

## BOOK REVIEW

Christopher Cocksworth, *Mary, Bearer of Life* (London: SCM Press, 2023), pp. 208. ISBN 9780334062004.

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Christopher Cocksworth, Dean of Windsor and formerly Bishop of Coventry and Chair of the House of Bishops' Faith and Order Commission, has produced a work on Mary, the mother of Jesus, which is, in itself, a worthy example of the bishop's teaching ministry. *Mary, Bearer of Life* has the very full apparatus of a work of scholarship and yet it is an intensely personal account of Cocksworth's response to the apparent absence of Mary from the evangelical tradition in which he was formed and, to some extent, from the Church of England, in which he serves.

He directs the reader's attention to the moral issues that arise from searching enquiry into who and where Mary is and why this matters, while locating the answers to those questions in the liturgical and devotional life of Christians across history and Church tradition. His exploration lays bare divisions of opinion about Mary but it is not opinionated, and it deploys a methodology of enquiry that constantly invites us to respond with care to traditions that might challenge our own.

The introduction gives us a lot of personal detail, accounting for how this book came to be written. The five sections that follow ('Chosen', 'Called', 'Redeemed', 'Fulfilled', 'Loved') offer a survey that traces the points at which Mary's story intersects with the life-giving work of the one to whom she gave and nurtured human life. The first four of those sections conclude with a case study that explores complex and sensitive moral issues, each of which is of equal significance: the environment, nuclear weapons, education and child welfare have all received comment from bishops and other Church leaders. Abortion, however, stands out as a subject on which we are generally silent. Cocksworth's presentation of this issue is exemplary in its reticent sensitivity and honesty.

For this reviewer, *Mary, Bearer of Life* opens a new perspective on Marian studies because the author gives us so much personal information. He writes self-consciously and disarmingly as a man whose profoundly inquisitive faith draws from the personal experience of women and men, mothers, spouses and children, all in family life across four generations. That points to some of the ecclesiological interest that is sublimated in the text. In the Lutheran reform, the joy of family life comes easily to the fore and faith is warmed by the impact of music, visual imagery and personal devotion. Cocksworth often reverts to this but does so from the critical

vantage point of maturity in which his recent experience of various strands of Orthodoxy has also proved influential.

Anglicanism has often found itself susceptible to the wisdom and richness of the Orthodox tradition: icons, liturgy and, in this case, spiritual poetry, feature persuasively in Cocksworth's reflections. The Second Vatican Council, the work of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commissions (ARCIC), and Cocksworth's evident respect for more recent papal statements on Mary also reveal a lively attention to Scripture and the centrality of Jesus Christ in the work of redemption. These aspects of the contemporary Roman Catholic presentation of Mary appeal to an enquiring evangelical mind that is also confident in its processes of enquiry.

This book is an accessible and attractive study. It is also demanding in the appetite for further exploration it is likely to awaken. I loved the tantalizing allusions to Mary as depicted in art. To give one example, Titian's *Assumption* in the Frari in Venice does indeed pre-date the reformation. But it is also evidence of the Renaissance in full-flood and the birth of something new in the Catholic west. Does that newness perhaps find expression in the reforms of the Council of Trent and a renaissance in Catholic evangelization?

Wanting more is also another way of thinking of that ecclesiological characteristic of the Church of England that is wary of the limits that dogmatic definition might place on the theological imagination as an instrument for articulating revealed truth. So, Cocksworth's section on fulfilment turns to John Keble for an example of Anglican reticence that allows for more than we might as yet be able to define or comprehend of Mary's heavenly existence: 'We see not yet, nor dare espy/Thy crowned form with open eye.'

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