

Marian Symbols and Marian Doctrines: Lonergan's Contribution

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The celebrating of a Marian Year in 1987—8 helped to stimulate reflection on the process by which faith in God is evolving through the medium of the Church's Marian tradition. By highlighting the figure of Mary, it posed the question: how are the Church's Marian doctrines able to articulate their truth within the variety of contexts in which they are received?

In the period between *Lumen Gentium* and *Redemptoris Mater*¹ we have witnessed a theological debate concerning the symbolic character of statements made by the Church about Mary—a debate that questions whether the Church's Marian doctrines are necessarily grounded in historical events.² The purpose of this paper is to describe briefly the contours of the debate concerning theological statements about Mary and to suggest that Bernard Lonergan's notion of conversion can provide a more adequate contemporary understanding of the ongoing role of Marian symbols and doctrines in the lives of believers.

Approaching the Problem

In the period between the publication of *Lumen Gentium* and *Redemptoris Mater*, there has taken place a debate within the theological community that has not been reproduced within the official Magisterium. The theological community has called into question the very nature of religious language; the ecclesial documents depict Mary as a type of the Church and model of faith precisely because what has been promised to us has already been realized in her—and do so without acknowledging any difficulty attached to the use of such language.

There is in these documents a tendency to mesh the Marian symbol—that dynamic memory of Mary that is structured into Catholic tradition and shapes the Church's self-understanding—with the Marian doctrines, as if believers could be expected to make the same quality of affirmation to every statement. As will be seen later, these documents set out to speak to the entire Church, employing both symbolic and rational discourse, but end by leaving part of the Church unsatisfied about the relationship between the historical Mary, the Church's Marian symbols, and the doctrines that articulate their meaning for us.

The main difficulty with the Church's position lies in its inability

to explain precisely how believers may imitate Mary in her uniqueness. Indeed, it would seem that the Church's own doctrines so removed Mary from the human condition that all attempts at imitation must be accomplished at the price of denying one's humanity.

What is lacking in the Church's presentation is an appreciation of the symbolic nature of *all* religious language, which retains its capacity to manifest the transcendent without annihilating it or confining it within the immanent. The question thus becomes: is it possible for the Church to acknowledge the inherently symbolic character of its own doctrines without sacrificing the substance of its faith?

Marian statements in Lumen Gentium

Lumen Gentium repeatedly employs symbolic language both in its presentation of Mary and in describing her relationship to Christ and the Church. Elizabeth Johnson has observed that the very decision by Vatican II to include the presentation of Mary within the Constitution on the Church had the effect of focusing the reader's attention on the presence of symbols.³ The image of the Mystical Body of Christ provides the background for statements that announce Mary as 'mother of the members of Christ'⁴, 'joined to Christ the Head'.⁵

Describing the relationship between Mary and the Church, *Lumen Gentium* emphasizes that 'the Mother of God is a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ'.⁶ As a type, Mary is not merely a sign, but a sign overflowing with meaning, so that 'devoutly meditating on her and contemplating her in the light of the Word made man, the Church reverently penetrates more deeply into the great mystery of the Incarnation and becomes more and more like her spouse'.⁷ There is, then, a plenitude of meaning in the figure of Mary: one that invites reflection and has the power to transform lives. By imitating Mary, the Church 'becomes more and more like her lofty type, and continually progresses in faith, hope and charity, seeking and doing the will of God in all things'.⁸

One is drawn to the conclusion, therefore, that *Lumen Gentium* implicitly recognizes the symbolic nature of its statements about Mary, not in the sense that their historical meaning is denied, but in the sense that these statements do not exhaust the mystery to which they refer. As will be seen, these statements, precisely because they are symbolic, reveal their fullness only to those who participate in the mystery; from such as these, they require a conversion that manifests itself in new commitments and behaviours.⁹

Following the categories developed by Philip Wheelwright, in which a distinction is made between symbols that attempt precise identification (steno symbols) and those that attempt to mediate the tension between symbol and reality (tensive symbols), we shall consider that the Council intended its theological statements about Mary to be tensive symbols,

bending and stretching in their various associations, yet never losing as their primary referent the historical figure of Mary.¹⁰

The symbolic nature of Marian doctrines

Elizabeth Johnson has proposed the view that theological statements about Mary indeed 'have a symbolic structure, so that while they refer immediately and in an obvious way to this one woman, they reach their intended theological referent when interpreted finally as statements about the church, the community of faithful disciples, of which she is a member and in which she participates.'¹¹ Distinguishing her position from one that locates the meaning of such statements only in historical fact (the so-called Catholic position) and one that views such statements as meditative reflections on the life of faith (the classical Protestant position), Johnson insists that symbolic understanding of these statements allows the Church to discern something both about Mary and about the Church of which she is a type.

