

MARY, MOTHER AND MEDIATRIX

PASCHAL SHAFFER, O.P.

“Lady! thou art so great, thou art so high,
That he who needeth grace and seeks not thee,
Is like to one who, wingless, yet would fly.”
Paradiso, Canto 33.



NE OUGHT to begin a study of the Blessed Virgin with these words of Saint Bernard in mind: “Thy grandeur is above the clouds and thy glory over all the earth, so that no one in heaven or on earth can fitly praise thy magnificence.”¹ Indeed we should be silent because of our lack of ability to praise Mary, but our love for her will not bear silence. Even though the attempt be poor and puerile let us proclaim from the housetops in the words of a child, if such they must be, our love, our desire to serve, our pledge of spreading a like love to all men. Mary as a true mother will understand and interpret the faltering words of her children, and in understanding she will make others understand.

In the following pages we have outlined and set out two considerations, two questions to be answered: first, is Mary, the Mother of God, our Mother also in the truest acceptance of the word? Secondly, do all the graces which God bestows upon men come through Mary as through a channel? Or, in the other words, is the Blessed Virgin the universal dispenser of God’s graces?

We know and lovingly acknowledge that Mary is our spiritual Mother; nevertheless, in a very true sense, she performs and fulfills in our regard the functions of the dearest of earthly mothers. This most profound belief is deeply rooted in the mind of every sincere Catholic. Our filial relationship to Mary is most intimate and real. It is based upon the reality of an intrinsic relation of the Virgin Mother of Christ to every one of us as members of the Mystical Body of Christ. It is founded upon her Divine Maternity.

¹ Sermo, “In Antiphonam Salve Regina.” In Migne: *P. L.*, CLXXXIV, 1063. (Paris: 1854)

The exalted eminence of the Blessed Virgin in the economy of Divine Love, the Incarnation, derives its origin from her bringing forth of Christ, the Son of God, Who from all eternity was begotten of the Father, but in time was generated of the Blessed Virgin by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. From this sublime moment until the death of her Divine Son on Calvary, Mary's life was inseparably bound up with His.

"There are three phases in the complete Life of Christ or in the Life of the whole-Christ: first, His Earthly Life; second, His glorified Life; third, His Mystical Life."² These three comprise the "Fulness of Christ." Christ's Earthly Life began at His birth in the stable of Bethlehem and ended with His glorious Ascension into Heaven. His Mystical Life, which began with the first Pentecost, is truly as real as His Earthly Life. The new body that Christ then assumed is called His Mystical Body, or the Church. In this Mystical Body, "just as the natural body is one though made up of diverse members, so the whole Church, Christ's mystical body, is reckoned as one person with its Head Who is Christ."³

Now the Blessed Virgin's complete and close union to Christ was more than a purely corporal one. What, then, is her participation in the Fulness of Christ? In Christ's Mystical Life which is an integral part of His whole and complete Life, He is the Head and we, as members of the Church, constitute the Body. Hence, most assuredly we can say that the Virgin gave birth not only to the Earthly Life of Christ but also to His Fulness, the Mystical Body, the Church. How could it be otherwise? Could she be Mother of the Head and not necessarily Mother of the Body? No, for in that case, Mary would not be the Mother of the whole-Christ. Mary's co-operation in the prolongation of the Incarnation follows as a natural corollary from her intimate and continual co-operation in the conception and birth of Christ. And since the Mystical Body must be considered as constituting the fulness of the Incarnation we conclude that Mary's Divine Maternity extends to the Mystical Body. Therefore the Blessed Virgin Mary is the Mother of the countless number of faithful who compose the Mystical Body. Saint Augustine succinctly recapitulates the whole doctrine: "Mary is the Mother of the members of Christ, which we

² Sheen, Msgr. Fulton, *The Mystical Body*. (New York: 1935). p. 19.

³ Saint Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, IIIa, q. 48, a. 6.

are; because by her charity she coöperated in giving faithful children to the Church."⁴

That Mary's participation extends to the complete concept of the Incarnation, including its prolongation, the Church, is further borne out by the fact that she, who so perfectly coöperated in the Incarnation by her consent, has merited the sublime title, Co-redemptrix, Mary knew that her Son was a victim destined for sacrifice. Furthermore, when she offered Him to God in the temple she heard the aged Simeon foretell her own heart's share in the holocaust which He was to consummate on Calvary. And so it was. When her Son breathed forth His last, Mary was at the foot of the Cross. Christ offered Himself to God for the redemption of the world; Mary in the same spirit united herself with Him. Saint Albert the Great explains for us the Virgin's participation in the Redemption: "Mary is after God and with God and under God the *efficient* cause of our regeneration, because she begot our Redeemer, and because by her virtue she merited by a merit of congruity this incomparable honor. She is the *material* cause, because the Holy Ghost, through the intermediary of her consent, took from her pure flesh and blood the flesh and blood from which was made the Body immolated for the Redemption of the world. She is the *final* cause, for the great work of Redemption which is ordained principally for the glory of God, is ordained secondarily for the honor of this same Virgin. She is the *formal* cause, for by the luminance of her virtue so very deiform (*deiformissimæ*) she is the universal exemplar which shows us the way out of darkness to the vision of Eternal Light."⁵

