

VENERATION DUE TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

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ONE of the stumbling blocks which gave trouble to the Anglican Newman in his groping toward the Catholic Church was the veneration Catholics offered to Mary. He himself had an interior feeling of reverence for her, a "true devotion," because of his sincere and intelligent belief in the mystery of the Incarnation, but inherited prejudice forbade him to express this internal devotion in external acts. He considered Catholic veneration extreme, giving to the Mother what belonged to the Son.¹ Now if the intellectual but Protestant Newman was so fettered by prejudice shall we judge too harshly the modern Protestant who labors under a similar but usually greater ignorance? Many well-meaning Protestants still think "Catholics *worship* the Virgin." We do worship her, and rightly so, but not in the sense of Protestant "worship" by which they mean adoration, divine adoration.

Worship is the giving of homage or honor to some one because of some excellence—superiority, power or virtue—in the one so honored.² These two, excellence—honor, are as cause and effect and consequently the higher the excellence the greater should be the honor. Now we may consider three grades or degrees of excellence: the uncreated, the excellence of God; the supernatural created, the excellence of the Blessed Virgin and of the angels and saints; and natural created, the excellence of ecclesiastical and civil rulers and superiors. To the first, the highest, the divine excellence belongs the highest honor, the supreme honor of absolute adoration or worship of *latria*. To God alone, God the Creator and Christ, God Incarnate, is due this supreme worship of adoration and to give it to a mere

¹ In credit to the generous mind of the great cardinal we should note that by his scholarly and persevering study of Catholic Marian doctrine and devotion, extending even to Apostolic times, he became a devoted client of Mary, a staunch defender of her prerogatives and of the traditional veneration paid to her. (cf. *The Mariology of Cardinal Newman*—Friedel, S. M.)

² *Summa*, IIa IIae, qq. 81, 84, 103.

creature would be superstition or idolatry.³ For God alone is the Creator, the First Principle and Ruler of all things. And as no creature can participate of His creative power so too no creature must be given the unique worship that is His of *latria* or divine adoration.

To supernatural created excellence, the participated excellence of grace and glory, as of the Blessed Virgin, the angels and saints, is due the worship or veneration termed *dulia*. This is a special virtue and specifically distinct from that of *latria* or adoration properly so called. Since, however, the excellence to which this veneration of *dulia* corresponds is created and finite it may be found in some one creature in a more perfect degree than in all others. Such is actually the case here where the Blessed Virgin far excels all angels and saints in the participation of grace and glory. For she though a mere creature and infinitely below God is yet God's Mother. And to her then is due this kind of veneration in its highest sense, theologically termed *hyperdulia*.⁴

To the last class of excellence, created excellence, that of our earthly rulers and superiors, is due not so much worship or veneration, as reverence and obedience, for they participate of the ruling power or dominion of God.⁵ And "there is no power but from God."⁶

It is evident then that the veneration paid to a person is measured by the dignity or excellence of that person. Whence is the dignity of Mary? We may consider it from a threefold source: her Divine Maternity; her supereminent sanctity or exalted state in grace and glory; and her universal motherhood and mediation—Mother and Mediatrix of all men.

Mary is Mother of God. This is her first and greatest prerogative, the principle and foundation of all her other privileges and true source of her high dignity. Although the title "Mother of God" nowhere expressly appears in Sacred Scripture, it is, nevertheless, clearly contained in the expressions used. For instance, in his message of the "Annunciation," the angel tells Mary that the One to be born of her would be called the Son of God,⁷ that is, would actually be the Son of God; and Eliza-

³ *Summa*: IIIa, q. 25, a. 5; IIa IIae, q. 94, a. 1; IIa IIae, q. 103, a. 3, ad 1.

⁴ *Ibid. loc. cit.* and IIa IIae, q. 104, a. 4, ad 2.

⁵ *op. cit.*, q. 103, a. 3, ad 1.

⁶ Roms, 13 1.

⁷ St. Luke, I, 35; I, 41.

beth, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, calls her the "Mother of my Lord." Mary is distinctly called the "Mother of Jesus."⁸ It follows then by force of the scriptural expression, since Jesus is God, that Mary "Mother of Jesus" is Mother of God.

