

A NATION'S MOTHER

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FROM a cloudless sky a radiant sun shone upon the Eternal City. People thronged the streets. From the snow covered wastes of the north and the tropics of the south, from the orient and the occident they had come to the city of the popes. The culture of Europe was there represented. The Americas had sent their quotas. Sons and daughters of France, England, Ireland, Germany, and in fact, of every country and nation on the globe mingled in that vast multitude. Truly it was a catholic throng that had made its way to the center of Christendom. Every road was a road to Rome and every street led to the majestic basilica of St. Peter. It was the eighth of December, 1854, the day on which Pope Pius IX gave the world that definitive decree infallibly proclaiming the Virgin Mother of Jesus immaculately conceived.

The words of the definition had been pronounced. The Sacrifice of Calvary had been reenacted. At its close the Pope intoned the *Te Deum*. The voices of two hundred cardinals, archbishops, and bishops, together with those of forty thousand people united in that beautiful hymn of praise. The vaulted walls of the great St. Peter's almost swayed with the sweet rhythmic tones of joy and thanksgiving as they soared aloft to the throne of God. Outside the historic basilica salvos of artillery were heard from the Fort Sant' Angelo. Havoc and destruction followed not in their wake for they brought to the awaiting world a message of great joy. Immediately the chimes of every basilica and church in Rome rang out announcing Mary's latest glory, a dogma old as eternity itself and ancient with the belief of centuries, the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God. It was the Madonna's day and her people in ecstatic joy were celebrating.

In far off America some eight years before, May 9, 1846, there was convoked a Provincial Council. From the frontiers of a sparsely settled country as well as from growing cities a mere handful of bishops, twenty-two in number, came to the city of Baltimore at the call of their archbishop. That body of men which then made up the young American hierarchy was composed of truly zealous and apos-

tolic men. Some of them knew the hardships of the wilderness in an uncivilized West and had experienced the fatigue and weariness of long days in the saddle. Others in privation and poverty had ministered to their flocks in the more populous centers of the east. All had borne the slur of the bigot, had been subjected to the mockeries of the prejudiced, and were witnesses to the hate and detestation in which their religion was held. Such was the body which on this occasion had gathered to discuss and deliberate upon the vexing problem which faced the struggling American church.

No decree of that council has been of greater importance to the American church and nation than the one drawn up on the thirteenth of May. On that day, in the third private congregation, the Fathers of the council of unanimous election, proclaimed Mary, the Immaculate Mother of God, patroness of the United States. At once the assembled prelates gave to the nation a powerful protectress, to the church a living intercessor, and to the faithful a mediatrix before the throne of God. Henceforth the destinies of both church and state are to be in the hands of the Mother of God. Till the one ceases, and the other begins a new existence as the Church Triumphant, Mary is their powerful advocate and benign guardian. Little wonder is there, then, that when the news of the definition of the Immaculate Conception reached America some eight years later, the joy of the faithful was a counterpart of that which Rome itself witnessed on that memorable eighth of December.

No one should be amazed at the fact that the Immaculate Mary should be chosen patroness of the American church for it is to her that all Catholics look for help and assistance in time of need. The Pastoral Letter, issued to the faithful by the bishops at the close of the council, gives reason enough for this selection when it states that, "By the aid of her prayers, we entertain the confident hope that we will be strengthened to perform the arduous duties of our ministry, and that you will be enabled to practice the sublime virtues of which her life presents a most perfect example. . . . To her, then, we commend you, in the confidence that, through the one mediator of God and men, the man of Christ Jesus, who gave himself a redemption for all, she will obtain for us grace and salvation."

But strange indeed it seems, that a small body of religious leaders should name as patroness of a country openly hostile to their beliefs, one whose person and name have ever been revered and held in benediction by that religion. Just two years before the council, the country saw in the Native American Movement a concerted effort to

destroy Catholicism. The attempt failed but the flames of hate had not been entirely extinguished when the council had been convoked. Why, then, was the Queen of Love and Peace proclaimed patroness of a land so full of hatred and rancor toward her loved ones? It is not for the mind of man to probe the infinite, nor can man give, with certitude, reasons for the actions of a provident God. However, in this instance, at least partial human causes may be assigned for such a singular election.

Doubtless the charity of God dwelt alike in prelate, priest, and layman, and the peace of Christ which reigned supreme in the hearts of all true Catholics, prompted in some measure that unparalleled choice. However, no stronger human reason can be adduced than that which is found in history, namely, three hundred years of love, honor, and devotion to the Mother of God. A brief survey of history will convince the most sceptical that this love and devotion played no small part in determining the action of the convened body of bishops.

From the very advent of the explorer to the shores of an unknown continent down even to the days of the council new lands and new peoples were won for Mary and were dedicated to her Immaculate Conception. Columbus, true knight of Jesus Christ and devout client of the Virgin Mother that he was, named the first land he touched San Salvador, and the second Santa Maria de la Conception—thus consecrating to his Liege Lord and Spotless Queen a new world. Here, however, our chief concern is with the territory which in later times was to comprise the United States.

Some hundred and fifty years after the discovery of the new world and far north of the lands first explored by the Genoese sailor, along the banks of the Kenebec and Penobscot Rivers the praises of Jesus and Mary were sung by the Abenaki Indians. There amid the hills and pine forests of Maine a chapel was erected in honor of the Immaculate Conception. So strong was the love for Jesus and devotion to Mary among these children of the forest, that more than a century and a half later, after fifty years without the ministry of a priest, Bishop Cheverus found the faith first taught by Jesuit and Recollect still flourishing in its pristine vigor. To the west, along the banks of the Hudson and through the valley of the Mohawk, where once the weird war cry of the Iroquois rent the air, the resonant notes of Mary's praises were heard. Here the blood of a martyred Jogues and a mutilated Bressani consecrated the soil to the Saviour and His Mother.

