

THE MARIAN DIMENSION OF VATICAN II

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In commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council it is worth bringing to mind an often-neglected dimension of the Council and its documents – a distinct Marian character that offers a rich lens through which to appreciate the Council's ecclesiology and the ongoing challenge that this theology brings to faith.

As Pope Benedict XVI recently recalled, the opening date of the Council, the 11 October, 1962, was in fact the Feast of the Divine Motherhood of Mary, a universal feast established by Pius XI some thirty years prior to the Council to mark the proclamation of Mary as *theotokos*, Mother of God, fifteen hundred years earlier at the Council of Ephesus (Paul VI would eventually move the feast to the 1 January). In choosing that date, Benedict recalls, John XXIII intended to entrust the great assembly to 'the motherly goodness of Mary and to anchor the Council's work firmly in the mystery of Jesus Christ.' The Council would close four years later on the 8 December, 1965, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, enfolding the four sessions of Vatican II within an indelible 'Marian atmosphere.'

This conscious framing of the Council in the context of Mary's person was undoubtedly a continuation of the spirit that pervaded the century before. Not only had this period, this 'Marian century', witnessed the definition of two Marian dogmas – the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Feast of the Assumption (1950) – but also a groundswell of Marian piety, apparitions, and congregations within the Church. This rise of Marian devotions and related phenomena can be understood partly in the context of the hardships and anxieties of European bloodshed and war but more theologically in the light of the biblical movement which played a critical part in the recovery of Mary's eminence in Scripture. At the same time, this Marian piety found itself in tension with, and even contested by, the arising liturgical movement on account of the excesses which predictably accompanied such enthusiasm.

It is in the context of this admixture of right honour and superstition that we can appreciate the achievement of the final and eighth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, 'The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God in the Mystery of Christ and the Church.' It is a well-balanced and restrained text which first recognises Mary's relation to Christ and then, and precisely because of this Christological significance, addresses Mary's position in the Church, her ecclesial meaning.

It is well known that the placing of this Mariological treatise at the end of the Council's document on the Church was disputed. While it remains an established convention to conclude magisterial teachings with a Marian statement, a number of Council Fathers had sought an entirely *separate* document on Mary to underline her significance in the economy of salvation and even pressed for a further Marian definition.

However, prudence won out and Mary was brought, as it were, into the heart of the Church as both mother and daughter of the Church, as exemplar and ‘model in faith and charity’ though one placed within the mystery of the Church and not above it.

The maturity of the Council’s theology concerning Mary was largely the fruit of the *ressourcement* movement, including Henri de Lubac whose 1956 work, *The Splendour of the Church*, inspired the basic architecture for *Lumen Gentium*. De Lubac’s incisive text, read widely in the pre-conciliar era by the likes of Ratzinger and Von Balthasar, began with a reflection on the Church as ‘mystery’ and concludes with an exposition on ‘The Church and our Lady.’ It was the self-same approach that would be taken up by the Council Fathers and *periti* at the Council and saw the insertion of Mary firmly within the Church’s self-understanding.

In the light of pre-conciliar scholarship, the role of Mary as a hermeneutical key who unlocks the meaning of the Church – and indeed salvation history as a whole – had become manifest and compelling for those shapers of the Council’s *oeuvre*. From the layers of tradition – Scriptural, liturgical and patristic – flowed images of Mary as a mirror of the Church’s identity and vocation, as ‘the New Eve’, ‘the Ark of the Covenant,’ as a mother who gives birth to Christ in the world, as fruitful not on account of self-determination but only to the extent of faith and on account of God who alone gives life through his Bride.

In drawing extensively on this bed of tradition, the final chapter of *Lumen Gentium* brings forth Mary as the eschatological icon of the Church as a communion of saints. What is said of the saints earlier in *Lumen Gentium* (LG 51), those to whom we look for ‘example in their way of life’ (as those *ahead* of us), ‘fellowship in communion’ (as those who are *with* us) and ‘aid by their intercession’ (as those who are *for* us) is true of Mary in a pre-eminent way. As de Lubac describes, she is ‘the first cell of the organism of that restored paradise,’ the one who reveals that God’s promise of everlasting life is not merely a promise but has *already* been realised in a person, in Mary as a fully redeemed human being, as the concrete embodiment of the glory of faith.

In the midst of the commemoration and debate surrounding the Second Vatican Council we do well to reflect on the Marian dimension of the Council and, even more than this, to imbibe the ‘Marian atmosphere’ of our own discipleship, personally and communally, as followers of her Son. As exhorted by the Council, we must abstain ‘from all gross exaggerations as well as from petty narrow-mindedness’ in our consideration of Mary as an intrinsic dimension of Catholic faith. The Second Vatican Council’s treatment of her person, she who Paul VI declared as ‘the Most Blessed Mary, Mother of the Church,’ provides a fresh and inspired starting point for such an undertaking.