



I have read in the secular press of a new Agreed Statement on the Blessed Virgin Mary between Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

I was taught that Anglicanism does not accept the 1854 Dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the 1950 Dogma of the bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven because they were defined by the Bishop of Rome alone, not by a General Council of all the Bishops in the Apostolic Succession.

The joint studies done since 1970 by the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) have repeatedly found that issues which have historically divided Anglicans and Roman Catholics are generally more a matter of disagreement concerning the proper source of dogmatic definition than disagreement about the actual content of belief and the theology of the subject itself.

The ARCIC Agreed Statement on the Blessed Virgin Mary – including the Immaculate Conception of Mary (in the womb of her mother, St Anne) and the bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven – has once again shown that historic differences are more a question of who has been given authority by Christ to define a dogma (an official explanation of *how* a doctrine happens, acceptance of which the Roman Catholic Church since 1870 has taught is necessary to salvation) than differences in the content of the two Churches' beliefs about the Mother of God.

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THE AGREED STATEMENT begins by reviewing the areas in which Anglicans and Roman Catholics have always known they concurred:

- the Dogma, promulgated by the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431, which defines the Blessed Virgin Mary as Mother of God Incarnate
- the unique vocation of Mary; the keeping of the festivals in the Church Year in her honor; and her place as “First among the Saints”
- Mary was prepared by divine grace for this vocation
- Mary is a model of holiness, obedience, and faith for all Christians
- Mary is a prophetic figure – an icon – of the holy Catholic Church both before and after the Incarnation

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IT POINTS OUT the importance of Mary in Holy Scripture:

- It is impossible to be faithful to Holy Scripture and not to take Mary seriously
- The scriptural witness summons all believers in every generation to call Mary “blessed”

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THE STATEMENT REVIEWS the place of Mary historically in the Church:

- In the early centuries, communion in Christ included a strong sense of the living presence of the Saints as an integral part of the spiritual experience of the Church. Within the “cloud of witnesses,” the Lord’s mother came to be seen to have a special place. The response of Christian people found devotional expression in both private and public prayer.
- The early Fathers of the Church presented Mary the Virgin Mother as a model of holiness, and taught that she had remained “Ever-Virgin.”
- A tradition of praying with and praising Mary was gradually established. This has been associated since the fourth century, especially in the East, with asking her protection.
- During the High Middle Ages a growing emphasis on the humanity of Christ was matched by attention to the exemplary virtues of Mary. Meditation on the lives of both Christ and Mary became increasingly popular, and gave rise to the development of such devotional practices as the rosary.
- One powerful impulse for Reformation in the early sixteenth century was a widespread reaction against devotional practices which approached Mary as a mediatrix alongside Christ, or sometimes even in his place. Such exaggerated devotions, in part inspired by presentations of Christ as inaccessible Judge as well as Redeemer, were sharply criticized by Erasmus and St Thomas More and decisively rejected by the Protestant Reformers. This entailed a rejection [in Protestantism] of real and perceived abuses surrounding devotion to Mary.
- The Anglican Church at the time of the Reformation continued to receive the doctrine of the Early Church concerning Mary. Its positive teaching about Mary concentrated on her role in the Incarnation, summed up in its teaching of Mary as *Theotokos* [Mother of God]. Following the tradition of the Early Church, Anglicanism accepted that Mary was “ever Virgin.” Following St Augustine, Anglicanism showed a reticence about affirming that Mary was a sinner. It neither affirmed nor denied the possibility of her having been preserved by grace from Original Sin. It is notable that the Book of Common Prayer in the Christmas collect and preface refers to Mary as “a pure virgin.”
- In the post-Reformation era in the Roman Catholic Church, the continued growth of Marian doctrine and devotion also suffered the distorting influence of Protestant-Catholic polemics. To be Roman Catholic came to be identified by an emphasis on devotion to Mary. The depth and popularity of Marian spirituality in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries contributed to the definitions of the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the bodily Assumption (1950). On the other hand, the pervasiveness of this spirituality began to give rise to criticism both within and beyond the Roman Catholic Church and initiated a process of re-reception. This re-reception was evident in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

– Mary has a new prominence in Anglican worship through the liturgical renewals of the twentieth century...a re-reception of the place of Mary in corporate worship has been taking place across the Anglican Communion. At the same time the Roman Catholic Church has attempted to set devotion to Mary within the context of the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Early Christian Church. Revision of the calendars and lectionaries used in our Communion [Roman Catholic and Anglican], especially the liturgical provision associated with feasts of Mary, gives evidence of a shared process of re-receiving the scriptural testimony to her place in the faith and life of the Church.

