

Mary as ecumenical Enabler.

In 1967, a Roman Catholic layman, Martin Gillett, and a few ecumenical associates founded a society, the *Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. They were convinced, in a way that seemed to many at the time counter-intuitive, that study of Mary and devotion to her could help transcend the deep divisions within the Christian Church¹.

Gillett and his co-founders succeeded brilliantly in one sense, but not in another. They did seek and obtain valuable scholarly studies from eminent theologians in a variety of traditions where little attention had been paid to the Mother of Christ within living memory. From my own Methodist tradition, they had papers from Neville Ward, Gordon Wakefield and John Newton. Two eminent scholars in the reformed tradition, Dennis Dawe and Ross Mackenzie also contributed. A little later we had papers from Tom Bruch and the Swede, Sven-Eric Brod².

In another sense, the founders were less successful. The membership of the society remained overwhelmingly Roman Catholic and anglo-catholic. A few Orthodox joined, a few other free church people, a few Anglicans who were not of the more catholic tendency, including the Irishman, William Bridcut, who spoke movingly on the humility of Mary but also added that Mary was currently doing nothing, just sleeping the sleep of the just awaiting the promised final resurrection. However, in the wider Church, at any rate in those traditions where Gillett hoped for a re-receiving of contemplation of Mary and her discipleship of her divine Son, little has happened!

The Society still exists and I am still a member of it, if a rather sleeping one for various reasons. Our Society's invitation came to me, both as a pleasant surprise but also as a challenge to resume my own thinking on the matter. The early work of the ESBVM has been complemented by four important ecumenical dialogues since the 1980's. They are, in date order, the US Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, *The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary* (1990), the British Methodist-Catholic dialogue, *Mary, Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness* (1995), the (unofficial) Group des Dombes francophone dialogue, *Marie dans le Dessein de Dieu et la Communion des Saints* (Mary in the Plan of God and the Communion of Saints), (1998) and, finally, the ARCIC document, *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ* (2005).

I should add that, both through official magisterial teaching and the work of theologians, the Roman Catholic Church has striven to encourage dialogue with the rest of Christendom in a way that recognises why, to varying degrees, other traditions have found difficulty both with some forms of Catholic marian piety and, particularly, with the marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950. The key statement to cite is that in *Lumen Gentium*, chapter 8, where it is made

¹ For a short history, see Knap-Fisher, E. *The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (ESBVM, 1997)

² Tom Bruch gave two papers to the ESBVM, one on Lutheran ecumenical dialogues and agreements at the Woldingham Conference of 2003, the other on Luther's devotion to Mary. Sven Eric-Brod's paper was on *Mary, A Bridge of Unity* (ESBVM, 2004). There have also been many papers given to the ESBVM by Anglicans. One may instance in particular Edward Knapp-Fisher and the late Canon Roger Greenacre.

crystal clear that 'we have but one Mediator, Christ, that all the saving influences of Mary flow from the divine pleasure...rest on his mediation and depend entirely on it and draw all their power from it'. We are also assured that 'in no way is the immediate union of the faithful with Christ impeded'- this very sentence witnesses to Roman Catholic acceptance that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, as *individual* believers, through Christ to the Father, is acknowledged alongside the more traditional Catholic stress on the *corporate* royal priesthood of the entire Body.

Pope John Paul II, in *Ut Unum Sint*, identified marian doctrine as an area in which there was still much to be done in ecumenical dialogue (at this stage only the American Lutheran-Catholic dialogue had been published)³. Pope Francis has issued no detailed Mariology, but his devotion to the Blessed Virgin and his belief in her relevance to the life of the faithful are obvious. I will touch on that later in this paper.

One of the most useful contributions to dialogue was made by Fr Rene Laurentin, a peritus on mariology at Vatican II. At the ESBVM Congress of 1981, he admitted that the witness of the New Testament to Mary is varied, that Paul and the other epistle writers say nothing of her and that it is primarily on Luke and John that we depend for the trajectory of pondering on the Mary who, herself, according to Luke 'kept all these things in her heart and pondered them' (Luke 2:19, 51). He touches on a key Protestant concern when he mentions that the western liturgy is very reserved in mentioning her and that it faithfully maintains the tradition that worship is worship of the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit alone. He stresses that invocation of Mary, asking for her prayers for us or others, 'is no more than a minor secondary, complementary form of prayer, related not to the worship of God but to communication within the communion of saints'⁴.

