

MOTHER OF GOD

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CHRISTMAS is a time for giving gifts. This custom corresponds perfectly with the spirit of the feast, for Christmas is essentially the commemoration of God's gift to mankind of His only-begotten Son. God's gifts to man are many and various. To all He gives life, a soul and body to serve Him, a mind to know His law and His truth, a will to love Him. To all He offers—although some unfortunately do not accept—grace, a supernatural gift by which one shares something of the divine life. Some receive His benefits in greater abundance: the artistic insight of the poet, the intellectual acumen of the genius, the precision and clarity of the scientist, the heroic virtue of the saint, the overwhelming dignity and power of the priest. But to *one* human person, He gave such gifts, such dignity, that in comparison all others pale to insignificance. It was to Mary of Nazareth that He gave the privilege of being the Mother of God. A deeper understanding of this great Marian prerogative and its connection with her other privileges should increase our appreciation of and our devotion to her, and should deepen our love of her Child, for "the Child is not found except in the company of Mary His Mother."¹

WHY GOD INCARNATE?

The story of God's initial generosity to man in freely creating him and elevating him to a supernatural state is saddened by mankind's rejection, in the person of Adam, of God's gifts. This rejection on Adam's part of God's gifts lost for us, his heirs, our supernatural birthright, and plunged humanity into the service of Satan. The human race became, in the strong words of St. Augustine, a "mass of perdition."²

God could, without the slightest injustice, have left man in this sad state, but He mercifully decreed his redemption. How was this to be accomplished? Many ways immediately present themselves, but the All-Wise God chose the most fitting—a way so fitting that mankind cannot even imagine one more suitable. God decreed that His

¹ Pope St. Pius X in his Encyclical Letter *Ad diem illam laetissimum* of Feb. 2, 1904.

² *De dono perseverantiae* 14, 35 ML 45, 1014.

Son was to *become man*, and by His passion and death free us from sin: *who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven.*³ In this way was there to be perfect satisfaction for the offense against the Infinite Majesty of God. By the incarnation of the Word, that is, the assumption of a human nature by the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, justice was to be fulfilled and a perfect victory over sin was to be achieved.

But, even from a descendant of Adam, it could have been done in some miraculous fashion, as Eve was formed from the rib of Adam. Divine Providence, however, chose a more fitting way to teach us God's love for us. Mankind fell to Satan through Eve: through the New Eve—Mary, man was to conquer Satan. Both sexes caused man's downfall, Adam's sin principally and essentially, Eve's in a subordinate and secondary way. Thus then in the all-wise plan of God, a woman would also share, though in a secondary and subordinate way, in man's redemption.

The power of God is evident in this miracle of miracles, for what could be more marvelous than that a woman should conceive and give birth to God? He Who gives being to all, is born of a creature; the handmaid of the Lord becomes Queen of the Angels.

These reasons show how fitting it is that Christ be born of Mary, for this birth shows forth God's love, power and wisdom. Still other reasons can be seen if we examine Christ's mission. By coming in the form of an infant, Christ, truly our brother, as it were compels our love. The thought of an Omnipotent Creator might cause us to tremble in fear and awe, but the sight of a child calls for our love.

Christ, through the Redemptive Incarnation, earns for us the right to say "Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6), for by grace we become the adopted sons of God. But by being born of Mary, He has given us a spiritual Mother as well. Through her, the gifts of God come to us. As Father McNabb puts it: "Graciously He gave us leave to call His Father our Father; and His Mother our Mother."⁴

WHAT DIVINE MOTHERHOOD MEANS

Certainly we can see many reasons why it was most suitable for Jesus to be born of the Blessed Virgin Mary.⁵ The question now

³ These words are taken from the Nicene Creed which is recited at Mass on Sundays and major feast days.

⁴ *Mary of Nazareth*, by Vincent McNabb, O.P., P. J. Kenedy & Sons, New York, p. 42. These words of Father McNabb echo Pope Leo XIII in his Encyclical *Magnae Dei Matris* of Sept. 8, 1892: "If we owe to Christ that He gave us in some way the right, proper to Him, of calling and having God as a Father; likewise we owe to Him the right, most lovingly given, of calling and having Mary as a Mother."

arises: what do we mean when we say that Mary is the Mother of God? In order to arrive at a more perfect understanding, in so far as we *can* understand this mystery, two points should be clarified.

