

ARCUSA Response to Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (2007)

The members of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States of America (ARCUSA) gave sustained attention to the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) agreed statement *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* at our 60th, 61st, 62nd, and 63rd meetings, in 2006 and 2007. Our reflections at the 60th meeting were informed by the participation of biblical scholars the Most Rev. Richard Sklba and the Rt. Rev. Frederick Borsch. We, the members of this Consultation, offer the following response and informed reflection, the result of our own sustained dialogue. We hope to advance an ongoing dialogue between Roman Catholics and Episcopalians in the United States with regard to this statement and the teaching it explicates.

In accord with the statement, we reject any interpretation of the role of Mary that would obscure the unique mediatorship of Jesus Christ. As the document explains, Mary is the primary exemplar of those who have been elected and predestined by God to be glorified and accordingly prepared by God to be worthy of this calling. Consonant with Roman Catholic doctrine and Anglican commitment to Reformation teaching, we are in agreement that salvation comes by grace alone. Thus we appreciate the approach of *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* in considering Mary's role and status in salvation history from the standpoint of a strong doctrine of God's prevenient grace.

The distinction between the faith of the Church, on the one hand, and private revelations and individual devotions, on the other hand, both emphasizes the importance of common understandings and recognizes the continued diversity of devotional practice. We concur with *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (45-49, 66) that the liturgies of our two traditions demonstrate the meaning and significance that devotion to Mary has in each of our churches.

As a group, we did not find the document entirely satisfactory. Our greatest point of discussion and contention was the papal definitions of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception. We appreciate a methodology that seeks to find consensus by exploring our common roots in Scripture and the patristic church. Yet we find it also necessary to articulate explicitly our different approaches to the authority of Scripture and the development of doctrine and to explain the premises on which Roman Catholics base acceptance of these doctrines as articles of faith. As the document acknowledges, Anglicans turn to Scripture to determine what must be believed as a matter of faith: only that which can be read in Scripture or proved on the basis of Scripture can be required to be believed (MGHC 60; cf. Article VI of the Articles of Religion). While Roman Catholics acknowledge that there are no biblical texts that express the doctrines of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception or from which they can be strictly proved, they nonetheless hold that these Marian doctrines are contained in divine revelation and that their church has arrived at such certitude that they are revealed truths as to justify their definition as dogmas of faith.

Both Anglicans and Roman Catholics accept that Christian revelation cannot be reduced to a series of propositions but is centered in the whole Christ-event, of which the apostles were the privileged witnesses. This witness of the apostles has been handed on through the Christian way of life, teaching, prayer, and worship. We recognize a legitimate development of doctrine in the

course of the Church's life, a growth in the understanding of what has been handed on by the apostles. Thus, for instance, an element of the Christ-event witnessed by the apostles was the relationship between Jesus and his mother, and her role in his work of our redemption. As devout Christians continued to contemplate the mystery of Christ and his mother, they came to see that since Mary's Son is truly divine, it is correct to speak of her as Theotókos ("Mother of God"). This was confirmed in 431 by the Council of Ephesus, whose teachings are accepted by both Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

For Roman Catholics, the universal consensus of the Roman Catholic faithful (laity, theologians, and pastors) in believing a doctrine as revealed by God provides sufficient certitude that this truth is contained in revelation and can be defined as a dogma of faith. With regard to the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, Roman Catholics believe that this growth in the understanding of the faith handed down from the apostles developed in such a way that after the sixteenth century the Roman Catholic Church arrived at a universal agreement on these doctrines. In the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, with which Pope Pius XII defined the doctrine of the Assumption as a dogma of faith, he spelled out the reasons that led him to this decision: The bishops from all over the world ask almost unanimously that the truth of the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven be defined as a dogma of divine and catholic faith; this truth is based on Sacred Scripture and deeply embedded in the minds of the faithful; it has received the approval of liturgical worship from the earliest times; it is perfectly in keeping with the rest of revealed truth, and has been lucidly developed and explained by the studies, the knowledge and wisdom of theologians. Considering all these reasons we deem that the moment pre-ordained in the plan of divine providence has now arrived for us to proclaim solemnly this extraordinary privilege of the Virgin Mary. While Roman Catholics are thus required to accept these dogmas as a matter of faith, among Anglicans there is a range of beliefs about the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, including acceptance of them.

