

custom and country. Once it was Loretto or Compostella: now it is Lourdes or Fatima. But what seems specially enduring about Lourdes is the absolute identity of its message with the words and works of the Gospels themselves. Nowhere else in the world can you feel so surely the presence of Christ and of his Mother, who now, as then, says: 'Do whatever he tells you'.



## OUR LADY AND HER ROSARY

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THOSE who accuse the Church of mariolatry would do well to study the history of mariology. Of our Lady more than of any other creature it can be truly said that she has had greatness thrust upon her; true, she foresaw it, and humbly stated it when she sang, 'Behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed'; but the honour, the glory, the veneration were not of her seeking, and when they came to her it was first of all as a result of defending the truth about her Son; and as they grew and grew through the ages their effect was, as she would wish, to increase men's love and understanding of her Son; while on the other hand attempts to destroy her *cultus* and deny her greatness have ended in a denial of the divinity of her Son. She began by declaring, 'Behold the handmaid—the chattel—of the Lord'; and her words summarize not only her life and personality but the story of her *cultus* as well.

If one were to ask, for instance, whether the apostles believed in what is commonly called the Immaculate Conception—the doctrine that Mary was preserved from all taint of original sin—or thought of and revered her as Queen of Angels, the answer would presumably be, no: they had had no occasion to think of her in such terms. Obviously they held her in deep veneration as the mother of their Lord; but she was still Mary of Nazareth: she became known and revered as Queen of Heaven not suddenly and *per saltum* but as a result of a long, gradual and homogeneous development, and a development which was at first not devotional but theological.

The folly of confusing sacredness of office with personal holiness seems to be a quite recent phenomenon: many modern Catholics seem to think—in bland defiance of the facts of history—that a Pope must *ipso facto* be a saint, or, for that matter, that a man who writes 'spiritual' books must be a spiritual man. Earlier ages suffered from no such delusions; no one ever had a deeper or more vivid veneration for the papal office than Catherine of Siena, for instance, yet no one could be more outspoken and scorching in denouncing the moral shortcomings of the holders of that office. In the same way the early Christians saw no immediate connection between the immensity of Mary's vocation and her own personal glory: in what is sometimes called the 'official' Gospel—that of Christ's ministry, from baptism to ascension—Mary is not specially exalted; on the contrary, when she and her relatives come to claim our Lord's attention he seems to ignore her; St Paul in Galatians speaks of the incarnate Word simply as 'born of a woman';<sup>1</sup> and the attitude of some of the early Fathers can be seen in their reading of the story of Cana, in which they see Christ as rebuking his mother, either because she doubted (Tertullian) or because she sought glory through his power (Chrysostom).<sup>2</sup> The first chapters of Luke underline her unique dignity: 'The holy Spirit will come upon thee, and the power of the most High will overshadow thee'; 'How have I deserved to be thus visited by the mother of my Lord?'; 'From this day forward all generations will count me blessed';<sup>3</sup> and while there is still no explicit attribution of personal sanctity, still less of sinlessness, one can say that the germ of all that will follow through the ages is contained in the threefold idea of Mary as overshadowed by the Spirit, as mediating (at Cana) between men and Christ, and (at the Cross, according to an age-old application of Christ's words to John) by being made the mother of all mankind.

In the first centuries the Church had to safeguard the truth about Christ from two opposing errors: that of denying the reality of his humanity, and that of denying his divinity. It was to counter the first of these heresies that the phrase *natus ex Maria* was

<sup>1</sup> Gal. iv, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Misunderstanding of our Lord's reply to his mother has often been due to a misreading of the sense of his words: 'Woman' is, in the original idiom, a term not of rebuke but of honour; the rest of the phrase can mean simply 'Leave it to me'. (Cf. Lagrange. *Evang. s. S. Jean in ch. ii, 4.*)

<sup>3</sup> Luke i, 35, 43, 48.

formulated: the Christ-man was really formed in the womb of Mary; on the other hand it was to assert Christ's divinity that the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) declared Mary to be *Theotokos parthenos*, the virgin Mother of God. The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) reiterates this definition, and in so doing closes this stage of mariological development—the stage of precise doctrinal definitions; and there will be no further official development until 1854. But meanwhile the theological interest in and discussion of the personality, the attributes, the status of Mary continue: Anselm explores the question of her close relationship with the Trinity; her greatness (greater than that of the angels) is elucidated; the idea of her sinlessness becomes clearer until it develops into the controversies concerning the immaculate conception—if she was sinless she was not in need of redemption by Christ, which cannot be true since she is a member of the human race and the human race as a whole was under the bondage of sin; if on the other hand she was redeemed she cannot have been sinless, which derogates from the dignity of the Word born of her flesh—controversies which were finally settled by the recognition that she was indeed redeemed but by preservation, not by liberation, from original sin.

