
Justification and Mary: Exploring the Potential for Mutual Affirmation and Amplification in Ecumenical Dialogue

Kenneth Loyer

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* represents a momentous agreement between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation regarding “basic truths of the doctrine of justification.”¹ This celebrated text, produced by a long and fruitful bilateral dialogue, presents the consensus on justification that participating Lutheran churches and Roman Catholics have reached and asserts that the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century regarding this doctrine do not apply to the positions articulated in the document.² It thus provides a solid basis for future Lutheran-Roman Catholic conversation. Given its mostly positive reception by other churches thus far, the scope of the *Joint Declaration* can be said to have expanded to include, in some sense, the ecclesial bodies that have affirmed this agreement.³ In other words, it holds promise not only for the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church but also for other churches in ecumenical dialogue about the vital issues of the Christian faith.

One such issue is the person of Mary. Admittedly, Protestants and Catholics have a long way to go before they can reach a consensus about the place of Mary in Christian doctrine and piety. Yet the outlook for progress appears to be promising. The recent convergence on the doctrine of justification proves that

1. *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), §40. This document also appears in *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level 1982-1998*, eds. Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch, Faith and Order Paper 187 (Grand Rapids/Geneva: Eerdmans/World Council of Churches, 2000), 566-582.

2. With the lifting of these condemnations, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation can now state in regard to one another what Paul says to all Christians: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1; all Scripture quotations come from the NRSV).

3. Member churches of the World Methodist Council are now fully included in this agreement, which was expanded upon the ratification of the Methodist Statement of Association at the 2006 World Methodist Conference in Seoul. The signing of the *Official Common Declaration* took place on July 23, 2006. It is hoped that other church bodies, such as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, will also become formally associated with the *Joint Declaration*. For a discussion of the ecumenical significance of the Methodist association with the *Joint Declaration*, see Kenneth Loyer, “Progress and Possibility: Ecumenism at the 2006 World Methodist Conference,” in *Ecumenical Trends* 35, no 9 (Oct 2006):9-14, in particular pp. 9-11, 14.

long-standing, bitter disagreements can be resolved through patient dialogue that is led by the Holy Spirit. Moreover, this convergence can shed important light on ecumenical conversation about Mary, who is an exemplar of the faith. And as it will be argued here, the influence also flows in the other direction: Mary's experience can deepen ecumenical conversation about justification, because she represents a way to interpret human agency, through grace and faith, in the process of salvation that might satisfy both Catholics and Lutherans.⁴ Toward that end, a proposal will later be offered that seeks to describe the interplay between divine and human agency in the mystery of salvation. More immediately, however, a discussion of three prominent themes in the *Joint Declaration* will aid us in exploring the potential for mutual affirmation and amplification regarding justification and Mary in ecumenical dialogue.⁵

THE RELEVANCE OF JUSTIFICATION IN ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE ON MARY

We will begin with the relevance of justification in ecumenical dialogue on Mary and then turn, in the second part of the essay, to the relevance of Mary in ecumenical dialogue on justification. The recent convergence on the doctrine of justification can inform ecumenical study of Mary because three prominent themes in the *Joint Declaration* find notable expression in Mary's experience as the Mother of our Lord. As we consider those themes, a brief explanation of their context is appropriate.

Three Prominent Themes in the Joint Declaration

The mutual understanding of justification is plainly stated in paragraphs 15-17 of the *Joint Declaration*. Through their "common listening"⁶ to Holy Scripture and through theological dialogue, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation have reached a consensus "on basic truths"⁷ concerning the doctrine of justification. While the common understanding of justification is later explicated in seven points, there are three prominent themes in that understanding that are particularly relevant to this study.

4. Throughout this study, the term "ecumenical" is used to refer principally to dialogue between Catholics and Protestants. Without in any way meaning to exclude Orthodox Christians, this study will deal primarily with Catholics and Protestants (especially Lutherans); and in this way, it is patterned somewhat after the *Joint Declaration*.

5. I myself prefer the term "salvation" instead of justification because salvation encompasses justification and sanctification. But I will follow the language of the *Joint Declaration* since it is my hope to show how this consensus can contribute to an ecumenical understanding of Mary and vice versa.

6. *Joint Declaration*, §14.

7. *Ibid.*

First, justification is the work of the Triune God.⁸ God the Father has sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world to redeem humanity through the power of the Holy Spirit. The *Joint Declaration* is quite clear that God is the ultimate “actor” in justification, and that humans can by no means attain salvation themselves: “We confess together that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation.”⁹ Through the gift of justifying faith, God grants grace to the human soul. Justification occurs “solely by God’s grace,”¹⁰ imparted in the reception of the Holy Spirit through the waters of baptism.¹¹ God alone chooses the condition of pardon and acceptance, and this condition is faith.¹² Justification is God’s work, not a human work, for faith itself comes always as a free gift from a gracious God. The priority and enabling power lie solely with the one God who is in perfect unity Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Humans do, however, play a role in justification—a necessary but not sufficient role—and this is a second point of emphasis in the *Joint Declaration*. While justification is undeniably the work of God, God does not exhaustively coerce anyone come to faith. God offers grace but not in an overwhelming, determinative way. Humans always remain free to respond to God’s grace.