First of all, we should refresh in our minds certain truths about the Incarnation—truths about Jesus, the Son of Mary. Secondly, we must arrive at some notion of what we mean by maternity.

The Word, the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, without losing or changing in any way His divine nature, at a particular point in time assumed a human nature in a personal union. Many truths are involved in this doctrine of the Incarnation. Perhaps it would help to list some of them separately.

- 1) The Word or the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, is, like the Father and the Holy Spirit, eternal and omnipotent.
- 2) The Person of the Word, like His Divine Nature (with which He is identified) is all-perfect; therefore He does not change.
- 3) Individual human nature, complete and perfect, was united to the Word.
- 4) This union, called the Hypostatic (or personal) Union, is not some mere accidental union, but a substantial union in the Person of Christ.
- 5) There are two natures in Christ, human and divine. These natures are not mixed or confused, but remain distinct.
- 6) There is only one Person in Christ, the Divine Person—the Word.

These last two points are of especial importance. Jesus is said

⁵ The fact that Mary is the Mother of God is so much a part of the Christian tradition that it has not seemed necessary to advance proofs. The truth of the doctrine of this divine maternity is revealed in Sacred Scripture, not expressly, but in equivalent terms (cf. *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 35, art. 4 ad 1); for Mary is called the Mother of Christ or the Mother of Jesus in many places (Mt. 2:11; Luke 2:37, 48; Jn. 2:1; Acts 1:14) and the fact that Jesus is true God is evident from practically every page of the New Testament (cf. Mt. 6:9-32; 10:33; Luke 10:22; Rom. 9:5, etc.).

The doctrine of the divine maternity is found in the early creeds and in the constant and universal teaching of the Fathers of the Church, and was dogmatically defined at the Council of Ephesus, 431. This same truth is found in the teaching of several other General Councils of the Church and in frequent Papal documents. Pope Pius XI explicitly considered this doctrine in his encyclical *Lux veritatis* of Dec. 25, 1931.

to be true God and true man, because He has both a divine and a human nature. But He is only one person—a divine person. A person, to give the most fundamental notion, is an intellectual, individual being to which qualities are attributed. In other words, we say (or predicate) things of this subject. Thus we say John (the person) is white. We don't say that the human nature which John has is white. So also we say: Christ is divine; Christ walked to Jerusalem. The person about whom we speak is one—and He is divine.

With regard to the second point to be clarified, we see that for maternity three things are required:

- 1) There must be an origin of one living being from another living being; and so in this case Christ takes His human nature and human life from His living human mother, Mary.
- 2) The one born must be from a conjoined principle, that is, he must be of the proper substance of the one giving birth. Thus Mary gave the matter from which was formed the body of Jesus, just as other mothers give the substance of their bodies to their children, and dispose this matter for conception and birth.
- 3) This process must be according to a similitude or likeness in nature. In the animal kingdom we don't see elephants giving birth to horses, nor eagles to sparrows. On the human level the mother and the son must be of the same nature: both Mary and Jesus have perfect human natures.

One further point should be discussed with regard to maternity. When maternity is considered in itself, we see that it is a relationship of the person who is the mother to her offspring—a certain accidental modification of the mother since it doesn't change her essence. This relationship is a reference to her child and is found in the mother by reason of her conceiving and giving birth to this child. The term or object of the relation, the one to whom the mother is ordered, is, of course, the child. Note, however, that it is the person and not the nature that is the term of this relation. As Bishop Sheen phrases it: Natures do not have mothers, only people do.

