

# ON TRUE DEVOTION TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

By JOHN McHUGH

**I**N 1961, Professor Hans Küng wrote in *The Council and Reunion* the following words, which are still true today:

. . . Often it is not theology but popular piety which stands in the way of reunion . . . [For] what has remained in the consciousness of the great mass of people [since the Reformation] is not so much theological controversy as the more external differences in popular piety . . . [And] on the protestant side, the chief difficulty (it would be convenient but dishonest to ignore it) is Marian devotion.<sup>1</sup>

Even within our own society, we are faced with an extraordinarily wide spectrum of opinion, and of practice. We have on the one hand Roman Catholics and Orthodox, who assign a very prominent place to Mary even in their eucharistic liturgy, and over against them, many members of other Churches which would never think of going so far. If there is such diversity of opinion among the members of this Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin, we cannot be surprised if the mass of church-goers adopt even more divergent views. Most of them find ecumenical activity hard to understand. The ordinary christian is not accustomed to questioning the general teaching or the practice of the Church to which he belongs; he has enough difficulty in struggling to uphold christian standards in a pagan society, and is therefore far from anxious to question the ethos or the traditions of his Church. And accordingly, invoking the prayers of Mary, or not doing so, will be for him a style of life rather taken for granted. His attitude to her will be part and parcel of his overall view of the christian faith, and will suffice to show whether he is a Catholic or a Protestant, High Church or Low Church, and so on. For if we put aside the rose-tinted spectacles so often worn by ardent apostles of christian unity,<sup>2</sup> and look fairly and honestly at what goes on in our home parishes, the differences are glaring. On the one hand we find the statue and the Lady Altar, and a church porch filled with notices about novenas, sodalities, and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. pp 177, 178, 182.

<sup>2</sup> This is not meant as a criticism: I wear them myself, most of the time.

pilgrimages to Lourdes or Walsingham; on the other hand, an almost deafening silence, as if in protest. This is the reality: this is how most christians live, not as active apostles of ecumenism. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of these differences in devotional practice, and to suggest some guidelines, in the hope that our joint efforts may help to clear away some of the misunderstandings that, sadly, persist even today.

*What is 'true devotion to the blessed Virgin'?*

It goes without saying that most of the differences arise from very basic disagreements over doctrine, and in particular over the doctrine of grace. Others have spoken about these, and I do not intend to speak directly about doctrinal matters, only about devotion. And here there is a very real difficulty which often passes unobserved. Because we are all fluent speakers of english, we tend to assume that other people always understand by our words exactly what we ourselves wish to convey by them. But once we leave aside such simple sentences as 'my cat is black', and begin to talk about religion, accurate communication of thought is by no means easy, for each one of us has his language coloured by a whole system of doctrine, with its roots in a particular historical tradition. A good example is the way in which Roman Catholics will speak about 'praying to St Anthony', or 'having a great devotion to our Lady'. This is the day-to-day language of folk-catholicism, and because it is not properly understood outside its home context, and sometimes even gives the impression of worshipping saints, a few words of explanation will not be out of place.

At the very heart of the catholic concept of the Church stands the notion of 'the communion of saints', taken in the sense of 'the living community and fellowship of christians'. The argument is that if I can pray for you, and you can pray for me, on this earth, and during this life, we cannot be in a less privileged position after death — least of all, when we stand in the presence of God. Therefore we can be assured that the relatives and friends who cared for us so much in their lifetime, and who prayed perhaps daily for our welfare, do not cease from intercession when they stand before the throne.<sup>3</sup> And St Thomas Aquinas explains:

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is now the common teaching of roman catholic theologians that the souls in purgatory can make intercession for the living. St Thomas held the opposite view (2-2ae, qu. 83, a.4, ad 3, and a. 11, ad 3), and the first to advocate the thesis was Richard de Mediavilla (ca. 1249 — 1302/08), in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Lib. 4, Dist. 15. *The Sacrae Theologiae Summa a Patribus Soc. Iesu in Hispania* (Madrid, 1953), gives a good series of references in vol IV, nos 247-8, pp 1015-16.

Prayer for others proceeds from charity. Therefore the more perfect the charity of the saints in heaven, the more they pray for wayfarers, who can be assisted by their prayers. And the closer they are to God, the more efficacious are their prayers.<sup>4</sup>

Here St Thomas sums up perfectly the doctrinal reason that leads so many christians to invoke the prayers of the blessed Virgin. As mother of the Lord, she is of all the saints the most perfect in charity, in love for God and all his children; and because she is the most perfect in charity, she of all the saints prays most earnestly of all for those of us who are still on our earthly pilgrimage, for all whom Jesus loves are her children.<sup>5</sup> Again, as mother of the Lord, she is of all the saints the closest to God; and therefore her prayers are the most efficacious. This is the context against which one must assess the phrase 'devotion to the blessed Virgin Mary'.

