



FOUNTAINHEAD OF MARIOLOGY

After God Himself, the Catholic Church has always venerated His Virgin Mother. No other single article of faith has been so much developed and enriched in the course of centuries as the doctrine about Mary. The source of everything said about her is the fact that she is the Mother of God. The expression "Mother of God" is the most sublime tribute which could be paid to her, for it is precisely in her Divine Maternity that she is blessed among women. This mystery even constitutes the very heart of Mariology because the divine Motherhood is not only Mary's greatest privilege, but it is the key to the understanding of all her other privileges. All her other privileges flow from her principal and unique role as Mother of the Word made flesh. Upon the firm grasp of this primary truth depends the entire structure of the theology of Mary.

If there is to be any study of Mariology at all, it must begin with this principle upon which Mariology depends; it must establish that Mary is truly and properly the Mother of God. To penetrate more fully Mary's Motherhood of God is to fathom more accurately her place in the Divine Scheme and to appreciate more profoundly her position of eminence and dignity in the Church of God. It is an article of faith, that the Blessed Virgin Mary is the Mother of God in the true and proper sense. This means that she is related to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity in exactly the same way as any mother is related to her son—she has given Him the human body which is truly His, and is united to Him by the same physical and spiritual ties as unite any mother to her son.

Because Mariology is a proper part of theology it employs the same sources and methods as the rest of that science. It proceeds from revealed principles contained in sacred scripture and divine tradition and makes use of human reason under the light of faith in order to deduce from them valid conclusions. It depends upon the teachings of the Church and the testimony of the popes. A solid beginning analysis must consider these sources and methods. It is precisely because the Divine Maternity has been defined by the teaching authority of the Church that it must be believed by the faithful. But because the basis for the definition lies in sacred scripture, tradition and the devotion of the faithful, we must also consider these. And since theologians have proclaimed its fittingness and popes have encouraged its devotion we cannot exclude them from our study.

Scriptural Indications

The initial step in Mariology is to consider the revealed word con-

cerning the fact of Divine Motherhood. The scriptural arguments concerning this fact are convincing, yet nowhere in the Bible is it expressly said that Mary is the Mother of God. It is written, however, that Mary is the Mother of Jesus and that Jesus is truly God, and thus it necessarily follows that she is the Mother of God. We read in the Gospel according to St. Matthew that the Magi "entering into the house, found the child with Mary His mother" (Mt. 2:11); and the first chapter of Acts of the Apostles relates that "all these were persevering with one mind in prayer with the women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with His brethren" (Acts 1:14). The most manifest of all the scriptural indications of the Divine Maternity is found in the Angel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary: "Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Most High" (Lk. 1:31-32). Finally we have the well known words of St. Paul: "God sent His Son made of a woman" (Gal. 4:4). There is no basis here for any other supposition that the son in question is any other than the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

Thus far we have seen that it is expressly stated in the scriptures that Jesus is the Son of Mary and the Son of the Most High God. But to conclude that Mary is the Mother of God it is necessary that this Jesus must Himself be divine. The First Epistle of St. John contains a clear reference to the divinity of Christ. "And we know that the Son of God has come; and has given us understanding that we may know the true God, and may be in his true Son. He is the true God and eternal life" (I John 5:20). This text was recognized by the Fathers as a clear statement of the divinity of Christ.

It follows necessarily from the words of sacred scripture, then, that since Mary is the Mother of Jesus and since Jesus is truly God, she is without doubt properly called the Mother of God.

Voices from Tradition

Because divine tradition, too, sheds much light on the fact of the Maternity of Mary no beginner in Marian Theology can neglect to consider the testimony of the early liturgy or the testimony of the Fathers of the Church. Convincing arguments for the status in tradition of the Divine Maternity can be deduced from the testimony of the liturgy of the early Church. Several of the ancient Eastern Liturgies contained prayers addressed to Mary under the title of Mother of God, which were said after the Consecration or after the Communion of the Mass. There can be no

doubt that the faithful, from the very earliest days of the Church have paid honor to the Mother of their God.

