

# A Critical Note on Norman Pittenger's Mariology

Owen F. Cummings

In his ecumenical Marian theology, Fr. George H. Tavard has a fine chapter entitled "Mary in Anglicanism," in which he traces the development of Marian teaching from Thomas Cranmer to the present. Tavard's essay is not intended to be comprehensive and so, while he maintains that it would be "an exaggeration to speak of a Marian movement in contemporary Anglicanism," nonetheless significant contributions have been made in recent times, for example, by Canon Donald Allchin and Professor John Macquarrie.<sup>1</sup> Had the nonagenarian Anglican priest-theologian Norman Pittenger's *Our Lady, The Mother of Jesus in Christian Faith and Devotion* been published before 1996, no doubt Fr. Tavard would have included some mention of it as yet another contemporary Anglican contribution.<sup>2</sup>

Norman Pittenger, born in 1905 and senior resident at King's College, the University of Cambridge, has been a prolific author and a much revered teacher at General Theological Seminary, New York City. Apart from articles, reviews and occasional pieces, he has written ninety books, and his final book, final according to his own testimony, is this book on Marian theology and devotion.<sup>3</sup> In a *Festschrift* for Pittenger, Dean Lawrence Rose emphasized the popularity of his theology: "Many of his writings have been 'popular' in the best possible sense of the word—for people—designed to bring the truth of Christianity out of the cloister or the study and give it currency in the living thought of men and women today."<sup>4</sup> Pittenger's project of making Christian theology accessible to people led him to a growing appreciation of process thought, especially to the writings of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. He has presented almost the entire fabric of Christian doctrine in process conceptual categories. This final book on mariology also contains a very clear precis of process theology.<sup>5</sup> His theological portrait of Mary, however, is not substantially (*sic!*) dependent upon process thought. He has a solid acquaintance with the entire sweep of the Christian tradition. Because of his lucidity and the suasive charm and style of his writing, his book on Mary deserves to be read with care. Pittenger advocates a "chastened" theology of and

devotion to Mary, and sees this chastened mariology as typically Anglican, valuing both the Catholic-Orthodox and the Reformation emphases of the Christian tradition.

The roots of Marian reflection, of course, lie in the gospel traditions, refracted through the experience of the Christian community. While the gospels contain historical truths, they are not to be understood primarily as documents providing historical data. They are written *ex fide, in fidem*, to express faith and to invoke faith. Assuming this truism of recent scholarship, Pittenger understands the Lukan and Matthaean infancy narratives to affirm that "Jesus (is) genuinely from God rather than to assert the supposed virginity of his mother . . . the human side included the part played by Joseph as well as that of Mary."<sup>6</sup> The point of the virginal conception, therefore, is theological not biological.

Commenting on the apocryphal literature about Mary (the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Arabic Gospel of the Childhood, the History of Joseph the Carpenter, the Protevangelium of James), he considers them the products "of a devout but highly fanciful imagination whose details are of no significance for Christian faith . . ."<sup>7</sup> The apocryphal literature is the stuff of sheer legend, but Pittenger distinguishes such legend from genuine myth and in this category he situates Mary as the second Eve, the perpetual virginity, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary into heaven. These are all classified as "mariological mythology." The difference between myth and legend is that in the latter the pious imagination seems "to have run riot."<sup>8</sup> While there are aspects of his judgment about the apocryphal literature that ring true, it is unfortunate that Pittenger categorizes the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption as "mariological mythology." Apart from the misleading imprecision of the terminology, there seems to be no awareness on his part of the profound anthropological, ecclesial and eschatological insights in these doctrines, insights that have now become quite common in ecumenical theological treatments of Mary.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Pittenger actually provides a basis for the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception when he describes so finely the influence Mary had on Jesus. He gives particular emphasis to her maternal role in the formation of her Son: "...as a mother whose son himself was a man of faith, we can see that her attitude and her way of behaving was of the sort which follows when we recognize that a son is influenced and affected by his parents and *above all by his mother*."<sup>10</sup> The question rises naturally, "What must she herself have been like to have nurtured a son like that?" Arguably, we find in such observations the seeds of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, an inductive approach to the doctrine, as it were. Such a point of view may be found in an earlier

Cambridge Anglican theologian, Harry A. Williams, who wrote of the Immaculate Conception in this vein: "The Roman Church, in declaring Our Lady to be born without taint of original sin, gave expression in a theological idiom to what Freud later discovered in his consulting-room—the overwhelming influence for good or bad which a mother has upon her infant and child."<sup>11</sup>

