

THE NEUBERT HERITAGE:  
A MARIAN APOSTOLIC THRUST

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A collection of Marianist Father Emile Neubert's Marian works makes clear to all his audience two of his chief activities. The diffusion of Marian doctrine and devotion is the most important part of his work left to posterity; of it, the most significant work, his *Mon idéal, Jésus Fils de Marie*, remains the small Marian and missionary tract still in demand today. To it is added a special study of the spirituality of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade, a Missionary Apostolic in the service of the Marian sodalities of Bordeaux which he resurrected after the French Revolution and founder of religious societies at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

It was essentially as teacher, preacher, and writer that Neubert exercised a truly apostolic mission.

The elements of this apostolic thrust are apparent in his numerous articles. The first two were written under a pseudonym in the context of the modernist crises, before his departure for the United States in 1905. They were followed with several other articles written in English in the United States at the time of his first classes offered to the Marianist postulants and novices. Other articles, for the most part in French, appeared between 1922 and 1949, when he was superior of the seminary in Fribourg, Switzerland.

A century after the publication of his doctoral thesis in 1907, and forty years after his death, it is easier for us, at this beginning of the twenty-first century, to appreciate

the contribution of this author in the field of specialized theology on the Marian question.

Reviewing his own life in his autobiography, he himself underlines the originality of the subject of his doctrinal thesis, as well as its excellent reception. This was at a moment when a Marian subject associated with patristic research was completely new. His first step, therefore, was the historic-positive study at the beginning of a century which was to shed the fullest of light on the value of the writings of the Fathers. The twentieth century would speak of a “patristic renewal” together with a “liturgical renewal” and a “biblical renewal.” This last, as we have seen in our work, would contribute to his research along the line of the Marian themes which he strove to penetrate more deeply.

Now, historical-critical and theological studies on Mariological themes based on the Fathers of the Church are numerous and particularly enriched by the contributions of *Marian Texts of the First Millennium*, which gathers into four volumes the contributions of the Fathers and other ancient writers of the East and the West.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of the publication of his thesis, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Mariological and patristic studies were modest within Catholic circles, even after the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Apart from a limited specialized research, the Fathers and ancient authors were studied from a point of view that was essentially literary and apologetic.

At the same time, Protestant studies were pursued along historical lines as a matter of polemics against what they termed the “Mariology” of Catholics. However, though their studies may have been more important in quantity than those of Catholics,

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<sup>1</sup> *Testi Mariani del Primo Millennio*, ed. G. Gharib, E. Toniolo, Luigi Gambero, G. Di Nola; Citta Nuova Editrice, Rome. Vol. 1. *Padri e altri autori Greci*, ed. G. Gharib, 1988. Vol. 2. *Padri e altri autori latini*, ed. L. Gambero, 1990.

they did not receive much credibility in terms of quality, for often their *a priori* concepts led to superficial interpretations passed on positions of “the opposition.”<sup>2</sup>

Avoiding all polemics, proceeding with method and precision, Neubert conducted a historical-critical research. He exposed all that had cast light on the mystery of Christ and of his Mother, moving from the gospel recitals to the beginning of the Arian controversies. His work comprised two relationships, to dogma and to the cult of Mary. We have seen how his work has helped us to better understand the tight bond which unites Christology and Mariology, the latter being at the service of the former. In reviewing again the texts which he cites on the truly human maternity of Mary, from the various Fathers and ancient authors beginning with Justin and, passing through Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Hippolytus, coming to Origen and then Tertullian, he presents us with the true human nature of Christ. The content of that faith was, at that time, being denied by the heretics, the Gnostics, the Valentinians, and the disciples of Marcion.

The situation is the same when these same Fathers and ancient authors defend the virginal conception. That, in itself, constitutes an argument in favor of the affirmation of the divinity of Christ, against the opposition of the Jews, the pagans, and the heretics who deny it. Faced with Docetists who denied the true humanity of Christ in favor of his divinity, this affirmation of the virginity of Mary reconciled the two realities which seems to be in contradiction with one another.

Finally, the affirmation of the divine maternity constituted a decisive phase, allowing a unifying into one only person, that of the Word of God, two natures: the human and the divine of Christ.

Neubert placed clearly in evidence that the affirmations concerning Mary, the Mother of Jesus, (thanks to the close ties which these affirmations made possible

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<sup>2</sup>See K. Benrath, G. Herzog, E. Lucius, G. Anrich, G. Rösch. The attitude of Protestantism toward the Mother of God was not very positive. In fact, Schimmelpfennig wrote these significant words: “je weiter die neutestamentliche Kritik und die religionsgeschichtliche Forschung fortschreiten, desto mehr wird das Evangelium seines Inharltes entleert” (*Geschichte der marienverehrung im deutschen Protestantismus*, p. 115).

between Christology and Mariology) essentially guaranteed the purity of the doctrine on the identity of Christ.