Although Johnson initially recognizes this dual capacity of symbolic language, she eventually distances herself from a strictly centrist position on the basis of 'the unequivocal primacy in the order of Christian truth which belongs to statements about God and God's saving self-revelation in Jesus Christ'.¹² In other words, the primary referent of Christian symbolic language must always be the saving work of God in Jesus Christ; the historical figures or events to which such statements refer are secondary in importance to their soteriological interpretations. Thus Johnson goes on to affirm that:

Marian statements originate in the imaginative faculty of the community brought into being by the Christ event and are uttered as expressions of its search for self-understanding in faithful and creative response (one of its members assumes corporate personality in reflecting back to the community its own gift and task).¹³

In Johnson's view, the two modern Marian dogmas constitute a particular instance of corporate symbolism. Since 'the truth of Christian dogma refers to aspects of God's salvation in Christ which can never be embodied in clear unequivocal formulas without remainder'¹⁴, the Marian dogmas 'signify that at the beginning and end of life we are surrounded and affected by the redeeming grace of God, more powerful than any evil.'¹⁵ Furthermore, these particular dogmas are distinct from other Marian statements in that they refer as much to later members of the Church as to Mary:

It is not as though the immaculate conception and assumption are historically based statements of unique prerogatives of this individual woman which separate her from the rest of us.... Neither is it as though these statements affirmed some truth about the ekklesia which at the same time could not

truly be said of Mary, for as a member of the church she shares its reality.¹⁶

Thus Johnson eventually comes to a position that differs from her original thesis: 'the content of the doctrine holds that Mary was enveloped from the beginning of her life in the redemptive and saving love of God through the merits of Jesus Christ, but this is not a situation unique to this one woman.'¹⁷ In the theology of the Catholic Church, however, this is a situation unique to this one woman, and Johnson's ecumenically sensitive argument does nothing to reduce the tension between the exegetical observation of the symbolic structure of marian statements and the Church's deliberately defined dogmas.

The dogma of the assumption is similarly vulnerable to reinterpretation. Following the lead of the U.S. Bishops, Johnson notes that 'Mary in her Assumption ... is a figure of the Church as perfected through union with Christ.'¹⁸ The final perfection previewed in Mary's assumption 'is a symbol of the final transformation of our whole human reality, thanks to the power and everlasting mercy of God; consequently, it expresses truth about the nature of human salvation.'¹⁹

To summarize Johnson's position: theological statements about Mary arose in the faith-conditioned imaginative faculty of the early Church in an attempt to articulate its own ideal relationship to God in Christ. They refer primarily to the Church's ultimate realization of its ideal, and refer to Mary as an historical figure insofar as she, too, is a member of the Church.

Johnson's position is, as I have said, ecumenically sensitive, attempting to establish a dialogue on the basis of the symbolic significance of marian dogmas, and reserving discussion of historical fact to the respective communions.²⁰ Yet, as Neal Flanagan has observed, it seems necessary to explain *why the Church has chosen Mary*, and not some other figure, as the vehicle for its symbolic articulation. Flanagan concludes that 'primarily symbolic though they be, these paintings of Mary must flow from historical memories that established her as a primary Christian model.'²¹ The Church has not invented Mary as the articulation of its ideal, but has found in the historical figure of Mary, as remembered by the Church itself, an appropriate and inviting image of what the Church knows itself called to become.

The position proposed by Johnson has the effect of concealing the historical person or event behind the symbol and its primary referent. As symbols, the Marian dogmas turn our attention, not to critical reflection on the person of Mary, but towards the Church and its relationship with God's saving work in Christ.

Opposed to Johnson's position are those interpretations of symbolic language that retain as referents both the historical and the ultimate—in the case of the Marian dogmas, both the person of Mary and the Church's ideal realization. Thus, Dennis Doyle writes of the New

Symbol, which ‘does not simply point away from itself; it does not only present that which it represents. The New Symbol contains within itself that which it represents; it is in itself a particular manifestation of that which is being presented.’²² The New Symbol is thus Doyle’s creative effort to respect the inexhaustible plenitude of symbolic language without lapsing into complete relativism.

