Mariology and Ecumenical Dialogue

by Donald H. J. Hermann

The Virgin Mary has increasingly become the subject of ecumenical dialogue. In part, this is a consequence of Vatican II, which marked a significant change in characterizations of the doctrine and devotion to Mary. As a result, there have been a number of ecumenical discussions and related publications. These interchanges have involved significant conferences between traditions including dialogues and commissions involving Roman Catholics and representatives of various Protestant denominations and the Anglican Communion. This article will survey some of the more significant developments in the ecumenical dialogues on Mary, including the dialogues of Roman Catholics with American Lutherans, British Methodists, and an independent group of Protestants meeting in France. Then, significant attention will be directed to the statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on Mary, which represents the most comprehensive ecumenical dialogue on Mariology. For many years, devotion to Mary and the suggestion that Mary has a special place in the Communion of saints was a cause for division among Christian churches and sometimes resulted in charges that the attention given to Mary was a matter of “popery,” a disparaging term referring to Roman Catholicism. The contemporary dialogue on beliefs about Mary and their Scriptural foundations marks a significant moment in Christian inter-religious dialogue and provides the basis for further developments toward Christian unity.

Mariology

Mariology is that part of dogmatic theology that deals with the Virgin Mary in relation to God and to her fellow creatures. In Roman Catholicism, Mary is recognized as the proper subject of pious veneration by the faithful because of Mary’s special relationship with Christ and the Church. This twofold aspect of Mariology was emphasized by Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation, Marialis Cultus on the “the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary,” delivered in 1974, where the pope states:

In the sphere of worship this devotion [to the Blessed Virgin Mary] necessarily reflects God’s redemptive plan, in which a special form of veneration is appropriate to the singular place which Mary occupies in the plan….the history of piety shows how “the various forms of devotion towards the Mother of God that the Church has approved within the limits of wholesome and orthodox doctrine” have developed in harmonious subordination to the worship of Christ. 

Scripture provides the basis for Christian teaching on the Virgin Mary. However, in Roman Catholic theology, understanding of scripture is aided by tradition and the Church’s teaching authority which are important bases for understanding the status and role of Mary in Catholicism. While Roman Catholicism places important value on


tradition, that tradition has a scriptural foundation. Nevertheless, Roman Catholic dialogue with most Protestant churches necessitates primary focus on scriptural passages that specifically support titles or special qualities of Mary. There are, however, only four dogmatically declared doctrines dealing with Mary: (1) Divine Motherhood, (2) Virginity, (3) Immaculate Conception, and (4) Assumption. The fact that there are only four definitive dogmas about Mary facilitates discussion. The absence of any claim that Mary is the “mediatrix” of all graces, for example, avoids a claim that would be a significant obstacle to discourse with most Protestant churches.

The Roman Catholic Marian tradition draws heavily from the Gospels of Luke and John, which are believed to be based on very reliable traditions about Mary and are viewed as coming close to the actual historical person. Mark and Matthew present a Mary drawn on oral legends or inventions by the evangelists themselves. From a Protestant point of view, the reliance on evangelists Mark and Matthew who are viewed as drawing on oral legends, which are largely rejected by the various Protestant churches, gave rise to unhistorical and legendary accounts of Mary. It was at the Council of Ephesus in 431 that Mary was declared the “Godbearer,” or Mother of God (Theotokos). And, it was only in 649 that the Lateran Council, under Pope St. Martin I, proclaimed the perfect and perpetual virginity of Mary both before and after the birth of Jesus.

Early meditation in Marian theology drew on the Pauline contrast between Jesus Christ and Adam (Romans 5:15). A comparable contrast is established by contrasting Mary as the new Eve, bringing forth life in Jesus in obedience to God, with the primal Eve, who brought forth sin and death in disobedience to God. Paul Palmer, S. J., in Mary in Documents of the Church, maintains that underlying the creeds dealing with the Mother of God, there is a devotional practice recognizing Mary as the sinless new Eve: “[T]he whole of Mariology, the truths of Mary’s motherhood, her virginity, her mediation, her sinlessness, the incorruptibility of her body, are foreshadowed in a tendency from the beginning to associate Mary, the second Eve, with Christ, the second Adam.”

