

Our Lady and the Church by Hugo Rahner,
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Reviewed by Johan D.Tangelder.

With the Roman Catholic Church (RC)we share core doctrines as confessed in the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. Furthermore, the RC is in dialogue not only with the Anglican and the Eastern Orthodox, but also with some Reformation churches. As we face an increasingly relativistic postmodern culture, hostile to anything Christian, we have so much in common that we see ourselves as allies rather than as enemies. We work together in the Right to Life Movement. We applaud the Pope John Paul II's rigorous pro-life stance. He fought against abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, and what he called "the culture of death." He stood up against the secular revolution, teaching the sinfulness of homosexuality, extra-marital sex, and pornography. Yet there is a theological divide which cannot be bridged.

The role of the Virgin Mary in the plan of salvation clearly shows where the RC and the Churches of the Reformation differ. And this despite recent efforts of some Protestant theologians to build bridges. For example, David Yeogo, professor of systematic theology at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, argues that not only is Mary inseparable from the plan of salvation in the Word becoming flesh, which should be obvious, but that she has a continuing relationship with the Church as prototype, mother, and "arch-prophet." Since Protestants ask where is the basis for all these Marian doctrines as proclaimed by the RC, many still believe Mariology is synonymous with Mariolatry. And they have a point. In the teachings of the RC Mary is inseparably linked with the Lord. "Mary's Faith has special relevance today," declared the lead editorial in *The Catholic Register* (Aug. 12, 1989). In 1997 *Newsweek* reported on an international petition campaign, signed by millions of Roman Catholics, asking Pope John Paul II to declare as dogma the Virgin Mary's titles of Co-Redemptrix, Advocate, and Mediatrix of all Grace. The drive was endorsed by more than 500 bishops, including 42 cardinals. Dr. Mark Miravalle, one of the leading voices of the Co-Redemptrix movement in the United States, said it denotes "Mary singular and unique *sharing with her Son* in the saving work of redemption for the human family."

Development of Mariology

During the last 150 years remarkable doctrinal developments show the unique place of Mary in RC's faith and practice. First published in 1961 in German, *Our Lady and the Church* explains how the RC doctrine of the Church and Mariology are intertwined.

Hugh Rahner (1900-1968), a Jesuit theologian, states that the eleven chapters of his slender volume have one simple object "to show from the warmhearted theology of the great Fathers and Doctors that the whole mystery of the Church is inseparably bound up with the mystery of Mary." He is convinced that RC believer needs once more what was so treasured by the early Church; "to learn to see the Church in our Lady, and our Lady in the Church." He believes the result will be an ever joyful readiness to accept whatever may come in dogmatic developments about our Lady, and at the same time a consequent deepening of our understanding of the nature of the Church.

It is noteworthy that Rahner's book is highly praised by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI). In his endorsement Ratzinger declares: "Hugo Rahner's great achievement was his rediscovery, in the Fathers, of the indivisibility of Mary and the Church. This marvelous work is one of the most important theological rediscoveries of the twentieth century."

The Immaculate Conception of Mary

In the 19th and 20th century devotion to Mary has been stimulated by many factors. Despite the contrary advice of German and Austrian theologians, in 1854 Pope Pius IX proclaimed as dogma the Immaculate Conception, stating that Mary "was preserved immune from all stain of original sin." He said that God's grace was bestowed on Mary "in such a wonderful manner that she would always be free from absolutely every stain of sin, and that, all beautiful and perfect, she might display such fullness of innocence and holiness that under God none greater would be known."

Rahner claims that Mary remained a virgin after her Son's birth for the rest of her life on earth. To this belief in the immaculate conception there is generally added the doctrine that she never sinned in her later life. Rahner says the RC knows from the sources of Revelation and from the solemn declaration of the Church that Mary in the first instant of conception, in virtue of the redemptive death to come of her divine son, was preserved free from all stain of original sin. According to this view Mary stands apart from the rest of the sinful human race. The implications are that Mary was not cursed by original sin, and that she, accordingly, was born without original guilt and without original pollution. She was unable to sin.