This last is a vital, helpful and, indeed, in Catholic-Protestant relationships, a very healing and reconciling statement. I admit to feeling that it seems inappropriate when Catholics interpolate a Hail Mary into the liturgy rather than saving it for private devotion or use in a prayer meeting. The question of what is liturgically acceptable was settled by the fathers of Nicea II in 787 when they distinguished between *latreia*, divine worship, due to the Blessed Trinity alone and *dulia* or respect, always due to those whom God has called and given to us as faithful examples of Christian discipleship. The Council did allow a higher degree of respect to Mary, *hyperdulia*, but it is still not worship. Mary is a creature, albeit one with a unique vocation and unique *engracing* by the Holy Spirit.

It is interesting to note in this connection that the German expression for the feast of the Immaculate Conception on Dec 8 means literally the *begracing* of Mary, her preparation for her unique vocation. It is a term that holds the promise of an ecumenical consensus on this previously controversial doctrine. The Orthodox may dispute the doctrine from the point of

³ Para 79.

⁴ Lecture *Pluralism about Mary: biblical and contemporary*, Supplement to *The Way*, no 45, (1982), pp 78-92, p 88 for his statement about 'the minor secondary nature of prayer to Mary.'

view of the eastern tradition, which does not recognise the doctrine of original sin. Orthodox and Protestants together may question the right of Rome to define doctrine without either clear biblical foundation or the consent of the rest of the oikoumene but none would deny that God ever calls to any particular vocation without supplying the grace needed, even less that He is unable 'to accomplish in us abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine' (Eph 3:20).

What we may, indeed should do, is pour out unbroken thanks, in personal prayer as well as in solemn public worship, to God, praising him for the grace that he has lavished on all his saints, and for the inspiration that comes from their examples of Christian faithfulness and service. In that sense the cult of the saints, both those recognised as having universal significance and those recognised as having significance for particular local churches, should be promoted.

I was once told by a prominent Methodist liturgist that little was said about Mary in Scripture. My friend, the late Rev. David Butler, responded when I told him this that even less is said about the eucharist in Scripture but we still don't dispute its importance. What little is said should be taken seriously by all in the oikoumene because we all deem the written Word of God to be of the highest importance. We would also all echo the hope recorded at Vatican II in the *Decree on Revelation* that the Church 'should constantly move forward towards the fullness of truth until all the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her⁵.' One thing which joins us across the entire oikoumene is the fervent prayer that God's will may be done on earth as well as in heaven and that, as part of that divine will and promise, the Church should finally be, in all its members, without spot or wrinkle, the Bride finally perfect in the gracious embrace of the divine Bridegroom (Eph 5: 27).

Let us look at now at how the Church, across all the multiple traditions, can learn from Mary how to grow, helped by her example of faithfulness to Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, into that unity that Christ wills for her as the Bride, one and spotless. I want to look at what Catholic theologians sometimes call the marian dimension of the Church (as opposed to the petrine one, which relates to structures of ministry and connexion). Catholic theologians are quite right to stress that there is an intimate connection between the motherhood of Mary and the motherhood of the Church. Calvin recognised this, arguing that he cannot have God as his Father who will not have the Church as his mother. Calvin also held Mary in the highest esteem even though he also opposed invocation of the saints *as such* on account of the abuses that had been associated with it.

Elizabeth Johnson, an American Catholic feminist theologian, stresses that we must understand Mary in her historical exact context, much easier for us now to comprehend than for so many medieval and later generations who did not have the knowledge of context that modern historical, literary and archaeological research can supply. Johnson's

⁵ *Decree*, para 8.

book, *Truly Our Sister, A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (2003), stresses Mary perhaps more as companion on our pilgrimage, as elder sister in the faith rather than mother, though in a way that does not exclude the more maternal angle. She shows that Mary's acceptance of her own lowliness was no exaggerated or false modesty. Mary was typical of most of her contemporaries, living in Galilee in villages where the men were largely peasant farmers or craftsmen, eking out a living which was little above basic subsistence level. They were oppressed by taxation for the benefit of the Roman Emperor or his local puppet rulers and had, in addition, to pay taxes which went to the Temple authorities. Mary was probably illiterate, though that did not prevent her from knowing the story of her own people, of its ups and downs, of the divine deliverance from slavery in Egypt, of the return from exile in Babylon, of the messianic hopes and promises. She would have learned this from both her own parents and the local synagogue. The Magnificat testifies to her knowledge⁶.