With these truths grasped, one is led immediately to a further truth: Mary is the mother of God, for the Person born to her is divine. Mary, of course, cannot be said to be the mother of the Divine Nature, but as St. Thomas observes: "The Blessed Virgin is called the Mother of God, not as though she were the mother of

the Divine Nature, but because she is the mother according to His humanity of a person having Divine and human natures."⁶

The most common difficulty, and one intimately connected with this previous point, is how Mary can be called the Mother of God, since she obviously is not the cause of the Divine Nature. But the difficulty loses its force when we realize that in other generations, the mother is not the cause of all the perfections of the child. In fact, the most noble part of its nature—its spiritual soul—is not caused by the parents, but rather is directly created by God. Thus the mother of Paul or John does not cause the soul, but merely disposes the matter. Yet no one would dispute her claim to be the mother of the person generated.

Fundamentally the reason that we can say this is that whatever belongs to a nature is said of the person who has that nature. For, as we said above, it is the *person* of whom we predicate something. It is the *person* who *is* and *acts*. A man on trial for murder would never escape by saying that it was his hand which committed the crime, and therefore only the hand should be punished. Rather it is the man, who acts through or by agency of his hand, to whom the action is attributable. My body does not get tired; I get tired. My arm is not struck; but, more precisely, I am struck on the arm. To act or to receive action belongs to the person. Thus to be conceived and born belongs to the person who has the nature which comes to be. Christ's human nature was formed by Mary. Since the person who received this nature from her is divine, Mary truly and properly is the Mother of God.

A UNIQUE TREASURE

The theologians and the saints seem to vie with one another in singing the praises of Mary's motherhood. St. Bonaventure, a Doctor of the Church, expresses very powerfully how great a dignity belongs to God's mother: "God can make a greater world, but he cannot make a greater mother than the mother of God."⁷ St. Thomas expresses the same idea with even more clarity: "The Blessed Virgin from the fact that she is the Mother of God, has a certain infinite dignity, from the infinite good which is God."⁸ This expression has become a classic utterance, for more than once it has been quoted with approval by Popes.⁹ Notice that Saint Thomas says that the

⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q. 35, art. 4, ad 2.

⁷ *Specul.*, chapter viii.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, Ia, q. 25, art. 6, ad 4.

⁹ Cf. Pope Pius XII, Encyclical *Fulgens corona* of Sept. 8, 1953, and Pope Pius XI, Encyclical *Lux veritatis* of Dec. 25, 1931.

Blessed Virgin's dignity is a "certain infinite dignity"; that is, it is infinite in a relative sense or in a qualified way. She is not in herself infinite (for a creature as such is limited), but her dignity is *relative*, that is in relation to her Son, Who is Infinite. As Saint Thomas says in another place: "The kind [or nature] of relation depends on the end or term: but the being of it depends on the subject."¹⁰ Applying these words of St. Thomas to what we said above; i.e., that maternity is a relation of the mother to the child, we see that the term of the relation determines its dignity. For example, it is more honorable to be the ruler of a large city than it is to be the ruler of a hamlet, because the term of the government is more noble. So also, since the person who is the object or term of Mary's maternity is a Divine Person, Infinite and Omnipotent, Mary has an infinite dignity from the term of this relation. Considered in herself, Mary is, of course, a creature; and every creature, as such, is limited and finite—"the being of the relation depends on the subject."

Mary, then, surpasses every other human person in dignity because of the divinity of her Son. Cardinal Cajetan, O.P., former Master General and the great 16th century commentator on the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas, so realized the greatness of this prerogative, that he wrote that the Blessed Mother "attains to the borders of Divinity by her proper operation, since she conceived . . . [and] begot . . . God."¹¹

Such is her dignity as mother of God, that this prerogative is the root and basis of her other privileges. As our present Holy Father writes: "From this sublime office of the Mother of God seem to flow, as it were from a most limpid source, all the privileges and graces with which her soul and her life were adorned in such extraordinary manner and measure."¹²

SPOTLESS VIRGIN, FULL OF GRACE

Space will not permit a complete or exhaustive treatment of Mary's prerogatives, but we will try to enumerate some of these in as much as they flow from, accompany, or are ordered to the divine maternity. The Angel Gabriel saluted Mary at the Annunciation as "Full of Grace" (St. Luke 1:28). Saint Thomas explains this salutation when he writes: "The closer someone approaches to a principle in some genus, the more does he share the effect of that principle. . . . But Christ is the principle of grace. . . . The Blessed Virgin

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, IIIa, q. 2, art. 7, ad 2.

