

Doctrine Commission response to the Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) report ‘Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ’

(A response from the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission.)

Mandate

1. At the meeting of the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney in 2005 the following resolution was passed –

“23/05 Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission

Synod notes the release by the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) of Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (The Seattle Statement) on 16 May 2005 but regrets that many of the conclusions of the report are in conflict with the teaching of Scripture. We therefore distance ourselves from the report and further state that the Commission does not represent or speak on behalf of the Diocese of Sydney. Synod also requests that the Diocesan Doctrine Commission prepare a response to the report. This response to be made available to the Diocese for use with the statement as the basis of study and dialogue.”

2. The Doctrine Commission makes the following response.

Introduction

3. It is a sad irony that she who was called by the angel “blessed above all women” should amongst the Christian followers of her son be a cause of division and confusion. The attitude and devotion, or lack of it, to Mary is one of the most significant divisions between Roman Catholic, Orthodox and some Anglicans on one hand and protestant evangelicals and other Anglicans on the other.

4. The Anglican - Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) have produced a document which, while not an authoritative declaration for either the Roman Catholic Church or the Anglican Communion, is a significant attempt to find common ground and understanding over the troubled matter of the place of Mary in the Christian church and life.

5. Sadly, the report does not live up to its intentions. What we do have is an explanation of how, if the traditional Roman Catholic understanding and dogmas about Mary were true, they might, if considered most generously, be reconciled, with Scripture. The report constantly uses soft and noncritically tested phrases, often like

'consonant with Scripture' to support doctrines which have little or no overt scriptural support at all, and are held by many to be contrary to scripture. It is a report that does not seriously deal with the objections to the classic Roman Catholic dogmas, either from the point of view of Protestantism or even the view of modern scholarship and criticism. One must already be strongly inclined towards a Catholic perspective, indeed be essentially in agreement with it, to find the ARCIC document believable.

What we do have in common

6. Evangelical Anglicans and Roman Catholics do have a great deal in common in their understanding of Mary. Both confess that she is truly the mother of God, *Theotokos*; that is, her son was God the Son and not merely Jesus the man. We also confess that she is blessed among all women and played a special and very important role in God's gracious economy of salvation.

Unresolved differences

7. There are major differences over questions of whether or not Christians ought to engage or pray to Mary now that she is no longer alive on this earth; whether or not she remained continually a virgin; whether or not she was bodily assumed into heaven; and whether or not her own birth was conceived immaculately: that is, she was born without original sin.

Mary and communicating with the departed

8. The devotion of Mary in Roman Catholic spirituality and teaching are part of the wider practice of invoking deceased Christians to pray for the living. The report moves from the scriptural example of Christians inviting brothers and sisters to pray for them to asking for the prayers of those who have died and are with Christ also to pray for them, this time without any clear scriptural warrant. This the ARCIC report admits while commending the practice –

“[...] we affirm that asking the saints to pray for us is not to be excluded as unscriptural though it is not directly taught by scripture to be a required element of life in Christ. Further, we agree that the way such assistance is to be sought must not obscure the believer's direct access to God the heavenly Father who delights to give good gifts to his children. (section 70)”

9. While ARCIC explicitly claims to get 'behind opposed or entrenched positions to discover and develop our common inheritance of faith' (*MGH.*, Introduction, p. 2) a tough-minded approach would have taken more note of the power and context of the 16th century Article (Article VI of the Article of Religion of 1562) which asserts that –

“Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that what is not read therein, nor may be

proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”

10. The writers do make use of this when discussing why Anglicans have difficulty with the papal pronouncements on the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption (see below paragraph 16), but it does not occur to them that this Article applies equally strongly to almost all aspects of Marian devotion including particularly prayers to Mary or seeking Mary’s intercession, or indeed petitions to any of the Saints.

11. There are three classic Protestant objections to this practice. The first is that the New Testament lacks any suggestion that those who are with Christ in paradise are praying for those on earth or that Christians should ask them to do so. Therefore it is a matter about which at best we can simply be agnostic. At the Reformation of the Church of England there was a decisive rejection of communication between the living and the dead which has been a mark of Reformed Anglicanism ever since. The report gives no real grounds other than devotional practice to assume why this conversation with the dead may be possible or desirable.

12. Secondly, and more alarmingly, the practice of asking Christians now with Christ in paradise to pray for us seems something of a circumlocution compared with directly praying to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. It seems to call into question, or even deny by implication that promised boldness and immediacy of access which is promised again and again in the New Testament (for example Ephesians 2.18, Hebrews 10.19-22). The report denies that it so distracts from the uniqueness of Christ, our High Priest, but doesn’t really answer the classic objection.

13. Thirdly the matter is made even more difficult when there is an implication that some Christians, “the saints”, are in the direct presence with Christ, with implications that other departed Christians may not be. This distinction is hinted at, though not explicitly asserted in the document, where Mary is presented to us as “a sign of the hope of all humanity, the faithful disciple fully present with God in Christ” (section 56) and the hope which will be fulfilled when all the redeemed will participate in the full glory of the Lord (section 57). It is alarming that the report does want to single Mary out, not because of her unique place in the incarnation of the Son of God, but because of an asserted eschatological significance. Needless to say there are no Biblical grounds whatsoever for a two stage view of the believers with Christ in paradise. More significantly it cannot but undermine the fundamental truth that all believers are justified by faith and have access to the Father.

14. It is unfortunate and surprising that the ARCIC report does not even mention the strictures of Article XXII which must be dealt with in

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any honest discussion of Anglican and Roman Catholic teaching about prayer to the saints. It asserts –

“The Romish Doctrine concerning [...] invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded on no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.”

