

XX Mariological Marian International Congress, Rome 2000.

The Position of the Anglican Communion regarding the Trinity and Mary

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I Introduction

I take the term 'Anglican' here to refer primarily to the Church of England, though I think that the positions to which I refer in this paper would also be found in the spectrum of most of its related episcopal churches, especially the Church in Wales and the Church of Ireland whose territory includes Northern Ireland, the Anglican Diocese of Europe, and the Episcopal Church of Scotland. I have no way of ascertaining the position of all the Churches of the world-wide Anglican Communion, though again I expect that within it I would find a similar range of theological conviction about the Trinity and Mary. We also need to bear in mind the existence of the Porvoo agreement with north European Lutheran Churches. The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Latvia has not yet taken a decision on the Porvoo Declaration, and the Church of Denmark has decided not to endorse it but to maintain links with those who have. There are many difficult issues for discussion in such churches, but my point here is simply that discussion of 'the Trinity and Mary' is a sensitive issue not least in the Church of England's ecumenical negotiations, especially with those Churches with whom we are now in full communion.

The second point I need to make by way of introduction is that I do not write as an official delegate of the Church of England to the XX Mariological Marian International Congress, though I hope I do justice to the complexities of my church's position as a member of its Doctrine Commission — not that at the moment the Commission is likely to discuss the relation between the Trinity and Mary. Relevant discussion, however, took place in the Church of England's Synod in 1998–2000, and I shall return to this via the records of the discussion in Synod's *Report of Proceedings* in the last part of my paper. For those unfamiliar with Synod, it may be helpful to note that it has three 'Houses' — the House of Bishops, the House of Clergy, and the House of Laity. For any motion to be carried

it is required that there be a 2/3 majority in each of the three Houses. The House of Bishops rightly does its best to present a united front to the Clergy and Laity when central points of doctrine are at issue, as in the 1998–2000 debates about the translation of the Nicene Creed to be used in the new liturgies. It was in the course of this debate that discussion of ‘the Trinity and Mary’ surfaced, as I have already indicated. It is also worth noting that just as the reports of the Doctrine Commission have to be presented to and approved by Synod, so does the work of the Liturgical Commission. In this case, however, it was the House of Bishops, and neither the Doctrine Commission nor the Liturgical Commission which had to negotiate consensus about the truth with the rest of Synod, and it was with the House of Laity that they had most difficulty.

The importance of the voice of the laity in the church should not be underestimated. I know virtually nothing about the theological competence of the members of the House of Laity, but I do know a little about those whom they represent. These include people who are studying Christian theology at an academic level in Britain, the majority of whom (and of whatever Church) are now lay, some of them teaching theology professionally. There are also many lay people serving the Church as Readers, taking non-Eucharistic services, leading intercessions and preaching, or having some other authorised liturgical role. There are more of them than there are full-time ordained clergy. And, importantly, there are the laity of the parishes, some of them sustained by the Book of Common Prayer. Clergy and laity together have all had about twenty years’ familiarisation with the Alternative Services Book, though ameliorated somewhat by the reintroduction of the Book of Common Prayer Collects in modern English. At the turn of the millennium they were faced with yet another round of liturgical revision. Tensions about these revisions may well have found a focus on the translation of the Nicene Creed, and hence on the relationship of Mary to the Trinity. Since, so far as I know, most of us learn our doctrine through our liturgical life and its associated ‘devotions’, it is of course important that the formal and the informal do not pull too far apart, and, in addition, that we work with genuine and deep respect for our differences. Reading the record of the Synod debates, I think that such respect was exemplified despite the tensions.