There was no significant advance in the overall approach to Mariology for centuries. Even the Council of Trent provided no significant new dogmatic statement about Mary, despite the fact that many leaders of the reformation specifically denied any privileged role of intercession for Mary. The Council of Trent limited itself to a reaffirmation of belief in Mary’s sinlessness and freedom from the taint of original sin. Palmer attributes this inattention to Mary by the Council of Trent to the limited critique of devotion to Mary by Luther: “Martin Luther refused to distinguish between true and exaggerated devotion to the Mother of God, and set the tone of future Protestant denials by branding all devotion to the saints and to Mary, their Queen, as idolatry. And yet Luther never completely rejected the teaching on the prerogatives of the Blessed Virgin Mary.”

The post-Tridentine Church, until the mid-twentieth century, witnessed an increased devotion to Mary with a recognition of her role in the redemptive work of Christ. This led to increased acclamation of Mary’s role as mediator and as spiritual mother of the Church. The Church’s acceptance of these roles for Mary produced strong criticism from Jansenism and Protestantism, which viewed these developments as establishing a privileged position for Mary and as undermining the unique role of Christ in salvation. However, it was the formal declaration by the papacy of the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Assumption (1950) that resulted in significant criticism and challenges of authority from the Protestant and Anglican communities that remain critical to the contemporary ecumenical dialogue on Mariology.

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7 Palmer, *Documents of the Church*, 12.
8 Palmer, *Documents of the Church*, 76.
The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception provides that Mary was conceived without original sin, this was declared an article of faith by the papal bull *Ineffablis Deus* in 1854. At the Council of Trent, it had been made clear that the teaching of the universal reach of original sin was not meant to include the Virgin Mary. The doctrine had been promulgated at the Council of Basel in 1439, but because this was subsequently held not to be an ecumenical council, its decree on the Immaculate Conception lacked authority. Pius IX was aware that this declaration of dogma would be subject to scrutiny by the entire Christian world, and therefore, sought to establish both scriptural and historical basis for the doctrine. However, lacking a specific scriptural text supporting the dogma, the pope maintained the doctrine was not contrary to the teaching of Scripture, and appealed to passages of Scripture, as understood by Fathers of the Church, and other ecclesiastical authorities, who had contributed to the Tradition of the Church.

In 1950, Pope Pius XII declared as dogma the Assumption of Mary in *Munificentissimus Deus*. This doctrine of the bodily Assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven, lacking explicit Scriptural textual support, raises issues within the ecumenical dialogue on Mary, including questions about the relation of Scripture and tradition. There is also the issue of infallibility of the pope as the authority for enunciating Church doctrine and belief, without the assent of an ecumenical council. Nevertheless, it is clear that the pope insisted in his decree of promulgation that the Scriptures served as the ultimate foundation for his declaration.

### Mary and Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council did not issue a specific document on Mary. This decision not to issue any pronouncement on Mary has had a significant effect. Peter Endeson, S. J., in his essay, “How to Think About Mary’s Privileges: A Post-Conciliar Exposition”, noted that: “The downplaying of devotion to Mary was one of the most obvious effects of the council on mainstream Catholic life, rivaled perhaps only by the disappearance of the Latin Liturgy.” Moreover, the way the council fathers chose to deal with Mary has had significance for subsequent ecumenical dialogue on Mariology. According to Endeson: “What prevailed, however, was a more ecumenically sensitive presentation, avoiding new titles and setting Mary within the perspective of salvation history. It became fashionable to base any account of what we might want to say about Mary on what Christianity must say about human beings in general.”

Mary was first mentioned in a council document in the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, issued in December 1964. The Council linked Mary to Christ’s work of salvation and honored her as the Mother of God; this suggests a Christocentric understanding of Mary. At the same time the Council recognized Mary as a faultless image of all the members of the Church; this provides an Ecclesiastical understanding of Mary. The most significant treatment of Mary by the Council is presented in Chapter 8 of the “Dogmatic Constitution of the Church,” *Lumen Gentium*, promulgated in 1964. Rejecting a declaration of Mary as co-redemptrix, the officially approved title of Chapter 8 is *De Beata Maria Virginie Deiparz in Mysterio Christi et Ecclesia*, (“On the blessed God-bearing Virgin Mary in the mystery of Christ and the Church”). With this terminology, Vatican II evidenced an embrace of both a Christocentric Mariology and an Ecclesiastical Mariology, both of which have become the significant bases of ecumenical dialogue. Vatican II represents a shift in Mariology from treating

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10 Boss, “Mary’s Immaculate Conception,” 207.
11 Boss, “Mary’s Immaculate Conception,” 281-283.
Mary as a privileged or centered subject of isolated devotion to a position which venerates Mary in association with Christ (Christocentric) and in relation to the Church (Ecclesiastical).

