

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION IN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

By DONALD G. DAWE

THE POPULAR presupposition of ecumenical dialogue is that we should start with the easy matters first and proceed slowly, if at all, to the more difficult questions. This approach has served the ecumenical dialogue on marian questions well up to this point. Common exploration of scripture has swept away much misunderstanding. Historical studies of the protestant reformers, their piety and theology, have shown a deep and widespread concern for Mary that had been lost by their later followers. While rejoicing in these discoveries, one is always left with the stubborn realization that we do not live in the first century, or the sixteenth century, but the twentieth century. Our theological questions, our ecumenical concerns and our piety are shaped by the traditions of the Church as it exists today. Therefore we need to look at the traditions that have shaped the Churches of today as they search for the meaning of Mary.

When we leave historical and biblical studies to look at contemporary marian devotion and theology, we are painfully aware of the depth and seriousness of conflict. Nowhere is this more evident than in considering the two great marian definitions that have been crucial to modern Roman Catholicism — the promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1950. Suddenly we find ourselves transported from the realm of the familiar, where agreement lies close to the surface, into those most difficult and painful questions, where deep and threatening differences become evident. However, I am convinced that if ecumenical dialogue on Mary is to be possible, we must be bold in grasping these difficult issues for thoughtful and prayerful consideration.

From an ecumenical perspective, the dogmas of the Immaculate

Conception and the Assumption pose a paradox.¹ These two dogmas are the ones against which Protestants, both liberal and conservative, have inveighed most vigorously. It is not simply that Protestants have rejected these as non-biblical; it is rather that they see them as anti-biblical. These dogmas have been stigmatized as examples of papal arrogance. They have been rejected as threatening a sub-christian piety of a mother goddess. They call into question the centrality of Jesus Christ as sole mediator by invoking the mediatorship of Mary. And the defence of these dogmas in the encyclical *Fulgens corona* by Pius XII has called forth some of the most pointed criticism of the intentions of Protestants heard in official documents. But at the same time, these dogmas have had a central role in the piety of modern Roman Catholicism. They have energized the faithful during this time in which the threat of secularization has pressed most threateningly against the Church. Against the modern assaults of fascism and communism, many of the roman catholic faithful have been strengthened in this century by a piety focused on Mary. So the question is, how is it possible to maintain ecumenical dialogue without undermining the piety of faithful people or the theological commitments to scripture of Protestants?

Major protestant objections

Protestant objections to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception have two major foci.

1. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception is an example of the unfortunate tendency of popular marian piety to turn the Virgin Mary into a semi-divine mediating figure. Over-emphasis on the eminently orthodox epithet *Theotokos* has led some to a misunderstanding of the Blessed Virgin as a kind of female deity. Such was reported as early as the fifth century by Epiphanius of Salamis. This distorted piety led to the heretical mariology of the so-called 'Philomarianites' or 'Collyridans' that was betrayed into paganism even while seeking to honour the Virgin.² It was such a heresy that Protestants saw breaking out afresh in the promulgation of the dogma in 1854. The learned editor of *The methodist quarterly review* wrote at that time:

Nothing is clearer in the way of historical testimony than that this dogma is a novelty in the christian Church. . . . It is the slow and sure eating of the poison which Rome received from a pagan antiquity, in the veneration, the cultus, the worship of that which is not God.³

2. To declare as does the bull *Ineffabilis Deus* that the Virgin Mary 'was preserved from all stain of original sin in the first instance of her conception' is to undercut the uniqueness and sole sufficiency of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. He alone is the one free of sin. Mary, as a member of the human race, comes from Adam. To exempt even the Blessed Virgin from original sin is to contradict the sure word of scripture, 'For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive' (1 Cor 15,22; see also Rom 5,14-18). No matter how well-meaning the effort to honour Mary, the dogma serves only to undercut the unique dignity of her Son as the sole source of salvation. Heiko Obermann, while discussing other marian definitions, concludes: 'The dogma of 1854, however, is the far more serious threat to a truly catholic christology. . .'.⁴ It isolates the mother of Christ from the rest of humankind, he argues, and leads to making her into a co-redemptrix.