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THE STATEMENT PRESENTS the theology of the Immaculate Conception and the bodily Assumption in the light of contemporary biblical and theological scholarship:

- Within the biblical framework we have considered afresh the distinctive place of the Virgin Mary in the economy of grace, as the one who bore Christ, the elect of God. The word of God delivered by Gabriel addresses her as already “graced,” inviting her to respond in faith and freedom to God’s call. The Spirit is operative within her in the conception of the Savior, and this “blessed among women” is inspired to sing “all generations will call me blessed.” Mary thus embodies the “elect Israel” of whom Paul speaks (Romans 8.30) – glorified, justified, called, predestined. This is the pattern of grace and hope which we see at work in the life of Mary, who holds a distinctive place in the Church as the one who bore in her own flesh “the Lord of glory.” Mary is marked out from the beginning as the one chosen, called, and graced by God through the Holy Spirit for the task that lay ahead of her.
- The Scriptures also speak of God’s care for all human beings, even before their coming to birth (Psalm 139.13-18), and recount the action of God’s grace preceding the specific calling of particular persons, even from their conception (Jeremiah 1.5, St Luke 1.15, Galatians 1.15). With the Early Church, we see in Mary’s acceptance of the divine will the fruit of her prior preparation, signified in Gabriel’s affirmation of her as “graced.” It is not so much that Mary lacks something which other human beings “have,” namely sin, but that the glorious grace of God filled her life from the beginning.
- According to the New Testament, being “graced” has the connotation of being freed from sin through Christ’s blood (Ephesians 1.6-7). The Scriptures point to the efficacy of Christ’s atoning sacrifice even for those who preceded him in time (I Peter 3.19, St John 8.56, I Corinthians 10.4). We can thus see that God was at work in Mary from her earliest beginnings, preparing her for the unique vocation of bearing in her own flesh the new Adam. Of Mary we can say she is “God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand” (Ephesians 2.10).

- There is no direct testimony in Scripture concerning the end of Mary’s life. However, certain passages give instances of those who follow God’s purposes faithfully being drawn into God’s presence. Moreover, these passages offer hints or partial analogies that may throw light on the mystery of Mary’s entry into glory. For instance the account of Stephen, the first martyr (Acts 7.54-60): at the moment of his death, which conforms to that of his Lord, he sees “the glory of God, and Jesus” the “Son of Man” not seated in judgment, but “standing at the right hand of God” to welcome his faithful servant. God’s faithful servant Elijah is taken up by a whirlwind into heaven (II Kings 2.11), and of Enoch it is written, “he was attested as having pleased God” as a man of faith, and was therefore “taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found because God had taken him” (Hebrews 11.5, Genesis 5.24).
- When Christians from East and West through the generations have pondered God’s work in Mary, they have discerned in faith that it is fitting that the Lord gathered her wholly to himself: in Christ, she is already a new creation in whom “the old has passed away and the new has come” (II Corinthians 5.17). Mary may be seen as a disciple with a special place in the economy of salvation.

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THE STATEMENT LOOKS at the Anglican/Roman Catholic situation today concerning the 1854 and 1950 Papal dogmatic definitions:

- The Scriptures lead us together to praise and bless Mary as the handmaid of the Lord, who was providentially prepared by divine grace to be the mother of our Redeemer. She stands as a model of holiness, obedience, and faith for all Christians. As one who received the Word in her heart and in her body, and brought it forth into the world, Mary belongs in the prophetic tradition. We are agreed in our belief in the Blessed Virgin Mary as *Theotokos* [Mother of God]. Our two Communion [Anglican and Roman Catholic] are both heirs to a rich tradition which recognizes Mary as ever virgin, and sees her as the new Eve and as a type of the Church. We join in praying and praising with Mary whom all generations have called blessed, in observing her festivals and according her honor in the communion of the Saints, and are agreed that Mary and the Saints pray for the whole Church.
- We have agreed together that the teaching about Mary in the two definitions of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the bodily Assumption in 1950 can be said to be consonant with the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Early Christian Church. The formulation of the dogmas respond to theological rather than historical or philosophical questions in relation to Mary. The 1950 dogma leaves open the question as to what the absence of Mary’s mortal remains means in historical terms. Likewise, “assumed body and soul” is not intended to privilege a particular anthropology.