Edward Schillebeeckx maintains that the Council’s decision to emphasize the Christological and Ecclesiastical aspects of Mariology, and the decision not to consider devotional aspects of Mariology, evidenced a desire to provide encouragement of ecumenical dialogue on Mary. This latter decision was taken by the Council fathers despite the fact that devotional practices had been a significant part of popular Catholic religious practice. According to Schillebeeckx: “Vatican II rightly continued to refuse to give explicit and honorable mention to any specific form of devotion to Mary. So, the council did not accede to the request made by some council fathers that explicit mention should be made of devotion to the rosary, which is historically so dear to many Dominicans. Particular devotions to Mary, however valuable they may be, remain a matter of choice for Christianity as a whole. And therefore, it is good the universal church councils should keep silent about them.”

We can see, for example, the result of the failure to endorse popular devotion to Mary in the diminished use of the rosary by Roman Catholics. At the same time, there has been an increased invocation of Mary by Anglicans in their communion prayers.

The third significant statement of Vatican II for the ecumenical dialogue on Mary appears in Chapter two of the “Decree on Ecumenism”, Unitatis Regintegratio, promulgated the same day as Lumen Gentium (November 21, 1964). Paragraph 20 provides in part: “The manner and order in which Catholic belief is expressed should in no way become an obstacle to dialogue with other Christians....when comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the Christian faith.” This statement has motivated theologians to consider the various Marian dogmas from the perspective of their relation to the central truths of the Christian Faith and the working of salvation. Frederick Jelly, O.P., wrote in Marian Studies (1976): “I submit that the ‘hierarchy of truths’ teaching from the Decree in Ecumenism calls for a contemporary contemplation of Mary in close connection with the Triune God, revealed in the Incarnate Word, our Redeemer, and also in intimate relationship with the mystery of the Church, the members of his redeemed body of which she is a part.” The result is that, the dogmas of Mary’s divine maternity and perpetual virginity are given to a Christocentric focus, while the dogmas of Mary’s Immaculate Conception and Assumption are given an Ecclesiotypical understanding. The Christocentric dogmas are viewed in light of the truths of revelation and the Ecclesiotypical dogmas are viewed in relation to the economy of salvation.

**Early Ecumenical Dialogue On Mary**

It is generally conceded that the subject of Mary has been a source of division between Catholic and Protestant Churches. As stated in the introduction, devotion to Mary was often misunderstood as worship leading to charges of idolatry and accusations of “popery.” Discussing the Virgin Mary and Ecumenism in Understanding the Mother of Jesus, published in 1978, Eamon Carroll, O.Carm., observed that: “Since the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century the Virgin Mary has been a sign of contradiction among western Christians.” According to Carroll, the treatment of Mary by Vatican II, in part, is explained by recognition of these differences among Christian Churches: “the Catholic side the Second Vatican Council showed a keen awareness of the difficulties other Christians find in Catholic doctrine and devotion about the Mother of Jesus.”

18 UR, no. 14.
20 Eamon Carroll, Understanding the Mother of Jesus (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1978), 37.
21 Carroll, Mother of Jesus, 38.
A significant move in the ecumenical dialogue on Mary was the establishment in England in 1967 of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, (ESBVM)\(^\text{22}\) The purpose of ESBVM is to promote ecumenical devotion and study at various levels of the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Church under Christ.”\(^\text{23}\) The group meets regularly, sponsors conferences, and publishes papers.\(^\text{24}\) An American branch was established in 1967 and has brought together Roman Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and Protestant Christian scholars to explore the significant questions related to devotion to Mary, including the Church’s teaching authority and the legitimacy of invocation of Mary and the saints in prayer.

