

THE LADY OF FAIR LOVE

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IN his latest encyclical, 'Fulgens corona gloria', the Pope has proclaimed our Lady's Year. The occasion of this proclamation is the centenary celebration in December of the infallible definition of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mother of God. This is but an instance of the progressive development of Marian tradition which from the earliest times is seen to be implicit and almost instinctive in the Faith of the Church. Pope Pius XII has allied himself closely with that tradition by becoming its spokesman. This he has done in defining the dogma of the bodily Assumption of our Blessed Lady into heaven, and in dedicating the present commemorative year to her honour.

Between Mary and the mysteries of faith there is an essential connection. This is seen so clearly in the Holy Rosary, wherein the joys, sorrows and glories of a holy partnership between the Son and his Mother are woven into a garland of prayer. The relationship between Jesus and Mary is living and everlasting. And so must be the relationship of Jesus and Mary to all those who by grace have received the adoption of sons, which is a sharing in the relationship which Jesus enjoyed by nature with his eternal Father and his human Mother. As St Augustine said, the Maker of the world came into the world, becoming present in our flesh, 'This is he who is beautiful above the sons of men, Son of holy Mary, Bridegroom of Holy Church whom he has made like his own mother; for he has given her to us to be our mother and keeps her a virgin for himself.'

A fervent lover of our Lady once wrote, 'There is a highest, ultra-literal, sense which it is the duty of the theologian to discover and defend. And whereas the literary critic will admit that the text of an inspired saying must at least mean the least, the theologian will add that it may mean the most. For example; when the angel addresses our Lady: "Hail, full of grace", it must mean at least "Hail, highly favoured". Yet it may mean "Hail, full of grace

that hath sanctified thee from the moment of thy beginning". Again, when Elizabeth cried out: "Whence is this to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?", it must mean at least "the mother of the expected Messias". Yet, as that Messias is "God of God", it may mean "the Mother of God".¹ It is the unerring and living voice of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, speaking in the name of God, that gives absolute assurance to, and makes at one, millions of minds.

There is no room for doubt that there is but one person in Jesus Christ and this is divine. The Blessed Virgin Mary is therefore to be acknowledged and venerated by all as really and truly the Mother of God.

This is the mystery towards which the miraculous star drew the Gentile world, enabling all without distinction to find the Holy Child and his Mother. But owing to the rise of heresy, faith in the Incarnate Word had to be proclaimed anew by God-given authority in the Council of Ephesus (431). This has rightly been called Our Lady's Council, since therein was solemnly declared that without any doubt Mary ought to be called, by all, not the mother of Christ the man only, but *Theotokos*, or God-bearer 'whom the Eternal Godhead has gifted with the fullness of grace and endowed with such great dignity'.²

None is more eloquent in his esteem for God's Mother than St Thomas Aquinas. And the Popes have repeatedly made his words their own in extolling her merits and virtues. Pope Pius XII has done so in his recent great encyclical where he cites a passage which might otherwise remain hidden to many, 'From the very fact that the Blessed Virgin is the Mother of God, she has a kind of boundless dignity derived from God's infinite goodness'.³ Whatever form of address we may use to her the title of Mother is the greatest of them all. It is the one most frequently used in holy writ, for she is the mother of fair love and holy hope. At the first miracle of her Son, we are

¹ *The N.T. Witness To Our Blessed Lady*, Fr Vincent McNabb, O.P., p. 12.

² Pope Pius XI, *Lux Veritatis*, 25 December, 1931.

³ *Summa* I, 25, 6 ad 1.

told by St John that 'the mother of Jesus was there', and it was at her motherly suggestion that our Lord entered on his public career, and at its closing moments she stood firmly at the cross-side with the disciple whom Jesus loved.

Her divine motherhood did not allow her to encroach beyond the borders of divinity, but it is the explanation of all the favours which are uniquely hers. 'At the first instant of her existence she was found on the side of God as Satan's foe. . . . Divine grace was hers without stint and came to her with life itself. Thus was she fittingly prepared for the virginal childbearing through which was crushed the serpent's head. The Virgin Mother of God is the Immaculate Mother of the Saviour of the world.'⁴

This is the truth in which our faith is once again aroused and reaffirmed during this Marian Year. This was a truth to which the Catholic mind had not been altogether blind, yet there was still a danger of its being denied or of being hedged round with obscurities. And the infallible decision made under the guidance of the Holy Ghost by Pope Pius IX, on 8 December, 1854, has given a precision and certitude to our thought far beyond the reach of theological speculation made by unaided reason on the data of revelation. As Bishop Ullathorne a little later was to write, 'It is curious that so long as the Immaculate Conception was believed, received, and preached with a simple unreasoning faith, as it always was in the East, there was no difficulty about it. The moment reason touched it it became obscured and darkened, and the language of divines got perplexed. And it has taken six centuries to get from reasoning to faith, and for the wisdom of man to get back to the foolishness of faith.'⁵

The proclamation of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin as a dogma of the Church was made by Pius IX in the Vatican Basilica in the presence of more than two hundred cardinals and bishops from all over the world. The definition was made in the following terms: 'by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the blessed Apostles Peter and

⁴ *Mary Mother of God*, Vassall-Phillips, 4.77.x. (*The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, Vol. I, p. 526).

⁵ *Letters*, p. 60.

Paul, and by Our own, We pronounce and define that the doctrine which states that the most Blessed Virgin Mary was, in the first instant of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ the Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God and is therefore to be firmly and unswervingly believed by all the faithful'.

Our Blessed Lady is the Mother of God, because her Son is both God and man. Her motherhood is in as close a relationship with God as a mother is with her son. Yet her Son is her Redeemer as well as ours, since her sinlessness is achieved by 'preventing' grace flowing from his cross. And so God showered upon Mary all the gifts and graces which befitted her to be the Mother and Spouse of God. Accordingly she is, as the Bride of Christ, Queen and Lady of heaven and earth, and whatever privilege has been granted to any of the Saints, has been bestowed on her in a more eminent degree.

'Thou art all beautiful, Mary, and in thee is no stain', is the Church's prayer in the Office for the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Although a creature like ourselves, and utterly dependent upon her Creator, no shadow of sin was ever allowed to touch her most pure soul. And it was nearly four years after the authoritative definition of this revealed truth that our Lady herself appeared at Lourdes to a peasant girl and spoke to her in the Basque language, saying: 'I am the Immaculate Conception'.

The crowning glory of Mary's peerless sanctity is her glorious assumption into heaven which was proclaimed by the present Pope as a dogma of faith in the Jubilee year of 1950. Thus we are reassured that our Lady's all-pervading influence is not restricted to any time or place, for she remains for ever united to her Son, in the borderland of eternity.

The brilliance of our Lady's immaculate sanctity is best seen against the background of dark shadows. This tormented world is filled with ungodliness and sin. Her free submission to God's design brought her into a close partnership with her Son's redemptive work at every stage.