

## MARY-GRACE AND HOPE IN CHRIST. AN EVALUATION IN ECUMENICAL CONTEXT.

In this paper, I aim to give a critique of Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ within a wider ecumenical context. I was fortunate, as secretary of our Churches Together in England Theology and Unity Group, in being able to hear a whole range of early reactions to the report, in particular a sharp but irenically expressed appraisal from Dr Martin Davie, an evangelical Anglican who is theological adviser to the House of Bishops of the Church of England.

I fervently hope that the Report will stimulate fruitful dialogue rather than sterile controversy both within the two communions concerned and beyond them. There are deep general theological issues involved in terms of our understanding of sanctifying grace and the nature of our incorporation into Christ. The Report clearly takes into account at least some of the key sensitivities within the Protestant and evangelical traditions, especially where the questions of the sole Mediatorship of Christ and the immediacy of the relationship of the believer with God are concerned. Thus we note that in para 68 it is stressed that both ARCIC I and the present commission 'reject any interpretation of the role of Mary that obscures this affirmation' and that any seeking of the aid of the saints 'must not obscure believers' direct access to God our heavenly Father who delights to give good gifts to his children (Matthew 7:11)<sup>1</sup>. The latter quotation has relevance to more general debates between Protestants and Catholics on the doctrine of grace, sacramental and non-sacramental. The other great Protestant concern, encapsulated in the phrase 'soli Deo Gloria' is less directly addressed and one could wish for a stronger emphasis upon the creatureliness and lowliness that she herself emphasised in her Song.

Indeed, one may argue that any failure to emphasise this vulnerable creatureliness detracts from our understanding of the uniqueness of God's extraordinary overwhelming of her with His grace. No other woman has been granted to hold her creator in her arms as her own child and, arguably, no other has ever known such agony as Mary knew at the foot of the Cross when she wrestled with trying to understand the purpose of the father in allowing the cruel death of her child. The feelings of Abraham on Mount Moriah as he prepared for the sacrifice of Isaac, from which of course, he was then at the last moment spared, will have foreshadowed those of Mary but not have equated with them.

It is important to put the Report in context, both the wider context of ecumenical dialogue and the more immediate one of ARCIC itself. Despite the immense importance ascribed to her in the traditions alike of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches, very little attention was given to the Mother of God in the early stages of faith and order dialogue. Many, understandably, regarded the issues as too emotive on both sides of the Reformation divide. To this day, there are some Protestants who regard any form of devotion to our Lady as idolatrous.

The founder of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Martin Gillett, dissented from such caution about marian issues and believed that dialogue concerning Mary could prove ecumenically fruitful<sup>2</sup>. His success in involving many church leaders in his new society proved a point, though one has to note that, with a few signal exceptions, most of the support

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<sup>1</sup> Mary, para 70.

<sup>2</sup> The Society was founded in 1967 and now has about 1000 members.

for the ESBVM from the Anglican, reformation and post-reformation churches has come from the elements within them most sympathetic towards the catholic and sacramental traditions and that, to this day, few conservative evangelical Anglicans and Protestants are involved in the Society, which, notwithstanding this fact, *has* made a very real contribution towards a more positive evaluation of Mary in those churches.

Within the previous twenty-five years, three inter-confessional dialogues had addressed the role of Mary and a few others had certainly touched upon her importance, ARCIC itself, in the Final Report of 1981 being amongst them. That report stated.

‘We agree that there can be but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, and reject any interpretation of the role of Mary which obscures this affirmation. We agree in recognising that Christian understanding of Mary is inseparably linked with the doctrines of Christ and the Church. We agree in recognising the grace and unique vocation of Mary, Mother of God Incarnate (Theotokos), in observing her festivals, and in according her honour in the communion of saints. We agree that she was prepared by divine grace to be the mother of our redeemer, by whom she was herself redeemed and received into glory. We further agree in recognising in Mary a model of holiness, obedience and faith for all Christians. We accept that it is possible to regard her as prophetic figure of the Church before as well as after the Incarnation’<sup>3</sup>.

