

PRIESTLY PERFECTION THROUGH MARY

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RUE LOVE must bear the sign of the Cross. The love of Mary for her Son was marked with this sign. By her "Fiat" she consented to become the Mother of the only Son of God, Who came to do not His Will but the Will of His Father. She had consented to become the Mother of Jesus—the Saviour, the Redeemer. In the silence of Bethlehem she brought forth the Victim. In the silence of Nazareth she prepared the Lamb for Sacrifice. And in the silence of Calvary she gave back her Son to the Eternal Father so that we might live.

The Angel of the Annunciation invited Mary to unite her will with the Divine Will. The Son of God had been predestined to come down from heaven so that He might lift up fallen man. Mary, in saying "yes" to this divine invitation, consented to cooperate in our redemption. She said, "Fiat; be it done to me according to thy word."¹ Thus Mary made possible not only the Incarnation but also the Redemption. From this supreme act of faith and charity flows the rest of her life. When she consented to be the Mother of the Saviour she accepted in advance all the suffering which the Redemption would involve.

Divine Providence willed to fashion the Redemption of man upon the fall of man. Thus Christ, the "new Adam," and Mary, the "new Eve," were chosen to merit our salvation. Mary has received the title of Co-Redemptrix for "with her Son she redeemed the human race."² What her Son merited in strict justice, Mary merited by claim of appropriateness, founded on her loving friendship with God. The same sacrificial love which was found in her at Nazareth carried her to the foot of her Son's Cross. How many times must she have repeated her "Fiat." How generously she must have pronounced it as her Son cried out, "It is consummated!"

Mary shared in the redemptive sufferings of her Son when His Precious Blood was shed and thus she has an incalculable love for His Passion. It was she who prepared the Lamb for the slaughter. Everything Christ received in this world, save His soul, was derived from

¹ Luke I, 38.

² Benedict XV, *Litt. Apost.*, Cf. Denz. 3034, no. 4.

her. His Body and Blood came from her own flesh. He was clothed by her and His food and drink was prepared by her willing hands. This was her role as Mother of Christ the Saviour. Now she desires to continue her maternal role over the Mystical Body of Christ. The normal means through which His Passion fructifies is the sacramental system of which the priest is the ordinary minister. Thus it is the distinctive office of the priest to share in this maternal role of Mary's by nourishing and caring for the members of His Body. Mary, the Mother who cared for Christ, now ardently desires to take care of those priests who, with the fruits of her Son's Passion, feed and care for the Whole Christ—the Church. For the sake of her Son she always seeks holiness in the priest so that His sufferings and Blood be not spilled in vain.

Mary is the Mother of all men and loves them dearly for she sees in them souls redeemed by the Blood of her Divine Son. But she is especially the Mother of priests for when she looks at them she sees not just redeemed souls but Christ Himself—for the priest is "another Christ." Because of this dignity the priest has a tremendous obligation to strive for perfection. But he also has the consolation that Mary can and will help him achieve this difficult goal.

I—THE PRIEST, AS *ANOTHER CHRIST*, HAS A TREMENDOUS OBLIGATION TO STRIVE FOR PRIESTLY PERFECTION

Our Lord, who is "always living to make intercession for us,"³ is no longer visibly present upon earth but the fruits of His Priesthood are being daily transmitted to men by a visible priesthood. The minister of Christ is not just a representative of the great High Priest, but he acts in the very person of Christ. The glorious title of "another Christ" is attributed to him because the source of all priestly power flows from Christ the High Priest, Who "is the fountain-head of the entire priesthood."⁴

When the priest is clothed with the royal Priesthood of Christ he receives a character by which he *is* Christ, at least instrumentally. This is what prompted St. Paul to say, "For what I have pardoned, if I have pardoned anything, for your sakes have I done it in the person of Christ."⁵ Daily the words, "This is *My* Body . . . this is *My* Blood," are found on the lips of a priest. His official acts are the acts of Christ for the Priesthood of Christ and that of His ministers is one and the same thing. Our Lord Himself says of His priests;

³ Heb., 7, 25.

⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q. 22, a. 4.

⁵ II Cor. 2, 10.

"He that heareth you, heareth me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth me: and he that despiseth me, despiseth him that sent me."⁶

Officially, the life of a priest is identified with that of Our Saviour and thus he must strive to be personally "another Christ." If he fails in this the priest is guilty of the sterile and fruitless heresy of "official piety."

The priest has a solemn obligation to conform his interior life as far as possible with that of his external ministry. To be convinced of this truth a priest has but to recall the day of his Ordination. On that day the priest received the character and grace to become the mediator between God and man for the offering of sacrifice, and thus took upon himself a special obligation to strive for perfection.