The significance of ESBVM as an ecumenical organization has been limited by the fact that most of its members are Roman Catholic, and the other members come from those parts of the Church of England and the Methodist Church that are most favorable to the Catholic sacramental tradition.\(^\text{25}\) The importance of the organization lies in that its meetings have been very inclusive, welcoming expression of views on Mary that are contrary to most of its membership and have included speakers who express traditional Protestant skepticism about the principal features of Mariology.\(^\text{26}\)

There have been three interconfessional dialogues on Mary involving the Roman Catholics: the American Lutheran Catholic dialogue;\(^\text{27}\) the British Methodist dialogue;\(^\text{28}\) and the dialogue of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission.\(^\text{29}\) An unofficial group, Groupe des Dombes, involved French and Swiss Roman Catholics and Protestants.\(^\text{30}\) The Lutheran and Methodist dialogues, along with the unofficial French consultations, will be discussed briefly in this section of this article. The Anglican dialogue will be dealt with more comprehensively in the next part of this article.

The first of these dialogues, the American Lutheran-Catholic dialogue (1983-1990), was initially focused on Marian devotion and veneration of the saints. There was common agreement on the singularity of Christ and his justifying grace. The Luthers agree that Catholic practice involving the saints is not idolatrous. The Catholics acknowledge the honor given to Mary by Luther in his sermons on writings. However, the Luthers stress the sole sufficiency of the merits of Christ and the immediacy of his grace, which raises questions about the intercession of Mary. In response, the Roman Catholics state the belief that the Church has always maintained, that Christ is the sole autonomous mediator of grace. Mary and the saints are recognized as cooperating with Christ through prayer on both sides of death: “Catholic teaching promotes confidence that death is not strong enough to keep those united with Christ in heaven from continuing to pray for others yet \textit{in via} and from being called on by those others for just that prayer.”\(^\text{31}\)

For Luthers, the importance of Mary and the saints lies in the example they give of obedience to God on earth, for which they are now honored. Mary is the pre-eminent praiseworthy saint and is a prototype of the Church: “With regard to Mary, Luthers affirm her as the ‘God-bearer’ (Theoto-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \(^{22}\) Carroll, \textit{Mother of Jesus}, 57.
  \item \(^{23}\) Carroll, \textit{Mother of Jesus}, 58.
  \item \(^{24}\) The books of papers published by the ESBVM include: A. Stackpoole (ed.), \textit{Mary’s Place in Christian Doctrine} (1982); A. Stackpoole, (ed.), \textit{Mary and the Churches} (1987); W. McLoughlin and J. Pinnock (eds), \textit{Mary is for Everyone} (1997); W. McLoughlin and J. Pinnock (eds.), \textit{Mary for Earth and Heaven: Essays on Mary and Ecumenism} (2002).
  \item \(^{26}\) Carter, \textit{Dialogue as Exchange}, 345.
  \item \(^{27}\) H. George Anderson, J. Stafford and J. Burgess, \textit{The One Mediator, the Saints and Mary: Luthers and Catholocs in Dialogue VIII} (Minneapolis: Augsburg,1992).
  \item \(^{28}\) British Methodist/Roman Catholic Committee, \textit{Mary, Mother of the Lord} (Methodist Publishing House and CTS Publications, 1995).
  \item \(^{29}\) Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, \textit{Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ} (London: Morehouse, 2006).
  \item \(^{30}\) A. Blancy, M. Jourjon and Dombes Group, \textit{Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints: Towards a Common Christian Understanding} (New York-Mahwah: Paulist, 2002).
  \item \(^{31}\) Anderson, \textit{The One Mediator}, 46-47.
\end{itemize}
kos) and hold her in high esteem as the most praiseworthy of all the saints. In this sense, Mary is to Lutherans a symbolic prototype of the Church: she is obedient to the mandate of the Holy Spirit, humble in her calling, and the embodiment of the unmerited grace of God.”

The remaining fundamental disagreement between Catholics and Lutherans are underlying theological views as well as specific differences on dogma. Mary is to be venerated, not because of merit reflected in her humility and virginity, but as a recipient of God’s grace reflecting the gracious regard God had for Mary. The most obvious disagreements are focused on specific dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church on Mary. Specifically, the Marian dogmas affirming her Immaculate Conception (1854) and her bodily Assumption (1950) are objected to by Lutherans because these dogmas arguably have no scriptural basis and were promulgated as infallible truths without consultation with other Christians. “Lutherans feel compelled to object to both the method used in establishing these doctrines and the assertions made in these papal definitions because they represent a doctrinal development reflecting specifically Catholic concerns rather than ecumenical ones.”

