

# **DOCTRINAL NOTE**

## **of the Catholic Bishops of Canada**

### **concerning the Army of Mary**

It was fourteen years ago, on 4 May 1987, that Cardinal Louis-Albert Vachon, then Archbishop of Quebec, formally revoked the decree by which his predecessor had established the Army of Mary as a pious association.<sup>(1)</sup> With this decree revoking the Army of Mary's canonical status in the Church, a decision that was made in full communion with the Holy See on 6 February 1987, the Archbishop of Quebec banned all celebrations organized under the auspices of the Army of Mary and by its various branches in the parish churches and other places of worship in the diocese. As well, the propagation of devotion and prayers to the "*Lady of all Peoples*" was also banned.

To this day, the leaders of the Army of Mary have not heeded the numerous interventions of the Archbishop of Quebec and have continued their activities, including the unlawful establishment of a chapel and retreat house at Lac Etchemin.<sup>(2)</sup> They have done so without regard for the legitimate authority of the local Ordinary to safeguard the ecclesial communion which is fundamental to the Catholic Church, and in violation of the norms of the Code of Canon Law.<sup>(3)</sup>

The Army of Mary's on-going activities and teachings pose dangers for the Catholic Church in Canada and to the faith of its members. In view of this and the continuing threat to the integrity and unity of the Catholic faith, the Bishops of Canada declare, and hereby inform all the Catholic faithful, that the Army of Mary, regardless of its claims to the contrary, is not a Catholic association. Some of the teaching it propagates about redemption, the Virgin Mary and ?reincarnation? are profoundly at variance with the teaching and profession of the faith of the Catholic Church. Because this constitutes for the faithful a danger to the faith, we, the Bishops of Canada, hereby exhort the members and sympathizers of the Army of Mary to take no further part in any activities of this group, whether these involve its publications or participation in prayer meetings and liturgical celebrations, including those notably at its Centre Spiri-Maria, located in Quebec.

For the benefit of the Catholic faithful in Canada, therefore, and especially the well-intentioned sympathizers of the Army of Mary, we reiterate here the fundamental teaching of the Catholic Church concerning some of the contentious doctrinal issues at stake.

#### **Catholic Teaching Concerning Private Revelations**

Since the belief and spirituality of the Army of Mary stem from, and are largely dictated by, a series of presumed private revelations, we must, in the first instance, address this key issue.

The possibility of private revelation through visions and auditory experiences has always been recognized by the Church. Indeed the tradition and practice of the Church, in many of its devotions and recognized prophetic figures and mystics such as Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila, presuppose the existence of genuine private revelations. God can make himself perceptible to any person not only by his works but also by his free personal word. We recognize that the Holy Spirit can act upon the Church through any of its members.

Nevertheless, while private revelations can and do take place in the history of the Church, these are not to be understood as revealing some new doctrinal truths, as though adding new truths to God's

definitive public Revelation. With the death of the last Apostle, the completion of public Revelation indicates the absolute supremacy and permanent normative character of the Christ-event: "*no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"<sup>(4)</sup> God's definitive public Revelation, which alone constitutes the faith of the People of God, is the standard against which the authenticity of any subsequent private revelation must be judged.

The Church has always taught that private revelations indicate how Christians should apply the message of the Gospel in a particular historical situation. They are not disclosures of new doctrines, as the Army of Mary maintains. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly states in this respect: "*It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history.... Christian faith cannot accept revelations that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfilment.*"<sup>(5)</sup> If perchance a private revelation does touch upon some point of doctrine, it has never been to add to the deposit of faith, but rather to draw special attention to some already revealed, but perhaps neglected, aspect of the deposit of faith. The presumed private revelations, upon which members of the Army of Mary stake their claim, do not merely urge Catholics to follow the Gospel more faithfully; they include spurious new doctrines that are without foundation in Scripture or Tradition.

