, the second person of the Trinity, with two natures, fully human and fully divine.

As a result of the theological process that led up to this affirmation, a deeper understanding of Mary also began to develop. Thus it was that the Fathers of the Council of Ephesus 431, who gathered to condemn Nestorius' view that there were two persons in Jesus, were also able to declare Mary as *theotokos*, (bearer of God), because in Jesus there is only one divine Person.

And so, as we take a quick look at the second century, we do not find a developed mariology, but we see the beginnings of attempts to consider the person of Mary in her own right. We shall trace this gradual trend and then look to the evolution of the major Marian doctrines.

The Second Century

Before the last third of the first century - 75-100 AD - the only New Testament (NT) writings that we know about are those of Paul. Within these writings Mary is not mentioned by name. As we discussed in Lecture One, the passages in Galatians sometimes cited as referring to Mary were probably not so intended by Paul. During the last third of the century, the Gospels were written and Mary is mentioned a number of times, but almost always in relation to Jesus - His identity and His message. There is no focus or meditation on Mary herself. In other words, in the first century there is no mariology as we understand it today and yet the basis had been established - Mary was the mother of Jesus and the first disciple.

It is only after the end of the first century, as we enter the "age of the Fathers" (the Patristic Age), that we begin to see some focus on Mary and the first beginnings of a mariology. There are two literary sources from the 2nd century that mention Mary: 1) the NT Apocrypha and 2) writings of the Church Fathers. First, we shall consider the texts themselves and then attempt to identify their major themes.

1) NT Apocrypha

The word *apocrypha* itself derives from the Greek and means “hidden things” or “hidden away”. Scholars suggest two meanings of “hidden”, 1) hidden from general use because it is judged that their material is too mysterious for the general reader or 2) hidden because they were heretical. The term “NT Apocrypha” refers to a collection of non-canonical NT writings, often in the form of “gospels”, “epistles” and “apocalypses”, composed in the second half of the first century. This kind of literature continued well into the middle ages.

They begin after the death of the apostles, but authorship is often “attributed” to witnesses from the apostolic age. These NT Apocrypha are Christian writings or revisions of non-Christian writings that tell of the teachings and life of Jesus often in legendary and colorful ways. For example, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* portrays the child Jesus as a rather showy miracle worker, who, for example, makes twelve clay sparrows and then caused them to fly off. By definition these apocryphal writings never qualified for the Canon of Scripture, in fact, some were the products of heretics.

Nevertheless, some scholars have considered them valuable because of the possibility that they might contain some authentic Christian traditions independent of those used in the composition of the canonical Gospels. And even if they did not arise from “authentic independent traditions” they are presented here to focus on the various direct and indirect references to Mary that were actually circulating in Christian communities in the 2nd century AD. Mariology, as such, had not developed yet, but we can see some basis for later mariological developments in the traditions contained in these documents.

These works fit into several categories:

Jewish Christian Gospels -- These are “gospel” tradition that grew up among Jewish converts to Christianity. These included among others: *The Gospel According to the Hebrews*, *Gospel of the Ebionites*, *Gospel of the Nazaraeans*, *Hebrew Gospel According to Matthew*, and *Gospel of the Twelve*.

Two passages from the *Gospel According to the Hebrews* will give a flavor for their content: The first passage is in the form of a cosmic myth with Mary spoken of as a “power” called Michael who comes into the world to give birth to Christ, the second speaks of the Holy Spirit as the mother of Jesus.

When Christ wished to come upon the earth to men, the good Father summoned a mighty heavenly power, called Michael, and entrusted Christ to its care. And the power came into the world, and it was called Mary; and Christ was in her womb seven months.

Even so did my mother, the Holy Spirit, take me (Jesus) by one of my hairs and carry me away onto the great mountain Tabor.

Gnostic Gospels

In 1945 two Egyptians were riding their camels in the vicinity of Nag Hammandi on the Nile in search of fertilizer. As they began to dig near a large bolder they discovered what turned out to be a Coptic Gnostic library. The word “Copt” derives from the Arabic for Egyptian. Coptic was the native language of Egyptians (using the Greek alphabet) from the 2nd century AD until the Arab conquests of 640 AD.

The word Gnostic comes from the Greek word for knowledge - *gnosis*. For Christian Gnostics, Jesus was sent to impart divine knowledge which would lead believers out of an evil material world into a kingdom of goodness and truth. The Gnostics, including Christian Gnostics, had a dualistic vision of creation which held that human life was imprisoned in created matter and all matter was evil. Because they saw created matter as dominated by evil, they denied that Jesus had a fully human nature because that would make the divine (Jesus) subject to the powers of evil. Thus the Gnostics also took a negative view of Mary.

Perhaps the most famous document in the Gnostic collection is the *Gospel of Thomas*. This gospel had been mentioned by Patristic writers (Origen and others) early in the 3rd century, therefore scholars posit its composition sometime in the 2nd century. It contains 114 sayings of Jesus, some parallel to those in the canonical gospels, others unknown from any other source. Some sayings in *Thomas* parallel the Synoptic sayings about who qualifies for the eschatological family and two other passages seem to hint of a true heavenly mother and father in contrast to earthly ones which one must “hate”. The *Gospel of Thomas* has become “famous” lately in the work of the Jesus Seminar where scholars like Dominic Crossan have elevated it to the stature of a true “Gospel” -- certainly a minority view among biblical scholars.

The *Gospel of Philip* is also part of this Gnostic collection. This Gospel contrasts a heavenly Virgin Mother (the Holy Spirit) and the Father-in-heaven as the true father. It also includes a legendary story about Joseph in which Joseph plants a tree and later from this tree makes the cross on which Jesus was hung.

The Protevangelium of James (named so in the 16th century)

This was a very popular and quite influential document reaching the height of its popularity sometime in the latter part of the 2nd century. Authorship is imputed to “James”, presumably James, the brother of the Lord. However, it was probably written long after the death of James (d. 55?) by an unknown author in the first half of the 2nd century, no later than 150 AD. It is important because it is the first Christian writing to deal with Mary directly.

Unlike the other apocryphal texts of the time, Mary is the focus of attention. In a legendary style the *Protevangelium* recounts the life story of Mary - birth, family, childhood, betrothal to Joseph, the annunciation, Joseph’s doubt, the birth of Jesus in a cave, adoration of the Magi, and the death of the holy innocents.

While certainly based on the NT, it contains a good deal of information not found in the NT and at times at variance with the NT. Examples of information not found in the NT include, the names of Mary's parents - Joachim and Anna/Anne - who like the parents of John the Baptist are barren and through God's intervention in answer to their prayer, Mary is born. Also it relates a story, in which Mary is brought to the Temple where she remains until her betrothal to Joseph at age twelve.