Ultimately the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue faltered on the significance of the issue of justification both as it relates to Mary herself as well as the faithful who venerate her. The Lutheran belief in justification by faith alone is central to Lutherans’ overall belief system. Lutheran acceptance of any teaching or practice relating to Mary, particularly prayers related to Mary and the saints, must in no way impinge on this central belief about justification. Subsequent to the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue on devotion to Mary, the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church articulated a common understanding of justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ. According to their “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church declared, “Justification is the work of the triune God…. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ…. By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving word and not because of any merit on our part, we are acceptable by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our heart while equipping and calling us to do good works.”

The Methodist-Catholic dialogue takes as its foundational belief, for any consideration of Mary, the gratuitousness of grace while rejecting any notion of salvation by works: “[M]ary is nothing apart from the grace of God, and all we affirm of her is the fruit of God’s grace in her life.” Mary in her acceptance of the word of God announcing the messiah’s birth is seen as a model for all Christians: “Mary sums up in herself the relationship between God’s sovereign grace and our free cooperation, (itself a gift of grace), as individual believers and as the Church of Christ.” The Methodist-Catholic statement affirmed that “Mary is rightly called the Mother of God, (or ‘God-bearer’, Theotokos, as taught by the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431”). Similarly, the virginity of Mary was affirmed: “Methodist and Catholics confess together that Mary was a virgin when she conceived Jesus (Luke 1:34).”

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32 Anderson, The One Mediator, 40-41.  
33 Anderson, The One Mediator, 40.  
35 Joint Declaration, no. 38-39.  
36 British Methodist, Mary, Mother of the Lord, 6.  
37 British Methodist, Mary, Mother of the Lord, 9.  
38 British Methodist, Mary, Mother of the Lord, 10.  
39 British Methodist, Mary, Mother of the Lord, 13.
The Methodists, however, reject the dogma of the Immaculate Conception as such: “The Methodist tradition does not accept the Immaculate Conception of Mary as a doctrine of faith firmly grounded in Scripture.” However, the Methodists and Catholics agree on the underlying doctrine of salvation which is expressed in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception: “For Catholics, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception teaches that Mary was redeemed by her son from the first moment of her existence. As Methodists and Catholics, we affirm together the victory of Christ’s grace in Mary. If Mary were indeed redeemed in this way, it would be the supreme instance of justification by grace alone.”

Similarly, the Methodists reject the explicit dogma of the Assumption while accepting the underlying doctrinal basis of the Assumption: “The Methodist Tradition does not accept the teaching as a Scriptural doctrine, but once again Catholics and Methodists can affirm together much that lies at the heart of the doctrine.” For example, the Assumption can be seen as an anticipation of the final resurrection: “If Mary was indeed assumed body and soul into heaven, then she already lives now in the life of the age to come. Her Assumption is an anticipation of all that we hope one day to be and to share [in the final resurrection of the dead].” The doctrine of the Assumption can be seen as based on the belief that both the body and soul are the subjects of salvation: “this doctrine also affirms that God loves and saves not just the soul but the whole human person, body as well as soul.”

The Catholic-Methodist statement can be read as lacking agreement on the literal truth of these disputed doctrines; however, there was basic agreement on the substance of Mariology: “Whatever difficulties remain to be resolved, however, we are able to affirm together much that lies at the heart of Marian doctrine. Doctrine must be deeply rooted in the Scriptures, read and interpreted with our hearts illuminated by the Holy Spirit and within the community of faith on its pilgrim journeyed through history.” This statement was not accepted by all Methodists as evidenced by the critique of the Catholic-Methodist statement by Edward Ball who suggested that the commission uncritically accepted debatable Catholic interpretations of Scripture. For example, Ball disputed whether the claim of Mary’s spiritual motherhood of all believers can be derived from Jesus commitment of the beloved disciple to her care. Ball maintains that it is not clear that the Assumption should be understood as a significant manifestation of the promise of final resurrection, without displacing the ascension as an entirely sufficient pledge of final resurrection.