If Mary had ever before the visit of the angel wondered who might be the mother of the Messiah, she would almost certainly have assumed that it would not be anyone of her lowly status from a backwater like Nazareth. However, when the totally unexpected happened, her faith in God's salvation at work in her people's history and in the promises of the God that had guided it helped her to make the response for which the whole of that history had been a preparation. Her fiat, her response, was the culmination, the crowning blessing, fulfilling everything for which the faithful remnant, the anawim or pious poor, had always prepared and prayed. It is with good reason that the Orthodox speak not just of Mary as the Mother of God but also of her own ancestors as the 'holy, just and righteous ancestors of God'. In her, all the Spirit empowered responses of the prophets, of the just kings like Josiah, all the promises and hopes of a reversal of oppression and the coming of a kingdom of perfect justice, all came together.

This is a point made strongly by the late Cardinal Suenens. 'In her is the yes of all the patriarchs and prophets. She is the daughter of Zion'. Suenens also stresses the role of the Spirit not just in the conception of Jesus but in Mary's response and collaboration in the task of nurturing and raising Jesus. 'She is free, but in the depth of her freedom, it is the Holy Spirit permeating that freedom and giving her the capacity to say yes. That collaboration was the gift of the Spirit. She was what she was by the gift of God. She said yes to the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption, which are one'⁷.

Suenens was one of the great modern prophets of the Holy Spirit, helping to recover for the western Church in general a proper emphasis on the distinctive person and work of the third person of the Trinity, helping to recover for the west a proper trinitarian balance and rescue it from what a Jesuit once described as 'practical popular binitarianism'. Suenens cited the

⁶ Johnson, op cit, Part 4, *Picturing a World*, pp. 137-208, gives a very detailed survey of Mary's immediate context, social-political, economic and religious, as a woman of lowly status in early first century Galilee.

⁷ Suenens, I-J. in *The Way*, op cit, pp 5-13, esp.8.

beautiful pre-Christmas antiphon, 'O wisdom from beginning to the end directing everything with power and at the same time with tenderness.' That is what the grace of the Spirit is, power, invitation and gracious attraction in a combination, the depth we can never fathom or analyse in this life but may perhaps understand later when we are known even as God already knows us.

In Orthodox churches two icons stand to either side of the gates of the sanctuary, both pointing to Christ. One is of John the Baptist, the forerunner, the other of Mary but whereas they are both witnesses to Christ, John is the less important. He is still the greatest under the Old Covenant whereas Mary belongs uniquely to *both* covenants. She will be present at the two stages of the final inauguration of the New Covenant, at the foot of the Cross and then at the final coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Suenens stressed that Mary was the first charismatic. Another theologian stresses what he calls the mini-Pentecost that took place at the Incarnation, involving three female proto-charismatics, Mary herself, Elizabeth and Anna the prophetess. Mary is of course also present, after the Resurrection, in the Upper Room, awaiting the final definitive coming of the Spirit upon all the disciples.

Suenens was, of course, a key advocate of the charismatic movement when it spilt over into the Roman Catholic Church from the early Pentecostal churches. He and other Roman Catholics have recognised its significance both for the vitality of the oikoumene and for ecumenical co-operation. One of his most important successors in this respect is the Northampton diocesan priest, Peter Hocken, whose book *The Glory and the Shame* (1994), is one of the finest contributions I know to the search for mutual ecumenical reception of all the gifts that the Spirit has bestowed on the whole range of Christian traditions⁸. Arguably the most important dialogue for the future of the entire Church will be that between the two largest bodies in Christendom, the Roman Catholic Church and the Pentecostal communities, now reckoned to number about 600 million globally. Can a consideration of the role of Mary, as engraced and enabled by the Spirit contribute to this? There is no doubt that Pope Francis earnestly desires all charismatics, both catholic and non-catholic to work together as vibrant communities of evangelical witness and service⁹. Some Pentecostals, such as Francis' friend Pastor Traettino in Italy, and Cecil Robeck, the American leader of the dialogue from the Pentecostal side, are strongly behind this.