The testimony of the Fathers showing that Mary was the Mother of God was subject to a definite progression. From apostolic times, the teaching that Christ was born of Mary was universal throughout the Church as was the doctrine that He was the Son of God. St. Ignatius of Antioch, a bishop and martyr who died shortly after the close of the first century, and who was probably a disciple of the Apostles themselves, is a notable witness to the early teaching of the Church. He wrote to the Ephesians: "Our Lord Jesus Christ was made flesh in the womb of Mary according to the dispensation of God, from the seed of David, by the power of the Holy Ghost."¹ Thus in early times Mary was implicitly recognized as Mother of God, although the term "Divine Maternity" was not yet in use. In the early fourth century, however, the term "Mother of God" was employed by such Fathers as St. Athanasius, St. Basil and St. Gregory Nazianzen. Soon others followed such as St. Ambrose and St. Augustine.

Defining Voice of the Church

The final stage in the evolution of the teaching that Mary is truly and properly the Mother of God reached its climax at the Council of Ephesus, where the Divine Maternity was defined in solemn pronouncement as a dogma of the Church of God. As we have seen, this doctrine was taught and believed in the Church long before Ephesus in 431. But it was not until this doctrine was seriously challenged by Nestorius that it was defined as a dogma of the Christian faith. Nestorianism, as his teaching came to be called, was not the first menace to the Divine Motherhood, but it was the most harmful. Nestorius, who was Patriarch of Constantinople in the early fifth century, did not acknowledge Christ in His unity of person as true God and, therefore, by a logical necessity was forced to reject Mary as the Mother of that God. Soon after his appointment to the See of Constantinople he preached a series of sermons in which he denounced the practice of honoring Our Lady as Mother of God. He affirmed that to attribute this title to her was to imply that Jesus derived His divine nature from a creature. This was to make Mary a goddess and expose Christianity to the ridicule even of pagans, he preached. His teaching caused considerable unrest and confusion among the people who had a universal devotion to the Mother of God.

The heresy of Nestorius, therefore, affirmed that there were two persons in Christ and that Mary was the Mother of the human person only.

In opposition to this error, St. Cyril of Alexandria began to turn out letters, sermons and treatises in defense of the true doctrine of the Incarnation and the Divine Maternity. He pleaded with Nestorius to heed the Fathers of the Church and the scriptures, but to no avail. Nestorianism was finally condemned at Ephesus in 431. With this condemnation we are brought to a consideration of the definition of the Maternity of Mary by the Magisterium of the Church. It is to the Magisterium of the Church that God has entrusted the interpretation and application of His Sacred Truths. Precisely because of this teaching power, the definition enunciated at Ephesus is the most important point of consideration beginning the study of Mariology. All the indications found in sacred scripture and divine tradition lead up to this definition. The testimonies of the theologians and popes are only further exemplifications of this definition. With this official and infallible pronouncement, four centuries of constant teaching and preaching of the doctrine of the Divine Motherhood of Mary were at last crowned with success.

The Council established that "God so loved the world to give His only-begotten Son" (John 3:16) and that in so doing He raised a daughter of Eve to the sublime dignity of being the Mother of God. It defined against Nestorius: "If anyone does not confess that God is truly Emmanuel, and that on this account the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (for according to the flesh she gave birth to the word of God become flesh by birth), let him be anathema."² With this formal proclamation, the doctrine of the Divine Maternity thus received an honored place in the dogmatic formulae of the Church as it had long received in the writings of the Fathers and in the devotion of the faithful.

Theologians' Teaching

The theologians, whose teaching must be considered, have proceeded from the revealed principles contained in sacred scripture and divine tradition and deduced conclusions concerning this doctrine. Their constant and clear teaching about the Divine Motherhood is a further indication of its truth. Every school of theology within the Church has ever held in highest esteem the sacred role of Mary as Mother of God.

