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homiletic & pastoral review

**Mary in Eastern
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**The blame game
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From bread and wine to Flesh and Blood

By Roy Abraham Varghese

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By Thomas G. Morrow

worth noting . . .

BREAD AND WINE BECOME THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST . . . The holy sacrifice of the Mass is the heart and soul of Catholic worship. We believe that at the consecration the bread and wine really become the Body and Blood of Christ, which include his soul and his divinity. This is a great mystery and a great miracle. In this issue Mr. Roy Abraham Varghese, making use of modern scientific analyses of matter into protons, neutrons and electrons, offers an explanation that harmonizes the data of physics with the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation. By divine power the matter of bread and wine is elevated into a vehicle for the divine Life that underlies all of creation (p. 6).

CRITICIZING BISHOPS AND PRIESTS . . . Bishops and priests are weak, fallible human beings just like the laity, but they have a unique function in the Church, being chosen by Christ to be his ministers of divine grace and salvation through the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. In recent years the sins and bad judgment of many bishops and priests have been front-page news and prime time on TV. Some Catholics are very severe in their criticism of the clergy. In this issue Fr. Thomas G. Morrow, a parish priest, relying on the example of the saints, makes the case that instead of constantly criticizing bishops and priests we should pray for them and give good example to others of Christian Charity (p. 16).

MARY IN THE EAST . . . The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, plays an essential role in the beginning of the Church since she was from eternity chosen by God to be the Mother of the Redeemer. In this issue Brother John M. Samaha, S.M., who is a Mariologist by trade, explains for our readers how Mary fits into the spiritual life of Eastern Christians. He points out that she is much more important in the liturgy than she is in theology and in the liturgy she is always related to her Son, Jesus, in some way (p. 22).

ON BLAMING OTHERS FOR OUR OWN SINS . . . Because of concupis-
cence, egoism, pride and other evil tendencies most of us tend to blame
others for our sins and defects. For example, many in our society think
and say that criminals are such because of their parents or the influence
of society. At the root of this is a denial of free will and the idea of respon-
sibility for one's own actions. In this issue Dr. Frederick W. Marks reflects
on the tendency to blame others for our sins and defects. He points out
that the Bible, from beginning to end, asserts the reality of free will and
that therefore God holds each person accountable for his thoughts,
words and deeds (p. 28).

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Mary in Eastern spiritual life

By John M. Samaha

■ Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the twenty-first ecumenical council, the Church has striven to promote a new and more careful study of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the mystery of Christ and of the Church, to encourage theological faculties in the pursuit of knowledge, research and piety in regard to Mary of Nazareth. The Mother of the Lord is understood as a "datum of revelation" and a "maternal presence" always operative in the life of the Church.

A chief springboard for this movement was the instruction on *The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation* issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education during the Marian Year of 1988. This instruction offers many rich insights. It draws copiously from *Lumen Gentium*, chapter eight, Vatican II; *Marialis Cultus* by Pope Pius VI; and *Redemptoris Mater* by Pope John Paul II.

Many other Christian Churches are also

experiencing new interest in this topic, and have followed suit in encouraging renewed study and research.

The history of theological reflection witnesses to the Church's faith and attention to the Virgin Mary and her mission in the history of salvation. Especially is this true in the Western Church.

The deeper the understanding of the mystery of the *Theotokos*, the more profound is the understanding of the mystery of Christ, of the Church, and of the vocation of humanity. Concerning Mary, everything is relative to Christ. Only in the mystery of Christ is her mystery fully clear. Conversely, it may generally be said that knowing Mary illuminates our appreciation of the mystery of Christ and of the Church.

To the degree in which the mystery of the Church is understood, the mystery of Mary is apparent. Knowing Mary, the Church recognizes its origins, its mission of grace, its des-

tiny to glory, and the pilgrimage of faith which guides it.

The Virgin Mary is like a mirror reflecting the mighty works of God, which theology has the task of illustrating. The importance of Mariological reflection derives from the importance of Christology, from the value of ecclesiology and pneumatology, from the meaning of Christian anthropology, from eschatology, and is an integral part of them.

