

## **Anglican Understanding of Mary**

Anglican comprehensiveness, however much or little one believes in it, has to face a number of theological and ecclesiological controversies which sometimes provide the fuel of uncomfortable conflict. One of these controversies is Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. For many over the past four hundred years and more it has been a delicate subject; so much so that teachers, preachers, conferences and synods have tended to avoid reference to Mary beyond the scene of the Nativity at Christmas and a mention of her presence at the foot of the Cross on Good Friday. To give an example: George Carey, the retiring Archbishop of Canterbury, said in an address he gave at the Shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham (Norfolk, England) in 1988 when he was leading a pilgrimage from his former diocese of Bath and Wells that it was eighteen years after his ordination to the priesthood before he preached a sermon on Mary: as recorded in his book *I Believe* (1991). He now realised how much he had missed.

### **Reticence and Remnant**

The reasons for such reticence are well-known. The popular devotions which were promoted and practised before the European Reformation era and the exaggerations which were associated with them, and the presentation of a theology which had the danger of detracting attention from the uniqueness of Christ, had the effect on many Anglicans and Protestants of hiding Mary if not completely ignoring her. There has been a fear in the Anglican psyche, over the years, of questionable exaggerations of a former age being revived if too much of Mary is made in a church which claims to be Reformed; with the result that often too little is made of her who is so vital to the Incarnation of God's plan of Redemption.

None the less there has always been a sizeable remnant in Anglicanism which has kept the Marian flame alight. For Anglicanism claims not only to be Reformed but also Catholic. She inherits along with Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism the living tradition of the undivided church of the first ten centuries. The teachings of the Fathers and Mothers of those centuries have played a significant part in Anglican spirituality through the whole of Anglican history. And since the churches or provinces of the Anglican Communion have only claimed to be a part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ, Anglicanism has benefited by much of the teaching and some of the practice of other parts of Christendom, especially of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. It is therefore this remnant which has prompted ecclesiastical authorities (synods and bishops etc) to give Mary the Mother of God, the recognition and honour which is due to her in the liturgical calendar and church buildings.

### **Recognition**

St Mary is the most common title throughout the Anglican Communion given to cathedrals and parish churches. Many contain a Lady Chapel. If statues of Mary in Anglican churches are not common she is seen to occupy a prominent place in stained-glass windows and works of art. Icons of Mary and the Child attract many faithful worshippers. (Rowan Williams, the forthcoming Archbishop of Canterbury, has this year produced a small beautiful book of meditations entitled *Ponder These Things Praying with Icons of the Virgin*. Published by Canterbury Press.) Collects and appropriate Scriptural Readings are provided in the lectionaries of the official Prayer Books for the Feasts of Mary. This is not new. The Book of Common Prayer of 1549 and 1662 included them.

The Marian Feasts which are commonly observed in the Anglican Communion are the following:

8th December The Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

2nd February The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (which is also a Marian commemoration)

25th March The Annunciation of Our Saviour to the Blessed Virgin Mary (Lady Day)

2nd July The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (or 31st May)

15th August St Mary, the Mother of Jesus

8th September The Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Of these the most debateable in Anglican circles are the Conception (Dec 8th) and the Assumption (Aug 15th). In fact A New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia Mihinare Aotearoa does not include the Conception of Mary in its calendar.

### **The Conception and The Assumption**

The uncertainty about these two is mainly due to the fact that there are no explicit references to them in Holy Scripture. Anglican calendars generally avoid the adjective “immaculate” with regard to the conception: yet some would say the conception is a strange observance if there is not something special about it; that in Mary’s case it is immaculate. Others have reservations about it with regard to the Redemption: at what point was Mary redeemed by Our Lord Jesus Christ? On the whole Anglicans see the Feast of the Conception in relation to the Advent message and the Nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is expressed by the collect appointed for the feast in the popular office book Celebrating Common Prayer:

Eternal God

who prepared the Blessed Virgin Mary

to be the mother of your Son,

grant that, as we rejoice in his coming as our Saviour,

so we may be ready to greet him when he comes as our judge;

for he is alive and reigns “

The Feast on August 15th is less problematic. Through the ages it has been given a variety of titles the Falling Asleep, the Dormition, the Repose and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Anglicanism has not pronounced that she was assumed corporeally body and soul. Anglicanism has seen the Feast of Mary on August 15th as the commemoration of her departure from this earthly life. When Pope Pius XII declared the Assumption to be a dogma of the church to be believed by all the faithful, Anglicanism objected that it was not part of the deposit of the Faith expressed in the Historic Creeds, that it should only be held as a pious opinion. The dogma has raised the question of the development of doctrine and that of the gift of authority. Anglicanism has always valued the Vincentian Canon (St Vincent of Lerins) on the test of Catholicity, namely “quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est” what has been believed everywhere, always and by all. What Anglicans believe about this feast is expressed by the collect in A New Zealand Prayer Book / He Karakia Mihinare Aotearoa which reads

God of love,

you chose the Blessed Virgin Mary

to be the mother of your only Son;  
grant that we who have been redeemed by his blood,  
may share with her the glory of your eternal Kingdom:  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

### **Invocation and Comprecation**

The Anglican Reformers of the 16th and 17th centuries reacted against the Marian piety of the time by their discomfort and disagreement with invocation to the saints. The claim is that all Christian prayer should be addressed to the Infinite God the main prayers of the Liturgy to the Father, through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Any invocation should be that of the Holy Spirit. Prayer to a saint, including Mary, is an attempt to address a finite being in Christ. Can that saint hear?