¹¹ *In Summam Theologiae*, IIam IIae, q. 103, art. 4.

¹² *Encyclical Fulgens corona*.

Mary, however, is closest to Christ according to humanity: *because He took human nature from her*. And therefore she ought to obtain from Christ a greater plenitude of grace than others."¹³

Note that here the Angelic Doctor stresses three things:

- 1) the degree of Mary's grace: "greater plenitude than the others"; that is, more than any other created person,
- 2) the source of this high degree of grace: closeness to Christ,
- 3) the specific reason for this closeness to Christ: "because He took human nature from her."

Mary, then, is full of grace, surpassing all human persons by her degree of God's favor. To look, as it were, at the other side of the coin, we see that Mary has no stain of sin. Mortal sin and sanctifying grace are opposites: one cannot tolerate the presence of the other. Of course, in Mary there was no sin of any kind—neither mortal nor venial. She never committed any actual sin, and "in the first instant of her conception was kept entirely from the stain of original sin by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in view of the foreseen merits of Christ Jesus, the Saviour of mankind."¹⁴ This privilege of the Immaculate Conception was thus defined by Pope Pius IX and in the very same document, he shows the connection of Mary's total sinlessness with the divine maternity.¹⁵

From the fact that Mary was predestined to be God's mother, her virginity was perpetually preserved. She was kept a virgin *before the birth* of Christ that her body would be a fitting place in which God would dwell substantially in the months between His conception and birth. Her virginity was preserved *in the birth* of Christ, for He who came to restore human nature to its pristine dignity would not take away any of the integral perfection of His mother. It would not be fitting for the one who gave birth to God to bear other children, so Mary's virginity was preserved *after the birth* of Christ.

These three privileges of Mary all are radicated in the divine maternity, even though some of them may have preceded it in time.

CO-REDEMPTRIX AND MEDIATRIX

Just as Mary's dignity was relative to her son, so, too, is her

¹³ *Op. cit.*, IIIa, q. 27, art. 5.

¹⁴ Apostolic Letter *Ineffabilis Deus* of Dec. 8, 1954.

¹⁵ This is found in the early part of the Apostolic Letter, in nn. 1, 2 in the edition prepared by Thomas J. M. Burke, S.J., *Mary and the Popes*, America Press, New York, 1954.

rôle in man's redemption a relative one. Christ alone is the perfect and sufficient mediator between God and man: "There is One God and One Mediator of God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, Who gave Himself a redemption for all" (I Tim. 2:5). Mary's mediation is not principal, but secondary and subordinate. It is not absolutely necessary, but only because it was positively ordered by the free will of God. Christ does, in fact, will to associate Mary with this redemptive action. Her first claim to the title of Mediatrix is found in the fact that her child is a Redeemer: *who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven.*

When we examine Christ's redemptive work, we see that it is essentially His offering of Himself to the Father as a perfect sacrifice. For Mary to share in this redemptive work, she had to be united to Christ giving Himself. Her power to offer her Son, in union with His immolation of Himself, was rooted in her maternal rights. In perfect conformity to the Divine Will, she gave up those rights, echoing in her heart the generosity of her Son. When she stood by the cross on Calvary, her voluntary surrender of her Son, reaffirmed the *fiat* of the Annunciation. When she said "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to thy word." (Luke 1:38), to the Angel Gabriel at Nazareth, she gave her consent to become the Mother of God with all the joys and *sorrows* that it implied. Her Son was to be a Saviour (Luke 1:31) and as she well knew from the Old Testament, a "Suffering Servant" (Isaias, cc. 42, 49, 52, 53). Mary so united herself to the work of her Son in the distribution of graces, that she is rightly called Co-Redemptrix, and because of this, her corresponding rôle in the distribution of graces warrants also the title of Mediatrix.