II Some historical reflections

It would not be to the point here for me to narrate in detail the fate of two inter-related sets of convictions and their associated practices — those concerning Mary, and those concerning the invocation of the saints — which can be traced in the history of the Prayer Books between 1544 and 1662, but it is necessary to recall certain points of importance. These are

that the Prayer Books reflect the protests of Reformers against whatever seemed to obscure the priority and centrality of Christ's redemptive work, the authority of Scripture relative to other authorities, and the doctrines of salvation and justification. What eventually remained in the Book of Common Prayer and associated liturgical books was far from negligible, even if unsatisfying. We attend to begin with to the Feast of the Nativity and its Trinitarian Collect:

Almighty God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure Virgin; grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

The liturgy for Christmas Day refers in its Proper Preface to Christ's being made 'very man of the substance of the Virgin Mary his mother, and that without spot of sin, to make us clean from all sin'. The Feasts of Annunciation and Purification were retained as 'Red Letter' days with 'Propers' (so-called because of the colour of ink used to highlight them, and now taken to require a eucharistic celebration); the Visitation, Mary's own Conception and her Nativity were retained as 'Black Letter' days. The Feast of Mary's Nativity on September 8 has for many Anglicans remained the principal Marian Feast, perhaps because as her own 'official birthday' it could focus primarily on Mary herself rather than on Christ in the first instance. Of course the Gospel for the Annunciation is the expected passage from St. Luke, but neither its Collect, nor that of the other Feasts, associates Mary in particular with the Trinity. Nor, despite Acts 1.14, does that for the Feast of Pentecost. In my view this is a significant and serious omission from the Prayer Books and Liturgies of any church, not just for understanding Mary herself, but for the place and authority of women in the Church at large — a point to which I shall return. The Collect for All Saints' Day addresses God as the one 'who has knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord', and goes on to petition God as follows:

Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys, which thou hast prepared for them that unfeignedly love thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Epistle is from Revelation, but not, of course, 'the woman clothed with the sun'. (For a relevant essay see Ian Boxall, 'Who is the Woman Clothed with the Sun?' in Martin Warner ed., *Say Yes to God. Mary and the* 366

Revealing of the Word made Flesh London: Tufton 1999, pp. 142–158). Self-evidently, Mary is not specially identified, and number XXII of the Articles of Religion ‘Of Purgatory’ declares that ‘invocation of Saints’ is repugnant to the Word of God, and ‘purgatory’ remains a contested concept. Article XXII apart, the implication of the Collect for All Saints’ Day is also that the saints are not to be ‘invoked’, if that means asking for their aid as if they have power to act on our behalf independently of Christ. Underpinning particular points in the liturgical year with their associated prayers and readings, at Matins and Evensong generations of Anglicans have said or sung the Apostles’ Creed: ‘conceived by (Latin *de*) the Holy Ghost, born of (*ex*) the Virgin Mary’, — two different prepositions as in the Latin of the Nicene Creed of the Eucharist. At Evensong said or sung on a daily basis in one of innumerable settings is the ‘Magnificat’, prayed as it were with Mary herself. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it must be noted that so far as parish (as distinct from Cathedral) worship is concerned, to the extent that the Eucharist has displaced both Matins and Evensong, the focus has increasingly been on the Nicene Creed: ‘And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man’.

If we look at the period before and after 1662 and the restoration of the monarchy and the Book of Common Prayer, there is unambiguous evidence of the discomfort and disquiet of at least some of the clergy, and we may suppose some of their parishioners, about what was on offer to them so far as Mary was concerned. I give here only three examples. (For others, see A. M. Allchin, *The Joy of All Creation. An Anglican Meditation on the Place of Mary* London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984). My three are as follows. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, who died in 1631, wrote in his poem ‘A Litanie’ of Mary that ‘As her deeds were/ Our helpes, so are her prayers: nor can she sue/ In vaine, who hath such titles unto you’. From the fact that Donne believed Mary’s prayers to be effective it did not of course follow that he could or would do more than pray that his prayers might be associated with hers. It is in that sense that he might ‘invoke’ her, not that he could appeal to her because he dared not appeal to Christ directly. One of Donne’s special friends — twenty years younger than he — was another great priest-poet, George Herbert who died only two years later than Donne, in 1633. In the central section of ‘To All Angels and Saints’ Herbert explicitly says to Mary: ‘Chiefly to thee would I my soul unfold’, yet continues: ‘But now (alas!) I dare not; for our King, / Whom we do all jointly adore and praise,/ Bids no such thing’. My third example is taken from the work of a man whose work was one of the most astonishing discoveries of the late nineteenth century onwards, a third priest-poet, Thomas Traherne, born after the death of Donne and Herbert (and dying in 1674). Traherne was reared and educated under the Protestant