Catholics have typically described this free response by using the word “cooperation.” Regrettably, however, that term has tended only to compound the disparity between Catholics and some Protestants rather than reduce it. Lutherans, for example, are generally leery of any notion of cooperation vis-à-vis justification because according to Lutheran teaching humans are simply unable to cooperate in their salvation on account of their sinfulness. The gift of faith can only be received in a totally passive sense. But as the *Joint Declaration* clarifies, Catholics speak of cooperation “as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities.”¹³ Used in this way, the term is

8. *Ibid.*, §15.

9. *Ibid.*, §19.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, §11.

12. Cf. the rich and neatly corresponding account of justification by faith presented by John Wesley in his sermon “Justification by Faith,” IV.6 (Sermon 5 [1746], in *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 1, Sermons I, edited by Albert C. Outler [Nashville: Abingdon, 1984], pp. 181-199). It is noteworthy that the Methodist Statement of Association, which draws heavily from Wesley’s sermons, has been found to declare and demonstrate “Methodist agreement with the consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification as expressed in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.” See the *Official Common Affirmation*, signed on July 23, 2006 by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran World Federation, and the World Methodist Council, http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/OEA/Methodist-Statement-2006-EN.pdf (accessed November 10, 2006). This document also appears in Kenneth Loyer, “Progress and Possibility: Ecumenism at the 2006 World Methodist Conference,” in *Ecumenical Trends* 35, no. 9 (Oct 2006):9-14, in particular p. 9).

13. *Joint Declaration*, §20.

not the problem that some well-intentioned Protestants have assumed. Later we will consider the phrase “responsible reception” as a possible alternative to the sometimes-misunderstood term “cooperation.” But whether one speaks of human consent as strictly passive or relatively active, it is crucial to emphasize that this consent is not in itself meritorious for salvation: the human reception of saving grace is actually part of God’s gift of that grace.¹⁴ This point is essential in order to avoid the Pelagian or semi-Pelagian tendencies that unfortunately crop up from time to time. St. Thomas Aquinas, the trustworthy Augustinian, aptly expresses the interplay between God’s grace and human freedom in a noncompetitive relationship when he prays: “Bestow upon me the power to accomplish Your will, as is necessary and fitting for the salvation of my soul.”¹⁵ Properly speaking, God’s purposes can be brought about only by his own action; and yet he graciously incorporates into his saving acts those who respond in faith. Put simply, God’s priority and enabling power create the possibility for a free human response, a response that is fully dependent on (but not coerced by) God’s initiating work. So while justification is the action of God, humans are given the privilege of freely sharing in that action which is itself wholly meritorious for human salvation.

A third prominent theme in the *Joint Declaration* deals with the results of the giving and accepting of God’s justifying grace. Here these results are described in terms of renewal.¹⁶ Such renewal, which Protestants typically call sanctification,¹⁷ proceeds from God’s grace imparted in justification and is expressed through good works.¹⁸ As “the fruits and signs of justification,” good works necessarily follow justification.¹⁹ The Holy Spirit renews the hearts of believers while calling them and equipping them to live lives of faith, hope, and love. Because of the divine initiative in this process, the renewal of life is always dependent on God’s “unfathomable grace.”²⁰ As St. Augustine observes, “When

14. Alain Blancy, Maurice Jourjon, and the Dombes Group, *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints: Toward a Common Christian Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), §220, p. 91.

15. Thomas Aquinas, “For Ordering a Life Wisely,” in *The Aquinas Prayer Book: The Prayers and Hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas*, translated and edited by Robert Anderson and Johann Moser (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1993), 5.

16. E.g., *Joint Declaration*, §23, §26.

17. John Wesley, for example, has developed a robust doctrine of sanctification in which he asserts the dynamic, organic unity between justification and sanctification: “at the same time that we are justified, yea, in that very moment, *sanctification* begins” (Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation” [1765], I.4, in *Works*, Volume 2, Sermons II, pp. 152-169, italics original). While a theoretical distinction can be drawn between justification and sanctification, they are in reality inseparable.

18. *Joint Declaration*, §26.

19. *Ibid.*, §39.

20. *Ibid.*, §27.

God crowns our merits, he is but crowning his own gifts.”²¹ Thus the good works of the Christian witness to the prior and sustaining act of God and ultimately bring glory to God.

There are no doubt other important components of the common understanding of justification articulated in the *Joint Declaration*. But these three are of particular interest for the purposes of this study because they represent significant points of contact between the doctrine of justification and Mary’s encounter with, and corresponding assent to, God’s grace. The God who justifies us through the reception of the Holy Spirit in baptism is the same God who imparts to Mary the saving grace through which she responds to God’s word in faith and so becomes a literal conduit of the living God. Clearly, then, the priority and enabling power of God, the freedom of human response, and the corresponding results of justification indicate the relevance of justification in ecumenical dialogue about Mary. One way of gaining a deeper understanding of that relevance is to think about Mary as a unique model of justification by faith.

“An Example of the Lot of All the Saved”: Mary as a Unique Model of Justification by Faith

By consenting to the saving purposes of God, Mary embodies Christian discipleship and sets a precedent for all other believers to follow. In an important ecumenical study, the Dombes Group (composed of Roman Catholic and Reformed scholars) has described Mary as “an example of the lot of all the saved.”²² Thinking about Mary in this way may be the most promising approach for producing an ecumenical consensus. Building on this appellation, we can infer that she epitomizes salvation. Based on the centrality of justification by faith in salvation, she can therefore be considered a model of justification by faith.

