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A.R.C.I.C. on the Mother of Our Lord

Roger Beckwith

The love of the Christian church for the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of our Lord, is an undoubted historical fact of considerable significance and with large consequences. It had its origin in the gospel itself – in the truth that not only was the Son of God willing to be born of a human mother, but that a young virgin named Mary consented to the unique role of being that mother. St. Luke's beautiful account (Luke 1:26-38) records this, and is essentially confirmed by the account written from the standpoint of her affianced husband Joseph and given by St. Matthew (Matt. 1:18-25).

Mary in the history of Christian thought

What St. Luke and St. Matthew had recorded led, very early on, to great interest in the holy family, and to the wide circulation of a tradition that Joseph was an older man, with children from a previous marriage, but that Mary's only child was Jesus.¹ The tradition was perhaps historically based,² but it soon started being elaborated by legend. In the Protevangelium of James, dating from the middle of the second century, Mary's parents are named (as Joachim and Anna), and her conception, birth and childhood are narrated, including her entry into the Temple, as one of the Temple virgins, at the age of three. Also, after her betrothal to Joseph and the birth of Jesus, she is found still to be a virgin. It is but a short step from this to belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary, a pious opinion acknowledged by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople II, in 553) and accepted as scriptural by many of the English Reformers.³

Devotion to Mary was greatly enhanced by the ascription to her of the title *Theotokos*, Bearer of God, which was endorsed by the Third Ecumenical Council (Ephesus, 431) in its condemnation of Nestorianism. It has been truly said that this title was primarily intended to confirm the incarnation of Christ and not to glorify Mary, but the latter was an inevitable consequence. The same has been said of the many festivals of Mary (her Annunciation, Purification, Nativity and Assumption) introduced in the East between the fourth and sixth centuries.⁴ Festivals of her Conception, Entry into the Temple,

and Visitation (to Elizabeth) were later added, giving her approximately as many festivals as our Lord himself.⁵

A great controversy arose in the Middle Ages over the Conception of Mary, the Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus (ob. 1308) arguing that she was conceived without original sin, thus contradicting the teaching of his great Dominican predecessor Thomas Aquinas (ob. 1274). According to Aquinas, Mary, like all other human beings except Jesus, inherited original sin, but was sanctified while in the womb, so that she did not commit actual sin.⁶ At the time of the Reformation, this question remained undecided: the Council of Trent explains that it is not its intention to include Mary in its decree on Original Sin, and it renews the constitutions of Pope Sixtus IV, issued in 1476 and 1483, condemning those who speak ill of the Scotist view.⁷ Despite the general commitment of Rome to the teaching of Aquinas, pressure in favour of the Scotist view and against the Thomist view continued, and in 1854, in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, Pope Pius IX defined the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary as having been revealed by God and as requiring full acceptance from all the faithful. The infallibility of the pope when defining such doctrines remained to be similarly defined by the same pope in 1870: this was at the First Vatican Council, in the dogmatic constitution *De Ecclesia Christi* 4.

With regard to the Bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven, matters moved rather more slowly. The festival of the Assumption seems to have been introduced into the West in the seventh century, and the belief underlying it had eminent defenders in the Middle Ages, on the basis of deductive theology, leading Pope Benedict XIV (1740-1758) to declare it a probable opinion (though no more than that). However, in 1950 it became the third of the three modern Roman dogmas, when it was defined as a binding doctrine of the Christian faith by Pope Pius XII in the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*.

It is worth remembering that on 17th August 1950, when the definition of the dogma of the Assumption was imminent, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York (Fisher and Garbett) issued a statement that the Church of England did not and could not regard the doctrine of the Assumption as a necessary part of the Christian faith, unsupported as it is by any scriptural evidence, and adding,

‘We profoundly regret that the Roman Catholic Church has chosen by this act to increase dogmatic differences in Christendom’.⁸ The Archbishops also sponsored a publication called *Infallible Fallacies*, by Kenneth Ross and others, in which the dogma was examined and rejected.

Significant also is the response of the Eastern Orthodox Church to the new Roman dogmas. Needless to say, they reject the infallibility of the pope and the dogma which asserts it. But, in view of the great devotion of the Eastern Church to Mary, their attitude to the other two dogmas is even more noteworthy. They observe the festival of the Conception of Mary, but they do not make it one of their twelve great feasts, because they reject the idea that she was conceived without sin. They do, however, give this honour of being one of the twelve great feasts to the festival of her Assumption (under the name of the Dormition), and they believe the event it celebrates to be true; but they still deny that it can be defined as a doctrine of the faith, because it lacks the necessary basis in Scripture and tradition, and belongs rather to the devotional life of the Church.⁹