Commonwealth, first commissioned as a minister according to Parliamentary regulation, then episcopally ordained into the Established Church at the Restoration, and thenceforward nourished by the Book of Common Prayer. He is arguably the most ecstatic priest-poet of them all. It is part of one of his devotions which is now included as one of those to be used by the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (My quotations are taken from J. E. Barnes, 'A Caroline Devotion to the Virgin Mary', *Theology* 73: 606 (1970) 535-541). Traherne's devotion begins:

And first O Lord I praise and magnify thy Name
For the Most Holy Virgin-Mother of GOD, who is the Highest of thy
Saints.
The most Glorious of all thy Creatures.
The most Perfect of all thy Works.
The nearest unto Thee, in the Throne of God.
Whom Thou didst please to make
Daughter of the Eternal Father.
Mother of the Eternal Son.
Spouse of the Eternal Spirit.
Tabernacle of the most Glorious Trinity.

It continues with seven lines of praise of her as 'Mother' with biblical titles, and another five lines of praise of her as 'Mirror' of nine biblical virtues: 'Mirror of all virtues' is the apt conclusion of this first part. Traherne goes on to sum up and as it were to comment on his praise of Mary, for he writes: 'The most Illustrious Light in the Church, Wearing over all her Beauties the veil of Humility to shine the more resplendently in thy Eternal Glory. And yet this Holy virgin-Mother styled herself but the Handmaid of the lord, and falls down with all the Glorious Hosts of Angels, and with the Armies of Saints, at the foot of Thy throne, to worship and Glorify Thee for ever and ever'. He indeed praises God 'for doing in Her all thy Merciful Works for my sake, and the Benefit of Mankind', but does not isolate her from all those who hear the Word of God and keep it, becoming Christ's brother/sister/mother by doing the Will of God. The 'Glorious Graces' given and imparted to 'this Holy Virgin' were given to 'all thy Saints', and in response to these and God's own excellencies and perfection Traherne summons himself to worship. Quite apart from Traherne's own knowledge of Roman Catholic devotional language in this period, the continued availability of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, suffused as it is with 'Marian' texts and convictions, may well have sustained familiarity with the kind of language Traherne used in the first part of his devotion. Quite apart from anything else, my examples from the seventeenth-century provide me with an opportunity to make what seems to me to be a very important point,

which is about how much liturgy and the very possibility of learning doctrine depends not just on such poets, but on musicians, sculptors, painters and workers in many crafts who are as such themselves discriminating and perceptive theologians. I also think that the capacities they exemplify to one degree or another are also required of the 'performers' of liturgies, though there is no time to explore this point here. To give only one example, the capacity of musicians to explore the significance of the 'Magnificat' across the centuries seems to me essential to keep the freshness of the words alive for all who participate in the liturgies where it is used in a way that reciting the words alone could not do.

In rehearsing some examples from the post-Reformation Church of England, however, one should also note the difficulties which continued to bear on some people in different centuries and circumstances. To many in nineteenth century Britain, for instance, Mary continued to symbolise superstition and idolatry. (See John Singleton. 'The Virgin Mary and Religious Conflict in Victorian Britain', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 43: 1 (1992) 16–34). Those who found her to be central to their life as believers had to make their convictions known with some caution. It is arguable that John Keble exemplifies the problem. The heir of those seventeenth-century priest poets already mentioned (and of many others to whom reference could be made) as well as of the Book of Common Prayer, he wrote a poem in 1844 significantly called 'Mother out of sight'. On the advice of his friends he omitted it from a collection of his poetry published in 1846, but eventually published it in a collection of his miscellaneous poems. Keble had moved himself beyond George Herbert's reluctance and thinks that we may at least like children say 'Aye' to Christ's mother. For as he wrote:

Angel nor Saint His face may see
Apart from what He took of thee.
How may we choose but name thy name
Echoing below their high acclaim
In holy Creeds?