It also included information at variance with the NT. It represents Jesus as born in a "cave" as opposed to Luke's "manger", however, later in the text the "manger" is mentioned as the place where Mary hid Jesus to protect Him from Herod's soldiers. Also, the Annunciation is said to have been in Jerusalem contrary to Luke's location in Nazareth. Given these and other discrepancies, most scholars still maintain that the *Protevangelium* is based on the NT and not some extra-canonical, independent source of the life of Mary. This additional "information" and the discrepancies are judged to be more the result of literary license than the discovery of independent traditions.

This document was rejected by the Western Church in the Gelasian Decree ca. 500 AD, but was used in the East and spawned many other apocryphal writings dealing with Mary and provided the material for the later "biographies" of Mary so popular in the middle ages and even down to our own times. (I believe that if you were answering the question for a million dollars on the TV show and the question was: "Who were the parents of the Virgin Mary?" and you would answer - "Joachim and Anna" - you would be a winner!)

Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Acts of Peter

The Acts of Paul

The Acts of Paul were forged by a priest of Asia Minor who admitted he did so "out of love for the Apostle". It is dated sometime after the middle of the second century. This document affirms the NT position of a virginal conception.

For in these last times God, for our sake, has sent down a spirit of power into the flesh, that is, into Mary the Galilean, according to the prophetic word, who was conceived and born by her as the fruit of her womb, until she was delivered and gave birth to (Jesus) the Christ, or King, of Bethlehem in Judea.

The same author also created a *Third Letter to the Corinthians* in which he refutes the views of some heretics who said the "the Lord is not come in the flesh, nor was he born of Mary." The answer is in the true apostolic tradition.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was born of Mary of the seed of David, when the Holy Spirit was sent from heaven by the Father into her, that he might come into this world and redeem all flesh through his own flesh.

God...sent the (Holy) Spirit (through fire) into Mary the Galilean, who believed with all her heart; and she received the Holy Spirit in her womb that Jesus might enter into the world.

In these texts we have a clear defense of the doctrine of the virginal conception. In addition, there are two interesting affirmations made about Mary that do not appear in the NT texts, but do appear in other Patristic writings, these are: 1) that Mary was a Galilean and 2) that Mary was of the Davidic line - "the seed of David". The NT makes no statement about the birthplace of Mary and only Joseph is identified in the genealogy as being of Davidic descent. The ultimate source of these traditions is unknown.

The Acts of Peter

The *Acts of Peter*, written about 185 AD, describes Peter's conflict with Simon the Magician and certain passages support the virginal conception of Jesus.

But Peter said, ... "In the last times a boy is born of the Holy Spirit; his mother knows not a man, nor does anyone claim to be his father." And again he says: "She has given birth and has not given birth." And again, "Behold a virgin shall conceive in her womb". And another prophet says in the Father's honor: "We have neither heard her voice, nor is a midwife come in." Another prophet says: "He was not born from the womb of a woman, but came down from a heavenly place".

These sayings not only affirm the virginal conception, but relate in a confused way the later tradition that not only the conception, but the birth of Jesus itself was also miraculous so that Mary remained a virgin even during the birth of Jesus (*in partu*).

Christian Revisions of Jewish Apocalyptic Writings

There were a variety of Jewish apocalyptic (things that are hidden) writings in the century before and in the century after the time of Jesus. These were classified as "pseudepigrapha", that is, false writings which purport to be written by Biblical characters or in Biblical times. They include such titles as the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*, *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *Testament of Solomon*, *Lives of the Prophets*, *The Ascension of Isaiah* and *The Sibylline Oracles*. It is the Christian revision of these last two documents, made in the 2nd century, that give us some insight into 2nd century Christian thought concerning Mary.

The Ascension of Isaiah

A 2nd century Christian revision of *The Ascension of Isaiah* added a vision of the prophet Isaiah (8th century BC) in which he "sees" the miraculous appearance (rather than

physical birth) of the Christ child.

And I saw a woman of the family of David the prophet. This woman named Mary, who was a virgin, was betrothed to a man called Joseph, a carpenter; and he too was of the seed and family of the righteous David, of Bethlehem, in Judah. And he came to his portion. And when she was betrothed, it was found that she was with child; so Joseph, the carpenter, wished to put her away. But the angel of the Spirit appeared in this world; and after that, Joseph did not put Mary away. He kept her but did not reveal the matter to anyone. And he did not approach Mary but kept her as a holy virgin, although she was with child. And he did not (yet) live with her for two months.

After two months, Joseph was in his house, with his wife Mary, the two of them alone. It came to pass, while they were alone, that Mary suddenly beheld with her eyes and saw a small child; and she was amazed. When her amazement wore off, her womb was found as it was before she was with child. And when her husband Joseph said to her, “what amazed you?”, his eyes were opened; and he saw the child and praised God that the Lord had come to his portion. And a voice came to them: “Tell this vision to no one”. But the report concerning the child was noised abroad in Bethlehem. some said, “ the virgin Mary has given birth before she was married two months”; and many said: “She has not given birth; the midwife has not gone up to her, and we have heard no cries of pain.”

Here, as in the *Acts of Peter*, we find one more the declaration that Mary was of the Davidic line and that the birth of Jesus was miraculous, to say the least.

The Sibylline Oracles

Another apocryphal work, the *Sibylline Oracles*, are a type of Greek literature adopted and revised by Jewish writers that portrays the 5th century BC Greek prophetess, Sibyl, praising Israel and forecasting Jewish history - the coming of Messianic times, punishment of the enemies of the Maccabees, etc. In the 2nd century AD Christians added to these oracles the foretelling of the virgin birth of Jesus. Without mentioning Mary by name, these oracles speak of a virgin who, by the power of God, gave birth to a boy who was the Word made flesh.

From heaven he came, and put on mortal form. First, then, the holy, mighty form of Gabriel was displayed. And second the archangel addressed the maiden in speech: “In your immaculate bosom, virgin, you receive God.” Thus speaking, God breathed grace into the sweet maiden. But then she was seized with both alarm and wonder as she listened, and stood trembling -- her mind was in turmoil, her heart leaping at such unheard-of tidings. But again she rejoiced and her heart was warmed by the saying. And the maiden laughed, her cheeks flushed scarlet, gladly

rejoicing and touched in her heart with shame; then she took courage. The Word flew into her body, was made flesh in time and brought forth to life in her womb, was molded to mortal form and became a boy by virgin birth-pangs. This, a great wonder to mortals, is no great wonder to God the Father and to God the Son. When the child was born, delight came upon the earth, the heavenly throne laughed, and the world rejoiced; a new-shining star, God-appointed, was revered by the Magi.

Here we can detect two important themes: 1) the virginal conception - the “Word flew into her body” and 2) the physical birth and the true humanity of Jesus - “(the Word) was molded to mortal form and became a boy by virgin birth-pangs”.

