

MARY AND THE PRIEST

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MARY is not a priest. She does not have the sacerdotal character. She cannot offer the Sacrifice of the Mass nor administer the Sacraments. The Church, therefore, speaking through the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, has decreed that the title of priest is not to be given to her.¹ Still, because of her unique position as Mother of Him Who is our great High Priest, and particularly because of her intimate connection with His supreme sacerdotal act, we find many striking analogies between our Blessed Lady and the priest—analogies which, if investigated, will cast much light upon the relations existing both between the Mother of God and her Son, and between her and the priests of the New Law.

A priest is essentially a mediator between God and man. His duties are to stand between the two; to render man's homage to God and to bring God's gifts to man. The first of these functions he exercises by offering sacrifice; the second, by being the dispenser of God's grace and the minister of His word.

All these functions of the priestly office were exercised most perfectly by Our Lord Who offered Himself as the supreme Sacrifice and Who brought us all grace and all knowledge. They are exercised also, and have been exercised from the time of the Apostles, by all the priests of the Church. But in these actions Mary too plays a part which, if not truly sacerdotal, is none the less of the greatest importance in the economy of our salvation and consequently well worth our consideration.

MOTHER OF GOD

The first office of a priest is to offer sacrifice. In a broad sense, Our Lord began to offer sacrifice to the Father from the first instant of His Incarnation. This sacrifice He consummated and perfected on Calvary when hanging on the cross He delivered His Soul into the Hands of His Father. This same sacrifice is offered in an unbloody manner on our altars. It was and is the most sublime act of Christ

¹ Cf. *Decreta S. Officii*: 15 Jan., 1913; 8 Apr., 1916; 10 Mar., 1927.

the Priest. But Mary was so intimately associated with this sacerdotal act that she is called the "helper" and the "loving associate" of the Redeemer. She is even given the title of "co-redemptrix." In what is Mary's right to these titles founded? How can she be said to be the co-redemptrix?

Like all the prerogatives of Mary, this one is founded basically upon her dignity as Mother of God. Mary is not only the Mother of God, but she is also the Mother of the Redeemer precisely as Redeemer.² When Mary spoke her *fiat* to the angel, she knew what she was consenting to. Of course all the details of the life, passion, and death of her Son were not clear to her, but she had studied the Scriptures and her mind, most perfectly in accord with the Holy Spirit, had penetrated deeply into the meaning of the ancient prophecies. She knew that this Child Who should be born of her would give Himself for the salvation of the world, and from the beginning she consented most freely to whatever part God would have her play in the work, both by offering her Son, in so far as it lay within her power, and by accepting whatever sufferings might be laid upon her because she was His Mother.

In this regard Mary was not like other mothers who, although freely entering marriage, do not know whether they will have children or whether these children will be a cause of joy or sorrow. Therefore, if evil befalls them because of their children, they can consent, i.e., they can bear for the honor of God and their own salvation that which they could not avert. Mary, however, freely accepted her motherhood when she could have refused it. She consented to be the mother of Him Who was to save His people from their sins, the mother of Him Whom Isaiah had prophesied would be a Man of Sorrows. In consenting to be His mother she accepted all the evils which would necessarily fall upon her as mother of this Man of Sorrows.

Having once accepted the office of mother of the Redeemer, Mary never withdrew her acceptance. Rather she renewed it constantly, never ceasing within her own heart to offer Jesus to the Father and to declare her willingness to bear His sufferings with Him. Thus at the solemn moment of the Presentation in the temple, we see her making her offering. Abbot Marmion speaks thus of it:

When Jesus is forty days old, the Blessed Virgin associates herself . . . directly and deeply with the work of our salvation by presenting Him in the Temple. She is the first to offer to

² Merkelbach: *Mariologia*, p. 75, no. 33.

the Eternal Father His Divine Son. After the oblation that Jesus, the supreme High Priest, made of Himself from the moment of His Incarnation, and that He consummated on Calvary, Mary's offering is the most perfect.³

and St. Thomas of Villanova puts on her lips this beautiful prayer :

Accept, O Omnipotent Father, the oblation which I, Your servant, present to You for all the universe. Receive this Son Who is common to us both, mine in time, Yours from all eternity. I give you the greatest thanks for having raised me up to become the Mother of Him of Whom You Yourself are the Father. Receive from the hands of Your servant this most holy Victim. This is the morning sacrifice which will become later, on the arms of the cross, the evening sacrifice. All Good Father, cast a favorable glance upon my offering and be mindful of those for whom I offer it.⁴

