

## THE VIRGIN MOTHER

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The violent storms of error which for centuries have centered around the divinity and humanity of Christ have also spent their forces in vain efforts to dislodge Mary from her unique position as virginal Mother of God. It is necessary that they who attack Christ should also assail Mary. The divine maternity of Mary is so intimately connected with the attributes of Christ that to call into question either the divine or human nature of Jesus is to undermine her dignity. The title of Mother of God necessarily postulates on the part of her Divine Son two natures: Jesus must be true Man, else she were not a mother; He must be true God, else she were not the Mother of God. Now, since the divine maternity witnesses to both the Godhead and the Manhood of Christ, it is necessary that he who would deny the one or the other must divest Mary of her transcendent glory as Mother of God. On the other hand, he who assails the divine motherhood of Mary deprives Jesus of His glory as true God and true Man.

The early heretics, by directly attacking the divinity of Christ, undermined the dignity of Mary; but Nestorius aimed his perfidious assaults directly at Mary's divine maternity. When the Council of Ephesus met in 431 A. D. and Nestorius' heretical teachings were read, with one accord the assembled bishops uttered in righteous indignation and condemnation those famous words which ever since have reechoed, in some sense or other, in all the Councils and teachings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church: "Anathema to such impious teaching! Anathema to whoever holds such opinions! They are contrary to Sacred Scripture and to the tradition of the Fathers."<sup>1</sup>

Conscious of such anathemas and in the face of the constant teachings of theologians, who would dare to deny the maternity of Mary? Were, then, her enemies to be silenced? Would they acknowledge their error? No! Such is not the course of error. It strives with all its might, by its inborn tendency to fraud, to force its adversary to concede (it) at least something and thus deprive him of the glory of complete victory. It ever seeks to justify, at least a part of its contention. In her office as Mother of God they could not assail her. They had been driven from the

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<sup>1</sup> Darras, *Gen. History of Church*, Vol. I, p. 573.

field of their first position; but might they not yet retrieve the day? Could they not find a vantage-ground in the field of her prerogatives? Having weakened her position here, might they not cast a slur upon her excellent glory? What of her virginity? It is a necessary consequence of her divine maternity. If she is to stand in such an unique and intimate relation to God, who is purity itself, how could her soul be stained with the dross of earthly affections and desires? How can that which is of heaven heavenly dwell with that which is of the earth earthy? If they could but wound her by calling into question her perpetual virginity, what a victory would be theirs! Could they but say that she had forfeited that angelic virtue, that she had been unfaithful to her vow, what odium might they not attach to her name? Having laid her character open to scorn and derision in this respect, who would dare to lift up his voice in her praise. Here, then, was their field of victory.

But even here their progress was impeded by great obstacles. In the Gospel God had safely guarded this precious prerogative of Mary. From it, it was evident that she remained a virgin till after the birth of Christ.

But what of her after life? In the Gospel, to which their adversaries recurred for proof of her divine maternity and virginity, there was nothing said that might confirm the opinion of perpetual virginity. But, on the other hand—and they rejoiced in the fact—there were many texts that would seem to indicate that she had lost her exalted privilege, had broken her vow of virginity by begetting children of a human father. Who could deny their position? Did not the Scriptures furnish them many undeniable proofs? If their adversaries questioned their arguments, they might open at random the New Testament and convince them. There could be no mistake. They did not base their appeal upon the shifting sands of reason; their source was the infallible teaching of God recorded in the Gospel. Their opponents held the sacred texts as the infallible Word of God. Who, then, could gainsay their proofs without branding himself with the odium of heresy? Who would dare to mutilate those texts so as to read into them another meaning? As they flaunted these texts in the faces of Mary's defenders, they rejoiced that they had won the day and humbled their adversaries. They dreamt, too, of a final triumph when Mary would be pulled down from her lofty position and dragged in the dust at the wheels of their triumphal chariot.

But they "meditated vain things." For when the dissenting voice of heresy made itself heard in the Church of God, Saints and Doctors rose up to defend Mary. In the conflict, to which they had been forced by the heretics, the Doctors found themselves facing a crafty enemy. Although they realized that they were well grounded on the infallible rock of Peter and that their opponents had taken up their positions on the restless, shifting sands of error yet it was no easy task to overcome them. The matter of controversy was the meaning of certain texts of Scripture. Could one imagine a more difficult ground of controversy than that of the Sacred Scripture? Yet it was behind the seemingly insurmountable barrier of the Sacred Text that their enemies entrenched themselves. Their final appeal was to the Word of God, not in any strange sense, but in the clear, evident meaning of the words. Since therefore the difficulty between them centered around the meaning of certain texts which *prima facie* seemed to favor the opinion of the heretics, it was incumbent upon the Doctors to show their enemies that they erred in the interpretation of the verses in question.