After 1854, Mary's popularity soared. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII declared: "We can receive absolutely nothing unless, God willing, it is bestowed on us through Mary." He also issued encyclical letters on the devotion of the rosary. Pius X wrote on the spiritual motherhood ("Mary is our sure way to Christ"). Benedict XV addressed incessant appeals to the Queen of Peace in World War I. Pius XI related Mary to the jubilee of Redemption (1933-34). In 1942, Pope Pius XII dedicated the world to the "Immaculate Heart of Mary," and soon afterward he instituted a feast day by that name.

Mary's Assumption to Heaven.

In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared the dogma of Mary's Assumption to heaven. He wrote that when her earthly life was finished, she "was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things." Rahner calls this teaching "a revealed dogma of the faith." He also says that Mary's assumption prefigures and anticipates the assumption of the Church. He claims that in the mystery of the Assumption we have a foreshadowing of what is to come for the whole Church, and what had in fact already been fulfilled in our Lord, "the first fruits of them that sleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20)

Pius XII says that her queen-ship is as vast as that of the Son and God, nothing is excluded from her dominion. "...like her Son before her, she conquered death and was raised body and soul to the glory of heaven, where as queen she sits in splendor at the right hand of her Son, the immortal king of the ages." Mary is called "the Queen of the Patriarchs and of the Prophets, and the Queen of the Apostles. Past and future meet in her: all the light of the Old Testament, from Eve to the Book of Wisdom, shines in her, for the sun of justice entered into her womb." In 1964 Mary was given a new title "Mother of the Church." Pope Paul VI said, "We believe that the Holy Mother of God, the new Eve, Mother of the Church, continues in heaven to exercise her maternal role on behalf of the members of Christ."

Mother of the Church

This new title should not come as a surprise for Protestants. It is a logical conclusion to a long development in RC thinking about Mary. Rahner claims that the early Christians' devotion to Mother Church always went hand-in-hand with their devotion to the Mother of God, and this was because they still realized that the whole mystery as presented in the Scriptures shows Mary, the virgin mother, to be essentially the symbol of the Church, our mother. Mary is also called "the mother of the redeemed." She is a type or symbol of the Church, and therefore everything that is found in the Gospels about Mary can be understood in proper biblical sense of the mystery of the Church. The Church is also viewed as the "Mother of the Living." This idea is linked with that of Eve, as the first mother of the living, and in turn receives fulfillment in Mary giving birth to the living God. No wonder Pope Leo XIII could say: "Most truly is Mary the Church's mother, and guide, and the queen of the Apostles."

Mary and the church are seen as one, for the history of the Church had its beginning in her womb. One of the Scripture passages used to support this claim is Revelation 12. The woman in this chapter stands for the Church. Yet the RC claims that they can see in her "the Blessed Mary, for she is the mother of the Church, since she gave birth to Him who is the head of the Church." Pius X claimed confidently: "Everyone knows that the great woman of Revelation represents the Virgin, Mary, who without blemish gave birth to our Head." According to this interpretation of Revelation 12, as Mary nourished Christ's body as his earthly mother, so she continued to nourish the Mystical Body of Christ. And she has also a powerful influence on earthly affairs.

Mary and Pentecost

In RC theology Mary has a vital role in the work of Redemption. According to Rahner, this is clearly demonstrated at Pentecost. This feast of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit has its origin in the innermost heart of Mary: it was there, the Church was born. The Spirit of God, which overshadowed her (Luke 1:35), descended on her with the infant Church (Acts 1:14). It is there that Mary reaches the very heart of her share in the work of Redemption. And the extravagant claim is made that in Mary all prophecies are fulfilled, in her begins the life of heavenly glory, in her the Spirit already breathes, which shall change the world in the last days.

Mary at the Font

The RC holds to baptismal regeneration. It teaches that the mystical gift of faith is given in baptism, which is completed in the next life by the everlasting vision of God.

Rebirth in baptism is symbolized in the birth which, overshadowed by the Spirit, gave us the Redeemer born of the Virgin. Since Mary is a type of the Church and the Mother of the mystical body, she is also present at the birth of "the children of salvation in baptism." This means in RC theology that at every baptismal font the Church is there as mother, and the mother of Jesus is there. Mary is therefore called in a real sense the beginning of baptismal grace. Consequently, Christmas is more than a celebration of Christ's birth, the feast of the Incarnation, it also becomes the feast of baptism. In his Christmas sermons Pope Leo the Great reminded his hearers of the connection of this - feast-with the grace of baptism: "For every man who is born again, the water of baptism is the symbol of the womb of the Virgin: for it is the same Spirit that gives power to the fountain of baptism as gave power to the Virgin to conceive."