In this view, every symbol—including dogmas—depends on the attitude of its receiver. ‘However, once a symbol establishes a true relationship between a believer and that which is symbolized, something becomes true about that symbol that can never be taken away from it. For not only do symbols present that which they symbolize; they create between that which is symbolized and a believer a living bond that is potentially common to all believers.’²³

For Doyle, the Church’s Marian dogmas, once they have been validated by the Church as appropriate symbols of God’s redeeming work, establish a normative relationship between the believer, God, and the world, articulated in the dogma itself. Thus, theological statements about Mary are not only true, but the relationship they create is normative. ‘Though particular aspects of the relationship between humankind and God can change, there has been established a fundamental relationship that remains the same. Christian beliefs are expressive of this fundamental relationship.’²⁴

When the Christian affirms the Church’s Marian dogmas, he or she simultaneously affirms the relationship with God and the world that is affirmed therein. Not only is this relationship affirmed at the cognitive level, but is constituted as normative for the believer in the very act of affirmation. The dogmas become the norm by which the believer must interpret life and his or her relationship with the living God.

Doyle insists that ‘within the framework of the New Symbol, the ontological status of dogma is positive. Dogmas are presumably true.’²⁵ While dogmas can change and grow, the relationship they affirm between God, humankind, and the world remains timelessly true. The truth of dogmas lies, not necessarily in their historical verifiability, nor even in their alleged facticity, but in the relationship they describe and effect for the believer.

The believer who adopts a faith stance does not disregard the virginity of Mary. One does not necessarily believe that this is literally true in the sense that it corresponds to a biological fact. One believes, however, that it is literally true in the sense that it discloses something about the nature of reality that corresponds with the actual relationship between humankind and the transcendent.²⁶

Thus while Johnson locates the truth value of the Marian dogmas in their reference to the Church as corporate persona, Doyle locates it in their ability to reflect the proper relationship between God, humankind

and world, and to create that proper relationship in the life of the believer. In Johnson's view, the Marian dogmas point beyond themselves to a theological reality as event (immaculate conception) and as promise (assumption). In Doyle's view, these dogmas make present to each believer the theological reality to which they refer. Johnson's position has the effect of allowing the believer to suspend belief in the historical truth of the dogma; Doyle's position has the effect of inviting the believer to believe in order to experience the truth the dogma affirms. Ultimately, Doyle's view succeeds where Johnson's ecumenical approach sets out to 'fail', i.e., in calling for an authentic personal response to doctrines by individual believers.

Symbols and doctrines: a distinction by Lonergan

In each of the aforementioned positions, it seems possible to detect an inadequate distinction between symbol and doctrine. Johnson assumes that since theological statements have a symbolic structure, one may treat theological doctrines as symbols and locate their primary meaning in their ability to point to an ideal beyond themselves. Because these theological statements are themselves symbols, creating the reality to which they refer, Doyle contends that they can create the proper relationship between God, humankind, and the world.

Bernard Lonergan offers a useful distinction between doctrines, which may have a symbolic quality, and symbols, which typically accomplish their purpose outside of doctrinal contexts. His distinction makes possible a corresponding distinction between the Marian symbol and Marian doctrines that have a symbolic quality.

In Lonergan's view, a symbol 'is an image of a real or imaginary object that evokes a feeling or is evoked by a feeling.'²⁷ Symbols evoke from us the feelings that energize and orient our lives: 'they are the mass and momentum and power of (his) conscious living, the actuation of (his) affective capacities, dispositions, habits, the effective orientation of (his) being.'²⁸

Although doctrines have a symbolic quality, doctrines are not symbols. 'Symbols obey the laws not of logic but of image and feeling. ... (The symbol) does not prove but it overwhelms with a manifold of images that converge in meaning.'²⁹ Not only are symbols different from doctrines, they defy precise articulation in logical discourse: 'The symbol, then, has the power of recognizing and expressing what logical discourse abhors: the existence of internal tensions, incompatibilities, conflicts, struggles, destructions.'³⁰ Symbols communicate at the non-rational level a plenitude of meaning that is only partially captured in doctrinal statements.