### **Mary's Role in the History of Salvation**

As its name clearly indicates, the Army of Mary centres much of its devotion and spirituality on Mary. Yet its Marian devotion contains many elements that are patently contrary to the teaching of the Church, especially with regards to Mary's place in God's plan of redemption and her non-repeatable, irreplaceable role in salvation history. These and other doctrinal points as taught by the Army of Mary seriously misrepresent the Church's teaching .

By God's design, the Virgin Mary has indeed always occupied a unique, privileged position in the history of salvation and in the communion of saints. Mary stands at the decisive point in the history of salvation as the person who, in faith, agreed to receive into herself the Son of God and Saviour of the world, Jesus Christ. She became the Mother of the eternal Word, the Mother of God, when she consented to receive Christ in her flesh and in her heart. According to the witness of Scripture, Mary's personal assent and co-operation stand at the very heart and centre of salvation history.

Yet her *fiat*, her personal act of acceptance, was itself a redeeming and sanctifying grace from God. Mary did not merit this grace on her own, independently of the redemptive grace of her Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>(6)</sup> This singular grace of accepting God's will was given to her by the power of the Most High, as a prevenient gift and fruit of Christ's redemption. Thus it was, at one and the same time, a divinely assisted and a deeply human response. Because of this unique and historically unrepeatable grace, the Church has always seen in Mary the supreme and utterly unique instance of redemption, both for herself and a world in need of redemption. Mary is she who is perfectly redeemed because she is "*full of grace*".

In this capacity, she and she alone stands as a living model and pattern for the Church and for all of us. To speak of Mary is to speak of the Church. Mary has always been, by reason of her faith and obedience to the Word of God, a model of the Church. In Mary, the Church affirms her own vocation. Thus in the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church we read: "*For in the mystery of the Church, herself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar of both virginity and motherhood.*"<sup>(7)</sup>

The Army of Mary, through their misguided interpretation of Catholic teaching, would in effect not only rob Mary of her unique, irreplaceable role in salvation history, but their so-called "*reincarnation*" of Mary all but renders superfluous Mary's on-going intercession in heavenly glory. The Mary of the Gospel and Catholic tradition is in heaven, not on earth. It is the teaching of the Catholic Church that Mary's life is both unique and historical, and as such cannot be repeated, reproduced, or otherwise "*reincarnated*". When the course of her earthly life was finished, she was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory. It is from there, beside the Risen Christ and no longer here on earth, that she continues, even now, to be our Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix: "*Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside her saving role, but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation.*"<sup>(8)</sup>

The presumed private revelation upon which the Army of Mary bases its claim to legitimacy does in fact introduce new and erroneous doctrines about the Virgin Mary and her role in the economy of salvation history. It significantly adds to Christ's definitive Revelation. It would have its followers believe, for example, that their "*Immaculate*" is co-eternal with the Triune God, and that although she was once the historical mother of Jesus, she is now "*reincarnated*" and "*dwells*" in the very person of the recipient of these presumed private revelations.<sup>(9)</sup> It was because of such spurious attempts to add to the fundamental deposit of faith, and other such assertions, that the Army of Mary forfeited its claim to be a duly recognized Catholic association.

### **Role of Ecclesial Authority**

The Catholic Bishops of Canada regret the way the leaders of the Army of Mary continue to defy ecclesial authority and refuse to heed the legitimate pastoral admonitions and injunctions of the Archbishop of Quebec. This can only be injurious to the proper teaching and unifying role of episcopal authority, mission and responsibility, and thus to the ecclesial communion.

At its deepest level, ecclesial communion is maintained by the unity of believers in the apostolic faith and by the celebration and profession of this faith in the Eucharist, the sacrament of the Church's unity. Right faith and authentic sacramental celebration are not possible apart from communion with the local bishop. He is the witness and point of reference of the life of faith in the community. He is not only the witness and authentic interpreter of the faith present in "*the particular church entrusted to him as the vicar and delegate of Christ,*"<sup>(10)</sup> he is also a witness for his community in that he stands in profound communion of faith with his fellow bishops. The bishop is entrusted with responsibility both for the public worship and for the religious teaching that occurs in his diocese. It is his responsibility to promote and safeguard Catholic teaching concerning faith and morals throughout the diocese. It is his function to ensure that what is being taught is in full accord with the teaching of the Church, that it is theologically acceptable, morally sound, and free of doctrinal error. In accomplishing this function, the bishop thereby protects the right of the People of God to receive the Gospel message in its purity and entirety.