This can be better appreciated if we recall the words of Our Lord at the first Ordination. They were addressed to His Apostles, the first priests, at the Last Supper; "I will not now call you servants . . . But I have called you *friends*."⁷ Thus the priest is a friend of Christ, but what does this bond of friendship imply? We learn from St. Thomas that, due to the mutual compenetration of hearts and minds possible between friends, the lover is in his friend by the fact that he makes his own the very sorrows, joys, failures and successes of his friend. The object of the love of a priest is Christ who should be permanently in his thoughts. A mere superficial knowledge of Christ, his Friend, should not satisfy him. He must long to know Him more intimately and penetrate more deeply into the innermost recesses of His Heart. Thus, being a friend of Christ, the priest ought to model his sanctity after Him, to become one with Him in mind and will. Saint Pius X, in his *Letter to Priests*, remarks; "Since the sure and only sign of true friendship is to will the same thing—*idem velle, idem nolle*; as His friends we must let that mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus, 'holy, innocent, and undefiled.'"⁸

A mediocre goodness obtained by being in the state of grace is not sufficient for the suitable living of this royal dignity. The Angelic Doctor says that "they who belong to the divine ministry assume a royal dignity and *ought to be perfect in virtue*."⁹ A superior excellence of life is required of the priest before his ordination and must continue to develop afterwards. St. Thomas adds; "Holy orders pre-requires holiness, whereas the religious state is a school for the attain-

⁶ Luke, 10, 16.

⁷ John 15, 15.

⁸ *Haerent Animo*, Aug. 4th, 1908.

⁹ St. Thomas, IV Sent., dist. 24, q. 2.

ment of holiness."¹⁰ Thus an initial perfection (*bonitas vitae*) is required of the priest before he receives his sacerdotal character. Father Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., points out that since the priest ought to enlighten others, it would be fitting that he has outgrown the spiritual age of beginners and has begun to tread the paths of the illuminative way.¹¹

This obligation of the priest to strive for holiness is further emphasized by the fact that at Ordination the priest assumes a duty towards the Sacramental Body of Christ and towards His Mystical Body. The principal reason the priest receives the Priesthood is to celebrate Holy Mass, to make the Son of God present upon the altar and to offer to the Father the Redeeming Sacrifice in a sacramental manner. Christ truly surrenders Himself, for His presence in the Host is not effected until the priest decides to consecrate. Who can deny that this power over the Body of Christ demands personal sanctity on the part of the priest? Christ submits to man, and Holiness itself is fondled!

What profound humility ought to be found in the custodian of such a Captive! The Curé d'ars once remarked that if the priest ever fully realized what he does when he says Mass he would surely die—either from fear or from love. Priests have often been reminded by the Fathers of the Church that, by virtue of their Priesthood, they should become victims with Christ. An outstanding example of this is the text written by St. Gregory the Great; "Those who celebrate the mysteries of the Passion of Our Lord must imitate what they are doing. There will truly be a holocaust for us in the eyes of the Lord when we shall have made a holocaust of ourselves."¹² These words strike a familiar note, recalling the admonition given by the Bishop during the Ordination ceremony; "Realize what you are doing, and imitate what you handle."¹³

The very law of friendship demands that the lover take to himself the troubles and sufferings of the loved one, as if they were his own. Thus it is that a devoted mother suffers a thousands deaths when one of her children is sick. If it were possible she would take the sickness of her child upon herself. It would seem incredible for a priest, who daily renews the Sacrifice of the Cross, to refuse to share with full compassion the moral and physical sufferings of Christ and to help bear the torments of His Sacred Heart. It is the lot of

¹⁰ *Summa Theologiae*, II IIa, q. 189, art. 1 ad 3.

¹¹ "The Priest in Union with Christ," p. 45, Newman, 1952.

¹² *Dialogues*, Bk. 4, c. 59.

¹³ Pont. Rom., de Ordinatio. Presbyt.

the priest to undergo with Christ a mystical death on the cross so that he can apply to himself the words of St. Paul, "with Christ I am nailed to the cross."¹⁴ The priest then must be a "living crucifix" united to Christ Crucified, the Priest Who was the Victim at His own Sacrifice!

