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# The Dogma of Mary's Assumption

## A Symptom of Antichristian Theology

By F. E. MAYER

MANY Americans view with alarm the increasing pressure which Rome is exerting on American political life. It is of course, no secret that by means of a carefully designed program of lay indoctrination the Roman hierarchy is attempting to direct the ideologies not only of its own members but also of those outside its own communion.<sup>1</sup> Leading Protestants have charged that Rome has definite political aspirations, and serious tensions have arisen between Protestants and Romanists as a result of conflicting political and social ideologies. However, we are dismayed when leading Protestants direct their attacks against Rome exclusively on the ground that Rome may become or already is a menace to our American democratic ideals. The gulf which separates evangelical Christianity and Romanism is much wider. It is theological, religious. It is the same in 1950 as it was in 1517. Rome always has attacked and always will attack Protestantism — in so far as it is loyal to its Reformation heritage — at its jugular vein: Jesus Christ alone is Lord of His Church. In his Christmas message the Pope could not have stated the issue more clearly than he did in the words: "We ourselves, to whom divine providence has reserved the privilege of proclaiming it [the Holy Year and all the alleged blessings accruing from it for the world] and granting it to the whole world, already foresee its importance for the coming half-century." Reinhold Niebuhr puts it very mildly when he comments on this as follows: "At the risk of the charge of 'intolerance' one must confess that the words of the Pope strike a non-Roman as blasphemous."<sup>2</sup> St. Paul in 2 Thess. 2:4 has a better description. Reduced to the least common denominator, the issue between

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power*, especially chapters IV, VI, XI, and XII. Only recently the Pope presumed to direct the consciences of American Catholic judges to determine divorce cases according to the principles of the Roman Church rather than American jurisprudence.

<sup>2</sup> *Christian Century*, January 18, 1950, 74.

Rome and evangelical Christianity may be stated in two questions: (1) Did Christ give us the final and absolute revelation of God concerning man's salvation or not? (2) Is Christ man's one and only Mediator or not? All other questions are peripheral, or better still, all other points of doctrine on which Romanists differ from evangelical Christians center in these two questions. Rome's dogmas of faith, the Mass, the priesthood, penance, purgatory, merits, the Church, saint worship, etc., etc., inevitably go back to what dogmaticians designate as the *formal* and the *material principles* of theology. And here is the unbridgeable gulf between Rome and genuine Protestantism. Everything else is only jugglery.

According to reports emanating from Rome, the *pia sententia* of Mary's Assumption is to be elevated to a dogma during the current jubilee year.<sup>3</sup> That Mary's body did not see corruption has been held by Romanists for many centuries as a "pious opinion." Many in the Roman Church have held that while the relics of other saints are to be preserved and venerated, there are no relics of Mary to receive such honor and veneration. Gradually the opinion prevailed that Mary's body not only did not see corruption, but that she was received into heaven according to body and soul. This opinion is now to be elevated to a dogma and is thus to be made an article of faith. At first glance one may dismiss this entire matter as of little significance, for what does it matter whether or not a view which has been held by some for centuries is now to be fixed as an official doctrine which must be held by all Romanists? The fact, however, is that the procedure in which this pious opinion is to become a dogma and the content of this dogma are symptomatic of Rome's *formal* and *material* principles. If and when the dogma of the Assumption is decreed, we shall have further evidence that, as Luther charged in the Smalcald Articles, (1) the Papacy establishes doctrines above and contrary to Scripture (the formal principle); and (2) that Rome today, as in the days of the Reformation, directs men to seek their salvation not solely in Christ (the material principle).

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<sup>3</sup> Msgr. Sergio Pignedoli recently informed a press conference that the proclamation of the Assumption dogma is unlikely this year, because the pronouncement of a dogma requires the presence of 300 to 400 bishops, who could hardly be expected to make a trip to Rome for this purpose in addition to their jubilee pilgrimage. (RNS release in January, 1950.)