2) Patristic Writings

The adjective “patristic” comes from the Latin word for father (*pater*). The term, “Fathers of the Church”, is used to designate those early Christian writers whose writings were considered in later times to provide a foundation for orthodox Christian doctrine. Therefore, the terms “Patristic writings” and “Patristic theology” designate important areas in the study of 2nd century Christian thought.

These writings of the early Fathers date from the 2nd century to the death of Gregory I in 604 - The Patristic Age. They include such names as Tertullian, Origen, Ignatius of Antioch, St. Augustine and many others. It was traditional for theologians of the middle ages to “argue from authority” or note the opinions of these early theologians as reference points in their own theologizing, e.g. St. Thomas who often cites Augustine.

Most of the earliest 2nd century patristic writings do not mention Mary and in general patristic theology contains relatively little about Mary. However, three important themes do emerge during this period - 1) the virginity of Mary before and after the birth of Jesus; 2) Mary as the new Eve; and 3) Mary as the mother of God (*theotokos*).

Ignatius of Antioch (110-115 AD) -- An early example of the theme of virginal conception is found in the letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch. He makes five references to Mary and these show an early Patristic belief in the virginal conception and provide a basis for the later declaration of Mary as the Mother of God. These references are from his letters: *Smyrnaeans*, *Trallians*, and *Ephesians* respectively:

You are fully persuaded concerning our Lord, that he is in truth of the family of David according to the flesh, Son of God by the will and power of God, truly born of a virgin.

Be deaf therefore when anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, of David's lineage, of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank...

There is only one physician, both of flesh and of spirit, born and unborn,

God in man, true life in death, sprung from Mary and from God.
For our God, Jesus the Christ, according to God's dispensation, was
conceived in the womb by Mary, from the seed of David and from the
Holy Spirit.

And hidden from the prince of this world were the virginity of Mary, and
her giving birth, and likewise the death of the Lord: three mysteries crying
out to be told, but wrought in the silence of God.

These sayings also reveal the efforts of Ignatius to condemn the heresy of Docetism.
This heresy was related to the Gnostic teaching that all material reality, including human
flesh, was evil. The Docetists, from the Greek term *dokein* - "to seem", taught that Jesus
only seemed to have a physical body. Thus Ignatius stressed that Jesus was "truly born
and ate and drank", and was "both of flesh and of spirit".

Aristides of Athens

In what may have been from an early creed, Aristides of Athens in the middle of the 2nd
century writes concerning the virginal conception:

He is confessed as the Son of the highest God, descending from heaven
(on account of the salvation of men) through the Holy Spirit; and (born) of
a (holy) virgin (without seed and in purity), he took flesh...

Justin Martyr (100-165 AD) -- The *Apology* of Justin Martyr also defends the tradition
of virginal conception, but his references to Mary's virginity are generally designed to
support his christology. Some scholars argue that Justin's interest in Mary was influenced
by the *Protevangelium*. In any event, for the first time Justin establishes a new
mariological theme in his work *Dialogue with Trypho* (the Jew) -- the parallel between
the virgin Eve and the virgin Mary.

Eve believed and obeyed the serpent (devil), while Mary believed and obeyed the angel
(God). Eve thus became the mother of sin and death, while Mary became the mother of
redemption and life. This theme of Mary as the "new Eve" would become an important
theme in later Christian mariology.

Irenaeus (130-200 AD) -- Following Justin was one of the truly great Fathers of the
Church, Irenaeus of Lyons. In his famous work, *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus supported
the typological parallelism of Justin by using the analogy of St. Paul where he compares
Adam and Christ. (1Cor.15:22; 44-48). Irenaeus writes:

He (Christ) recapitulated in himself what was shaped of old. As through
one man's disobedience sin had gained entrance, and death had obtained
power as a result of sin, so through the obedience of one man
righteousness was introduced and has caused life to flourish in men
previously dead. And as Adam was first made from untilled soil and

received his being from virgin earth (since God had not yet sent rain and man had not yet cultivated the ground) and was fashioned by the hand of God (that is, by the Word of God “by whom all things were made”...), so he who existed as the Word, recapitulating in himself Adam, received from Mary, who was still a virgin, a birth befitting this recapitulation of Adam.

Thus for Irenaeus, Mary is not mentioned simply for christological support, but can be seen in her own right as the mother of a new humanity in Jesus. Furthermore, reference to the “Word” receiving birth from Mary indicates the beginning of a development in Christian thought that will later speak of Mary as the “Mother of God” perhaps a slight refinement of the designation *theotokos*, which literally translated from the Greek meant “God bearer”.

The development of this thought will continue in later Patristic tradition and will culminate in the designation *theotokos* being officially applied to Mary at the Council of Ephesus in 431. This declaration at Ephesus was the result of a long development in the understanding of the divinity of Jesus begun at the Council of Nicaea 325 and its primary focus was Christological. However, it also had important mariological implications because it was also the intention of the bishops at Nicaea to refute the false claims of the heretic Nestorius that Jesus was two persons - one human, the other divine - and therefore Mary could not be truly called Mother of God (*theotokos*), but only Mother of Christ (*Christotokos*). The Ephesus declaration that Mary was *theotokos* as upheld twenty years later at the Council of Chalcedon.

Summary

There are very few significant statements about Mary found in the 2nd century writers that do not appear in the NT. However, it is important that the 2nd century saw the beginning of the “interpretative development” of the NT texts. This interpretative approach to biblical texts was common to NT writers as in the case of Matthew who gave a creative interpretation of the “young girl” or “virgin” mentioned in Isaiah 7: 14 to support his view of the virginal conception of Jesus.

Another example is found in the *Protevangelium of James*. The legendary story of the parents of Mary, Anne and Joachim, perhaps harkens back to the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel. Both Hannah and Anne are barren and must implore the Lord to give them a child, which they dedicated to God’s service - Samuel for Hannah and Mary for Anne. Thus Samuel and Mary, much like Isaac and John the Baptist, owe their birth to the special “favor” of God granted in human circumstances where no birth would otherwise be possible and thus these children are “of God” and marked in a special way for the service of God.

Perhaps the most positive contribution of the Fathers of the Church relative to Mary was their strong affirmation of the NT witness to the virginal conception of Jesus. Most scholars agree that the development of all other mariological assertions hinge on this

fundamental truth about Mary.

Concerning the actual birth of Jesus, there were two strands of Patristic thought. One spoke of a miraculous, non-physical birth with the absence of labor pains, no mid-wife, just the “appearance” of the child Jesus (see the *Ascension of Isaiah* and *Acts of Peter* above). Indeed, Tertullian in his *Adversus Marcionem* argues against the view of the heretic Marcion that Jesus simply “appeared as an adult” .

The second strand of thought about the birth of Jesus reacted negatively to this idea of a non-physical birth. Tertullian accepted the virginal conception, however to protect the true humanity of Jesus he argued that a totally normal, physical human birth was necessary. The concern here was very real, because a non-physical birth might give credence or support to those heretics who denied the full humanity of Jesus e.g., Gnostics and Docetists (who claimed Jesus had only the “appearance” of a physical body).

