

Comment:

The Balasuriya File

In his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (25 May 1995) Pope John Paul II invited churches in 'real but imperfect communion' with Rome to 'engage in a patient and fraternal dialogue' with him about a way of 'exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation'.

Protecting the faithful from heresy has long been part of the mission; part of the new situation is how to do so without creating even greater scandal. The excommunication of Fr Tissa Balasuriya OMI for refusing to recant alleged heresies in his book on Mary is one way of 'exercising the primacy' which makes many Catholics shudder, and undermines the confidence in Rome of the considerable number of other Christians who believe in the need for a centre of unity such as the papacy might provide. Many Orthodox and many in the Reformed tradition who, no doubt for opposite reasons, would regard his feminist-liberationist Marian spirituality with distaste would nevertheless think that the treatment of Tissa Balasuriya is a scandal — exactly the kind of display of Vatican power that makes the rock of Peter a stumbling block.

Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text, edited by Helen Stanton and introduced by Edmund Hill OP (Mowbray, 1997, 262 pages, paperback), brings us the file. The controversial text, augmented by meditations for a 'Marian Way of the Cross', takes up about 150 pages. As an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, and a native of Sri Lanka, with its very rich (perhaps over-ripe) tradition of Marian devotion, Tissa Balasuriya (he was born in 1924 and ordained in Rome in 1952) has, not unnaturally, thought a good deal about the place of the Mother of God in the Christian dispensation. Briefly, he wants to replace an image of Mary as the submissive sexless ethereal (etc.) model for Catholic women with what he takes to be a much more biblical picture of Mary as the strong woman who sings the *Magnificat*, identifying herself with the cause of justice and liberation (etc.). He thinks he is in line with Pope Paul VI's call, in *Marialis Cultus* (1974), to renew Marian piety in tune with the aspirations of women today (etc.).

His New Testament scholarship is conservative. He thinks, for example, that the adoration of the shepherds, the visit of the Magi, the massacre of the innocents, and the flight into Egypt all actually happened — nothing here about stories based on Old Testament quotations! Mary and Joseph were migrant workers in Egypt 'for years', he says. Later, 'Mary would have wondered why Jesus was not settling down to a married life. She may have often asked herself, as Oriental mothers still

do, whether she should arrange a marriage for Jesus' — and much else in this speculative vein.

'It seems to me', Balasuriya says, 'that reflections such as these are more significant than speculation concerning her preservation from original sin or her being a virgin'. While not denying the Marian dogmas, he seems unable to present his own reflections without contrasting them with traditional theology. One way or another, 'it is not surprising', Edmund Hill says, 'that the Sri Lankan bishops were alarmed by Balasuriya's book — and indeed they would have been failing in their duty of episcopal oversight if they had not taken notice of it'.

The book first appeared as two journal articles in 1990, in all of 600 copies. (It is of course circulating much more widely now.) In December 1992 a small committee began to study it on behalf of the Sri Lankan bishops. After fruitless exchanges locally, Balasuriya received an extensive set of 'Observations' from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in July 1995 — in Italian, so that he had to ask for an English translation. These are among the documents published in full in Helen Halton's book. The misunderstandings between Balasuriya and the CDF go deep. For example, when he contends that 'the papacy is a function in which sexuality is not significant', the CDF concludes that he is denying the dogmas of papal primacy and infallibility. 'There is nothing that the Pope has to do which an Indira Gandhi, a Margaret Thatcher, a Cory Aquino, or Benazir Bhutto could not do', he replies — a bizarre enough thesis, surely! His lengthy reply was dismissed by the CDF in one word — 'Unsatisfactory' — a little insultingly, one might think. On the face of it, it looks as if his case has never been treated in accordance with the CDF's own regulations. His appeal to the Apostolic Signatura was disallowed on the Pope's instructions, presumably on the grounds that no controversial act of ecclesiastical administrative power has taken place (see Canon 1445). On 2 January 1997 he was excommunicated — 'to avoid an interminable discussion which would not be useful to anyone', as Cardinal Ratzinger said a few weeks later, justifying the action.

Even Christians who believe that procedures are required to protect the faithful from heresy must wonder whether in Tissa Balasuriya's case anything like justice has been done. A much loved old man has had his peace of mind destroyed. Far sillier stuff flourishes unchallenged, especially about the Virgin Mary. Respect for authority cannot be taken for granted these days; it has to be earned — procedures have to be followed to the letter, and justice has to be seen to be done. Decades of ecumenical confidence building have been nullified by this impatient exercise of Vatican power — and there cannot be many Catholics who have followed the story without disquiet and embarrassment.

F.K.