

The Council for Christian Unity

Briefing paper by the Faith and Order Advisory Group (FOAG) on the
Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) report

Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ

1. Introduction

This briefing paper offers an introduction to and evaluation of the ARCIC report *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* (2005) which FOAG sees as the opening stage of a conversation between Anglicans and Roman Catholics on the subject of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The paper begins with a consideration of the two Marian dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church and asks why they have been a cause of division between the Roman Catholic Church and Christians of other traditions. It then outlines the background to *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* in the ARCIC process and offers a brief overview of the contents of the report. The paper then sets out those aspects of the report that the Faith and Order Advisory Group (FOAG) welcomed, and outlines a number of areas on which it had concerns and recommended further joint study. Finally, it offers some suggestions about how the Church of England should respond to the report.

The substantive work of FOAG, on which this paper draws, is set out in the collection of essays by members and staff of FOAG *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (ARCIC II)* [GS Misc 872], which was circulated to the previous Synod and is available on the Church of England website.

2. The Marian Dogmas

In the line with the task given to ARCIC, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* is primarily concerned with the two Marian dogmas defined in the Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, issued by Pope Pius IX in 1854, and the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, issued by Pope Pius XII in 1950.¹

Ineffabilis Deus teaches, as the faith of the Catholic Church, Mary's Immaculate Conception and her preservation from any stain of original sin:

We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of

¹ In accordance with normal practice the two Constitutions are referred to by the original Latin text of their opening words 'God ineffable' and 'The most bountiful God.' The full text of the two Apostolic Constitutions are available on the Vatican website at www.vatican.va

original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.²

Of anyone who dissents from this dogma it declares that ‘he is condemned by his own judgment; that he has suffered shipwreck in the faith; that he has separated from the unity of the Church.’

Ineffabilis Deus seems to have been issued in response to three factors: petitions from the bishops and from the Roman Catholic faithful in general and the growing liturgical celebration of the Immaculate Conception; perceived ‘errors in contemporary thought’, which were thought to pose a threat to the Roman Catholic religion and to civil society; and, as an encouragement to the bishops and the Roman Catholic faithful, in the face of threats to the temporal and spiritual authority of the Roman Catholic Church.³

Munificentissimus Deus declares the faith of the Catholic Church with regard to Mary’s assumption into heaven in body and soul at the end of her earthly life:

We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.⁴

The Constitution was issued on the basis of the infallible teaching authority of the Pope, as defined by the First Vatican council in 1870. Anyone who ‘should dare wilfully to deny or call into doubt that which we have defined,’ is warned, ‘let him know that he has fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic Faith.’

Like *Ineffabilis Deus*, the later definition it was issued after extensive consultation with Roman Catholic bishops from around the world. It was intended to ‘rebound to the glory of the Trinity and therefore benefit human society, deepen devotion towards Mary and a desire to share in the unity of the body of Christ amongst ‘all those who glory in the Christian name,’ convince people of the value of a life devoted to God and the good of others in face of materialism and the moral corruption flowing from it and, finally, strengthen the belief of the faithful in their own resurrection.

Each of the Marian dogmas was widely welcomed among Roman Catholics and gladly received by some other Christians, as giving formal expression to what had long been accepted as important aspects of the faith of the Church. But other Christians, including many Anglicans, responded critically. They felt that the definitions lacked a proper theological basis in the teaching of the New Testament and the Early Church, and they held that the Pope did not have the authority to define the faith of the Church Catholic or to anathematise those who were not able to accept this definition.

² For a detailed explanation of this definition see S. Butler, ‘The Immaculate Conception: Why was it defined as a dogma? And what was defined?’ in A. Denaux and N. Sagovsky (eds), *Studying Mary* (London & New York: Continuum, 2007), pp. 147-150.

³ See Butler ‘The Immaculate Conception’.

⁴ For a detailed explanation of this definition and the theology behind it see L. Walsh, ‘The definition of the Assumption of Mary into Heavenly Glory,’ in Denaux and Sagovsky, pp. 165-192.

3. The background to *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* in the ARCIC process.

The Marian dogmas therefore raise important questions of authority as well as of theology. It was noted in the Anglican – Roman Catholic *Malta Report* of 1968 that ‘Real or apparent differences between us come to the surface in such matters as the unity and indefectibility of the Church and its teaching authority, the Petrine primacy, infallibility, and Mariological definitions,’⁵ and that they therefore needed to be examined as part of a wider study of the subject of the nature of authority in the Church.