Saint Paul gives us cause to advance our exposition yet further. The Apostle of the Gentiles, preaching the word of God to the peoples of Corinth and bringing them thus under the saving power of the Blood of the Redemption, could and did declare that he had begotten them in spirit (I Cor., iv, 15): "For in Christ Jesus, by the gospel I have begotten you." This he was able to say because he was the instrumental and the remote cause of their birth to the life of Faith which made them members of the Church, Christ's Mystical Body. Now if Saint Paul can so speak of himself in relation to the Corinthians, with

⁴ Sermo, "In Natali Domini." In Migne: *P. L.*, xxxviii, 1012.

⁵ *Opera Omnia*, "Quæstiones super Evangelium," T xxxvii, q. 146. (Paris: 1890) p. 209.

how much greater reason can we speak of Mary as the Mother of *all* Christians?

As a final step in showing how the Blessed Virgin is our Mother we will consider a very persuasive argument of Saint Albert. He says: "There are four qualities or prerogatives which a mother is said to have in reference to her child: she gives him birth, she cares for him, she exists before him in time, and she is greater in dignity. . . . Now, Mary is Mother (of all good men) according to all the qualities of maternity. She gives birth, because she brought forth Him in Whom all are regenerated: and thus it is said (Luke, II, 7), 'she brought forth her first-born.' Similarly, our Mother Mary is provident because by giving birth to One she has provided for us whatsoever was needed for this life or the future life. Wherefore it is said (Eccl., XXIV, 26): 'be filled with my fruits,' and (Romans, XVIII, 32), 'He that spared not even His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how hath He not also with Him given us all things?' Likewise she is our Mother by precedence because she is the 'first born before all creatures' (Eccl., XXIV, 5). Finally she is our Mother in virtue of her predestined dignity, for she was predestined before the world began so that she might be the font from which is renewed the face of the earth."⁶

Is there need for further argumentation to establish this truth that is so deeply embosomed within us? We feel that a breach of faith is shown by the mere mentioning of such a necessity. And indeed, we know that it would take far more than arguments to prove to us that Mary is *not* our Mother.

By showing that the Blessed Virgin is truly our Mother because of the extension of the Divine Maternity to include motherhood of Christ's Mystical Body, we have established the foundation for calling her the Mediatrix of all graces. Cardinal Lepicier unites the two truths thus: "Because the Blessed Mother was ordained by God to be the Mother of the Faithful in the order of eternal salvation, it naturally follows therefore that she exercises the function of Mediatrix between God and man."⁷

In advancing this thesis there are certain principles which must be borne in mind throughout. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the sole Mediator between God and man: "For there is one God and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ

⁶ *Op. cit.*, q. 145.

⁷ *Tractatus de Beatissima Virgine Maria.* (Paris: 1906) p. 379.

Jesus."⁸ He alone is the source of sanctifying grace, the author of our supernatural life. Strictly speaking, He is the sole universal meritorious cause of our Redemption and when the Blessed Virgin is associated with these beliefs she is always placed in a secondary and subordinate position. In short, Christ is sole Mediator by principal title, Mary is Mediatrix by a dependent one. Christ alone is the universal meriting cause of our Redemption and of our participation in the life of grace; Mary, by her free consent to the Incarnation and her co-operation in the economy of Divine Love, is the moral cause. Hence in a subordinate degree she is Co-redemptrix. Lastly, to Christ alone belongs the right to distribute the fruits of the Redemption. But even in this it has pleased God to associate Mary universally in the office of Dispenser. "Every grace given to the world comes by three steps in perfect order; from the Father to Christ; from Christ to the Virgin; from the Virgin to us."⁹ "It is God's plan that everything in the spiritual order should come to us through Mary. God has bestowed all graces on Mary that men, through her as through a channel, may receive whatever good is in store for them."¹⁰ "God dispenses all His graces through her."¹¹ "Mary, by her union of will with her divine Son merited to become the Dispenser of all the gifts which Jesus procured for us by His death and precious Blood."¹²

Saint Thomas fully explains the sense in which others can be called mediators and enumerates the necessary requisites for such an office. "Nothing hinders certain others from being called mediators in some respect between God and man, forasmuch as they co-operate in uniting men to God dispositively and ministerially."¹³ He teaches that four qualities are demanded of an intercessor for efficacious mediation: "First, that he be acquainted with the mind and ways of the one before whom he intercedes; secondly, that he be on familiar terms with him; thirdly, that the intercessor be entitled to a hearing; fourthly, that he be cognizant of the wants and needs of him for whom he intercedes."¹⁴ The Blessed Virgin possesses these four req-

⁸ I Tim., II, 5.