Of course, Mary remains unique in a very important sense. While Protestants have generally given little notice to Mary’s role in salvation history, the biblical story itself clearly indicates her uniqueness as the Mother of the Lord (Luke 1:43). She was, in the words of one evangelical study, “chosen by God.”²³ God entrusted to Mary a special place in his saving acts, and in her fiat she became *Theotokos* or Mother of God.²⁴ According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Mary was

21. Augustine, “Grace and Free Will,” chap. 6, §15, in *Saint Augustine: The Teacher, The Free Choice of the Will, Grace and Free Will*, translated by Robert P. Russell (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 267.

22. Blancy et al., *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, §219, p. 91.

23. David F. Wright, editor, *Chosen By God: Mary in Evangelical Perspective* (Reading: Marshall Pickering, 1989).

24. Significantly, this designation is principally a confession concerning Christ’s incarnation. Its original focus was not on the person of Mary as much as on the person of Christ. And as it is noted later, knowledge of this fact will aid us in a responsible Mariology, namely, one that directs us through Mary to Christ instead of to Mary as an end in herself.

invited to conceive him in whom 'the fullness of deity' would dwell 'bodily' [Col 2:9]."²⁵ The passive verb is fitting, for it reveals the primacy of God's will and work. Elsewhere, the same text speaks of Mary's predestination:

'God sent forth his Son' [Gal 4:4, Heb 10:5], but to prepare a body for him, he wanted the free cooperation of a creature. For this, from all eternity God chose for the mother of his Son a daughter of Israel, a young Jewish woman of Nazareth in Galilee, 'a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary' [Luke 1:26-27].²⁶

By virtue of her divine motherhood, which has been brought about by the grace of God and Mary's consent to that grace, Mary is indeed unique among all humans. She herself testified that "all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). And she has rightly been described as not only Mother of God but also Mother of Believers.²⁷

In addition to Mary's uniqueness, we find in her a true pattern of faithful living. Through her fiat she exemplifies "the decisive and perfect example of the Yes which Christian faith must utter."²⁸ Consequently, she represents a model of justification by faith. Though Catholics tend to think more often than Protestants of Mary as a model of faith through their regular veneration of her, it is proper for all Christians to acknowledge Mary's embodiment of justifying faith. Yet Protestants have typically showed hesitancy toward Catholic doctrine and practice concerning Mary. While some of these reservations may have been warranted, in light of what might be called excessive Mariology, Protestants certainly have much to learn about actual Catholic teaching about Mary and the rationale behind it. Likewise, Catholics would benefit from hearing Protestant concerns about devotion toward Mary possibly undercutting the centrality of Christ. There is, in other words, room for growth in understanding on both sides. Certainly, "Mary needs to be liberated from the grizzly hang-ups and defensive positions of centuries, to be revealed as what the biblical tradition shows her to be: the person who *par excellence* opened herself in lowliness to One who brings new life out of acknowledged impotence."²⁹ With its strong biblical basis, the common understanding of justification can aid us in this endeavor. Mary's

25. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), §484, p. 136.

26. *Ibid.*, §488, p. 137. Incidentally, Protestants might be pleased to note how thoroughly this text is bathed in Scripture.

27. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, for example, proposes this title for Mary in her insightful study of Mary in Luke-Acts: "'Nothing Will Be Impossible with God': Mary as the Mother of Believers," in *Mary, Mother of God*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 19-35.

28. Blancy et al., *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, back cover.

29. R. Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Iona Community* (London: SPCK, 1988), as quoted in Wright, *Chosen By God*, 12.

experience in the annunciation, conception, and subsequent birth or “delivery”³⁰ of the Incarnate Son of God into the world is particularly illustrative of the priority and enabling power of God, the freedom of human response, and the corresponding results of justification. We will now read Mary’s experience through those lenses as we seek to explore the potential for mutual affirmation and amplification regarding justification and Mary in ecumenical dialogue.

“You Have Found Favor with God”: The Priority and Enabling Power of God

Of all the Gospel writers, it is Luke who recounts Mary’s experience prior to and immediately after the birth of Christ in the greatest detail. Luke’s infancy narratives mention Mary by name some twelve times, versus five times in Matthew. Furthermore, her portrayal in Luke is vastly different from her portrayal in Matthew. Whereas Matthew refers to Mary in a passive or subordinate way, Luke seems to place her at the center of the entire nativity story. Because Mary figures so prominently in Luke’s account, we will rely largely on it here, beginning with the annunciation.³¹

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth” begins Luke’s account of the annunciation (Luke 1:26). Immediately, the priority of God is clear: the angel “was sent by God” to visit Mary (1:26). Gabriel “came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you’” (1:28, emphasis added). Through Gabriel, the messenger of God’s revelation, Mary learns of the nearness of God and hears the promise that she will, by the grace of God, herself become a special herald of God’s revelation to the world. God has drawn near to Mary with a word of good and glorious news: “you have found favor with God” (1:30). Because of God’s favor—his choosing of Mary—God will dwell in her in a truly remarkable way:

And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (1:31-33)

Gabriel speaks of God’s enabling power, through which this extraordinary birth will occur. Luke continues with Gabriel’s message to the blessed Virgin, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God”

30. The quotation marks are meant to signify that the birth of Christ is Mary’s “delivery” of him into the world only in so far as it is simultaneously—and even principally—his own delivery of *himself* into the world through a compliant person in whom there is space for God.