In addition to wishing that Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ had provided a fuller explanation of the process by which these dogmas were defined for the Roman Catholic Church, we find it necessary to clarify the terms with which these two dogmas were defined. With regard to the definition of the Immaculate Conception (MGHC 59), the assertion that Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, preserved immune from all stain of original sin means that she never contracted the inherited guilt of original sin, and implies that she began her human existence in the state of supernatural grace. On the other hand, as a member of the human race she shared the universal need of redemption. Her redemption was accomplished, through a singular privilege of grace, by being preserved from contracting the guilt of original sin, rather than by being justified during her lifetime. Her immunity from original sin was due to the merits of Jesus Christ, the sole Redeemer of all humankind. The gift of supernatural grace with which she was endowed was essentially the same as ours, the difference being that she never lacked what we receive in baptism.

Anglicans may be helped by the emphasis in Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ on grace and egalitarianism. Mary is elected from all time by a sheer act of grace; her response is exemplary, and, perhaps most important, the event centers on Christ, not Mary (MGHC 54, 56). Sensitive to Anglicanism's egalitarian thrust, we are reminded again and again that Mary's role is as much

exemplary as it is unique: “The holiness which is our end in Christ (cf. 1 John 3:2-3) was seen, by unmerited grace, in Mary, who is the prototype of the hope of grace for humankind as a whole” (MGHC 59). We, too, are addressed through the angel’s greeting, inasmuch as we who have also been called to receive Christ, and are enabled to say yes to that call, are elect: “Mary’s ‘Amen’ to God’s ‘Yes’ in Christ to her is thus both unique and a model for every disciple and for the life of the Church” (MGHC 64).

Turning to the definition of the Assumption (MGHC 58), the phrase “having completed the course of her earthly life” is intended to leave open the question of whether Mary died. It is true that the original title of the feast was “Dormition,” which suggests the description of death as a “falling asleep.” However, the belief that Mary died and was then raised from the dead is not so common and consistent in the tradition as to warrant including this belief in the dogma of her Assumption. What is common in the tradition is that her complete person, both body and soul, was taken into heavenly glory. In other words, her Assumption means that she already enjoys what all Christians hope to receive at the resurrection of the body.

The care taken to present the Assumption as a theological affirmation rather than an assertion about her physical death (MGHC 58, note 10) addresses Anglican concerns lest Mary’s exaltation be presented as a resurrection event paralleling Christ’s own. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* suggests that Mary’s “whole person” being taken up into the presence of God is rather to be viewed as her “glorification,” in anticipation of the Church’s glorification on the last day. Like the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, the doctrine of the Assumption is grounded in Mary’s election as the Mother of God. However, though one effect of baptism is to render believers sinless through the merits of Christ, as individuals we may not hope to be glorified in our whole persons, body and soul, before the general resurrection, as Mary has been. To argue that Mary here represents the Church simply proves the point: she represents us in our collective glorification as the Church in a way that is analogous to Christ’s representing us as its head.

Another approach, consistent with the Anglican theological emphasis on the Incarnation, would be to ground the significance of the Assumption in Mary’s ongoing relationship with Jesus as his mother. Indeed, to say that Mary was taken “body and soul” into heaven is to say that her whole person has been brought into the immediate presence of the Father and through the Holy Spirit reunited with her Son. The real question, then, is whether and how this understanding relates to our own salvation. Put in this way, it matters that Mary’s relation to Jesus as *Theotókos* is eternal, because that means that the Incarnation is irrevocable, continuously in effect, and part of our common destiny.

Even with a fuller explanation of these dogmas, it may be that not all Anglicans will be satisfied that they can be held as matters of faith, and not all Anglicans will accept the particular papal formulation of the doctrines. Nor, as the document acknowledges, is it clear whether Anglicans would be required to accept these definitions as a condition for the restoration of full communion (MGHC 63). We appreciate the suggestion that explicit acceptance of the precise wording of the definitions might not be necessary for Anglicans, an approach parallel to that adopted in Roman Catholic dialogues with the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Assyrian Church of the East concerning the Chalcedonian definition and with the Lutheran World Federation in the Joint Declaration on Justification (MGHC note 13). Yet further clarification is needed. What might be

an acceptable diversity of belief in a reconciled church, particularly with regard to doctrines that are fruits of developments that the churches have not shared? Communion between our churches might better be understood not as uniformity in doctrinal formulations but as an embrace of difference within a common faith.

In conclusion, we find that *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* offers a significant contribution to our ecumenical dialogue by showing how the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption can be understood to be consonant with the teaching of Scripture and our common Christian traditions. ARCUSA encourages members of our churches to study *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, to continue this dialogue in our local communities, and to share their experiences of liturgical practice and devotion to Mary. In this way, the faithful of both our churches may deepen their understanding of the faith we hold in common while also recognizing the different ways we have received and practice that faith.

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