The article “conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary” was part of the first Creed known -- the “Roman Creed” -- on the basis of which later creeds were developed. Meanwhile, the content of this article of faith belonged to the essential truths which each believer had to accept. We are indebted to Neubert, through his original firsthand research of the Latin and Greek texts of the Fathers and ancient authors, for having shown clearly, without partisanship, that the intimate dependence of elements of Christology and of Mariology are indeed Christocentric:

The true factor in the early Mariological development is in the very special relationships which unite Mary to Jesus. As that is verified in dogmatic statements, the first part of the work has shown it sufficiently. Nor is it any more difficult to see that it is also because of Jesus that Mary has become the object of the attention of the faithful. The fact is clear in Saint Luke. Similarly, we see clearly in the proto-gospel that the virginity *in partu* and *post partum*, as well the holiness of Mary, have only one purpose: the honor of Jesus. As has been recently pointed out by a Protestant: “if the author wished to make clear the Mother’s purity from the beginning to the end,” it was “to safeguard the purity of the birth of Jesus.” And if he “almost forgets Christ on the way,” it is still Christ who “is the end-point.”<sup>3</sup> It is also in relationship with Jesus that Mary is glorified in the apocryphals and that she is represented in paintings and that she is attributed a special role in the work of the Redemption.<sup>4</sup>

Neubert concluded his work with this affirmation which was repeated in the reviews of the publication of his thesis:

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<sup>3</sup> Meyer, in *Neutest. Apokr.*, p. 50, quoted in *Marie dans l’Eglise anténicéenne*, pp. 278-279.

<sup>4</sup> *Marie dans l’Eglise anténicéenne*, pp. 278-279.

In summary, the whole history of the beginnings of Mariology is presented as a history of the defense and extension of Christology: the Mother being the guarantor of the Son, and the glory of the Son beginning to shine on the Mother.<sup>5</sup>

We owe him much for having put in evidence that the principal elements of Mariological themes which were prevalent in his time were already sufficiently developed or were in germ on the eve of the Council of Nicaea:

In summary, the greater part of the present elements of Mariology are already quite clearly developed on the eve of the Council of Nicaea. The human maternity and virginal conception have passed into the Creed as articles of faith. The divine maternity is acknowledged, all that remains is for the word to be officially sanctified; the tradition concerning the preservation of the virginity is universally accepted at least as a pious belief. If Mary's perfect holiness continues for a long time to torment some theologians, it is accepted from the beginning by the piety of the faithful. The cooperation of Mary in the work of Redemption will hardly be proclaimed in stronger words than those of Saint Irenaeus. Both veneration and invocation are destined to undergo indefinite developments. The principles have been established, and progress is already being made in drawing the conclusions: but we are still only at the beginning of this road which is without end.<sup>6</sup>

All his study shows admirably that the reasons for this development (both in the important place assigned to Mary in the domain of faith, and in the popular piety of the primitive Church) have nothing to do neither directly with the polytheistic aspects of the popular beliefs of the period nor with an exaggerated conception of the Virgin's role. It is only a matter of showing clearly the necessary and unique relationships which unite Mary and Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> *Marie dans l'Eglise anténicéenne*, p. 280.

<sup>6</sup> *Marie dans l'Eglise anténicéenne*, p. 275.

His method of critical study joins that of Cardinal Newman whose Mariological thought Neubert well understood.<sup>7</sup> It is not, therefore, a matter of adventuring into imposing syntheses, but of attaching to a re-reading and a rigorous analysis of the testaments provided by the gospels, the Fathers, and ancient authors.

Dom Bède Lebbe's review brought attention, but with a negative critical opinion, to this aspect in Neubert's work:

Again and again, we have a long parade of testimonies of all the ecclesiastical writers, quoted at length and carefully interpreted. Concern for detail is very apparent; but, I would have preferred more concern for a synthesis ... It might be objected that a synthesis is easy if constructed *a priori*, by tiptoeing over disturbing discoveries with little attention to exactness. But, then, is there no way, given the congestion generated by the discussion of minutiae of the texts, to extract from that congestion some ties among them, and the development of some ideas? Is it sufficient to relegate to a brief conclusion the overviews which it was impossible for the reader to draw out, and for whom it is even not easy to find in the midst of the accumulation of texts and detailed studies?<sup>8</sup>

The polemic nature of that review is not in harmony with other reviews, such as that of E. Treubert, in the *Revue thomiste*:

Mariology has just been enriched by a beautiful book of positive theology which was lacking to it. We hope for a wide diffusion of this work of a sober erudition and of high quality. Against the Protestants and the rationalists, it will demonstrate that, from the earliest centuries, Mary had a special place at the side

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<sup>7</sup> See F. J. Friedel, SM, *The Mariology of Newman*, New York, 1928; H. F. Davis, *La Mariologie de Newman*, in *Maria, Etudes sur la Sainte Vierge*, under the direction of Hubert Du Manoir, SJ, vol. 3, pp. 533-552. Neubert himself published an article entitled *La devotion envers Marie d'après Newman*, in the *Apôtre de Marie*, vol. 5 (1908), pp. 121-128. What Davis wrote of the famous Anglican convert could equally well be applied to Neubert's research, and also to all contemporary Mariology: "From the intellectual point of view, the study of the Fathers and the doctrine of evolution will lead us to a full realization that the Catholic Church had always and everywhere been 'Marian' in the Catholic sense of the word. If Mariology has continued to develop, it is simply by an instinctive tendency to render to the doctrine of the Incarnation an always greater witness" (*La Mariologie de Newman*, p. 538).

<sup>8</sup> Dom B. Lebbe, review in *Revue Bénédictine*, 25 (1908), p. 409.

of Jesus and that it is neither a polytheistic mentality nor an exaggerated esteem that explain this phase.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, it seems that Neubert, remaining above all polemic, attained his objective. This was to place clearly in view, and with simplicity, both the various components present in Mariology and the profound motivations which sustain them, as well as their harmonies.

The bibliography of his thesis and his personal witness given by his autobiography converge. He openly confronted the refutations of the polemic authors of his time, especially the most recent and the most virulent: Herzog and Harnack.<sup>10</sup> Those authors were determined to root out of the dogmas and the faith of the Christian faithful of that époque whatever concerned the Mother of God.

Neubert did not choose to respond with some research of a synthesis which would seek to be exhaustive and clear. He rather attached himself to a first-hand study of history and literature around the theme of the ancient Christian dogma toward which the rationalist and Protestant criticism was directed, but without any real depth; it was simply an attempt to demolish the acquired positions of the Catholic faith.

On the Catholic side, the way to respond to the positions of the adversaries consisted in occupying the field of historical-critical research with strength and faithfulness to the documents then available. That is where Neubert's strength lies. As we have seen, he would continue his work on the same path of scientific precision and research on the consistency of the message.

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<sup>9</sup> E. Treubert, *Revue thomiste*, 16th year (1908).

<sup>10</sup> See Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, III Freiburg im Br. Und Leipzig, 1894-1897; G. Herzog, "The virginity of Mary after the birth," in *Revue d'Histoire et de Littérature religieuse*, 1907, pp. 327-340, in *Marie dans l'Eglise anténicéenne*, pp. 57-120. Neubert pointed out: "Herzog holds, among other things, that the idea of virginity in giving birth, apart from the absence of physical lesion in the mother, was an invention of the Docetists of the second century. They had, as purpose, to deny the true human nature of Christ." According to Neubert, on the contrary, the witness of the oldest ecclesiastical writings shows how the doctrine of the virginal conception belonged to the earliest tradition of the Church. It was because of it that the primitive Church's insistence on the dogmatic aspect of the belief in the virginal conception is explained by the preoccupation of defending a point which had become, so to say, the criterion of faith in the divinity of the Word Incarnate.

The important work which marks this research is beyond doubt *Marie dans le dogme*. He modified his general plan for the second edition. These modifications were determined by the different aspects of Mary's Mission. They appropriately precede a presentation of the privileges and grandeurs of Mary which he compares broadly to dogma. In fact, the word "dogma" is understood by the author in a more extensive sense of revealed doctrine: that is, Marian statements defined by the Church, and those yet to come. His work on Mary's Assumption, from this perspective, gives us very rich and pertinent analyses, as well as precious landmarks for the future of the dogma.

According to Neubert, Mary is above all a living person. All his exegetical, patristic, and theological assessments are a contribution to helping us see the figure of the Mother of God in a present relationship with each one of us and with the ensemble of the People of God. More than that, Mary is present in our "today" to draw us into the mission.

This mission is above all Mary's Mission willed by God which we designate as truly apostolic. The mission consists, as Chaminade expressed it in his letter of August 24, 1839, in saving souls from the contagion of the world by working at the reform of morals, at the growth of faith, and at the extension of the Church throughout time. This apostolic mission of the Virgin is, for Neubert, the ultimate reason for her predestination:

The sending of Mary by God to the work of redemption and sanctification of the human race was included in her predestination as Mother of the Savior, and, therefore, in the decree of the Incarnation.