The third Marian dialogue being examined in this paper, is from the Groupe des Dombes, which met at the Cistercian monastery of Les Dombes, north of Lyon. This independent group which met in 1997 and 1998 was not established by any official Church bodies. Its forty members were split evenly between Roman Catholic and Lutheran-Reformed Church in France and Switzerland. The foundational premise of the group was that reconciliation between churches can come about through “a process of mutual conversion to God and his Christ; every dialogue is a dialogue of conversion.”

The document produced by the Groupe des Dombes rejects the association by some Catholics of Mary with the language of mediation in any way that is not subordinate to Christ as sole mediator. On the other hand, the Groupe also rejected the view of some Protestants that there is an incompatibility between the Catholic notion

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41 British Methodist, *Mary, Mother of the Lord*, 11-12.
of Mary’s co-operation and the Protestant view of grateful response to a perfect gift of grace.49 The Groupe cited Luther’s recognition of the free works and love of Mary and the duty of every person “after we have been justified by faith, [to] do everything for others, freely and gladly.”50

The Groupe warns Catholics of the danger of invoking “the sense of the faithful” in defense of new cults and devotions, because of the danger of taking religious sentiment for true Christian faith.”51 From the point of the Groupe, Mariology should be taken as an aspect of Christology, and not presented as an independent theological subject. The Groupe maintained that submission to the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption should not be required of the other Christian churches, because of their promulgation without consultation with the other churches, and because of the papal view prior to 1854 that those holding contrary opinions in such matters of faith should not anathematize each other. The Groupe suggested that the other churches in dialogue should be asked only to affirm their respect for the content of these dogmas, not judging them to be contrary to the faith, but accepting them as “free and legitimate consequences of reflection of the Catholic consciousness on the coherence of faith.”52 The Groupe endorsed Pope Paul VI’s assertion that Marian doctrine and devotion should be biblical, liturgical, and ecumenically sensitive.53 Most significantly, from an Ecumenical point of view, the Groupe concluded that Mary should never be a reason for disunity in the Church: “Yet our entire work has shown that nothing about Mary allows her to be made the symbol of what separates us.”54

The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, An Agreed Statement: Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ

The Anglican Church and Roman Catholic Church have been engaged in significant inter-religious dialogue for over half a century. Early discussion focused on the sacraments of Eucharist and Ordination. Given the significance of the splintering of the relation between the English Church and the Church of Rome over the authority of the Pope, the subject of authority has been given extensive consideration. With the dawn of the twenty-first century, the subject of Mary became the object of serious Anglican and Roman Catholic dialogue. The Agreed Statement on Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ, published in May 2005 is the result of the dialogue on Mary by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), authorized by the Anglican Communication Office and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. This is the tenth ecumenical statement of the ARCIC. These statements have dealt with: Eucharist (1971), Ministry and Ordination (1973), Authority in the Church-I (1976), Authority in the Church-II (1981), Salvation and Church (1996), The Gift of Authority-Authority in the Church III (1998), and Mary: Grace and Hope in the Church (2005).

Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops meeting in 2000 asked the Commission to produce a statement on the place of “Mary in the life and doctrine of the Church.”55 This request reflected acknowledged differences between the churches on the Mariological definitions promulgated in 1854 and 1950, namely the Roman-Catholic dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Anglicans had questioned these doctrines on grounds of insufficient support in Scripture, and because they were defined by the pope acting apart from a council.

The Agreed Statement draws on Scripture and tradition to provide “the context for a common appreciation of the content of the Marian dogmas resulting in [p]rogress in ecumenical dialogue and understanding [which] suggests that we now have an opportunity to receive together the tradition of Mary’s place in God’s revelation,”56

49 Blancy, Mary in the Plan of God, 291-4.
50 Blancy, Mary in the Plan of God, 216.
51 Blancy, Mary in the Plan of God, 291-4.
53 Blancy, Mary in the Plan of God, 306.
54 Blancy, Mary in the Plan of God, 336.
55 Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ, 2.
56 Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ, 4-5.
This process of reception ultimately allows the questioned dogmas to be understood in light of the implicit scriptural foundation underlying the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Thus, the basic question being answered by the Agreed Statement is: “[T]o what extent doctrine or devotion concerning Mary belongs to a legitimate ‘reception’ of the apostolic Tradition, in accordance with the Scripture.”