It went on, though, to point to Anglican difficulties over the two dogmas of 1854 and 1950 and the manner of their promulgation.

Clearly both the significance of Mary and the existence of continuing difficulties related to Roman Catholic teaching about her were at this point recognised as key issues for the future ARCIC agenda.

In the meantime, the issue of marian devotion and teaching has been addressed first by American Lutherans and Catholics within the more general context of the understanding of the communion of saints and its role, next by British Methodists and Catholics and finally, as well as most comprehensively, by the famous French Groupe des Dombes, an unofficial but highly influential and creative dialogue body of French Protestants and Catholics which originated with an initiative of the late Abbe Paul Couturier in 1937<sup>4</sup>. In the latter two dialogues there was a clear admission from the Protestant side that the role of Mary, clearly attested in Scripture had been unreasonably ignored within the tradition concerned. It was accepted that though Scripture says little per se about Mary, its teaching about her discipleship is nevertheless highly significant. Methodists were asked ‘whether they responded positively enough to the call of Scripture to all generations to call Mary blessed’<sup>5</sup>. The Methodist members of the dialogue accepted that there was a case to be answered and that exploration of marian devotion was part of their ecumenical duty, integral to authentic ‘walking together on the pilgrim journey’<sup>6</sup>. It was accepted that Mary stands for all time as

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<sup>3</sup> ARCIC, *Authority in the Church*, 1981, para 30.

<sup>4</sup> For the three reports concerned see *The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary* (Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, VIII, 1983-90), reproduced in Burgess, J. and Gros, J. (eds) *Growing Consensus, Church Dialogues in the US*, New York, 1995, pp. ; Evans, M. *Mary, Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness*, London, 1995; Groupe Des Dombes, *Marie dans le Dessein de Dieu et la communion des saints. I Dans l’histoire et l’écriture; II, Controverse et conversion*, Paris, 1997/8.

<sup>5</sup> *Mary, Sign etc*, para 2.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, Intro and para 1.

model disciple and that she ‘sums up in herself’ the relationship between God’s sovereign grace and our free co-operation as individual believers and as the Church of Christ<sup>7</sup>. The Methodist stress upon responsible grace and the common confession that ‘Methodists and Catholics recognise the need for human beings to co-operate in the mystery of salvation’ made it easier for Catholics and Methodists to reach this agreement than it would be for some other Protestant confessions that are only too wary of what they see as synergism or co-operating grace<sup>8</sup>. The general point about convergence on the doctrine of responsible grace was re-emphasised in the most recent eighth report of MRCIC.

An important advance was made when the Methodists, while declining to accept that the dogmas of 1854 and 1950 as necessarily *de fide* nevertheless agreed that they could accept the underlying principles that they were meant to reinforce, namely the granting of a unique grace for an unique vocation and the ultimate eschatological destiny of the elect in glory<sup>9</sup>.

The consensus statement did not go uncontested in British Methodism nor has there been any suggestion that it be adopted as a Conference approved statement-the nearest thing in British Methodism to an exercise of magisterium in the Roman Catholic sense<sup>10</sup>.

The Groupe des Dombes argued that there need be no necessary incompatibility between the traditional Catholic language of co-operation and the term ‘grateful response to a perfect gift;’ as used by the French reformed theologian, Jean Bosc. It cited Luther’s affirmation of Mary’s free works of love and his conclusion. ‘after we have been justified by faith, we must do everything for others, freely and gladly’<sup>11</sup>. Both Catholics and Protestants were respectively challenged as to their distorted emphases in the one case and their neglect of Mary in the other. Catholics were reminded that much marian doctrine and devotion had come dangerously close at times to losing its moorings in the key truths of christology and grace. They were warned about invoking the ‘*sensus fidelium*’ in defence of new cults of proposed dogmas since such an alleged *sensus fidelium* can rest on ‘religious sentiment rather than Christian faith’. Protestants were challenged as to whether their silence concerning Mary prejudices their relationship with Christ and does justice to Scripture. They were challenged to recover those marian feasts that have a clear scriptural basis<sup>12</sup>.