QUEEN ASSUMED

Fathers and Doctors of the Church, Pontiffs, theologians, and saints join in affirming Mary to be Queen of men and angels. This truth is part of the very fabric of Christian piety as we see from the many invocations of the litany of the Blessed Virgin and the familiar "Regina Coeli" of Easter time. The "Hail Holy Queen" is perhaps the most common prayer that gives this title to Mary, for it is in daily use after "the great prayer of the Church—the Mass, and the great prayer in the home—the Rosary."¹⁶

¹⁶ Archbishop A. G. Cicognani, Apostolic Delegate to the United States in a sermon on November 16, 1954, entitled *Queenship of Mary*.

From an analysis of the notion of queenship, we can see both the clear right that Mary has to the title Queen, and the connection of her queenship with the divine maternity. First of all, we should understand that Mary's regal power, regardless of its source and nature, is *relative* and *subordinate*. She is Queen only in relation to and in dependence upon Christ. He "is the Blessed and *only* Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (I Tim. 6:15). Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, would be the first to proclaim her dependence and subordination to Christ, and, in fact, this subordinate rôle is implied in the very notion of queenship.¹⁷ Furthermore, a queen is not merely a minister or delegate of the king. Her power, though subordinate to that of her Son, is unique. Her authority differs, not merely in degree, but also in kind from that of other ministers of Christ.

We have seen some of the negative aspects of Queenship; what then are some of the positive features? A queen, rather than taking the place of a king, takes her place *beside* the king. She is a woman who is uniquely associated with the sovereign. Her rôle is womanly, and it is unique, that is, it belongs only to one who is joined to the king by an intimate and irrevocable bond. In human affairs, the queen is the spouse of the king. This notion, which is fulfilled in a more noble way in Mary's relation to Christ, needs further examination.

First of all, we should determine how, or by what title, Christ is King. Then, the question of Mary's union with Christ must be considered. In his Encyclical instituting the feast of Christ the King, Pope Pius XI indicated the two-fold right that Christ has to the title King. The first and fundamental right is one of natural birthright, for the man Christ is, in Person, God. By virtue of the Hypostatic Union of the humanity to the Second Person of the Trinity, Christ, as Man, has dominion over all creatures. The Pope continues, indicating a second right to this Kingship: "Not only has He this natural right, but He has an acquired right as well, for He is our Redeemer and has purchased His subjects with His Blood."¹⁸ Mary, in a lesser but proportionate way, shares in this regality for two reasons. First of all, she is the Mother of the King. This maternal office links her in an intimate, irrevocable, and womanly way to her Son, Christ the King. Cer-

¹⁷ Obviously we do not speak of the case where the queen rules by reason of the absence of a king, as, for example, in present day England.

¹⁸ Encyclical *Quas primas* of December 11, 1925.

tainly a loving Son would not deny to His mother a share in His rule. This right to the title of Queen corresponds to Christ's natural or fundamental right to be King, for Mary was predestined to the dignity of the Mother of God.

Mary's second title to Queenship, a title that corresponds to Christ's acquired right, comes from her close union with the redemptive work of her Son. She is the Mother of the Redeemer and is most closely linked with His passion and death. Her co-redemptive rôle, however, is closely united to her maternity, as was said above. Thus both of Mary's claims to the Queenship of the Universe correspond to and are subordinate to her Son's titles to Kingship.

It is certain, then, that Mary is Queen because she is the Mother of God. Pope Pius XII explicitly teaches this and quotes with approval the words of St. John Damascene: "When she became Mother of the Creator, she truly became Queen of every creature."¹⁹

Although Mary's title to Queenship is rooted in the divine maternity, the full exercise of her royal powers were deferred until, by a special privilege, she was assumed, body and soul, into heaven. This doctrine, so dear to Catholic hearts, was defined in our own day. Its connection with the divine maternity can be shown in two ways. First of all, the Assumption is intimately linked with the privilege of the Immaculate Conception, which, as we have already indicated, was bestowed on Mary that she might be a worthy mother of God. Since she was exempt from the general law of original sin, her body is also exempt from the general law of corruption of the grave, and she does not have to wait until the end of time for her body to share in the glory of eternal life.