By the shores of the Great Lakes the *Salve Regina* and *Ave Maris Stella* were heard as intrepid missionaries, in bark canoe, made their way westward to bring the message of salvation to the pagan aborigine. Among others, Allouez and Dablon planted the cross in Wisconsin and Michigan and with it placed the standard of Mary. Marquette as he set out in his quest of the Father of Waters placed his journey under the patronage of the Immaculate Mother, promising, if successful, to name that river in honor of the Immaculate Conception.

From the mission at Green Bay the priest explorer started. To the West and South he made his way to the Wisconsin River. Floating down that river for one hundred and twenty miles he came to the object of his search, the Mississippi and named it the Immaculate Conception. Down that broad stream the birch canoe wended its way past Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri to the mouth of the Arkansas. At that point the missionary turned to ascend the river. After a journey of well over two thousand miles, during which he preached the glories of Jesus and Mary to the scattered tribes, he returned broken in health to Green Bay. The following year he set out for the Illinois country and there established a mission dedicated to the honor of the Immaculate Conception.

In the south the story of the progress of the faith, which is also the story of the devotion to Mary, is as full of heroism and self sacrifice as it is to the north. At a date earlier than that which marked the beginning of the French missions in the north, courageous Spaniards preached the gospel of Jesus in our southland. From the point where that zealous Dominican devotee of Mary, Louis Cancer, laid down his life on the Florida coast, thus becoming the proto-martyr of that state, to the Carolinas and Virginias the word of God was made known to the savage and Mary's glories chanted. The waters of the Chesapeake which wash the shores of Virginia and Maryland were then called St. Mary's bay. Lord Calvert brought a persecuted Catholicity from England to find its freedom in Maryland where the first settlement established was named in honor of the Virgin Mary.

Along the shore of the Gulf to the vast ranges of Texas and from thence, across the desert wastes of New Mexico and Arizona to the mountain slopes of the Pacific, Franciscan, Jesuit, and Dominican preached the gospel of salvation and the glories of Mary to the swarthy savage. In San Antonio, Texas, the Franciscan Padres, as early as 1718, erected a chapel in honor of her Immaculate Conception.

This vast stretch of country from the Atlantic to the Pacific was thus consecrated to Jesus and Mary by the labor and hardships of zealous missionaries and, in many instances, the soil was bathed in the blood of martyrs. As the years passed the evangel of Christ was made known to the dusky inhabitants of the lands which border on the Pacific. In Oregon the name was revered and honored by the redman when, as the decades rolled on, the Black-robe and Oblate of Mary brought to that country the gospel of Christ. Finally, during the forties of the last century the great northwest with its vast plains and towering ranges, through the labors of De Smet and other saintly missionaries, knew of Mary's name and glory.

Thus the great name of the Virgin Mother was loved and honored along the frontiers and borders of our country. With the establishment of the first bishopric in the newly formed republic devotion to Mary increased in the interior. Just as the church expanded and gained new members so also did the clients of Mary grow in number. With the tide of immigration bringing builders of a nation, it brought also stalwart sons and fair daughters of Germany, France, and Ireland, all ardent lovers of the Mother of God. Churches and schools were named in her honor while in seminaries students invoked Mary, the Seat of Wisdom, under whose patronage they studied.

Such, then, in brief, is the story of devotion to Mary in our land up to the time of the Sixth Provincial Council. Is not that glorious history of martyrdom and suffering, toil and labor, in spreading honor to the Immaculate Mother, an impelling reason for the action of the council in choosing the Mother of God, under the title of the Immaculate Conception, as our country's patroness?

That the patronage of Mary has proved beneficial both to the church and state cannot be denied. Through the terrible days of the Know Nothing movement the children of the Church looked to her for comfort and aid. She was to them their refuge and their hope. In 1866 the Second Plenary Council gave evidence of Mary's powerful protection, for while every other religious body was rent in two by the forces which brought about the Civil War, the Catholic Church alone remained united—one in practice, one in belief and one for the honor and glory of God. And so down even to our day Mary guides and protects the American Church and will continue to direct her destinies until time is no more.

Since that memorable day in 1846 our country has passed through many social, political and economic crises until today, she

stands out among the nations of the world enjoying a peace and prosperity equalled by few and surpassed by none. It is neither vain nor presumptuous to say that the loving care of our Blessed Lady contributed much toward placing our country in the preeminent position she occupies. It is, therefore, the constant prayer and confident hope of every true Catholic and loyal citizen, that Mary will ever deign to grant us, as a nation, her material aid and guidance.

That devotion which prompted a Jogues and a Cancer to lay down their lives, and which led a host of apostolic men to suffer every privation and endure every torture, reigns today in the hearts of the faithful. Though perhaps not as heroic, for circumstances do not demand the heroism of the past, it is just as strong in intensity. In our times devotion to Mary finds expression in the number of churches and cathedrals dedicated to her name, in the almost countless schools, academies, and colleges placed under her protection, and in the many guilds and societies instituted for her honor and praise. The crowning glory of their devotion is the construction, now in progress, of a magnificent basilica dedicated to the Immaculate Conception in our nation's capitol. In this the month which marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the definition of the Immaculate Conception, it should be the prayer of every devout client of Mary, that the day may not be far distant when, under the dome of a completed national shrine, a vast multitude shall gather, in the name of Church and State, to honor Mary Immaculate as patroness, and to acclaim her to be, in every sense of the word, our Nation's Mother.

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