## I

In announcing that the Assumption of Mary may be declared as a dogma the Catholic weekly *America* defined a dogma as a part of the deposit of the faith which God expects the whole world to believe and which is to be expounded and set forth by the Church. *America* states, furthermore, that God's revelation to man ceased with the death of the last Apostle and that no additions can be made to this deposit of truth. But, so the periodical adds, many truths may have been believed implicitly until the Church saw fit to propose them also for explicit belief, as was the case when the Council of Ephesus in 431 for the first time declared officially that Mary is the Mother of God and when the Church in the thirteenth century finally fixed the dogma of the Holy Trinity. The editorial closes with the words: "Unless the Assumption was revealed to the Apostles, it cannot be (and will not be) proclaimed a dogma."<sup>4</sup> It seems that the Tridentine Fathers and their successors have heeded the Lutheran shibboleth *Sola Scriptura*. Naturally we ask the Roman theologians to produce Scripture proof for Mary's Assumption. In compliance with this request the Romanist will point to two dogmatical propositions on the basis of which Rome establishes such doctrines as are not specifically mentioned in the written Word.

In the first place, the Romanist will point to the decree of the Council of Trent, which declared in its Fourth Session that "saving truth and moral discipline are contained in the written books *and the unwritten traditions* [italics our own] which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down unto us." Since Bellarmine, Roman theologians distinguish between material and formal tradition, the former term denotes the subject matter handed down, while the latter designates the act of handing down. From John 21:25 the Roman dogmaticians infer that not all Christian doctrines have been deposited in the Scriptures and must therefore be sought in the "material traditions," the so-called shrine of the Church. The infallible Church to which has been given also the "formal tradition" will propound the "material traditions" as articles of faith as the occasion demands. The Roman dogma-

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<sup>4</sup> *America*, December 24, 1949, 363.

tician Wilmers teaches that the infallible Church—the *ecclesia docens*—can develop more and more (*traditio formalis*) the truth entrusted to it (*traditio materialis*), can define it more exactly and develop the entire wealth of revelation with increasing clarity, without rejecting any doctrine previously held or adding one which had not been implicitly held.<sup>5</sup> And Adam Moehler states that, in representing Christ, the Church is the living exposition of the divine revelation and is invested with Christ's own authority and infallibility.<sup>6</sup> And the Vatican Council decreed that "all those things are to be believed with divine and Catholic faith, which are contained in the Word of God, written or handed down, and which the Church either by a solemn judgment or by her ordinary and universal *magisterium* proposes for belief as having been divinely revealed." Hence only the *ecclesia docens* can determine the extent and the content of the "material traditions" deposited in the shrine of the Church, and this Church, more specifically the hierarchy, will determine when to exercise the "formal tradition" and establish explicitly as dogma what allegedly was held implicitly since the days of the Apostles. Luther's judgment is still valid when he declared that "the Papacy is sheer enthusiasm."<sup>7</sup>

But what will Rome do when there is evidently not the least trace of Scriptural evidence for a proposed dogma? Here Rome appeals to its second dogmatical axiom, namely, that reason is the handmaid of theology. Both reason and revelation are said to be gifts of God, and there can be no conflict between them; on the contrary, reason must support revelation. Since the Assumption of Mary is generally accepted as part of the material traditions, reason is now called upon to establish this dogma as being "theologically certain." And the manner in which this doctrine is established by philosophical and theological arguments is merely symptomatic of Rome's method of establishing any dogma which is said to be revealed in the "unwritten traditions."

Opinions vary in the Roman Church today as to whether the

<sup>5</sup> Wilmers, *Handbuch der katholischen Religion*, II, 694.

<sup>6</sup> See Gustav Voss, "Johann Moehler and the Development of Dogma," *Theological Studies*, September, 1943, 420—444.

<sup>7</sup> "Denn das Papstum auch ein eitel Enthusiasmus ist." Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. VIII, 4. Cf. Part II, Art. IV. Both Articles deserve careful reading in the light of the probable proclamation of Mary's Assumption!