In the middle ages a new approach is discernible, no longer so predominantly intellectual but now more affective; the age of chivalry, of courtly love, of the exaltation of woman, brings a marked growth in the *cultus* of Mary in, so to speak, her own right: she had always been venerated, she had been portrayed in Christian art, but always with her Son: now she is portrayed alone, she becomes Our Lady, *Notre Dame*, a sovereign, a Queen; at the same time she becomes also the refuge of sinners, interceding for them: there is in other words a simultaneous development of interest in and devotion towards her as Queen of glory and as the mother of men, of sinners, praying for them to her Son. This latter aspect of her place in the Church and the world's history was the subject of renewed theological speculation about her exact rôle in the work of redemption: her *fiat* was recognized as a free act of acceptance of her rôle and therefore as the beginning of a true co-operation; it was seen moreover as given, as St Thomas says, *loco totius humanæ naturæ*, speaking for mankind as a whole; the passion of Christ is linked with her freely given and suffered compassion, and his universal love and redemptive will are linked with her universal motherhood. The attacks upon her

during the Reformation period again produced a renewal of study and a greater precision of definition regarding her graces, her knowledge, her sufferings, her glory, her power, her mediating intercession at the throne of God; at the same time the precise nature of the *cultus* due to her was explored, and the term *hyperdulia* invented: a veneration much greater than the *dulia* given to all the saints, yet infinitely removed from the adoration which is due to God alone. The development in the seventeenth century, largely under French influence, was not entirely felicitous, tending as it did to the florid, the rhetorical, the unctuous, to a devotion in which can be discerned the germs of modern *bondieuseries* and repository art.<sup>4</sup>

With the nineteenth century we come to the great age of 'mariophanies', of Lourdes and the rest; and these in turn led, or helped to lead, to that yet greater concentration on the power and importance of Mary, her loving activity within the redemptive plan, which is characteristic of our own century. Yet always these accretions of glory seem to flow from her back to her Son: it is as when Dante, looking into the eyes of Beatrice, sees reflected in them not his own image but that of Christ. Her greatest glory is, as it always was, to give glory to him. To think of Lourdes as a purely personal glorification of Mary would be entirely wrong: its affirmation of her divine motherhood is an implicit affirmation moreover of the legitimacy of religious development, of 'popular' forms of piety;<sup>5</sup> the emphasis here as in other shrines on the rosary

<sup>4</sup> What a heart-felt relief it is to turn, from the turgid sentimentality of modern 'devotions' to the Mother of God, to such splendid things as the prayer which Villon, the rascal-poet, wrote for his old mother—

*Dame du ciel, regente terrienne,  
Emperiere des infernaux palus—*

and which was so beautifully paraphrased by Synge:  
'Mother of God, that's Lady of the Heavens, take myself, the poor sinner, the way I'll be along with them that's chosen.

'Let you say to your Son that he'd have a right to forgive my share of sins, when it's the like he's done, many's the day, with big and famous sinners. I'm a poor aged woman was never at school and is no scholar with letters, but I've seen pictures in the chapel with Paradise on one side, and harps and pipes in it, and the place on the other side, where sinners do be boiled in torment; the one gave me great joy, the other a great fright and scaring; let me have the good place, Mother of God, and it's in your faith I'll live always.

'It's yourself that bore Jesus, that has no end or death, and he the Lord Almighty, that took our weakness and gave himself to sorrows, a young and gentle man. It's himself is our Lord surely, and it's in that faith I'll live always.'

<sup>5</sup> 'Popular' is not at all the same thing as 'debased': valuable developments of theology and ultimately of defined doctrine have come from the devotional life of the people;

is after all a recall to the 'mysteries' of Christ's life and passion; and the 'message' of all these appearances, the call to a *metanoia*, to a change of heart, to repentance and prayer, is a call to accept, acknowledge and serve the sovereignty of Christ and to live within the framework of his redemptive plan.

Thus we can see the essential office of Mary as being not only to bring us grace from Christ, but to lead us back to Christ, just as we can see the essential purpose of her motherhood of men as revealing to us, and leading us back to, the motherhood of God. At the same time, she—who is so often liturgically identified with Wisdom and with the Church, leads us back to the essentially *motherly* nature of the Church.