Doctrines communicate their meaning at the logical level. Symbols are the means by which 'mind and body, mind and heart, heart and body communicate.'³¹ To explain a symbol is to go beyond the symbol, to

abandon the context in which fullness is communicated and enter a context in which only partial perceptions occur. The proper meaning of a symbol 'has its proper context in the process of internal communication in which it occurs, and it is to that context with its associated images and feelings, memories and tendencies that the interpreter has to appeal if he would explain the symbol.'³²

The distinction provided by Lonergan's work is potentially the distinction between the Marian symbol—the image of Mary herself, as virgin, as mother—and the Marian doctrines that have arisen in response to the Church's historical need to understand the symbol and proscribe unorthodox interpretations. The Marian symbol awakens feelings that recall a history of relating, positively or negatively, and orients our actions according to the power of those feelings. Marian doctrines deaden our feelings in order to function more efficiently at the strictly rational level.

Even within the Marian doctrines, it seems necessary to distinguish between the symbolic elements and the doctrinal context. Thus, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception includes the image of Mary as sinless, etc., even if that image is deprived of some energy and meaning by the preciseness of the definition. Similarly, the doctrine of the Assumption calls to mind the image of Mary and evokes from us an affective response to her glorification; presented exclusively as a doctrine, however, it loses the plenitude of meaning that pertains to the Marian symbol *per se*.

With Johnson, then, it becomes possible to say that Marian doctrines, as symbolic theological statements about Mary, arose within the imaginative faculty of the Church in response to historical situations that required precise formulations; the richness of the Marian symbol was adapted to the Church's ideal self-presentation, yielding doctrinal statements that have a symbolic structure without exhausting the plenitude of meaning contained within the symbol itself.

With Doyle, it becomes possible to say that Marian doctrines are permanent expressions of the proper relationship between God, world and humankind—not only expressing, but creating that relationship for the believer. This relationship remains valid and normative even as the historical circumstances of the believing community require change and growth.

With Lonergan, it becomes possible to say that the Marian symbol has been found by the Church to evoke those feelings that appropriately orient the believer's life to God. Marian doctrines are historical articulations of the Church's faith; we must constantly seek to articulate these truths so that they adequately interpret the Marian symbol in the language of contemporary experience and evoke from the believer the feelings that can orient his or her life to God.

Symbols, doctrines, and conversion

Symbols can evoke feelings that reorient a person's life because they resonate with the individual's necessary orientation to transcendence and therefore call for a fully personal conversion to their transcendental reality and truth. In Lonergan's view, the theologian witnesses to the inherent power of the Church's symbols by allowing them to challenge his or her faith and issue a call to personal conversion.

The central idea in Lonergan's thought is the threefold conversion of the conscious and intentional subject in response to the gift of grace.

Religious conversion is being-in-love-with-God as a response to the love of God flooding the human heart: 'a conscious dynamic state of love, joy, peace, that manifests itself in acts of kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control.'³³

Moral conversion is the lifestyle that reflects the new loving relationship between God and the subject: the working out of love's implications according to the circumstances of one's concrete existence.

Intellectual conversion is the 'elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge. The myth is that knowing is like looking, that objectivity is seeing what is there to be seen and not seeing what is not there, and that the real is out there now to be looked at.'³⁴

In Lonergan's view, symbols have the capacity to evoke the affective dimension of religious conversion. Symbols are not themselves the *source* of conversion, which is the result of grace alone. But religious conversion is a dynamic state of being-in-love that transforms one's affectivity, and symbols have the capacity to evoke the feelings that are consistent with religious conversion. Thus, the Marian symbol is intended to appeal, not to the rational and logical dimension of the subject, but to that affective dimension at which religious conversion is transforming his or her existence. When the Marian symbol is subjected to rational analysis apart from religious conversion, it yields little that can be valued as knowledge, precisely because outside of conversion one will assume that 'knowing is looking', that objectivity is looking at what is there, and reality is what is out there to look at.'³⁵

Lonergan also insists that authentic Christian conversion is not merely an affective transformation. 'Besides the gift of the Spirit within, there is the outward encounter with Christian witness. That witness testifies that of old in many ways God has spoken to us through the prophets but in this latest age through his Son (Heb. 1:1—2).'³⁶ There is, then, a historical record of the work of God's Spirit: the writings of Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church. Within this historical record, the Church's doctrines are a necessary and valid articulation of the Church's faith in God, binding on later generations as invitations to authentic Christian conversion. Thus, the Marian doctrines, although they may never capture the plenitude of meaning contained in the Marian

symbol, are the Church's witness to the power of this symbol and a call to allow this symbol to interpret the Church's faith.

