

GRACE OF EASTER MORN—BAPTISM THROUGH MARY

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AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE.”: on a pathway to Bethany, Our Divine Lord, toward the end of His public life, spoke these encouraging words to one of His most intimate friends, Martha. In expressing this profound truth, Christ laid the foundation for our hope in His resurrection.

“I am the Immaculate Conception”: in a deserted grotto in southern France, more than eighteen centuries later, Our Blessed Lady uttered these sublime words to the child-messenger of her predilection, Bernadette Soubirous. Through this peasant-girl her heavenly message has spread to all of Mary’s children, a source of consolation and encouragement.

These two scenes afford us a glimpse into the divine plot of our Redemption, into the drama of our sanctification. For in each scene the principal character establishes a personal relationship to us. Christ, en route to the site of His miraculous raising of Lazarus, consolingly reminds his sister, Martha, that He is the life of our soul and the sole source of our hopes for an eternal resurrection on the last day. Mary, on the other hand, in her apparition at Lourdes, reveals herself to Bernadette as our special Co-redemptrix and Mediatrix of the graces won for us by Her Son. We must, however, look behind and beyond these scenes to appreciate just how the grace of our baptism to life eternal flows from Jesus through Mary.

I.—CHRIST, OUR RISEN SAVIOR

The first place one turns to find out about an event in the life of Our Divine Lord is the Gospel narrative. This is especially true of the story of His Passion, Death, and Resurrection; for the evangelists go into great detail recounting the climax of Christ’s life. According to the design of the Holy Ghost, each one tells the story in his own way—one filling little gaps left by another. The result is a tightly-woven account of a drama which began in the Upper Chamber of a house in Jerusalem, on the eve of the Pasch,

when Jesus addressed the Twelve: "With desire I have desired to eat this Pasch with you, before I suffer," and which ended in the very same room, three days later, when Jesus greeted eleven of these men with: "Peace be to you. It is I; fear not."

Between the first and second meeting Our Divine Lord underwent unimaginable physical and spiritual torture. No human has suffered or will ever suffer as He. He was reviled by His own people, mocked by the Roman soldiers, forsaken by his closest friends, and denied by the chief of the Apostles. He was nailed three hours on a cross, rejected by earth and seemingly cut off from heaven. Finally, He gave up his soul in the sleep of death.

In contrast to these terrible occurrences are others, terrible in another sense. For after two nights and a day in the tomb, the Son of God rose glorious on Easter morn, the event heralded by an earthquake and by assisting angels. All this is recorded plainly in the pages of Holy Writ.

But the Bible in the mouth of the Church tells us much more. The living, teaching, and praying Church places the Gospel story side by side with the epistles of St. Paul, which illumine it. In this way she expounds the mysteries of our redemption, unfolding the true significance of the facts of Christ's life. In presenting the mystery of the Resurrection, she goes back to its prelude, the Crucifixion. Indeed, she goes back even further—to the office of Jesus Christ in the plan of God for man's redemption. For the Crucifixion and the Resurrection are one in their relation to this office. The name *Jesus* means *Saviour*, and is witness to the fact that His vocation in this world was to *save* it from sin. In the last and most important phase of His life, His battle with sin, which resulted from this calling of *Saviour*, obscured every other consideration—so much so that St. Paul could say, on the one hand, that Christ on the cross: "became sin" for us, and on the other, that His sacrifice cancelled the debt mankind owed to God because of sin. In a word, sin caused Christ's death, even though He suffered it with the greatest possible freedom, and sin put the seal on His tomb.

That mankind actually was liberated from its enemy, sin, was not apparent at all until Easter morn. The passion and death of Our Lord appeared to be a decisive defeat—the triumph of hell itself! But the true story was told by the massive rock rolled to one side of the entrance of the empty tomb and the linen wrappings folded and laid aside neatly in the interior.

When, therefore, the elements are collected—the events and

their causes—the picture is clear! Sin dealt a death-blow to the Son of Man. At this juncture, when Life Himself seemed not able to stir, the resurrection inserted itself and a new era of history was born, an unending era. This St. Paul sums up in a single verse of his epistle to the Romans, a passage adopted by the Church for use in the liturgy of the feast of the Resurrection: "For in that he died to sin, he died once; but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God" (Rom. 6, 9-10). The death of Christ is an event of time; His life to God is unlimited, for it is measured by eternity. The morning of Easter having begun, it continues "*per omnia saecula saeculorum.*"

In His Resurrection, as in all His other acts, Christ does not cut Himself off from the men He came to save. Together with them He forms a Mystical Body, and what takes place in the Head flows down into the members. Those who are thus joined to Christ must take part in His Resurrection, too. This is a favorite theme of St. Paul. To the Romans, again, he exclaims: "If we have been planted *together* in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection" (Rom. 6, 5). This *must* be so, for He is the Head and we are the members.