These objections have been raised not only by protestant theologians and church leaders, but roman catholic theologians, such as Léon-Josef Cardinal Suenens and Bishop Paulus Rusch, have expressed sensitivity to them also.⁵ The question is whether these objections pose an irreparable barrier to the growth of ecumenical understanding of Mary. Critical reflection on these objections, I believe, discloses the first of them to be wide of the mark. However, the second objection enshrines theological affirmations over which significant differences persist, despite the most sympathetic attempts at reinterpretation. To make good on these assertions requires a careful analysis. The first objection can be handled most easily by a look at what the definition of the Immaculate Conception actually said. In dealing with any controversies over dogmatic definitions, it is important to return to the exact wording of the original texts.

The language of Ineffabilis Deus

In the 1854 definition of the Immaculate Conception, Pius IX and the teachers of the Church of his day were aware of the excesses to which folk piety could go. They were also aware of the complex medieval theological controversy leading up to that definition. There had been a long and authoritative tradition of theologians in the Middle Ages opposed to the notion of the Immaculate Conception. The so-called 'maculist' theologians taught that Mary had been touched by the effects of Adam's fall. The refutation of the maculist tradition by John Dun Scotus was based on an argument of great subtlety. Hence their formulations were made with great care. The

text of the bull *Ineffabilis Deus* teaches that 'the most Blessed Virgin Mary was preserved from all stain of original sin in the first instant of her creation, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God'. However, this unique preservation was made, 'in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race' (*intuitu meritorum Christi Jesu Salvatoris humani generis*).⁶ The definition excludes the possibility of Mary's being a unique or separate source of grace. Her unique sanctity was derived from the grace and merits of her Son, Jesus Christ. She had no independent divine status. She was not a fully sanctified person apart from the merits of her Son. There is no possibility here of lapsing into the pelagianism that dogged the earliest reflections on the sinlessness of Mary, such as those of Julian of Eclanum (454). Even as serious a critic of the dogma as Walther von Loewenich could say, 'Mary's sinlessness is the first fruit of the redemptive work of Christ'. For this reason, von Loewenich could conclude, 'The veneration of Mary is not incompatible with the worship of Christ but part and parcel of it'.⁷

The theology of *Ineffabilis Deus* is built, at this point, upon an affirmation shared by Protestants and Catholics. It is that while the grace of God in Jesus Christ was given historically at a particular point in history, its salvific effects are available to human beings who lived before as well as after the Incarnation. In the words of the Westminster Confession, 'Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his Incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect, in all ages successively, from the beginning of the world . . .' (W.C. VIII,6).

There is no claim in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception that Mary received saving grace apart from her Son. There is the claim in the dogma that she received this grace while still in the womb of her mother. Yet even here there are not insuperable difficulties. There are certainly parallels to this suggested by the prenatal blessing of Jeremiah (Jer 1,5) and John the Baptist (Lk 1,15.41). While there is an ordinary progression through the *ordo salutis*, the effectual calling and sanctification of the elect take place after birth. God in his sovereign freedom may grant salvation when, where, and how he wills. The important point is that Mary is the elect one predestined by God for a unique role in the coming of salvation through the Incarnation.

The election of Mary

The theme of Mary as the expression of predestining grace has played a vital part in modern marian theology. Marie-Joseph

Nicolas, in his authoritative essay 'The meaning of the Immaculate Conception', argues that the election of Mary is the key to finding the meaning of the Immaculate Conception. 'In reality, *the proper and formal reason for the Immaculate Conception is Mary's predestination to the divine motherhood*'. This is true because 'predestination is the ordination of a being from all eternity by God to *an end* for which it was willed and created'.⁸ The unique character of Mary's election is that it is not only election to eternal beatitude but to a particular role in the plan of salvation. 'The other saints', according to Nicolas, 'are predestined *in Christ* . . . Mary is predestined *for Christ* . . .'.⁹ Now predestination always embraces all the necessary graces to accomplish the end of the divine election. In the case of Mary, this implies those graces needed to prepare her for her role as the *Theotokos*. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception is then, according to Nicolas, the explication of what is implied in the election of Mary.