Mary was duly considered in the course of the 1981 ARCIC report *Authority in the Church II* which declared that Anglicans and Roman Catholics could agree on much of theology that the two Roman Catholic dogmas were intended to affirm:

We agree that there can be but one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, and reject any interpretation of the role of Mary which obscures this affirmation. We agree in recognizing that Christian understanding of Mary is inseparably linked with the doctrines of Christ and of the Church. We agree in recognizing the grace and unique vocation of Mary, Mother of God Incarnate (Theotokos), in observing her festivals, and in according her honour in the communion of saints. We agree that she was prepared by divine grace to be the mother of our Redeemer, by whom she herself was redeemed and received into glory. We further agree in recognizing in Mary a model of holiness, obedience and faith for all Christians. We accept that it is possible to regard her as a prophetic figure of the Church of God before as well as after the Incarnation.

Nevertheless, the report continued, the dogmas continued to present a problem to many Anglicans:

The dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption raise a special problem for those Anglicans who do not consider that the precise definitions given by these dogmas are sufficiently supported by Scripture. For many Anglicans the teaching authority of the bishop of Rome, independent of a council, is not recommended by the fact that through it these Marian doctrines were proclaimed as dogmas binding on all the faithful. Anglicans would also ask whether, in any future union between our two Churches, they would be required to subscribe to such dogmatic statements. One consequence of our separation has been a tendency for Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike to exaggerate the importance of the Marian dogmas in themselves at the expense of other truths more closely related to the foundation of the Christian faith.⁶

In 1995, Pope John Paul II noted that the topic of ‘the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God and Icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ’s disciples and for all humanity’ was one of the ‘the areas in need of fuller study before a true consensus of faith can be achieved’.⁷

The subject of the Blessed Virgin Mary – and specifically the Roman Catholic dogmas concerning her – was therefore included for further exploration in the second phase of ARCIC’s work of ARCIC. *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* is the first result

⁵ *The Malta Report* 1968, Paragraph 20.

⁶ *Authority in the Church II*, paragraph 30, in *The Final Report* (London: CTS/SPCK, 1982), pp. 95-96.

⁷ *Ut Unum Sint*, 1995.

of that work. ARCIC's intention was to explore a way of looking at Mary that would be in agreement with both biblical teaching and the 'ancient common traditions' shared by both churches, and that might offer the basis for Anglicans to accept as legitimate the theology underlying the two Marian dogmas, thus reducing the obstacle presented by the dogmas to closer relations between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches.

4. An Overview of the contents of *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*

Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ consists of an Introduction followed by four major sections (Mary in Scripture, Mary in the Christian Tradition, Mary within 'the pattern of grace and hope', and Mary in the Life of the Church) and a conclusion.

The Introduction (Paragraphs 1-5) describes the background to the current report in the previous work of ARCIC.

Section A (Paragraphs 6-30), 'Mary according to the Scriptures', begins by looking at the overall biblical pattern of the grace of God and the hope for a perfect human response to it, arguing that while Christians have seen this pattern perfectly fulfilled in the obedience of Christ they have also discerned a similar pattern of response in Mary. It then goes on to survey the biblical material relating to Mary in the Gospels, in Acts and in Revelation 12, and concludes by declaring that the biblical witness summons all Christian to call the Mary described in Scripture 'blessed'.

'Mary in the Christian Tradition,' Section B (Paragraphs 31- 51), examines the way that Mary has been understood down the centuries within the Christian tradition as a whole and within the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions in particular. It concludes that, contrary to what is often thought, there is significant convergence between the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions with regard to Mary in several areas. Specifically, it notes that both traditions agree in seeing that Mary as the *Theotókos*, the God-bearer or Mother of God incarnate; both are heirs to a tradition that believes that Mary was ever virgin, and that sees her as the new Eve and as a type of the Church; both join with Mary, whom all generations have called blessed, in praying and praising God; both observe the Marian festivals and accord Mary honour in the communion of saints; both are agreed that Mary and the saints pray for the whole Church.

The theological centre of the report is Section C (Paragraphs 52-63), 'Mary within the Pattern of Grace and Hope.' Referring to Rom 8:30 – 'those whom God predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified' – it draws on the New Testament teaching that through the work of the Holy Spirit the divine glory in which Christians will fully share at the end of history is already anticipated in their earthly lives. This biblical teaching offers a theological framework for understanding the angel's description of Mary as 'graced' (Luke 1:28): God has prepared her from the earliest days of her life to fulfil her predestined role of being the Mother of God by filling her with grace and making her holy. So, too, according to the report, it is possible to maintain that at the end of her life Mary ascended into glory, in a manner similar to that in which Elijah, Enoch, the penitent thief crucified beside Christ, and St. Stephen were also drawn into God's presence. In the light of this biblical teaching it is therefore possible (the report believes) to understand the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the bodily Assumption of the Virgin Mary as consonant with Scripture. This being the case, the report concludes, it ought to be possible for Anglicans and Roman Catholics to

recognize a common faith concerning Mary, even if Anglicans do not explicitly accept the precise wording of the dogmas themselves.