Despite this difficulty, the Fathers rose to the occasion. They met the heretics on their own grounds. From analogous texts in the Bible itself they showed that the verses in question could not be used as arguments against Mary's perpetual virginity. The following texts, brought forth by the heretics, and even today cited by Protestants who deny Mary's virginity, were answered by St. Jerome, "the greatest Doctor raised up by the divine hand to interpret the Sacred Scriptures."<sup>2</sup> The first text is taken from Matthew i, 18, "before they came together." This verse St. Jerome shows cannot be used as proof against Mary's perpetual virginity. "From the phrase 'before they came together' it does not follow, he says, that they came together afterwards; Holy Scripture merely intimates what did not happen."<sup>3</sup> On the first point the Saint, writing against Helvidius, thus clearly argues *ad hominem*: "If I say: 'Helvidius died before he did penance for his sins,' does it follow that he did penance after his death?"<sup>4</sup> In regard to the other text, Matthew i, 25, "He knew her not till she brought forth her first-born son," St. Jerome shows the absurdity of concluding from this that Joseph had intercourse with Mary

<sup>2</sup> Thein, Rev. J., Eccles. Dictionary, p. 377.

<sup>3</sup> St. Jerome In Matt., I, 18.

<sup>4</sup> St. Jerome In Matt., I, 18 Sqq.

after the birth of Christ by citing analogous texts, as Ps. 109, 1, and Genesis viii, 6. Does it follow, he asks, that Christ will sit no longer at the right hand of God when His enemies are conquered? Or did the raven return to the ark after the waters had dried up? ...either does the term "first-born" always imply that other children were born of the same mother, for the name was often used in the Bible to denote a first child, whether other children followed or not. We find this epithet applied to Machir, who was the only son of Manasses.<sup>5</sup>

Not only does Scripture prove the opinion of the dissenters to be false, but tradition also is against them. The Fathers looked upon the denial of Mary's perpetual virginity as an insult to our Lord Himself. They called such an opinion "perfidious," "blasphemous," "sacrilegious," "impious," St. Ambrose exclaims: "Mary did not fail, the mistress of virginity did not fail; nor was it possible that she who bore God should be regarded as bearing a man."<sup>6</sup> St. Augustine says: "A virgin now and forever."<sup>7</sup> St. Jerome appeals to the early Fathers, to Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Irinaeus, Justin Martyr. Moreover, in the Apostles Creed, and the Nicene Creed, which were compiled long after Mary's death and hence prove the general belief of the early Church, she is called a virgin. Another proof is the canon of the Mass, doubtless composed in apostolic times, which calls Mary "ever Virgin!"

Had we not the unanimous teaching of the Councils and the Fathers, based upon Scripture and tradition, might we not prove the necessity of Mary's always remaining a virgin from reason? "There is a propriety," says Cardinal Gibbons, which suggests itself to every Christian in Mary's remaining a virgin after the birth of Jesus."<sup>8</sup> The learned Bishop Bull, of the Church of England, declares that the opposite opinion "cannot with decency be imagined" "The learned Grotius Calvin and other eminent Protestant writers hold the same view."<sup>9</sup>

And, finally, St. Thomas, the Prince of Theologians, perhaps the greatest mind that ever devoted itself to the defense of Mary's

<sup>5</sup> Josue 17, 1.

<sup>6</sup> St. Ambrose *De Virg.*, VI, 44.

<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine *Serm.* 291 In Natali Joannis Baptistae.

<sup>8</sup> Card. Gibbons, *Faith of Our Fathers*, ch. XIV, p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 202.

virginity, gives in his immortal *Summa* four principal reasons why it was necessary that Mary should preserve perpetual virginity.

"Without any hesitation we must abhor the error of Helvidius, who dared to assert that Christ's Mother, after His birth, was carnally known by Joseph and bore other children. For, in the first place, this is derogatory to Christ's perfection: for as He is in His Godhead the Only-Begotten of the Father, being thus His Son in every respect perfect, so it was becoming that he should be the only-begotten son of His Mother, as being her perfect Offspring.

"Secondly, this error is an insult to the Holy Ghost whose shrine was the virginal womb, wherein he had formed the flesh of Christ: wherefore it was unbecoming that it should be desecrated by intercourse with man.

"Thirdly, this is derogatory to the dignity and holiness of God's Mother! for thus she would seem to be most ungrateful, were she not content with such a Son; and were she, of her own accord, by carnal intercourse to forfeit that virginity which had been miraculously preserved in her.

"Fourthly, it would be tantamount to an imputation of extreme presumption in Joseph, to assume that he attempted to violate her whom by the angel's revelation he knew to have conceived by the Holy Ghost.

"We must, therefore, simply assert that the Mother of God, as she was a virgin in conceiving Him and a virgin in giving Him birth, so did she remain a virgin ever afterwards."<sup>10</sup>

—Damian Kennedy, O. P.

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<sup>10</sup> III qu. 28, art. 3.