Assumption can be established by tradition or theological argumentation. Pohle-Preuss is not quite certain whether the Assumption rests on a dogmatic basis, or on a Scriptural argument, or on historical data. He seems to lean toward the view that it rests mainly on ecclesiastical tradition.<sup>8</sup> M. J. Scheeben admits that ecclesiastical tradition is very scant and that during the first six centuries there is no authentic witness concerning Mary's death; and if no witness concerning her glorious death is available, it seems futile to build up a historical tradition for her assumption.<sup>9</sup> Scheeben ascribes the lack of witnesses both to Mary's death and to her assumption to a *disciplina arcani*, that is to say that at a time when the Christians were still surrounded by polytheistic paganism, the proclamation of Mary's Assumption might have created the impression that Christians looked upon Mary as a goddess. But he adds that the Roman Church can establish the doctrine of Mary's Assumption on purely theological grounds and does not require a specific "material tradition." (P. 148 f.) It seems to us that Romanists should have no theological scruples to decree Mary's Assumption without further ado; for if they are in duty bound to accept her Immaculate Conception, they must by all laws of logic also accept the Assumption.

According to Scheeben, the Church has "proximate, definite, and decisive" suggestions that because of her worthiness and dignity Mary enjoyed a threefold freedom from the bondage of death: (1) Mary was not subject to the necessity of death; (2) because of her sinlessness she was free from the penal consequences of sin and hence from the law of decomposition; (3) she was free from the duration of death until the general resurrection. (P. 150.) Expanding these three points, Scheeben states that because of her complete freedom from the taint of original sin, death could not be imposed on her as a punishment. Though Mary had a mortal nature, this did not subject her to death as it does the rest of mankind, because Mary possessed a "supernatural claim" by virtue of her divine motherhood. She could therefore have been exempted

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<sup>8</sup> Pohle-Preuss, *Dogmatic Theology*, B. D. Herder Book Co., St. Louis, 1930, Vol. VI (Mariology), 118.

<sup>9</sup> M. J. Scheeben, *Mariology*, translated by T. L. M. J. Geukres, B. Herder Book Co., St. Louis, 1947. Vol. II, 141 f. — In the following analysis we have followed Scheeben.

from death entirely were it not for the fact that in the economy of redemption her death was necessary; necessary not as a means of cancelling man's sin, but as an evidence that she was not greater than her Son and as a proof that as her nature was truly human, so was also the nature of her divine Son human. (P. 152.) Scheeben argues further that death itself can under circumstances be something dignified and glorious. The degrading thing about death is the concomitant decomposition, the penalty and curse of sin. However, through her union with Christ as His spouse and mother, Mary could not see corruption. And this incorruption is said to agree with the threefold incorruption of her virginity: (1) She was not contaminated by another's sinful flesh when she conceived Christ; (2) her womb was not violated in any way; (3) her freedom from the *fomes* of sin was perfected through Christ's conception and therefore her body cannot be called the "body of sin."<sup>10</sup> And so Mary's incorruptible body is said to be aptly typified in the Ark of the Covenant, which was constructed of imperishable wood. (P. 158 f.) Therefore death could not hold Mary until the general resurrection, but her resurrection and glorification must take place in the shortest possible time, just as in the case of Christ, for incorruptibility and resurrection are correlative concepts. In fact, Scripture proof for this is found in Gen. 3:15. (P. 164 f.)

In support of the theological proposition that because of her divine motherhood she must share with Christ the immediate bodily resurrection and glorification, Scheeben advances four arguments. (1) Mary is the Mother of God through and in her body, and therefore a permanent separation of body and soul in her case is as impossible as in Christ. (2) Mary is the bride of Christ, and without the resurrection of her body the intimate and complete union of Christ and His Church portrayed in Ephesians 5 could not be effected. (3) The Fourth Commandment demands that Christ honor His mother, which He can do best by having her share in His own bodily resurrection and glorification. (4) Since Mary has been appointed as mankind's *mediatrix*, she must herself ex-

<sup>10</sup> What strange inconsistency in theology! Do Roman theologians see in the act of procreation the essence of sin? If so, then why does Rome elevate matrimony to a sacrament? — It would be interesting at this point to trace Rome's views on anthropology and hamartiology and to show the wide gulf between Roman and Lutheran theology in these doctrines.

perience the fruits of the work of Christ and become the perfect surety that Christ's work is complete. In fact, as the "second Eve," she must stand at the side of Christ. (P. 166 f.)

In conclusion, the Church does not require any specific Scripture or historical evidence for the doctrine of Mary's Assumption. After all is said and done, Rome has said *A* when it established the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, and it must sooner or later say *B* and proclaim the dogma of the Assumption. *Ceterum censeo*, the "Papacy is sheer enthusiasm"; its formal principle is not Scripture, but the unwritten traditions (Rome's revelation) and reason.

