

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Saint John's Abbey Publications

Saint John's Abbey

6-1960

Mary and the Protestants

Kilian McDonnell OSB

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kmcdonnell@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/saint_johns_abbey_pubs

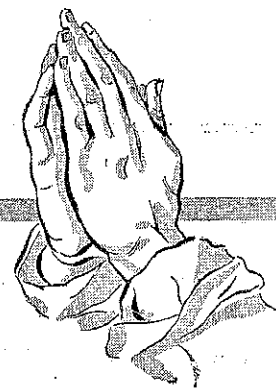


Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McDonnell, Kilian OSB. "Mary and the Protestants." *Sign*, 39 (June 1960) 35.

Reprinted with permission.



Mary and the Protestants

BY KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.

ONE OF the areas which divide Protestants and Catholics is devotion to Mary, but there are signs that a change for the better is taking place. A Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler, has suggested that Protestants should not withhold all veneration of Mary because they consider Catholic veneration of Mary as imbalanced: "The way to correct imbalance is to teach balance, not to damn imbalance with silence. This silence cannot appeal to the Bible. For there we hear of her. There we hear her speak; and what she says is rich and many-dimensional. . . . It is not strange but right and proper that her meaning should be declared and her praise sung from a Protestant pulpit. If we find it in our competence to hail the witness to the faith of Augustine, of Luther, of Calvin, or Wesley—how grudgingly before the gifts of God never to utter 'Ave Maria—Hail Mary.'"

In England the return to Marian devotion has been due in large part to the Oxford Movement of the early nineteenth century. This group rediscovered Mary when it sought to find the true meaning of the Church by returning to the first six centuries of Christian history. In studying these centuries, the Anglicans found the Church nourished not only on the Mass, the sacraments, the Holy Scripture, but also on a deep devotion to Mary.

Other groups, especially in Europe and America, are becoming more conscious of Mary in God's plan of redemption through their study of the Bible. In times past, Marian piety was rejected as unscriptural; now they are finding that, though the Scriptures say little of Mary, what is said is of great importance. Others are returning to an understanding of Mary through the writings of the Protestant reformers.

Luther was excommunicated in 1520—it should be remembered that Luther originally had no idea of starting a new church, and he found himself outside the Church quite against his

wishes, though later he had no wish to return. In the following year, 1521, he wrote a commentary on Mary's song, the Magnificat. Luther expressed the hope that a right understanding of the Magnificat "may not only illumine and teach, but burn and live in body and soul; may Christ grant us this by the intercession and assistance of his dear Mother, Mary. Amen."

During the following year, 1522, Luther's doctrine becomes distinctly less favorable to Mary. He fears that the honor shown to the mother will be subtracted from the honor shown to the Son. Later he is to say, "Your prayers, O Christian, are as dear to me as hers. And why? Because if you believe that Christ lives in you, as much as in her, then you can help me as much as her."

The official formulations of the Lutheran doctrine also contain Marian devotion. The Formula of Concord, 1579, calls her "Virgin most worthy of praise" and "Mother of God." The apology for the Augsburg Confession asserts, "Mary prays for the Church." Because Luther always retained a deep love for Mary, and because the early statements of Lutheran belief upheld perpetual virginity and a right to the title "Mother of God," we can understand Karl Adam, the Catholic theologian, exhorting the Lutherans to be as Lutheran as Martin Luther. The early Lutherans held Mary in greater esteem than do the vast majority of modern Lutherans.

The return of the Protestants to a better understanding of Mary through a study of the first six centuries, the Bible, and the writings of the reformers is heartening, but the extent of this return is minimal. For the most part, it is confined to a few university students, scholars, and Protestant religious communities. The ordinary Protestant remains untouched by it and would, if made aware of it, tend to be unfavorable to such a development. The greater number of Protestant authorities

feel that this return is dangerous and should be discouraged.

"What Protestant does not tremble on hearing the phrase 'the Blessed Virgin Mary?'" writes Max Thurian, a Protestant of the Calvinist tradition. This antagonism is sometimes unwittingly fostered by unthinking Catholics. A number of Protestants are making great efforts to understand our position. But even when they understand our doctrine, they are often repelled by our practice. They marvel at our bad taste: the gaudy, little, plastic-madonnas on the dashboard, the rosary beads filled with Lourdes water, the Fatima shrines which glow in the dark, the sentimental hymns.

Then there is the type of devotion to Mary that is hardly distinguishable from magic. All you have to do is say "Mary, Mary," and, without the reformation of life, you can assure your entry into the kingdom of heaven. Religious sensibilities of Protestants are rightly offended by this religious fluff, having sweetness but no substance.

WE HAVE no intention of diluting Marian doctrine so as not to give offense to our Protestant friends. To do so would be a disservice to both Protestants and ourselves. But we do not want to place before the Protestants the sweets of a superficial religiosity, nor the derivative and secondary aspects of the mystery of Mary. Rather, we want to lead them to the center of the mystery, rooted deep in Scripture and tradition, which shows the mother of God turned toward men in her desire to lead us to her Son and turned toward the Father in praise and adoration. We also want to show them that our devotion to Mary can be tender without descending to shallow emotionalism. We want to show them that, though she is Queen of Heaven, she is first and foremost "the handmaid of the Lord." And we want to show them the riches of their own Protestant tradition: "Mary prays for the Church."