This fundamental privilege of the Blessed Virgin and principle of her exalted dignity was ever believed and cherished by the faithful. It was the evident teaching of the Apostles in their narration of the mystery of the Incarnation, and this teaching the Evangelists had enshrined in their inspired narratives. The early Christians were not unacquainted with this divinely-inspired Apostolic teaching that the Mother of "the Son of the Most High,"⁹ the "Son of God," was the Virgin whose name was Mary; "Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."¹⁰ At the same time we hear the voice of the Apostolic Fathers¹¹ against the rising heresies—Docetists, Gnostics, Cerentians—concerning the nature of Christ. To preach and defend the true notion of Christ, the God-Man, was to preach and defend the divine maternity of His Mother. For the doctrine of the mystery of the Incarnation which tells us that God the Son, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, assumed a human nature, directly implies the divine motherhood of her from whom God took that human nature. As Newman reflects, to call Mary "Mother of God" is to destroy all heresies against this divine mystery.¹² In fact, the Greek equivalent *Theotokos* (*Deipara*, Mother of God) became the test, the shibboleth of belief in the true doctrine.

Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople 428, and pupil of Theodore of Mopsuestia, was the first to preach openly against the doctrine of Mary's divine maternity. His heresy was strenuously opposed by the great St. Cyril of Alexandria, and effectively condemned at the first session of the Council of Ephesus, 431, when the traditional teaching was officially declared and defined as a dogma of Catholic faith: "If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is truly God, and that, therefore, the holy

⁸ Acts I, 14, John I, 1-14; II, 1.

⁹ St. Luke, I, 27-35.

¹⁰ St. Matt. I, 16.

¹¹ St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, St. Cyril of Alexandria, etc. (cf. *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, Tome 9 Part II, col. 2339).

¹² cf. Friedel, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

Virgin is Mother of God (Theotokos) in that she gave birth in the flesh, to the Word of God made flesh, let him be anathema."¹³ Moreover, it is reasonable to call Mary the Mother of God. A woman is rightly called the mother of that person whom she conceived and brought forth. Now the Person whom Mary conceived and brought forth, according to the human nature He assumed from her in the first instant of conception, was the Person of the Son of God.¹⁴ Rightly therefore do we call Mary the Mother of God, for her Son is truly God, and at the same time truly Man.¹⁵ We do not, of course, say that she is Mother of the divinity or of the God-Head, but of the Word Incarnate, of God Incarnate, of "the Word made flesh." This is the great mystery of the Divine Motherhood, and on the authority of God Himself we believe this divinely-revealed truth, declared and defined by the infallible voice of God's Church.

With the light of this divine truth upon us we immediately see what it implies: Mary's almost infinite dignity, her peerless sanctity, and the special honor and veneration due to her. The dignity of the divine maternity exceeds the whole created order of grace and glory.¹⁶ It demands then a correspondingly higher veneration. Man through sanctifying grace becomes the adopted son of God, and consequently the son of God by participation. Mary through the divine maternity became *per se* truly and properly the natural Mother of God. Hence, her relation to God is most intimate, a real direct relation, almost touching, as theologians say, the very borders of divinity, *et sic propriissime divinitatis fines attingit*.¹⁷ St. Thomas says, the Blessed Virgin as Mother of God has a certain infinite dignity from the infinite good, that is God—*quandam dignitatem infinitam ex bono infinito, quod est Deus*—and from this, even God could not make a greater mother than the *Mother of God*.¹⁸ Infinite here is taken in a moral and relative sense, *ex termino ad quem*, not in herself but in her divine maternity. We must ever remember that Mary is but a mere creature and as such at an infinite distance from divinity. Our veneration, then, for her should correspond, in so far as we are able, to the honor God has given her, that is, the highest

¹³ Denz. 113.

¹⁴ *Summa*: IIIa, q. 35, a. 4. Lepicier: *Tractatus de Beatissima Virgine Maria*, p. 86.

¹⁵ *Symbolum Athanasianum*, Denz. 39.

¹⁶ Lepicier: *op. cit.*, p. 100; *Summa*: IIIa, q. 25, a. 5.

¹⁷ Lepicier: *op. cit.*, p. 98-99.

¹⁸ *Summa*: Ia, q. 25, a. 6, ad 4. Hugon: *Tractatus Dogmatici*, Vol. 2, p. 733.

possible to a mere creature, for she is above all creatures and next to her Divine Son.

