

# Anglicans, Catholics find common ground on Mary: Role model and Christ's foremost disciple

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Roman Catholic and Anglican leaders have announced newfound agreement on the Virgin Mary, seeing her as a role model and “Christ’s foremost disciple” while softening disagreements over dogma that had simmered for almost 500 years.

An 81-page booklet, released in Seattle May 16 by the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), said the churches now see eye-to-eye on the divisions that helped spark the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Prayers directed to Mary, mother of Jesus, is not now the continuing divisive issue it once was, the report said.

Only two Catholic dogmas on Mary carry the weight of papal infallibility—that Jesus’ mother was born without “the stain of original sin” and that she was “assumed body and soul” into heaven at the end of her life—and those remain an obstacle for some Anglicans.

Traditionally, Anglicans have rejected the pope’s power to proclaim any doctrine as infallible and have been skittish about the Marian dogmas. “Anglicans generally are a bit wary about definitions of dogma,” Anglican archbishop Peter Carnley, cochairman of ARCIC, said in an interview.

The booklet, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, said both churches now agree that the immaculate conception, proclaimed in 1854, and Mary’s assumption, proclaimed in 1950, are “consonant” with scripture. Neither should be a cause for division between the two bodies, the statement said.

“The question arises for Anglicans, however, as to whether these doctrines concerning Mary are revealed by God in a way which must be held by believers as a

matter of faith,” the document said. Carnley said both sides agree on the meaning of the two dogmas, but “the question of how the dogmas are defined still needs to be addressed.”

Still, the document represents a landmark agreement for both sides, as well as a step forward for Anglican-Catholic talks that were temporarily derailed by some Anglican churches’ embrace of homosexuality.

The Anglican Communion, which traces its roots to the Church of England, has 77 million members in 38 national churches, including the Episcopal Church in the United States.

In 2003, Episcopal presiding bishop Frank Griswold resigned as ARCIC’s cochairman after he presided at the consecration of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire. On May 12 the Vatican said the statement on Mary represents “new hope” for ecumenical relations.

The two churches have engaged in official dialogue since 1965, and the statement on Mary grew out of a 2000 request from leaders of both churches. It was released in Seattle because it was finished during a previous meeting there.

The commission’s report declared that prayers to the mother of Jesus do not conflict with Christ’s unique mediation with God the Father. “We do not consider the practice of asking Mary and the saints to pray for us as communion dividing. . . . We believe that there is no continuing theological reason for ecclesial division on these matters,” said the report. “Asking the saints to pray for us is not to be excluded as unscriptural, though it is not directly taught by the scriptures to be a required element of life in Christ.”

The statement called Mary “a model of holiness, faith and obedience for all Christians” and looked to her as “Christ’s foremost disciple.”

The statement also downplayed any notion that Mary has the power to save sinners. The churches said she “has a special place in the economy of salvation” but also said the power of redemption lies only with Jesus Christ.

Catholic archbishop Alexander Brunett of Seattle, the Catholic cochairman of ARCIC, said Mary remains especially important for Catholics, but “if you were talking about the hierarchy of dogma, [the Marian dogmas] would not be at the very top of the

list.”

The document said both Anglican and Catholic understandings of Mary would be “authentic expressions of Christian belief.” In a footnote it suggested that Anglicans might not have to follow the “explicit acceptance of the precise wording” of the two dogmas since they were not in communion with Rome when the dogmas were proclaimed.

The document drew an immediate response from Reform, a group representing the evangelical wing of the Church of England. “Prayer to Mary goes completely against the grain of Jesus Christ being our great high priest who intercedes on our behalf with the Father. Theological fudge can never be a basis for moving forward in unity,” Reform spokesperson Rod Thomas told Ecumenical News International.

Thomas added, “ARCIC has resorted to contorted use of scripture in an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. A better way is to move forward locally, where there is a great deal of cooperation between the Christian churches and where such debates are viewed as extremely arcane.” - *Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*