The final section, D (Paragraphs 64-75), 'Mary in the Life of the Church,' identifies a fourfold role for Mary: providing the highest example of the life of grace; holding a special place in the Church's life of praise and prayer; along with the other saints, interceding for the Church on earth, but exercising a distinctive ministry of intercession because of her special place in the economy of salvation; taking a particular, motherly, role which involves caring both for the faithful and for the world as a whole. Through the words of the Magnificat, Mary has become an inspiration for work for peace and justice. Devotion to the Virgin Mary is argued to be legitimate though not obligatory, and the report believes that there is no reason why asking Mary and the other saints to pray for us should be a cause of 'ecclesial division.'

The Conclusion (Paragraphs 76-80) summarises the report's achievements in terms of looking afresh at the teaching about Mary in Scripture and the Christian tradition, and sets out the consequent 'advances in agreement'. It suggests that together Anglicans and Roman Catholics can affirm the teaching that God has taken the Blessed Virgin Mary in the fullness of her person into his glory as consonant with Scripture, and as only to be understood in the light of Scripture. They can affirm that, in view of her vocation to be the mother of the Holy One, Christ's redeeming work reached back in Mary to the depths of her being and to her earliest beginnings. They can therefore also affirm that the teaching about Mary in the two definitions of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception, understood within the biblical pattern of the economy of hope and grace, can be said to be consonant with the teaching of the Scriptures and the ancient common traditions. Finally (the report asserts), Mary has a continuing ministry which serves the ministry of Christ, our unique mediator; Mary and the saints pray for the whole Church so that the practice of asking Mary and the saints to pray for us is not communion-dividing.⁸

The report notes that, should this agreement be accepted by our two Communion, it would place the questions about authority in the Church, that arise from the two definitions of 1854 and 1950, in a new ecumenical context.

5. What is welcome about *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* ?

In accordance with the normal pattern of receiving ecumenical texts in the Church of England, the text of the report came to the then Faith and Order Advisory Group (now subsumed into the Faith and Order Commission) for consideration. The group welcomed a number of points and approaches:

- The helpful exposition of the theological significance of the Church's traditional belief in the virginal conception of Christ (paragraph 18) and the affirmation of the teaching of the Third Ecumenical Council, at Ephesus in AD 431, that Mary is rightly to be called *Theotókos*, the God-bearer or Mother of God.
- The endorsement by the report of the normative role of Scripture in Christian theology and its acknowledgement by the report that 'doctrines and devotions which are contrary to Scripture cannot be said to be revealed by God nor to be the teaching of the Church.'⁹

⁸ *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, pp. 78-80 (Para 78).

⁹ *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ*, p. 80 (Para 79).

- The report's methodology of seeking to understand Mary within the wider biblical pattern of grace and hope, its exploration of the biblical texts specifically concerned with the Virgin Mary and its clear biblical emphasis on the prevenient grace of God.
- The fact that the report's discussion of the saints and of forms of devotion to the Virgin Mary emphasises the unique role of Christ as the one mediator between God and humanity, its recognition that any idea of seeking the help of the saints in prayer must not obscure the direct access of believers to God our heavenly Father; and its insistence that doctrinal statements and devotional practices which focus on Mary must not obscure the unique and central place of Jesus Christ in the life of the Church. 'Mary points always to her Son.'
- The report's useful summary of aspects of the Anglican liturgical and devotional tradition relating to Mary from the Reformation to the present day.
- The recognition in the report that Mary's obedience to God has been abused in order to 'encourage passivity and impose servitude on women,' whereas Mary should be an inspiration to those working for: 'justice for women and the empowerment of the oppressed' (paragraph 74).

In a number of these areas, however, it was felt that the report could and should have been developed further.

6. Recommendations for further work to clarify unresolved issues

Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ follows the established methodology of ARCIC statements in opening up an ecumenical conversation between Anglicans and Roman Catholics by offering some preliminary observations and inviting further study by both churches. Accordingly in this section we note four areas of the report that we believe require clarification by means of further joint study at the international level by our two communions.

(a) The place of Scripture

The task given to ARCIC is felt by some to have led to an approach that assumed what it set out to prove. In particular, there have been concerns that the dogmas in fact guided the reading of Scripture, rather than Scripture being taken as normative for defining doctrine. Questions have also been raised about the value of the affirmation of the Marian dogmas as 'consonant with scripture' on the basis of this methodology.

