

## Is it Mariology or Mariolatry?

### Introduction

Some of this discussion will involve interaction with the Catholic priest, theologian, and acclaimed authority on religion in the contemporary world, Richard Neuhaus, per his book, *Death on a Friday Afternoon: Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus from the Cross* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). There is much to commend in this meditation on the last sayings of Jesus. As I read through the book, I found much that was thought provoking and valuable...until I got about a third of the way through it to the section on the words of Jesus to John and Mary at the foot of the cross.

**<sup>25</sup> but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. <sup>26</sup> When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" <sup>27</sup> Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home (Jn. 19.25-27).**

#### 1A. Prayer to and through Mary (Is this idolatry?)

##### 1B. Statues

The offering of prayers to Mary and to other dead saints is surely confusing at the least. Is prayer not a biblical mode of worshipping God? How can we draw any other conclusion than this: praying to Mary –to get to God- while bowing before a statue of her violates both the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> commandments because an image is used to aid worship of God (breaking the 2<sup>nd</sup>) and when that takes place worship goes to the image (you worship the image because God tells us He is not worshipped; thus, you worship and serve the engraved images, Ex. 20.5, **You shall not bow down to them or serve them**). In turn, some other god, some other object of worship is placed before God violating the first commandment.

##### 2B. Mediation

Again, to pray to Christ by petitioning His mother (on analogy with going to a son through his mother) is prayer, which is an act of worship that belongs to God only. She then has the practical place of a god (again, the violation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> leads to the violation of the 1<sup>st</sup>).

This theology then squeezes Scripture into a false mold. Scripture tells us that there is one mediator between God and man, the man, Christ Jesus (1Tim.2.5).

Does it help to claim that Christ is the one mediator to the Father, but Mary is the mediator to Christ? Or is this sophistry that voids Scripture by tradition?

What can we say to the defense that says, “We are not worshipping Mary; that is not our intent; we do not believe she is a god”?

#### 2A. Mariology (Is it theological and practical idolatry?)

##### 1B. John 19.25-27

Neuhaus discusses the words of Jesus to Mary at the foot of the cross. Q: in the phrases, “the words of Jesus to Mary at the foot of the cross,” what is it that Neuhaus accents and what is it that he does not accent?

##### 1) Perspective on the text

To get our perspective, consider John 19.25-27 in light of this question: what do these words reveal *about our Lord*? Notice that this question directs our attention away from all the people around the cross (our Lord’s mother, His aunt, Mary Magdalene, and the beloved disciple, vs. 25-26).

How can we rightly speak of Mary as the mother of God?

Mary is the mother of God but nothing along this line of thought is central or important in this context. What is all-important is the speaker who sees these people and what He says.

Although caught in a whirlwind and swept away to the place of a skull, there in crisis, Jesus was conscious of the presence of His mother and He spoke to her need. He did not look at Himself. He did not consider His own needs or protection from suffering.

What kind of words are these? These are words of love, dying love, or crucifixion love. At a very human and fundamental level, these words reveal something of the love of the Lord

Jesus. It may sound like an understatement (words always fail us when speaking about the cross) but we must still state it, the love of the Lord Jesus was marvelously unselfish. Selfishness involves considering the prosperity, health, well-being, comfort, and the good name of oneself exclusively. Thus, selfishness is pointedly a matter of exclusiveness in which we consider others only when it serves social pressures or personal interests. Of course, there is a proper love for oneself, a proper self-preservation and looking out for one's own things. However, we are selfish when our concern is only with our own families or ourselves alone to the exclusion of heartfelt and active concern for other people.

2) What does Neuhaus do with this text (70-101)?

He puts almost all attention on Mary (99%). It is while discussing this word from the cross that he discusses the background to this event...of Mary (pp. 70-80). Then, after commenting on gender disputes (80-82), he focuses the hour of the cross with this question (82): "what was she [Mary] thinking then?"

He then discusses some Latin phrases that summarize Mariology (82-84): her station at the cross (*Stabat Mater dolorosa*), her place as mediator (*Ad Jesum per Mariam*, To Jesus through Mary).

Next, he draws some things from church history regarding Mary as mother of God that leads into a discussion of the immaculate conception of Mary (85-88) and her place as the model disciple (89-96) in which she consents to give birth to Jesus and becomes the mother of the church (John is her son = all disciples are now her sons).

When we think the author is about to develop the humanity of Christ, what we get is an elaboration on the bond of this mother and this son (the rest of the chapter, 96-101). Thus, Mary "was the secure field of all being in which he [Jesus] received unqualified permission to be" (99-100).

Hence, the mixture of things in the concluding paragraph: "Come follow me," Jesus says. The invitation resounds through all the time there is and ever will be, and all who respond in faith...make their way...to the foot of the cross. There they find themselves with John and Mary and a host of bedraggled saints and sinners whose hour has come. And to each of the brothers and sisters in whom he forever lives, to each of us, Jesus says, 'Behold, your mother.' And to Mary, 'Behold, your children. Behold me.'" (101). He does end with a focus on Christ: "Behold me." [cf. the 1%]

What are some key things here to note as we seek to evaluate?

3) Evaluating Neuhaus in light of the text