

FONS HORTARUM

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GRADUATION is a step forward, a progression to a higher stage. Somewhat like St. Paul, the senior "puts away the things of a child" (I Cor., 13, 11) and faces life in earnest. He has matured. So, too, the whole universe has been graduated—it has stepped from the natural to the supernatural order through the diploma of grace. The Blessed Virgin has a special function and place in this new world, a role which is sometimes inadequately understood.

In nature the inanimate bodies—things that do not have life—occupy the lowest grade. For example, the stone exists, has a beginning and an end, and undergoes change; but that is all. A step higher are the plants, which live by developing materially. They grow and die. Close to the stones, yet infinitely superior! Animals, however, also know and love, and because of this humans make pets of them. For animals can reciprocate while plants remain insensible. Above these is man, who thinks and chooses freely and so rules all the inferior grades. He is a long way from the stone, but he is not the apex. There are pure spirits (we call them angels) who are living minds and wills. And superior to all is God; stones exist, He is existence; man thinks, but He is thought. Higher we cannot go.

With grace, however, the order changes a bit. Inanimate things, plants and animals are in the lowest grade, insofar as they are aids to grace. The next level consists of man (all men, that is, save Christ and Mary) and the angels who are the recipients of grace. Their superior is Mary, the Mother of Grace. Higher still is the humanity of Christ united forever to the Divinity and the principal medium of grace. The scale is crowned by the Trinity, grace itself.

In the natural order, each class has its immediate dependence and relationship to its neighbors: the plant depends upon rain and in turn supplies food to the animal. But in the supernatural sphere, everything hinges upon grace which comes principally from God alone. St. Paul reminds us that "the grace of God (is) life everlasting" (Romans, 6, 23), and St. Thomas teaches that man cannot merit eternal life without grace (I-II, q. 109, a. 5). Christ's words "What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul" (Mt. 16, 26) point out the importance of seeking eternal life. Everything, then, depends for its rank and value on the vital connection with Divinity. This "connection" is Mary; she is man's link with God. Through her they receive grace and eternal life, from her they assume rank and graduation.

Mary's place flows from her Maternity. Because she was predestined to be the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin was fashioned most carefully by the Creator. The brightest jewels of creation were made for her; she shimmered with graces; her splendor put mankind to shame. God filled her with "the peerless richness of sublime gifts."¹ She is Christ's greatest glory and shares the triumph of His resurrection. She supervises the distribution of graces, she becomes the Queen of men.

The Church emphasizes Mary's singular position by comparing her to a fountain. The symbolism is apparent: the water is Christ's grace, the fountain is Mary, and the drinker is mankind. Man must drink of this water for salvation, and there is but this one fount. A fountain does not produce water but merely conducts it to an opening where water may be conveniently gathered. So, too, Mary does not cause grace, but only channels it to us.

We call Mary "Our Hope." This is a testimony to her power, for hope is had only in those who can help. The Blessed Virgin has power to aid all. St. Ephrem calls her "Mistress of all, under the Trinity," and St. Germain wrote, "No one achieves salvation save through thee."

Mary's position is fixed, and so is the place of the rest of men. They are totally dependent upon her; there is no grace which they have received that has not come through Mary. More important, there is no grace they can receive except through Mary. To overlook this fact and to relegate to the Blessed Mother an inferior role, is to stunt the full flowering of the Christian life. An essential element is then misunderstood and consequently all other parts of the spiritual edifice are misplaced.

Mary's place is not optional in the Christian life, rather it is ordained by God to give life, growth and termination to that life. The more a Christian includes prayer to Mary, the more fruitful will the results be, the easier will impediments be removed, and the more glory will be given to God Whose plan will then be accepted.

Mary and the universe have been graduated to the life of grace. Yet grace and its Author are often cast aside and ignored. The Church, considering the tepidity and indifference of the human race, has emphasized more and more Mary's role. New doctrine is not being introduced; rather the divine plan is made more manifest, in the hope that man will approach the fountain, and so be led to drink of its waters. Thus all things will be restored in Christ, through Mary.

¹ Marian Year Prayer. These sentiments are echoed throughout the prayer.