'THE ROMAN CATHOLIC POINT OF VIEW'

BY

HENRI DE RIEDMATTEN, O.P.

N the 15th August the Church learnt of the Holy Father's decision to define Mary's Assumption as an article of faith on the 1st November. The previous day the S.P.C.K. brought out a small book entitled *The Assumption of Our Lady and Catholic Theology*.[1] The blurb informs us that 'It is an important characteristic of this book that it is written from a Roman Catholic point of view'. That before the Pope's decision was known Catholics should speak against the opportuneness of the definition is in no way extraordinary. Learned theologians have expressed such an opinion. But we are at a loss to understand how Messrs Bennett and Wynch, if they are Catholics, consider themselves authorised to publish a book on such a serious subject without the *imprimatur* and from a publishing house which is *ex professo* non-Catholic. In point of fact we are speedily enlightened on this 'Roman Catholic' point of view when we find the authors envisaging the possibility that such a definition would compromise papal infallibility itself (pp. 95-6) or watering down the latter in order to render it acceptable to those who do not share the views which prevailed at the Vatican Council (p. 4 ff.).[2] We do not think it worth while to enter upon a detailed discussion of arguments which are based on equivocation right from the beginning. We will content ourselves with asking our Lord that the authors, if they are Catholics, may not belong to 'the few' who will be excommunicated because 'they cannot accept a dogmatic definition of the Assumption' (cf. p. 13). But since 'a' Roman Catholic viewpoint is spoken of, it may not be out of place to attempt to set forth, on the eve of the proposed definition, 'the' Roman Catholic point of view. We shall not here touch on the reasons for the definition—these cannot be properly set forth and appreciated until the dogmatic bull is published—but on the frame of mind in which it seems to us that Catholics ought to prepare themselves for this definition.

One of the dangers of the polemics initiated in certain quarters on the subject of the Assumption is that it leads certain Catholics

---

[1] *The Assumption of Our Lady and Catholic Theology*. By Victor Bennett and Raymond Winch. (London, S.P.C.K.; 5s.).

[2] 'Indeed there seemed little to object to in the infallibility of a pope, if he had no intention of exercising it.'

to create difficulties for themselves because they start from a standard of evaluation which is not that of their faith or of their Church. The definition is presented as suddenly raising an entirely new problem, as making the burden of the faith heavier, as lengthening a list of conditions necessary to salvation which it is of paramount importance to reduce as much as possible. And by recourse to argument from Scripture such people would like to conclude the discussion in accordance with the standards commonly accepted by 'Christianity'. Those who do not belong to the Catholic Church may indeed speak in this way and we ought to have great respect for their good faith, at the same time hoping eventually to see such good faith better enlightened. But we know that the question is wrongly stated and that that is not the problem.

If the Assumption, viewed in the full historical and theological context which has led up to the papal decision, is not thoroughly capable of definition, it would not be on the morrow of the event that the claim of the Church to the doctrinal assistance of the Holy Spirit would be proved void. The place which Mary occupies in Catholic doctrine and practice is such that it can be affirmed, setting, of course, on one side inevitable extravagances and excrescences, that if this position is in need of adjustment or correction in its essentials and in the general line along which it has developed, the Church has been erring for a very long time. For from the very first centuries of Christianity the life and devotion of the Church have been set in this direction. Far from holding back the natural enthusiasm of her faithful for devotion to Mary, the Church has seen in it one of the surest and most authentic means of making them fully conscious of the riches of the economy of redemption. Is it in any way surprising that the Church should remain faithful to the first datum of Christianity, that everything is in the Incarnation? Mary sums up and in a certain sense 'makes' the Incarnation, the link of our flesh to Christ, our physical union with God. That God should have willed that this should take place by conception in the womb of a daughter of men is a gracious provision for which we cannot but give praise to him. All is simple and clear in Mary's part in the divine plan and devotion to the Mother of God flowers quite naturally at the very heart of the Christian mystery.

The Christians of ancient times had to sustain a struggle over the title THEOTOKOS. In winning a final victory for the term, the orthodox Fathers brought the faith, and theology, closer to full possession of one of the most divinely human elements of Christian teaching. The devotion of simple folk made no mistake in this matter; it has neither more heavily burdened nor obscured the message but has been a constant invitation to the Doctors of the Church to deter-

mine, with the utmost exactitude possible, the place and titles of her who said 'yes' to the divine plan, of her to whom Christ said on Calvary, 'Behold thy son'. We are not in the least alarmed by the share taken in this elaboration by popular demands. Rather than denounce the forms in which such demands have been framed, it will be our pleasure, on the contrary, to recognise in them the naïve and sincere expression of the awakening of loving hearts to the grandeurs of Mary. Without canonising every legend or whitewashing all the fomentors of apocrypha, without approving every formula or every practice put into circulation, we know that the historical theologian has the obligation of gauging these expressions of the life of the Church exactly, of evaluating at its full supernatural value such forms of Christian devotion once they have enjoyed the recognition of ecclesiastical authority to such a great extent.[3] The Doctors have not been found wanting at this task and they will certainly not be accused of precipitation. Whilst they have been quick to recognise that here we are at the very heart of the Christian economy, they have meditated at great length on the share which falls to Mary in the structure of Christian teaching. They have not accepted without investigation what the instinct of the faithful or the teachings of pious souls suggested. Their office is to serve the teaching Church by a rigorous evaluation of the facts and articles of faith, by a technical method, by a diligent and tireless investigation of what is 'given' to us in revelation. It is possible, it is even certain, that as time has passed doctrinal labour has become more technical, more conscious of its methods, and for this reason more skilful in checking up on them. All this is only one aspect of that unceasing organic life which is the eternal youth of Holy Church. It is in this light that the definition of the Assumption will be viewed in her history.