31. Stephen Benko, *Protestants, Catholics, and Mary* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1968), 13-14. Benko gives a fine analysis of Mary in the New Testament in his opening chapter.

(1:35). Mary will become “The Container of the Uncontainable.”³² Gabriel’s visit testifies to the priority and enabling power of God, for whom nothing is impossible (1:37).

“Let It Be with Me According to Your Word”: The Freedom of Human Response

Of course, Luke’s account of the annunciation does not end there. Mary, sustained by the grace of God, becomes God’s willing vessel through her fiat: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (1:38). Having heard God’s word proclaimed by the angel Gabriel, Mary, for her part, believes that God’s word will be fulfilled. Through the grace of God, which creates the possibility for a free human response, Mary consents to the will of her Creator.

“My Soul Magnifies the Lord”: Renewal of Life to the Glory of God

The corresponding result of God’s gracious gift, which necessarily includes reception in order to be a gift in the proper sense of the term,³³ is nothing short of spectacular: Mary gives birth to God. Charles Wesley expresses this marvel in his characteristic poetic brilliance:

Being’s Source *begins to be*,
And God Himself is born!³⁴

In another hymn, Wesley writes:

Who gave all things to be,
What a wonder to see
Him born of His creature
And nursed on her knee!³⁵

“God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God”—the Divine Son enters the world in the fullness of human nature through the Virgin’s womb.³⁶ And the worship of God abounds: an angel (2:9-14), the heavenly host (2:13-14), the shepherds (2:15-20), Simeon (2:25-35), Anna (2:36-40), and the Magi (Matt 2:1-12) erupt in praise to God.

Whereas the actual birth of Christ is the ultimate realization of God’s

32. This is Robert Jenson’s clever translation of the Greek inscription on some Orthodox icons, which are called as a type the Virgin of the Sign (“A Space for God,” in *Mary, Mother of God*, 50-51).

33. Properly speaking, if a gift is not received it is not a gift but rather an offer. Later this point will be expounded upon in relation to the human role in salvation.

34. George Osborn, editor, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1868-1872), vol. 4 (1869), 108. Emphasis in original.

35. *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, vol. 7 (1870), 81.

36. The Nicene Creed.

promise to Mary in the annunciation, we see the first fruits, so to speak, of that promise in the events shortly after Gabriel's visit to Mary. Luke says that she herself embarks on a visit; she travels "with haste" to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:39). When Mary greets Elizabeth, John leaps "for joy" in her womb (1:41, 44). Elizabeth, "filled with the Holy Spirit," then acclaims Mary as "blessed... among women" for God's choosing of her and for her trust in the angel's message about her pregnancy (1:41, 44). Following this witness of the Spirit, Mary bursts forth in a hymn of praise: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." (1:46-47). In a stirring echo of Hannah's song after Samuel's birth (1 Sam 2:1-10), Mary praises God for having "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" (Luke 1:48). She exults in the God who brings salvation to the lowly and who keeps covenant faithfulness forever (cf. Luke 1:52, 55).³⁷

If Mary is, as Protestants and Catholics alike would agree, a model of faithful living, and if a consensus can be reached on "basic truths" of justification, then it seems that progress in ecumenical dialogue about Mary is sure to follow, in so far as the doctrine of justification relates to the experience of the Virgin Mother. This is a necessary qualification, for the question of sin in Mary's life is a disputed one. Put rather bluntly, did Mary have any sin from which to be justified? The Roman Catholic Church teaches that God preserved Mary from the stain of original sin through the Immaculate Conception, and that Mary "remained free of every personal sin her whole life long."³⁸ Further, it is Catholic teaching that "when the course of her earthly life was finished, [Mary] was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death."³⁹ For many Protestants, however, the lack of biblical evidence for the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary leads to a certain reluctance or even suspicion about these dogmas.

But what is most important for our purposes here is not the Catholic declaration of the absence of personal sin in Mary's life (or the common questioning of this understanding by many Protestants) but rather the primacy of grace in Catholic teaching about Mary, on which this declaration is based. Whether Mary needed to be justified from personal sin or not, she remained completely dependent on the grace of God her whole life long. There is a notable parallel, then, between the role of grace in the life of Mary and the role of grace in the lives of all other believers. The accentuation on grace in Catholic teaching

37. David L. Tiede, "Luke: Introduction and Notes," in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, eds. Wayne A. Meeks et al. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), pp. 1956-7.

38. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §493, p. 138.

39. Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), as quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §966, p. 274.

about Mary corresponds nicely to what is doubtless the underlying theme in the common understanding of justification, namely, that justification is the work of God—and nothing earned by human merit—that occurs by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-10). Moreover, from this foundational point, the two other selected themes in the consensus on justification logically follow in the case of Mary: through the grace of God, Mary is free to respond to God's initiating work, which she does favorably, and which, in turn, results in a kind of renewal (however narrowly conceived) with a clear doxological bend. Mary's experience in the annunciation, conception, and birth of Jesus therefore reflects the justification of the believer by grace through faith in at least three vital ways: both show (1) the primacy of God's grace, which allows for (2) the freedom of human response, and which, when received in faith, (3) renews the life of the believer to the praise of God.

