

The Place of Mary in the Roman Catholic Church

Presentation by Barry O'Halpin

Thank you Robert and thanks also to the Council the Church for giving permission for this lecture on their premises.

I invite any of you who may wish to join me in tracing the Sign of the Cross and sharing the Lord's Prayer and the Doxology.

Good Evening, and thank you all for being here. I am, I have to say, both honoured and somewhat awed to be delivering this lecture on a subject that is of such enormous significance as the Mother Of God. If you had told me even three years ago that I would be doing this, and in the Anglican Pro-Cathedral to boot, I would have laughed at you.

But here I am and whatever about my own feelings of inadequacy God obviously wants me to be here, so who am I to question him?

It may seem strange that in the first moments of a talk I am already going to labour a point, but that is what I am going to do. In opening this presentation by inviting you to join me in tracing the Sign of the Cross, and then sharing the Lord's Prayer and the Doxology together we are establishing one of the most fundamental points about the place of Mary in the RC Church. That is that while we may and do honour her, reverence her and respect her, we do not offer her adoration. That is due to God alone.

This is an important distinction to draw because it defines the nature of the relationship that she has to the Church and indeed our relationship to her. I hope that it is abundantly clear already that everything that we do, all prayer, whether to God directly or through an intercessor, is prayer to GOD. The intercessor is just that, great and wonderful as that is, but is **not** more than that.

Introduction

Before going on, I would like to set some linguistic parametres. In the course of the lecture, I will use some terms with a very particular meaning. This is for reasons of **economy and clarity** and I would ask that they be understood in that context and not be taken as pejorative or presumptive. When I say 'Church' I mean the Roman Catholic Church and when I use the word 'Christian' it will be in its widest, most inclusive and ecumenical sense.

I would stress also that the teaching in this lecture is a reflection of Roman Catholic teaching on Mary and it should not be thought to represent the views or doctrinal position of any other person, institution or persons.

It is probably true to say that it is the Church's teaching upon Mary, more than almost any other that identifies the RC faith for many people, both inside and outside. It is a little surprising and disappointing that it should be a definition that is often a cause – or possibly a pretext in some extreme cases - of division rather than unity.

It seems clear that while in the minds and hearts of some very few “division” is an asset, for the majority, for those of good will, the attitude to Catholic teaching is based more often than not on a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of what that teaching actually is. The objective this evening is to attempt to share with you the basic reality of the Church's teaching on Mary, particularly in terms of her place in the Church. To this end, I will be drawing mostly on the Vatican II document entitled, The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, or rather more snappily *Lumen Gentium*. This document, which has a large section devoted to the Place of Mary in the Church, is frankly a masterpiece of theological reflection and coherent teaching, and I would suggest that it bears reading by everyone who is interested in and concerned for the Christian faith, even if they do not respond entirely positively to what is contained in it. As an exercise in academic rigour and an example of clarity it is a very great piece of work.

Before I begin in earnest, I would like to stress that “The Place of Mary in the Roman Catholic Church” is not an exhaustive treatise of Marian theology, rather an effort to communicate how the Church understands Mary in what I will call institutional terms.

The Context of Vatican II

I cannot go on without first putting the document *Lumen Gentium* in context. As one of the four Dogmatic Constitutions to come out of the Second Vatican Council it contains the definitive statement of what the Church is and how she is constituted. While LG does address many aspects of Church life, it is primarily a statement of what the Church is. Other documents look in detail at the Liturgy, Divine Revelation, and the Church's Pastoral relationship to the secular world, where each of these aspects is given intensive attention. In addition, many other papers and documents were produced and there have been a raft of Post Consiliar documents. I draw your attention to all of this to explain that the Second Vatican Council was one of the most important Councils in the history of the Church, and one of the most broad-reaching, albeit that many would argue that it has not yet borne the anticipated fruit..

The Council was convoked by John XXIII and met formally for the first time on October 11th 1962 and closed officially on December 8th 1965, the feast of the Immaculate Conception as it happens. Pope John was elected in 1958 and was seen as a safe pair of hands. A man of outstanding humility and simplicity in many ways, he was pastor of extraordinary gifts. There are stories of his ‘sneaking’ out through the back door of the Vatican to walk through the streets of Rome talking to and indeed helping the poor and dispossessed that he found there. For me, there is something almost Franciscan about him, and like St Francis, his obvious pastoral generosity is often confused with what we would term **liberalism**. Neither man, both great in their way, was anything other than passionate in adherence to and loyalty to the Magisterium of the Church. Pope John was a conservative at heart, not wishing to see the Church undergo screaming and radical

change or to become populist as a route to popularity, but he recognized the need for an opening up of the mysteries of the Church, the sacraments and the liturgy, and a greater transparency in the manner in which the Church related to the faithful and to the wider world. In this light, the need to be able to discern and to communicate the wonder and the beauty of the Catholic faith in a way that was accessible and comprehensible was identified as paramount. In the hundred years plus that had elapsed since the First Vatican Council – which had been convoked by Pope Pius IX and had had a relatively limited focus – the world had changed out of all recognition. In that context, and the context of the events of the twentieth century up to that date in 1961 when the call to convocation was issued, wars of unimagined horror, genocides in many countries and vastly changed modes and types of communication with the attendant possibilities for misunderstanding that go with that, the Council was convoked with the intention of reestablishing the connection between the Church episcopate and the faithful.