I referred earlier to the title of the British Catholic-Methodist dialogue on Mary, *Mary Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness*. Mary is hailed by the angel as kechairotomene, that is not

⁸ After drafting this paper, I came across a further book by Hocken, *One Lord, One Spirit, One Body* (1987), the second part of which, entitled 'Holy Spirit Renewal and the Christian Churches' very effectively summarises the challenges of the charismatic movement to all the churches. Hocken died in 2016.

⁹ See, eg. his address to charismatics, both Catholic and others on 50th anniversary of the Catholic charismatic movement, as later cited by him at an audience with the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, 28.9.2018.

simply engraced but lavished with grace, overwhelmed by grace¹⁰. What she expresses in her song of rejoicing is not the acknowledgement of such graces as she may already have had but the sheer overwhelming wonder of God's grace so freely lavished on her as His choice of the person who should bring His eternal Son into the world, a choice which showed the extraordinary way in which His mercy was indeed over all His works, even to the extent of choosing one as lowly as her to use and share her flesh to bring about the fulfilment of all His promises and purposes.

Luther, of course, realised this in such statements as his catechetical reference to the Magnificat 'Since then, it is his (God's manner) manner to regard things which are in the depths and disregarded...He has regarded me, a poor, despised, and lowly maiden...I must acknowledge it all to be of pure grace and goodness and not of any merit or worthiness'¹¹.

Pope Francis endorses the stress on Mary's lowly, very ordinary position. He stresses that she was 'a normal girl. Nothing was exceptional in her life. She worked, went shopping, helped her Son, helped her husband. She lived normally, just like the people around her'.

Francis' statement aroused the wrath of an American right wing Catholic group 'The Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property'. 'How dare the Pope call the Queen of Heaven just an ordinary girl?'¹²

Charles Wesley captures the spirit of Mary in a hymn that was not written as specifically marian, but undoubtedly expresses that spirit that she established for all time as paradigmatic of the true spirit of Christian worship and diaconal service of others.

'Behold the servant of the Lord

I wait thy guiding eye to feel,

To hear and keep thy every word,

To prove and do they perfect will,

Joyful from my own works to cease,

glad to fulfil all righteousness'¹³.

The last two lines sum up the entire content of the *Joint Declaration on Justification*. They spell out succinctly what subsequent theological dialogue caused Roman Catholics and Lutherans to work through in full and fruitful detail, so fruitful that it has since also been

¹⁰ The French Jesuit, Bernard Sesboue stresses this. Mary is 'comblee de grace', which certainly translates as overwhelmed. Sesboue, B. *Pour Une Theologie Oecumenique* (1990), p. 358.

¹¹ Cited from Tom Bruch's paper *Mary in the Lutheran Tradition*, given to the Ecumenical Marian Pilgrimage to Walsingham on 12 March 2013, see pp. 3-13 for detailed quotations from Luther on the Magnificat.

¹² It is from their website that I gained this. Clearly, the present pontiff understands the meaning of incarnation better than some of his critics.

¹³ *Singing the Faith* (the current British Methodist hymn book, 2011), no 546.

accepted by Methodists (2006), by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (2018) and by the Anglican Communion (2019)¹⁴. The Baptist-Methodist dialogue report of 2018 has also asked the Baptist World Alliance to consider affirming the Joint Declaration¹⁵. Truly, a key moment in Mary's ministry as ecumenical enabler for a future which she could never envisaged at the time even though her reference later in the Song to the reversal of all the injustices known to her world shows that she had confidence in a God granted eventual reversal in the coming kingdom.

Charles Wesley sees the joy of Mary in what the later Wesleyan fathers were to call 'the true, the experimental religion' the religion in which, amidst wrestling for understanding, deeper truth is discovered. In similar struggle and exploration, many of her later spiritual sisters were to be 'true mothers in the new Israel.' Pope Francis also captures the amazement then expressed as an abiding experience for all the faithful as they seek to live in the experience which Mary shares with all her sisters and brothers in faith. At the papal mass on 1 January 2019, he said,

'Today is also a day to be amazed by the Mother of God. God appears as a little child held in the arms of a woman who feeds her Creator... God rests on the lap of his mother, and from there he pours out on humanity a new tenderness'.