Because these themes find concrete expression in Mary's life, the *Joint Declaration* can shed light on her place in the Christian faith. If nothing else, it may serve to remind us how Mary fully depended, as all humans do, on the grace of God. While she plays a special role in salvation history, it is only by God's prior and enabling power that Mary can freely respond in faith, with the birth of Christ as a result. That birth is, of course, a decisive moment with far-reaching implications not only for Mary alone but also for the universal Church, which she in that grace-filled moment represents. Though Mary is unique in God's choosing of her and in her consent to God's claim upon her life, she nevertheless relies utterly on the initiating and sustaining power of God. And in that crucial regard, the doctrine of justification by faith is directly relevant to the experience of Mary. Through its emphasis on God's grace, the freedom of human response, and the subsequent renewal of life for the glory of God, the recent consensus on the doctrine of justification can thus contribute to ecumenical conversation regarding Mary.

THE RELEVANCE OF MARY IN ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE ON JUSTIFICATION

But does the influence also run the other way? Can the witness of Mary, despite the lack of ecumenical consensus about her, deepen the continued conversation about justification? It would seem so, and for two primary reasons: (1) Mary's experience evokes another issue, namely, the debate concerning the role of human persons, through grace and faith, in the process of salvation; and (2) Mary continually orients believers toward Christ, because her faithful witness signifies the depth and power of his redeeming love.

Gracious Offer, Responsible Reception: The Role of Humans in Salvation

First, Mary's experience raises a more general question about the role of humans in salvation. The *Joint Declaration* affirms the agreement between the Roman Catholic Church and participating Lutheran churches that humans cannot save themselves, "for as sinners they stand under God's judgment and are incapable of turning by themselves to God to seek deliverance, of meriting their justification before God, or of attaining salvation by their own abilities."⁴⁰ Humans are not capable of earning their salvation, for it cannot be earned. The Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation agree on this indispensable point. Yet they have different understandings of the related issue of human freedom with regard to salvation, each with a nuanced account that creates tension (though not intolerable tension⁴¹) in relationship to the other.

One pivotal question concerns the nature of the human reception of God's grace. Lutherans hold to a merely passive understanding of such reception, whereas Catholic doctrine attributes a more active role to humans in receiving God's grace.⁴² But they still *receive* God's justifying grace; they do not take it or achieve it in a meritorious sense.

Earlier, I intimated that my Wesleyan convictions place me closer in line with the Catholics on this issue. Humans do, I think, possess the ability to consent actively to God's saving grace, which always precedes human effort. Among Catholics and like-minded Christians from other traditions, the human role in salvation has chiefly been described in terms of cooperation. But because of the common misunderstanding of the word by advocates of mere human passivity, the need has arisen to qualify this term in order to correct misinterpretation and ensure clarity. This qualification sometimes finds expression through the use of quotation marks, as in *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*. In this remarkably lucid text, the Dombes Group acknowledges the checkered history of the term "cooperation" and then attempts both to "purify and 'convert' it."⁴³ This is an admirable intention, given that the term "cooperation" "is alive in the mentalities of both [Catholics and Protestants]," and the Dombes Group does a very fine job of "reconstructing" it.⁴⁴ The writers of this text allude to the possibility of another term emerging from their conversation (or another) some day, a term that "is more satisfactory to all concerned, because it will be free of

40. *Joint Declaration*, §19.

41. That is, this tension need not be church-dividing. But neither need the tension be accepted as inescapable when it may ultimately be resolved. Below the phrase "responsible reception" will be posited in a modest effort to deepen the consensus on justification and to promote church-uniting dialogue on Mary.

42. *Joint Declaration*, §20-21.

43. Blancy et al., *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints*, §214, p. 89.

44. *Ibid.*

all equivocations.”⁴⁵ What is needed is a way forward on this issue without having to rely on the often-misconstrued word “cooperation.”

Some theologians speak of the active response of the human in relation to God’s prior and sustaining work, though it is not clear whether this phrase (i.e., “active response”) could ever hold a sufficiently broad appeal so as to drive the discussion forward. While it is helpful for some, the very mention of the term “active” might be enough to elicit an objection from those who favor a strictly passive view of the human reception of God’s grace. Perhaps a way beyond this theological impasse can be forged in the phrase “responsible reception.”

Responsible reception implies, first of all, that something is offered. In this case, it is the grace of God. But just because something is offered does not actually make it a gift. The object must be received in order truly to be a gift. If the intended gift is not received, it remains an offer and not a gift. Second, this proposal thus assumes reception of the gift. Yet such reception is not a work, for someone “who accepts a gift plays no part in the initiative that produces the gift.”⁴⁶ The response to the gift is part of the gift itself; it is contained in the gift, so to speak. The third point follows from the description of the reception: if God’s grace is to be properly received, it must be *responsibly* received. God entrusts his grace to us but does not overwhelm us with it in such a way that would abolish our human freedom to respond. Rather, we always remain free to accept or reject God’s grace. An appropriate response to this grace is a responsible one, in which we relinquish control of our own lives, open wide our hearts to God, and so become “participants of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4) through God’s presence among and within us. When greeted by the gift of saving faith, God’s grace is responsibly received. The fact that responsible reception of God’s grace is indeed a response to God’s initiative is underscored in the presence of the word “response” in the word “responsible.” The phrase “responsible reception” indicates that the human action of reception is itself a response to God’s prior action in the offering of grace because the word “responsible” literally assumes the word “response.”⁴⁷

Humans thus have a necessary but not sufficient role in “working out their own salvation” (Phil 2:12-13). John Wesley describes the relationship between God’s work and the human freedom of response in this memorable line: “God works; therefore you *can* work.... God works; therefore, you *must* work.”⁴⁸ As Wesley rightly maintains, God’s grace goes before, accompanies, and follows the efforts of the believer. Under the heading of responsible reception, the Christian

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, §220, p. 91.