Changes in the transmission of the Liturgy were agreed upon and following from this it became the norm for the Liturgy to be celebrated in the vernacular, in language that everyone could understand in their own as opposed to the traditional Latin. What is important to recognise however, was that these changes **did not change** the liturgy, but rather **changed the manner** in which people were enabled to participate and share in it.

Similarly when it came to reflection on the Church and specifically, for our purposes, of Mary's place in the Church, there was no root and branch reform, but rather a crystallisation and gathering together of the strands to present a clear and definitive statement of the Church's teaching.

Mary

So we come at last to Mary.

Mary is the Mother of God, by virtue of being the mother of Jesus who is the Christ. In using the present tense to describe her we are also attesting to her special and living place in heaven.

Christianity is built upon four Divine central piles or pillars: The Trinity, the Incarnation, The Pascal Mystery and the Dignity of the Human Person. The mystery of the Incarnation is the one aspect that most directly attracts us in our examination of Mary. It was necessary for God to become Incarnate, and the meaning of this word carries with it all the resonance of the **hypostasis**, the wholly Divine and wholly Human nature of Jesus. Mary was the chosen mother of the saviour and, crucially, the willing recipient of this terrifying grace.

Any full examination of why she should have been chosen is beyond my competence but it is clear that she does fulfill the prophecies recorded in Isaiah 7:14 and Micah 5:2-3. She is the Daughter of Sion who is to be the mother of the saviour. Her place in the history and unfolding of salvation is very clear.

Mary is described in *Lumen Gentium* as **Mother** and **Model** of the Church.

She is the **Mother** of the Church by virtue of being the Mother of Christ, The Church in turn being the Body of Christ. But she is Mother in another way, and as we look to St John's Gospel and we meet both St John and Mary at the foot of the Cross, we see each given into relationship with the other by Christ himself. Mother and son. This may appear confusing however, as it suggests a primacy of the Joannine line, while Peter was nominated and finally anointed as the 'rock' upon which the Church was built. Without going into exhaustive detail, the protection of Mary to which John was called was in her capacity of Mother of the Church and indeed as the Book of the Apocalypse shows, the Queen of Heaven. John, always slightly apart from the other Apostles, by virtue of his youth amongst other things, is the one who lingers a little behind at the end of John's Gospel and who is the cause of speculation and indeed misrepresentation even in the contemporary setting of the Gospel. To say that John was the Church to which Mary is Mother is not to diminish Peter, but it is to acknowledge that the ministries of John and Peter and indeed Paul were different. For Peter and Paul, the Kerygma, or proclamation, was their vocation. St John, through the course of his long life, really drew out the theology of the early Church. To him, therefore, was the blessing of the protection and shelter of Mary granted, so that the Church would not simply be a flower to bloom and wither, but a plant to be tended and nurtured and husbanded.

To this plant, then, is Mary directed to be the carer. Her role throughout the Gospels is that of carer and watcher. We hear so little from her, we hear so little about her, that it is almost understandable that she should be confined to the sidelines by some. After all, is not the coming of the Holy Spirit in Tongues of Fire far more dramatic? We must not forget that Mary was there too, amongst the disciples, leading them by gentle faithfulness, she too was in the Cenacle, the Upper Room. She was there at the start of the "Jesus" story, at the Annunciation. She was there when the child leapt in the womb of Elizabeth, and when the shepherds and the Magi came to testify to who He was, when Simeon and old Anna testified to His glory; she was there when He was found in the Temple, and when the water, symbol of expiation of sin, was transformed into the wine that was in turn to become the healing, cleansing Blood of the Saviour. She was there at the Crucifixion, and at the Tomb. In fact, she was there all through the story, quietly, in the background, but there, a rock and a support, the Daughter of Sion, the Mother of the child of the City of David.

Mary is loved and respected as the **Model** of the Church. She is seen by the Church as not simply being a pawn to be used, but as cooperating in the ministry to which she is called. She is this because she is a free human being and she chooses to do as the Lord wishes. "You see before you the Lord's Servant. Let it happen to me as you have said." In all the confusion and fear that must have assailed her, she remained true to this. "let it happen to me as you have said". She is devoted not only to God's will but to Christ and his mission and it is to this that St Augustine is referring when he says of her "Mary is more Blessed because she embraces faith in Christ than because she conceives the flesh of Christ".