This declaration consists of four sections, the first of which is “Mary according to the Scriptures.” This section is important because in the Anglican tradition, article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles of faith provides: “Holy Scriptures containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, not may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as on article of the Faith, or to be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” The method of analysis adopted by the statement uses modern hermeneutical approaches to Scripture which lead to the identification of scriptural authority for all the doctrines of Catholic Mariology: “More recent approaches to Scripture point to the range of possible readings of a text, notably its narrative, rhetorical and sociological dimension” at the same time recognizing that “no reading of a text is neutral, but each is shaped by the context and interest of its readers.” After examining significant Scriptural passages, the conclusion is reached that it’s impossible to be faithful to Scripture without giving due attention to Mary.

The second section, “Mary in the Christian Tradition,” involves examination of common Anglican and Catholic traditions within the Christian Tradition which reveals that the early Church understood Mary as the Mother of God, the Word Incarnate, and the God-bearer (Mary as Theotokos). This conclusion follows from a review of the early Church councils which are authoritative in both traditions, from the writings of the Church Fathers, and from devotion to Mary in the medieval centuries.

The ‘Re-reception” of Marian doctrines and spirituality is recognized in both traditions. In the Catholic tradition, it is recognized that in the post-Vatican II Church, devotion to Mary “is properly located within the Christological focus of the Church’s public prayer” with the recognition that “the authentic renewal of Marian devotion must be integrated with the doctrine of God, Christ, and the Church.” At the same time, the Anglican Church has renewed Mary’s prominence in its liturgy and prayer book: “Mary has a new prominence in Anglican worship through the liturgical renewals of the twentieth century.”

The third section “Mary Within the Pattern of Grace and Hope” approaches Mary from a Christological perspective applying its method of interpretation of Scripture to the contested doctrines of Mariology. The conclusion is reached: “We….view the economy of grace from its fulfillment in Christ ‘back’ into history, rather than ‘forward’ from its beginning in fallen creation towards the future in Christ.” This perspective is said to offer a fresh light in which to consider the place of Mary. This development of the methodological approach draws on the Pauline perspective of the way God’s grace and salvation work, involving a pattern of grace and hope that can be seen throughout the economy of salvation. This understanding of the operation of God’s grace provides the framework for re-receiving the two disputed Marian dogmas: “Within this biblical framework, we have considered afresh the distinctive place of the Virgin Mary in the economy of grace, as the one who bore Christ, the elect of God.”

57 Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ, 5.
59 Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ, supra note at 29.
60 Mary: Grace of Hope in Christ, 28.
61 Mary: Grace of Hope in Christ, 45-6.
62 Mary: Grace of Hope in Christ, 46.
63 Mary: Grace of Hope in Christ, 49.
64 Mary: Grace of Hope in Christ, 52.
The Commission views the pattern of grace in the life of Mary as mirroring the destiny of the Church. God prepared Mary to be the mother of his Son by the grace already bestowed on her: “[W]e see in Mary’s acceptance of the divine will the fruit of her prior preparation, signified in Gabriel’s affirmation of her as ‘graced.’”65 It is here that the Commission establishes a scriptural basis for the Immaculate Conception. It is through the grace of God, made possible by the working of the Holy Spirit that Mary is able to accept her role in the Divine Incarnation.

Mary is seen as the faithful disciple fully present with God in Christ. She thus becomes a sign of hope for all humanity, so that her Assumption becomes a model of the resurrection and the hope for all Christians: “[T]he pattern of hope and grace already foreshadowed in Mary will be fulfilled in the new creation in Christ when all the redeemed will participate in the full glory of the Lord.”66 Thus, the Commission affirmed both the teaching about Mary implicit in the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception [grace] and Assumption [hope]. These doctrines are to be “understood within the biblical pattern of the economy of grace and hope...which can be said to be consonant with the reading of the Scriptures and the ancient common traditions.”67 While the statement recognizes agreement on the content of the two dogmas, there remains a serious question about the authority by which the doctrines were actually defined. That is the fact that the doctrines were declared by a pope claiming infallibility without the participation of an ecumenical council. However, the Agreed Statement recognizes the possibility of resolving even this issue of authority. If the Agreed Statement were to be accepted by both the Anglican Commission and the Catholic Church, “this would place the questions about authority, which arise from the two definitions of 1854 and 1950, in a new ecumenical context.”68