The Groupe argued that its consensus on Mary’s co-operation should suffice for unity in faith. They argued that explicit assent to the dogmas of 1854 and 1950 should not be required of Protestants, instancing the repeated appeals of earlier popes that those holding contrary opinions on the matters concerned should not anathematise each other. Protestants should simply be asked to affirm that they respected the ‘content’ of the dogmas’ accepting them as ‘free and legitimate consequences of the reflection of the catholic consciousness on the coherence of the faith’. Reference was made to the then recent progress in christological dialogue between Rome and the ancient churches of the east in which it had been agreed that those churches need not be bound to the theses of Chalcedon<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, para 17.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, para 5.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, para 4.

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting critical evaluation from within the Methodist tradition, see the article by E. Ball, ‘Mary, Mother of the Lord’ in *Epworth Review*, 1997, vol. 24, no 4, pp. 25-41.

<sup>11</sup> *Marie dans le Dessein* etc, paras. 209, 216.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, paras 291-4, 331.

<sup>13</sup> *Marie*, paras 295-9.

It is interesting in the light of these previous dialogues, which deserve to be far better known than they are, to review the advances made by this most recent ARCIC dialogue.

The scriptural section of the Report largely echoes themes already stressed in the preceding dialogues. Para 30 summarises.

‘The scriptural witness summons all believers in every generation to call Mary ‘Blessed’; this Jewish woman of humble status, this daughter of Israel living in hope of justice for the poor, whom God has graced and chosen to become the virgin mother of His Son through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. We are to bless her as the ‘handmaid of the Lord’ who gave her unqualified assent to the fulfilment of God’s saving plan, as the mother who pondered all things in her heart, as the refugee seeking asylum in a foreign land, as the mother pierced by the innocent suffering of her own child, and as the woman to whom Jesus entrusted his friends. We are at one with her and the apostles as they pray for the outpouring of the Spirit on the nascent Church, the eschatological family of Christ. And we may even glimpse in her the final destiny of God’s people to share in her son’s victory over the powers of evil and death’.

This section of the report has not gone without criticism. Mary’s sinlessness has sometimes been questioned by Protestants in the light of Paul’s teaching in Romans 3:23, that ‘all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God’. The report argues that the specific context of this Pauline teaching being the equal sinfulness of Jews and Greeks, it is ‘unrelated to the issue of the sinlessness or otherwise of Mary’. Dr Davie contests this, referring to the trend of Paul’s teaching earlier in the epistle and specifically to Romans 3:9, where Paul declares that ‘all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin’. The interpretation of John 19:25-7 as legitimating an understanding of the spiritual motherhood of Mary can also be contested as a piece of eisegesis or reading into Scripture what is not there; however, the present commentator would argue that such an interpretation is not untenable in the light of modern biblical scholarship. It is accepted that the Gospels do not give us generalised biographical information about Jesus; they are concerned only to relay points that are of permanent religious importance. Thus, the fact that they relate the arrangements that Christ made for His mother indicates that their significance goes beyond the ordinary performance of family duty. No doubt our Lord carried out many duties as a son and a sibling of which no record has been kept precisely because they held no permanent lesson for the Church in terms of the essential truths of salvation; the fact that John relates this incident says something, as I have argued elsewhere about the nature of mutual spiritual care within the Church.

The hermeneutic question, of course, remains, with Catholics and Orthodox contesting that Scripture must always be read according to the mind of the Church, which involves, for both churches, the light of Tradition and, additionally for Catholics, that of the magisterium. Protestants, holding the principle of the perspicuity of Scripture, will always argue that Scripture is clear and plain upon essentials and that what is unclear or not mentioned in it is not a matter of core belief. Protestants will also argue that, at certain points, Tradition, as understood by Catholics and Orthodox, appears fallible because it contradicts either the general tenor of Scripture or specific teaching in it, an example of course being the teaching about Mary’s sinlessness as cited above.