Mary is further our Model because she is a **Pilgrim**, knowing the truth of what is happening but struggling to understand it. She is the perfect model of faith, and of the humility of exploration that is our individual and collective calling. Twice we hear it said of her, in the Stable and in the Temple, that she kept these things and pondered them in her heart. In some ways, she demonstrates here not only that which we should do, but the very nature of faith and belief. There is no doubt that she believes that he who is before her to be the Son of God himself, the Messiah, the Christ. This belief does not come upon her by whim, or simply as a result of some empirical process. It is implicit in her acceptance of the Gift of the Holy Spirit that is the conception, in her acceptance of the Angel and his words. Mary is graced with that which we have lost, or been argued out of this last three to four hundred years particularly. She is graced with **KNOWING** the truth because it is **true**, not because it has been proven intellectually to her. From this knowledge, a metaphysical sense liberating the Truth that God plants in each and every Human creature, she believes. Neither blinded by the so-called Enlightenment, not shamed by fashion, she believes what she knows to be true, because it is true, because the **reason is always the servant of Truth, and not that Truth is the servant of reason.** Mary, the pilgrim, works from the knowledge of God to the discovery of who he is and to knowing him, through reflection, prayer, service and pondering.

The Church is the same, or should be, as the exploratory Church, safe and secure because the answer is known and visible, but unravelling the textures and tones and sometimes bewildering skein that is the fabric of God. Christians know God exists. We know that He became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We know that he died on the cross and rose again on the third day and that He has left us with the Great Commandment(s). I suggest that it is safe to say that these things are held as true by all Christians because if they are not, then someone may be a good person, may seek to follow Christ's teaching and may be exceptional in many ways, but to be honest that person is not a **Christ-ian**, for all their merits and I do not wish to be taken as pejorative or claiming superiority in saying that. It is almost a semantic issue, though in reality one of faith.

Praying to Her

A particularly noxious motto of a particular group of rather extreme and irreflective radicals in the eighties and nineties in Ireland was "Keep your Rosaries off my ovaries". Even in my pre-conversion days, the days before my own and true enlightenment into the JOY of Christianity, I found this troublesome and offensive and that was coming from a perspective of a fairly wild, left-wing priest-baiter. Nowadays, I am less offended by this sort of disrespect that verges on blasphemy but I am saddened by it, because in a world where there is no thought often about what we are attacking, we twist and pervert and caricature our targets to suit our own agendas, and we take that which is Holy and profane it for the sake of a soundbite.

Roman Catholicism has as one of its great strengths a deep and special devotion to Mary, for the reasons that we have already spoken about and also for the particular role that she plays as the supreme Mediatrix, conveying our prayers to God with the added weight of her own sanctity. As Mediatrix, however, she **IS NOT THE ONE WITH THE POWER** and it is in the misunderstanding of this simple fact that much of the caricature

of Catholicism is sourced. The Catholic Church is accused even of idolatry because she is accused of elevating Our Lady to a divine or quasi-divine position.

This is not true!!!!

Mary holds a position in the Order of Grace that is above all other creatures, whether human or celestial. She occupies a position below that of the Trinity, and to use the word extremely loosely, almost INFINITELY below the Trinity. She occupies this singular position, uniquely and wholly because she is the Mother of God and wholly without personal sin at any time in her temporal or spiritual existence. Never before or since has there been a human creature who was perfect, a human totally free from sin. She was conceived without sin, in the womb of Anna by the seed of Joachim, because of the divine predestination of her place in the Revelation. It was, to refer to John Dun Scotus, **fitting** that the **creature** (an extremely important word) who was to be the mother of the saviour should be conceived without the taint of sin; God **could** do this; so God did it. While this doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is one that is identified with the Catholic Church, it is generally accepted as being accurate, as is the Virgin Birth and indeed the continued virginity of Mary, by Christians of many denominations. This broad point is joyfully acknowledged in Article 69 of *Lumen Gentium*.

What it is important to stress in this evening's talk is that despite the misunderstanding and indeed misrepresentations that Mary's place in the Church suffers from, she is not perceived as being, nor **should** she be perceived as being anything other than human and not in any sense or measure divine. Article 62 of *Lumen Gentium* states: "The Church does not hesitate to profess this subordinate role of Mary [to the Trinity]". The document goes on to encourage and indeed to admonish the faithful to appropriate devotion to Mary in Article 67 but concludes this article with the following, and I will quote this in full because it really lays many of the myths that the Church is accused of fostering about Mary.