The Communion of the priest, which is required for the completion of the Sacrifice of the Mass, follows closely upon the Consecration. The Communion is the achievement of a personal union with Christ and presupposes the holiest of dispositions. This union must become more intimate with every reception so that the priest resembles Christ more and more. Christ has given Himself to the priest and the priest must daily give himself to Christ, for love demands a return. The priest must decrease and become less and less and Christ must increase within him. The words of St. Augustine are particularly apropos when applied to the Communion of a priest; "Grow and you will feed on me, for I am the food of grown men. I shall not be changed into you like that which feeds your body, but you will be changed into me."¹⁵ The priest should lose himself in Christ as do the drops of water poured into the chalice at Mass.

The priest, who is "a merciful extension of the great mystery of the Incarnation,"¹⁶ has power over and duties towards the Mystical Body of Christ, namely the faithful. He is so to speak, the sacrament of Christ's burning love for men, a living sign of the boundless mercy of God towards creatures. Thus he no longer belongs to himself but is a public personage and consequently is not at full liberty to judge what to do or how to do it merely in relationship to himself.

The priest belongs to souls and is their pastor who, like the Good Shepherd, loves his flock and knows them by name. He is their father who, by administering Baptism, begets them into the spiritual life. He is their physician who, by absolution and direction, heals and comforts them if they fall. The faithful wish to see in the priest the reflection of Christ and they are deeply wounded if this reflection cannot be found. The priest is the salt of the earth and the light of the world. How monstrous it would be if this salt should lose its savor and this light be put out!

When one considers the work of a priest, the need for personal holiness is most evident. The Word of God which is preached from

¹⁴ Gal., 2, 19.

¹⁵ *The Priest in Union With Christ*, Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., Newman, 1952, p. 76.

¹⁶ *The Blessed Virgin and the Priesthood*, Rev. Paul Phillippe, O.P. Mercier Press, Cork, 1952.

the pulpit must be living and "proceed from the fulness of contemplation,"¹⁷ if it is to be fruitful. How can a priest expect to kindle the flame of love for Christ in the hearts of his hearers unless he himself be first consumed with this love? How can he give Christ unless he first possesses Him?

The Word of God is truth and of itself is most efficacious, but it can fail to fructify because of the minister of the Word. The words which Emerson applied to himself probably echo identical thoughts in the minds of the laity today; "What you are speaks so loudly to me that I cannot hear what you say." People very naturally consider the quality of the cup, and, if they find it defective, they will ignore the rich wine of truth it contains.

The faithful know that their priests are "other Christs" and thus wish and expect to see Christ in them. The priest, who is called to engrave the image of Christ in the souls of others, continues the office of the Saviour who came to save men. With his whole soul, mind and strength he must strive to emulate the holiness of Christ, and thus be able to say with Him, "which of you shall convince me of sin?"¹⁸

We have seen that the priest has the privilege and obligation to strive for perfection and that this is not an easy task. It remains to be shown that there is someone who can and will help the priest achieve this goal. This someone is Mary who "is in labor again" to form Christ in her priests over whom she exercises a very special maternal love.

II—MARY CAN AND WILL HELP THE PRIEST ATTAIN PERFECTION

It was by her "Fiat" that Mary became the Mother of God. With this act Mary consented to become the Mother of the Word, Who also, according to the Divine Plan, was preordained to be the Head of the Mystical Body. Thus a dual maternity was effected on the day of her Annunciation, for she became the Mother of the Head according to the flesh, and the Mother of men, the members of the conjoined Body, according to the spirit. The Mother of the Redeemer was destined to communicate to men the supernatural life of grace merited by His Passion and Death. The seeds of Mary's Motherhood of men were planted at Nazareth but it was at Calvary that her spiritual maternity received its full perfection.

¹⁷ *Summa Theologiae*, II IIa, q. 183, art. 6.

¹⁸ St. John 8, 46.

The fundamental reason Mary exercises her maternal care over the priest in a very special manner is because she sees in him, not merely a soul redeemed by her Son, but her *Son Himself!* This claim of the priest that Mary is in a very special way his Mother is not founded upon mere pious sentimentality but upon solid theological teachings. She is the Mother of Christ and of "other Christs," and is especially zealous for the sanctification of the priest lest the image of her Son be disfigured. She keeps a motherly eye upon his soul so that the sacerdotal grace received at Ordination may bear fruit. She loves her sons of predilection as she loved the newly ordained St. John who was committed to her care on Calvary. She longs to see her Divine Son mirrored perfectly in them, to see them become His living images. She longs to form Christ in them so that they may be able to say with St. Paul, "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me."¹⁹ This is what Mary desires, this is what she will effect if the priest permits. Mary has been called by St. Augustine the living "mold of God," for it was in her virginal womb that God became true man without losing any feature of the Godhead. It is through her alone that a priest can be truly formed into Christ.