How does this likeness to the Risen Christ come about? St. Paul again has the answer, leaving little room for doubt. "We are buried together with Him by *Baptism* into death; that as Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6, 4)—and: "Buried with Him *in Baptism*, in whom also you are risen by the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him up from the dead" (Col. 2, 12). These texts show conclusively that the sacrament of Christian initiation, Baptism, is our claim to the holiness of the Resurrection, to the grace of Easter Morn.

At Easter, when the Church commemorates and contemplates this mystery, this particular truth is constantly in the fore. One of the most striking examples is the change made in one of the prayers of the most stable part of the Mass, the Canon. Shortly before the consecration of the bread and wine, the priest at the altar recites a prayer proper to the season which is but a confirmation of the thought of St. Paul: "We pray, O Lord, that thou wouldst graciously receive this oblation of our service, and that of thy whole family, which we offer also *for those whom thou hast deigned to regenerate by water and the Holy Ghost*, granting them remission of all their sins." This prayer is ancient, dating from a time when the sacrament of Baptism was administered to

a whole group of catechumens at Easter. After a long period of preparation they were judged ready to be buried with Christ, "that as Christ is risen from the dead," they, too, might "walk in newness of life." This is the meaning of the phrase which refers to regeneration or the taking up of life.

The recent reinstitution of the Easter vigil by Pope Pius XII is also witness to the intimate connection between the Resurrection and the sacrament of Baptism. The whole service preliminary to the offering of the Eucharistic Victim is centered around the blessing of the Baptismal font. The symbolism of Baptism is inseparable from the Resurrection; for it is at once death to sin and the beginning of life, the power of which comes directly from the limitless and unending life of the Risen Christ. Seen in the light of the teaching of St. Paul, who is but expounding the meaning of the gospel, and of the prayer of the Church, always a sure guide, Baptism is the fruit of Christ's resurrection. Its effects can be traced to the power which the Son of God manifested on that first Easter Morn.

II.—MARY, OUR CO-REDEMPTRIX AND MEDIATRIX

There is no one who is saved without Christ. The holiness of His Resurrection reaches every one in every age. The sanctifying power from that first glorious Easter morn illumined all who passed before, as well as those who followed. Like a light upon the mountaintop, it shines upon the whole world of time.

Yet there is some difference in its distribution. Not everyone has felt its healing rays. Those in hell have hidden themselves entirely from the Eternal Light which embraces forever the inhabitants of heaven. Wayfarers on earth are either journeying toward God or away from Him. Out of all these souls there stands one unique. Every other has at least this in common: that when it was united with the body at the moment of conception, it was stained with original sin. And so each needed to be cleansed by the merits of Christ: those under the Old Law in virtue of Christ's foreseen merits, and those in the New Dispensation by the saving waters of Baptism. One alone was saved in a most extraordinary manner by Christ, whose Resurrection sanctified her before any sin stained her soul. Mary alone, who said to Bernadette at Lourdes: "I am the Immaculate Conception," has from the first moment of her existence been resplendent with the light of that first Easter morn.

From all eternity, before time began, God the Father de-

creed that Mary would be the Mother of His Divine Son. The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity was to become man and take His flesh from a woman. It was not sufficient that such a woman be in the state of grace just at the moment the Word became Incarnate. No, her womb was to be made a most fitting habitation for God's Son. He who dwells in the infinitely holy bosom of His Father, must be conceived in the most saintly woman ever created. God, therefore, made her His child in a very special way, by making her a saint from the first moment of her existence. The Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son to preserve her immaculate upon the very threshold of life; as He is sent to cleanse us in the waters of Baptism. The Holy Trinity dwelt in her from the beginning. Her sinless person, full of Christ's sanctifying grace, which He reaped upon rising, was worthy to have the Holy Spirit come upon her in the Incarnation. It was her sublime vocation to be intimately associated with Christ in all the mysteries of His life which merited special graces for us.