Two things are perhaps more strongly stressed than in earlier dialogues. One is the parallel between the choice of earlier heroes of the Old Covenant to do special tasks and the choice of Mary. A related point is that of Mary’s special preparation for her role. Stress is laid on the

fact that it is a Greek perfect participle that is translated as ‘highly favoured’. Mary is one who ‘has been and remains endowed with grace’, implying ‘a prior sanctification by divine grace with a view to her calling’ (para 16). The second point is Mary as a personification of Israel and type of the Church; indeed, it is said that ‘it is difficult to think of the Church without thinking of Mary, the mother of the Lord, as its archetype and first disciple’<sup>14</sup>. The spiritual motherhood of Mary, already mentioned above, is linked to that of the Church and the care of the Beloved Disciple for Mary related to that which every Christian should have for the Church.

The section on Tradition emphasises the development of patristic reflection on Mary, in particular her virginity which, the Report stresses ‘is understood not only as physical integrity but as an interior disposition of openness, obedience and single minded fidelity to Christ which models Christian discipleship and issues in spiritual fruitfulness’<sup>15</sup>. An important turning point is noted as occurring in the high Middle Ages when ‘theologians associated her ever more closely with Christ in the continuing work of redemption. The centre of attention of believers shifted from Mary as representing the faithful Church to Mary as dispensing Christ’s graces to the faithful’<sup>16</sup>. The Report however fails to make clear that it is here that real difficulties begin for those who adhere to the principles of the Reformation, including, of course, many Anglicans. Protestants may, indeed *should* admit that reaction against questionable aspects of Roman Catholic mariology has led them to ignore plain scriptural truths about Mary, most notably her significance as model disciple, even spiritual guide in terms of her ‘pondering upon all these things’ (Luke 2:19,52).

We must, however, continue to record reservations about any concepts that associate Mary too closely with redemption as such. It is true, of course, that God asked Mary to ‘let go’ of Jesus as he sometimes asks all faithful Christians to let go of precious relationships and to deny themselves and in that sense Mary’s sacrifice was great but can it be seen as in any way parallel to God’s setting forth of His only beloved Son as the gift and embodiment of His eternally saving will and love? There is a difference between the eternal activity of the Trinity for our salvation involving alike the gracious plan of the Father, the ‘lamb slain from the foundations of the world’ and the self-offering of the Son ‘through the eternal Spirit’ (Hebrews 9:14) and the *passive* willingness of Mary to let her Son go into his public ministry and then to his death, accepting albeit amidst questioning and anguish, that this was the will of the Father. Mary cannot be said to set forth or offer her Son in the sense in which the Father sets him forth or Christ offers Himself; this is why many of us, willing as we are to accept that Protestants have erred in their past underestimation of Mary, remain chary of the enthusiasm of some Roman Catholics for doctrines of co-redemption and co-mediation. The Report does not, of course, endorse these moves amongst some Roman Catholics but it might have done an ecumenical service by warning specifically against them as did certain non-Roman Catholic mariologists at a congress in 1997<sup>17</sup>.

To talk of Mary as ‘dispenser’ of divine grace is to come too close to a limitation of that divine grace and to a constraint on the free access of the believer to Christ. ‘Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out’ (John,6:37), promises Jesus and while it is the norm that believers should come to Him with and in His Church, he does not in His divine freedom and compassion relinquish his right to receive them in other ways. We remember his rebuke of

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<sup>14</sup> *Mary*, para 27.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, para 37.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, para 42.

<sup>17</sup> See the comments on this Congress as reported in the *Tablet* on 17,24,31 Jan. and 7 Feb. 1998.

the disciples who tried to stop a stranger healing in Christ's name because he was not of their number (Mark, 9:41).