A second reason can be given which shows the immediate connection of the Assumption with the divine maternity. Pope Pius XII in discussing the arguments advanced by scholastic theologians in favor of the Assumption writes: "Their first argument was always drawn from the filial love of Jesus Christ for His Mother, by which He Himself willed her assumption into heaven. They rest the strength of their proofs on the incom-

¹⁹ Pope Pius XII writes: "According to ancient tradition and the sacred liturgy the main principle on which the royal dignity of Mary rests is without doubt her Divine Motherhood." Encyclical *Ad Caeli Reginam* of October 11, 1954. The words of St. John Damascene are taken from *De fide orthodoxa*, I. IV, c. 14.

parable dignity of the divine motherhood and all the other privileges which flow from it."²⁰

MOTHER OF MEN

It is obvious that the Blessed Virgin Mary is not our mother in the same way as she is the Mother of Jesus, but these two titles of motherhood are closely linked. Mary was the mother of Jesus by giving Him a human nature. We do not receive our human nature or human life from her, but we are her adopted sons receiving from her in some sense our supernatural life. We should not think of this adoption as a merely external, juridical adoption (as it is in human affairs); for she truly gives birth to us, since she is, in some sense, a true cause of our supernatural life. What, then, is the basis of Mary's spiritual maternity?

The theologians tell us that Mary conceived us, in consenting to be the Mother of the Redeemer. Here again the divine motherhood is the basis of the privilege. But what does this consent involve? Christ, as we know, came into the world to give supernatural and divine life to us. He came as the head of the human race (Eph. 4:5), the first born of many brethren (Rom. 8:29). Mary, with a heart inflamed with love toward us, in the very fact that she consented to become the mother of Christ, consented also to communicate supernatural life and grace to us.

The Incarnation was a kind of spiritual marriage between the Word of God and the human race, regenerating and elevating human nature to a divine life. Mary, at the Annunciation, the time when she conceived Christ, gave consent, in the name of the whole human race to these spiritual nuptials.²¹ Christ is the head of the human race, which is His mystical body (Rom 12:5). In conceiving Christ, she conceived also His entire body—physical and mystical.

Mary, then, conceived us at Nazareth, but she gave birth to the redeemed human race at Calvary by her rôle in the redemption. She brought forth Christ without sorrow or pain; at our spiritual birth she could say: "Attend and see if there be any sorrow like to my sorrow" (Lamentations 1:12). At Calvary too, the motherhood of all men essentially begun at Nazareth was proclaimed by her Son from the Cross: "Woman, behold thy son: Behold thy mother" (John 19:26, 27). Since our birthday on

²⁰ Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* of November 1, 1950, dogmatically defining the doctrine of the Assumption.

²¹ Cf. *Summam Theologiae*, IIIa, q. 30, art. 1.

Calvary, she has shown herself a true mother by interceding for us, and caring for us with a maternal heart.

This prerogative of spiritual maternity is, it seems, the most "practical" gift as far as we are concerned. It gives us a great motive for love and trust, for she will love us maternally and will intercede for us with her Divine Son, Who shows Himself so generous to His mother. She became the Mother of the Redeemer, and since the Redemption is the greatest mercy that can be shown to mankind in his fallen state, Mary was predestined because of mercy. Her life is to *show mercy to man*. She will never fail in this work.

ANIMA CHRISTI

Make me a saint, Thou holy Soul of Christ
Save me, Thou sacred Body of Christ

Fill me to the brim, Thou precious Blood of Christ
Wash me clean, Thou purest Water from the Side of Christ

Heal me Thou Sweat so full of strength from the Face of Christ
Comfort me, Thou loving Passion of Christ.

O good Jesus, keep watch over me
Hide me within your wounds
Let me not depart from Thee
Defend me from the evil foe.

At the hour of my death do Thou call to me
Charge me to come to Thee, Place me next to Thee
So that with your Angels and Archangels I may praise Thee
Through an infinite age of ages.

Amen.

Translated from the *Libellus Precum* by Adrian M. Wade, O.P.