We think of the Church as 'summed up' in the person of our Father the Pope; and we are right; so too every parish is in a sense summed up in the person of the priest, the father, who is its pastor; though to be accurate we should think here of the *ecclesia docens*: it is the teaching, authoritative, jurisdictional aspects of the Church which are summed up in the papacy. Even so, the personal infallibility of the Pope derives from and expresses the infallibility of the Church: it is the Church, in the last resort, that 'has the mind of Christ'. And we think of the Church not as father but as mother. Too often nowadays the aspect of the Church as life-giving or life-renewing Mother is overlaid and obscured by an exaggerated preoccupation with its paternal aspects—with the legal, the canonical, the penal aspects of authority. True, in the Christian ideal, law and life are one; but it is possible to separate them, so that law is de-vitalized into legalism. Dr Erich Fromm defines a patriarchal society in terms of an authoritarian, hierarchical, legal social-system; a matriarchal society as one in which the moving force is to be found in the laws of blood, love, and the solidarity of all humanity;<sup>6</sup> the Church can be seen as a matriarchy not in the sense of being 'run by women' but inasmuch as the paternal-legal aspects of its life must always be ensouled by the maternal aspects, the endless

but popular devotion can 'go wrong' just as on another level theological speculation can go wrong; to approve of popular forms of prayer or worship (e.g. the rosary) is certainly not to approve of such disastrous phenomena as the 'Lourdes hymn' or the *objets de piété* which pullulate in Lourdes and other shrines; nor can we deny the undeniable fact of a good deal of naive superstition masquerading as religion within the Christian family.

6 *The Forgotten Language*, pp. 190-1.

torrent of life-giving waters, the laws of blood and love and solidarity, the all-embracing Cross, the font-womb which is the comfort of the afflicted and the refuge of sinners.

All this is vividly illustrated for us in the rosary. In the first place, we tend to think of it as a prayer to our Lady, and the bulk of the words we say are indeed addressed to her; but the *Hail Mary* is in fact bracketed between the prayer to our heavenly Father and the praise of the Trinity; and the events and truths recalled in the mysteries are concerned primarily not with Mary—from some of the events she is absent altogether—but with Christ, and then with his Mother precisely as his mother-to-be or mother-in-being and, finally, as queen and mother of all men. During her Son's earthly life she is with him when (and only when) she is needed, to serve and help him; when he is gone she mothers for a time the *pusillus grex*, the little flock which is the infant Church; and when, his glory accomplished, it is time for her to be glorified in her turn, her triumph does but underline for us, bring home to us, the love and mercy, the nearness, the motherhood, of God.

Some Catholics find it difficult to pray the rosary; and sometimes no doubt the reason is that despite its all but universal appeal, it is not 'their' prayer, they are temperamentally unsuited to it; but perhaps more often it is because they set about it the wrong way. There are the words to be said, the beads to be told, the events to be considered, and underneath all this there is the essence of all prayer, the awareness of God; and they find this multiplicity confusing, distracting, and they scold themselves for being unable to concentrate on all these things at one and the same time. But why should they? There are various ways of praying the rosary, and we can pick and choose according to our different temperaments or the needs and moods of the moment. We can, if we will, concentrate on the words we are saying ('Mother of God, pray for us, sinners'); or, knowing what we are saying, we can turn our immediate attention away from the individual words and phrases and concentrate on the scene with which we are concerned and with the ideas it suggests, its relevance to our own lives; or again, while retaining a vague awareness of the scene (whether as mental image or as idea) we can give all our attention to the divine love which lies behind it and is expressed through it: we can rest in the immobility of the divine reality which is

mediated to us through the moving panorama of the temporal events. We can do now one or another of these things, free and tranquil of mind; we can also do them all simultaneously if we remember that the essence of prayer is the awareness of God and that all the other activities comprised in the saying of the rosary can be of great help precisely in stilling the other levels of the personality and so making this deep awareness possible. Women often find it easier to concentrate on a lecture if they can do some knitting during it; in the same way the telling of beads can tranquillize the body and help the mind to concentrate; the vague awareness of a picture in the imagination (vague because quiet, unstrained) can similarly help to keep that faculty stilled; words, too, if they are used in the same effortless sort of way, can occupy and still the body, the imagination, the surface of the mind, and so allow the essential process to take place in the deeper levels of the soul, in the 'fund of the spirit'.