47. The same point is nicely conveyed in German as well: *die Antwort* (“response”) and *die Verantwortung* (“responsibility”).

48. Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation” (1785), III.2, in *Works*, Volume 3, Sermons III, pp. 199-209.

life in its entirety can be regarded as a continual process of responding to—or, in a slightly more passive sense, but one that certainly remains compatible with this view—receiving God’s grace.⁴⁹ The crucial point is that while humans remain free to consent to God’s saving initiative, human freedom of consent in no way contributes anything to justification about which humans could boast of their own merit before God (Rom 3:27). Human consent comes always as a reception of or response to the prior and enabling power of God, and it results, through grace and by faith, in the renewal of life to God’s glory.

I do not pretend that my proposal is itself impervious to ambiguity or misunderstanding. But I set it forward as a modest attempt to bridge the gap between the Catholic and Lutheran⁵⁰ positions on human agency, through grace and faith, in the process of salvation. It seems that this alternative could maintain the active connotations of the word “cooperation” and of the phrase “active response” while simultaneously heeding the emphasis of those in the “passive camp” on the saving power and gratuitous act of God.⁵¹ Hence, responsible *reception*—we receive God’s offer. God’s grace elicits in us the freedom to respond. We can respond in faith only by the grace of God, and yet that is precisely what must happen in order for this grace to be fully efficacious. As Augustine says, “He who made you without you will not save you without you.”⁵² God still does the saving, but not in an overpowering, unilateral manner.

Mary stands as an example of responsible reception at its finest. In her fiat, she voices her consent to God. She did not earn her special place in the history of salvation; rather, God chose her for this task and equipped her with the

49. One might say that the response *is* the reception and vice versa.

50. Lutherans, of course, are not the only Protestants to describe the human role in the process of salvation in merely passive terms. As it is observed in the next footnote, Barth operates out of that understanding also, as do Protestants of various other stripes.

51. I would, however, not go as far as Barth, who insists on the unilateral power of God’s revelation as the sole factor in salvation: “No receptivity, no exchange, no transmission of power can be envisaged, even with the most careful reservations. For faith is precisely not an act of reciprocity but an act which consists in renouncing any reciprocity and acknowledging the sole Redeemer apart from whom there is no recourse. Revelation and reconciliation are irreversibly one-directional; they are indivisibly and exclusively the work of God.” *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 15, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrence (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956), 133. Positively, Barth’s view of providence gives God the special place that God deserves. But Barth’s belief in the utter passivity of human persons in their encounter with God’s word appears to reflect an implicit competitive account of grace and human freedom rather than a noncompetitive one (such as what is found in Aquinas). For an instructive overview of the principal contemporary accounts of the relationship between divine and human agency, including a nuanced distinction between a competitive account of grace and human freedom and a noncompetitive account, see Reinhard Hütter, “The Christian Life,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, eds. John Webster et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, publication forthcoming), especially pp. 10ff. of Hütter’s article.

52. Augustine, *Sermon 169*, pp. 11, 13, as quoted in *Mary in the Plan of God and the Communion of Saints*, §220, p. 92.

necessary grace by which she could herself respond appropriately: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). God drew near to Mary, who accepted God's promise through faith and, renouncing control of her own life, presented herself to God as an instrument for God's good purposes.⁵³ God offered, she consented, and God's gift—of himself!—came into the world. Mary believed that God's word would be fulfilled, the Spirit came upon her, and she received Christ by bearing him into the world. Mary's experience reflects that of other Christians in baptism and eucharist, respectively, when the Holy Spirit initiates them into the body of Christ and they receive Christ, in the eucharistic feast, for themselves. In baptism and eucharist, all Christians are equipped with the sufficient grace to live as Christ's disciples and to "bear" him, in a sense, into the world. Just as Mary believed that God would do as he had promised, so the Christian hears the word of God, accepts it in faith, and acts according to that faith. It is through the responsible reception of God's gracious offer that the gift of salvation is imparted—for Mary and for all the faithful. In this way, Mary's experience can shed light on the discussion of human agency vis-à-vis the doctrine of justification.