What, then, is 'true devotion to the blessed Virgin'? First of all, it is a product of faith. In other words, it must be based on, and proceed from, a deep, personal, intellectual conviction about God; it must be based on doctrine, and above all on those dogmas solemnly taught by the Church (*e.g.* that it is right to call her 'mother of God'). True devotion will be the sincere love and earnest commitment that arise spontaneously from this intellectual conviction: for example, when by considering St John's gospel, we learn to look upon her as our model and our mother. And true devotion will naturally seek to express this love outwardly in 'religion', that is, in outward forms such as liturgical prayer, the formation of societies to promote such prayer, to study Mary's role in the economy of salvation, etc. At the same time, *true* devotion will always remain conscious that Mary is not the central figure in the christian faith, or the most important. The centre of the christian faith is the holy and undivided Trinity, and Mary is of interest only in so far as a consideration of her tells us something about God, only in so far as devotion to her increases and nourishes our love of God, only in so far as honour paid outwardly to her redounds to the glory of God. That is true devotion, to recognize Mary's place, under Jesus Christ, in the work of our salvation, and by honouring her to rouse ourselves to a yet greater appreciation of the generosity of him that is mighty, who has done great things for her.

<sup>4</sup> 2-2ae, qu. 83, a. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Jn 19, 25-27.

*The criteria for discerning true devotion from false devotion*

Devotion true or false will inevitably express itself in outward actions and prayers. True devotion will prove itself, false devotion will betray itself, by its fruits. Now there can be no denying that, within the Roman Catholic Church at least, there have been some very regrettable aberrations across the centuries: on all too many occasions the Holy See has been compelled to intervene and to outlaw practices that assigned to Mary a role inconsistent with Jesus Christ's position as the one and only mediator between God and man. I would add that the under-estimation of Mary's role in some of the Reformed Churches is also an aberration (though often stimulated by exaggerations with the Roman Church). And it is in popular religion, in our own home parishes, that these unbalanced and incorrect customs are most likely to flourish. What criteria can be used, therefore, to discern true devotion (and its legitimate expression) from false devotion?

Fortunately, we have at hand on this very matter a document, *Marialis Cultus*, which is both authoritative and outspoken. It is authoritative for Roman Catholics in that Pope Paul VI is there addressing to them an exhortation of great importance; but it is authoritative in another sense, too, in that it is a profound and extended treatment of its topic, Marian devotion. Even had it been the essay of a private theologian, it would have carried considerable intrinsic authority because of its thoroughness and its balance. Yet it is also very outspoken at times. Pope Paul states very openly that not all is well done in Roman Catholic practice, and that there have got to be changes (*M.C.* nos 31, 32, 34, 36 ff). It is interesting, for example, to note how, in the splendid passage commending the prayer of the Rosary (*M.C.* nos 42-55), he does not shrink from condemning in the strongest terms two abuses that have led to a diminishing of respect for this prayer. First he warns against a merely mechanical recitation of the words:

Without the element of contemplation the Rosary is a body without a soul, and its recitation is in danger of becoming a mechanical repetition of formulas and of going counter to the warning of Christ: 'And in praying do not heap up many phrases as the gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words' (*M.C.* n 47).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mt 6, 7.

Secondly, he warns against a legalistic attitude towards it, or an over-emphasis on it (any Catholic will recognize the abuses he is stigmatizing):

This very worthy devotion should not be propagated in a way that is too one-sided or exclusive. The Rosary is an excellent prayer, but the faithful should feel serenely free in its regard. They should be drawn to its calm recitation by its intrinsic appeal (*M.C.* n 55).

It would be a tragedy if this most important of papal pronouncements were lost to sight in the sea of paper which floods our desks nowadays, for I will venture to prophesy that if this danger is averted, and if this document is taken seriously, studied carefully and put into practice, it will work as profound and lasting a change within the Roman Catholic Church as did the encyclical of Pius XII on biblical studies, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.

What, then, are the criteria there proposed for distinguishing authentic devotion to the blessed Virgin from that which is counterfeit? It goes without saying that devotion to Mary, and its expression, should be based on doctrine, not legend, much less sentiment, and the whole of the first part of *Marialis Cultus* plus the first section of Part II, dwells on this. It is perhaps worth recalling, however, that here the Pope is only expounding an appeal of the Second Vatican Council, asking theologians and preachers 'to refrain as much from falsehood by way of superlative as from narrow-mindedness'. *Marialis Cultus* spells out the implications of this paragraph (*M.C.* n 67) from *Lumen Gentium* at considerable length, stressing that 'exercises of piety directed towards the Virgin Mary should clearly express the trinitarian and christological note that is intrinsic and essential to them' (*M.C.* n 25). It then goes on to give four practical guidelines for judging devotions to the blessed Virgin (biblical, liturgical, ecumenical and anthropological), to which we now turn.