## II

The doctrine of Mary's Assumption is but the capstone to the entire structure of Rome's Mariology. Protestants are familiar with the extravagant statements concerning Mary's part in mankind's salvation. However, the fact dare not be overlooked that Rome does direct the sinner to Christ. It is still a Christian Church. But it is a miracle of God's grace that Romanists still find Christ as the only and all-sufficient Redeemer under the mass of Mariological appendage. According to Scheeben, Mary participates in the redemption of mankind as Eve participated in the fall of mankind. Mary is therefore addressed as *salvatrix*, *reparatrix*, *restauratrix*, *liberatrix*, *reconcilatrix*, *redemptrix*. Theologically Rome holds that Mary is not the cause of man's salvation, but the *mediatrix* of Christ's redemptive work. She is therefore not considered the primary, but the intermediate cause of man's redemption. (P. 194.) Nevertheless she co-operates with Christ, who alone is the Redeemer, and she is spoken of as a "ministering partner" in the execution of His work. (P. 196.) As the "second Eve" she is the helpmate (*adjutrix*) of the "second Adam." As both Adam and Eve, though in a different manner, are the cause of mankind's sin, and as both were conquered by the devil, so both sexes must co-operate in restoring mankind. True, according to Scripture, Adam's guilt was the greater because he was the head of the race; but Eve initiated the sin, and therefore the work of redemption must also be initiated by a woman. (P. 200.) Scheeben supports this with the following four propositions: (1) Man's redemption is the work of the Triune God, therefore the two Persons proceeding from the

Father must be represented by a created agent [?]; (2) the honor of man's redemption is to be shared not only by a human *nature* [Rome's Christology is Nestorian], but also by a human *person*; (3) one human being as a representative of mankind must passively take part in the redemption to assure its procurement for mankind in general; (4) through her participation in the redemption, Mary, as the maternal bride of Christ, has become the mother of the redeemed, and they are assured of sharing in the merits of Christ. (P. 206 f.) Space does not permit a discussion of how Mary is said to have participated in the work of Christ, especially by way of her motherhood both before and after the birth of Christ, by her being the maternal spouse of Christ, by her sharing in the joyful and sorrowful experiences of Christ, etc. Suffice it to say, that by her co-operation with Christ's sacrifice Mary has been made the *mediatrix*, through whom mankind now alone can receive the blessings of Christ's sacrifice. (P. 239.) Some extravagant statements go so far as to say that Mary's soul remained in Christ's lifeless body; that when the side of Christ was pierced, Mary assumed all the power of Christ's death to bestow new life on mankind; that Mary received the lifeless body of Christ in her bosom and has thereby symbolized the truth that she is the depository of Christ's merits. (P. 240 f.) Thus Mary has become the spiritual mother of the redeemed.

Since Mary enjoys such a unique and exalted position, it is only logical that faithful Romanists hope that the "holy father" will establish the Assumption of Mary as a dogma. They are taught to believe that only as the resurrected and ascended "Queen of heaven" (*felix coeli porta*) will she, as the "Mother of our Judge," be able to quiet the fears of the redeemed as in death they are brought before the judgment seat of Christ. In a standard dogmatics one paragraph states that Romanists should trust that at the judgment seat they will see Christ's extended arms and hear the words of pardon on His lips. But in the next paragraph they are directed to turn their eyes to the "mystic ark of the covenant" (the ascended body of Mary), who will look in mercy upon her faithful children and show them the blessed fruit of her womb.<sup>11</sup> What

<sup>11</sup> *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, edited by Geo. D. Smith, The Macmillan Co., 1949. Vol. I, 548.

a strange mixture of the Gospel<sup>12</sup> and the doctrines of men! Whom will the Romanist trust for his salvation: the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ or the "Mother of God," who participates in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ? Will the Romanist pray in the hour of death: Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress? or will his dying words be: Mother Mary, help me in the hour of death?

We fear less the political aspirations of Rome than the indifference of large segments of the Protestant world to Rome's anti-Christian theology.

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<sup>12</sup> It is not in the scope of this study to show how even the elements of the Gospel are buried under the debris of Rome's material principle, the doctrine of work-righteousness.