Proper Mariology as Orientation toward Christ

A second reason for the relevance of Mary in ecumenical dialogue on justification derives from her continued orientation toward Christ. A proper understanding of Mary rests on this central principle. Mary is *Theotokos*, a designation that was originally Christological and not Mariological. The term was useful for the Church in formulating orthodox Christology, which entailed stating true claims about the person of Christ as well as refuting false ones. With its use firmly established by Chalcedon in 451, the term "*Theotokos*" expresses the Christological claim that the One to whom Mary gave birth is irrefutably both fully God and fully human.⁵⁴ Fittingly, Jaroslav Pelikan translates *Theotokos* as "the one who gave birth to the one who is God."⁵⁵ This translation is consonant with the historical context out of which the title emerged. Moreover, it creates a kind of semantic crescendo in the mellifluous movement from Mary's past act as mother to Christ's continued identity as God (note the present tense: "the one who *is* God").⁵⁶ Perhaps more so than "Mother of God," Pelikan's elegant rendering reminds us of the original meaning and purpose of the term. But whatever the translation (e.g., "Mother of God," "God-bearer," or the one supplied by Pelikan), it is crucial to recall that *Theotokos* served originally as a

53. Blancy et al., *Mary in the Plan of God and the Communion of Saints*, §216, p. 89.

54. Benko, for example, places the word "*Theotokos*" in its historical setting through a thorough analysis of its usage throughout church history. *Protestants, Catholics, and Mary*, 129-144.

55. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 55.

56. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

Christological confession of the incarnation of the Son of God. Mary is mother, but Christ is God. Or, more positively, Mary is mother, *and* Christ is God. This is one way in which a sound Mariology increases our devotion to Christ.

Geoffrey Wainwright clues us in on another way by highlighting the importance of growth in understanding, particularly among Protestants: "For possible convergence towards agreement between Protestants and Catholics concerning Mary, it will be important that Protestants familiarize themselves with Catholic doctrine and practice in her regard."⁵⁷ According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Catholic Mariology is inherently Christocentric: "What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ."⁵⁸ In Catholic teaching, then, Mary is by no means an end in and of herself but rather cannot be understood apart from the Son whom she bore.

Protestants have long been suspicious of Catholic teaching on Mary, usually out of the assumption that it detracts from the centrality of Christ. But Catholic doctrine is actually contrary to this assumption. For example, whereas a major sticking point on the Protestant side has been the alleged Catholic belief in Mary's co-mediation with Christ, *Lumen Gentium* seeks to clarify that Catholic teaching on Mary confirms, rather than eclipses, the apostolic teaching that Christ is the one mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5-6): "Mary's function as mother of men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power."⁵⁹ The document continues, seemingly anticipating Protestant objection, "the blessed Virgin's salutary influence on human persons originates not in any inner necessity but in the disposition of God."⁶⁰ Finally, we should note the strengthening of language: Mary's significance in Christian faith and life "flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on his mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it. It does not hinder in any way the immediate union of the faithful with Christ but on the contrary fosters it."⁶¹ Mary is only intelligible in terms of Christ. Paradoxically, although he established his earthly origin in his mother's womb, her life actually originates in him: he is in fact "before all things, and in him all things hold

57. Wainwright, *Is the Reformation Over?*, The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology, 2000 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000), 53. Throughout the research and writing of this article, I have attempted to heed Wainwright's advice. In addition to gaining a better conceptual grasp of Catholic doctrine concerning Mary, I have taken up some Catholic practice in her regard, including the invoking of her in a certain prayer of St. Thomas Aquinas as well as in some of my own prayers. These practices have added much to the "theoretical" knowledge that I have gained through a study of Catholic teaching.

58. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §487, p. 136.

59. *Lumen Gentium*, §60, as quoted in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery, O.P., new revised edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 418.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

together” (Col 1:17). Mary points all believers in the direction of Christ, upon whom her status and influence wholly depend. Her experience testifies to the depth and power of the love of God, who “shuns not the Virgin’s womb” in redeeming a fallen world.⁶²

It may be a stretch for some Protestants—both individual Protestants and, perhaps especially, certain Protestant ecclesial bodies—to let go of preconceived notions about Catholic devotion to Mary. But as Wainwright suggests, it is critical for Protestants to become acquainted with Catholic teaching and practice in her regard. Continued progress in ecumenical dialogue about Mary will require it.

The current ecumenical landscape provides some reasons to be hopeful. For instance, one of several encouraging signs of the bilateral dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics about Mary is the document *Communio Sanctorum: The Church as the Communion of Saints*.⁶³ This text is significant because of its extended inquiry into the communion of saints both as its own ecumenical topic and also in relation to other issues, such as the recognition of Mary by these ecclesial bodies. The text does not gloss over the differences in perspective that Catholics and Lutherans take concerning her role in the faith. Instead, it explores these differences in open, honest, and possibly even painful ways. It also contains important statements of consensus, however basic, that provide hope for continued progress in ecumenical conversation about Mary. Together, the contributors to this text affirm that her role in salvation history cannot be understood apart from the rest of the story: “If Mary, with salvation-historical consistency, has her place in the mysteries of incarnation and redemption, then her veneration is always and above all also veneration of these mysteries.”⁶⁴ Proper Marian devotion constantly orients Christians to the holy mysteries of God’s salvation, particularly the justifying work of Christ.

Another promising sign in recent ecumenical study and conversation is the affirmation of this key principle by some Protestant evangelical theologians. Timothy George, for example, observes that when “we praise and love Mary, it is God whom we praise for his gracious favor to his chosen handmaid.”⁶⁵ As we acknowledge the unique status of Mary in God’s saving purposes, we are in fact acknowledging the saving God. Our recognition of Mary is, at its very core, a recognition of the God of her salvation, who is indeed the God of our

62. John F. Wade, “O Come All Ye Faithful” (ca. 1743), translated by Frederick Oakeley et al. (1841), in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), no. 234.