#### *Some practical implications of these criteria*

Marian piety should draw its inspiration especially from the bible (*M.C.* n 30). We would all agree with this, but what does it entail, apart from the singing of the *Magnificat*, or of hymns like 'Virgin-born, we bow before thee'? Let me illustrate with two examples, one addressed to the more evangelical section of this audience, one to the catholic section. Both examples are taken from the Litany of Loreto.

'Tower of David, tower of ivory' are titles assigned to Mary in this litany, but what do they mean? Perhaps some members of the Reformed Churches who find honorific titles such as these altogether too lyrical have not reflected that both are taken from the Song of Solomon: 'Thy neck is like the Tower of David' (4, 4), 'Thy neck is like a tower of ivory' (7, 4). In each text the bridegroom is addressing the bride, dwelling on her beauty; and the Church has always seen in the Song of Solomon the most expressive allegory of the love of Yahweh for Israel his bride. In greeting Mary, therefore, as 'Tower of David' and 'tower of ivory', Catholics are greeting her as the personification of the Church, of the redeemed, as the living embodiment of true christian faith, as the perfect exemplar of all lowly servants of the Lord. Like so many other names in the Litany of Loreto, these two are good biblical titles.

But there is one title in this litany which I should like to see suppressed: 'Morning Star'. It probably arose from a false etymology of the name *Miriam*, interpreted as meaning 'Star of the Sea', or from the idea that with Mary's birth, the dawn of salvation was imminent: like the day-star, she by her appearance heralded the coming of Christ, the sun of justice, rising with healing in his wings.<sup>7</sup>

Holy light on earth's horizon,  
 Star of hope to fallen man,  
 Light amid a world of shadows,  
 Dawn of God's redemptive plan.

Caswall's lines express the concept perfectly. Now it is true that in Sirach 50, 6, the title 'morning star' is applied to a man, to Simon, the high priest ('Like the morning star amid the clouds . . .'), and it is true that its application to Mary can be defended, as above. But on the other two occasions where it occurs in the bible,<sup>8</sup> which are much more familiar to christians, it is a messianic name. In Apoc 22, 16, Jesus says: 'I am the root and offspring of David, the bright star of the morning'. It seems to be asking for trouble to ascribe to Mary one of the great messianic titles of the Apocalypse.

Let me take next the third guideline of *Marialis Cultus*, the ecumenical aspect.

Every care should be taken to avoid any exaggeration which could mislead other christian brethren about the true doctrine of the Catholic Church. Similarly, the Church desires that any manifestation of cult which is opposed to correct catholic practice should be eliminated (*M.C.* n 32).

<sup>7</sup> Mal 4, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Apoc 2, 28 and 22, 16.

The Pope here clearly implies that certain Roman Catholic practices could mislead members of the Reformed Churches, and that other practices actually misrepresent catholic doctrine. But even perfectly legitimate invocations and devotional practices can be misunderstood.

Take the title 'Queen of Heaven'. Roman Catholics will readily speak of 'Christ the King', and address Mary as 'Queen of Heaven' without ever adverting to the fact that, to other christians, this seems to set the blessed Virgin almost on a level with Christ. Yet 'Queen of Heaven' is a favourite title for Mary in latin countries, and here we glimpse the sort of misunderstanding that can so easily arise as a result of differences in the cultural context. In the United Kingdom, or in Holland, we take it for granted that a woman can succeed to the throne; and therefore to call Mary 'Queen of Heaven' does appear to set her almost on a level with Jesus Christ, at least as a consort. But in latin countries it has for centuries been taken for granted that a woman *cannot* succeed to the throne; and therefore to call Mary 'Queen of Heaven' is to imply that she is disqualified from succeeding to the throne. This is a good example of how careful one needs to be in assessing words against their correct cultural context, and not simply against one's own.