Alongside the theological developments culminating in the two Marian dogmas, were Marian developments in prayer. The mediaeval practice of the invocation of saints, though by no means confined to Mary, concentrates especially on Mary, and on the use of the *Ave Maria*. This is a twelfth-century salutation of Mary, based on the angelic message to her and Elizabeth’s greeting of her in Luke 1:28, 42, followed by a fifteenth-century request, ‘Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen’. The request is simply for her prayers, but the implication is that she can hear the request and knows something of the identity and needs of the innumerable individuals who make it, both at the time when they do so and at the time when they die. In other words, it ascribes to her something like omniscience, and is appropriately followed by ‘Amen’, since such a request is hardly distinguishable from a prayer: this, indeed, is how the Church of Rome describes it.¹⁰ The invocation of saints is therefore a very different thing from asking the prayers of friends on earth, to which the new ARCIC report on Mary likens it, and Article 22 has good reason for calling it a ‘fond (foolish) thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God’. The new report denies that this issue is ‘communion dividing’ (section 75), but one is bound to wonder.

The work of A.R.C.I.C.

In 1964, the Second Vatican Council declared that ‘among those [Protestant communions] in which some Catholic traditions and institutions continue to exist, the Anglican Communion occupies a special place’ (Decree on Ecumenism 13). Not much more than a year later, the late Pope Paul VI and the late Archbishop Michael Ramsey had a meeting at which they decided to set up ‘a serious dialogue’ between the two communions. As a result, in 1967, nearly forty years ago, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (A.R.C.I.C.) was appointed and began meeting, and it has continued doing so ever since. At long last, in the year 2005, under the title of *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ, An agreed statement*,¹¹ the Commission has given us its reflections on the sensitive subject of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Since A.R.C.I.C. has continued in being for so long, it is not surprising that its work has gone through several stages. Mid way through, the membership had to be reconstituted, so there have really been two Commissions, an A.R.C.I.C. I and an A.R.C.I.C. II, and they are popularly known by these names. A.R.C.I.C. I issued agreed statements on three subjects, the Eucharist, the Ministry and Authority, followed by Elucidations in answer to comments received, and on Authority it issued a second statement. It summed up its work in its Final Report, published in 1982. On each subject it made certain concessions to Roman Catholic opinion, but on Authority it reported important residual differences, relating to the papacy and the Virgin Mary (*Authority in the Church II*, 29-33).

There had been an expectation that A.R.C.I.C. I would deal also with the equally controversial doctrine of Justification, and, as it had not, A.R.C.I.C. II took this as its first important theme. Much enterprising work had recently been done on the subject by Roman Catholic theologians, stemming from Hans Küng’s revolutionary book on the matter,¹² and A.R.C.I.C. therefore felt free to follow suit and to issue a report, *Salvation and the Church* (1987), which moved a long way towards Pauline and Reformation theology. They did not anticipate what the consequences would be.

The A.R.C.I.C. reports and the Vatican

In describing its reports as ‘agreed reports’, A.R.C.I.C. meant, of course, agreed among the members of the Commission, both the Anglican members

and the Roman Catholic members. It did not mean, agreed by the communions to which the members belonged. This could only be the case if and when the two communions had assessed and approved what the Commission had proposed.

A.R.C.I.C. had been appointed from the outset to conduct a dialogue ‘founded on the Gospels and on the ancient common traditions’, as they existed before the Reformation controversies. It had therefore paid scant attention to the Reformation formularies, and had viewed pre-Reformation tradition, up to and including the Middle Ages, in a tolerant way. It may be for this reason that all the A.R.C.I.C. reports prior to *Salvation and the Church* had tended to reflect a certain move away from the Anglican and towards the Roman Catholic position. In *Salvation and the Church*, on the other hand, the move was away from traditional Roman Catholicism towards modern Roman Catholicism, which had itself been moving towards Protestantism. A.R.C.I.C. apparently did not realise how strong traditional Roman Catholicism still was. It was soon to find out.

In 1988, the year after *Salvation and the Church* appeared, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the most important of the Vatican Congregations, formerly known as the Holy Office, issued its *Observations*, calling for the report to be revised and brought into conformity with the teaching of the (Counter-Reformation) Council of Trent. The Congregation followed this up in 1991 by publishing what it called the *Response of the Holy See to the Final Report of A.R.C.I.C. I*, calling for all the statements of that report to be revised and brought into complete conformity with the teaching of Trent and Vatican I (the council which promulgated the decree of papal infallibility); it also called for the reported Anglican reservations about some Roman Catholic teachings to be dropped. It was in vain for the co-chairmen and secretaries to protest that this was contrary to the instructions they had received, which were to concentrate on the Bible and the ancient common traditions; for the Congregation evidently felt that the official formularies would sooner or later have to be taken into account (which was hard to deny), and that the time for this had now come.

