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THE HANDMAID'S SON . . . A SLAVE

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IN ANY HOME a new born child will become the center of attraction. There is something wondrous about that tiny bundle of humanity which draws all eyes to itself. Any mystery will excite attention, and no one can deny that a new born child is all mystery. The Child who was born at Bethlehem on the first Christmas Day came into the world doubly wrapped in mystery, for within His mysterious humanity there lay an infinitely more mysterious Divinity. Immediately, the manger on which His Mother placed Him became the center of the world's stage, and the Infant lying there drew all eyes to Himself. His Eternal Father gazed at Him with Infinite Love; His Mother's eyes sparkled with heavenly joy, because the Almighty had done great things for her; angelic eyes were fixed on Him and Saint Joseph could not tear himself away; wide-eyed, ragged shepherds stared at Him, truly believing that He was the Christ. Throughout the ages Christian eyes have looked on Christ; some gazed long and prayerfully, others merely glanced and turned aside. This tendency of merely glancing and continuing along the way is still widely prevalent in these times. Men fear to stop and look on Christ. As a result their lives, instead of being careful reproductions of His perfect Life, are nothing but distorted caricatures of it. This fear could be overcome easily, if men found the time to think of Christ. Among those who do pause to think of Christ, there are some who center their thoughts on His Divinity, taking His humanity for granted, as if the Divinity in Christ were the only mystery involved. There are mysteries in His Humanity, too. One of these, the relation of Christ's Humanity to His Father and Mother, offers material for some very interesting reflections.

The first hint of this mystery is found in the Gospel of Saint Luke: "But Mary said, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to thy word.'"¹ This was in reply to the question of Gabriel, the messenger of God, who asked her in God's name, if she would consent to be the Mother of His Eternal Son. When Gabriel heard Mary's words, he must have hesitated a moment before returning to God, as the thought struck him that she who was to be the Mother of God called herself a handmaid. Mary did this a second time in Saint Elizabeth's home, when she confided to her cousin the reason why her soul magnified the Lord and her spirit rejoiced in God her Saviour, namely: "Because He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaid."² Saint Elizabeth, however, did not see in Mary a handmaid, but wondered how she had come to deserve a visit from the Mother of her Lord. Mary, who twice spoke that word, did see something in herself which neither the Archangel nor the Saint could see. She saw her true position before God and rejoiced in her title of handmaid. At Bethlehem, surely, she received a perfect right to change it to "Mother of God," but her Wisdom counselled her not to do so. Far from relinquishing her lowly title at the birth of her Son, she passed it on to Him. This clearly indicates how dear to Mary that title was. God, also, must have loved that title, for He permitted His Son to be born of a self-avowed handmaid, knowing that His Son would have to bear a similar name. Children of handmaids are slaves; hence, Jesus, Son of Mary the Handmaid, came into the world a Slave.

This notion of Christ as Slave is precisely the mystery involved in the Humanity of the Babe of Bethlehem. Eyes accustomed to look upon Christ as King and High Priest, as Saviour and Teacher, may turn aside with a certain aversion from the picture of Christ in the guise of a slave. After all, it would seem that since Christ the Son of God was God, He could not be called a slave. This is true; as God, Christ cannot be called a slave. In Christ, however, God and Man were perfectly conjoined in such a way that names denoting human qualities might be truly said of Him, excepting, of course, the name of sinner. Therefore, Christ, insofar as He is Divine, rightfully deserves the titles of King, Saviour, Teacher; if His Humanity be regarded, He may fittingly be called Slave. This statement needs further explanation.

¹ Luke, I, 38

² Luke, I, 48.

Things are said to be fitting, when they may be joined together without opposition. A small size hat on a large size head does not fit, because there is a ridiculous disproportion between hat and head. So when it is said that Christ may fittingly be called a slave, it means that there is no opposition between the terms Christ and slave, as there would be between God and slave. A clarification of the meaning of the word slave will help to see this. A slave is a living instrument belonging completely to a master. Three things go to make up a slave: a human being, his function as an instrument, his total subjection to a master. These three characteristics will be found in both perfect or voluntary slavery, and in imperfect, or involuntary slavery. Slavery as it is used in common speech is always involuntary. However, the pure notion of slavery does not exclude a voluntary state of subjection to another. As a matter of fact, when slavery is voluntary, it becomes more perfect. When Christ of His own free will assumed human flesh, He fulfilled the above stated conditions and became thereby a Perfect Slave. First, He was born a true man; second, as man He was the Perfect Instrument of His Father in the task of redeeming the world; third, as Instrument He belonged completely to a master—His Father. No other slave was so perfectly human; Christ's body and its faculties were without the slightest defect. No other slave was more completely an instrument, since Christ accomplished exactly what was required of Him. No other slave belonged more surely to a master than Christ belonged to God. Manifestly, slave is a fitting name for the Son of Man. At this point it is well to notice that those three qualities pertaining to slavery were fulfilled in the case of the Blessed Virgin, also. She was human, the most perfect and purest of creatures outside of Christ; she was the instrument God used to give Christ to men, and also, lead them back to Him; her subjection to God her Master, was surpassed only by Christ, her Son. It is apparent, then, that the Blessed Mother of God called herself handmaid with very good reason. Saint Paul, too, was not defaming Christ when he said: "He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men . . ."³ It was not by mere chance that the Psalmist sang: "O Yahwe, I am indeed thy servant and the son of thy handmaid."⁴ Rather, he was prefiguring there in the Messianic sense Christ, the Perfect Slave of

³ Phillipians, II, 7.

⁴ Psalm CXV, 16.

Yahwe, and Mary, Yahwe's humble handmaid. Finally, Christ Himself affirms this: ". . . the Son of man is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister . . ."⁵

All the above indicated lines of thought come to a focus in the question: Why? Why did Christ choose to live this life of a Perfect Slave? The answer to this question is to be found in the reasons for the Incarnation itself: Christ became man to repair the damage done to God's glory, to magnify His Mother, to free mankind from its sin. Each of these reasons demanded of Christ a voluntary subjection, a slavery of Love. To make amends for His Father's outraged Majesty Christ took upon Himself the form of man who perpetrated the injury, and by His perfect life of submission effected the required infinite reparation to God's glory. Christ was subject as a slave, not only to God, but to His Blessed Mother for the sake of God, and in this way honored her immeasurably. Think of the limitless confidence placed in a young girl of sixteen chosen by God to be His Mother. Think of the honor granted her by the fact that Christ placed Himself at His Mother's beck and call for nearly ten times the number of years that He spent in the public ministry of His Father. Of course, this was the Will of God and must not be taken to mean that He honored His Mother ten times as much as God.

There is another reason of great importance. The redemption of all men and their instruction in the ways of perfect living induced Christ to make of Himself a flawless example of every virtue, but especially of Charity and Humility. Charity, because it is the virtue which turns the soul to God and unites it with Him; Humility, because this virtue helps the soul advance most swiftly towards Him. The willingness with which Christ assumed human flesh, and consequently slavery, demonstrates His Charity and Humility. In the Incarnation, then, if we may say so, Christ forgot that He was the Son of God, so that we, too, might forget that we are the adopted children of God (an honor of which we sometimes get too proud) and live as Christ did—Slaves of Love. In a similar way, Christ chose to serve Mary as her Slave to caution us against boastfully claiming to be her children and at the same time excusing ourselves from the total service we owe her.

⁵ Mark, X, 45.