And yet we also find in this poem the sense of discretion which I suggest still characterises Anglican devotion to Mary. The first line of Keble's poem indeed addresses her as 'Mother of God', and with her he wishes to magnify the Lord and bring her near 'with all the saints'. He incorporates 'Hail Mary, full of grace!' into his fifth stanza, and in his sixth refers to her as 'enthroned Spouse, / His Church and Bride'. His discretion appears in his second stanza:

What glory thou above hast now,
By special grace of thy dear Son,
We see not yet, nor dare espy
Thy crowned form with open eye.
Rather beside the manger meek
Thee bending with veiled brow we seek,
Or where the Angel in the thrice-great-Name
Hail'd thee and Jesus to thy bosom came.

We may suppose that Keble seems to be aware that conspicuous by its absence from the Book of Common Prayer, and indeed from the 1980 Alternative Services Book, was the Feast of the Assumption to which Keble clearly alludes, as did Traherne. If we ask how they came to know of it, the answer may well be that both learned of it at the University of Oxford, since it survived in that University's Calendar despite the Reformation. Whether or how it was celebrated in Christ Church, at once Cathedral and College Chapel, or anywhere else in Oxford in the middle of the long vacation, I simply do not know. Keble cannot, however, make it central to his devotion — 'Mother' may be greeted, and sought, but not directly adored as one seen in full glory. And Keble's sense of discretion is still arguably present in the Church of England, for although the Feast of the Assumption is now back as a 'Red Letter' day in the Church of England's Calendar, (thus catching up with Scottish Episcopalians in their 1928 Prayer Book), the Feast on August 15 is simply indicated as for 'The Blessed Virgin Mary' as in the American Episcopal Prayer Book of 1976 (which, however, does not commemorate her own nativity on 8 September). As with other saints, the day of Mary's death is now commemorated, and this means that at last the Church of England has restored the Feast which is most significant for the dedication of some of our Cathedrals as well as parish churches, did they but know it, since unless some other feast is specified in a dedication to Mary, it is this one which is being honoured. Long before the official restoration of the Feast, some twentieth century Anglicans at least (depending on which hymn book they use) have in fact been singing it, for the second stanza of Athelstan Riley's 'Ye watchers and ye holy ones' (well known in a splendid setting by Ralph Vaughan Williams) goes as follows:

O higher than the Cherubim,
More glorious than the Seraphim,
Lead their praises, Alleluia!
Thou Bearer of the eternal Word,
Most gracious, magnify the Lord,
Alleluia!

Anglicans are certainly short of prayers for the Feast, having 'misaid' them a long time ago, as well as lacking a wealth of earlier imagery associated with Mary, but not everything was lost, as that hymn for one indicates. The restoration of the Feast of the Assumption minus some if not all of its decor, as it were, is a logical follow-on from the agreement reached by the Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) on the content of Marian dogmas: 'Mary, the Mother of God incarnate (Theotokos), was prepared by divine grace to be the mother of our Redeemer, by whom she was herself redeemed, and received into glory.'

III Some doctrinal reflections

It is clear from the ARCIC agreement that to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption does not require assent to the controversial dogma of the Immaculate Conception. To focus on that dogma, however briefly, I suggest that a helpful essay referring to it is by Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Wales (in ed. Warner, *Say Yes to God* as above). Williams writes of its point without endorsing it as a dogma:

What Jesus, humanly speaking, grew up into was made possible by his closest human contacts; so that what he is able to give God through his human will and understanding is what is given to his developing humanity by those who first nurture him. If Jesus is able to live in a way that means that all his dealings are, without obstacle, open to God, this must (in the ordinary processes of human development) be enabled by what is given to him by the first human other he encounters. And that first human other is Mary. At the foundation of Jesus' historical humanity lie his relationships with his parents but, more particularly, with Mary; hers is the first human face he will in any real sense be aware of. What he sees there is crucial to how he sees God. (pp.19-20).

