

Ecumenical 'Thaw' Seen Over Role of Mary

San Francisco [RNS] — A leading Roman Catholic Marian scholar, maintaining that Catholics do not always view the Mother of Christ in true perspective, said here that Catholics must be slow to label as "enemies" of Mary other Christians who do not see or accept her role in the Church.

Speaking at the opening of a five-day ecumenical workshop on Mary, Father Eamon Carroll, O. Carm., acknowledged that for 450 years "the mother of Jesus has been a sign of division between Western Christians" and that Catholic and Protestant beliefs and practices about Mary "hardened into positions characteristic of two contending sides."

But he added that in recent years there has been a "thaw."

The professor of theology at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., said he hoped the workshop — entitled "the Virgin Mary in Ecumenical Perspective" — would be able to "examine from various Christian viewpoints some of the hopes and difficulties for Christian unity in this sensitive area."

In welcoming participants, Archbishop Joseph McCucken of San Francisco said, "It is consoling to me to see an increase in devotion to the Mother of God." He strongly endorsed the ecumenical approach to Mary, stating that devotion to the Mother of Jesus is "really centered on the one redeemer of the human race, Our Lord Jesus Christ."

Father Carroll called to mind that from 1927 to the present the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has periodically taken up the place of Mary in the Communion of Saints. He said this was done particularly at the urging of Eastern Orthodoxy.

"In the Roman Catholic world, the overtures of the Second Vatican Council, begun under Pope John, continued under Pope Paul, have shown sensitivity to the special difficulties Protestants find with Catholic doctrine and devotion to the Mother of the Lord," he added.

The Carmelite priest, who was a major contributor to the 1973 American bishops' pastoral on Mary, "Behold Your Mother," retraced various recent European seminars on the development of "Mary in the Communion of Saints." He said the subject has been "strangely neglected even though of ecumenical importance, joining as it does belief and practice."

Father Carroll noted that Eucharistic prayers as early as the fourth century in the East and the fifth century in the West "commemorate Mary." He added that "in time, however, the Blessed Virgin came to be separated from the Church, and placed over it."

"The reaction of the reformers to extreme separation of Mary from the rest of the Church was a factor in forbidding all calling upon her in prayer," he stated.

"Within Catholicism, the Second Vatican Council restored the Mother of Jesus to her

rightful place in the Communion of Saints, as the fellowship which is the Church," Father Carroll explained. "We have moved from a privilege-centered consideration of Our Lady to a 'sharing concept.'"

The Marian scholar said "she is neither understudy for Christ nor substitute for the Holy Spirit. Rather she remains the first great witness to other members of the Body of Christ, for she is especially joined to Him."

Father Carroll suggested that the reason many Protestants tend to exclude Mary, the Apostles and saints from the Communion of Saints, which they see as a living fellowship, is that they feel it harms the "majesty of Christ."

"An old prayer runs: 'Make me worthy to praise you, O Virgin Mary,' and the response is, 'Give me strength against your enemies.' Catholics should be very slow to label as 'enemies' of Our Lady, any other Christian," he said.

Father Carroll recalled a statement he heard last Summer in Australia, addressed to him by a congregationalist theologian: "Can we know more of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by dwelling devotionally on Our Lady's role in the Incarnation?"

He told the workshop participants, "It is the hope and prayer of the San Francisco workshop to find an affirmative answer to this ecumenical question."

The Many Faces of the Mother of God



The Blessed Mother is a symbol of virtue throughout the world and each culture sees her as its own. Some of the many faces of Mary are shown here. Beginning at upper left and proceeding clockwise: Our Lady of Czestochowa, enshrined for 600 years in Poland with its famous double slash, made by some marauder in the 15th Century; Our Lady as pictured in Thailand; then the Chinese version; the grace and beauty of Indonesia is reflected in the picture upper right; below is the famous Our Lady of Guadalupe [Mexico]; next, Our Lady of Japan; and at the lower left the sculpture, Our Lady of the Star, in Cherbourg, France.