Mary - the Co-redemptrix

A particular critical development in Mariology is the doctrine of Mary's co-redemption. It has won so many adherents that it is regarded as the opinion of the vast majority of RC theologians. Mary is styled Co-Redemptrix because she cooperated directly and immediately in the redemptive process itself. Mary is believed to be the "new Eve" who is associated with Christ "the new Adam." As Eve contributed to the ruin of men, Mary and the Church contribute to their redemption. Pius XII wrote: "Free from all sin, original and personal, always most intimately united with her Son, as another Eve she offered Him on Golgotha to the eternal Father for all the children of Adam, sin-stained by his fall, and her mother's love were included in the holocaust." Two Biblical texts are cited as key proofs for this view. R.C. theologians argue since her struggle with Satan is identical with her Son's, it follows that the prophecy of Genesis 3: 15 foreshadows also Mary's co-redemptive mission. Pius XII says that this prophecy is to be understood of Mary alone. The full meaning of the prophecy is only realized when we see foreshadowed in it the "new Eve," the other "Mother of all life," who herself would actually give birth to the Saviour. It points to Mary who with her divine Son is to crush Satan's head. On the cross then we see the fulfillment of what was announced at the gates of paradise lost.

RC theologians stress Mary's role at the foot of the cross (John 19), by which she participated directly with Christ in the act of Redemption. They see it as a logical consequence of her union with Christ from the moment of the Incarnation. Rahner comments that on our account she suffered as no mother on earth has suffered. He says: "She cried out in the pain of her innermost heart, when she came to her martyrdom at the Passion of her son."

Mary's Consent

In RC thinking faith alone is not sufficient. It is faith plus works. This is clearly demonstrated in Mary's consent to become the mother of the Son of God. Rahner says that in virtue of her consent (Luke 1:38) she had become the mother of the eternal son. Mary had the free decision of a human person, in virtue of a special grace to accept the task of becoming the Mother of the Son of man.

Tradition

As I see it, the key issue between RC and the Reformation is the question of tradition. In the RC the relationship of tradition and Scripture is all encompassing. It accepts the authority of Scripture but places beside it the authority of Tradition. The deposit of faith is found, therefore, not only in Scripture but also in the living tradition of the Church. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reference. In practice, however, tradition is so prominent that the Scripture becomes invalidated. In the case of Mary, tradition supersedes Scripture. In other words, the RC develops theological doctrines which cannot be revised but are irreversible and infallible as though Christ Himself were present and speaking in the church of the present.

Evaluation

The veneration of the Virgin Mary remains an unbridgeable point of division between the RC and the churches of the Reformation. The RC theologians cite the Church fathers and tradition as additional evidence for their doctrine. But the statements of these prove meaningless in all instances in which they are not based on God's Word. Tradition is not a source of infallible truth. It is a means of nurturing the Church through gleaning pearls of wisdom from the past, but it cannot be our final source of truth for faith and practice. Scripture itself performs this role. Calvin reminds us that truth cannot be determined by long-standing customs only, for this is just "the conspiracy of men." The Church of the Reformation is a listening church. It submits itself to the Word of God.

The Reformation principle still is - Sola Scripture (Scripture alone). As we read Scripture we notice it doesn't mention either the Immaculate Conception or Mary's bodily assumption to heaven.

It is also silent about Mary at the cross co-earning our redemption. In fact, Mary as co-redemptrix with Christ is derogatory to His unique mediator-ship. You would think if Mary is so vital in the role of salvation, the Apostles would mention her name in their sermons. But on Pentecost nor on any other day did they ever mention Mary's name in preaching Christ. Abraham Kuyper points out that neither in the Acts nor in the Epistles of the Apostles is any kind of honour ascribed to her. Her opinion is not asked for upon any occasion. She disappeared from the Scriptures inconspicuously.

Johan D, Tangelder