When we say Mary is Mother of God, we can immediately say she is the Immaculate Conception, she is the Ever-Blessed Virgin, she is Queen of Heaven and earth. All this follows logically and fittingly from her "election and pre-election" to divine maternity. "To the honor of the holy and undivided Trinity, to the glory and ornament of the Virgin Mother of God, to the exaltation of the Catholic Faith and the increase of the Christian religion, by the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord, of the Blessed Apostles, Peter and Paul and Ours, We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind was preserved immune from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore should be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful."¹⁹ Thus did Pius IX, the Pope of the Immaculate Conception, by his infallible voice as the Vicar of Christ on earth solemnly define as a dogma of faith what, after her divine maternity is Mary's most precious privilege, her Immaculate Conception. This is a "singular" privilege, gives her a singular dignity above the rest of the children of fallen Adam, and entitles her to a singular honor and veneration. But not only did she receive grace and was preserved from sin in that first instant, but also received a certain "fulness of grace" for she was then as always the elect, the chosen Mother of God. "The ineffable God . . . from the beginning and before the ages, chose and ordained a mother for His only-begotten Son, of whom, made flesh, He should be born in the blessed plenitude of time, and followed her with so great love before all creatures that in her alone He pleased Himself with a most benign complacency. Wherefore, far before all the angelic spirits and all the Saints, He so wonderfully endowed her with the abundance of all heavenly gifts, drawn from the treasure of divinity, that she might be ever free from every stain of sin, and, all fair and perfect, should bear before her that plenitude of innocence and holiness than which, under God, none greater is understood, and which, except God, no one can reach even in thought."²⁰

¹⁹ *Ineffabilis Deus*, Denz, 1641.

²⁰ *Ineffabilis Deus*.

It was fitting that Mary should receive this plenitude of grace because of the office to which she was elected. Those whom God chooses to some special office He so prepares and endows that they may worthily fulfill that office. He gives them grace according to the purpose to which He has elected them. It therefore follows that since God chose the Blessed Virgin to be His Mother He gave her a corresponding fulness of grace to prepare her for that office.²¹ Such indeed was the fulness of this First Grace conferred on the Immaculate Mary that, according to the common teaching of theologians, it far exceeded the final grace of either angels or saints considered individually. And because of the special character of her dignity some hold that it was greater than the final grace of all angels and saints taken collectively.²² Yet this first grace given to God's Mother elect was not such that she could not advance more and more to a greater fulness of grace. For it was a *finite* grace, and the Blessed Virgin while on earth was a wayfarer capable of greater perfection even until death. Theologians teach further that with this first grace Mary received all the accompanying virtues and gifts of the Holy Ghost, and probably too the use of reason and free will.²³ Thus from the beginning she was able to merit an increase in grace and grow more and more pleasing in the sight of God until He would send His angel to greet her with the significant title "Full of Grace"—Hail, full of grace.²⁴

Besides the singular privilege of preservation from all stain of original sin, God granted to His blessed Mother another *special privilege*: that of exemption from all actual sin. "If anyone saith that a man once justified can sin no more . . . or that he is able during his whole life, to avoid all sins, even those that are venial, except by a special privilege from God, as the Church holds in regard of the Blessed Virgin; let him be anathema." Such is the teaching of the Council of Trent (Sess. VI, can. 23). This absolute freedom from all sin was due to her election and office as Mother of God. All her perfection was because of Christ her Divine Son, as St. Augustine, cited by St. Thomas

²¹ *Summa*: IIIa, q. 25, a. 4, ad 1; q. 25, a. 5.

²² Hogan, O. P., *Mother of Divine Grace*, p. 33-35; Hugon, *op. cit.*, p. 752-55.

²³ *Summa*: q. 27, a. 5, ad 2. Lepicier, *op. cit.*, p. 244, seq. Kennedy, D. J., O. P., *Mary in the Theology of Saint Thomas*, Section I, chap. V, being printed serially in *The Torch*. We anxiously await the publication of this authoritative work in book form.