15. The report proceeds as if such concerns never really existed.

Mary as ever virgin

16. There is another disputed claim about Mary which is not poorly handled in the report. In section 19 the prima facie strong New Testament evidence that Jesus had a number of brothers and sisters is not adequately dealt with in view of the Roman Catholic claim that Mary remained a virgin all her life. All we are offered is a footnote that it is possible to read the word “brothers” as “step-brothers or cousins”. The report has simply glossed over a topic of considerable significance for the sake of traditional doctrines and assumptions.

The two Papal Dogmas concerning Mary

17. Much more serious, however, are the two major Roman Catholic Papal dogmas about Mary. The alleged immaculate conception of Mary was defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854: “The most blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God, in view of the merits of Christ the Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stains of original sin”. The dogma of Mary’s bodily assumption into heaven was decreed in 1950 by Pope Pius XII: “that the immaculate Mother of God, ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul to the heavenly glory”.

18. The report is well aware that these definitions have created considerable problems for Anglicans and other Christians (Section 61). The authors of the report assert that they have agreed together “that the teaching about Mary and the two definitions of 1854 and 1950, understood within the biblical pattern of the economy of grace and hope outlined here, can be said to be consonant with the teaching of Scripture and the ancient common tradition”. This use of the word “consonant” with Scripture is unhelpful and avoids the issue. And it certainly doesn’t show why someone ought to believe the doctrine to be true in the first place. Needless to say both are completely lacking biblical warrant.

19. The report does attempt to show that the immaculate conception is “consonant with Scripture in that Christ’s great redeeming work can reach ‘back’ in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings” (section 59). It is a possibility, perhaps. But there is no reason to believe it to be so, or that it took the particular form as to render her immune from original sin. The report also asserts

that the dogma of Mary's assumption is really not about how her life ended but a statement about 'the action of God in her' but is best understood as 'the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fulness of her person in to his glory'. (Section 58) Again we may concede that God can, as with Elijah, take a human bodily to heaven. But there is no reason to believe it to have been so with Mary of Nazareth. There is even less biblical reason to hold, as the report goes on to claim, that Mary 'holds the pre-eminent place in the communion of saints and embodies the destiny of the church'. Why and how can one believer, and one believer alone "embody the destiny of the church"? other than the man Jesus Christ?

20. More seriously, the Roman Catholic Church holds that these two Marian dogmas are "revealed by God" through the ministry of the Pope authoritatively discerning the so called consensus of faith among believers in communion with the Bishop of Rome (Section 62). How can Anglicans who give even a modicum of weight to the principle of Article VI (see above paragraph 7) accept this position? The issue is effectively avoided in the relevant section 63 where we are left with the suggestion of the 'the adoption of an eschatological perspective', and the application of the process of 'a mutual re-reception of an effective teaching authority in the church' as outlined in the earlier *Gift of Authority* Report. This latter proposal is the effective adoption of the revised papacy where the gulf between Roman and Anglican Christians is in principle as wide as ever.

What else is at least as consonant with Scripture

21. The attempts to build agreement on the grounds that Roman Catholic Dogma is "consonant with Scripture" fails. It could be at least as consonant with Scripture that one need not and must not seek the prayers of or the aid of the departed in Christ, since the silence of Scripture might mean something.. It is at least as consonant with one drift of the Gospels that Mary and Joseph had children together subsequent to the miracle of Jesus. It is at least as consonant with Scripture that the limits to Mary's real place were limits and that silence about her death does not mean more than that; and it is at least as possible that notions of her sinlessness as a precondition of her bearing the Christ are to be heard as early pieties but not to be imposed as the "faith" for all.

The real danger in the Mary issue

22. While the report helpfully reminds us that although Christ is unique we also should experience God's grace through others, it does not adequately deal with a proper understanding of the uniqueness of Christ. The report too easily wishes to emphasise Mary's cooperating with God in salvation, rather than what she truly is, an example of someone living by faith alone, trusting in God's promise (Luke 1).

23. To emphasise, as the report does, that Mary's 'yes' to be Man cooperating with God in his salvation is to (a) deny this crucial

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significance of the humanity of Jesus which is man, in which humanity cooperates with God, offering perfect obedience and response; and (b) misunderstands Mary's response which is one of faith in the promises and command of God. Mary is a supreme example of "by faith alone", which looks outside of itself, trusting the word of God. In that sense, she is our model but not a model of the human being working with God to achieve their salvation.

24. It is of concern that the effort to use Mary as the exemplar of the human part of salvation or contribution to salvation, what it is to be human let alone the one who leads us from the good to the better, should be found not in Mary but the Lord Jesus Christ who is fully human. Whereas the doctrine of *Theotokos* is to preserve the true humanity and divinity of Christ, it would be ironic if the role of Mary were effectively to push Jesus up the ladder as it were, and away from us, and she fundamentally provide the human side and he the divine side of our salvation.

An Evangelical appreciation of Mary

25. The Evangelical Christian sees Mary as something of a parallel to the place of John the Baptist. Mary and John were crucial figures in the coming of the Son of God. Both reach from the late ancient world into the time of the Gospels and fundamental in the coming of Christ. "There was a man sent from God whose name was John." "The angel Gabriel came to a village called Nazareth, to a woman called Mary."

26. Both are highly acclaimed. Mary may indeed be blessed among all women, and John one of whom our Lord said, "There is no one born of woman greater than he". But he was not the light but came as a witness to the light and she was not the light but came, as it were, to bear the light.

27. However, having said all this, we would no more want to have a regular prayer or devotion to Mary as we would to John the Baptist. They are important brothers and sisters as it were in the great story of salvation, with a unique and special place but that is all.

For and on behalf of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission

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26 July 2007