Francis talks of the way in which Mary 'generates in her children the amazement of faith because faith is an encounter, not a religion. Without amazement, life becomes dull and routine, and so it is with faith'.

Mary's moment of triumph is also one of amazement. We must remember that Mary, though obedient also remained puzzled and questioning. As Elizabeth Johnson puts it, she did not have a copy of the papal bull defining the Immaculate Conception pinned up in her kitchen. Living in the volatile world which was that of early first century Palestine, she was to worry first about the troubling prediction of Simeon, then Herodian persecution and the safety of her baby, then about Jesus going 'awol' in Jerusalem. The angel had told her baby had a unique place in God's plan of salvation but she still felt the qualms of a mother about his future safety and these came out in the famous incident recorded in all three synoptic gospels¹⁶. 'A sword shall pierce your heart' must always have remained in her mind and she must have struggled with that.

Anita Baly, a Lutheran theologian, considers that it is important that we understand Mary's continuing doubts and struggles. She analyses the famous incident related in all three synoptic gospels where Jesus appears to give his family the brush off. She even argues that the hostile reception to his first sermon in Nazareth, the saying about his having nowhere to lay his head and the saying about a prophet not being with honour except amongst his own

¹⁴ This can be googled under title *Notre Dame Consultation Statement* (March 2019)

¹⁵ See my 'A tale of Two Dialogues', *One in Christ* (2018), p. 284.

¹⁶ Mark 3:34-5 and parallels.

folk, may all witness to a degree of misunderstanding between him and his nearest which was distressing and problematic for both sides¹⁷.

In this struggle with doubt and fear both Baly and Johnson argue that she remains 'truly a sister' for all of us who try to follow Christ. She kept the bliss of that moment of annunciation in her mind. We know her wisdom at the marriage feast at Cana. 'Do whatever he tells you'. She trusted that Jesus would do something to help though she did not know what.

A key feature of her life with was her pondering to which Luke refers twice. We must not think of this as a smooth process such as we might imagine occurring in the heart of an unusually exceptionally holy nun like St Teresa of Lisieux. Bonnie Miller-McLemore states 'Mary attends to God precisely within the confused messiness of her life. She prays in the midst of tensions and questions, fixing attention so that she might see things otherwise hidden and make God's purpose manifest in daily toil'¹⁸.

Miller-McLemore particularly stresses that Mary is 'not one to whom we pray, but one *with whom we pray*, as a sister in Christ and God's Mother, unceasingly, in the midst of our work and lives'.

There is a danger both that we *underestimate* Mary and the lessons for devotion to God's will and Christ that we can derive from her example and that we *overestimate* her, seeing her as so far above every other Christian that she can no longer be a fruitfully encouraging and enabling sister. Ultramontane Roman Catholicism and the more robustly reactive forms of Protestantism have fallen respectively into these two traps. Ultramontane Catholicism, as exemplified both by some theologians like St Alphonsus Liguori and in some forms of popular piety, has sought to glorify Mary ever more fully, overlooking her own desire to give praise and glory to God alone, a matter in which Luther, commending the Magnificat as a lesson for all time in giving full and hearty thanks to God, sees her as of abiding significance for us. Protestants have gone to the other extreme.

The way back to balance is, as, alike, the fathers at Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* and as the French Groupe des Groupe des Dombes saw it, is to locate Mary clearly in the full communion of saints. I would add not just in the communion of the saints secure above, but in the communion of the saints below, those being formed in Christ, those 'pressing on to full salvation' as Wesley would put it, but, I would add as still, in most cases, far from 'having obtained the prize'.

¹⁷ Baly, A. 'A personal Approach to Marian spirituality-a Lutheran perspective' in McLoughlin, W, and Pinnock, J (eds) *Mary is for Everyone* (1997), pp. 220-236.

¹⁸ Miller-McLemore, B. 'Pondering All These Things' in Gaventa, B.(ed) *Blessed One. Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (2002), pp. 97-111. pp. 108-9 stress the anguish in which Mary prays, balanced in pp 109-110 by the stress on her amazement. She also argues that the translation 'kept in her heart' is not strong enough-it should be 'treasured in her heart.'

