

[unrevised machine translation]

Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, as a witness of love.

A Protestant perspective in the ecumenical dialogue² Thursday, April 27, 2023

Víctor Hernández Ramírez

I sincerely appreciate the invitation to this ecumenical table, within the framework of the International Mariological Congress of the Catholic University of Valencia. And when I say that I do it from the heart, it is because in each ecumenical meeting we participate in some way in the plea of Jesus, when praying to the Father: "that we all be one so that the world believes in him, as the one sent" (John 17, twenty-one). And, furthermore, I do it from the bottom of my heart because the topic that concerns us at this table is precisely one of the ones that has distanced us the most over time, Catholics and Protestants and, therefore, requires that we attempt a conversation that deals with be sincere, and even daring.

From distancing to ecumenical dialogue I point out that it was not Mary who did not distance, but Mariology (and very particularly the two dogmas of the Catholic Church: the dogma of the Immaculate Conception [defined in 1854] and the dogma of the Assumption of Mary [defined in 1950]).

Now then, at the beginning of the Reformation there was no distancing on this point, since the reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin) had no aversion towards the figure of Mary¹. We must always remember Luther's text on the Magnificat, written between 1520 and 1521². It is a text by Luther where the biblical figure of Mary appears expressing all her faith and hope in God. Zwingli also intended to direct the devotion of Mary to Christ, precisely following her own example in this way³.

But in Protestantism there was a move away from the figure of Mary in the following centuries. Initially, at least in the Lutheran Church, several Marian feasts were kept in the liturgical calendar (the announcement to Mary [March 25], Mary's visit to Elisabeth [July 2], the purification of Mary or the presentation of Jesus in the temple [February 2]), but they were celebrated as festivals of Christ and referred to him. But starting in the 18th century they began to disappear and were completely canceled in the ecclesiastical calendar⁴.

Se puede uno preguntar si el alejamiento de los protestantes, en siglos pasados, con respecto a María no es más bien el efecto de la Contrarreforma, que de la Reforma misma⁵. En buena medida María se convirtió en una especie de estandarte de la Contrarreforma: esto se ejemplifica muy bien en la película *Silencio* (2016), basada en la novela homónima de Shusaku Endo, de Martin Scorsese: en el epílogo de la película aparece una escena ubicada en el siglo XIX, en la cual un par de campesinos se presentan ante los sacerdotes católicos de Tokio, y les hacen tres preguntas, antes de revelarles que ellos son cristianos: una de esas preguntas es si creen en la Virgen María. Las preguntas, que les habían enseñado los jesuitas a los campesinos, 200 años atrás, tenían el propósito de distinguir a católicos de protestantes [las otras dos preguntas era si obedecían al Papa de Roma y si no estaban casados]. Este es un buen ejemplo de cómo la veneración de María se ha utilizado como signo de identidad católica.

Aunque tampoco me parece que sea un distanciamiento sino una diferencia muy precisa entre católicos y protestantes que, por ejemplo, se expresa bien en esa carta que Karl Barth le escribió a Karl Rahner⁶, después de que éste le enviase su nuevo libro sobre Mariología: con toda cortesía Barth le responde que no puede aceptar la presuposición católica de que

exista una legitimidad y necesidad para una —Mariología‖ y —añade Barth—, que la teología católica, y la teología de Rahner por supuesto, no se sostienen ni caen por la —Mariología‖⁷. One can ask if the distancing of the Protestants, in past centuries, with respect to Mary is not rather the effect of the Counter-Reformation, than of the Reformation itself⁵. To a large extent, María became a kind of banner of the Counter-Reformation: this is exemplified very well in the film *Silencio* (2016), based on the homonymous novel by Shusaku Endo, by Martin Scorsese: in the epilogue of the film a scene appears Set in the 19th century, in which a couple of peasants appear before the Catholic priests of Tokyo, and ask them three questions, before revealing that they are Christians: one of those questions is whether they believe in the Virgin Mary. The questions, which the Jesuits had taught the peasants 200 years ago, were intended to distinguish Catholics from Protestants [the other two questions were whether they obeyed the Pope of Rome and whether they were not married]. This is a good example of how the veneration of Mary has been used as a sign of Catholic identity.

