

IN PRAISE OF OUR LADY

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IN SOME RESPECTS a page of manuscript is like a painting. The canvas, once bare, is now a square of reality on which are pictured the innermost thoughts of the artist, and the once blank sheet of paper is filling, filling, and now is overflowing with the written signs of the author's thoughts, his emotions, his beliefs. The pen in the hand of the author has made its way back and forth across the page, now he lays it aside and reads what he has written, "I have always envied Catholics their faith in that sweet sacred Virgin Mother, who stands between them and the Deity, intercepting somewhat of His awful splendor but permitting His love to stream upon the worshipper, more intelligible to human comprehension, through the medium of a woman's tenderness."

Here the great novelist, Nathaniel Hawthorne, has expressed a thought, a conviction reiterated by Catholics and non-Catholics alike down through the centuries. From the earliest days of the Church the Blessed Virgin and, more especially, her Immaculate Conception, has been the inspiration for poets of varying abilities and beliefs. Praises of Mary have been sung in transcendent poetry and in simple rhyme. It seems as though every phase of her immaculate life here upon earth has been touched upon and not one of her heavenly virtues has failed to arouse poetic inspiration in the minds of great writers and thinkers, resulting in a lively flow of written praises from the facile pens of devoted sons and daughters.

Poetry is the imaginative representation, through the medium of language, of true grounds for the noble emotions. This is the reason why our Blessed Mother, the nobility of her virtues and the magnificent things she does for all mankind are compelling subjects for the poet to write about and for the lover of poetry to read about. The most perfect poetry will arouse in the mind of the one who reads it thoughts of Mary because its perfection will be a mirror in which one will see reflected the beauty of the Mother of God. Mary is the channel of all grace! Mary is our Mother! Mary is the Mother of God! The Maid of Nazareth acquiesced with a humble "fiat" when the Angel Gabriel brought the solemn message from the throne of God. Here are sentiments which give rise to poetry of the highest

order. Prayers of petition, of praise, and of thanksgiving for gifts and graces received through Mary's bountiful and generous hands have ever been shot as golden arrows to the highest reaches of heaven.

We find that many Protestant poets have paid tribute to the Holy Mother of God. Even the most disinterested and hardened reader cannot but accept the sincerity of expression of these artists when he sees with what noble sentiment, devotedness of expression, and heartfelt prayerfulness they place their literary offerings at the feet of the Virgin.

Ruskin was a man who at times displayed an almost fanatic hatred of the Church, yet he was moved to confess; "I am persuaded that the worship of the Madonna has been one of the noblest and most vital graces of Catholicism, and has never been otherwise than productive of true holiness of life and purity of character."

That the absence of devotion to Mary caused Protestantism to be strained of every potential Christian element was the conviction of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who subscribed to no church or creed.

Orby Shipley, at one time a bitter foe of Catholicity, but who became a devout Catholic, compiled an anthology, "Carmina Mariana," in which English-speaking poets display singular talents in praising the Mother of God.

Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, Kipling; there has been inscribed on the testament of the years name after name of the immortal men of literature who have devoted some of their God-given talents in extolling the virtues of Mary, the Mother of God.

Wordsworth once said that, "every great poet is a teacher, and desires to be considered as a teacher or nothing." Truly these men of the literary world have "taught" Mary. They have told us of her virtues, of her beauty, of her holiness. This same Wordsworth, a great Protestant poet, years before the Immaculate Conception was defined, dedicated to Mary Immaculate a poem which will live forever:

*Mother, whose virgin bosom was uncrust
With the least shade of thought to sin allied;
Woman, above all women glorified,
Our tainted nature's solitary boast.*

Here is testimony to the fact that many men and women, woe-fully shrouded in the fog of error, have yet sung praises to the Mother of God and have paid tribute to her supremacy among the offspring of Adam. This supremacy is a grace flowing from God Himself and it is possible that through Mary, their Mother, they have

obtained the grace at death to see the everlasting truth of God's one true Church.

Can those who so honor the Mother fail to pay greater honor to the Father and to the Son? Can those who so beautifully sing the praises of the Holy Virgin forever neglect to perform obeisance before the Divine Saviour—He who came forth from that holy womb and sacrificed Himself upon the cross for our salvation?

The infant Church had hardly emerged from the cradle of the catacombs when strains of poetry were heard for the first time. A new era of peace and charity had come to the world and the flourish of music which heralded its dawning took the form of hymns in praise of Christ. And necessarily interwoven in the sublime history of the Incarnation was the name of the Maid of Galilee who was Christ's mother and the mother of all mankind. In a hymn he wrote, Saint Ambrose, great churchman and poet, petitions the Saviour of the world to manifest to us the inestimable beauty of the Virgin Birth.

A powerful figure of the Church of the East, one ever ready to do battle with those who would slash away at the Church with the swords of heresy and schism, was saint John Damascene. At the very apex of his arguments against the enemies of Christ this great Saint became inspired with the loveliness of Christ's mother and called her "the glory of the priesthood," "the Queen of nature," and often invoked her in these words: "O Lily among thorns, O Rose among the briars, shed your fragrance over all things."

The people of the East presented Mary under the aspect of power. We know of Mary as the "Queen of Heaven," and following in this same vein the Orientals pictured the Virgin as ruling over a magnificent court where majesty was exalted above anything human and where women with their gentle beauty wielded more power than men. The Oriental poets called Mary, "Queen," "Empress," "Most Exalted Lady."

During the Middle Ages the saint-poets, the poets, and even those who were neither, sang their songs of love to this daughter of the kingly David. The age in which the Church's children had done great things in the field of art and education was coming to a close and a new era was dawning; forebodings of great and awful conflicts between the Church and the forces of the devil filled the air and men were turning to Mary, seeking her heavenly aid and guidance. They knew that she considered them her children and they called on her, as on a Mother, to be led by her hand to the Father. Humbly placing their trust in her intercession before the throne of God, they felt sure that the way to the Son was through the Mother, the way to the

Bridegroom through His Bride, and the way to the Father of all mankind through His Immaculate Daughter.

Down through the centuries, through the periods of the Renaissance and the Humanistic era, indeed, to our own day and age, the praises of Mary and of her Immaculate Conception have been sung. It is very true that all is not poetry in this great collection of rhyme and verse, but despite the fact that there is often an absence of art, love—which, indeed, is the very heart of art—is rarely found to be lacking.

Poets have sung the praises of God the Father and have turned, too, to writing beautiful stanzas extolling the Immaculate Virgin Mary who was His humble servant. They have told us of Jesus in His glory and in His sufferings, and then their pens have performed the loving task of telling of His mother who watched with tender care over his childhood and with tender pity over His manhood. We read of the perfections of the saints and see reflected in their glory the inestimable perfection of Mary—that inexhaustible channel of grace from which they drank so fully, and that instrument of God's love whose intercession in behalf of men is so powerful. Mary is always present where the glory of God radiates, where the saints perform their dedicated services, and where poetry lives. When we invoke Jesus with the title, "Son of Mary," we approach close to Him, for He is one with us in our condition as men, joined together in one human family. And at the request of His Mother, Jesus hears our prayers and shows Himself full of loving pity for all.

Without a doubt, many poetic prayers of praise have never been written down on the bare canvas of a sheet of paper. These are the prayers abiding silently in the minds of humble souls incapable of expressing their thoughts in terms of beautiful words. But still, here is praise, and poetic praise, indeed, to our most Holy Mother. She hears, and answers.