Despite that, one has to insist that ultimate likeness to Mary is offered to us all. It could scarcely be otherwise since we know that when Christ finally appears his faithful people will then be like him (1 John 3:2). We shall be like His mother too, glorying in God alone, as in this verse in Charles Wesley's 'God of all power, and truth and grace'.

Now let me gain perfection's height,

Now let me into nothing fall,

Be less than nothing in your sight

And feel that Christ is all in all¹⁹.

Mary was and remains on our side of the division between divine and human. One of the dangers of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is that removes Mary too far from us. It is one thing to accept that God offers grace proportionate to the need of everyone whom he calls to serve him, in whatever capacity or sphere of life. That Mary, granted her particular calling and responsibility needed a special outpouring of grace we may all grant.

Mary was called to a unique vocation. We may also acknowledge that she experienced a transcendent joy that could not be available to any male and was only available to one woman. She received the eternal Son of God in her womb in order that he might assume our flesh. Charles Wesley captures the wonder as well as any poet could.

O mercy divine;

How could'st thou incline

My God to become such an infant as mine?

He comes from in high,

Who fashioned the sky,

And meekly vouchsafes in a manger to lie.

Our God ever blest,

With oxen doth rest,

Is nursed by his creature and hangs at the breast²⁰.

If she was called to such bliss, she was also called to incomparable sorrow. From the point of Simeon's prophecy, she must always have felt a shadow of fear. According to John, the disciples tried to dissuade Jesus from going to the family of Lazarus and thus getting near to

¹⁹ *Singing the Faith*, op cit, no 498.

²⁰ Cited in Hart, E. *All Loves Excelling. Daily Meditations with Charles Wesley* (no 21, p.37.)

Jerusalem and danger. When Mary heard the news that Jesus was insisting on going, all her fears may well have come back vividly.

Fr Laurentin makes an interesting point about the scene at the foot of the Cross. He stresses the nuances in the description. 'Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother...when Jesus saw the mother and the disciple whom he loved, he said to the mother, 'Woman, here is your son' and to the disciple, 'here is your Mother'. At first Mary is referred to as mother of Jesus but then she becomes 'Woman'. Laurentin and other Roman Catholic exegetes see in this an indication that, for Jesus, his mother has ceased to be defined purely as his mother and is now to be a spiritual mother to all his followers²¹.

Of course, this has sometimes been disputed by Protestant scholars who read the interchange as being purely Jesus' making arrangements for the future welfare of his grieving mother. No doubt this was part of Jesus' intention, but it does not exclude the possibility that Jesus was also extending a continuing function to Mary within the ongoing community of the disciples. I think the case for such a supposition is increased when we remember that John was the one other person particularly close to Jesus. He was the beloved disciple. There would seem to me to be an appropriateness in our Lord's commending of the care of the two persons closest to him to each other and seeing this as a pattern for mutual care within the community that would result from resurrection and Pentecost.

In recent years, Roman Catholic theologians have often made a distinction between the *petrine* face of the Church, church as connected by particular ministerial structures and the *marian* face of the Church, Church as community of fellow disciples, caring for each other within the common fellowship, proclaiming the Good News through the medium of their service of each other and their reaching out to the rest of the world. This is an important distinction and in a sense it is a distinction between facilitating structures and the inner essence of the Church as communion. It is helpful to make this distinction as it allows us to recognise as authentic Christian communities all gatherings which love and serve the Lord and care for each other as well as those beyond their own community, whilst still needing to engage over the strictly secondary matter of appropriate ministerial structures. This, I argue in another study, is the trajectory of Francis' own ecumenical approach²².

It reminds us of the importance of the basic Christian gathering in each separate community, whether it be parish or congregation. It is there that people grow in mutual learning and discipleship. I know that, theologically, local church is understood as diocese in Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiology, but wider units of Church are effectively below the radar for most layfolk; it is the Sunday by Sunday congregation with which they identify. In early Methodism, it was complemented by the even more intimate

²¹ Laurentin, op cit, pp 89-90.

²² *Ecumenical Trends*, Jan-Feb 2020, pp 4-11 'The ecumenism of Pope Francis: A significant pontificate for the Oikoumene'. See also my 'A wider role for the Petrine Ministry' in *One in Christ* (2020), no1, esp. pp.69-73.

association of the class meeting, the vitality of which is so strongly stressed in many of Charles Wesley's hymns, the context within which the joys and the difficulties of Christian pilgrimage are experienced²³.