Of course, Barth is aware at that moment (the letter is from October 1966) that the Second Vatican Council had already taken place, and that although Vatican II maintained the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption -in addition to expressly requesting the Catholic faithful to promote worship, especially liturgical, "of the Blessed Virgin" and have "in general the practices and exercises of piety towards her"⁸, however the conciliar discourse is fundamentally ecclesiological, for which reason Mary is placed in the church and not outside or above it. It seems to me that it is important to recognize this change in Catholicism since Vatican II, since the new ecclesiological emphasis makes it possible for Protestants, together with our fellow Catholics, to consider Mary as a member of the people of God, Mary as part of the same church of which we are all part.

Even Barth himself, in later years, commenting on the Gospel of Luke (1, 26-38), says that Mary is a model and example for all Christians of service to their Lord: Barth insists that Mary is not so much Mother or Mediatrix of all grace [mediatrix omnium gratiarum] or co-redemptrix [corredemptrix] nor Queen of heaven [regina coeli], as Mariology says, but is the model of Christian service¹⁰.

Of course, in later years many steps have been taken in the ecumenical dialogue regarding Mary and Mariology, between Catholics and Protestants, especially with the Anglican Church and the Lutheran Church. Thus, for example, we have the ecumenical dialogue between Anglicans and Catholics, which in the 1981 document (known as ARCIC I)¹¹ begins to outline the difficulties and possible bridges for dialogue. This is expressed in much more detail in the 2004 document (known as ARCIC II¹²), in the study on the figure of Mary and her relationship with Catholic Mariology, where possible points of convergence are pointed out.

Likewise, Lutherans, for example in the United States, have maintained a dialogue with Catholics in this regard, thus in their document on Mary and the saints¹³, it is said, among other things, that Lutherans must, for their part, declare that the teaching Catholic Church on the saints and Mary as established in the documents of the Second Vatican Council does not promote idolatrous beliefs or practices and does not oppose the Gospel, while the Catholic Church should, for its part, recognize that in a greater communion, but still incomplete, the Lutherans, placing the accent on Christ, the only Mediator, also as Scripture presents, would not be obliged to invoke the saints or to affirm the two Marian dogmas (the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption).

There has also been an ecumenical dialogue between German Lutherans and Catholics that even raises the place of Mary in worship, pointing out her place in evangelical piety. But, nevertheless, in the Lutheran Church the position of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 is maintained: according to which the memory of the saints and of Mary was proposed to evangelical believers "so that

we imitate their faith and their good works... But the Scriptures do not teach us to invoke the saints or ask for their help, because they offer us only Christ as mediator, reconciler, high priest (pontificem) and intercessor" (article 21)¹⁴.

The rapprochement not so much through Mariology but through Maria

In short, the dialogues have taken place and that shows us that we have been able to overcome the distances of yesteryear. But in dialogue, differences are also recognized, and it may be necessary not to try to dismiss them quickly.

Because there are also deeper reasons for the intent of our dialogue, for example that we start from different places in terms of our own experience: Catholic believers pray to Mary and Protestant believers do not; Catholics make their devotion to Mary a daily spiritual practice¹⁵. For the Catholic his faith is also committed to the dogmas about Mary and for the Protestant it is not in any way.

Perhaps this can be expressed synthetically in the way that the Waldensian theologian Paolo Ricca says it: for the Catholic, Mary is part of the relationship of faith in God through Christ; For the Protestant, Mary is part of the community, although she occupies a unique place there¹⁶. What is unquestionable is that Mary, and not Mariology, brings us closer in various ways on the ecumenical path and, likewise, on the path of faith of each church. It can be said that among Protestant theologians there is a tendency towards this approach through the consideration of Mary in a symbolic and meditative sense (something highly developed in Catholic Mariology). Thus, Paolo Ricca comments on the various Protestant theologians who speak of Mary in a typological or symbolic sense. Thus, Maria is:

—type of Church and type of humanity|| (Lukas Vischer), —symbol of believing humanity|| (André Dumas), —type of Church|| (Final Document of the Conference of the Italian Evangelical Federation), —model of faith|| (W. Schöpsdau), "refiguration of the Church and of the new humanity" (W. Pannenberg), "type of the people of God" (E. Schlink), "example of the action of God's grace towards the human creature » and «enlightenment of faith» (group of German Lutheran theologians), «image of grace and holiness» (W. Meyer)...¹⁷

Paolo Ricca also comments on the exceptional case of the Protestant theologian Gerard Siegwalt (he was a professor at the University of Strasbourg), author of an extensive work entitled *Dogmatique pour la catholicité évangélique*, who affirms that:

Mary is —the 'type' (typos) of the Church, its 'icon' or model||, in addition to being the one who —represents|| humanity [...]and adds that Mary is —representative of the function of the entire Church|| of being "mother of faith" [...] Siegwalt draws a parallel between the "fatherhood of Abraham" and the "motherhood of Mary" and affirms that both are not only "according to the law" but also "according to the Spirit": they are physical but also "spiritual in its deepest essence". They should not be opposed: in any case, Abraham's paternity represents the promise and Mary's maternity the fulfillment [...] [according to Siegwalt] The ecclesiological "Marian" model, that is, maternal, "is an equally necessary and legitimate corrective [as is the Protestant criticism of a Mariology that has become autonomous with respect to Christology] to the ecclesiological deficit of Protestantism", which consists "in the annulment of the 'maternal' character of the Church".¹⁸

However, placing Mary as a symbol not only revalues the historical person, the Mary of Nazareth of the New Testament, but also relativizes her, because a symbol refers to something else, and therefore, the question is what is that something or that who. And this is where the problems appear in the debate, because possibly we do not always understand the same thing on one side and the other, when the typological-symbolic perspective is raised, since in Catholicism the historical weight of a Mariology prevails, which has its demands¹⁹. An example of this is if we consider the programmatic phrase of Mariology that says per Mariam ad Christum, and that can

be accepted as an indication of its faultless Christology. But from the Protestant side, the question can always be asked: And if instead of *per Mariam ad Christum*, we say *per Verbum ad Christum*, or *per Spiritum sanctum ad Christum*, what changes? As Paolo Ricca asks:

Does the evangelical believer who is in communion with Christ through the Word and the Holy Spirit have something different quantitatively or qualitatively than the Catholic believer who is in communion with Christ through Mary? In other words: does the mediation of Mary really add anything to the mediation of the Word and the Holy Spirit?²⁰

But we must recognize that the link between Mary and Mariology is very complex (in addition to the fact that we cannot assume that there is only one Mariology) and, above all, it is an intense link because it is crossed by the paths of devotion, spiritual practices and the meditation. And it seems to me that this is something that cannot be changed because it overflows not only theological reflection but also goes far beyond the institutional courses of the Catholic Church. Precisely today we are witnessing the growing diversification of religious and spiritual expressions, in a highly secularized world but in which there are also "hybrid" religious and spiritual practices, so to speak. *Per feminism ad Mariam*: another look at Maria, thanks to feminism

But it seems to me that there are other paths in which we can continue to work in the ecumenical dialogue, and that may be promising. One of them derives from the new look that feminism has brought to theology. As is known, feminism is not a movement that has emerged from the churches, but has come from outside, in that unarmed revolution that has modified our vision of society from the second half of the 20th century to the present day.

Feminist theologians have given us a new, often critical look at Mary, the mother of Jesus. And they have done it from the beginning in an ecumenical and biblical way, that is, in a certain way from a different place than the theologians or biblical scholars who are located in an institutional framework. The radical novelty comes from the critical look at the genre, which is applied both to the biblical texts, and to the context of those of us who read and interpret those texts. And this critical look allows us to see a certain instrumentalization of the figure of Mary in favor of these relations of domination, as the Catholic theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson rightly points out: [...] the figure of Mary has played an ambiguous role, which has sometimes subtly connected women with divinity, but on other occasions it has strengthened the masculine authority that places women in a subordinate place. The passive and obedient Marian figure who is willing to do whatever men with authority tell her; the asexual figure whose lack of experience is considered a sign of sainthood; the woman whose sole purpose in life is to give birth; the silent personalization of the so-called feminine ideal that consists of nurturing and giving herself.²¹