Such an analysis holds great promise for fresh interpretations of the Immaculate Conception. Two lines of development have followed from the analysis of the election of Mary. The first of these is represented by Charles De Konick in his essay 'The Immaculate Conception and the doctrine of co-redemption'.¹⁰ The second line of development is that suggested by Charles Augustus Briggs in one of his late works *The Incarnation of the Lord*.¹¹ The first of these lines of development leads to severe difficulty for ecumenical understanding and should be rejected, while the second creates important opportunities for dialogue.

De Konick interprets the election of Mary on the basis of the unique intimacy and fulness of the relationship between Mary and her Son. To be prepared for her task of being the mother of the sinless Saviour, Mary received the grace of her Son in a way that went beyond that known to any other of the elect. It goes beyond the union of intention to a participation in the work of salvation. Because of this special union, De Konick argues, Mary may be spoken of as the 'co-mediatrix' or 'co-redemptrix' with her Son. Mary is linked in such an intimate fashion to the coming of salvation as to become drawn into its source.

There is a causal relationship, in this interpretation, between Mary's election, her Immaculate Conception and Assumption, and her 'co-redemption' of the world. De Konick gives a very special meaning to election. He goes far beyond the definition of election given by Nicolas. 'Mary belongs to the order of the hypostatic union', he asserts, because of her election.¹² It is at just this point

that severe difficulties appear. To argue that because of her election Mary shares in the hypostatic union represents a confusion between the unique, once for all event of the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures of our Lord and the union of grace between God and the elect. The hypostatic union in our Lord is an *unio personalis* in which the person of Christ is formed by the sharing of attributes (*communicatio idiomatum*) of the human and divine natures. Election is an *unio gratiae* in which the merits of Christ are bestowed upon the elect to provide for their salvation. Mary is the supreme instance of the *unio gratiae*. But in this, she is and remains human. There is no hypostatic union, even by analogy, for anyone save Jesus Christ. And hence there is no possibility of granting her the status of co-redemptrix. She is the recipient of grace and the channel of grace.

A very different interpretation of the election of Mary is that given by Professor Briggs, one of the few Protestants, until the work of John Macquarrie and H. A. Ross Mackenzie, who tried to think constructively about the Immaculate Conception. Briggs viewed the dogma from his unique stance as both biblical scholar and historian of doctrine. The problem which Immaculate Conception answers is posed for the western Church by the form Augustine gave to the doctrine of original sin, Briggs maintained. How is it possible for Jesus, the sinless Saviour, to stand in solidarity with humankind when original sin is communicated through birth? From his study of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Briggs concluded that 'though Jesus partook of flesh and blood, we were not obliged to think that he partook of any hereditary sin or corruption. When now we consider, not only that Jesus became flesh, but that he was born into this world, of a human mother, we have all the more to consider how he could have been conceived and born without sharing, with all others of human kind, in original sin and hereditary inclinations to sin'.¹³

Theologians have seen the necessity of removing the taint of original sin from the human nature which the Son of God assumed when he became human, according to Briggs. 'There must have been such a sanctification of that flesh, at the time of the Incarnation, or prior to it, that Jesus Christ might be conceived without sin'.¹⁴ In studying the history of the doctrine of the sanctification of the human nature of Jesus, Briggs saw the growing tendency to locate this sanctification in Mary. Initially it was seen during the lifetime of Mary, or in the moment of Jesus's conception. But this sanctification devolved on to the Immaculate Conception of Mary herself. It was this line of development, Briggs said, that had been given the stamp of papal approval

in 1854. He admits the cogency of this line of thought. He sees the roman catholic approach as in many respects superior to the views on the sanctification of the human nature held by the theologians of protestant orthodoxy. Protestant theologians held for an instantaneous sanctification of human nature in the moment of Jesus's conception. This view is mechanistic and magical, according to Briggs. It ignores the developmental ways in which God acts through human history. But Briggs believed that it was necessary to find some way to mediate the impasse between Catholics and Protestants. 'It is possible to take a position somewhat intermediate between roman catholic doctrine and that medley of opinions which Protestantism has produced but not yet officially defined'.¹⁵

