

GROWING Together

11th Series

MARY AND THE SAINTS IN ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Lk. 1:42). With these words Elizabeth greets her pregnant cousin Mary, but Mary’s response placed Elizabeth’s statement in a proper perspective: “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Lk. 1:46). For, as Mary herself knew, the importance of the occasion was not that she was pregnant, but that she had said “yes” to God’s call.

Through the past 2,000 years, different Christian traditions have made their interpretation of Mary and the saints a factor in their disputes with other Christians. The most prominent disputes of the Protestant Reformation dealt with some Roman Catholic devotional practices. The Reformers considered the practice of calling upon saints to be problematic. The challenge for contemporary churches is to find a suitable understanding of the saints and Mary, so that greater unity can become possible between our churches. Can an understanding of the saints and Mary be achieved which neither rejects the historical practice of many Christians nor imposes that practice on others? Today, a greater appreciation for the role of women and for diversity of religious practice has allowed a consensus to develop regarding Mary and the saints.

The U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue has recently issued a statement on “The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary.” In this statement, the church leaders and scholars express a consensus which appeared impossible only 50 years ago. The statement clarified the issues relating to the invocation of the saints and Mary by distinguishing between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic use of the term “saint.”

Contemporary Lutheran use of the term “saint” normally includes all justified believers. The Roman Catholic use of the term generally applies to individuals from the past who are identified by the church as worthy of commemoration. When Roman Catholics and many others talk about the saints, they are usually using the second definition. The dialogue statement confirms that the dispute over the saints does not relate to the issue of

whether saints exist, or whether the saints pray for the living (intercession) – although these are open issues – the dispute is over whether the living can ask the saints to pray for our needs (invocation). While contemporary Roman Catholics continue to believe that prayers requesting the intercession of the saints are “good and useful” and “supremely fitting,” many contemporary Protestants are concerned with remaining faithful to the Reformation principle of the centrality of Jesus Christ.

The 16th Century Reformers discouraged but did not reject the practice of invoking the saints and Mary. The dialogue statement affirms this position and clearly states that neither Mary nor the saints are redeemers, for Jesus Christ is the only redeemer. “Our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus.” However, “among the saints who have played a role in God’s plan of salvation for humanity, Mary, who bore Christ, is in particular to be honoured.” The statement points the way to a further consensus by recommending that Mary be viewed as a model disciple.

The concerns that many Christians have had in the past regarding the saints and other devotional practices have sometimes been appropriate. The dialogue statement sets the standard that “devotion to the saints and Mary should not be practiced in ways that detract from the ultimate trust that is to be placed in Christ alone as Mediator.” The question that remains for all Christians is whether their current devotional practices measure up to this standard. As we seek greater unity with other Christians, we must examine our own practices with as much concern as we do those of others. Christian unity requires integrity and faithfulness to the essentials; in this way our Christian communities will live in reconciled diversity.

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All non-scriptural quotations are taken from: *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992.

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Saskatoon Centre for Ecumenism

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Saskatoon Centre for Ecumenism
1006 Broadway Ave.
Saskatoon, Sask. S7N 1B9
(306) 653-1633