As we know, Elizabeth Johnson's proposal is located in a trinitarian perspective, where Mary is seen from our side, as a creature, as our sister. And this perspective, precisely, allows faith to be reconciled with justice:

—Mary is not a heavenly creature, but someone who shares their lives as a comrade and sister in struggle, a magnet of hope for those who have been deprived of their lives.²² So she proposes a two-step hermeneutic: the first consists of a recovery of the biblical Mary, the woman of the story narrated in the gospels: The Mary of whom we know that her:

...the context of his life was economically poor, politically oppressed, and of Jewish peasant culture, characterized by exploitation and publicly violent events. Becoming dangerously pregnant, giving birth in a stable, fleeing abroad as a refugee, doing the hard work of women in a farming town, feeling anxious at the ministry of her first child, losing him to execution by the state, living as an elderly widow in the post-Pentecost community, Maria becomes a sister to the untold lives of marginalized women throughout history and those who stand in solidarity with them.²³

From there, Elizabeth Johnson proposes a second hermeneutic step, which consists of seeing how this historical figure accompanies the church throughout history, but not in a transcendent sense, but rather as a witness who walks with us as a companion. Travel. Thus, Johnson questions that Maria has been placed in a patronage model, of that patron-client relationship, where she plays the role of intercessor. As an alternative, she proposes the recovery of the memory of the biblical Mary, which is certainly a "dangerous memory", and that allows us to recover a more horizontal, community model, where she is a sister among her brothers, she is our true sister. That fresh air to approach the figure of Mary in the biblical text and reflect on her fraternal presence with all Christian communities can be seen in the works of many other theologians and biblical scholars who work from a gender perspective. A good example of this is the issue of RIBLA (Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana) dedicated to María²⁴, where ten different authors (and two authors²⁵) write with very interesting approaches. Mary as a witness to God's love... since the scandal This rediscovery of Mary as a sister who is present, and not absent, can be beneficial for both Protestants and Catholics. Because for us Protestants, it will allow us to go beyond our inhibitions in front of the figure of Mary and, as a true sister (as Elizabeth A. Johnson says) to be able to greet her (greet, not adore or hyperdulate) with the terms of Elizabeth : : "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Lk 1,42). And it can allow Catholics to review Mariology from the biblical and historical figure of Mary.

But, it seems to me that there is something more that can be given by this open path towards the figure of the biblical Mary, and that is that we can all recognize the uniqueness of Mary's testimony, that is, the way in which she becomes a witness of God's love . And that way in which Mary's testimony takes place is simply scandalous.

I would like to point out, succinctly, the sense of scandal that the figure of Mary has in the Gospel, as she is a witness of God's love. And, from the outset, I want to say that in no way do I intend to offend any sensitivity related to Mary, the mother of the Lord. But it seems to me that the gospel appears in the apostolic testimony (the gospels, the letters, of the New Testament) as a message that scandalizes, as an irruption of God in terms that we cannot adopt to our schemes. And if we do, it is because we move away from the centrality of the message that shows us the way in which God wanted to come to us, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Given the brevity of the space, I will use two examples, about Mary as a witness of God's love, in the key of scandal. The first of them is taken from the Blog of a Catholic theologian, José Cobo, who has recently published a trilogy of books on God, the last one entitled Anatomy of Christianity²⁶, which is really one of the best that Catholic theology has produced in recent times. , as it seems to me.

The extract I choose is the following:

...it is often said that Jesus was born without original sin. And many understand this in the docetic way, that is, as if the humanity of Jesus were simply a wrapper. How could the Son of God be accused of Adam's guilt? However, it is closer to the truth to believe that Jesus was born without sin out of Mary's compassion. Well, for Maria, that child—the son of Pantera, the legionnaire, according to the Talmud—was not to blame. If the Son could bear the sin of men and offer God's forgiveness in exchange, it was because he himself was born of that forgiveness. Mary certainly carried the compassion of God in her bowels. Mary is not, therefore, the archetype of an original purity. There is really no virginity. Men and women are children of violence, we are born with the seal of denial of God. Christianly, the only purity is that which can be understood in terms of a return from death, in terms of a resurrection. It will be true that the entire history of salvation was gestated in the womb of Mary.²⁷

It is not possible here, for space reasons, to comment on the many implications of what Cobo proposes, which does not intend to cause scandal, but to think radically about what the revelation of God tells us in the man Jesus, and in this case, what the gospel shows us with the role of the young woman from Nazareth, Miriam. What Cobo's text wants to accentuate is the in-credibility of faith, precisely in the experience of the incarnation of God²⁸.