"But this Synod earnestly exhorts theologians and preachers of the divine word that in treating of the unique dignity of the Mother of God they carefully and equally avoid the falsity of exaggeration on the one hand and the excess of narrow-mindedness on the other. Pursuing the study of sacred Scripture, the holy Fathers, the doctors, and liturgies of the Church, and under the guidance of the Church's teaching authority, let them rightly explain the offices and privileges of the Blessed Virgin which are always related to Christ, the Source of all truth, sanctity and piety.

Let them painstakingly guard against any word or deed which could lead separated brethren or anyone else into error regarding the true doctrine of the Church. Let the faithful remember moreover that true devotion consists neither in fruitless and passing emotion, nor in a certain vain credulity. Rather it proceeds from true faith, by which we are led to know the excellence of the Mother of God, and are moved to a filial love toward our mother and to the imitation of her virtues"

From the earliest days of the Church, it has been clear that Mary held a special and favoured place in the Church and in the eyes of God. As such she was worthy of worship.

But as so often in these matters, the language used is often less precise and less subtle than the glorious Greek that was the working language of the early Church. So the word 'worship' is understood in only a limited way and the distinctions between the original Greek words are not seen or acknowledged. For some, the mischievous ones that I referred to earlier, there may be merit in that, so that the misunderstanding is convenient if not downright wilful. For the rest of us, as much as for these, the terms do need to be stated and clarified.

Two words were commonly used in the context of worship in the early Church. These were **Latria** and **Dulia**. Both translate as worship but the nuances of the words are profoundly different (I am reminded of what someone – I think it was Bernard Shaw - once said about the inhabitants of an extremely prosperous country. These people, he said, 'know the price of everything and the value of nothing').

Latria is the worship, praise and adoration due to God alone.

Dulia is the worship, reverence, respect and devotion due to those who are special and holy – the saints and martyrs like St Stephen for instance.

The Church Fathers conferred upon Mary, even in the earliest days, the status that is worshipped as *Hyperdulia*. This worthiness of devotion and its **intensity** is what is reflected in the place that she occupies in the Order of Grace and reflects entirely her special but entirely human status, excluding any room for confusion as to her being a **creature**, that is a creation of God, like the angels and the saints.

Conclusion

So, in Mary we find the **Mother** and the **Model** of the Church. The title of **Mediatrix** is accorded to her in full recognition of the sole and supreme Mediator as being Christ. Mary is the **Virgin**, ever chaste and loyal to God, her partner in the conception of the saviour. She is the **Pilgrim**, abounding in faith unencumbered by the need to understand intellectually, journeying in the safety of knowing and recognizing TRUTH to knowing the fullness and the sweetness and the beauty of God. She is our **Guide** in prayer, as Pope Benedict recently prayed in Brazil "Today it is she who leads our meditation; it is she who shows us to pray. It is she who shows us the way to open our minds and hearts to the power of the Holy Spirit".

Within the Catholic Church particularly, there has been a degree of disconnection between the 'Old' and the 'New' Church. These streams are typified by, though not exclusive to those who would accord themselves with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal on the one hand and those whom I will call the 'Rosarians' on the other. For some reason, there is a deep suspicion in many in the one camp towards the other. I would stress that this tension is not generally to be found in the lay or ecclesial leadership of these 'camps'. As a Catholic who was guided to faith through the Renewal I am intensely aware that some of my fellow Roman Catholic Charismatics actively disparage and dismiss the rich heritage of the Rosary for instance. This is a great shame. God has given

us many gifts, and we are a body of many parts, and those parts in turn have many parts. Among those gifts that he has blessed us with is Devotion to Our Lady. Another is the active and energetic presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, day to day, alive and living and indeed principally directive in the Church.

It is interesting that both the present and last chairpersons of the CCR in the UK – Charles Whitehead and Michele Moran – used as the foundation for their excellent course ‘This Promise is for You’ the New Jerusalem Bible, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and a long series of papal Encyclicals penned by Pope John Paul II in addition to the writings of the then Cardinal Ratzinger. Both Michele and Charles come from a long line of Charismatically converted Christians whose faith has been enormously deepened and actually fully formed by the Catholic Church, and indeed within other Churches. The point is that, like the Church and the evolution of her teaching, we do not take up one thing and discard what was there before, because that only weakens us by chiseling into the firm rock of the foundations. We build on the work of those who have gone before and unify around the inalienable Truth of Christ, in all his manifestations. John Paul II was fond of saying, in more than one context, that it is not a matter of Either/Or, but rather of Both/And.

Mary is not only central to the Catholic Church, and deserving of all the worship and devotion prescribed by the *Hyperdulia*. She is, like the Church, real and valid and contemporary. She is for **now**, not **then** and for Catholics and many other Christians, she is for **us**, not **them**. She can be a focus for unity and shared understanding, and a model not just to the Church but to each of us individually of faithful, loving and obedient service to God, to his will for us and his will for the world.