It seems reasonable then to suppose that the praying of the rosary should involve not great mental strain and effort but on the contrary a feeling of freedom and tranquillity. Indeed for those who have made themselves familiar with it, and who love God and his mother, this must surely be the case unless they put unreasonable demands upon themselves. The rosary is a unity; its various mysteries are all part of a single pattern, so that the words or events of one scene may well lead the mind to think of another or of the total pattern or again of some parallel between them and something—whether realized or hoped for—in our own lives. As we begin the joyful mysteries the 'Behold the handmaid' of the first mystery may remind us of the 'Behold from henceforth' of the second, or of the 'Behold the Man' of a later mystery, or again of how that initial humility, the humble acceptance of things whether great or lowly as they are, is the key to the fulfilling of the pattern in our own lives as in these others, the key to the creative living of our lives, to learning from and being reborn through the experience, the joys and sorrows, of which our lives are made up and out of which the final glory is to be fashioned. There is no harm in allowing ideas and images to float thus to and fro in mind and imagination provided that they do not stray too far from the pattern or some point in it or some application of it or from the reality behind it, and provided also, once again, that this gentle activity has a quietening effect on the

personality as a whole and so enables the deeper levels to be tranquil, attentive, receptive.

It is in fact soothing to allow the fingers to play with well-worn, well-loved beads, the lips to murmur again and again a well-loved phrase, the imagination to linger over a well-loved scene, the mind to consider a familiar but always evocative story or idea; on the other hand we know how quickly, when we make an effort to recollect ourselves, to concentrate, the body begins to fidget, the mind to wander, the imagination to lead us off into endless irrelevancies; we know that if we attempt to pray we shall almost certainly be distracted after the first few moments, our attention will wander and perhaps we shall fail for quite some time to advert to the fact that it is wandering. But the solution to our difficulties does not seem to lie in tremendous effort and stress and strain, for these can never bring about in us that tranquillity which is the condition of awareness. The solution must lie rather in learning to be humble and patient and gentle. If at the beginning of our time of prayer we have made an initial act of adoring awareness of God we need not be discouraged by the fact that our attention to him is so short-lived, so piece-meal. If for some part of the allotted time we can keep our surface-consciousness occupied with divine things as the rosary can help us to do we should rejoice: we are doing well, and our inability to do more must be taken as part of those human limitations which we have humbly to accept as part of ourselves; but even if we fail to achieve this much we need not think our time is wasted: our initial attention and intention have laid open to God's impulse and influence the 'fund of the spirit', and in the fund of the spirit what matters most is not what we do but what is done in us. 'He that is mighty hath done great things in me, and holy is his name.' In the Mass (explicitly in the *epiclesis* of the Greek rite but equivalently in the Roman Canon too) we pray that when we have fulfilled all the external requirements of the rubrics, and when the earthly offerings of bread and wine have been brought to the altar and duly prepared, the quickening Spirit may come, the Fire may descend upon the altar, so that the offerings 'may become for us the Body and Blood' of the incarnate Word. The rosary too gives us 'external' things to occupy—and enrich—the periphery of consciousness, the beads, the words, the images; but these things will best fulfil their purpose if they make all



things quiet in us, so that then, our 'house being now at rest', we may allow unimpeded entry to the quickening Spirit. We pray to and think of our Lady, but it is essentially in order that she may lead us to her Son; we think of the human events in the life of that Son, but it is essentially that we may be led *per humanitatem ad divinitatem*, through those human things to the divine reality they express and reveal. We pray, 'Mother of God, pray for us, sinners'; but it is essentially in order that through growing in love and understanding of the motherhood of Mary we may be led to know and love and adore, to accept and so be renewed by, the creative Motherhood of God.



## OUR LADY IN TRADITION

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THE centenary year of Lourdes has drawn the attention of the world as it was drawn in that wonderful year 1858. Some approach with an attitude of reverence, others with a faint but somewhat sceptical admiration, and there will no doubt be others who greet the celebrations with a scoffing smile of contempt. So far, however, there has been little sign of scoffing or contempt. Indeed the most striking thing that has appeared since the opening of the centenary year was, not the enthusiastic crowds of pilgrims who assisted at the ceremonies of February 11, but the dignified and respectful way in which the great journals of the secular press reported the event. They showed no fumbling or hesitation in the use of Catholic terminology; they spoke of 'the Blessed Virgin' and 'Saint Bernadette' without the use of inverted commas, nor was there any hint of scepticism about the visions or the miracles of Lourdes.

In tone and spirit it was worlds away from the old cheap insult of the late Dean Inge about 'the lucrative imposture of Lourdes'; or from the less impolite but equally contemptuous observation of the learned Cambridge don who, when writing of the theophanies and miracles of the old pagan shrines, proceeded to say: 'Aristides believes in the healings of Asclepius at Epidaurus as