His point is that if Christ's humanity was exceptional, the conditions of his learning it must have been in some way exceptional, with Mary at the centre of it. She herself so lives in relation to God and others that she makes her son uniquely free for God and others also. Her role is not only her free consent at the Annunciation, but the way in which her freedom makes room for God throughout her life. She makes possible for him in his particularity something already real at the centre of his being, which is 'the given, abiding presence of God the Word, the real relation of divine love to divine love that is eternal in heaven.' Mary enables in him a humanity in which there is no obstacle to that divine self-expression (p.21).

True to the dogma, Williams' exposition is also valuable in the way it makes a number of useful points. He emphasises the inter-dependence and

intra-dependence of human beings with one another, but also Mary's freedom. We may all appreciate the determination of theologians as diverse as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar to dislodge all traces of human pride and self-assertion from our understanding of Mary's assent to God's 'proposal' at the Annunciation, but we have no need, so far as I know, to turn Mary of all human beings, into some kind of door-mat if we are even to begin to understand her son. Although Williams does not say so, we may add to his explicit concerns one for recognition of the full human dignity of women, given that Mary's bodiliness remains held to the centre of divine and sacred life, for what is true for her may be true for other women specifically, and not merely for indifferentiated 'humanity'. Touched on in Williams' work is Mary's own discipleship, existing necessarily from before the Annunciation, which makes her assent intelligible, but carried on throughout her life in relation to, and mutual interaction with, her son up to Pentecost and beyond, including the 'beyond' of her Assumption. This theme of her discipleship received sustained and substantial treatment in the two books published by David Brown arising from his 1996 Hensley Henson Lectures in Oxford. His two books are of major importance for anyone concerned with Anglican doctrinal theology. In *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (1999) there is a chapter on 'Pentecost and Crib'; and in *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (2000) there is a chapter on 'Mary and Virgin Promise'. Even here, however, there is so to speak, an unfinished line of development. Given that the earliest known image of Pentecost is that from the Raboulah Gospels (from the monastery of St. John of Zagba in Syria) of 586AD and that this image places Mary at the heart and centre of the disciples (as in Acts 1.14) as did many another for some centuries, we may well ask about the evangelistic mission for women that this image of Pentecost suggests. Mary's discipleship may have included not merely recognition of Christ's resurrection and Spirit-giving but its active proclamation, perhaps made doubly hard for her because she would have to meet the grief of the mothers whose own sons had been done to death by the Herods and Pilates of this world. Her predecessor in the hope of resurrection was the mother of the Maccabean martyrs (2 Maccabees 7), but Mary would be the one to bear the burden of proclaiming its reality. One very powerful visual image of what is being suggested here is Elizabeth Fink's immensely powerful statue of Mary outside Salisbury Cathedral, walking away from it, still marked in face and body by grief, but off and out of her familiar world to proclaim the resurrection — apostolic witness in the New Testament sense. I have yet to come across one single post-Vatican II discussion of Marian doctrine which makes this proposal, no doubt because its consequences for the responsibilities of women for the

preaching and teaching of the gospel would be intolerable to some, and perhaps burdensome to women themselves. There can be deep resistance to the summons such a 'Mary' represents by women as well as men, within Anglicanism as well as in other churches. (Apart from David Brown's essays in his two books listed above, see also Elizabeth A. Johnson's particularly fine essay, 'The Symbolic Character of Theological Statements about Mary' in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22:2 (1985)312-335 for a possible theological framework in which to reconfigure Mary for our time).