Mary knows full well that the thirst of Christ was not fully slaked on the Cross. His Mystical Body continues here on earth to reveal His unquenchable love for His Father. Christ thirsts to love His Father in our hearts for all time and thus wants souls, especially those of priests, to abandon themselves completely to Him and allow Him to satisfy His Divine love in them. Christ thirsts for other humanities in which He can continue His love for the Father. He wishes to act, pray, suffer, live and love in us. When Mary looks at the soul of "another Christ" and then at the thirst of her Son, her maternal heart overflows and almost bursts with love and solicitude for her adopted sons. She desires and obtains the necessary graces so that the priest can make his heart like unto the heart of St. Paul which has been called "the heart of Christ."

Because the priest is "another Christ" by virtue of the indelible character imprinted upon his soul at Ordination, he should possess the utmost confidence that Mary's motherly love will continue when all other loves fail. The love of our earthly mothers is tremendous but it cannot even begin to compare with the love of our heavenly Mother. Earthly mothers do not desert their sons who are in need, no matter how low they have fallen or how far away they have strayed. Nor does Mary desert the weak and stumbling priest. Not

¹⁹ Gal. 2, 20.

too long ago a census taker approached a mother of a very large family. With a knowing smile she asked the mother which one of her children she loved the most. Without hesitation the mother calmly and lovingly answered "the one who is sick until he gets well; the one who is away until he comes home again." Sickness or absence did not diminish, but rather increased, this mother's love for her child. Though the priest be diseased with sin and far away from the life of grace, Mary still sees in him the image of her beloved Child. After all, did not her Son come to save sinners?

We know that Christ's mission was a priestly mission whose purpose was to offer to God the plenary satisfaction which would win Divine pardon for sinful humanity. Christ was consecrated by His Incarnation, and thus, by becoming the Son of Mary, He was made Priest. Now it was at the Cross that Mary, in union with Christ's highest priestly action, completely became our Mother. Calvary was the place where all the graces of our vocation and priestly life were merited—and this was accomplished by the Blessed Mother with and in Christ. Divine Providence has from all eternity decreed that a priest should be called to the Priesthood by virtue of the merits of Christ and through Mary, in answer to their common prayer.

By her intense "Fiat," motivated by a burning selfless love, Mary first conceived Christ in her heart, and then in her womb. This same charity urged her Immaculate Heart to unite itself to the Passion of her Son. The Blood of Christ and the tears of Mary were only the outward manifestations of the inward oblation which won life for mankind and also the calling of men to participate in the Priesthood of Christ.

Further, a mother not only begets her children, she nourishes them. Mary, too, not only helped give birth to our Priesthood but she nourishes it, and thus no priest can afford to overlook the fact that every grace which he receives and of which he is the minister is due, after Christ, to Mary. Keeping this in mind, we can read with a much fuller understanding the words of Saint Pius X; "From this community of will and suffering between Christ and Mary 'she merited to become most worthily the Reparatrix of the lost world' and Dispensatrix of all the gifts that Our Saviour purchased for us by His Death and by His Blood."²⁰

We might note in conclusion that, after Christ, the priest is totally dependent upon Mary because God has so willed it. Unless the priest becomes a child of Mary he will never be truly "another

²⁰ *Ad Diem Illum*, Pope Pius X, Encyclical Letter, Feb. 7, 1904.

Christ." Mary sees her Son in the priest and wishes to conform his life with that of Christ's. The life of Christ was a litany of suffering and love and so also must be that of the priest. Mary can and will help him to take up his cross for she herself knows the true meaning of suffering and love. After Jesus, no one suffered more than His Mother. Christ redeemed us chiefly by His Passion and Death, and the dolors which were the lot of the Man of Sorrows echoed in the maternal heart of the Mother of Sorrows. She suffered not a martyrdom of an instant but one of a lifetime; one which was continually being offered upon the altar of her sorrowful heart. It is Mary who will help the priest make use of all the contradictions and pinpricks of daily living, for these are the fuel for the fire of love. The priest must be like the shepherds of old who, watching their sheep in the winter, had from time to time to leave and brave the cold to find more wood to burn. Mary can and will help the priest brave with love the trials and difficulties which he will surely encounter so that he might be the living image of Him Who is Love!

Mary will help the priest live a life of humility as Christ did for those thirty years of silence. She wishes him to be a holy and fruitful servant of his flock, as Christ was for those three years. And she ardently prays that the priest will be completely transformed into another Christ" by submitting *all* to God as Christ did for those three hours!