²⁴ St. Luke, I, 28.

says: "In the matter of sin, it is my wish to exclude absolutely all question concerning the holy Virgin Mary, on account of the honor due to Christ." Not only was the Blessed Virgin free from all sin, but also, by reason of her exemption from original sin, free from the common inclination to sin. Yet, absolutely speaking, she was not incapable of sin, not impeccable, as Christ was, but because of her most intimate union with Christ, the Principle of all grace, she received such fulness of grace that it was morally impossible for her to commit sin.²⁵ Her impeccability, as her dignity, came from her Divine Son who being All perfect Himself would have His Mother all perfect and fair according to her nature and state.

From this we get a glimpse, our earthly vision cannot bear the full splendor, of the holiness and excellence of God's Mother. Too, we can understand better the words of Gabriel: "The Lord is with thee: Blessed art thou among women"; and Mary's words: "My soul doth magnify the Lord: And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour . . . Because He that is mighty, hath done great things to me."²⁶ In a flash of inspiration she sees the awful height to which God has raised her, the tremendous gifts and graces He has given her, and with heavenly wisdom and profound humility, she refers all her greatness to its proper Source, to God, to God her Saviour, for all is from God, all for God, even she herself "*propter Christum*" because of Christ her Saviour. All generations indeed will call her blessed, as God has decreed it. When we proclaim her blessed, when we praise her and venerate her, we are but fulfilling the divine decree. To praise the Mother is to give glory to the Son, for she refers all to Him who is the source of her greatness and the cause of her joy—Jesus—God her Saviour.

Mary has a claim to our special veneration not alone because of her unique dignity as Mother of God and her preeminent sanctity and excellence in grace, but also because of her very personal relation to us as Our Mother and Mediatrix. When Mary, by her *fiat* "be it done to me according to thy word" freely and deliberately consented to be the Mother of the Redeemer she at the same time became in a manner the Mother of the redeemed. According to St. Thomas, she, at that moment, represented the whole human race: "to show that there is a certain spiritual wedlock between the Son of God and human nature

²⁵ *Summa*: IIIa, q. 27, a. 4. Kennedy, O. P., *op. cit.*, chap. vii. Lepicier: *op. cit.*, p. 223, seq.

²⁶ St. Luke, I, 28, 49.

the Blessed Virgin's consent was sought in the name and place of the entire human nature."²⁷ As her Son, Jesus, was to be the New Adam, so she was to be the New Eve, the new Mother of the new mankind. In this we have the familiar antithesis of the first Eve and the second Eve which the early Fathers so frequently used in their praise of the obedient Virgin Mary in contrast to the disobedient virgin Eve. Eve was our mother according to nature, but our mother unto death; Mary is our spiritual Mother, our Mother unto life, the true "Mother of all the living." Although the human race would not have fallen, if Eve alone had fallen and Adam had remained faithful, since he was its head and representative, yet, Eve had her own important role as mother of mankind and was indeed a real cooperating instrumental cause in the universal fall.²⁸ Not without reason do we cry "poor banished children of Eve." But God had pity on us and no sooner had Eve fallen by the deception of the serpent than the Almighty promised us a new Eve a new Mother who by the power of her Divine Son, the New Adam, would crush the head of the serpent.²⁹ In the divine decree of the Redemption of mankind Jesus and Mary are always together. We see this in the Promise; it is true also in the fulfillment. Cardinal Mercier is to the point: "This fact is a law. In the mystery of the Redemption which Christ came to accomplish, Mary His Mother, is always united with Him. She is at the crib; at the Presentation in the Temple; for thirty years she abides with her Son at Nazareth; she is on the road to Calvary and on Calvary itself at the foot of the Cross at the hour of the closing tragedy; she is present in the Upper Room at the Descent of the Holy Ghost and the foundation of the Church; she sits at the right hand of her Divine Son in the Kingdom of His glory, from whence she shields the Christian world under the mantle of her maternal protection."³⁰

But Jesus Himself would officially appoint her and give her to us as our Mother and at the same time commend her, as it were, to our keeping, to our special honor and veneration. "Woman, behold thy son," and to the disciple: "'Behold thy mother.' And from that hour, the disciple took her to his own."³¹ Pope

²⁷ St. Luke, 1, 38; *Summa*: IIIa, q. 30, a. 1 (Eng. trans. vol. 16, p. 42).

²⁸ Card. Newman: Letter to Pusey, p. 40; *Summa*: Ia, IIae, q. 81, a. 5.