And so Tertullian and others like Ignatius stressed the full human reality of the birth of Jesus, while holding fast to the virginal conception. They were also luke-warm to the idea of the perpetual virginity of Mary for the same reasons. However, in the centuries that followed, after the Gnostic and Docetist crisis had passed, there developed a tradition in Marian piety that Mary was a virgin before, during and after the birth of Jesus - *ante partum, in partu* and *post partum*, thus the title “Mary Ever Virgin”. However, this later view did not include the miraculous “appearance births” mentioned above.

As the Patristic Age drew to a close there had been no direct reference to the later dogmas of the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption. Both the NT and the Fathers are silent about these matters. St. Augustine was the first to teach of the absolute sinlessness of Mary, but the concept of Mary’s freedom from original sin is not found in the literature before 1,000 AD. In fact, the concept of original sin itself was not articulated until the 5th century in the theology of St. Augustine in his defense of infant baptism.

However, the Patristic affirmations of the virginal conception, the development of the Eve/Mary comparison, the identification of Mary as *theotokos* and the role of Mary compared with the role of the Church in the history of salvation, set the stage for the development of the Marian dogmas in the centuries that followed.

The Second Century - An Ecumenical Assessment

In Lecture One we noted that the New Testament provided solid common ground for Catholics and Protestants. Thus ecumenical discussions concerning Mary in the NT could focus on primary sources that are acceptable to all Christians. We also saw that there is general agreement among Catholics and mainline Protestant Churches about the NT witness to Mary. There are exceptions, of course, but the published work, *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars*, shows a large area of agreement.

This agreement is an important first step in a process that could well result in Mary becoming a source of Christian unity, rather than an ecumenical obstacle. While there is general agreement among Catholic and Protestant scholars on the NT witness to Mary, there is still much work to be accomplished before the laity becomes aware of the fruits of this ecumenical scholarship.

What of the second century's contributions to and understanding of Mary? Do we again find common ground to trace the development of Christian thinking about Mary? I think the answer is yes for three reasons: 1) the 2nd century Christian traditions pre-date the Reformation by some 1,300 years and can be considered ancient shared traditions by all Christians, 2) the 2nd century literature, especially the writings of the Fathers of the Church, used the NT as the primary source for their developing theological insights, and 3) the majority of the references to Mary in the 2nd century are in the context of and in support of orthodox affirmations about Jesus against the heretics. In other words, in the 2nd century, while Christology remains the focus, out of this context there would develop a clearer understanding of Mary and her role in salvation history and in the history of the Church.

Therefore, the 2nd century writings of the Fathers provide a solid common ground of ancient shared traditions, with the NT retained as the primary source and Jesus as the central focus. All statements about Mary flow from statements about Jesus. Therefore, in fidelity to Jesus and the witness of the NT, Catholics and Protestants are able to see how the various developments in the understanding of Mary arose from their commonly accepted traditions.

Given this context, all Christians can be assured that the development of true mariology, at least through the second century, will always be subordinate to true Christology. All real or perceived exaggerations of mariology and Marian devotions will be so judged on the basis of a true Christology. On this Catholics and Protestants can agree. All developments in mariology after the second century will have to pass this same litmus test in order to be accepted by Catholics and Protestants alike.

Beyond the Second Century

During the eighteen centuries that have passed since the age of the apostles and the Fathers of the Church, a great number of mariological themes have developed in the Catholic Church. Only two have developed into official dogmas of faith - the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary. Other issues, such as Mary's place in the Church, her role in the redemptive process of Jesus and her role as mediator for mankind are important, but secondary issues and none constitute matters of faith.

These secondary issues are, however, very important from an ecumenical perspective because they are most open to misunderstanding and unless kept within the correct christological context could be seen as undermining the central place of Jesus in the redemption and sanctification of the human race. For example, while such Marian titles as co-redemptrix and mediatrix can be understood in a scholarly context of a correct and

orthodox distinction between the role of Jesus and Mary in the redemptive process, at the popular level there was often (and still is) much confusion. Thus the Protestant fear that Mary was infringing on the role of Jesus in our salvation was understandable.

Given the veritable explosion in Marian devotions at the popular level from the 17th century on and such statements from dedicated mariologists like Louis de Monfort that “the devil feared Mary more than God himself”, it is not difficult to understand the Protestant judgment that devotion to Mary in some instances had eclipsed devotion to Jesus. And, of course, all of this took place in the rather hostile atmosphere of the post-Reformation era where both “sides” were more likely to point out the real or perceived theological “errors” of the other side than to engage in efforts to understand one another and to find common ground for discussion of disputed topics.

While the entire history of mariology and Marian devotions is interesting and important for our understanding of Mary in an ecumenical perspective, for our purposes we will briefly examine the two most important Marian dogmas: The Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950).

Incidentally, most scholars agree that these two Marian doctrines are the only two papal pronouncements that could be qualified as infallible. Two other Marian doctrines - the virginal conception and Mary as the Mother of God - while not the subjects of infallible papal pronouncements, are held to dogma on the grounds that they are part of the universal teaching authority (magisterium) of the Catholic Church.

The Immaculate Conception (IC)

Note: Before considering this dogma, it is still important to remember that many people, Protestants and Catholic alike, often confuse the immaculate conception (of Mary) with the virginal conception (of Jesus). Some also misunderstand this dogma to mean that Mary herself was conceived virginally. And in any discussion at the popular level it is well to clarify these points at the beginning to avoid confusion.

Briefly stated, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (IC) states that Mary was free from original sin from the *first instant* of her conception. In the December 8, 1854 papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus* (“Ineffable God”), Pope Pius IX states:

We declare, pronounce and define: the doctrine that maintains that the Blessed Virgin Mary in the first instant of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of almighty God and in view of the merits of Jesus

Christ the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.

The declaration stresses that Mary's preservation from original sin was possible through the "grace" of God and the "merit" of Jesus. Because of Mary's unique call to be the Mother of God, she was granted an exemption from original sin. What was not discussed was the nature of "original sin" itself which is still the focus of scholarly debate.

1) Ecumenical Common Ground

Before taking a quick look at the background of the IC, perhaps a brief look at the ecumenical common ground for the IC would be helpful. When lay Catholics talk with their fellow lay Protestants about the IC of Mary, their common ground consists in a shared belief in Jesus as Savior and the shared belief in the importance of Baptism. All Christians believed that all human beings, including Mary, are in need of salvation and that salvation comes in and through Jesus.

Given this common ground, Catholics can explain that when the doctrine of the IC declares "freedom from sin" for Mary, this is the same "freedom from sin" that is offered to all Christians through Jesus and in their baptism. Catholics and most Protestants profess that baptism is "for the forgiveness of sins".