The fourth section, “Mary in the Life of the Church,” deals with the subject of devotion to Mary. The past practice of Anglicans has been to view Mary from an inspirational perspective as an exemplary disciple in her response to Christ. Catholic devotion has taken Mary as a participant in the ongoing salvation through the economy of grace. The Anglican concern has been that devotion that involves prayerful intervention to Mary threatens the doctrine of Christ as the only Mediator. Catholic devotion continues to recognize the practice of supplicatory prayers to the Virgin. In its final declaration the Agreed Statement reconciles these devotional views by denying that Mary has the role of “mediatrix of grace” while recognizing the propriety of supplicatory prayer: “Affirming together unambiguously Christ’s unique mediation, which bears fruit in the life of the Christ, we do not consider the practice of asking Mary and the saints to pray for us as communion dividing.”69

The Agreed Statement concludes by restating the basic agreement on the doctrines of Mariology and suggests that this represents authentic ecumenical dialogue. The hope is expressed that the members of the two churches will develop a consensus on the place of Mary in both the devotion and doctrine, and that there be even a wider “re-reception” of Mary among Christian believers.

Conclusion

These four ecumenical dialogues dealing with Mary discussed in this article represent an important advance on a subject that can be seen as a significant service to the ecumenical objective of overcoming the division between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant and Anglican Churches. The significance of a movement toward a common agreement of the place of Mariology in the Christian tradition can be observed by comparing those

65 Mary: Grace of Hope in Christ, 54.
66 Mary: Grace of Hope in Christ, 58.
67 Mary: Grace of Hope in Christ, 79.
68 Mary: Grace of Hope in Christ, 74-75.
dialogues with a statement of a Scottish protestant churchman who could be found stating some fifty years ago that: “The cult of the Mother of Jesus is not only a perversion of the gospel, but the subversion of Christianity.”

These dialogues are evidence of efforts to achieve common understanding on the traditional doctrines of Mariology (Mary as the Mother of God and the Virginity of Mary) by agreed upon reading of Scripture. The more contentious doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption have received innovative analysis which is based on use of modern methods of Scriptural interpretation. In these dialogues we can see at minimum a common agreement that these contested dialogues have an implicit Scriptural foundation. In the ARCIC dialogue, one can observe actual common acceptance on the doctrines, with difference only on the process of their promulgation. These dialogues represent a consensus that Marian doctrines must be integrated into a Christology that recognizes the primacy of grace and the saving mission of the Triune God. There is agreement that Mary, as with every faithful Christian, both stood in the need of grace and received the grace needed for her role as the God-bearer.

There is agreement in these dialogues that Mary is a model disciple within the fellowship of the Christian faithful along with the other saints. As Mother of Jesus and Mother of the Church, Mary is a disciple who guides and teaches through her own profound reflection. While there is recognition of the special place of Mary in the history of salvation, these dialogues represent a consensus understanding of Christ as the sole mediator and source of grace. The rooting of Mariology in Christology and Ecclesiology is complementary in that Mary cannot be related to Christ without being directly associated with the ecclesiastical Body of the Church that is the result of Christ’s redemptive activity. Mary is, in turn, the archetype of the Church because of her unique relationship with Christ. Edward Schillebeeckx summed up this foundational basis of Mariology in Christology and Ecclesiology: “Her concrete motherhood with regard to Christ, the redeeming God-Man, freely accepted in faith - her fully committed divine motherhood - this is both the key to the full understanding of the Marian mystery and the basic Mariological principle, which is concretely identical with Mary’s objectively and subjectively unique state of being redeemed.” Thus, the two foundations of Mariology are Christocentric divine motherhood and the Ecclesiotypical prototypical redemption of Mary. The recognition of these two foundational aspects of Mariology, which support the four doctrines basic to Mariology, provide the basis for the agreed upon consensus present in the four inter-religious dialogues discussed in this article. As ecumenical dialogue seems rekindled under the papacy of Pope Francis, there is a basis for hope that the agreements established by the inter-religious dialogues discussed in this article may be formalized by the respective churches. At minimal, these dialogues establishing a basic agreement on the attributes of Mary have removed what was a significant obstacle to ecumenical dialogue leading to the unity of the Christian churches.

70 Mackenzie, “Ecumenical Problem.”