The key to this intermediate position is the doctrine of election and ultimately that of the election of Mary. In his earlier work on messianic prophecy Briggs develops, through an analysis of Old Testament prophecy, the ways in which God prepares for the coming of Jesus by the election of Israel, her kings and prophets, priests and heroes. The election of Israel implies not an arbitrary divine choice of one people. The election is the preparation of a saving remnant within this people by a process of sanctification. 'We have to consider that Israel was the chosen nation . . . and that the seed of the promise was being prepared by a process of sanctification through the centuries for the time when the Messiah should be born'.¹⁶ Finally 'the holy seed of promise' appears 'in Joseph and in Mary, in persons of extraordinary purity, simplicity, and devotion'.

May we not suppose that the Holy Spirit had been sanctifying the holy line for generations, preparing it for that fulness of the time when the Messiah was to be born of it, and that in Mary the Mother of our Lord that sanctifying had reached the supreme point of entire removal from her, even at her birth, of all the taint and defilement of original sin, so that she was fitted from her birth by purity, innocence, and consecrated sanctity to be the Mother of our Lord.¹⁷

Such an approach Briggs maintains does no violence to the pauline doctrine of original sin. Here there is no magical breaking into the chain of human life. Rather there is witness to a slow careful preparation for the advent. It is a preparation that has reached its fulfilment in Mary. 'The holy Mother, pure and undefiled, immaculate and altogether sacred, had been prepared through many generations of holy ancestry, as the consummate flower of humanity, to bear as her fruit the holy child'.¹⁸

There is a lonely greatness about Charles Augustus Briggs that has stirred little response. The liberalism he once espoused degenerated into a negative modernism from which he turned. The orthodoxy he sought to defend became increasingly shrill and anti-intellectual. Perhaps the ecumenism of our time can find fresh inspiration in Briggs. Briggs offers one line which ecumenical dialogue about the dogma of the Immaculate Conception may take. There is, however, another way for ecumenical dialogue to take. That is to go back into the history of the development of the dogma to listen to those voices which we may affirm together in our search for knowing the truth about Mary.

Mary as Theotokos

Arguments in favour of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception have found their focus not only around the notion of predestination but also around the notion of the *Theotokos*. The sanctioning of the title *Theotokos* for Mary at Ephesus in 431 provided far more than an antidote to nestorianism. *Theotokos* and its various latin translations as *Deipara*, *Mater Dei* or *Genetrix Dei* represent a complex of theological, liturgical, and devotional ideas that are related to the central mystery of the Incarnation itself. To confess Mary as *Theotokos*, *Mater Dei*, or, to use its inevitable english translation, 'Mother of God', is to reject any form of adoptionism or nestorianism. It is to confess that from the moment of his conception by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was already divine. What Mary carried in her womb was consubstantial with God the Father as regards his divine nature. Eric Mascall explains the meaning of Mary as the Mother of God:

It has been made absolutely plain by everyone who has used the term that it does *not* mean that the Blessed Virgin is the source of our Lord's Godhead. It means that she is the one who by the ordinary processes of motherhood, while remaining a virgin, gave a complete human nature, body and soul, to him who before this happened was God, and who, of course, remains God.¹⁹

The question posed by such an assertion is just how a human being, in this case Mary, is prepared for the high and unique task of being the 'Bearer of God'. The answer to this question given by the dogma of the Immaculate Conception is that Mary could be the *Theotokos* because she was 'preserved from all stain of original sin in the first instance of her conception'. Later Pius XII in *Fulgens corona* specifically links the bestowal of the title *Mater Dei* to Mary's having had 'a soul immune from stain'.