For Catholics, baptism marks the forgiveness of original sin for adults and children, through the salvific power of God made manifest in Jesus. Thus, what it declared to have taken place in Mary in the IC is exactly what takes place in all Christians at baptism. The difference is that it took place in Mary first, at her conception. Thus the "special privilege" claimed by Catholics for Mary is one of timing, not of a unique freedom from sin in itself.

Catholic mariology does not set Mary off from other members of the Church. All Christians share the same baptism. Nor does it make her "semi-divine" or more than human. Mary is in total solidarity with all Christians. Catholics simply declare Mary to be the first disciple, the first member of the Church. Like all Christians, Mary is in need of redemption and can only be redeemed by the power of Jesus. Like all Christians, Mary is freed from original sin by the power of Jesus in baptism. Like all Christians, Mary must make an act of faith to be redeemed and freed from the power of sin. Not only is Mary like other Christians, other Christians are like Mary in that they too can receive freedom from sin in the very same way -- in Jesus.

Thus, the IC does not set Mary off from the rest of Christians, but it proclaims that because she is the Mother of God she is the first among Christians, the first among disciples and thus the first member of the Church to be the beneficiary of the redemption offered by her Son, Jesus. Only by the power of God in Jesus, does Mary receive her "favor", "grace" and "blessings". Given her stature as Mother of God and the first member of the Church, Mary can be held up as a model to be imitated and as one who calls for love and devotion from all Christians because of her unique relationship to

Jesus.

2) The IC and the Scriptures

We can agree with our fellow Protestant Christians that the idea of the IC is not found explicitly in the Scriptures. However, some scholars have enlisted various biblical texts in support of the IC. The value in these lies not in their literal meaning, but in the reinterpretation in the light of the IC.

Gen. 3:15 - This text is in the context of the conflict between the serpent and Eve.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

Some mariologists would interpret “you” (the serpent) as referring to the devil and “woman” as referring to Mary. Also the “seed” is Jesus who will bruise (strike) the devil. They also see this as part of the Patristic Eve/Mary comparison. However, most biblical scholars see the literal meaning of the text to exclude an identification of the serpent with the devil, the woman with Mary and the seed with Jesus. The seed speaks literally to the descendants of Eve.

Nevertheless, we have noted before that the practice of searching the scriptures for texts to support theological positions is a time honored practice. And the reinterpreting of texts, as found in Matthew’s reinterpretation of Isaiah 7:14, to take them beyond their original intention in support of a new insight is a common practice among the writers of the NT.

This practice is like the type of writing called *midrash* found both in the OT and NT. Midrash is an imaginative development of a scriptural thought or passage that goes beyond the literal meaning of the text to make an edifying point for the purposes of teaching or preaching.

So here in the case of Gen. 3:15, the literal meaning does not apply to Mary, the devil or Jesus, but its reinterpretation is an imaginative development of the text to make a valid point about Mary, the devil and Jesus in the present context. The present context is the mariological assertion of the pivotal role of Mary in the history of salvation, thus it can be argued that it is “fitting” that she receive from God the privilege of being free from original sin at the moment of her conception, thus the doctrine of the IC.

All that is said here about reinterpretation will apply to the texts that follow.

Luke 1:28 - The context is the angel’s greeting to Mary:

And he (the angel) came to her and said, “Hail O favored one, the Lord is with you”.

The key here is the phrase “O favored one”. This is from the Revised Standard Version, (RSV) translation of the Bible. The phrase more commonly remembered by Catholics is “Hail full of grace, the Lord is with thee”. This phrase is taken from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible based on the Vulgate. The Vulgate was translated in the 4th century by St. Jerome. In 1582 a new translation of the Vulgate NT was published at Rheims and in 1609 the OT was published at Douay. The Douay-Rheims translation was used by English-speaking Catholics for over two centuries.

The question arises: What are the implications for Mary in being either “favored” or “full of grace”? Luke gives his answer in vs. 30-31 with the angel saying that because “you have found favor with God...you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus”.

Mariologists, without denying Luke’s answer, take the phrase from the Vulgate, “full of grace”, to indicate that since Mary was full of grace, this implies that she was also free from all sin, including original sin. Obviously this is not the literal meaning of the text, because the term “original sin” was not coined until St. Augustine did so in the 5th century. Furthermore, the term “grace” is taken in the sense of “sanctifying grace” a term and a concept unknown the NT writers. Nevertheless, as pointed out above, this is a common and accepted resort to the reinterpretation of a text to support a current theological or mariological insight.

Luke 1:42 - This text contains Elizabeth’s joyful greeting to Mary.

And she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!

Later mariology will place Mary above all the angels and saints in holiness and the phrase “blessed are you among women” will be used to support the thesis that Mary is uniquely blessed among all women. and also free from all sin. It will also be enshrined in the “Hail Mary” prayer.

Again, without denying the validity of the mariological claims, such claims cannot be supported from the literal meaning of the text. The declaration by Luke that Mary is “blessed among women” indicates that she is playing an important role in the history of salvation. The use of the word “blessed” puts her in the company of two other women who played a key role in God’s plan to deliver His people and who are also addressed as “blessed among women”: Jael who called “most blessed of women” in Judges 5:24 and Judith who is blessed by Uzziah: “O daughter, you are blessed by the most high God above all women on earth.” (Judith is not part of the Protestant OT canon)

Therefore, the terms “blessed” or “blessed among women” do not, of themselves, mean that Luke is indicating that Mary is the most blessed of all women and therefore free from all sin. However, it is an appropriate reinterpretation of the text for present mariological purposes as we have discussed above.

In summary, the use of OT and NT texts and the reinterpretation of some of these texts to take them beyond their literal sense in support of the IC has its merits. In ecumenical discussions, Protestants often point out that the literal meaning of various texts does not support such Catholic dogmas as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. As Catholics we can grant that argument.

It is true that the literal meaning of the OT and NT texts does not refer to the idea of the IC. However, the reference to Genesis, with the analogy of Mary as the new Eve, coupled with the witness of Luke that Mary is “favored/graced” and “blessed” by God certainly do set the context for the special role of Mary in God’s plan. Therefore, it is judged to be “fitting” and within the expanded meaning of the scriptural text to declare her free from all sin.

3) The Patristic Era

We have noted earlier that the 2nd century Fathers of the Church introduced and developed the idea of the Eve/Mary relationship. Thus, while the idea of the IC is not found anywhere in 2nd century Patristic writing, the Fathers did provide a new insight into Mary that helped lay the groundwork for the development of the doctrine. The portrait of Mary as the “new Eve,” who through her faith and obedience cooperates in a pivotal way to make God’s plan of salvation a reality through the incarnation of the Son, was a significant contribution.

In addition, the 2nd century Fathers continued to stress the themes of the virginal conception, Mary as the Mother of God and her role in salvation history compared to that of the Church. Viewed historically, all of these come together to provide a solid basis for the later development of the doctrine of the IC.