IV Concluding observations

That remark brings me to the final part of my essay, which is concerned with what I learned from my reading of the 1998-2000 debates in the Church of England's Synod. Recall that I said earlier that Anglicans have been used in the Book of Common Prayer to 'conceived by (*de*) the Holy Ghost, born of (*ex*) the Virgin Mary' in the Apostles' Creed; and at the Eucharist to 'And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary' in the Nicene Creed. In addition, in the Alternative Services Book, they learned a version of the Nicene Creed which introduced a paraphrase, and interpretation of 'by the Holy Ghost' which read 'by the power of the Holy Spirit'. Two different prepositions, then, to mark the difference between the Holy Spirit and Mary, and the first prepositional phrase interpreted (I understand) as suggested by the International Consultation on English Texts. The interpreted clause incorporates as 'translation' what is proper to 'instruction', though the Nicene Creed it should be noted was never intended as a creed for uninstructed beginners, but for those who are least likely to confuse the respective roles of the Spirit and Mary.

Round one of Synod debate in November 1998 went to those who wanted to retain 'by the power of the Holy Spirit' for which of course there was no precedent before the 1960s/1970s, for what precedents are worth. Round two in February 2000 almost went to the Bishops and clergy who wanted to be faithful to the *original* language of the Nicene creed and not to its Latin and later English translations with two distinct prepositions. The Greek text of the Nicene Creed ran: *kai sarkothenta ek Pneumatou Hagiou kai Marias tes Parthenou*; and as translated by the English Language Liturgical Commission (ELLC) correctly with the *one* preposition governing both genitives. 'and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary'. The problem was that Bishops and clergy could not get the laity to agree with them at the two-thirds majority level, no matter what was said about the point and purpose of this part of the Nicene Creed. They saw no reason to concede the ELLC translation, given their familiarity with the Latin/English version in use

for centuries. If the issue was one of returning to the original language of the Nicene Creed, then another question of a radical kind about 'origins' could be asked, which was whether the Greek of the Nicene Creed quite did justice to the texts of St. Matthew and Galatians. If the argument was to move in the direction of development rather than in appeal to origins, there could be justification for the introduction in the Latin west of two different prepositions to distinguish between the roles of the Spirit and Mary, and there could then be justification for a further move in that direction, such as 'by the power of the Holy Spirit'. And, persistently throughout the debate, some supposed that what was at stake was precisely the exaltation of the role of Mary.

Bishops and clergy finally persuaded enough of the laity in February 2000 to accept the one preposition Nicene Creed. The price was to drop the ELLC 'of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary' and agree on 'was incarnate *from* the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary'. One justification for the translation of *ek* as 'from' was that it was familiar from Anglican Patristic scholarship. Far more important seems to have been the claim that 'from' was deemed to indicate the 'beyondness', transcendence and creativity of the Holy Spirit, but could not indicate *anything* of the kind in respect of Mary. I think that an Anglican 'Trinity and Mary' theology can and must do better than this. I have already said that it should certainly embrace the implications of Pentecost if we are to be 'biblical'. My conclusion, however, turns us back to Mary at the point in her discipleship indicated by the word 'Annunciation'. We need to probe further questions of the interrelationship of Spirit, grace and nature that to a large extent are put on one side if we are talking here of 'beyondness' and transcendence. I concentrate instead here on 'creativity', since I remain entirely at a loss in reading theologians who deny Mary (and by implication, other women) even a shred of creativity in her consent to pregnancy, a pregnancy which might result not only in her abandonment and ostracism, but, given the conditions of her time, even in her own death. Persuasive definition, no doubt, but if consent to pregnancy is not about creativity, generosity and self-gift, even before we begin to think of the nurture and up-bringing of a child safely born, it is difficult to imagine what is. We must, I think, suppose that Mary was a girl of remarkable courage, and we might begin a renewed Marian theology with her courage and creativity in mind. It is in these graces that the divine Spirit meets with and meshes with hers, not to overwhelm her, anymore than she overwhelmed her son, but to enhance the freedom which was already hers, a freedom which cannot be enjoyed on a pedestal, but eventually takes her to apostolic life as an evangelist.