The classical reformed dogmaticians were not insensitive to the question of how a finite and sinful creature could serve the high office of bringing into the world a sinless son who was, while fully human, also consubstantial with God the Father. The *Leiden Synopsis*, XXV, speaks of Mary as '*Theotokos*' and '*Deipara*', as well as the biblically sanctioned '*Mater Domini*'. But the explanation of how Mary can be the 'God-bearer' given by reformed theologians was very different from that given in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The reformed understanding of Mary grew out of the maculist tradition of medieval theology. This tradition, which could number Anselm, Bonaventure, Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas as its members, held that Mary was subject to original sin.²⁰ The question asked by this tradition was not how Mary could be exempted from original sin. The question was how could Mary, while sinful, be the instrument of the Incarnation? If the human nature of our Lord were derived from his mother, and if that human nature were stained by original sin, then how could it be united with the divine nature to give rise to a sinless Jesus? The answer given to the question by the seventeenth-century dutch reformed theologian Henrici a Diest was that the human nature received from Mary was sanctified by an action of the Holy Spirit so that it would be suitable for being united personally with the second person of the Trinity. In his *Theologia biblica*, a Diest writes:

It is the conception of Christ, by which without male action and the sole blood of the Virgin Mary, his human nature was formed, sanctified by the operation of the Holy Spirit, assumed by the Son of God and united personally to himself.²¹

The Incarnation must be considered, according to the reformed teachers, in two aspects: it is an act of divine condescension by which the infinite, eternal Son of God takes up existence as Jesus, a finite and mortal man. It is also dependent upon a sanctification of human nature by the Holy Spirit, so that human nature could be rid of the stain of original sin so as to allow it to come into the most intimate union with the divine nature in its holiness.

The glory of Mary in the reformed tradition is grounded in her act of faithful obedience to the divine word by which she fulfilled her predestined role in the order of salvation. She allowed the act of sanctification to take place that made the Incarnation a possibility. This was the glory on which John Calvin reflected in his commentary on the greeting of Elizabeth to Mary in Luke 1,42:

To this day we cannot enjoy the blessing brought to us in Christ without thinking at the same time of that which God gave as adornment and honour to Mary, in willing her to be the mother of his only-begotten Son.²²

But in his typical way Calvin insists that the blessedness that Elizabeth declares is the 'blessedness due to the blessedness of her son'. The basis for this position is not to be found in conceiving how Mary was exempted from original sin but in the way in which original sin was overcome in her. She was the first recipient of that grace that alone triumphs over sin. 'Happy Mary', wrote Calvin, 'to have embraced in her heart the promise of God, to have conceived and brought into the world for herself and for all — salvation'.²³

The triumph of the immaculist tradition

The irony, from an ecumenical perspective, is that the reformed understanding of the proper honouring of Mary is a position that grows out of the maculist tradition of the Middle Ages. The maculist theologians, including Aquinas, taught that Mary was subject to original sin and that Christ alone is sinless. According to these theologians, the scriptures and the church fathers knew nothing of an immaculist view of Mary's conception. The maculists believed, as did the reformed theologians, that it did no honour to Mary to hold to her immaculate conception, but it did undercut the unique honour of Christ. The historical claims of *Fulgens corona* that the Immaculate Conception is a tenet of the faith 'from ancient times', or that it was the doctrine of the fathers, have been refuted by roman catholic historians.²⁴

The traditionalist response to this line of argument is that such thinking has been rendered irrelevant since the work of John Duns Scotus. Duns Scotus marks the triumph of the immaculist tradition that was subsequently given full exposition in the nineteenth century by J. Perrone. Scotus's position is based on the nominalist view of the divine omnipotence. The divine omnipotence is defined in terms of God having an unlimited range of possibilities for his actions. God is able to do anything, Scotus argues, and hence the Immaculate Conception is a possibility. But the actuality of the Immaculate Conception must still be established. This actuality is not argued from any historical data or scriptural texts. It is argued instead that the Immaculate Conception took place because it was appropriate to the high honour given Mary. Such honour would be inconceivable if

she were to be stained in any way by original sin. Scotus argues further that the Immaculate Conception is the most excellent way in which God could act to bring about human redemption, and God always acts in the better way.²⁵

The care and intricacy with which the immaculist tradition has been elaborated allows of no simple refutation. What remains unclear to the ecumenical observer, as has been already noted by Macquarrie and Yarnold, is just what is the force of the immaculist argument?²⁶ Has the older and well-founded maculist tradition really been refuted? Scotus could be said to have established a probable opinion. He provides theological rationale for a pious practice coming from the Middle Ages. But his arguments lack the force needed to establish a dogmatic definition of high authority. Hence the concern of those who long for the unity of the Church and seek to give Mary the high honour that is her due. Does the triumph of the immaculist tradition in mariology mark the closing of a door to ecumenical growth, or is there some way to be given by God through this impasse?