However, Christians also need a strong sense of their belonging to the one holy catholic Church of God, called to preach the Gospel to every nation, and within which each nation and human culture can find its place and its fulfilment within God's plan to reconcile all things in Christ.

In church, both at the most local level and at the most universal, Mary finds her place as sister and as Mother. When I started preparing this paper, I had a lingering mistrust of putting too much stress on Mary as Mother of the Church rather than as theotokos, mother of Christ, God Incarnate. My mind was changed by an experience at a small Methodist church near Bristol.

For many years that church had been served by an extremely humble and self-effacing lady called Jan, who had spent her entire life in the local community and chapel. She had been church steward for heaven knows how long and indefatigable carer for anyone in need or unwell. After a few years of very much declining health, in which she had continued despite that to give herself unstintingly, she died. Her assistant steward, a Ghanaian, rang me to ask me to take a small service at which a tribute could be given to her and some of her favourite hymns sung.

I had always known how well loved Jan had been but what I grasped more clearly on that Sunday morning, speaking to the people was how much she had been spiritual mother of that church and had prayed regularly with some of the members during the course of her week as well as carrying out her various caring visitations. She had been, to use an old Methodist expression relating to exemplary women class leaders, a real 'mother In Israel' to them.

It struck me that if Jan, and others of her ilk, can be seen as mothers of the Church at the most local level, then one can, maybe *must* use that expression of Mary in relation to the Universal Church. Though we have no definitely reliable information about her role in the Church after Pentecost, we can be sure that she will have been important in handing on particularly the fruits of that pondering which Luke records as taking place after the presentation in the Temple and the famous visit to Jerusalem when Jesus went missing.

Any mother knows that children vary, sometimes very much despite being siblings. We do not and cannot know what exact state of knowledge the Church above has of the pilgrim Church but I think that, precisely as charismatic, Mary may be able to discern the

²³ See, in the first ever official Methodist hymn book, that of 1780, the 'hymns for the society meeting and parting', nos 478-539. It is also worth mentioning that, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis mentions the parish and its community before he deals with the responsibility of the diocese under its bishop. EG paras 24,26.

complementarity of the charisms of the various traditions and churches. Her prayer may well be that we should grow in humility in receiving gifts from others, learning from them in truly receptive ecumenism. Mary will remember that her own spiritual journey was one in which she had to struggle to understand what God was doing in Our Lord's ministry and, above all, what he was doing as she stood at the foot of the Cross.

Sometimes remarkable insights come from unexpected quarters. Despite the veneration in which some of the Reformers, particularly Luther and Zwingli, held Mary, their successors, at least in the continental churches and English free churches, seemed until a generation or so ago, determined to forget her. An exception was the early nineteenth century Congregational minister, John Angell James, minister of Carr's Lane church in Birmingham. He describes Mary as standing grief stricken but in dignified silent contemplation at the foot of the Cross. He describes her as a 'wondrous woman', not shrieking or cursing or even loudly crying, but simply being there for her Son.

Mary can be, indeed is, if we but let her, an ecumenical enabler. She reminds us in the Magnificat of the whole heritage of faith of her people which remains that of Jews and Christians alike. She straddles the two religious traditions in a way no one else does, a Jewish matriarch of great holiness, the first Christian disciple in learning from struggling with her Son. She is a pivotal figure for every generation.

Over the centuries, the famous woman of Revelation 12 has been seen sometime as Mary, sometimes as personification of the Church. I think she can be seen as both since her Son is 'never without His people seen' (Charles Wesley)²⁴.

David Carter.

(This paper was originally commissioned by the Anglican-Lutheran Society for their 2020 Conference in Rome, which, of course, had to be cancelled as a result of the pandemic. As a relatively very new member, I felt honoured and thank them for their kindness in stimulating me to such reflection as I have tried to record here. The Society, on whose committee I serve as a Methodist observer alongside Fr. Philip Swingler, a Roman Catholic observer, does prodigious work in promoting Anglican-Lutheran understanding, dialogue and exchange. It has several American members from both traditions.)

²⁴ *Hymns and Psalms* (Methodist hymn book, 1983), no 622.