At this same solemn moment, Mary was reminded that she too must share in the sacrifice of her Son. "And thy own soul a sword shall pierce," were the words she heard from Simeon and throughout the more than thirty years that Mary lived in sweet familiarity with her Divine Son, the memory of the prophecy of Simeon did not leave her. "She lived in the thought of the Sacrifice of Jesus and in the sight of Calvary. The saintly old man had set up the cross before her: she never ceased to fix her gaze upon it."⁵

LADY OF SORROWS

But as the Sacrifice of Jesus was consummated upon Calvary, so also was Mary's part in that Sacrifice perfected at the foot of the cross. Here she joined herself to the suffering Saviour in three ways: 1) by a most perfect union of her own will to that of her Son, so that His Will to offer Himself for the salvation of mankind and her will that He be offered might almost be said to be one; while her love for Him and for mankind was so great that she would most willingly have died in His stead were that possible; 2) by freely offering what was hers, namely, her Son, so that Mary may be said to have provided the Victim for the Sacrifice, and to have provided Him willingly by freely abandoning her maternal right over Him; 3) by offering her own sufferings and the sorrow which rent her own heart

³ *Christ in His Mysteries*, pp. 158-159.

⁴ Sermon on the Purification of B.V.M. Cited in Bernadot: *Notre Dame dans sa Vie*, p. 21.

⁵ Bernadot: *Loc. cit.*

in union with the sufferings of Jesus. And indeed these sufferings were so great that Pope Benedict XV has said that ". . . with her suffering and dying Son, she suffered and nearly died."⁶

Of Mary's part in the Sacrifice of Christ, the same Pontiff wrote: "As much as it pertained to her (she), immolated her Son."⁷ We can see from these words how very close was her participation in the Sacrifice of the Cross; yet, lest there by any misunderstanding, we must note carefully the words used by the Pope: "as much as it pertained to her." The proper and adequate cause of the Sacrifice of the Cross was the Will of the Redeemer. It was He Who laid down His life because He willed it. "He was offered because it was His own will" (Isaias, LIII, 7). The Jews and the Roman soldiers, it is true, through the crucifixion and the acts which preceded it, placed a sufficient cause for death, and that with the intention of killing their Victim, and so they are said to be the cause of His death. Yet they had no power over Him unless He permitted it. He allowed Himself to be tortured and crucified. He could have rendered His enemies powerless by a single act of His Will; He could have deprived their blows of any power to injure Him, and having borne the crucifixion, He could have prevented His Soul from departing from His Body. Yet He willed to undergo all these things; and having suffered them, it was He Who bowing His Head, gave up the ghost (Jn. XIX, 30). His death was not forced upon Him, but accepted willingly, so that He could say: "No man taketh it (My life) away from Me: but I lay it down of Myself, and I have the power to lay it down (Jn. X, 18).

Since the essence of the Sacrifice was an act of the Will of Christ, no one could properly be said to share in it intrinsically. God alone can operate intrinsically on the human will. Union with the will of Christ, then, no matter how perfect it may be, must always remain extrinsic to that will and to its act, which is the essence of the Sacrifice.

Mary, then, cannot properly be said to have offered the Sacrifice of the Cross, and for this reason she cannot be called a priest. On the other hand, those having the priestly character conferred by the Sacrament of Holy Orders can be so called for they truly offer sacrifice, not independently of Christ, Who is the Principal Minister in the Sacrifice of the Mass, but subordinate to Him as secondary ministers.

⁶ *Inter Sodalita* AAS 10 (1918) 182; Denz. 1978a, note.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Mary, however, and Mary alone, co-operated in the Sacrifice of the Cross, even though her co-operation was not truly of a sacerdotal nature. Now the Sacrifice of the Cross is the principle of all merit. Through it Christ merited all grace and reconciled man to God by making satisfaction for all sin. This he did according to strict justice, since all His actions were the actions of a Divine Person. Mary in co-operating with Christ also merited all graces and made satisfaction for all sins, not indeed according to strict justice, but with a merit founded upon her rights as the creature most loved by God.

The Mass does not merit grace but applies that which has already been merited by Christ and Mary. Thus, while Mary is a principle of grace, that is, one from whom grace comes—a principle, of course, always sub-ordinated to her Divine Son—the priests of the New Law are instruments for the distribution of grace.