Although this concern is somewhat mitigated by the specific task given to ARCIC and by recognition of the explicit appeal to scripture in the report, there is nonetheless a clear need to clarify questions of biblical interpretation. **We therefore recommend further study of the relationship between doctrine and the reading of Scripture in shaping thinking about Mary.**

(b) History and the development of Marian doctrine

Some scepticism has been expressed within FOAG and elsewhere as to the historical basis for the Marian dogmas, although it is generally recognised that evidence of belief in the particular holiness of Mary and of a significant ending to her earthly life can be traced back to the early centuries of the Church. The events referred to in the Marian dogmas and celebrated at the Marian feasts have an important theological and symbolic meaning which needs to be elucidated and explained. This might usefully be done against the background of a more detailed examination of the development of

the Marian doctrine and devotion. The report has been criticised for its lack of nuanced awareness of the context of the development of teachings about Mary and for its lack of acknowledgement of the criticisms that have been made of this development. These neglected traditions could be helpful in opening up a deeper understanding of the meaning of teachings about Mary. **We therefore recommend further study of the development of Marian theology and devotion, focussing on the reasons for this development and the criticisms that have been made of it.**

(c) Mary and women

The report has been criticised for its almost complete silence on the effect of Marian teachings on the lives of women, its failure to engage with feminist readings of Mary within both Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism and to acknowledge the distinctive contribution to thinking about Mary made by medieval women such as Hildegard of Bingen, Gertrud the Great and Elizabeth of Schönau. A further concern was the relatively brief consideration of Mary considered as an inspiration for those working for justice and liberation. **We therefore recommend further study of the ways in which Marian theology and devotion are perceived by, and impact on the lives of women in our traditions.**

(d) The development of Marian theology and practice within Anglicanism

A widely expressed concern has been whether the report does justice to the range of Anglican teaching and practice with regard to Mary, and in particular to an important strand of Anglican thinking which is critical of many aspects of medieval and modern Roman Catholic Marian theology and devotion. It has been said that the liturgy of the Church of England has been very restrained in its references to Mary and that the recital of the Magnificat at Evensong has generally been understood not particularly as Marian devotion, but primarily as the proclamation of the gospel. Moreover, whilst some Anglicans see asking for the intercession of Mary and the saints as a central part of their spirituality, there are others who view this practice as contrary to Scripture and to the Anglican formularies. It is not clear that this latter view has been adequately represented in the report. At the same time, wider knowledge and understanding amongst Anglicans of the resources within Anglicanism, which might form the basis for moving towards an ecumenical agreement about Mary, could place the historic disagreement about the status of the Marian dogmas in a new and more hopeful context. **We therefore recommend further study of the theology and practice with regard to the Blessed Virgin Mary within Anglicanism, taking the full range of Anglican perspectives into account.**

7. Conclusion: A Church of England response to *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*

In the light of the welcome aspects of the report noted in section 5 of this paper, and in the context of the Anglican Communion's continuing theological dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, and despite the points for further discussion discussed above, FOAG believes that this report represents a genuine ecumenical advance. However, there still remains the crucial question of the status of the Marian dogmas and the anathemas associated with them.

As several senior Roman Catholic theologians have noted, the context in which the Marian dogmas and the anathemas were proclaimed binding on the faithful was that of a divided Church.¹⁰ The report seeks to help Anglicans and Roman Catholics to

¹⁰ See, for example, the comments noted in C. Morerod OP, 'The authority of recent Marian Dogmas in

recognise the beliefs underlying the dogmas as part of the faith that they hold in common. On this basis it suggests that Anglicans might accept that the Roman Catholic dogmas are ‘a legitimate version of the Christian faith’,¹¹ whilst Roman Catholics might not require of Anglicans ‘the explicit acceptance of the precise wording’,¹² of the dogmas. However, it was not the intention of the report to settle the issue of whether Anglicans should be asked to accept the Marian dogmas or whether the anathemas apply to them, but rather to provide a foundation upon which Anglicans and Roman Catholics might address the theological issues underlying the content of the dogmas and thus provide an appropriate context within in which the specific questions relating to the dogmas themselves and the anathemas might be addressed.¹³

Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ should therefore be seen as the opening of a conversation which should be taken forward by further joint study between our communions along the lines recommended in this paper.

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Denaux and Sagovsky, pp. 208-209.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 63 (para 63, footnote 13).

¹² Ibid, p. 63 (para 63, footnote 13).

¹³ A parallel example is the way in which, in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999), the Lutheran World Federation (now Communion) and the Roman Catholic Church were able to reach agreement about the substance of the doctrine of justification and to agree that the anathemas issued at the time of the Reformation should not be regarded as applicable today.