63. *Communio Sanctorum: The Church as the Communion of Saints*, Bilateral Working Group of the German National Bishops’ Conference and the Church Leadership of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, trans. Mark W. Jeske, Michael Root, and Daniel R. Smith (Collegeville: Unitas Books, 2004).

64. *Ibid.*, §254.

65. Timothy George, “The Blessed Virgin Mary in Evangelical Perspective,” in *Mary, Mother of God*, 116.

own. Mary is the servant of the God whom she bears. Her identity as disciple, after all, precedes her function as mother. As George cleverly articulates, “had she not believed she could not have conceived.”⁶⁶ He then adds this necessary qualification, fully compatible with the doctrine of justification: “And this faith, too, is not the achievement of merit but the gift of grace.”⁶⁷ Mary embodies salvation *sola gratia*. For this reason, it is appropriate for all Christians—including reluctant Protestants—to consider her as a mother in faith, the foremost witness to the redeeming grace of God. Mary directs believers to Christ because our faith looks in the same direction as does hers: to the Holy Trinity.⁶⁸

In his commentary on the *Magnificat*, Martin Luther identifies Mary as a model for all believers. She “teaches us, with her words and by the example of her experience, how to know, love, and praise God.”⁶⁹ Through her exemplary faith, she accepts God’s calling on her life and entrusts herself fully to God. Her response is suitably doxological: she exalts God for having regarded her lowly estate. Luther commends Mary for her faith, although he adds that in our admiration of her it is necessary to recall how she humbly deflects glory away from herself and toward God:

Whoever... would show her the proper honor must not regard her alone and by herself, but set her in the presence of God and far beneath Him, must there strip her of all honor, and regard her low estate, as she says; he should then marvel at the exceedingly abundant grace of God, who regards, embraces, and blesses so poor and despised a mortal.⁷⁰

Mary traces everything back to God; she lays claim to “no works, no honor, no fame” herself but “would have us honor God in her and come through her to a good confidence in His grace.”⁷¹ Of the house of David (Luke 1:27), she occupies a position in the Jewish tradition. Her experience thus reveals God’s faithfulness to the people of Israel: “He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promises he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (1:54-55).

Mary’s *Magnificat* is ultimately not her song alone, but the song of all the faithful. She sings not only for herself but also for all believers, to sing it after her.⁷² By epitomizing humble faith and trust in God, Mary helps us to sing of God’s mercies ourselves. Drawing from Luther, we might even consider Mary

66. *Ibid.*, 115-16.

67. *Ibid.*, 116.

68. *Communio Sanctorum*, §268.

69. Martin Luther, “The Magnificat,” trans. A.T.W. Steinhaeuser, in *Luther’s Works*, volume 21, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 301.

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*, 322.

72. *Ibid.*

the conductor of the heavenly choir—with whom she herself sings to the glory of God. By God’s grace through faith, Mary leads all the faithful in a chorus of praise to “the Mighty One who has done great things” (Luke 1:49).

CONCLUSION

We have now come full circle:⁷³ the consensus on justification can guide ecumenical conversation about Mary, and Mary’s own experience can likewise have a bearing on continued dialogue about justification. Each provides a potentially helpful lens through which to view the other. On the one hand, the common understanding of justification leads us to consider Mary because of her unique identity as a model of salvation, at the heart of which lies justification by faith. The common understanding of justification affirms and amplifies the prior and enabling act of God, the freedom of human response, and the subsequent renewal of life to the glory of God that are all part of Mary’s experience.

On the other hand, Mary points us back to the topic of justification. Her experience in at least the three aforementioned ways illustrates justification at work and thus provides important clues that might aid Catholics and Lutherans in reaching an agreement on the role of human persons, through grace and faith, in salvation. Mary can deepen the consensus on justification by having exemplified the interplay between divine grace and human freedom in salvation. As the story of the annunciation indicates, it is God’s prior and enabling work that makes possible a faithful response. And Mary, for her part, consents to God’s grace in her fiat. The grace of God and the freedom of human response exist simultaneously in the experience of Mary, not unlike in the case of all who would join in the singing of her *Magnificat*. In these ways, justification and Mary can inform one another.

Furthermore, both the doctrine of justification and the witness of Mary ultimately direct us to the Triune God. While justification orders us toward our chief end because it is God’s work in every believer, including Mary, Mary points us to God because it is only by the grace of God that she can live in obedience to her high and holy calling as the handmaiden of the Lord. Through this mutual orientation of justification and Mary toward the other and, above all, toward God, each can support and strengthen the other while principally directing praise to God.

Given the relationship, then, between justification and Mary, there is sufficient reason to believe that ecumenical dialogue on each issue can be enhanced through a consideration of the other. While much work remains to be done, the recent progress on justification may bode well for dialogue on Mary. As we seek the Spirit’s guidance toward further progress, perhaps a way forward can

73. Or, perhaps, we have completed the same circle twice—the first time in one direction, the second time in the other.

be discerned through ever-deepening study, conversation, and common prayer to the sole Source of salvation—for Mary and for us all.

O God, you have taken to yourself the blessed Virgin Mary, mother of your incarnate Son: Grant that we, who have been redeemed by his blood, may share with her the glory of your eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.⁷⁴

74. "Saint Mary the Virgin," in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979).