The Report rather skates over the excesses against which the Reformers reacted. It refers to deformations in popular piety and excessive emphasis upon Mary as mediator and miracle worker<sup>18</sup>. There is a slight element of special pleading in the treatment of the Anglican reformers. The Report notes correctly that they affirmed the universal need (including that of Mary) for a saviour but argue that articles ix and xv neither affirmed nor denied the possibility that Mary had been preserved by grace from sin<sup>19</sup>. They record the preservation of five marian feasts in the calendars of 1561 and 1662 and the references of certain Anglican fathers, both Caroline divines and later leaders of the Oxford Movement to the purity of Mary<sup>20</sup>. They stress the moderation of the fathers at Trent who said little new about Mary but rather play down the significance of the tremendous increase in popular marian devotion in Catholic Europe in the nineteenth century<sup>21</sup>. Finally, there is a very proper emphasis upon the way in which Vatican II sought to relocate Mary clearly within the communion of the Church and upon the subsequent greater prominence given to Mary in the Anglican liturgical revisions of the late twentieth century<sup>22</sup>. Dr Davie, however, has stressed that Church of England liturgical revision in the late twentieth century was extremely restrained in its references to Mary and the resultant texts cannot be seen as endorsing the theology of the Report. He also emphasises that the teaching of the Homily on Prayer remains official for the Church of England<sup>23</sup>. In turn however, the reasoning of the homily might be disputed in any church which accepts, as does the Church of England, that there are legitimate spiritual and liturgical practices which lack direct scriptural authority but which are of proven value in the fostering of Christian faith and love.

The final section, 'Mary within the pattern of grace and hope', argues that the glorification which is the destiny of all God's elect is already present and effective in Mary. 'Viewed eschatologically, Mary thus embodies the elect Israel of which Paul speaks' (54). 'Mary is marked out from the beginning as the one chosen, called and graced by God through the Holy Spirit for the task that lay ahead of her. This emphasis assists the Commission in its argument that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is consonant with Scripture (although not directly attested in it). Within para 59, however, there is an oblique criticism of the way in which the dogma has sometimes been presented.

'The negative notion of sinlessness runs the risk of obscuring the fulness of Christ's saving work. It is not so much that Mary lacks something that other human beings 'have', namely sin, but that the glorious grace of God filled her life from the beginning. The holiness which is our end in Christ (1 John 3:2-3) was seen, by unmerited grace, in Mary, who is the prototype of the hope of grace for humankind as a whole'.

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<sup>18</sup> *Mary*, para 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, para 45.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, para 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, para 47.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, paras 47-50.

<sup>23</sup> The homily states, 'But that we should pray unto Saints, neither have we any commandment in all Scripture nor yet example which we may safely follow. So that being done without authority of God's word, it lacketh the ground of faith and therefore cannot be acceptable before GOD (Heb 11:6). Or whatever is of faith, is sin (Rom 14:23). The argument would seem to tally more with later Puritanism than with classical Anglicanism as defended by Whitgift and Hooker.

Similar reasoning is applied to the defence of the dogma of the Assumption, also held to be consonant with Scripture. 'We can affirm together the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory'. (58) This can, however, be disputed from the point of view that the New Testament asserts the definitive entry into eschatological glory body and soul *only* of Christ; for the rest of us, even the most faithful, that hope remains future. Indeed, there are even Protestants who argue that Mary along with the rest of the elect, does not even intercede since she is still asleep awaiting the final resurrection of the just; one may argue of course, that the weight of the evidence of Scripture plus the consensus fidelium not only in 'catholic' churches but also in the reformation and post-reformation traditions is that the just are already in Paradise and that they are involved in the conscious and unending praise of God. From this, one may also legitimately infer that they intercede for those still in the Church militant. The dogma of the Assumption as such, however, remains problematic.

