

“Mary: The First Member of the Church”

A Response by Terrence W. Tilley to

“Karl Rahner’s Work on the Assumption of Mary into Heaven” by Mark F. Fisher

At the outset, I must confess that I am not sure that I am the best respondent to this paper. First, in 1951, when the work was finished, I was four years old and about to be immersed in about a decade of the U.S. version of the Marian piety of the period, from the Touring Statue of Our Lady of Fatima to the Blue Army and the Legion of Mary. Rahner’s response to that form of piety was to rethink the significance of the Assumption. Mine, alas, was to turn my back on Marian devotion, so saccharine as to provoke spiritual diabetes, although I continued to say an occasional rosary. Second, the problem took another form when, in 1986, my late wife, Maureen Tilley, was a TA for a course in the History of Christianity at Duke Divinity School. She reported a conversation with a student-pastor, a person who had been appointed by his rural congregation who then went to divinity school. “Mrs. Tilley, you are a Catholic, ain’t ya?” the student asked. “Why, yes I am,” Maureen responded, “why do you ask?” “Mrs. Tilley,” he replied, “Why do Catholics worship statues?” Maureen, of course, gave a fairly standard explanation of the statue be a representational reminder, etc. At the time, I just thought that the student-pastor was theologically uninformed. But I later came to think that much of what passed for Marian devotion was rank superstition. And I suspect still that much of it was. But leaving that preamble behind, I will admit

that I am thankful that Karl Rahner and others have worked diligently to retrieve or construct insights that place Mary in the church, a member of the communion of saints, and truly a sister¹ to every member of the church. And I thank Mark for exploring *Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis* with and for us. It is a shame that it could not be published before 2004.

Rahner's work is an exercise in the hermeneutics of an eschatological assertion, that Mary's dormition and assumption is fundamentally an eschatological claim. To paraphrase Rahner, "Knowledge of the future, insofar as it is still to come, is an inner moment of the the Church's understanding of its present hour of existence—and grows out of it."² Hence, the primary point of the doctrine is not what happened to Mary, but God's salvific will. It first means, as Mark put it, "that God intends to save the entire creation" (2).

Mark focuses on Rahner's "Theology of Death," as evidently this excursus riled the censors more fundamentally than the theologizing on the Assumption. They evidently balked at his understanding that the human soul is not fully disembodied, unconnected with the material world, even when a person dies. They could not accept his point that the soul grows in holiness even after death from its relation not only to God and the church triumphant, but to the material world. And they evidently rejected

¹I allude here to Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of the Saints* (London and New York: Continuum Publishing, 2003).

²Karl Rahner, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," *Theological Investigations IV* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966) p. 331. The actual quotation is "knowledge of the future, insofar as it is still to come is an inner moment of the self-understanding of man [*sic*] in his present hour of existence—and grows out of it."

as an unacceptable form of universal salvation his thesis about the transformation of the whole cosmos through his transforming death (5). "More than a celestial queen," Mark writes, "Mary is precisely a type of the pilgrim Church" (6).

Mark turns to the censorship. I agree with Mark and think Father Lakner entirely right: from the point of view supported by the Marian devotion that had been accelerating at least since the spiritual awakening after the Napoleonic era, this is clearly a "fundamental reinterpretation." That Rahner argued against the hyperbolic titles for Mary as "mediator of all graces" and "co-redemptrix" (8) would also rile the censors. Of course, they were right that this was in tension with recent theology. Rahner was treating her as the first of the redeemed, not the neck through which all graces flowed from the Head to the body of the church. It is not so much that Rahner was a Marian Minimalist, as that he recognized her as redeemed, not an assistant redeemer whose Immaculate Conception had made her something much more than the ordinary human, theological deductions of the most literalistic sort that helped launch an enduring superstitious devotionism.

Even today, Rahner's theology of death is difficult. Death, "rather than being merely the punishment for sin, was for Christians a participation in the death of Christ" (10) uniting the Christian with the redemption of the cosmos. "Death is not just a moment of shameful defeat . . . but a moment of culmination" of our lives and our surrender to God (10).

It is not that Rahner did not treat the Assumption in a “scientific way,” as the censors put it. Rather, he recognized the Assumption as an “eschatological assertion,” which was not a picture of what will happen in the future, but a reflection on the faith in the present. The Assumption of Mary underlines the hope each has for his or her future, the hope that all Christians have for humanity, and ultimately for all of God’s creation.

I was likely wrong to throw Mary out with the bathwater of superstition that eddied about her when I was young. Devotion, however, is, alas, still beyond me. But I can now better appreciate the Mary of the New Testament³ and hope that someday I will be something like a friend to this courageous woman who represents the wholeness and holiness of the new creation. I will not worship her statue, but do venerate that image that Rahner struggled to articulate and that has been, in my opinion, vindicated long after he was censored.

³Elizabeth Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture* (London and New York: Continuum Publishing, 2004) is drawn from *Truly Our Sister*. I find it serious, well-grounded spiritual reading, on the level of Rahner’s *Spiritual Writings*, edited and introduced by Philip Endean (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).