MOTHER OF DIVINE GRACE

Having seen something of Mary's part in the Sacrifice of the Cross, we may now consider her dignity as the Mediatrix of all graces. Our Lord is, of course, our universal Mediator with the Father. St. Paul says, "There is . . . one mediator of God and man, the Man Christ Jesus, Who gave Himself a redemption for all" (I Tim., II, 5-6). He it is Who reconciled man and God by His death on the Cross, and Who merited for mankind all graces. In heaven before the throne of the Father, He is "always living to make intercession for us" (Heb. VII, 25). All graces come through the instrumentality of His Sacred Humanity and in His Name the Church prays for all things. But the mediation of Jesus does not exclude the possibility of other mediators subordinate to Him. Thus the priests of the New Law are mediators who, acting as instruments of the High Priest, dispense His grace by means of the Sacraments. This is the second part of the priestly office—to bring grace to men.

Mary too is a mediatrix. By her very position as Mother of God she would have a right to this title, for she is thus truly constituted an intermediary between God and man. "She is certainly far below God and Christ, because she is a creature, but she is elevated far above all men by the grace of the divine maternity 'which made her approach even to the frontiers of the divinity' and by the fullness of grace, received at the instant of her Immaculate Conception, a fullness which did not cease to grow up to the moment of her death."⁸ We have seen also that through her co-operation in the work of

⁸ Garrigou-Lagrange: *Les Trois Ages de la Vie Interieure*, I., p. 159.

redemption Mary merited with Christ all grace and made satisfaction for all sins. She is certainly mediatrix then in the order of acquisition, but she is also mediatrix in the order of application. Thus, just as Jesus interceding for us with the Father obtains all graces and distributes them to us, so in a manner subordinate to Him does Mary obtain and distribute all grace.

Her mediation is not absolutely necessary, for God could have distributed graces to men without her intercession, just as He could have become incarnate without her consent; but such was not His Divine Will, and there is indeed a beautiful parallel in this: as Jesus came to us through Mary, so also we must go to Him through Mary, and through her mediation obtain all graces and favors. As Pope Leo XIII has worded it:

. . . by the will of God, Mary is the intermediary through whom is distributed unto us the immense treasure of mercies gathered by God; for mercy and truth came by Jesus Christ. Thus as no man goeth to the Father but by the Son, so no man goeth to Christ but by His Mother.⁹

Mary exercises this office of Mediatrix by intercession, obtaining all graces in union with Our Lord from the Father. Her intercession is both implicit and explicit. Mary is for all eternity the Mother of God and Co-Redemptrix. Thus, she need only represent to the Father the dignity of her divine maternity and the worth of her merits to obtain all graces from Him, just as Jesus intercedes by showing the Father His now glorious wounds. But both Jesus and Mary also intercede for us by making actual formal petitions to the Father.

The saints, of course, also intercede by their prayers, but between their intercession and that of Mary there are important differences. Mary, through her part in the Redemption, has merited all graces and made satisfaction for all sins. She is in this subordinated only to Christ, her merits depending upon His. The saints did not co-operate in the Redemption. Their merits and satisfaction are not, therefore, universal but particular, and depend upon the merits and satisfaction of both Christ and Mary. Mary, because she is Mother of God and Co-Redemptrix, intercedes by virtue of the office given her by God, and not by reason of any special deputation given her in particular cases. Mary's mediation is omnipotent, not in the sense that she could act contrary to the absolute Will of

⁹ *Octobri mense* AAS 24 (1891) 196 sq. Denz. 1940a.

God, but in the sense that according to the present disposition of Providence, there is nothing which she cannot obtain by her prayers. Her mediation is universal in extension. She intercedes for all men. The saints are permitted to see in the Beatific Vision those things on earth which pertain to them. Mary, however, because she is the Mother of Christ the King, is Queen of the Universe, and in giving birth to the Redeemer, she became also the adoptive spiritual mother of all those whom He died to redeem. She sees therefore the needs of all and exercises her mediation upon each and every one. Her mediation is also universal in that it extends not only to all men, but to all grace. There is no grace which does not, so to speak, pass through the hands of Mary.