When it comes to the Roman Catholic claim that these two dogmas are part of Revelation *per se*, the Report becomes a little more tentative. It accepts that, for Anglicans it is the teaching of a General Council that would be seen as most authoritative in confirming that a doctrine was, indeed, consonant with the original revelation attested in Scripture. It records that the dogmas of 1854 and 1950 were proclaimed not in response to controversy, upon which Rome as final court of appeal in such matters had to adjudicate, but in response to popular demand. It states its hope that it should be possible for the two churches to agree upon the consensus as reached in the Report as sufficient witness to a common faith. In a footnote it refers to ecumenical precedents for accepting alternative formulae as equally legitimate expressions of the same basic fait, citing precedents in agreements with the Lutherans and the Oriental Orthodox churches. It asserts.

'In these circumstances, the explicit acceptance of the precise wording of the definitions of 1854 and 1950 might not be required of believers who were not in communion with Rome when they were defined... Conversely Anglicans would have to accept that the definitions are a legitimate expression of catholic faith, and are to be respected as such, even if these formulations were not employed by them'<sup>24</sup>.

One feels that this the ticklish point of the authority of these definitions might have received more extensive treatment. A key question relates to the circumstances in which doctrinal definition becomes necessary. Clearly, it is necessary when it is needed to avoid heretical opinions that threaten the integrity of the 'scripture way of salvation' and the theology and christology that are necessarily involved. Thus, Athanasius had to fight for the principle that 'what is not assumed is not saved'. With the dogmas of 1854 and 1950, the situation is by no means so clear. A key question is the extent to which any one church, in the conditions of Christian separation is entitled to consecrate the popular pious opinions of its members as *de fide* dogmas when they lack both direct scriptural witness and the assent of other churches, in this case most notably the Orthodox. The Orthodox view is that their confession of Mary's purity as 'panagia' the All-Holy One and their belief in her glory in heaven are part of the hope of the Church rather than of its public proclamation *per se*<sup>25</sup>. Since both Roman Catholics and Anglicans value their relationship and dialogue with the Orthodox, this point should have received some attention. Consideration should also have been given to the statement in the British Catholic-Methodist dialogue that Methodists accept the truths about

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<sup>24</sup> *Mary*, FN 13 on p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> On this, see E. Behr-Sigel in her *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, New York, 1991 (ET), pp. 201-2.

God's enabling grace and glorious destiny of the elect that the dogmas are meant to underline and its potential relevance in this context<sup>26</sup>.

Very properly, the Report calls for a profound degree of re-reception on the part of both churches. It argues that, in both, there has been some exaggeration of emphasis within their respective forms of marian devotion, Anglicans tending to privilege the concept of Mary as model disciple and Roman Catholics her ongoing ministry; neither, it is said, does full justice to the riches of the marian heritage of the Church across the ages. On the question of mediation, the Commission accept that nothing must be done that 'obscures the unique mediation of Christ' (76). Nevertheless, it points out that that mediation is served by many ministries in the Church which mediate the grace of Christ to human beings, not 'competing with the unique mediation, but serving it' (68). Mary's ministry of continuing intercession must be understood within the framework of the total communion of saints, 'all the faithful, both living and departed', being 'bound together in a communion of prayer' (69).

In a final subsection to this last section, entitled 'The Distinctive Ministry of Mary', there is a commendation of the wide variety of forms of devotion to Mary and even of the usefulness of 'private revelation' which 'can be a genuine help in understanding the Gospel and living it better at a particular moment in time' (73). It is accepted that provided it is consonant with Scripture and does not obscure the uniqueness of the mediation of Christ, 'such private devotion is acceptable, though never required of believers'. In the conclusion, the essential point of this subsection, that 'Mary has a continuing ministry which serves the ministry of Christ, our unique mediator', is reiterated.

One omission that surprises me is the lack of fuller treatment of the two occasions in Luke's Gospel in which Mary is recorded as 'keeping all these things in her heart and pondering upon them' (Luke 2:19,51). It is strange that Roman Catholics did not wish to relate this to the whole process of meditative reflection, guided by the Holy Spirit that is at the root of their understanding of Tradition. From the practical point of view of Christian discipleship it is also a pity that there was not greater emphasis upon the way in which Mary had to struggle to come to terms with God's purposes. She is, after all, represented as questioning at the time of the Annunciation, 'how can these things be'? The Commission grant that she may have misunderstood just as the disciples frequently did<sup>27</sup>. This is a point it could have expressed more fully and strongly. It is surely vital that any understanding of the unique graces granted to Mary does not make them sound as though they were some sort of supernatural prophylactic against any sort of doubt or temptation. We are not helped in following Mary as a model if she is too totally removed from ordinary human experience.