The Anglican members of A.R.C.I.C. could very reasonably have responded by pointing out that Anglicans also have official formularies, notably the Book of

Common Prayer and the 39 Articles, which likewise have things to say on all the subjects addressed by A.R.C.I.C., and by suggesting that a comparison should now be made, and the differences discussed. Instead, they took a quite astonishing decision. Realising that Rome was not interested in mutual concessions but only in an Anglican surrender, they evidently decided to give Rome what it wanted. As a result, the reports produced by A.R.C.I.C. from this point onwards have, from the Anglican point of view, been like nothing so much as a bad joke. The Anglican church could not possibly accept them, and it is difficult to see why it has wasted money and risked misunderstanding by having them produced and published.

The first of this new generation of reports appeared in 1993, when A.R.C.I.C. issued a further report on the Eucharist and the Ministry, called *Clarifications*. Here they claimed that Anglicans agree with the Roman Catholic doctrines of transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the mass, despite the explicit rejection of these doctrines in Articles 28 and 31. This extraordinary report has never been discussed by the General Synod of the Church of England, despite strenuous efforts made by certain private members to get it on to the agenda; but in 1999 A.R.C.I.C. followed it up by a report on the papacy, called *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III*, which pursued a similar policy. It withdrew Anglican objections to papal infallibility (section 47) and proposed that, even in their separated state, Anglicans should accept the universal authority of the Pope (sections 60-63). Such a report could obviously not be left undiscussed indefinitely, and in February 2004 the General Synod bit the bullet and discussed it. The official motion proposed that the report should be sent back for further work, to clarify its proposals on universal authority and on infallibility, and to consider whether it was consistent with Anglican teaching and with what had been agreed by Anglicans in other inter-denominational discussions. This motion was passed. Anglican teaching in Article 37 rules out universal authority for the Pope, and the Anglican-Orthodox Commission had agreed in 1976, and again in 1984, that neither Anglicans nor Orthodox can accept papal infallibility (*Moscow Agreed Statement* 17-18; *Dublin Agreed Statement* 29-30).

It might have been expected that A.R.C.I.C. would have taken warning from such a decision, and would not have made the same mistake again. But, as we shall see, its report on Mary is entirely of the same character as *Clarifications*

and *The Gift of Authority*. It claims that Anglicans can accept (or ‘re-receive’, to use its own curious expression) the controversial Roman Catholic teaching.

‘Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ’

The report on Mary is in some respects an attractive document. As the mother of Jesus, it is careful not to separate Mary from her Son. It emphasises that she is an intercessor with her Son, and not a second Mediator.¹³ It calls her the Mother of God, but the mother of God *incarnate*. It quotes a lot from the Bible (though often in an uncertain, secondary sense). It attempts to find in Mary (as its title indicates) a source of Christian grace and hope. Nevertheless, the Commission’s consciousness that it is not in the business of reforming Roman Catholic teaching and practice, but of justifying them, places obstacles in the way of its irenic aims.

It is easy enough for the authors to admit that Christ, not Mary, is the only Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), but if prayer can equally be offered to Mary, the admission rings hollow. They can fairly claim that Mary features a good deal in the Bible, but some of the things it says about her pose painful difficulties for Roman Catholic teaching. They are right to point out that, in the Magnificat, Mary acknowledges God as her Saviour (Luke 1:47), but if she was exempted from both original and actual sin, he was her Saviour in a different way from the way in which he is the Saviour of sinners, and she does not present any very clear example for penitent sinners to follow.

The great privilege of Mary in being the mother of the Messiah is emphasised by Gabriel at her annunciation (Luke 1:28-35), and Elizabeth’s salutation of her almost anticipates the title Mother of God (Luke 1:41-43). But elsewhere in the Gospels her blessedness is said to be less than that of those who hear the word of God and keep it (Luke 11:27f.) and the titles of his mother and his brethren are transferred by Jesus to ‘whosoever shall do the will of God’ (Mark 3:31-35). In the latter passage, his mother and brethren are usually identified with the ‘friends’ in verse 20f. who say ‘He is beside himself’ and seek to restrain him – an act which, however well-meaning, was very presumptuous. Comparable with this are the mistaken words of blame which Mary addressed to him in Luke 2:48-50 and the rebuke which he addressed to her in John 2:4. Aquinas and Scotus were agreed that Mary was exempt from *actual* sin, but these passages throw a measure of doubt on it.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, however, affirms that she was exempt also from original sin – as the report puts it, ‘that Christ’s redeeming work reached “back” in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings’ (section 59). If Mary’s exemption from actual sin is in doubt, there is no point in making this further assertion, but the report does make it, and says that ‘it is not contrary to the teaching of Scripture’. It does not discuss the fact that Scripture asserts the universality of sin in the human race (1 Kings 8:46; 2 Chronicles 6:36; Proverbs 20:9; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:23; James 3:2; 1 John 1:8, 10) and makes Jesus the only exception to this (John 8:46; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26; 1 Peter 1:19; 2:22; 1 John 3:5). To say that Mary is a second exception is either contrary to Scripture or additional to Scripture, most probably the former, as Articles 9 and 15 indicate. But even if it were only additional to Scripture, this would not justify it.

