

THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

By LÉON-JOSEF SUENENS

IN THIS opening paper I would like to make three points. The first is the ecumenical value of a discussion concerning the blessed Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit. The second deals with the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary in the light of the mystery of the incarnation. Finally, I wish to discuss the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary in the light of the mystery of Pentecost.

Ecumenism

Something rather unexpected has happened in the last few years. Before the Council, there was disagreement between Catholics and their protestant brethren, because it was thought that the former exaggerated about our blessed Lady and her privileges, to the detriment of the unique mediatorship of Christ. After Vatican II things began to change on the catholic side. There was even some alteration of the external expression of devotion to Mary — not so much among ordinary people, as in theological circles. At the same time, strange to say, our protestant brethren seemed to have been rediscovering our Lady.

As you perhaps know, there was a serious discussion at the second Vatican Council on whether there should be a separate schema and document about Mary or whether what we had to say about her should appear in the document on the Church. On the invitation of Pope Paul VI, I myself proposed that the Council should concentrate on the subject of the Church, and that everything should be focused on this. Therefore I recommended that we should study the role and place of Mary in the final chapter of the Constitution on the Church. It seemed logical to place her in that context and certainly no disrespect was intended. Some people, however, especially journalists, made a big fuss about this. They suggested that the bishops were divided for or against Mary, which was not at all the

case. The position we recommended was accepted finally by the vote of the Council.

However, after Vatican II, the idea seemed to arise that we ought to tone down what we were saying about Mary. One day I asked Karl Rahner, the German theologian, how he explained the fact that Catholics were a bit more reticent about our blessed Lady. His answer was that so often they made Christianity a kind of abstraction by turning it into an 'ism' — a *Weltanschauung*. On the other hand I remember the saying of a famous president of the Reformed Church of France: 'My brethren, what did you do with the promise, with the prophecy of our blessed Lady in the Gospel: "All generations will call me Blessed"?'.

It is a joy to see that now we are coming together more and more on this point. I really believe that if we insist on the dynamic unity between the Holy Spirit and Mary in the mystery of the Incarnation, this can help a great deal in making a bridge between Protestants and Catholics. It should be understood, that when I say 'Catholic', I always mean to include the orthodox and Anglican traditions. In my book *New Pentecost*, I wrote a few lines about this idea and I received a lot of reactions from Protestants who said that they agreed that this could be a way of coming together. In the past, we created the impression that we put Mary where they were expecting to find the Holy Spirit. There is a very clear indication of this in an article by Elsie Gibson, entitled, 'Mary and the Protestant mind'. She writes:

It is possibly as difficult for Catholics to understand what Protestants believe about the Holy Spirit as it is for Protestants to understand what Catholics believe about Mary. When I first began reading Catholic periodicals and books, I was puzzled and offended by caricatures of our views regarding the Holy Spirit more than by anything else. The Catholic consensus seemed to be that we glorify human impulses and judgments, attributing them to the inspiration of the third person of the Trinity. This is a travesty of the Protestant position. When I began to study Catholic theology, in every place I expected to find an exposition of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, I found Mary. What Protestants universally attribute to the action of the Holy Spirit, was attributed to Mary.

Of course, this is not the case but it was certainly the impression given. So, if we can now show the deep unity between the Holy Spirit and Mary, I feel that this would be a step forward in

ecumenical discussion. Thus I think it is important that at the beginning of this Congress the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin should concentrate on that relationship.

The Incarnation

To speak of the Holy Spirit and Mary in the light of the mystery of the incarnation is to be on the deepest level of Christianity. Jesus is not half human and half divine; he is fully human and fully divine. We cannot express the way such a mystery has been realized; we have to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal it to us. We talk very easily about God the Father, yet it is said very explicitly in the scriptures that only the Holy Spirit can proclaim God as Father. We are not able to say 'Jesus' as it should be said in the depth of the mystery of Jesus without the Holy Spirit, for only the Holy Spirit can say 'Jesus'. Nobody can answer the question Jesus put to his disciples when he said, 'Who do you say I am?', replying, 'You are the Son of the living God', without the Holy Spirit. Jesus said so very explicitly to Peter (Mt 16,17). This is perhaps the reason why there are so many books about Jesus which see him only as a man in an historical, sociological setting.

Only the Spirit can say 'Church', for the very simple reason that the Church is a mystery: it is the mystical body of Christ. So we cannot even pronounce the word 'Church' without the Holy Spirit. We need to remember this, because we use the word 'Church' all the time in a sociological way. When I say in the Creed, 'I believe in the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church', that is the Church of my faith, that is the Church of the Holy Spirit who reveals it to me — although my human eyes show me something quite different. I see the divided Church and I believe in the one united Church. I see a Church composed of people like you and me, not holy people, and I believe in the holy Church. I see that the Church is not universal. She does not exist in many parts of the world, or only as a very tiny minority, but I believe in its universality. The Church is born one, the Church is born holy, the Church is born universal from the first. That is the meaning of Pentecost: a dynamic universality. So when I have to speak the word 'Church', I should see it with the eyes of the Holy Spirit, who shows me the depth of its unity, and the depth of its holiness. The Church is not holy because we are holy; the Church is already holy because, before we become holy, it is the holy mother Church which makes us holy.