What makes Mary so closely connected with all the events of Christ's life, those happenings in time which have eternal consequences? We find the answer to this question in the words addressed to us by the Holy Father in his encyclical on the Marian Year: ". . . from this sublime office of the Mother of God seem to flow as it were from a most limpid hidden source, all the privileges and graces with which her soul and life were adorned in such extraordinary manner and measure. For as Aquinas correctly states: 'The Blessed Virgin because she is the Mother of God has a certain infinite dignity from infinite Good, which is God (I, 25, 6, ad 4).' And a distinguished writer develops and explains this in these words: 'The Blessed Virgin is the Mother of God; therefore, she is the *purest and most holy, so that under God a greater purity cannot be understood.*'"

It is her Divine Maternity, then, which is the *seed* in her garden of glories. No other human can enjoy a more intimate union with the Godhead. She is *truly* the Mother of God. The Divine Word has taken His flesh from her most chaste body; and just as no other mother says: "I am the mother of John's body," but "I am the mother of John," so Mary could very truly utter: "I am God's Mother." For Jesus Christ is a Divine Person in Whom are hypostatically united the human and divine natures. And, since the Father chose that He should be born in His human nature of a woman, that most privileged woman is the mother of the Person

Who assumed our humanity ; she is the Mother of God.

No other created person, then, could possibly enjoy a greater holiness than she who is in such immediate contact with Sanctity Itself. Mary reflects most perfectly the Divine Holiness.

Mary's Motherhood is also the *flower* in her garden of glories. She is the Mother of the "Whole Christ," of her Divine Son's Mystical Body. In giving birth to the Head, she also brought forth the members. As the "Mother of divine grace" she begets all those who shall share in the grace of Jesus Christ. On Calvary, Mary—unlike the painless birth at Bethlehem—was in labor that the Church be born. Christ Himself explicitly gave her to us as our Mother when, hanging upon the cross, He said to her : "Woman, behold thy son," and to the beloved disciple, John : "Behold thy Mother." Mary, then, was worthy to be co-redemptrix in our salvation ; for, as Our Saviour's Mother and the Mother of His Mystical Body, she helped beget the Church founded by Jesus Christ.

We have now caught a glimpse of the beautiful plan of Divine Wisdom. That Mary the Mother of Christ, should be a most fitting dwelling-place for the Word Incarnate, she was *preserved* free from original sin by the foreseen merits of Christ—whereas we are *cleansed* in Baptism by rising with Christ from the death of original sin to life with God. This sublime life of sanctity in Christ reaches its fullest growth in Mary. Thus, under Christ, she becomes the model of *our* life in Him.

As the life of the Risen Christ is endless, her Motherhood of the Whole Christ is also without end. The Father's decree that she be the Mother of Christ is irrevocable. It is His holy Will that she, as Mediatrix of all graces, continue to bring forth other Christs, namely, those Christians who live by the grace of her Divine Son. Every grace which we receive, and that of Baptism is no exception, comes to us through her. She is still intimately associated with Christ in our sanctification.

Here is set before us a picture of the beautiful scheme of mankind's salvation. In the center of the picture can be seen Christ coming forth victoriously from the tomb, and, as it were, immediately behind Him the first fruits of His victory, Mary, His Mother, the Immaculate Conception. Following her from the tomb is a long line of souls all sharing in the newly-won life of sanctifying grace. All the holiness that radiates from Christ's glorified body illumines her virginal body and is diffused among all the joyful persons in the background. . . . Here Mary, under

Christ, is the model of our holiness, and as a loving Mother she is ever vigilant for our needs.

Christ's solemn pronouncement to Martha, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," was an announcement that His Person is the model of our sanctity, the source of our participation in God's life. We look at Him to see what Our Father in heaven expects us to be. We approach Him to reap the grace which brings about this Christ-likeness.

The gentle, confidential, but firm assertion of the Virgin at Lourdes, "I am the Immaculate Conception," shows the role Mary plays in the achievement of our sanctity. God has placed her in full view of all, the perfect accomplishment of what was in His Mind for the Mother of His Son. She is held up as the unparalleled creaturely model of Christ-likeness, both in the degree of Her sanctity and in the ever-increasing intensity of Her union with God.

We have risen with Christ in Baptism. We have been conceived immaculate, too, in the bosom of the Church—and that through the mediation of the Mother of all the faithful. God has, also, decreed our growth in holiness; His design for us is clear. For it is that we daily become more like His Risen Son—until finally we reach the "measure of the age of the fullness of Christ," in company with Christ, the Perfect Man, and Mary, the Perfect Woman.