This mission was indicated to Mary by the archangel Gabriel: "The angel Gabriel was sent by God" (Lk 1:26). It was accepted by her when she responded: "Behold the servant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Mary does not receive it in view of her own person, but totally in view

of her Son and of the reason for his Incarnation. And Christian understanding was not mistaken.

The faithful know that Mary is only a creature, dependent in all things on Christ; that she is a woman, a mother; and that her grace is adapted to her nature and to her proper role. God made Christ for himself; he made Mary for Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Christ, by having his own Mother participate in his prerogatives and his functions, to the extent that Mary (being only pure and simple creature) was capable of taking part in them, wished to make her participant in his own apostolic mission.

On this point, Neubert wrote:

Indeed, the true apostle of humanity is Christ. If, then, Mary participates in the different functions of her Son, it must also be that she participates in his apostolic mission. Her son had to share with her, in the measure she was capable of receiving it, his apostolic mission which will continue as long as there are souls to be saved and sanctified.<sup>12</sup>

It is through Mary's apostolic mission -- chiefly exercised through her functions of Mother of God and Coredemptrix of the human race -- that the excellence of her being is explained, not the contrary. It is in this perspective that the "Neubertine" teaching is situated; it consists in sensitizing Christian faithful to this apostolic mission of the Virgin Mary. This is a mission that falls to all the baptized. It is fitting that we better understand how such a message, in his day, was received and why. Our study wished to offer its contribution to that understanding.

Through both his articles and his books, Neubert is therefore not only a great witness to the Marian doctrine and devotion of his time. He is a missionary as well as a theologian and a spiritual director who discerned the fundamental tradition of the

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<sup>11</sup> *De la découverte progressive des grandeurs de Marie: application au dogme de l'Assomption*, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> *De la découverte progressive des grandeurs de Marie: application au dogme de l'Assomption*, p. 187.

Church, that which nourishes continued meditation on the mystery of the *Theotokos*. He contributed to an updating of the language of his time from an apostolic perspective; he also prepared the present-day explanation of the mystery of Mary, both pre- and postconciliar.

He is an apostle of the glory of the mystery of her to whom God has reserved the victory of the Last Days. Following William Joseph Chaminade, he remains, in a special sense, a great apostle of the apostolic mission of Mary,<sup>13</sup> the biblical Woman, whom God, from Genesis (3:15) to Revelation (12), gives as a model of holiness and of the apostolate to the Church and to its members. The Marianist family seems to have been the only religious congregation of the Church to develop specifically the notion of Mary's apostolic mission under the influence of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade.

Neubert is the one who strove the most to put at the disposal of the entire people of God the specificity of this Marian doctrine inherited from the founder of the Marianist Family. Mary truly received an apostolic mission in the Church, of a universal nature, in time and in space, dependent on that of Christ, "the apostle *par excellence*" and source of every form of apostolate. In this way, by obeying the word of Mary at Cana: "Do whatever he tells you," the disciples, drawn by Mary's faith, participated in her apostolate. This follows from the social functions of Mary as spiritual mother and associate of the Redeemer.

Neubert, through his theological study of Mary's apostolic mission in the multitude of its mutual and reciprocal implications, offers a totally original and significant contribution to the Mariology of the twentieth century, well before the renewal of Vatican II.

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<sup>13</sup> In his autobiography he declared: "In almost all my books I have at least one chapter on the apostolic mission of Mary and the cooperation which she expects of her devotees. I treated the question *ex professo* in *La mission apostolique de Marie et la nôtre*, Alsatia, 1956. In my apostolate in the Society of Mary and with the Daughters of Mary, and even in the Church in general, I have always tried to underline the importance of Mary's apostolic mission. But, as I have just mentioned, it was not I who discovered this idea. I received it from Father Charles Klobb, S.M., who had received it from our founder, Father Chaminade, who had received it from Mary herself at Saragossa."

Even if tradition does not speak explicitly of Mary's apostolic mission, Neubert affirms that this mission appears as a special and integral aspect of her spiritual maternity and of her coredemption.

In the theology of the saints, as at the heart of a symphony, Neubert, through his personal witness of holiness which has struck those who were close to him and have read his works, no doubt offers more than a theological heritage when carrying out his insights: it is a truly missionary thrust. He was responsive to the movements of the Holy Spirit to which his Marianist predecessors had been sensitive.

In our turn, faithful to this spirit of reception of the gift of God which fascinated him, we would like to recognize the originality of the grace which touched him when still very young at the desk of a private school in Alsace. There he received the call of his Master whom, during his entire life, he loved and served by honoring his Mother: "Come, follow me!"