

## Mary and the Reformation - Part 2 of 4 - Zwingli

### Crying for Reform

To mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation it is important to consider one of its most important controversies; that which swirled around the figure of Mary. It does no good to evade the catastrophic decline in church discipline and theological teaching in the Catholicism of the fifteenth century and the papacies of Julius II whose main concern was to reinforce the political power of the papacy and Leo X who behaved like a Renaissance prince. Neither was concerned with moral and theological reform.

### Reformation

Three figures dominate the period, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1529) in central Switzerland, Martin Luther (1483-1546) in Germany, and Jean Calvin (1509-1564) in France. It is important to remember that these men did not turn against Mary but honoured her. In the period of the Counter-Reformation their followers reacted against many of the excesses that took place; it has been stated that Catholicism developed a fixation on Mary while Protestantism developed amnesia, something to be explored as we go forward.

### Ulrich Zwingli

From 1516 to 1518 when Zwingli was chaplain at the monastery of Einsiedeln, his main task being to preach to pilgrims honouring a famous statue of the Virgin. He had many occasions to speak of Mary, preaching on the Annunciation and on her presence at Pentecost. He often referred to Mary when commenting on the Bible and spoke eloquently about her. Not only was he the first of the major Reformers, he was the most Marian figure of the Reformation.

Learned in Greek and Hebrew, Zwingli liked to quote the New Testament in Greek. When he came to Matthew 12:48, where “the mother of Jesus and his brothers” come to the house where Jesus preaches, he does not take Jesus’ response as a rebuke to his mother, but simply a reminder of the proper subordination of human families to God, “...*The Jews call ‘brothers’ anyone, especially blood-relatives. His relatives then came along with his mother...Jesus here does not speak as though despising his mother. For how could he who teaches to honour one’s mother humiliate his own? But he did not want attention to his mother to interrupt the work of God...*”

In the family of Jesus, Zwingli did not forget Joseph. In a sermon on Mary he begins with praise of the man to whom she was betrothed and then married. In this man ‘the divine wisdom’ was manifested. For if Joseph had not been there Mary would have been stoned according to Jewish Law. ‘He protected her from the Law’. He helped her flight into Egypt and in their return to Judea and Galilee, and his service was ‘most welcome to her.’

### Ave Maria

In 1522 Zwingli was the priest in charge of the Gross Munster of Zurich, the main church of the city. He wrote to his family, “If you are told that I despise God and his Mother, or that I falsify God’s teaching, do not believe it.” He assumed that good Christians are in the habit of reciting the Hail Mary, but knew only the scriptural first half, not the later addition popularized between 1555-1566.

He realised that the starting point for correct teaching about Mary is the Christological role of mother of Christ as implied in her traditional title *Theotokos* or God-bearer, for which she should be praised, 'the ever pure Maid who has born this Saviour for us.' It is right and proper to praise her, he taught, but not to invoke her or pray to her.

It was at this point that Zwingli rejected the prayers of petition that were commonly addressed in Catholic piety to the Mother of God and the saints, not admitting invocations of Mary that ask for her intercession or mediation. But he accepted a contemplative evocation and praise of her, insisting that the Hail Mary (as known then) was 'not a prayer, but a greeting and a praise', scriptural since it repeats the greetings of the archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation and the praise of Elizabeth at the Visitation.

### **Prayer in German means**

"To ask to bring something, to beg for a gift, but the Hail Mary does not ask for anything. It is pure greeting and praise, mirroring Mary's own *Magnificat*, "The Almighty has done great things for me." Zwingli acknowledged the fundamental title of *Theotokos*: Mary's motherhood of the divine Word as the basis for her praise, even affirming *She remained a pure, unsullied Virgin before the birth, in and after the birth, indeed for eternity.*

### **Mary's Exemption from Sin**

For Zwingli, father of the Reformation in Switzerland, Mary's exemption from sin was a major reason to sing her praises; "since the beginning of the world" she alone of all women conceived her Son without transmitting to him "the human weakness that we all bring with us from Adam." Zwingli uses the term 'immaculate' of Mary though he does not relate her virginal conception of Jesus to her own immaculate conception. In his writings he states that she was without "the smallest trace of a stain." The only Marian doctrine not reflected in his preaching is the Dormition or Assumption of Mary.

### **Mary's Heart**

Zwingli was keen to promote the right kind of Marian piety. Anticipating the Mariology of the Counter Reformation he turned to Luke, pointing out that when Jesus was a child Mary was "pondering all these things in her heart," a reference to the Finding in the Temple. This led the Swiss reformer to focus on the heart of Mary who admired the ways of God who did not choose "the emperor's daughter or King Herod's daughter, but me, a small, simple virgin."

She admired the mystery "that I, a bride of God the heavenly Father, and a palace or chamber of the Holy Spirit, have born him in this world for the salvation of all humans without a bodily father, him who in his divinity is born from all eternity from the heavenly Father without a mother." All of this took place as Mary reflected, "not according to my merit but according to God's grace."

"Who then has ever known God better than the Virgin Mary?" "Who would despair of God, seeing the valiant heart of the immaculate Mary follow her Son after all men abandoned him, even to the cross?" "All the things that Christ experienced in his childhood she pondered over in so loyal a heart." Zwingli asked these questions and went on to see them as being a sure sign of

“how closely her heart was grounded in God.” Mary’s was a heart that carried “the care and love of a mother, for in her virginal heart she felt all the sufferings of her Son.”

### **Mary’s Example**

We have much to learn from Mary and her faith for she referred all things, not to herself but to God and Jesus. “Her greatest honour is her Son” and by the same token, “her greatest honour is that one likewise learns to love him above all things and is ever thankful for the benefit that he has brought us.” A true following and imitation of Mary leading to a holy life in Christian discipleship requires a balance, “The more the honour and love of Christ Jesus has increased among humans, the more has the honour and appreciation of Mary increased, since she has born for us a great and precious Lord and Redeemer. But if you wish especially to honour Mary, follow her purity, her innocence, and her strong faith.”

Zwingli did part with some trends of Marian devotion in Catholicism. In the face of exalting her and recognising her as graced and honoured by God, “she has not become less poor herself, and she has had to bear persecution, pain, and misery, in which however she has remained with a strong heart. And therefore may you, with your poverty and your weariness, find an example in her. This misery that is so well known to humans must be born, since the holy Mother of God was not sheltered from it.”

### **Summary**

Zwingli’s approach to Mary was essentially pastoral. He wanted all forms of devotion to respect “the true religion,” that is, the only mediation of Christ for the sins of the world and the primacy of faith in the life of Christians. Therefore no petition should be addressed to any saint and not even to the Mother of God. But there should be a contemplation of Christ’s relation to Mary, admiration of the divine gifts that she received, participation in the meditations of her heart, and imitation of her examples.

This high Mariology of praise was preserved under Zwingli’s successor, Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) who also preached notable sermons in praise of the Virgin. He taught both that Mary was properly called Mother of God and the perpetual virginity of Mary, as well as that she was taken to heaven body and soul on the biblical model of Elijah who was carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire: *We believe that the Virgin Mary, Begetter of God, the most pure bed and temple of the Holy Spirit, that is, her most holy body, was carried to heaven by angels.*”

### **Source**

Tavard, G. H. (1996). *The Thousand Faces of Mary*. Michael Glazier: Collegeville, MN.

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