Some may also feel that the Report took too much for granted in its references to the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. It is acknowledged that exegetical differences over the nature of the brothers of the Lord reach back into the earliest known commentators of the patristic era. Within Catholic and Orthodox piety the concept of perpetual virginity has always been regarded as more fitting, yet, in view of the pre-lapsarian nature of the institution of marriage, one must at least hold it as a possibility that Mary could have enjoyed a subsequent marriage with Joseph, involving a sexual relationship and the production of children, that would in no way have detracted from her holiness and would rather have

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<sup>26</sup> as referred to above. See FN 14 above.

<sup>27</sup> *Mary*, para 19.

adorned her piety and discipleship in that divinely ordained state and would have been eminently in accordance with her status as a mother in Israel.

As a Methodist, commenting, in one sense, from the outside as it were on this Anglican-Roman Catholic conversation, I should like to add a few reflections from within the Wesleyan tradition. One must begin by acknowledging that there is much for my own tradition to ponder by way of possible reception and re-reception, in conjunction of course with our own British Roman Catholic-Methodist report.. Those Methodists, probably, despite the British dialogue and the existence of the ESBVM the vast majority, who have reflected little on the significance of Mary, might begin with a couplet from Charles Wesley,

‘Mary held him in her womb  
Whom heaven cannot contain’

and a short verse

‘Our God ever blest,  
With oxen doth rest,  
Is nursed by his creature and hangs at her breast.’<sup>28</sup>

Significantly, neither verse has appeared in standard post-Wesley Methodist hymn books but they lie deep within the richness of the Wesleyan hymnodic tradition, waiting for re-reception.

As far as the vexed question of invocation and intercession is concerned (in relationship to any of the saints and not just the Lord’s mother) one may perhaps look to the Wesleyan tradition for help. It cherishes a strong sense of the fellowship of the Church ‘below’ and the Church ‘above’, particularly well exemplified in this still much used hymn.

‘Come, let us join our friends above  
Who have obtained the prize’. It continues

‘For all the servants of our king  
In earth and heaven are one

‘One family we dwell in him,  
One church above, beneath’<sup>29</sup>.

It must be admitted that, in the past, the Wesleyan tradition, despite its affirmation of the unity of ‘all the servants’ past and present ‘of our king’, has looked askance on the cult of the saints, which drew sharp criticism from John Wesley himself, a criticism tempered by his frank admission of the great holiness of so many of those saints whose cult he criticised! At the same time, Methodism has always emphasised the mutual care and support that ‘the saints terrestrial’ should give to one another. It would thus seem logical to commend the practice of invocation not as something that a Christian must do but as something that he or she may do if they find it a real aid to growth in grace and devotion to the Lord of the saints.

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<sup>28</sup> cited in the collection of Wesley’s hymns, *All Loves Excelling*, Peterborough, 1997, edited by Pauline Webb, nos. 11,21.

<sup>29</sup> *All Loves Excelling*, no; also in *Hymns and Psalms*, the current official British Methodist hymnal, no. 812.

Wesley himself distinguished between the instituted means of grace and the prudential means of grace. The former were regarded as having clear scriptural warrant and their due use as obligatory upon all the faithful. The latter were regarded as lacking clear scriptural warrant per se and thus as not obligatory upon all, but as being not inconsistent with Scripture and as usually helping either to implement a scriptural principle or as having a clear precedent in the life of the primitive church. The prudential means of grace thus included those developments in spirituality and devotion that had arisen from the sub-apostolic age onwards and were of proven value in the living of a disciplined Christian life<sup>30</sup>.

It is on these grounds that not merely invocation of the saints but devotion to and learning from their example can be commended.