Mary is a type of the Church, and Pittenger sees this fully developed in the Annunciation. Whether or not the details of the Annunciation in the Lukan pericope (Luke 1.26ff) correspond to the canons of scientific historiography, and Pittenger is skeptical, nonetheless this marian scene is replete with theological insights: "The annunciation story may be dubiously historical both in detail and in background. yet perhaps it is telling us something that within the Christian tradition of faith, worship and life is of quite enormous significance."<sup>12</sup> Given that in the process conceptuality all divine activity in creation is dependent upon creaturely responsiveness to the divine initiative or lure, Mary's fiat may be seen as "precisely a supreme symbolic instance of consent to the divine will."<sup>13</sup> Her entirely appropriate yet free response to the divine initiative made known to her through Gabriel makes her "a model for all genuine Christian discipleship."<sup>14</sup> Mary typifies the faith-filled Christian response for the individual and for the body corporate, the response of receptivity and openness.

One could go on to find other helpful insights of Pittenger such as Mary Mother of the Church and of all humankind, Mary as sacrament of God's beauty, and so forth, but the link with the Eucharist is especially pleasing. It is axiomatic that the Eucharist is central to Christian life, a preliminary manifestation of this redeemed creation."<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is entirely fitting that Mary's name be recalled in the eucharistic prayer along with the angels and saints.<sup>16</sup> The doctrine of the communion of the saints expresses our reliance and inter-dependence upon one another in the order of grace which, for Pittenger, corresponds also to the order of nature. The inter-connexion of all actual entities in the becoming of creation reflects God's Being as Communion, and Mary exemplifies the appropriate response as God lures creation eschatologically to himself.<sup>17</sup> There may be found here roots for developing a process approach to eucharistic ecclesiology.

The most problematic aspect of Pittenger's mariology lies in his christology. Perhaps because of his espousal of a Whiteheadian process metaphysics, there is a reluctance to acknowledge Jesus as the definitive and incarnate revelation of God. He speaks of Jesus as "a focal and decisive activity of God," "a peculiarly vivid and decisive revelation of deity," "a disclosure of God as 'pure unbounded Love.'"<sup>18</sup> Why not

substitute the definite for the indefinite article? Hand in hand with this perspective is his equal and logically necessary reluctance to talk of Mary as “Mother of God.”<sup>9</sup> He prefers the term “Mother of Jesus” or *Christotokos*. “Mother of God” is the one phrase in the “Hail Mary” with which he finds difficulty. This is the crux of the matter. It is virtually impossible to avoid the conclusion that Pittenger’s christology is adoptionist. It is certainly not docetic. The humanity of Christ really matters for him but, in the late Eric L. Mascall’s words, for Pittenger, “whether (Christ) is personally divine is at best of secondary importance” though “God was active in him as in no other human being.”<sup>20</sup> Pittenger’s relativist christology is the flaw that mars what is in many ways a helpful contribution to a growing ecumenical appreciation of mariology.

The example of Norman Pittenger’s commitment to the enterprise of theology throughout a long life is second to none, not least in his rendering theology accessible to the intelligent lay-reader. That is why, while affirming his contribution in this his last book, *Our Lady, The Mother of Jesus in Christian Faith and Devotion*, firm and critical appreciation is the highest accolade we can give him.

- 1 George H. Tvard, *The Thousand Faces of the Blessed Virgin*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996, pp. 134–152.2. Published in London by SCM Press, 1996.
- 3 “This is my last book . . .,” op. cit., p. ix.
- 4 R. A. Norris, ed., *Lux in Lumine: Essays to Honor W. Norman Pittenger*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1966, p. 2.
- 5 Op. cit., pp. 2–22.
- 6 Op. cit., pp. 6, 28.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 10.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 9 For example, John Macquarrie, *Mary for All Christians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990; Jaroslav J. Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, especially pp. 189–214.
- 10 Op. cit., p. 28, my emphases. See also p. 54.
- 11 “Theology and Self-Awareness,” in Alec R. Vidler, ed., *Soundings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963, p. 101.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 47. Pittenger’s book, *Life As Eucharist*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973, offers a good summary of his eucharistic theology.
- 16 Op. cit., p. 47.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 23, 83.
- 19 See pp. 54, 86.
- 20 *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, London: S.P.C.K., 1977, p. 130. See also Mascall’s remarks in his essay, “Guide-Lines from St. Thomas for Theology Today,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas, 1274–1974, Commemorative Studies*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974, pp. 489–501, especially pp. 494–495.