For the authors of the report, it is sufficient that a doctrine of the Christian faith should be ‘consonant with Scripture’ or ‘in conformity with Scripture’ (sections 58, 59, 60, 61, 78). This is all that they can claim for the doctrine of the Assumption (section 58), since it is non-scriptural. They do note that such a doctrine should have been ‘revealed by God’ (section 60), but they realise that Anglicans might agree with Article 6 in confining what is revealed by God to what can be read in Scripture or proved by Scripture. It is interesting that they do not expect Roman Catholics to think similarly, since one of the big issues at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s was precisely this, and we seem to have here another indication of the way pre-Vatican II thinking has reasserted itself in the Church of Rome. The report claims that the Marian dogmas should be thought of, not as new revelations, but as what has been believed and transmitted from the beginning (section 61); but why so many in the church should have failed to perceive this for the best part of two millennia is not explained. In the end, they fall back upon the infallibility of the pope (sections 62, 63).

The sufficiency of Scripture, as taught in Article 6, is itself a scriptural doctrine. Adding to God’s revealed words, no less than taking away from them, is forbidden in Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Proverbs 30:5f; Revelation 22:18. Adding to God’s words in Scripture might come about either through adopting spurious scriptures or through giving scriptural authority to oral traditions, and in the Church of Rome the latter is the chief way that it has happened. In

conformity with this, the report itself tells us that what ultimately brought about the Marian definitions was the *sensus fidelium*, local liturgical traditions and the support of bishops (section 62). This is true not only of the two Marian dogmas, but also of the invocation of Mary and other saints.

We are told that the report on Mary will be the last report from A.R.C.I.C. II. One cannot expect there to be an A.R.C.I.C. III, if only because women priests and bishops have been introduced by a number of Anglican churches, against strong Roman Catholic opposition, but with the consent of the Lambeth Conference, while the talks have been going on.

The A.R.C.I.C. enterprise has lasted for more than a generation, and has passed through a strange evolution. It began with fine words and fair hopes, and is now coming to an end in perplexity and disillusionment. When the history of the ecumenical movement comes finally to be written, A.R.C.I.C. will be seen as one of its most curious episodes.

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ENDNOTES

1. See J. B. Lightfoot's dissertation 'The Brethren of the Lord', appended to his Commentary on Galatians (1865).
2. Matt. 1:25 is often supposed to conflict with this tradition, but without sufficient reason.
3. See Cranmer, *Remains and Letters* (PS), p. 60; Latimer, *Works* (PS) 2:105f; Jewel, *Works* (PS) 3:440f.
4. See J. A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy to the time of Gregory the Great* (ET, London: DLT, 1960), ch.15.
5. The Entry into the Temple is peculiar to the Eastern Church and the Visitation to the Western. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, the Annunciation is a red-letter festival, and so is the Purification (under its new title of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple). The Conception, Nativity and Visitation are retained as black-letter commemorations, without provision for liturgical observance, and so is the festival of St Anne, Mary's reputed mother. The Assumption, because of its purely legendary character, is struck out.
6. *Summa Theologiae* 3a, qu.27. See also qu.14:3; qu.15; and 2:1, questions 81-83.
7. Trent, session 5, Decree concerning Original Sin 5.

8. See Edward Carpenter, *Archbishop Fisher – his Life and Times* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1991), p. 351f.
9. See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1963), pp. 261-65.
10. See *The Sunday Missal* (London: Collins, 1975), pp. 798-800, ‘Prayers to our Lady’. Curiously, the ARCIC report on Mary denies this (section 70). The *Ave Maria* (‘Hail Mary’) is the basic constituent of the Angelus and the Rosary.
11. Harrisburg and London: Morehouse Publishing, 2005.
12. See R. G. England, *Justification Today: the Roman Catholic and Anglican Debate* (Latimer Study 4, Oxford: Latimer House, 1979). Küng’s book is entitled *Justification: the Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (ET, London: Burns & Oates, 1964).
13. The *Ave Maria* is explicitly a request for intercession, but many prayers to Mary and the saints, including the one quoted by the report in note 9, read like direct requests for grace, and require some sophistication if they are to be read as requests for the saint’s prayers. Incidentally, the belief that the departed saints, like the angels, do pray for those on earth is probably more an inference from Scripture than anything stated there. It seems to be explicit only in the Apocrypha (2 Macc. 15:11-14).