Even an outline of the later Patristic period - 3rd to the 6th century -- would be too long to recount here. However a few points should be made:

With the approval of Christianity by Constantine in 312 and the issuance of the Edict of Milan in 313, persecutions of Christians ceased and the stage was set for Christianity to flourish and later become the religion of the Roman Empire. In this peaceful context, liturgical and devotional life developed and flourished. It was thus possible from the 4th to the 6th centuries for Marian devotions to proliferated, especially in the East. There were also, for the first time, (and basically the last time) voices of criticism. They were the exception, but saints like Athanasius and especially St. John Chrysostom, found some fault in Mary. Chrysostom noted the negative tone of the Gospel of Mark and in his *Homilies on St. John’s Gospel* he stated: “she did not cease to think little of Jesus...but herself she thought everywhere worthy of the first place, because she was his mother”. He even claimed that Mary was seeking her own social advancement in asking Jesus to change water into wine at the wedding at Cana.

However, the vast majority of the voices were positive. St. Ambrose (d. 397) even went so far as to declare that the fact of Mary’s divine motherhood *necessitated* that she be perfect in physical and moral purity. As noted above, the Council of Ephesus in 431 gave

support to this developing mariology by declaring Mary “Mother of God” as it denounced Nestorius’ claim that in Christ there were two persons - one human the other divine. Thus Nestorius argued that Mary was mother of the human person, but not of the divine. Therefore, she could not be called “Mother of God”.

The implications of the motherhood of Mary, as taught by Ambrose and declared by the Council of Ephesus, expanded to include the idea that it was indeed “fitting” that the mother of God be morally perfect from the first moment of her existence. It may seem an odd way of reasoning, but for these theologians and for theologians well into the Middle Ages, the argument for “fittingness” was considered a powerful argument.

By the Middle Ages, Western theology was based less and less on the Scriptures. Theological method was characterized by a rational, deductive approach. The argument for “fittingness” (also called the argument from convenience) was part of this approach. This is how it was formulated:

God (or Christ) *could* do something; it was *fitting* that he should; therefore, he *did* it. *Potuit, deuit, fecit*. This principle would play a large role in the development of medieval Mariology. (McBrien, p. 1086)

This reasoning process would eventually pave the way for the development of the idea of the Immaculate Conception -- God *could* preserve Mary from all sin, it was *fitting* that He do so and therefore He *did* it.

4) Sixth to the Nineteenth Century

Before Ephesus (431), the only feast day for Mary was that of the Purification and that was only celebrated in parts of the East. After Ephesus, feast days multiplied and by the middle of the 7th century four separate Marian feasts were celebrated in Rome: The Annunciation, the Assumption, the Purification and the Nativity of Mary.

By the end of the 7th century, a feast of the Conception of Mary was begun in the East. A hymn written in the 8th century by Andrew of Crete spoke of Mary as “alone wholly without stain”. In the theological language of the Western Church this meant that Mary was conceived without sin. In Eastern thought it only implied freedom from death and human weakness.

Finally, in the 11th century a feast of Mary’s Immaculate Conception was introduced into the churches in England. There was theological opposition to this feast and so for the first time the idea of the Immaculate Conception came under the microscope of theological discussion.

Two prominent 12th century theologians, St. Anselm of Canterbury and St. Bernard of Clairvaux raised objections to the idea of an immaculate conception for Mary. Bernard was a very strong advocate of Mary and even held that she had an important role in the redemption of mankind. He described her as the “aqueduct that leads the waters of divine

grace down to earth". Bernard gave mariology the phrase "everything through Mary", which has remained an influential mariological principal down to the current age.

However, Bernard, like Anselm, objected to the idea of the IC on the grounds that it detracted from the doctrine of the universal redemptive work of Jesus. Mary could be sanctified (saved) in the womb and throughout her life, but she could not be free from sin from the moment of her conception. She had to be touched by original sin for at least an instant in order for her to be redeemed by the grace of Jesus. Bernard called the belief a "superstition".

In the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquinas (perhaps the greatest of theologians) and St. Bonaventure both objected to the Immaculate Conception on the same grounds as Bernard and Anselm. They agreed that Mary was indeed the greatest of all saints and could well have been sanctified in the womb, but they argued that the universal saving grace of Jesus must have applied to her at some point in her human life, even if that point was immediately after her conception.

Finally, in the 14th century Duns Scotus addressed these objections using his theory that Jesus can save in two ways: Jesus can save those already gripped by sin or Jesus can preserve someone from ever being touched by sin, *for even an instant*. This latter way was reserved for Mary and only Mary. Following the reasoning of Scotus, Pope Sixtus IV, in 1476, made the Immaculate Conception a feast day.

Given this reasoning, the Council of Trent in 1545-63 specifically stated that Mary was excluded from its Decree on Original Sin and in its Decree on Justification it stated that Mary was indeed free from all sin throughout her entire life. There was still a good deal of theological debate, but in 1661 Pope Alexander VII forbade any attacks on the doctrine.

For almost a century and a half, discussions of the IC were limited and there was little theological development or even interest in the doctrine.

However, interest was revived when on December 17, 1830, St. Catherine Labouré reported a vision of Mary as the Immaculate Conception. Mary was described as standing on a globe, her hands spread toward the earth with rays of light emanating from them. She was said to be framed by an oval frame on which was inscribed: "O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee". Catherine was commanded to produce a medal depicting the vision. This medal has been called the "miraculous medal".

This vision stimulated new interest in the IC and there were calls for it to be officially defined by the Church. Pope Gregory did not act on these demands, but Pope Pius IX did proceed and contacted some 603 bishops. Of this group, 56, including the Archbishop of Paris opposed the definition. However, on December 8, 1845 the papal bull *Ineffabilis Deus* defined the doctrine (see above) which was later determined to be an exercise of papal infallibility under the terms of the First Vatican Council's definition which would take place 25 years later in 1870.

In 1846, a year after the definition by Pius IX, the American bishops made Mary the patroness of the United States under the title of her Immaculate Conception. This event was followed in 1858 with the apparition of Mary to Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, France. In her vision, the Lady said: “I am the Immaculate Conception”.

In 1917, another apparition was reported in Fatima, Portugal. Here the Lady spoke of herself as “the Lady of the Rosary”. The in 1942, Pope Pius XII, who had a strong devotion to Our Lady of Fatima, consecrated the entire world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. He would later define the Assumption, which we will consider below.

On December 8, 1953, Pope Pius XII declared a Marian year to commemorate the definition of the Immaculate Conception one hundred years before. As the year ended, the pope established another Marian feast, the Queenship of Mary, and on May 31 of 1954 he renewed the consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

In the decade that followed, Catholic scholarship, including Marian scholarship, became more Christocentric, more biblical, more Church-centered and more ecumenical. There was an effort to recast Marian thought within the context of Scripture, of the mystery of salvation in Jesus and the mystery of the Church.