⁹ Leo XIII. Encyclical Letter: *Magnæ Dei Matris*. 1892

¹⁰ Saint Bernard. Sermo, "De Aquaeductu." In Migne: P. L. CLXXXIII, 437.

¹¹ Leo XIII. Encyclical Letter: *Jucunda*. 1894.

¹² Pius X. Encyclical Letter: *Ad Diem Illum*. 1904.

¹³ *Summa Theol.*, IIIa, q. 26, a. 1.

¹⁴ *Opusc.* 63, a. 18.

uisites in a preeminent degree. She is an ideal Mediatrix, able and desirous to bring about a reconciliation between the offender and the offended, man and God.

To what extent and in what manner can we say that the Blessed Mother is acquainted with the mind and ways of God before whom she intercedes? Even though Mary is the Mother of God she is also one of His creatures. "No created intellect seeing God can know all that God does or can do."¹⁵ If this were not true, the power of God could be comprehended. Since God is Infinity Itself such comprehension is impossible to a creature because every creature is finite, understanding only those things within a limited cycle and scope. But the more perfectly a creature sees God so much the more does that creature know the power of God. In the Beatific Vision the Blessed Virgin sees God more intimately and knowingly than any other creature, for she is the most perfect of His creatures, the "first born before all creatures."¹⁶ To her therefore in the highest degree possible is given the knowledge of the inscrutable mysteries of God's ways.

We would not dare deny to Mary the second requisite namely, that she be on familiar terms with God. "What has our Divine Jesus not done for her and what has she not done for Him! Where shall we find an intimacy that can be compared with the union of these two lives?"¹⁷ The Blessed Virgin was in constant union with her divine Son during his life on earth. Surely in her heavenly home, as the Queen of His Kingdom, she continues to enjoy the most intimate familiarity with Him.

Is the Blessed Virgin entitled to a hearing? God has promised to hear the petitions of those who do His Will. He showers His choicest blessings upon them making them participants in the divine life. Every moment of Mary's existence was spent in perfect conformity to the Will of God. And the title "Full of Grace" bestowed upon her by the angel gives her still greater claim to be heard. Saint Jerome says: "Full of Grace indeed! for to others it is given in portions, whereas on Mary the fulness of Grace was showered all at once."¹⁸ Because of her superabundance of grace and because of her most perfect accord with God's Will throughout her life, Mary deserved to be crowned

¹⁵ Saint Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, Ia, q. 12, a. 8.

¹⁶ Eccl. xxiv, 5.

¹⁷ Pastoral Letter of Cardinal Mercier. *The Universal Mediation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.*

¹⁸ "De Perpetua Virginitate B. Mariae." In Migne: P. L., xxiii, 163.

Queen of His Angels and Saints. In this high office, like Esther of old, she intercedes for her afflicted people, she is their Mediatrix at the Throne. And her intercession is said to be universal: "so that, as no one can come to the Father except through the Son, so too no one can come to Christ except through His Mother."¹⁹

Twenty centuries of Catholic devotion to Mary, twenty centuries in which Christian souls have unburdened themselves to her, telling her their troubles, asking her help, offer magnificent proof that Mary possesses the fourth requisite namely, knowledge of the needs and wants of the ones for whom she intercedes. Charity, the connecting link between the departed souls and the living, between men on earth and the blessed in Heaven, has won for the Saints the ability to foresee our needs and prompts them to pray for us. Our Blessed Mother's charity is greater than that of the Saints. She looks upon us all as her children. Her love for us is unbounded. And our affection for her, in turn, founded upon the realization of her eternal eminence, is yet the tender confiding union of a child with its mother. We should approach her as the countless Catholics before us have, firm in the belief that through our humble prayers she will hasten, and so gladly, to obtain for us all necessary graces.

"We beseech thee, O Lord, through the intercession of Mary our Mediatrix, grant that the oblation of these sacrificial elements may transform us, by the action of Thy merciful grace, into an offering whole and entire to belong to Thee forever."²⁰

¹⁹ Leo XIII. Encyclical Letter: *Jucunda*. 1894.

²⁰ From the Secret Prayer of The Mass, "Mary our Mediatrix."