Pope John Paul II reminded us simply that "Among creatures, no one knows Christ better than Mary; no one can introduce us to a profound knowledge of his mystery better than his Mother."

In the Eastern Christian Churches, the understanding and appreciation of the Virgin Mother of God developed differently, and not as the result of scientific theological reflection. The veneration of Mary, when properly understood, permeates the entire life of the Church. It is a dimension of dogma and of piety, of Christology and of ecclesiology. This dimension needs to be made explicit today in connection with the problems of humanity. Mariology expresses something fundamental to the Christian life itself, to the Christian experience of the world. Among contemporary Catholic and Orthodox theologians, Orthodox Father Alexander Schmemmann has been especially emphatic on this point.

Sound Mariology has always been understood in Christological terms. If the Gospel revealed nothing more than the fact that Jesus Christ, man and God, was born of the Virgin Mary, this alone would be sufficient for the Church to love her and to draw theological conclusions from pondering this relationship of Mother and Son. We need no other revelations. Mary is a self-evident and essential datum and dimension of the Gospel.

As in all aspects of theology and Church life, Eastern Christian Mariological insights testify amply to the time-honored principle of diversity in unity.

Is there an Eastern Mariology?

Pursuing this question leads to a seeming paradox. On one hand we find a tremendous richness of Marian thought in the liturgy, but on the other hand a virtual absence of specifically Mariological studies. The Mariological experience and piety of the Eastern Christian Churches — Catholic, Orthodox, and non-Chalcedonian — seem embodied almost entirely in their worship. We find no prominent theological reflection on the subject, nothing that would parallel the specialized Mariological treatises of the Western Church. Theology manuals contain no chapters dealing with the place of Mary in the economy of salvation. The veneration of Mary, which is so central to Eastern worship, has not been extensively expressed, analyzed, or evaluated systematically. How could the Eastern Churches, who always connect Mary to God and Jesus in their prayer, neglect theologizing about her? Why have they not focused their theological minds on this enormously important aspect of their life and worship?

In the Eastern mind, this seeming absence of theological study and reflection is seen as an integral part of the "mystery of Mary" in the experience of the Church. Eastern Christian scholars question whether theology as the rational investigation of the truths of faith is adequate to transpose into precise terms the real content of that mystery. Perhaps the proper locus of Mariology is in liturgy and prayer, that is, in worship. This is reminiscent of Prosper of Aquitaine's maxim: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. What we pray, we believe.

In the Eastern traditions, Mariology developed through liturgical veneration within the framework of its concomitant feasts; that is, it followed the development of Christology and the Church's contemplation of the Incarnation. All Marian devotion — liturgical and popular — remained organically connected with the mystery of Christ. This has always been the norm and criterion.



In the Eastern spiritual heritage the liturgy has been the principal locus of Mariology. The liturgical expression of piety is often adorned with allegory and symbolism. This gave rise to questions about the biblical character and justification of these expressions or forms. Where in the Bible do we find information about Mary's Nativity, Presentation in the Temple, Dormition? Yet these are celebrated as Marian festivals. Whatever their poetic, liturgical, and hymnographic expressions, all these events are real because they are self-evident. Mary was born. Like every Jewish girl she was taken to the Temple. Eventually she left this earthly life. Simply because such information derives from the apochrypha does

not alter their reality. The Church contemplates the ultimate reality of these events, not the poetic elaborations in the prayers and hymns.

In Eastern Christianity worship and liturgy are paramount. Liturgy is not seen as an action of the community. Liturgy is the procession and entrance into the eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God. It is the meeting place between this world and the Kingdom of God fully realized. Worship is not the commemoration of a past event; it is participation in the events of salvation themselves because, although these occurred historically, they also occur outside the category of time.

While the Eastern tradition differs from the theological exposition common in the West, the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio n.17*) explains that it nonetheless "belongs to the full catholicity and the apostolicity of the Church."

Some in the West have speculated that the Nestorian controversy, which was lived in the East, may have contributed to the fuller liturgical celebration of the Theotokos in the East. This development gave the East a more satisfying and habitual devotion to Mary, and would support the notion that the proper locus of Mariology is primarily in the liturgy.

