

THE MOTHER OF THE PRIEST

By CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

OUR LORD, remembering the family occasions in his home town, once remarked on the joy of a mother who has just brought a child into the world. The joy is not merely the negative one of relief from pain; it is, he implies, a human joy because she knows that a man child now has existence apart from her own and yet so close-tied to her own existence that his very blood is hers. Our Lord, thinking of that, must have thought too of the reciprocal joy of the son belonging to his mother, a separate being and yet the same blood—and more than that, the same mind and the same words, as his bringing forth continues to his maturity. The son belongs to his mother all those years as she, even more than his father, inspires his imagination with homely pictures and places on his lips homely words, the first being those of 'Father' and 'Mother'. The countryside round Nazareth is seen reflected in our Lord's imagination as he unfolds one parable after another to his wondering audience. And those pictures and habits of thought were given him by Mary, pointing out the significant events of the seasons, the sowing and the reaping, the thrill of the vintage—by these scenes the imagination of her child was developed as he grew in grace and wisdom before God and man.

So it is that the boy or the young man, destined by God to become his minister among men, is reared in the joy of life stemming principally from his mother. Perhaps it is almost too hackneyed a notion to insist on the importance of the home formation of future vocations; but it could not pass unnoticed in looking at the priest. For the priest carries the stamp of his mother more than of any other member of his family. Grace can supplement the deficiencies of nature, but in the natural order of things the home setting of one who is to feed Christ's family lays the foundation of a sound 'vocation'. Unhappy homes mar even the lives of the children in lay life; so much the more in the life of the priest. But a happy home provides all that nature needs to support a man in a life supernaturally dedicated to the 'edification—the building-up—of the body of Christ'.

The priest first of all is identified with his family in a special way because he is identified with his mother. She it was who formed his flesh and blood, his bones and sinews; she it was who nurtured him with her own substance, who fed his mind and will, who taught him the love and respect that she herself felt for his father and her devotion to his brothers and sisters. She taught her son to make the sign of the cross and to stammer the *Our Father*; she taught him to salute his heavenly Mother and to turn to her in his adolescent difficulties as the final stages of the bringing forth of the man are completed.

But then the hand of the Lord is placed on this child of promise, and the Son says even that he must be prepared to 'hate' his father and mother, sisters and brothers. The moment of final weaning has come, and the young man who still lives his mother's life and is still anchored to the hearth, must cut himself adrift from this natural surrounding. And the one who suffers most is his mother who is losing part of herself; the pain of bringing forth the child is upon her once more. Now, however, the greater joy soon begins to flood her soul. Her son never in fact leaves her, for even thousands of miles away in missionary lands he remains the son of his mother. But more than that—the mother by nature has for these years been introducing the son of her flesh to his Mother by grace; and she knows that the 'exodus' from the family hearth is only a flight to the promised land of the family of God under the protection of the Mother of God. The young man has all this time been drawn deeper into the 'household of the faith' as in her domesticity the mother has nurtured him among the *domestici Dei*. There is no real severance, then, as her flesh and blood leaves the apron strings of one mother for the mantle of the other; and her joy is even fuller as she sees her man child brought more wholly and entirely into the world.

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Mary, the blessed Virgin, has never been given a priestly title, except by the extravagant. Indeed, Rome has forbidden the use of such terms for the Queen of Heaven. This may seem strange to those outside the household of the faith who think that Mary's children use superlative terms in her regard without much respect to sense, still less to theology. But in fact the Mother of the High-Priest does not herself exercise the functions of a priest; for she is too closely associated with his priestly character and work to bear

herself any distinct title. In these days, when the Holy Office has forbidden the use of the word 'Priest' for the blessed Virgin, an ever-increasing realisation of her co-operation with her Son has revealed her as essential to his priestly work. The Mother of Jesus was there not only to inspire the changing of water into wine, but also to assist at the priestly sacrifice. All through those years of her own family life she had been preparing the priest and the victim for the altar of sacrifice. She had nurtured the priest from the first FIAT which compassed his priestly FIAT of offering in the garden. The sword of sacrifice had begun already to pierce her heart in the Temple when she took her Son and offered her turtle-doves. And then she had prepared the body of the victim, flesh of her flesh, blood of her blood; she had nourished him with food and clothed him with vestments of her own making, the 'coat without seam' at the foot of Calvary. All this time the Mother knew that the perfect human being she was bringing into the world, that he might redeem it, was to suffer as the sorrowing servant, the worm and no man.

The priest, then, when he steps on to the altar for the first time, has already been fully introduced into Mary's family, for the Mother of Jesus the High-Priest is Mother of him who acts in the person of Jesus offering the same sacrifice. And as he utters the words of consecration and Calvary is made present once more the Mother of Jesus stands there at the side of the priest, the fellow-redeemer and the fellow-sufferer with the High-Priest through whom all honour and glory is now offered to the Father. Mother of the priest, indeed, Mary protects with her mantle those whom the Father has chosen to act in the person of the Son; and she continues the work of the mother at home round the hearth, teaching him to love the blessed Trinity who has committed to her all the motherly qualities of the Godhead, and to love also all her other children throughout the family of mankind.

For Mary sets before the priest the family ideal, ennobled and broadened, but stemming from the priest's home. She sets before him the ideal of chastity which is not merely the negative one of leaving behind for ever the possibility of children of his own flesh. The Mother of God had herself vowed virginity that seemed to cut her off from the domestic happiness and hopes of her relatives and friends. But it was a vow that led to her becoming the Mother of the Word—her virginal purity being so utterly

receptive that the bearing and the keeping of the Word was completely concrete. Such maternal chastity in its now divine power and vigour was not even compassed by this infinitude within her womb. Her receptivity became the unique motherhood of the world—having denied herself the joys of family she was given the joys of bringing *the* Man into the world and then of being made the Mother of the World. And as the priest utters those sacred and simple words of nourishment—eating and drinking—he may hear the Son from the Cross saying to the priest himself as to John—‘Son, behold thy Mother’.

The priest then has gone forth from his home, has left his mother and her domestic nurturing behind, has vowed himself with chastity to forego the joys of his own local family. But his new Mother with her chastity sees to it that he takes no sterile stand by flight from family. She gives him the fecundity of her motherhood. People call him ‘Father’ because she, the Mother, has introduced him into her great family, the ‘domestics of God’. He is given by chastity to all. Every man and woman is a child of God and is his child. Every man and woman is a child of Mary, and the priest is there in the person of her Son, her first-born and home-nurtured son. The Mother of the priest is the Mother of Jesus.