What stands out in an extreme way, in Cobo's text, is the extreme of the story that is presented to us in the gospel. And not only because scandal is inescapable (Origen already had to respond to the hoax against Christians reported by Celsus, in the case of Mary), but because what is scandalous is the way in which the mystery of God is given to us, in the story of the man from Nazareth, in the life of Jesus and in his maternal bond. Now, saying that Mary is a witness of God's love is equivalent to saying that she is not the owner of the ultimate meaning of her actions. In reality, she responds to the announcement and responds to the situation of her pregnancy, which has occurred, which radically interrupts her life, but she responds from a love that allows her to support her son, together with his father, and to transmit to him her belonging to the law of God. (ie, to God's promise). That he is a witness does not mean that he responds from some virtues, but rather that he responds in vital and spiritual terms that cannot be understood except after the fact. Nobody is a witness because they want to be, but because it is given to them. And his testimony is not recognized until after his disappearance. That is why the gospel is the passionate memory of the way in which God reveals himself in Jesus of Nazareth, and in the obedient response of Mary.

The second example, I will take from Erri de Luca, an Italian writer who is not a believer (but he is not an atheist either) and who has written a couple of very beautiful books, where he talks about Mary. One of them, dedicated only to Mary and the second where he talks about various women from the Bible, whom he calls "The Saints of Scandal". I choose this excerpt to show you: "Get used to the desert, son": these are the words that the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky puts into the mouth of his Maria. She, a girl from Galilee, suddenly finds herself with the desert around her. The irregular pregnancy, pregnant before the marriage and not by her fiancé, excludes her from the community. If it weren't for the passionate love of Yosef/Joseph who believes her and marries her anyway, she would be guilty of adultery and sentenced to death. It still happens today.

[...] The love of her second husband, the land, saves her, and allows this story to come true, but around her the desert has arisen. That's why it doesn't bother her to leave in winter, nine months pregnant, nor does it bother her to give birth to her son in a stable without any help, in the light of a star, wandering and lonely like her in space. "Get used to the desert, son": the Russian poet intuitively in her a loneliness that he should teach his son. ²⁹

In a beautiful but incisive way, Erri de Luca's text places herself on Miriam's side, on the side of the one who is in the position of greatest vulnerability and exposure, but shows us the strength of this girl, who is really an extraordinary woman. But she is a woman... she is not a being elevated to the sphere of virtues, but she is the girl, the recently released mother, who will know how to take care of the child with her hands and with her whole body, who will be taught in those terms that Says the poet's verse: "Get used to the desert, son."

In her other little book, Erri de Luca imagines Mary giving birth alone in the stable in Bethlehem, and she plausibly imagines all of Joseph's struggle to welcome her and to resist the teachers of the law, in order to protect Mary. But she will give birth alone, and with her birth the hope of the world as life, as a gift of life becomes possible: "In the name of the father": inaugurates the sign of the cross. Life is inaugurated in the name of the mother" –writes Erri de Luca³⁰. Why this story, reported by Matthew and Luke? Why were these accounts necessary in the testimony of the kerygmatic announcement? These are the questions that open up to us and that are

questioned when we can recognize the scandalous dimension, the revealing dimension of the way God comes to us. And Maria is the witness of that love, so unusual, so surprising, whose scandal makes all schemes break.

Because Mary is the voice (in the Magnificat) that, by picking up the ancient voices of the prophets and psalms, picks up all the voices of heartbreak and exclusion, but which rise up as voices of hope. How can a girl, a young woman, harbor and allow those voices to pass through her body? Certainly, with Mary the fiat takes place, the response of the donation to the donation. Thank you so much.