The West, which lacks such regular liturgical expression, sought other means of elaborating Marian devotion, such as defining privileges and giving impetus to various movements.

Exploring three areas may enlighten our appreciation of the Eastern Christian Marian heritage: the place of Mary in liturgical tradition, the development of the veneration of the Mother of God, and a synthetic view of its theological significance. The Byzantine tradition especially offers ample evidence of these marks.

Eastern Liturgy and Mariology

In Eastern Christian liturgies are found

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four main expressions of Mariology: Marian liturgical prayers, Marian feasts, Marian iconography, and Marian paraliturgical piety.

Usually each cycle of prayers in the liturgy concludes with a special prayer addressed to Mary. This applies to all liturgical prayer units—daily, weekly, yearly cycles, and also the sanctoral cycle. The last word and seal will normally be the Theotokos, Mary the Virgin Forthbringer of God.

The liturgical year for the Eastern Churches includes well-developed Marian commemorations, both major feasts and lesser feasts.

In most Eastern Churches the icons of the Theotokos are integral to the life of the Church. This is especially pronounced in the Byzantine tradition. The very position of the icons in a church conveys definite theological meaning. The meaning of an icon is not a visual representation to stimulate the imagination for devotional purposes. Nor is it meant to teach or inspire. In the spiritual sense it is a living thing, the point where heaven and earth meet. St. John of Damascus called the icon a “channel of divine grace.” The icon is considered a mirror of divine revelation, and gives testimony to the reality that the saving truth is not communicated only by mere human words but also through wordless beauty. The cult of commonly termed miraculous icons of the Theotokos is highly developed, and some of them are celebrated in important and popular feasts.

In addition to the official Marian prayers and celebrations of the Eastern liturgies, add an abundance of secondary or paraliturgical feasts and services. While these vary in quality and value, it must be noted that many outstanding hymnographers wrote some of their best works on Marian themes. And the Eastern patrimonies are rich in the commentaries on these themes in the homilies composed for Marian feasts by the Greek and Syriac Fathers and Doctors of the Church.

The liturgical year for the Eastern Churches includes well-developed Marian commemorations, both major feasts and lesser feasts.

Historical and liturgical perspectives

Because the Eastern Churches have no comprehensive historical record of the veneration of Mary, our observations are limited. The earliest liturgical expression of Marian veneration must have been the concomitant feasts, the celebrations attached to the major feasts of Jesus Christ. Mary was contemplated within the mystery of the Incarnation. This Christological dimension is still evident today in the Incarnation-centered prayers and iconography of the Mother with the Child.

The employment of biblical expressions applies to Mary the terminology of the Temple and its cultic symbolism. This is considered basically as the fruit of a particular reading and understanding of the Old Testament.

The origin of some Marian feasts is rooted in the construction of churches and shrines in places where events of sacred history were supposed to have occurred. Historically the Marian piety of the East is not rooted in any special revelation, but primarily in the experience of liturgical worship. Theological reflection did not give rise to her veneration. This veneration sprang from the liturgy as the experience of “heaven on earth,” as communion with heavenly realities. This is the result of an act of love and devotion that gradually indicated the unique place of Christ’s Mother in both the economy of salvation and the mystery of the “world to come.” The Church preaches Christ, not Mary. An ancient hymn states, “In her rejoices the whole creation.”

In celebrating the liturgy there is really no time gap. In the mystical area of time beyond

time, Jesus' redeeming act and one's being redeemed are going on together now — this day, this hour, this minute. When one is praying with the Church, one is not praying a memory of an event. One is living the dynamics of the event with that special awareness that recognizes the presence of the Lord.

To understand the meaning of Eastern Christian liturgy, it is important to note that it is not symbolic in the Western sense. A liturgical action has no isolated intrinsic meaning. There can be no appeal to theology for a definition or rational explanation of a single sign or action, because Eastern theology describes rather than defines the reality of salvation. The Eastern Churches resist attempts to define meaning piecemeal by analyzing elements of liturgy: Eastern Christian worship must be comprehended holistically, and liturgical actions recognized as pointing beyond themselves to a greater reality in which the Christian participates when worshipping.