One example of this opinion was expressed by Joseph Hall (1575-1656). He stated:

“How absurd is it to reason when the King of Heaven calls us to Him, to run our petitions to the guard or the pages of the court! Had we to do with a finite prince, whose ears must be his best informers, or whose will to help us were justly questionable, we might have reason to present our suits by second hands. But since it is an Omnipresent and Omniscious God with whom we deal, from whom the saints and angels receive all their light and love to his Church, how extreme folly is it to sue to those courtiers of heaven and not come immediately to the throne of grace! ” ” Besides, how uncertain must our devotions needs be when we can have not special assurance of their audience! For who can be sure that a saint hears him? That God hears us, we are sure, as we are unsure to be heard by saints. Nay we cannot all be heard of them. For what finite nature can divide itself between ten thousand supplicants, at one instant in several regions of the world, much less impart itself whole to each? Either therefore we must turn to the Saints into so many Deities, or some of our prayers are unheard.”

This apparent negative view-point concerning the invocation of saints does not mean that Mary and other saints are to be ignored. Far from it. Another Anglican divine of the same period, John Person (1612 1686) wrote as follows:

“In respect of the Blessed Virgin Mary it was therefore necessary that we might perpetually preserve an esteem of her person, proportionable to so high a dignity. It was her prediction “From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed” but the obligation is ours to call her so. If Elizabeth cried out with so loud a voice ‘Blessed art thou among women’ when Christ was but newly conceived in her womb, what expressions of honour and admiration can we think sufficient now that Christ is in heaven, and that Mother with him! Far be it from any Christian to derogate from that special privilege granted her, which is incommunicable to any other. We cannot bear too reverend a regard unto the Mother of Our Lord, so long as we give her not that worship which due unto the Lord Himself. Let us keep the language of the Primitive Church. Let her be honoured and esteemed; let Him be worshipped and adored.”

Anglicanism prefers comprecation to invocation with regard to the saints. By comprecation the prayer is addressed to God asking that we may benefit by the prayers of Mary and the saints. In a devotion such as the Divine Praises Anglicanism does not say “Blessed be the Virgin Mary ” but

“Blessed be God in the Virgin Mary, Mother of Our Lord and God. Blessed be God in the angels and saints” (Celebrating Common Prayer p 242) Anglicanism is keen to make clear distinction between veneration and adoration, between honour and worship between *dulia* and *hyperdulia*. For this reason no direct prayer to Mary or any other saint is included in the official Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion. Some unofficial devotional manuals may include some for private use. In commemorating the Incarnation in the words of the Angelus many less scrupulous Anglicans are content to pray, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death”.

### **Anthems and Hymns**

In Anglican worship Mary is particularly recognised in anthems and hymns. Some of them are addressed directly to Mary. It may be asked what the difference is between addressing a hymn to her and not addressing a prayer to her in the official liturgy. The Magnificat is sung or said at Evening Prayer. Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith has written a popular metrical version ‘Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord’ and I have shown three hymns by Anglicans at different times in history, which express an Anglican understanding of her. They are on a separate sheet and are taken from the New English Hymnal and may be found in other hymn books.

### **Mary, the Figure of the Church**

Commemoration of Mary is therefore bound up within the whole package, so to speak, of the Apostolic Tradition, as articulated by the historic creeds and the Bible, with the communion of saints being a fundamental living dogma. Mary has a distinctive mention in the Creed ‘born of the Virgin Mary’ which means she cannot ever be separated or thought of apart from her Son Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate. In the words of Max Thurian of the Taize community she is ‘the Figure of the Church’. To separate her from Christ and the Church would be like children telling their mother to leave home and get lost. Some neglect of the Virgin Mary may seem a bit like that. She is essential to the Body of Christ, the community of faith. The icons, stained-glass windows, the paintings, sculptured figures and statues, and the title St Mary, given to churches, schools and colleges, are a constant reminder of her vital role in God’s work of redemption. If the church is compared to a ship Anglicanism knows that Mary Our Lady Theotokos is an essential member of the crew next to Christ the Captain. She is always on board: the ship cannot sail without her, let alone reach its destination. Thus Mary does have a vital part in Anglican ecclesiology.

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