

ECUMENISM WITH EVANGELICALS

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Talk 3: Mary and the Saints; the Personal and the Corporate, the Earthly and the Heavenly Church

Probably top of the Evangelical objections to any relationships with Catholics is the issue of Mary and the Saints, especially of Mary. This visceral opposition comprises various elements all focusing on Catholic devotion to Mary: praying to or worshipping anyone other than God and Jesus; the issue of honouring statues and accusations of idolatry; maybe seeing Marian devotion as a survival of paganism.

Catholic apologists have been answering these objections for centuries. Central in the Catholic response are two lines of argument: (1) that in Catholic teaching, full worship (adoration = *latria*) is only given to God; the honour given to saints is *dulia* or in the case of Mary *hyperdulia*, the highest honour; and (2) that the Old Testament prohibition of images is changed by the Incarnation, when God himself took on a visible form (*eikon*). But these arguments have little effect when Evangelicals see some aspects of Catholic practice and cannot see much difference between the honour given to Mary and the honour given to Jesus. St Augustine wrote: "It is only God whom we worship ... with that degree of worship which is called *latria* because it is the form of total service due properly to the divinity. It is in this kind of worship that the offering of sacrifice is appropriate. Therefore to offer this *latria* to idols is called 'idolatry'. And so we never offer such worship, nor do we teach that it should be offered to any martyr, any holy soul or any angel." (Against Faustus, 21).

The only answer is the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. The problem is not primarily theological. It is spiritual. The problem is the existence of Catholics having acquired and been taught a love for Mary when they have not been properly evangelized and do not have a personal relationship with Jesus. When Catholics love Mary and do not know Jesus, it is impossible to have a right honouring of Mary. The same applies with all devotion to the saints.

When Catholics experience conversion and open themselves to the Holy Spirit, many Evangelicals expect them to abandon all Marian devotion. When this does not happen, they can doubt the authenticity of the conversion. But what is really happening or should be happening, is that with conversion and with baptism in the Holy Spirit, our faith understanding and our faith practice gets re-centred on Jesus Christ. Everything else is understood and lived in relation to Him, and is led by the Holy Spirit. It is only at this point that it is really possible for Evangelicals to understand that honouring Mary and the Saints does not compromise or weaken our faith in Jesus as the one Lord and the only Saviour.

The Personal and the Corporate

When this barrier is overcome, the way is clear to address fully the relationship between the personal and the corporate. Evangelical Christians focus on the personal, my response to the Gospel, my relationship to Jesus. Catholics think more corporately, and typically start from the Church and then move to the individual person. Today the Popes are emphasizing the need for each person to have a personal relationship with Jesus. But we should not confuse personal with individualistic. For the Catholic Church insists that as human beings, we belong to the human family (No man is an island), and we are not saved as individuals but as incorporated into one body in and through Jesus.

In the authentic tradition of the Catholic Church, the personal belongs within the communion of saints, so that the person is not absorbed or dominated by the corporate nor is the person independent of the community. This teaching has been frequently expounded in the Social Teaching of the Church, and developed particularly by St John Paul II taking up the personalist philosophy that he made his own.

In the renewal of the Church at and since Vatican Two, there is a rediscovery of the relationship between Mary and the Church. As long as Mary is seen or imagined as being up there with Jesus without any reference to the Church, then it is impossible to have a balanced understanding. Mary is a person, the most highly privileged person (“all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me” Luke 1:48), but she is also a representative person like Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, and David. She represents Israel saying Yes to the birth of the Messiah, she represents humanity in saying Yes to the birth of the Saviour. She is the first believer in her Son, the first member of the Church. “At once virgin and mother, Mary is the symbol of and the most perfect realization of the Church.” (Catechism, para. 507 - see also para. 967). “And so in the divinely inspired scriptures, what is said in general of the Virgin Mother the Church, is said individually of the Virgin Mary; and what is said in the particular case of the Virgin Mother Mary is rightly understood of the Virgin Mother Church universally” (sermon by Blessed Isaac of Stella).

The Corporate and the Institutional

As long as Catholics do not have a living relationship to Jesus, and a responsiveness to the Holy Spirit, our loyalty to the Catholic Church will be more a loyalty to an institution than a loyalty to Jesus, the head of the Church that is his body. This is one reason why Evangelical Christians see the Catholic Church as just a massive institution, the religious equivalent of a huge multinational corporation. But in many ways, the Catholic Church has often been run like an institution in which the most important qualities are efficient administration and institutional loyalty. That is why Pope Francis is insisting that the Church needs bishops who are real shepherds with “the smell of the sheep”. In February 2014, Francis gave an address to the Cardinals and bishops responsible for recommending new bishops: “From the lips of the Church will come in every time and in every place the question: give us a Bishop! The Holy People of God continue to speak: we need someone who looks after us from on high; we need someone who looks upon us with the breadth of the heart of God; we do not need a manager, a company administrator, and much less one who is at the level of our smallness or little pretensions. We need someone who knows how to raise himself to the height of God’s gaze above us to guide us towards Him.”¹

In fact, the Catholic Church is only secondarily an institution - it cannot avoid having an institutional organized dimension - but its deepest reality is to be a communion. It is significant here that the Church as communion is a key concept in the teaching of Vatican Two and that in the many ecumenical dialogues about ecclesiology the church as communion has been emerging as a common theme. The deepest reality of the Church is manifest in the liturgy: “the principal manifestation of the church consists in the full, active participation of all God’s holy people in the same Eucharist ... at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers.” (Cont. on Liturgy, para. 41)². The organizational structures are secondary. The heart of the Church is

¹ Address to Congregation for Bishops, February 27, 2014.