This recasting of Marian thought within the mystery of the Church officially took place at Vatican II. Many of the Council Fathers wanted a separate document on Mary, however, in the closest vote at the Council, the Council Fathers determined to include Mary in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter 8 - *The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church*.

The Assumption

Briefly stated, the dogma of the Assumption holds that Mary was assumed, body and soul, into heaven. After consultation with the bishops of the world, 98% of whom affirmed that the doctrine was possible and opportune, the promulgation was made on November 1, 1950 by Pope Pius XII in the papal bull *Munificentissimus Deus*. It states:

We do pronounce, declare and define as a divinely revealed dogma: The Immaculate Mother of God, Mary every Virgin, after her life on earth, was assumed, body and soul, to the glory of heaven.

The declaration made no statement about the manner or time of Mary’s death or her assumption or whether she had died at all. Nor did it discuss what an “assumed” or “resurrected” body might look like. St. Paul had experienced difficulty in speaking of the resurrected body of Jesus and theologians still have the same difficulty, the subject is open to theological discussion. This dogma was also considered infallible under the terms of Vatican I.

1) Ecumenical Common Ground

As in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Catholics and Protestants share common ground. All Christians profess Jesus as universal savior who rose from the dead and through His victory over sin and death all believers will also rise from the dead. The assumption of Mary is the realization of the resurrection from the dead for her, the same resurrection of the body which will also be realized for all in due time.

The ancient Creeds of the Church profess a common belief in “the resurrection of the body and life everlasting”. In this context the dogma can be seen as a “prophesy of sorts” that given the reality of sin, suffering and death there is hope for resurrection and new life and that it has already happened, first in Jesus and now in one of us - Mother Mary.

Mary was the first disciple to hear the word of God, to accept the word of God and to do the word of God. In her faith and through the power of God she has received the promised resurrection of the body. This does not set Mary off from other Christians as semi-divine or the only human that will enjoy the resurrection of the body. She is set off, however, in that she is the first disciple in the Church to partake in the resurrection of the body. Due to this special privilege she is the most honored of all the saints - the object of true devotion and imitation.

As in the case of the Immaculate Conception, what is claimed for Mary is the same that is claimed for all, except that because Mary is the Mother of God and because of her faith, she is first among the disciples of Jesus to be the beneficiary of His promise of resurrection of the body. As Vatican II states: “she is the first flowering of the Church as she is to be perfected in the world to come” (Constitution on the Church, n. 68). This thought is echoed by Karl Rahner in his work *Mary the Mother of the Lord*: “The Church looks on and greets in Mary her own type and model, her own future in the resurrection of the body” (pp. 91-2).

2) The Assumption and the Scriptures

Again, as in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, we can agree with our fellow Protestant Christians that the concept of the Assumption is not found in Scripture. Some scholars have pointed to the “woman clothed in the sun”, etc. in Rev 12:1 as Mary assumed into heaven. But as we have pointed out above, the woman referred to in Rev 12 is not Mary, but symbolizes the nation of Israel in giving birth to the Messiah and/or the new Christian church in the wilderness under attack by Satan after the Messiah had been taken up into heaven. While the woman of Rev.12:1 is mentioned in the papal bull on the Assumption (see below), it is referenced only as an example of symbolic interpretation by medieval theologians.

The other passages from Scripture that would have important indirect import to the Assumption would be those related to the resurrection. The study of the resurrection literature is a subject in itself and beyond the scope of this lecture.

3) The Patristic Era

The Fathers of the Church during the second and third centuries are silent about the Assumption. The foremost authority on the Assumption, M. Jugie, concluded from his study of the subject: “The patristic tradition prior to the Council of Nicea (325) does not furnish us with any witness about the Assumption” (*The Death and Assumption of the Holy Virgin*, p. 56.)

Their contribution is the same as in the case of the Immaculate Conception, i.e., the affirmation of the virginal conception and the development of the Eve/Mary comparison. These contributions helped lay the groundwork, along with the Scriptures, for the later development of Marian themes and dogmas.

During the last half of the 4th century up to the 6th century, the development of Marian traditions, including the Assumption, was to be found in the expansion of Marian devotion and piety. This was also true of the later centuries. The basis of this development was the focus on Mary’s role as the virgin mother of Jesus. Many of the later theological arguments would flow from this Christological fact.

4) The Sixth Century and Beyond

As the Patristic Era was drawing to a close, beginning in the 6th century, various churches began celebrating the feast of Mary’s bodily assumption into heaven. This belief did not originate from any analysis of Scripture or reference to the Fathers of the Church. It probably arose from two sources:

- 1) The argument from convenience or “fittingness” - it was fitting that Jesus should rescue his mother from the corruption of the flesh. He could do it, He willed to do it (it was fitting) and He did it. This “reasoning” included arguments such as - Mary gave life to the body of Jesus, Jesus in turn kept life in His mother’s body; a son is to love his mother and this love of Son for mother was expressed in saving Mary’s body from corruption.
- 2) There was in circulation an apocryphal narrative about Mary entitled *Transitus Mariae*. This document purported to give details about Mary’s death, funeral, empty tomb and bodily reception into heaven. This feast of Mary was celebrated on the “day of her death” as was the custom for saints and martyrs. By the middle of the 7th century four separate Marian feasts were celebrated in Rome: The Annunciation, the Purification, the Assumption and the Nativity of Mary.

From the 7th century through the Middle Ages the development of the concept of the Assumption was expressed in the liturgy, sermons and spiritual writings. The theological discussions revolved around the question of “fittingness” and in these terms was accepted by such scholars as St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas.

There was little significant discussion or development of this doctrine until its declaration

by Pius XII in 1950. The issues of when or if Mary died, where this took place, whether there was an empty tomb, what are circumstances of her present existence and many others are unresolved to this day. However, devotions to Mary flourished. The Rosary gained importance and various novenas and local feast days (May crowning) proliferated throughout Catholic communities.

Summary

There seems to be a good deal of common ground between Protestants and Catholic on which to hold discussions about the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. That common ground is the recognition of the humanity of Mary and her “special privileges” within the context of these same “privileges” -- freedom from original sin and resurrection of the body -- being also granted to all believers.

However, gaining consensus on these issues is more difficult than on other Marian issues. This is so because there is no real, obvious basis in the Scriptures or the Fathers of the Church on these dogmas. The key elements in the development of these dogmas in Catholic thinking are tradition, the ordinary magisterium and the infallibility of the pope. these are very difficult issues in and of themselves. So the path is difficult.

A Unique Ecumenical Question

Given this difficulty outlined above, an important ecumenical question arises. Consider the following scenario unfolding at sometime in the future: Let us imagine that the mainline Protestant Churches and the Catholic Church have come to a point in their dialogue where they have reached substantial agreement on justification, the role of the papacy, the nature of the sacraments and other central issues that now divide them, BUT they cannot reach agreement on the Immaculate Conception and/or the Assumption. Without completely resolving these issues, could a fundamental unity be established that would include a common sharing of the Eucharist? A good question.