If one were to apply Lonergan's analysis to the question of the truth-value of the Marian doctrines, one would tend to exclude the position adopted by Johnson, in which these statements, because of their symbolic structure, are seen to refer primarily to the Church's ideal self-realization, and only to Mary as a historical figure whose life is encompassed by the Church. On the other hand, if one understands Doyle's position to mean that doctrines are historical articulations of the right relationship between God, world and humankind, Lonergan's analysis tends to be more supportive, although it seems clear that Doyle is protecting the relationship between God, world and believer without reference to the facticity of the events to which doctrines relate. Lonergan's call to threefold conversion is Doyle's call to the right relationship between God, world and humankind—a call that may be articulated by the Marian doctrines themselves, but one that is born of grace and gains its affective energy from the abiding power of the Marian symbol.

Conclusion

For Lonergan, the coherence of doctrines is revealed only with the context of the subject's ongoing conversion: first religious, then moral and intellectual. Only the subject who has accepted the dynamic state of being-in-love-with-God can fathom the mystery that is proposed for faith in doctrines. Conversion is the prior condition of intellectual conversion: the ability to affirm as true statements that refer to the absolutely unconditioned and its relation to human reality.

In this view, it becomes possible to argue that the Marian symbol—the Church's active memory of Mary—has the capacity to evoke from the subject that quality of affective devotion that conforms to religious conversion: the dynamic state of being-in-love that typifies the Church's memory of Mary herself. By remembering and relating to the Church's traditional presentation of Mary as one whose being proclaims the greatness of the Lord, the subject may enter into the transforming mystery of God's love and, within that mystery, come to understand how the Church's historically-conditioned doctrines uncover different aspects of the mystery.

The purpose of doctrines in general, and Marian doctrines in particular, is not merely to exact from Church members a series of orthodox faith affirmations, but to facilitate the transition from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh: a transition prompted by the encounter with God's transforming love, one that continues in response to the Church's living witness to the meaning of that love in its life. The official Magisterium would do well to acknowledge that without a meaningful distinction between the Marian symbol and the Church's Marian

doctrines, believers are expected to make cognitive affirmations to statements that have their plenitude of meaning outside a cognitive context.

- 1 Cf. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in Austin Flannery, O.P., general editor, *Vatican Council II, Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1968); *Redemptoris Mater*, AAS, March 25, 1987.
- 2 Cf. Elizabeth Johnson, 'The Symbolic Nature of Theological Statements about Mary', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22:2 (1985), 312—336.
- 3 Johnson, op. cit., p.326.
- 4 L.G., §53.
- 5 L.G., §52.
- 6 L.G., §63.
- 7 L.G., §65.
- 8 L.G., §65.
- 9 For a summary discussion of symbolic language, cf. Avery Dulles, 'Symbolic Mediation', *Models of revelation*. (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 131—154.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Johnson, op. cit., p. 313.
- 12 Ibid., p. 323.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., p. 329.
- 15 Ibid., p. 330.
- 16 Ibid., p. 330.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., p. 331.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 The fact that Johnson is publishing in an ecumenical journal obviously colours her presentation; the attempt may well be to demonstrate that while Roman Catholics and others affirm these doctrines as grounded in fact, ecumenical dialogue is possible on the symbolic level.
- 21 Neal Flanagan, 'Mary of Nazareth: Lady for all Seasons', *Listening* 22 (3) 1987, 170—180, p. 175.
- 22 Dennis Doyle, 'The Symbolic Element in Belief: An Alternative to Tillich', *The Thomist* 45 (1981), 449—472, p. 458. Doyle acknowledges that the New Symbol is not original in his work; he introduces it here as a corrective to Tillich's notion of symbols as transitory.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid., p. 466.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. (Minneapolis, MN: The Winston-Seabury Press, 1972), p. 64.
- 28 Ibid., p. 65.
- 29 Ibid., p. 66.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid., p. 67.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid., p. 106.
- 34 Ibid., p. 238.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., p. 327.