As we noted earlier, the Church has always recognized the presence of mystics and mystical experience in the community of the faithful. Indeed, it can even be said that every Christian is a mystic in virtue of his or her baptismal vocation and life in Christ. The Church is also mindful, however, of the inadequacy of human words, whether theological or mystical, to capture and express fully "*the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*" (Eph. 3:18). Thus it is that both the theologian and the mystic must submit, in all humility, to the limitations of human words to express and communicate the ineffable mystery of being loved by a God of infinite love. Because of this inadequacy of human language, and the ensuing dangers to the true faith, bishops have a divinely appointed overseeing role in the Church to

ensure, in their diocese, that the definitive Revelation in Jesus Christ is transmitted faithfully and without distortion.

Contrary to this humble submission, the Army of Mary has publicly defied episcopal authority, and its defiance has not been confined to the local Church. Prior to the decision to revoke the Army of Mary's canonical status, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had already examined the extensive written record of the presumed private revelations and had found them, in many instances, to be contrary to Catholic teaching. Contesting the canonical legality of Cardinal Vachon's decree revoking its status, as was its right, the Army of Mary lodged an administrative recourse against his decision. It appealed its case to the supreme tribunal of the Church in Rome, the Apostolic Signatura, which is the highest recourse possible in such judicial matters. After due process and prolonged procedures, this supreme tribunal issued a definitive decision by decree on 20 April 1991.<sup>(11)</sup> With this decision, the Archbishop was vindicated in his decision to revoke the Army of Mary's canonical status, with the ensuing consequence that Catholics were to refrain from belonging to this particular group. Sadly, many still continue to do so in defiance of ecclesial authority. In the eyes of the Catholic faithful, this can only be divisive and undermine the teaching and unifying role of episcopal authority.

## Conclusion

It should be obvious that a group can no longer represent itself as truly Catholic when its leaders teach a doctrine that is contrary to that of the Catholic Church, especially on points as fundamental as those enumerated above. The Bishops of Canada thus invite pastors and faithful alike to a serious spiritual discernment and to preserve intact their Catholic faith. We urge all Catholics to recognize the errors of doctrine inherent in the teachings of the Army of Mary, to be mindful of the harm and divisive consequences its leaders are having in the Church of Canada and elsewhere, and to preserve the purity of their Catholic faith. With pastoral charity, we remind all Catholics in Canada to make the revealed Word of God and the teachings of the Church the basis for their life of faith and the central focus of their Christian spirituality.

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Solemnity of St. Peter and St. Paul, apostles

29 June 2001

**This Doctrinal Note of the Catholic Bishops of Canada concerning the Army of Mary received the *recognitio* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 10 August 2001 (Prot. N. 216/74-13501), and was subsequently published by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary, 15 August 2001.**

## Endnotes

1. Cf. *Pastorale-Québec*, vol. 99, no. 10, June 22, 1987, p. 245.
2. Cf. *Pastorale-Québec*, vol. 112, no. 6, May 15, 2000, pp. 10-15.
3. Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1226.

4. *Dei Verbum*, 4. Cf. also 1 Tim 6.14; Titus 2.13.
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 67.
6. *Lumen gentium*, nos. 60, 62.
7. *Lumen gentium*, no. 63.
8. *Lumen gentium*, no. 62.
9. For an overview of the creed of the Army of Mary, cf. *Le Royaume*, no. 143, July 1, 2000, p. 8.
10. *Lumen gentium*, no. 27.
11. For a French translation of this official Latin decree, cf. *Studia Canonica*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1991, pp. 409-15