Grace abounding

At this point, there appears no neat set of answers that will resolve the tangle. Rather I should like to suggest a word picture, a kind of extended metaphor, by which not only thought but also prayer may be guided. For one may well conclude that mariology has suffered from overly intricate analysis. By trying to say too much about Mary we are in danger of obscuring the real mystery of her person by a theological miasma of our own making. If ecumenical dialogue about Mary is to be carried forward, we must face difficult and intricate theological problems. But we also need to find a way to focus that dialogue. For this I should like to suggest the metaphor of an overflowing stream. This was suggested to me by my visits to Wikki Spring in Yankari, Nigeria, to which we made our escape whenever we could during the dry season.

When a powerful spring breaks forth from the earth, its waters spread in all directions from it. A great pond is formed from which streams flow out to water a parched earth. Right around the spring there is verdant growth where its abundant waters bring forth a beauty only faintly intimated in the surrounding countryside. The grace of God came into human history at a particular time and place through the coming of Jesus. And like a mighty spring this grace abounding flowed forth in all directions transforming whatever it

touched. It flowed with particular fullness into Mary because of her unique closeness to her Son. It flowed backward in time to Mary to prepare her for her role in the Incarnation. This is what is celebrated in the Immaculate Conception. The grace of God in Christ flows forward in time to fulfil in Mary the promise made to all the saints for their full salvation of soul and body in the kingdom of God. This is what is celebrated in her Assumption.

Such a metaphor suggests the basis for an ecumenical vision of Mary and for ecumenical prayers of thanksgiving and hope. May such prayers and hopes sustain us until our theological quandaries are resolved, in that time when we shall no longer 'see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood' (1 Cor 13,12).

NOTES

¹ Dawe, Donald G.: 'The assumption of the Virgin in ecumenical perspective', *The Way Supplement* 45 (June 1982), pp 41-54.

² Oberman, Heiko A.: *The Virgin Mary in evangelical perspective* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1971), pp 14-18.

³ 'The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception', *Methodist Quarterly Review*, Vol XXXVII (Fourth Series), Vol VII (April 1855), pp 308f.

⁴ Oberman, Heiko A., *op. cit.*, p 25.

⁵ Rusch, Paulus: 'Mariologische Wertungen', *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, Vol 85, pp 129-35; Suenens, L.-J.: *Mary the Mother of God* (Hawthorn Books, New York, 1959), pp 26-38.

⁶ Denzinger: *Bulla 'Ineffabilis Deus'* (8 Dec 1854), 1804.

⁷ Loewenich, Walter von: *Modern catholicism* (Macmillan, London, 1959), p 198.

⁸ Nicolas, Marie-Joseph, O.P.: 'The Meaning of the Immaculate Conception in the perspectives of St Thomas', *The dogma of the Immaculate Conception*, ed. Edward Denis O'Connor, C.S.C. (Notre Dame; University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), pp 336f; Michael Schmaus, *Katholische Dogmatik*, Vol 5 (Max Huelou, Munich, 1955), pp 181-85.

⁹ Nicolas, Marie-Joseph, *op. cit.*, p 336.

¹⁰ De Konick, Charles: 'The Immaculate Conception and the Divine Motherhood, Assumption and Co-redemption', in O'Connor, *op. cit.*, pp 363-412.

¹¹ Briggs, Charles Augustus: *The Incarnation of the Lord* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1902), pp 215-35. See also his 'Criticism and dogma', *North American Review*, Vol 182 (June 1906) pp 861-74. Briggs is best known for his work as an interpreter of the new historical critical scholarship of the bible. Anyone who has attempted Hebrew will remember him as one of the authors of the famous Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Hebrew-English Lexicon*. He was defrocked by the Presbyterian Church USA for heresy in his treatment of scripture in 1893. He retained, however, his professorship at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. In 1899 he was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church, after which he gave much time and energy to the problems of christian unity. He had close personal ties with many people in Rome, where he gave one of the lectures that formed the basis of his book, *The Incarnation of the Lord*.