The Problem

Briefly stated, the problem concerns the fact that the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are considered infallible statements by the Catholic Church under the terms of papal infallibility as defined at Vatican I. As such, they are considered matters of faith for all Catholics.

In defining the dogma of the Immaculate Conception Pope Pius IX gave this warning:

If, therefore any persons shall dare to think - which God forbid - otherwise than has been defined by us, let them clearly know that they stand condemned by their own judgment, that they have made shipwreck of their faith and fallen from the unity of the Church.

In a similar vein Pope Pius XII gave a stern warning when defining the Assumption:

Wherefore, if anyone - which God forbid - should willfully dare to deny or call in doubt what has been defined by us, let (that person) know that he (or she) certainly has abandoned the divine and catholic faith.

Given these warnings, the question revolves around the binding force of these dogmas and their implications for unity among the Christian Churches.

Towards a Solution

In classical scholastic style, perhaps it is possible to make a distinction between not accepting these dogmas and remaining in the *Catholic Church* and not accepting these dogmas and remaining in *the Church*. Let us consider this last possibility.

The last century has seen a greater awareness in theology and especially in the liturgy of baptism of the fact that all Christians, through their baptism, are members of the Church, albeit a divided Church. The days of the standard “conditional baptism” of Protestants who join the Catholic Church have given way to the recognition of our common Christian baptism. Those who intend to join the Catholic Church and become part of the RCIA process, (the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), are divided into candidates, indicating those who have already been baptized and catechumens, indicating those who have never been validly baptized.

Given this common baptism and various elements of a common creed, the Second Vatican Council in its *Decree on Ecumenism* rightly refers to Protestant communities as “churches and ecclesial communities”. It further states in Chapter I, note 3:

Nevertheless, all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ. They have a right to be honored by the title of Christian, and are properly regarded as brothers in the Lord by the sons of the Catholic Church.

Moreover some, even very many, of the most significant elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church herself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, along with other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit and visible elements. All of these which come from Christ and lead back to Him, belong by right to the one Church of Christ.

Echoing these thoughts, Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Ut Unam Sint*, makes a statement about the real communion and the “presence” of the one church of Christ that exists between the Church of Rome and other Christian Churches:

Indeed, 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. To the extent that these elements are found in other Christian communities, the one church of Christ is effectively present in them.

The *Decree on Ecumenism* also makes an important point. In Chapter II, note 11, we find the following statement:

Furthermore, Catholic theologians engaged in ecumenical dialogue, while standing fast by the teaching of the Church and searching together with separated brethren into the divine mysteries, should act with love for truth, with charity, and with humility. When comparing doctrines, they should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order or “hierarchy” of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of Christian faith.

If this notion of a “hierarchy” of truths is significant for ecumenical discussions, it seems to open up the possibility that if the ecumenical partners reached agreement on fundamental “truths” at the top of the hierarchy -- justification, papal authority, christology, resurrection, salvation in Jesus -- those “truths” at the lower end of the hierarchy (the Marian dogmas?) could be “held for further discussion” while a true (not perfect) unity could be established that included the sharing of the Eucharist. Certainly no one has or could reasonably argue that the Marian dogmas, even though infallibly defined and therefore true, are so central to the Christian faith that it would not stand without them. They are not part of the apostolic preaching (original kerygma) of the NT nor part of the Patristic witness. Neither of these dogmas are contained in the major Creeds of the Catholic Church.

Furthermore, Vatican II granted permission for a limited sharing of the Eucharistic between Catholics and Orthodox, even though the Orthodox Churches (sister Churches) do not accept the two infallibly defined Marian dogmas. In its Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches (note 26,27), the Second Vatican Council stated:

...in order to promote closer union with the Eastern Churches separated from us, the sacred Synod lays down the following policy:

In view of the principles recalled above, Eastern Christians who are separated in good faith from the Catholic Church, if they ask of their own accord and have the right dispositions, may be granted the sacraments of penance, the Eucharist, and the anointing of the sick. Furthermore, Catholics may ask for these same sacraments from those non-Catholic ministers whose Churches possess valid sacraments, as often as necessity or a genuine spiritual benefit recommends such a course of action, and when access to a Catholic priest is physically or morally impossible.

Therefore, the acceptance of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption and *even*

the full acceptance of papal authority do not seem to be absolute requirements for a true, but imperfect, membership in the Church or for the sharing of the Eucharist. The only absolute requirement is for a unity established in baptism and an agreement on fundamental truths at the “top” of the hierarchy of Christian truths that constitute the “foundation of the Christian faith” (see *Decree on Ecumenism* above). And while Catholics still hold that the Marian dogmas are infallibly true, this infallible status does not necessarily promote these dogmas into the top of the hierarchy of the truths of the Catholic Church.

In an article in the December, 2001 edition Our Sunday Visitor’s magazine *The Priest*, entitled “Consensus on the Biblical Picture of Mary”, Dr. Charles Diskson, a Lutheran pastor expressed this hope:

And still another step envisages the possibility that Catholic Church authorities might agree that in *an ecclesial communion* (emphasis mine) Lutheran Churches and their members might be left free to decide whether or not to profess belief in the main dogmas of 1854 (Immaculate Conception) and 1950 (Assumption). This is not to suggest that such disagreements are unimportant, but that within closer fellowship they would continue to be seriously discussed. Ultimately, full ecclesial communion would involve agreement with regard to all truths that either Church holds to be binding in faith or inseparable for the Gospel.

This hope of Dr. Diskson is based on the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue on Mary during the past 25 years which has born fruit in a fundamental consensus about the place of Mary in the history of salvation. Dr. Diskson notes:

The dialogue groups of the 1990’s (published under the title, *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary*) then hold out the wonderful possibility that if there is significant convergence involving mutual recognition of ordained ministries, it may be possible to have reciprocal eucharistic sharing between Catholics and Lutherans.

In the final analysis, it does not seem out of the realm of possibility that the next step in the unification of Christianity may well be possible even though a full agreement on the Marian dogmas is not yet accomplished.

It is of first importance to remember this: the search for Christian unity is not an option! It is the will of Our Lord (Jn. 10:16; 17:21). We Christians have destroyed the unity willed by our Savior and we must do all in our power to restore it. This is a moral obligation of the first order and exemplified in the life and teachings of Pope John II. Therefore, to set up unreasonable theological roadblocks on the road to Christian unity is to betray our mandate from Jesus.

Unity does not require absolute uniformity in all things, only those fundamental truths of the Christian faith. We can therefore look with hope to the future as all Christians

struggle to remain faithful to the Jesus and to each other. We can be assured that The Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God and Mother of the Church, will be our companion on this important journey.