So too only the Holy Spirit can reveal Mary to us, because she is

in the mystery of the Father, Jesus and the Church. That is why in Vatican II the title of the final chapter of *Lumen Gentium* is 'Mary, in the mystery of Christ and of the Church'. If Christ is a mystery, if the Church is a mystery, Mary is also a mystery, and so we cannot discover Mary except in the light of the Holy Spirit. The first thing we read about Mary is that Joseph, in his uncertainty, heard in his soul a voice saying: 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit' (Mt 1,20). That was said on a specific and special occasion, but I believe we have to enlarge it and listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking and saying to each of us: 'Do not fear to open your heart to Mary. Do not fear to take Mary into your heart and soul, and life and tradition, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit'. The link is very deep, and the Holy Spirit will show it to us.

When I think about the Holy Spirit, I see the oriental vision of the Trinity. The Father comes through the Son in the Holy Spirit. I see him coming through the mystery of the incarnation: the Father through the Word of God sends the Spirit to Mary. I see the Holy Spirit as the final point. If I may say so (it is a vision), it is as if the Father, through Jesus his Son, was lending a hand to humanity. On the other side, the purest human love which goes to meet the Spirit sent by the Father in the Word of God, is Mary. I find the meeting place of heaven and earth in Mary. She is the answer to God, Father, Son and Spirit, coming to her. She is the answer, not only by saying 'yes' in her personal name. She is the opening to that love; she is human love, the purest love possible. Mary is an answer to the full receptivity of that love. Human love meeting divine love.

However, it is not only Mary who is there at that moment. She is the daughter of Sion, she is Israel, she is all our people. In her is the 'yes' of all the patriarchs and the prophets. She is, in her person, all Israel. Moreover, she is saying 'yes' not only in her own name, not only in the name of all the elected Jewish people, but she is also saying that 'yes' in the name of humanity. She is 'yes' to that mystical marriage between God and Man.

Everything in that moment is the work of the Holy Spirit. The faith of Mary is the gift of the Spirit. If she can say that 'yes', it is because the Spirit in her is working in her will and her action (cf Phil 2,13). She is free, but in the depth of her freedom it is the Holy Spirit, permeating that freedom and giving her that capacity of freely saying that 'yes'. It is a receptivity and a positive action at the same time. We should not be afraid to insist on the collaboration of

Mary because that collaboration is a gift of the Spirit. There is no danger that we make of her a deity. She is what she is by the gift of God. Her freedom is a real freedom but inspired by the Spirit. As Zundel, the swiss theologian and poet wrote: 'God really gives what he gives. He still gives what he asks for. He gives twice what he receives.'

We should not see Mary only in that historical setting from a very narrow, sociological viewpoint, but really see the life of Mary in its full extension. To what did she say yes? She said 'yes' to the mystery of the Incarnation. But that incarnation was a redeeming incarnation. Her 'yes' was a 'yes' to that mystery of incarnation and redemption, which are one.

This makes the difference between an ordinary mother and Mary the mother of Jesus Christ. Let us take the mother of an important person, say the mother of Napoleon or the mother of Eisenhower. The mother of Eisenhower had nothing to do with the battles of her son; the mother of Napoleon had nothing to do with Waterloo. Why do we not attribute to the mother the glorious or inglorious deeds of the sons? When the mother of Napoleon gave birth to the little child Bonaparte, he was not *born* as an Emperor, he *became* Emperor. He was born as a child like everybody else, and then accidentally, casually, because of historical events, he became a famous general. But if I look at Mary, she started as the mother of the Redeemer. She did not bring to birth a son who later on became Redeemer. He came into the world as the Redeemer. So the 'yes' of Mary embraces, from the beginning to the end, what her Son was coming to do.

There is an antiphon sung the week before Christmas: 'O wisdom from the beginning to the end directing everything with power and at the same time with tenderness'. The love of God starts from the beginning of our life and continues to the end; everything is conducted, everything is guided. In the life of Mary there is continuity. She does not just bring a child into the world in the biological sense. Even if we remember that the mother is also important for the education of the child, it is not just that; that is only human. The Holy Spirit shows that it is much deeper than that. To become the mother of Jesus meant becoming the mother of the Redeemer. The name of Jesus means the Saviour. You can feel it from the very beginning when Simeon received her in the temple of Jerusalem, and said, 'You will have to suffer. This child is destined to be a sign which men reject and you too shall be pierced through

the heart'. There is one single mystery. So when I see in the gospel that Mary was there at the foot of the cross, that is the very logic of incarnation. Supposing that for some reason this was not mentioned in the gospel, I would still know that Mary participated at that moment because she was the mother of the Redeemer. How could she be disconnected at the moment of Redemption?

This dimension of Jesus as the son of Mary is a dimension for ever and ever. He never loses it, and he is the most perfect son. He said very clearly that we have a duty to love our fathers and mothers, and you may be sure that the perfect love of Jesus was always there and he was faithful to his mother. Jesus is the perfect son of the Father and perfect son of his mother throughout his life, even if some aspects of the text of the gospel can sometimes create an impression of rejection.