In the Eastern world the cultic, liturgical origin of Mariology possesses special importance for the understanding of its true nature and theological implications. Mary is not the object of a cult added to that of Jesus Christ. Rather she is an essential dimension of the cult.

A biblical theological perspective

The Eastern liturgies unfold other Mariological themes that are Biblically based. Jesus is the New Adam and Mary is the New Eve. This is the primary and soteriological aspect of her veneration in the Church. Some of the Eastern Christian Churches, especially the Byzantine, concentrate in Mary the entire Biblical vision and experience in the relationship between God and creation, the Savior and the world, as a mystery of love whose closest expression in this world is the man-woman relationship. God loves the world; God loves the chosen people; Christ loves the Church as a husband loves his wife. More precisely, the

mystery of human love reflects the mystery of God's love for his creation. Mary stands for the femininity of creation itself. Her femininity means responding love, obedience, self-giving, the readiness to live exclusively in and for the other. The woman responds to the initiative of man and flows to him, and in this total self-giving she fulfills herself. Eve failed to be the woman because she took the initiative; she distorted the order of creation and became the cause of sin. The chosen people of God failed to be the handmaid of the Lord in love and obedience. But Mary, by her total obedience, restores something absolutely essential in the order of creation.

An Ecclesial perspective

The Church is not only an institution or community, but also a sacrament in the sense of being the epiphany of the events of salvation. In this context liturgy is not the way which the community expresses its faith, but is the participation of those who believe in the timeless reality of salvific events. The Church is institution and the Church is life. Since the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, ecclesiology has often dwelt mainly on the institutional aspect of the Church. All this, however, is not the Church. The Church is new life in Christ, new joy, communion, love, dedication, peace. The Church is a continuing passage from the old into the new, from this world into the Kingdom of God. This life is difficult to define, but those who live it, no matter how imperfectly, know Mary is its perfect expression, its very movement. As heart of the new creation, Mary is the icon of Christ, the Bride of the Bridegroom, as is the Church. The living experience of the Church herself discovers this identification of the Church with Mary, and expresses the life of the Church in the Mary-Church context. The devotion of the Eastern Churches is Mariological because Mary is the very embodiment of that piety, its image, its direction, its move-

ment. Mary is the *oranta* constantly alive in adoration and self-giving.

An eschatological perspective

As icon of creation and icon of the Church, Mary is also “the dawn of the mysterious day,” the foretaste of the Kingdom of God, the presence of realized eschatology in the Eastern mind. Dormition prayers call her “virgin after childbearing” and also “alive after death.” Faith tells us that even before the common resurrection and the consummation of all things in Christ, Mary is fully alive, beyond the destruction and separation of death. The Eastern Churches have never rationalized this mystery.

In the Christian East knowledge of God is not seen as the result of logical arguments presented by theology. Only in worship can human beings obtain knowledge of God. Western saints have also attested to this. Such knowledge is non-rational; it is contemplative and mystical. Mary’s total unity with her Son destroyed her death. In her a part of this world is totally glorified and deified, making her the “dawn of the mysterious day of the Kingdom.”

Mary was associated in all the mysteries of her Son’s life on earth. She stood at the foot of the cross, and a sword of sorrow pierced her

heart. Her crucified Son proclaimed her our Mother. The Eastern liturgies recall her suffering and compassion in hymns and prayers similar to the Latin *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*. The experience of Mary as protector and intercessor is prominent in Eastern Marian veneration. She is identified with all human suffering and tragedy. She mirrors the Church as Mother.

The Eastern Mariological perspective

The role of theology in Eastern Christianity differs from that in Western Christianity. In the West theology is symbolized and encoded in liturgical action. In the East theology flows from liturgy and is subject to it. Theological discussion is always dependent on liturgy, and can be understood and experienced only in the context of the worship life of the Church.

Mariology is not an independent and free-standing element in the rich tradition of the Eastern Christian Churches. It is not studied in itself. Rather Mariology—doctrine and devotion—is an essential element of Christian cosmology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. It is not an object of faith, but its fruit. Mary is not a *nota ecclesiae*, but the self-revelation of the Church. Mariology is not a doctrine, but the life and fragrance and flavor of Christian doctrine in us. ■



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