

Review Essays

Mary Among the Catholics and Anglicans: an Orthodox Response

Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (Toronto: Novalis, 2005, 81 pages).

This short monograph is, of course, the most recent agreed statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). Otherwise known as the “Seattle Statement,” this statement is the fruit of years of work by the members of the commission.¹ The history of how the commission arrived at this statement, and where it fits with previous work by ARCIC in particular and in the context of ecumenical dialogue in general, is told in the first two paragraphs of *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*:

A special consultation of Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops, meeting under the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey, and Cardinal Edward I. Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, at Mississauga, Canada in 2000, specifically asked ARCIC for “a study of Mary in the life and doctrine of the Church.” This request recalls the observation of the Malta Report (1968) that “real or apparent differences between us come to the surface in such matters as ... the Mariological definitions” promulgated in 1854 and 1950. More recently, in *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), Pope John Paul II identified as one area in need of fuller study by

¹ The statement is published in monograph form by several different publishers and also available electronically at many sights, including the following: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ecumenical/dialogues/rc/arcic/mary/index.cfm> (official website of the Anglican Communion) and http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20050516_mary-grace-hope-christ_en.html (official website of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity).

all Christian traditions before a true consensus of faith can be achieved “the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God and Icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ’s disciples and for all humanity,”

ARCIC has addressed this topic once before. *Authority in the Church II* (1981) already records a significant degree of agreement.

The 1981 statement’s “significant degree of agreement” did not address all the issues pertaining to Mary, and thus left several areas requiring further attention, areas addressed in this current statement.

I must say straightaway that I am thoroughly impressed with the quiet balance of this agreed statement. The careful review of the evidence concerning Mary from Scripture and Church tradition, and the attempt to “embrace one another’s ways of doing theology”(x), is a model of how two churches can rightly handle the other’s point of view and make genuine progress in understanding while still admitting to differences on some substantial issues. A few observations from an Orthodox perspective could perhaps widen the conversation and contribute to thinking about Mary’s role in the life of all our churches.

1. Mary as Excess

Having said that the careful tone of the dialogue is to be appreciated (and indeed one could anticipate that a similar ecumenical statement involving the Orthodox would most likely have a similar tone), it needs to be said that it is precisely this “tone” which introduces a certain dissonance with the music of Mary’s veneration. This is a music that springs from the heart, and so overflows the boundaries of cool theological dialogue. The language of her veneration is warm, generous, abundant, even excessive.

This is seen, for example, in the *Akathistos Hymn*, a characteristic form of devotion to Mary in the Orthodox Church.² The hymn takes the form of a dialogue between Mary and the Archangel Gabriel:

A prince of the angels was sent from heaven to greet the Theotokos, saying: Rejoice! (3 times) Seeing You, Lord, take bodily form at his bodiless word, he stood in awe and cried:

Rejoice, for through you joy will be enkindled;
Rejoice, for through you the curse will be quenched!
Rejoice, recall of fallen Adam;
Rejoice, deliverance of weeping Eve!
Rejoice, height unattainable to human reason;
Rejoice, abyss unsearchable by angelic eyes!
Rejoice, for you are the throne of the King;
Rejoice, for you bear him who upholds all things!
Rejoice, star giving rise to the sun;
Rejoice, womb giving flesh to God!
Rejoice, for through you creation is renewed;
Rejoice, for through you the creator becomes a
 newborn child!
Rejoice, O unwedded Bride!

Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice. Such poetic, excessive, emotional responses are poor foundations for theological precision. But this is perhaps one reason that the Orthodox Church has resisted making dogmatic pronouncements about the Mother of God, wanting to preserve her place in the center of the Church's heart, which abhors stingy language.

2. *Mary as Intercessor*

The most significant progress in the dialogue is the agreement about Mary's role as intercessor: "we affirm together ... that Mary has a continuing ministry which serves the ministry

² *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* alludes to the importance of this hymn in paragraph no. 39.