And then there is the custom of lighting candles, so strange to members of the Reformed Churches, and yet so common and so beloved of folk-religion among Catholics and Orthodox. What does it signify? Basically, the person who lights a candle is saying: 'I would like to stay, and I know I ought to stay, and pray longer, but I can't. I have to go to work (or: I have not the spiritual strength to pray longer, though I know I should). But I want this candle, as it melts away, to be a token of what I would like to do — to let my heart melt away in total submission'. The candle will continue to burn after he has left the shrine; but his heart (however lukewarm) will continue to burn long after the candle has burnt out its ephemeral existence.<sup>9</sup> That is why, on occasion, people will light bigger candles, or more candles, at greater cost to their own pockets: they want to show their willingness to pray by making some sacrifice, and the bigger candle burns longer, and three candles burn more intensively than one. Good people, but perhaps inarticulate, they are talking to God in a language he understands as well as they, and they feel more comfortable in the presence of their all-seeing Judge if his mother will be their advocate, and put their case more eloquently than they are able to.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Schillebeeckx, E.: *Mary, Mother of the Redemption* (London, 1964), pp. 184-5.

And yet it would be foolish to deny that in many churches devotional practices are tolerated which do not have a biblical justification, and which are a hindrance to ecumenical understanding. Most of them concern interference with, or the upsetting of, the liturgy, and Pope Paul is well aware of the pastoral sensitivity required to apply the principles of *Marialis Cultus* in an area where folk-catholicism is deeply involved, emotionally and psychologically. He writes:

What is needed on the part of the leaders of the local communities is effort, pastoral sensitivity and perseverance, while the faithful on their part must show a willingness to accept guidelines and ideas drawn from the true nature of christian worship; this sometimes makes it necessary to change long-standing customs wherein the real nature of this christian worship has become somewhat obscured (*M.C.* n 31).

This means that we must not be always afraid of shocking people, or disturbing the even tenor of their ways, if they are caught up in customs that obscure the true nature of christian worship. The Pope strongly deprecates the insertion of novenas (*M.C.* n 31) or the recitation of the Rosary (*M.C.* n 48) during the celebration of the holy Mass. I myself have never been attracted by the custom that obtains in some places of crowning a statue of the blessed Virgin annually. I can see that placing a crown on a statue is an expression of honour, especially if the crown is of a precious metal, silver or gold: then it fulfils (as in so many of the latin countries) exactly the same purpose as lighting a candle. I can see that if it is a crown of roses, the garland needs to be replaced, as the candle does; as candles burn out, so roses fade. But I fear that in practice, in our own culture, which is a protestant and north european culture, this custom concentrates too much attention on the statue instead of passing directly and immediately beyond it, to the Virgin who is there represented. One need hardly say that where this practice becomes an occasion for little girls to parade as mannequins (and who can blame them, at their age?), 'it is necessary to change the custom, however long-standing, because the true nature of christian worship is being badly obscured'. I admit that the change would sometimes call for almost super-human tact and pastoral sensitivity; but it ought to be made.

The basic principle of *Marialis Cultus* is that true devotion must proceed from solid doctrine; to put it another way round, sound faith will give birth to true devotion, and true devotion will ever be anxious to express outwardly in a very accurate form what is inwardly believed. And this leads us to the fourth criterion listed by Pope Paul, which he

calls the anthropological or the socio-cultural. As soon as a man begins to express outwardly what he believes in his heart, he begins to use the language and the symbolism of his own particular culture; and these vary from country to country, and even within the same country, from age to age. John Henry Newman called attention to this fact in his *Letter Addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, D.D., on Occasion of his Eirenikon of 1864*,<sup>10</sup> and in 1961, Hans Küng reminded people that 'a degree of emotion which would represent the utmost permissible limit for a christian in Scandinavia might well be too little for a christian in Italy'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, anyone who has ever tried to translate italian into english, or english into italian, will know how truly impossible it is to catch the exact nuance of language as one tries to explain to people in Manchester what precisely is intended and implied by a sentence written in Naples. No italian would make a fuss over the inclusion of sayings like 'blessed be the name of Mary, Virgin and Mother . . . blessed be St Joseph . . .' under the title 'The divine Praises'; he would think it odd that a person could not see at what point in this litany the phrases ceased to refer to God, and pedantic to talk about altering the title. I suspect that it would be difficult to put over his viewpoint in some quarters of Belfast.

*Marialis Cultus* calls attention also to the changed role of woman in society today.

First, the Virgin Mary has always been proposed to the faithful by the Church as an example to be imitated not precisely in the type of life she led, and much less for the socio-cultural background in which she lived and which today scarcely exists anywhere (*M.C.* n 35).

Mary of Nazareth, while being completely devoted to the will of God, was far from being a timidly submissive woman (*M.C.* n 37).