Chief among the theological reasons is the argument from the dogma of the Incarnation. The argument is as follows: "She is truly the Mother of God, who conceives and generates the person who is God. The Blessed Virgin conceived and generated the Person of Christ, Who is God, even from the moment of His conception, so that never was He man without

being God. Therefore the Blessed Virgin Mary is truly the Mother of God."³ St. Thomas explains that since the word "God" can stand for the person having a human and a divine nature, whatever belongs to the divine and to the human nature can be attributed to that person, whether the word is used to signify the divine or human nature. Conception and generation are attributed to the person, according to that nature in which it is conceived and born, for what is generated is not the nature, but the person who subsists in the nature generated. In the Incarnation, the Divine Person assumed the human nature at the very beginning of the conception and for this reason it can be truly said that God was conceived and born of the Virgin Mary.⁴

Confirmation by the Popes

The testimony which the Roman Pontiffs have made concerning the fact of the Divine Maternity is of value in examining the well-springs of Mariology. The popes have never been reluctant to express the glories of the Divine Maternity. Among the early popes teaching on this point was John II who in 534 in a letter to the senators of Constantinople wrote: "We rightfully teach that the glorious holy ever Virgin Mary is acknowledged by Catholic men to be both properly and truly the one who bore God, and the Mother of God's Word become incarnate from her."⁵

In more recent years, popes have written entire encyclicals devoted to this teaching. Pius XI, in his *Lux Veritatis* wrote: "If the one person Jesus Christ is at the same time human and divine, then without doubt Mary ought to be called by all not only Mother of the Man-Christ, but Mother of God as well."⁶ This encyclical was issued to commemorate the fifteenth centenary of the Council of Ephesus. The document also announced a new liturgical feast of Our Lady in honor of her Divine Motherhood, the feast of her Divine Maternity, celebrated each year on October 11. Another important reference is the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of Pius IX. This document was primarily concerned with the definition of the Immaculate Conception, but it contained many profound teachings relative to the Divine Motherhood.

Contemporary Opinions

Because of the great honor the Church gives to the Mother of God it has become a proverb among our separated brethren that the Catholic Church is no longer a Church of Christ, but a Church of Mary. In refutation of this accusation it is sufficient to note how the concept of Christ,

which has faded more and more in the Protestant Churches through denial of His divinity, has been retained in all its purity in the Catholic Church. It is this concept of Christ, precisely because of His divinity, which keeps vivid the veneration of His Mother as truly Mother of God.

Far from diverting attention from Christ, the veneration of Mary has proved the most striking guarantee of the purity of belief in the Incarnate Word. The phrase "Mother of God" frightens most Protestants precisely because they lack conviction about the divinity of Christ Himself. Paul Tillich, for example, whose opinion about Christ is described as a kind of Nestorianism, does not regard Mary as the Mother of God, or even as the Mother of Christ. A study of his doctrine is necessary to understand what he means when he says that Mary is only the Mother of Jesus of Nazareth and that it is this Jesus who is sacrificed to Jesus as the Christ. In Tillich's opinion, Mary has no significance in Protestantism.⁷ Karl Barth, on the other hand, unhesitatingly defends the Virgin Birth and the Incarnation, but he never speaks of Mary as Mother of God. Contemporary Protestantism, therefore, denies Mary a privileged place and ranks her purely and simply among the members of sinful humanity.

To Catholics she is exceedingly more than this. She is the Mother of God in the true sense. We have seen this as it was defined by the Church, as it is found in the sacred scriptures, divine tradition, the teachings of the popes and theologians. In conclusion, we must say that this doctrine of the Divine Maternity of Mary is at the very basis of Christianity, or rather it contains the very basis of Christianity, for it signifies that the Son of Mary is at once perfect God and perfect man. The Divine Motherhood demands faith in the true human nature of Christ; otherwise Mary would not be a real mother. It demands faith in the divine nature of Christ; otherwise Mary would not be truly the Mother of God. It is an affirmation of belief in the union of the two distinct natures in the person of Christ; otherwise He would not be both Son of God and Son of Mary.

—Leonard Tracy, O.P.

¹ Letter to the Ephesians 18:2.

² Denz. 113.

³ Edward R. Daley, O.P., *The Rosary, a Compendium of Mariology*, unpublished dissertation, Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D. C.

⁴ Cf. *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 35, a. 4.

⁵ Denz. 202.

⁶ Encyclical *Lux Veritatis*, December 25, 1931.

⁷ Cf. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, (University of Chicago, 1951) I, p. 128.