It is argued that the Church does not make a definition unless it is to eliminate the poison of heresy, and a famous phrase of Newman's on 'luxury' definitions is recalled. This is to belittle the riches entrusted to the Church and the meaning of the powers given to her. Our faith is not a burden, it is a full adherence to revealed truths as put forward by the Church. Such adherence, like all knowledge, is an entering into possession and an enrichment, the repercussions of which influence our whole life of grace. All theologians agree in conferring an eminent status upon everything which

[3] This is not tantamount to saying that apocrypha or argument of devotion can serve to justify a definition, but that rather than reject them *a priori*, the historian of the Church knows how to discover in them manifestations of a more solid and profound value than profane history or literary criticism would be disposed to recognise in them.

comes under the certitudes of the faith. It is, it seems to us, beyond question that there is a sophism in reducing this content on principle to a minimum. No, it becomes explicit in the propositions of the ordinary and extraordinary *magisterium*. Historically it seems more than probable that many points explicitly *de fide* today have been thus assimilated, not through definitions 'against' anyone but through the teaching of the ordinary *magisterium*. None of us, of course, would care to lose the least jot of what is given to us in this way. The problem of definition is thus much more a problem of enrichment (and, *subjectively speaking*, of a real growth in knowledge of the divine mystery), of dispensing to the members of an elect people from the riches entrusted to the 'Mater Ecclesia'.

This organic conception of things will find a further field for its application. As we have said, the reasons for the definition will not be known until the publication of the dogmatic bull. It can however be anticipated that they will be essentially of the order of theological arguments on the most prudent and unbiassed level. But this does not mean that references to the Scriptures and to tradition will be excluded. There, too, it seems, adverse arguments have not been without influence upon some Catholics. People are afraid of an immoderate use of human reasoning, of appeals to the evidence of history insufficiently founded, or they almost expect to find Scriptural arguments obtained by accommodation or by an obvious ignorance of the primary meaning of the text.

To cherish fears like this is to place little confidence in the Church, and it is also to fail to recognise the value and nature of the methods of procedure of her workers. The *Osservatore Romano* recalled very opportunely some time ago that the scientific method of the theologian was not the method which is merely concerned with dissecting an isolated fact. Working in the faith and in the context of the whole of his faith, the theologian (speculative or positive) has the right and the duty to throw light on the different data from revelation as a whole and to bring fully into play the connections with and lights received from other parts of it. Thus, for our part, we should find it quite natural to see Gen. 3, 15 introduced into the factors of the definition. It will be argued that to read the Assumption of our Lady into this text is to force it. The reply, not inapposite, will be that if the fruit of sin is death, if death has dominion over us through original corruption, the total victory of Mary over the devil, guaranteed by the Immaculate Conception, implies *ipso facto* that she should not suffer corruption. The non-Catholic exegete will not be convinced of the fact and will contest it, but the Catholic, who cannot abstract from the fundamental data of revelation, has a legitimate right to go deeper without being in the

slightest degree unfaithful either to the exigencies of the scientific method or to the sovereign rights of truth.

Finally, whatever else may be said, the Christian will not forget that here we are in the domain of the transcendent. The function of Mary's Assumption is not, like Christ's Resurrection, to be an attestation to men of the truth of the message—so that the Resurrection, because of the very context of its promise by Christ, must be palpable and evident as an historical fact even to those who do not believe in Christ. The Assumption is not a motive of credibility; the nature of this doctrine does not demand that the historical circumstances which surrounded it should have been transmitted to posterity by irrefutable evidence. Its place is in that line of truths which are the joy and the riches of the faith, which can have meaning only for those who believe, that is, the divine rulings and provisions to which it is good for us to adhere, but the certitude of which, as it bears on objects beyond our apprehension, is only given in the loving acceptance of divine revelation. It is not Mary's empty tomb that the Pope will define shortly; it is her triumph already fully enjoyed in the plenitude of participation in the triumph of Christ, her Son and our first-fruits.

THEOTOKOS
(LOURDES)

BY

DOROTHEA STILL

On the grey stone
Kneeling remote, alone,
Clouded with other people's prayers,
In the thick crowd alone:
Mother, where is your son?
Where is maternity, its shining dread?
The wind blows
An artificial rose:
The leaves are dead.
—Help sinners now and in the hour of death—
Words defeat the sense that they repeat.

Rocks and trees distil the tears of these
Imploring multitudes
Here in the flesh and ghosted from the past.
Heartache and pain again and yet again
Wash round the hem of smugly plastered robe