We see then, the part played by Mary in this second priestly function—the dispensing of grace. She is a universal cause of grace, while the priests of the Church are particular causes. She does not, it is true, administer the Sacraments, as do the priests, but rather she with Christ has merited the graces conferred by the Sacraments as well as all other graces which come to us. It is true that the Sacraments are of themselves causes of grace, without any other cause intervening; yet they are not entirely independent of Mary, for she, by her prayers obtains for us the administration of the Sacraments and disposes us to receive them fruitfully.

SEAT OF WISDOM

In addition to being a dispenser of grace, the priest also brings to men the knowledge of divine things. This office Our Lord, the great High Priest, fulfilled in the most perfect manner. The knowledge of the things of God comes to us primarily through revelation, whereby we are permitted some glimpse into the very knowledge proper to God Himself. The center of all revelation is Our Lord. All the revelations of the Old Law were ordained to the mystery of His coming. All the revelations of the New Law were made either by Him or by the Holy Spirit Who was to teach the Apostles all things whatsoever Our Lord had said to them (Jn. XIV. 26). Jesus then is the Teacher Who has brought us the knowledge of the things of God.

The priests of His Church also participate, by reason of their priesthood, in this teaching mission. The function of teaching is properly reserved to the bishop who possess the fullness of the priesthood; but by virtue of delegation from him, it is shared also by the priests who are to instruct the faithful in the things necessary for salvation.

Can we discover in Mary also a participation in this teaching office? If we exclude her *Magnificat*, the words of Mary which have been preserved for us number scarcely more than fifty. As a mother she did not even exercise the teaching office toward her Son, since it was not fitting that He should learn from other men.¹⁰

Yet Mary truly plays a part in bringing the knowledge of divine things to us. Students of the Scriptures see in the opening chapters of St. Luke's Gospel the words of Mary herself, so that the account of the Incarnation and the Nativity come to us from her own lips. However, Mary's claim to a part in bringing us sacred truths is even more basic than this. Once again, we will discover that it is founded upon her Divine Maternity, for as Dr. De Koninck has recently shown, Mary's office as the Mother of God justifies our attributing to her the title of Wisdom itself.¹¹ "She is," says Cornelius a Lapide, "the Mother of eternal Wisdom incarnate in her. Just as her Son is Wisdom begotten and incarnate, so is she the wisdom which begot Him and gave Him flesh."¹²

Mary is then a principle in the order of our knowledge of divine things, and just as the eternal Wisdom, which is the Son of God, became incarnate and came to us through her, so also does our knowledge of the things of God come through her. It is not without cause, then, that she is called the Queen of Apostles and Queen of Evangelists, and that the Church says of her: "Thou alone hast destroyed all heresies throughout the whole world."

Mary's place in the bringing of divine truths to us is further clearly seen when we remember that assent to these truths is possible only through the gift of Faith, and that this, like all graces, passes through the hands of Mary.

MOTHER OF PRIESTS

We have seen then, the relation of Mary to Jesus the High Priest and to the priests of His Church. Mary is not a priest. She does not have the sacerdotal character conferred by Holy Orders. She cannot offer the Sacrifice of the Mass nor administer the Sacraments. Yet we shall not conclude from this that Mary is in any way inferior to the priest. Rather let us say with Father Merkelbach:

¹⁰ *Summa Theologica*, III, p. 12, a. 3.

¹¹ *Ego Sapientia*, Ch. I-V.

¹² *In Ecclesiasticum CXXIV*, Vers. 1 & 2; T. LX, p. 617b. Cited in De-Koninck, *op. cit.* p. 30.

... the Divine Maternity surpasses all other graces and dignities, offices and privileges: even that of the priesthood. For: a) the priest is merely the instrumental cause which places Christ in the sacramental state, i.e., makes the Body and Blood of the Saviour to be present under the appearances (of bread and wine); but far more eminent than this, Mary is a principal cause, generating the very Body and Blood of Christ and giving them their human existence; b) the priest, ministerially, as minister of Christ, once again offers the representation and renewal of the Sacrifice of the Cross: but far more eminently, Mary proximately co-operated in the very Sacrifice of the Cross, and by her consent to the Incarnation, gave (us) Christ, the High Priest of the New Law; wherefore, the whole priesthood of the New Law, as a participation of the priesthood of Christ, depends on Christ and on Mary as on a source and origin.¹³

Mary is, then, truly the Mother of priests, and they hold their priesthood from her.

¹³ *op. cit.* p. 71, no. 30.