Certainly we can, and should, continue to preach as much as ever about Mary as Virgin and Mother; but can we not also preach about her as Joseph's wife? Of course, this idea has always been there in the background; but most sermons have stressed her maternal rather than her wifely role. And it was taken for granted that if she was the ideal wife, and Joseph the ideal husband, Mary must have been a model of submissiveness. Now this is exactly what St Luke does not say: it is Mary who has the leading role in this marriage. In the New Testament, she is presented as a very strong and courageous and noble figure. Nos 34-37 of

<sup>10</sup> In *Difficulties of Anglicans*, vol 2 (in the standard edition by Longmans, Green), pp 92-105.

<sup>11</sup> *The Council and Reunion*, p 181.

*Marialis Cultus* dwell on this theme, and should, if taken seriously, work a revolution in the attitude of christians towards women in society. For I would suggest that one reason why so many christian nations have in the last hundred years become (effectively) pagan nations is that the christian Churches lost the allegiance of so many women, because they lagged behind the civil authorities in granting equality of status to women. Perhaps a real rethinking and reappraisal of Mary's role, in accordance with the scriptures, would put a different picture of the Church not only before christians, but also before open-minded non-believers.

*'Et Iesum benedictum fructum ventris tui nobis post hoc exilium ostende'*

In the last part of the *Divina Commedia*, the *Paradiso*, Dante is introduced to St Thomas Aquinas, St Albert and a circle of other theologians (X, 82-138). Later, he is examined by St Peter on faith, by St James on hope, and by St John on charity (XXIV-XXVI). But it is St Bernard who in the final canto (XXXIII) introduces him to Mary. And in this progression can be discerned the allegory intended by Dante. From the academic study of theology, the christian must proceed to the active practice of virtues within the Church. But neither the study of theology nor the practice of virtue can bring him to the throne of God. Prayer alone can do that (Bernard is the symbol of the contemplative life, as Thomas is of the academic). But at this point even Bernard steps back (prayer itself is inadequate!) and asks Mary to let Dante see the vision of God. Why is Mary brought in here? Is it just a flourish of medieval piety, or did Dante have a doctrinal reason for introducing her?

Dante is the spiritual knight of his lady, Beatrice, the little florentine girl whom he loved so dearly, and in whom he saw heaven's glory walking on earth. Throughout his work Beatrice becomes the symbol of all that is good and gracious, a symbol of divine grace, a symbol of the Church as the Bride of Christ, and even of that other God-bearer *par excellence*, the blessed Virgin. For Dante saw in Beatrice all the gentleness and love and compassion that he knew were absent from his own soul: 'he himself in the journey symbolizes the ordinary sinner', (*l'homme moyen sensuel*); and so after her death, he idealized her in his poem. In so doing, he showed a profound insight into the nature of love, and of woman. In Gen 2, 18, we read, 'It is not good for man to be alone', and it is the general experience of mankind that spiritual progress to maturity is normally achieved through the sacrament of marriage. What happens is that each partner discovers in marriage the 'other half' of his or her being, the 'Not-Self', whose good qualities become for the christian a revelation of God. So Dante saw, in Beatrice's candid

goodness, the extent of his own deficiencies, and a partial unveiling of the glory and goodness of God. That is why Beatrice idealized can, and does, symbolize the Church Triumphant as the spotless Bride of Christ.

But Beatrice is, for all that, only a symbol. To Dante, Mary of Nazareth is, by contrast, in very truth the Spouse of the Holy Spirit, the sinless mother of God, and full of grace. Prayer, represented by Bernard, will bring us to the very threshold of the Holy of Holies; but before a man can enter, and see the face of God, Dante finds it *doctrinally* necessary to introduce him to Mary because she alone, of all creation, is full of grace. Even prayer is not enough to bring us to the vision of God; we shall never gaze upon the face of God, except by grace. Mary, the sinless mother of God, is the perfection and embodiment of grace, in comparison with whom Beatrice and every wife or husband or friend is a poor, inferior, inadequate reflection of God's glory; for there is no wife, no husband, no friend, however saintly, in whom we cannot discern some flaw, some weakness, some failing. But as we contemplate Mary in her fulness of grace, we sinners become more conscious of our own lack of it, and need of it, and of our own poverty in faith and charity (like Dante *vis-à-vis* Beatrice). And yet we also see in Mary's fulness of grace the revelation of the glory of God, of the great things that he who is mighty can do to a creature. For (unlike her Son) Mary is only a human being, a creature like ourselves. But *full of grace*. That is why, when the study of theology and the practice of virtue and contemplation itself are left behind, she can symbolize the very last stage by which we come to the vision of God — the gift of grace. That is why we beg her most earnestly to be our advocate, to turn her merciful eyes towards us, and after this our exile, to show unto us the blessed fruit of her womb, Jesus.