If we have to say, like St Paul, 'I am not living, Christ is living in me', he is living in me as the son of this Father. But he must also live as the son of his mother in one way or another. How you express it, how you find the theological words to describe all this is another matter. But we cannot cease to be Christian, nor cease to be sons of Mary. The only point is, at what age are you a son? It is for you to choose. However, you may not say, 'I will not be a son of Mary in my spiritual life'. That is impossible if Christ is living in you. You can be a son at different ages. Remember the word of the Lord, 'if you do not become like a child, you will not enter into the kingdom of God'. So we are all invited to be children, to become like a child. We also have to be a child by imitating Jesus and continuing his life. You can be a child of your mother if your mother is living with you. My mother died when she was 85 and I was 50. At that age you are a child towards your mother, but with a very independent life. A child of one day old is much more dependent on his mother, and an unborn child still living in the womb, seeing only through the eyes of the mother, walking and moving through the mother, experiences complete dependence. Jesus chose that way of being dependent.

In order to follow Jesus in my own life, I give a priority to being Mary's child. Being a child is to be born in her. This is a grace, an invitation. Everybody can translate it in his own way, but I repeat, do not be afraid to receive Mary; what is born in her is from the Holy Spirit. I say to my protestant friends, do not be afraid if you see some exaggerations in catholic literature from time to time. You have to understand that this is a way of loving our Lord by loving our mother who is his mother.

Pentecost

There is now a third step: to see the Holy Spirit and Mary in the light of the mystery of Pentecost. As I said previously, incarnation and redemption are one in the eyes of the Lord. Now I would also say that the incarnation and Pentecost are deeply linked. It was a great joy, when I read all the papers of the Society of our Blessed Lady, to find a talk given under the same title in 1976 by Bishop Alan Clark. He took as a starting point for his talk 'The Holy Spirit and Mary', a statement of the Father of the Church, St Athanasius, who said, 'The Word took flesh in order that we could receive the Holy Spirit'. Since Jesus was born in order that we could receive the Holy Spirit, incarnation and Pentecost are very deeply linked. Bishop Alan Clark continued:

. . . the second coming of God into the world, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is the reason for the first coming in the person of the Son, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. For God has come twice, not once. . . . This perspective will influence our consideration of Mary and her relationships which form the material of our various doctrinal affirmations concerning her person and her work within the salvific plan of God.

It is vital for us to see that God became man only to make man become divine. We always look at the mystery of Christmas from the point of view of God becoming man. We forget to stress that the final reason is that man should become deified, united with God, and open to receive the fulness of God through and in the Spirit who is bringing us back from whence we came. The Father through the Son in the Spirit comes to us, so that the Holy Spirit in us through Jesus can go back to the Father.

It is very natural that there should be a link between the incarnation and the birth of Jesus Christ, and the birth of the Church of Pentecost. There too the name of Mary is mentioned. Even if there were no mention in Acts that she was there in the upper room in Jerusalem with the apostles, I would know that Mary was linked with that mystery of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit, since the mystery of the incarnation is only fulfilled and ended by that mysterious coming. The Holy Spirit is coming to actualize Christ; to make him present for past, present and future and all times; to make him the contemporary of all generations; to initiate in us the mystical life of Jesus and his sacramental life.

The Holy Spirit was sent to christianize the disciples in depth, and in that light we should look at the mystery of Pentecost, first birthday of the Church. There I see Mary, as the first Christian, as the first Church. She is the first to be christianized fully. She is fully receptive to this. She has already been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. The annunciation and the incarnation and the progressive illumination of the Spirit came in her life. Now at Pentecost she has been overshadowed as the first representative of the Church in a very special way.

This is why I link her overshadowing with the charismatic renewal. When I stress the fact that Mary was the first charismatic, the first to be fully christian, it is because I think there is a need for the Christians of today to become more fully Christian, to be open to the new Pentecost. There is really only one way to bring the message of the Lord to the world, which is that we Christians should let Christ be Christ in us. This is the work of the Holy Spirit for he alone can make us Christians. We are christianized by baptism and confirmation, but we need to be Christians, baptized and confirmed again, not sacramentally, but with the full adherence of our being.

This is why I am very optimistic about the future. Quantitatively speaking, we are losing ground. But when you see the quality of Christians affected by the 'renewal' (and outside the renewal, because the Holy Spirit is not limited), when you see the work of the Spirit sanctifying people, you at once feel the attraction. We do not need many saints to make Christ visible in the world of today. When you meet saints, you see Jesus in them, so that you are looking only at the face of the Lord. It is not the saints who are wonderful, it is Jesus in them. Once the Christians of today let Christ be Christ in them, evangelization will really make progress.

The same is true of the mystery of unity. Of course we have to discuss the problems. They are not all solved. But the more each of us in his own tradition is christianized by the Lord now, the more quickly we shall be one in a visible way tomorrow. Jesus is born of the Holy Spirit and of Mary. May Jesus be born in each of us more and more deeply through the Holy Spirit and by our blessed mother.