²⁹ Gen. III, 15.

³⁰ *Pastoral Letter*: on the Universal Meditation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and "True Devotion to Mary" as Expounded by Blessed Grignon de Montfort.

³¹ St. John, XIX, 26, 27; *Encycl. Adjutricem Populi*. cf. Nau, Louis, J. *Mary Mediatrix*, p. 53.

Leo XIII tells us the signification of this: "In John, however, as the Church has always sensed, Christ designated the person of the human race and most especially those who would adhere to Him by faith." Mary then is our very own, given to us by Jesus Himself and we as her spiritual children have a right to call her by the loving title: "Our Blessed Mother." "In His eternal decrees He predestined her as our Mother by adoption—He could hardly honor us more—but with this astounding gift came the solemn command, 'Honor Thy Mother.'"³²

As Mary is our Mother she has a mother's care for us; as she is our spiritual, our heavenly Mother, her care for us is spiritual and heavenly. She is our Mother in the supernatural life and obtains for us our supernatural needs, namely, the graces necessary for the life and health of our souls. In this she is our Mediatrix, our Mediatrix with Jesus-God from whom, as from their source, all graces come. Christ, the God-Man, is the one, perfect and principal Mediator between the two extremes God and man. For there is but "one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus: Who gave Himself a redemption for all."³³ However, adds St. Thomas, "nothing hinders certain others from being called mediators, in some respect between God and man, forasmuch as they cooperate in uniting men to God, dispositively or ministerially."³⁴ As examples of this dispositive or ministerial mediation St. Thomas mentions the prophets of the Old Law and the priests of the New; also, it may be held of the angels and saints. Now the mediation of the Blessed Virgin, although indeed secondary and instrumental, yet, is of a higher order than that of the other saints, for she is the Queen of saints, but above all, she is the Mother of God—the Mother of the Redeemer and the redeemed. And as she cooperated with Christ in the work of the Redemption, in "the acquisition of all grace" so now is she associated with Him in the "dispensing of all grace."³⁵ All grace given us by God comes indeed through Jesus Christ but dispensed to us from the immaculate hands of God's Mother and ours. "Come let us adore Christ the Saviour Who has ordered that we shall receive all graces through Mary."³⁶

³² Card. O'Connell: *Pastoral Letter: Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.*

³³ Leo XIII: *Adjutricem populi*; I Tim. II, 5, 6.

³⁴ *Summa*: IIIa, q. 26, a. 1 (Eng. trans. vol. 15. p. 357).

³⁵ *Summa*: IIIa, q. 27, a. 5. ad 1. Pius X: *Ad diem illum*; Leo XIII: *Adjutricem populi*; *Augustissimae Virginis*.

³⁶ Invitatory to the Matins of the office for the feast of the Blessed Virgin, Mediatrix of All Graces, approved by Benedict XV. (cf. Nau, *op. cit.*, p. 69).

Besides, then, the rightful claim Mary has on us, to a special honor and veneration, because of her incomparable dignity of divine motherhood, because of her radiant sanctity "a glory and a supernatural beauty surpassing in its splendor that of all the angels and saints of heaven"³⁷; she has moreover this twofold claim on being our Mother and Mediatrix of all graces. Reverence, says St. Thomas, is the first motive of honor, and honor a protestation of the excellence of goodness in some one.³⁸ Now if in the human heart there is an instinct of reverence for motherhood, how great should our reverence be for her who is our spiritual, our Heavenly Mother! It should be in proportion as spirit is above matter, as Heaven is above earth. And corresponding to this reverence should be our honor, our veneration, our devotion. For the excellence and goodness of Our Blessed Mother is the excellence and goodness of the Blessed Mother of God. We have no apology to offer for the honor and veneration we give to Mary. We cannot do otherwise if we are to be true children of God and brothers of Jesus Christ. We can never honor her as God has honored her, as Jesus Christ her Divine Son has honored her, as the angels and saints in glory honor her their Queen who stands "in gilded clothing, surrounded with variety" at the right hand of the King.³⁹

³⁷ Card. Mercier: *op. cit.*

³⁸ *Summa*: IIa IIae, q. 103, aa. 1 and 2.

³⁹ Psalm XIV, 10.

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