- However, in Roman Catholic understanding as expressed in these two definitions, the proclamation of any teaching as a dogma implies that the teaching in question is affirmed to be “revealed by God” and therefore to be believed “firmly and constantly” by all the faithful (i.e. it is *de fide*). The problem which these dogmas may present for Anglicans can be put in terms of Article VI of the Elizabethan “Articles of Religion:”

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation

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THE ANGLICAN/ROMAN CATHOLIC International Commission suggests a way forward:

- ...the explicit acceptance of the precise wording of the definitions of 1854 and 1950 might not be required of believers who were not in communion with Rome when they were defined. Conversely, Anglicans would have to accept that the definitions are a legitimate expression of Catholic faith, and are to be respected as such, even if these formulations were not employed by them. There are instances in ecumenical agreement in which what one partner has defined as *de fide* can be expressed by another partner in a different way.

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THE STATEMENT DISCUSSES the place of Mary in the Church which Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism share today:

- We together agree that in understanding Mary as the fullest human example of the life of grace, we are called to reflect on the lessons of her life recorded in Scripture and to join with her as one indeed not dead, but truly alive in Christ. In doing so we walk together as pilgrims in communion with Mary, Christ’s foremost disciple.
- Including Mary in praise and prayer belongs to our common [Anglican and Roman Catholic] heritage, as does our acknowledgement of her unique status as *Theotokos* [Mother of God], which gives her a distinctive place within the communion of Saints.
- The practice of believers asking Mary to intercede for them with her son grew rapidly following her being declared *Theotokos* at the Council of Ephesus [A.D. 431]. The most common form today of such intercession is the “Hail Mary.” This form conflates the greetings of Gabriel and Elizabeth to her (St Luke 1.28,42). With this background in mind, we [Anglicans and Roman Catholics] seek a theologically grounded way to draw more closely together in the life of prayer in communion with Christ and his Saints.
- The Scriptures invite Christians to ask their brothers and sisters to pray for them, in and through Christ (St James 5.13-15). Those who are now “with Christ,” untrammelled by

sin, share the unceasing prayer and praise which characterizes the life of heaven (Revelation 5.9-14; 7.9-12; 8.3-4). In the light of these testimonies, many Christians have rightly found that requests for assistance in prayer can rightly and effectively be made to those members of the communion of Saints distinguished by their holy living (St James 5.16-18). It is in this sense that we affirm that asking the Saints to pray for us is not to be excluded as unscriptural, though it is not directly taught by the Scriptures to be a required element of life in Christ.

- Among all the Saints, Mary takes her place as *Theotokos* [Mother of God]: alive in Christ, she abides with the one she bore, still “highly favored” in the communion of grace and hope, the exemplar of redeemed humanity, an icon of the Church. Consequently she is believed to exercise a distinctive ministry of assisting others through her active prayer.
- Many Christians find that giving devotional expression to their appreciation of this ministry of Mary enriches their worship of God. Authentic popular devotion to Mary, which by its nature displays a wide individual, regional, and cultural diversity, is to be respected. The crowds gathering at some places where Mary is believed to have appeared suggest that such apparitions are an important part of this devotion and provide spiritual comfort. There is need for careful discernment in assessing the spiritual value of any alleged apparition. This has been emphasized in recent Roman Catholic teaching. We are agreed that, within the constraints set down in this teaching to ensure that the honor paid to Christ remains pre-eminent, such private devotion is acceptable, though never required of believers.

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THE AGREED STATEMENT concludes:

- Affirming together unambiguously Christ’s unique mediation, which bears fruit in the life of the Church, we do not consider the practice of asking Mary and the Saints to pray for us as divisive between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Since obstacles of the past have been removed by clarification of doctrine, by liturgical reform and practical norms in keeping with it, we believe that there is no continuing theological reason for ecclesial division on these matters. Our hope is that, as we share in the one Spirit by which Mary was prepared and sanctified for her unique vocation, we [Anglicans and Roman Catholics] may together participate with her and all the Saints in the unending praise of God.