Another point at which the Wesleyan tradition may prove helpful is in its emphasis that those who have received the gift of perfect love are even more reliant on the grace of God than those who are justified but not yet sanctified. It is a commonplace of Calvinist criticism of both the Catholic and Wesleyan theological systems to argue that they place too much stress upon human co-operation and effort; in the case of the Wesleyan system, the emphasis upon 'responsible grace' is balanced by the sense of adoring wonder, why such love to me? It may be exemplified from these two quotations.

'Thy sovereign grace to all extends.  
Immense and unconfined:  
From age to age it never ends:  
It reaches all mankind.

'How shall I thank thee for the grace  
On me and all mankind bestowed?  
O that my every breath were praise!  
O that my heart were filled with God!  
My heart would then with love o'erflow,  
And all my life thy glory show'<sup>31</sup>.

In such a doxological atmosphere, I think Protestants may be reassured that the divine grace manifested in the call and vocation of Mary are in fact referred back to their divine source. *solī Deo Gloria!* My former ecumenical colleague, the late Fr. Michael Richards, used to stress that the marian dogmas were essentially doxological

Finally, I will add a purely personal note, which, however, I regard as not irrelevant to the search by Protestants for a fuller appreciation of the role of Mary. I should honestly admit that, for a long time, I found no aspect of Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic piety or teaching more difficult than that relating to Mary which seemed to me essentially redundant in view of my faith in the all-sufficiency of Christ. It took some persuasion on the part of a much admired friend and ecumenical colleague, Joe Farrelly, before I was prepared even to join the ESBVM though I soon discovered, to my delight that the Society gave every opportunity for the small minority within it that held a very different understanding of Mary than that held by the considerable majority, to express their views and their critique of the

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<sup>30</sup> See his sermon, *The Means of Grace*.

<sup>31</sup> Hymns and Psalms, nos 46, 47.

mainstream marian tradition. Two short phrases have I think helped me to come to a profounder appreciation of the enduring importance of Mary for Christian faith and practice.

The first is the Catholic invocation, 'Our Lady, seat of Wisdom, pray for us'. At first I was inclined to regard this as an attribution of a degree of wisdom to Mary that properly can be predicated of God alone. One day it suddenly came to me that Mary can be called truly wise precisely because she was aware of what she did not know. She questioned, 'how can these things be?', but amidst all her questioning and pondering she remained faithful. That was her wisdom. That is why she is such an admirable model disciple, and, in her pondering and struggling an authentic 'type' of the pilgrim Church.

More recently, I read Thomas Ken's famous lines, 'Her virgin eyes saw God incarnate born'. It would be historically anachronistic to attribute to Mary a full understanding of the Incarnation as it only developed generations later after prolonged reflection in the Church. We can, however, say that she was aware of being mother of the promised Messiah and to have held the future deliverer of her people in her arms must have brought her a degree of bliss unparalleled in the history of her people. This was later to be accompanied by the profoundest grief as she stood at the foot of the Cross. The one nearest to God both in her obedience and in her unique maternal role came as close as anyone to the heart of God and to God's own great pleasure in self-giving love and to his pain in seeing such constant rejection of His love by human beings. To come close to Mary is to come close to the heart of God. This is perhaps the most important benefit that flows from a contemplation of her. Pace the late Fr. Richards, it is perhaps a matter for prayerful thankfulness and reflection rather than dogma. I would, however, entirely endorse the conclusion of the Commission that it is impossible to be faithful to Scripture without giving due attention to Mary, though whether that warrants acceptance of the marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950 still remains a question for further debate.

David Carter.

This paper was originally given at the Aylesford Conference of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary in August 2006. I had earlier published in *Ecumenical Trends*, no 32, no3, March 2006, pp 8-15, an previous paper, 'Mary Grace and Hope in Christ.' This second paper represents a slight updating of my thinking in the light, particularly, of observations made by colleagues in the Theology and Unity Group of Churches Together in England in the meantime.