² See also Catechism, paras. 946, 959, 1108.

made manifest in times of severe persecution, when committed Christians gather simply to hear the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist.

Another consequence of Evangelicals just seeing the Church as an institution is the opposition of many to ecumenism, which they can see as institutions negotiating mergers, like any business companies. Here the word “denomination” often causes some confusion. This term “denomination” originally arose as a sociological term to describe church organizations in the pluralist society of the United States. It is a mistake to call the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches denominations. The ecumenical movement is not about uniting denominations, but is about the reconciliation of separated communities of faith, churches whose essence is communion but are not yet in communion.

Church on Earth, Church in Heaven

An important dimension of Catholic faith is the union between the heavenly Church and the earthly Church. “But at the present time some of his disciples are pilgrims on earth, others have died and are being purified, while still others are in glory ... All ... in varying degrees and in different ways share in the same love of God and our neighbour, and we all sing the same hymn of glory to our God. All, indeed, who are of Christ and who have his Spirit form one church” (Vatican Two, *Lumen Gentium*, para. 49). The union in worship between the church on earth and the church in heaven is clearly expressed at the end of the Preface in each Mass in this or an expanded form: “And so, with all the company of angels and saints, we sing the hymn of your praise, as without end we acclaim, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts.” This is the deepest reality of the communion of saints, which we profess in the Creed.

For Evangelical Christians, prayer to the saints is seen as wrong and as derogating from the unique mediation of Jesus. “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.” (1 Tim. 2:5 - 6). Many Evangelicals see Catholic prayer to the saints as against the command not to communicate with the dead.

Here again the only answer is a conversion and renewal that puts Jesus totally at the centre, that deeply honours the whole biblical text, and is really open to the Holy Spirit. In this context it is possible to see how the whole communion of saints is the fruit of the redemptive work of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The right picture for this is the depiction as in many ancient mosaics of Christ Pantokrator, Christ the Ruler of All sitting on the throne surrounded by a chorus of saints and angels. This is an enormous enrichment, and is the fullest answer to every narrow form of individualistic piety that is just Jesus and me. Where Jesus is truly at the centre, and the Holy Spirit is the giver of all life, then a joyful honouring of Mary and the saints within this vast context will no longer cause problems.

A renewed church celebrates the liturgy with renewed faith in the risen Lord and the life-giving Spirit. The liturgy demonstrates the faith of the Church in action. When we understand this and we live this, we cannot confuse the roles and callings of Jesus and Mary. The Catholic Church celebrates several feasts of Mary, but every liturgy is worship of the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit in, with, and through Jesus Christ, as is expressed in the great doxology at the end of each Eucharistic prayer. The Orthodox Churches give a bigger place to Mary in all their liturgies but always in the context of glorifying God for all his works: “we offer this spiritual sacrifice for all those who rest in faith: the fathers, the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, the preachers, the evangelists, the martyrs, the confessors, the ascetics and all who have died in the faith;

especially for our all-holy, most pure, highly blessed and most glorious Lady, Mother of God and ever Virgin Mary.”³

In this right context, asking the help of Mary and the saints is obviously quite different from worship of the one Lord. The problem arises when people who do not really know the Lord and have Jesus at the centre take all their needs to Mary. Then it can appear as though a Catholic has various ways to God, one of which is Jesus and another is Mary, which is a terrible distortion. There is much more positive to say about Mary and her uniqueness in God’s great plan, but this is not the place to develop it.

The Place of Israel and the Jews

These teachings focusing on Catholic - Evangelical relations are not directly addressing the role of Israel and the Jewish people. However, in all these questions we have to go back to the biblical roots which are in Israel. As Evangelicals and Catholics return to the Jewish roots, our positions will become less distant and less polarized. This is very obviously true of points covered in this teaching: the personal and the corporate (never separated in Israel), and between the earthly and the heavenly. The Jewish people whose call is rooted in this world and inscribed in the body through circumcision will always remind Christians that salvation is grounded in the physical, and that it reaches its fullness in the resurrection of the body and in the setting free of all creation.

The Jewish believers in Jesus challenge all the Christian churches to rediscover the biblical concept of salvation which is total and holistic. Already with the biblical renewal in the Catholic Church, the Vatican Two constitution on the Church in the World Today included a section on “The Hope of the New Heaven and the New Earth.” (CCC, paras. 1042 - 50). Here we find this teaching: “The visible universe, then, is destined to be transformed, ‘so that the world itself, restored to its original state, facing no further obstacles, should be at the service of the just,’ sharing their glorification in the risen Jesus Christ.” (CCC, para. 1047)⁴. This perspective is strongly present in Romans 8, where Paul speaks about the whole creation being set free from “its bondage to decay” and waiting “with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (Rom. 8: 21, 19).

³ From the anaphora of St John Chrysostom.

⁴ The citation in this para. Is from St Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Book V.