

OUR LADY¹

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They that work in me shall not sin, they that explain me shall have life everlasting.—ECCLESIASTICUS XXIV, 30, 31.

AS Dominicans we pride ourselves on having a special devotion to our Lady. If that means that we consider ourselves to have *more* devotion to her than other orders or other Catholics generally, then our pride is foolish and based on a manifest untruth. It is hard to think of a single order or organization in the Church which doesn't pride itself on a special devotion to the Mother of God. But surely we are not reduced to infantile competition on 'who loves Mother most'. What our special devotions ought to mean is that we all love her in different, characteristic, ways. And our characteristic Dominican way, I would suggest, of loving our Lady, is to give her the service of our minds as well as of our affection. All love presupposes knowledge to some extent, our love should both presuppose it and generate it to the greatest possible extent.

After all, our motto is *Veritas*, Truth, and our principal function in the Church is the apostolic one of preaching the truth. Now there is no denying that one of the greatest obstacles which hinder Protestants from taking kindly to the truth of the Catholic faith, is the great place taken in it by the blessed Virgin. It is not that they object to her as a person, or wish to blaspheme her, but it is a fact that there is really very little about her in the gospel or the New Testament as a whole, and so our devotion to her, the average Protestant quite sincerely considers, is a sort of excrescence or growth on the pure gospel of Christ. I suppose their feelings on the matter could be rationalized by putting it like this; the Bible gives us God's great design for our salvation, in it we find the guiding principles and rules by which that design proceeds—and practically all your Catholic doctrines about the Virgin Mary seem to be exceptions to those rules. The Immaculate Conception is the most obvious case.

¹ A sermon preached to a Congress of Dominican Tertiaries on the feast of Our Lady of the Snows, August 5th.

Well, of course, there is no denying it, our Lady is a magnificent exception to all the rules. But that, to my mind, is precisely what makes her, as the teaching of the Catholic Church paints her, so very biblical a figure. The Bible, you might say, from our point of view, is scarcely anything more than a long account of God breaking his own rules over and over again. The very pattern of God's salvation is exceptions to the rules. We have a special word for this foible of God's for making apparent exceptions to the rules—we call it 'grace'. And so it is quite proper that our Lady, who played such an important part right at the centre of God's gracious scheming for our salvation, should present the most flagrant exception to most of the rules.

Perhaps we will be able to see how our Lady fits into the pattern of God's grace if we consider one of the titles we give her in the Litany of Loreto, 'Mirror of Justice'. Justice here, I think, does not simply mean the virtue of justice, it means first and foremost justification. Justification, the making of sinful godless people into upright people who are pleasing to God, the turning of bad people into good people, that is the basic activity of God's grace. Since we were all of us born in sin, we have all, even the most respectable of us, begun by being sinful godless people, and have all needed to be justified, or made just, by God's grace, in order to be turned into good people who are pleasing to God. That then is what our Lady is a mirror of, God's justification. But she is a mirror, if we can put it like that, which reflects the light on both sides; she is both a mirror of God's justification as it is received in us, a mirror of the justified, of the faithful, of the Church, and a mirror of God's justification as it is in God, a mirror of God's saving, redeeming activity.

In the first of these aspects, then, our Lady stands for, she reflects, the Church, in so far as she has received personally in herself all the graces and privileges which God has bestowed on his Church. She shares with the Church one of her oldest titles, the second Eve to our Lord's second Adam. She is given this title by St Irenaeus of Lyons, who was martyred about 200 A.D., and you can see the beginnings of it even in St John's gospel. He recalls how our Lord twice called his Mother 'Woman', once at the wedding at Cana, and the second time on Calvary. The point of that strange form of address is that it echoes what Adam said when God had made Eve out of his rib, and brought her to him

to see what he thought of her; he said, 'This now is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; and she shall be called "Woman" because she was taken out of man'. Later on in the story of Adam and Eve, after they had committed the first sin, and received the sentence of God, the Scripture says that Adam called his wife Eve, because she is the mother of all the living—it is a pun on the Hebrew name. Now what did our Lord say to his Mother from the cross? He said 'Woman, behold thy son', he was making her, in other words, mother of all the living, of all who live the true life of grace. Mary is the mother of us all, and so is the Church of Christ the mother of us all, the Church which was formed from the side of Christ pierced by the lance just as Eve was formed from the side of Adam; Christ dead on the cross, Adam in the deep sleep into which God had cast him. That is one of the oldest and most consistent commentaries, made by Christian writers from the earliest times, on the description St John gives us of the piercing of our Lord's side with the lance. 'And there came forth blood and water', he says; and he clearly thinks that this fact has some important meaning, because he goes on, 'And he that saw it has given testimony, and he knows that he speaks true, that you also may believe'. And the meaning, according to this consistent tradition of Christian writers, is that the blood and water represent the sacraments of the Church, and so stand for the Church in her sacraments, through which she gives us life and is our mother.

So our Lady, the second Eve, the mother of us all, stands for, personifies, the Church's motherhood of us all. But she is a perfect picture of the Church in more ways than that. She is a virgin mother, and so is the Church. St Paul tells the Corinthians, 'I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ'. Virginité is the great biblical symbol for sinlessness. In our Lady the symbol and the thing symbolized, virginité and sinlessness, absolutely coincide. Her real and perfect sinlessness represents the ideal sinlessness of the Church, which will only be made fully real in the Church triumphant after the last day. Only then will the Church of Christ be wholly 'without spot or wrinkle or any such thing'. But that perfect freedom from sin which the Church will only enjoy at the end, has been really embodied and personified in the perfect freedom from sin which our Lady has enjoyed from the beginning. Her Immaculate

Conception is not just something we can honour and admire from afar; it is something which we can look forward, in some sense, to sharing.

Now let us see how the Mother of God is the mirror of God justifying as well as of the faithful justified. She is so, precisely because she is God's mother, and not just our mother, as Eve was. She is more than the second Eve, just as her Son is more than the second Adam. Eve, after all, was not Adam's mother as well as his wife. Who was his mother then? Well, of course, he hadn't got one, or a father for that matter, in the literal sense; but just as we can say that God was his father, so we can say that God, that the divine Wisdom which is God, and which the Old Testament often presents to us in feminine terms, was his mother. Now the Church has long been accustomed to apply what the Old Testament says about the divine Wisdom to our Lady. The text I chose is a case in point. In doing this I don't think the Church is just playing with Scripture and giving it a meaning, for the purposes of worship, which the sacred text will not bear if read in its context, though that is an opinion many reputable people do hold. The Church is justified in so using the figure of divine Wisdom, as the Old Testament represents it in the guise of woman, because there is a genuine relationship of similarity between God's Wisdom and our Lady. Our blessed Lord is the divine Wisdom, the Word of God, the wise utterance of God, incarnate; as St Paul says, he is the Wisdom of God and the Power of God. His Mother is its perfect, unblurred reflection; as the fairest of creatures and the summit of creation, she is the supreme created representative of God's wisdom.

For the ancient Hebrews there was something very natural about picturing God's Wisdom as a woman and a mother. It is true that women among them had an inferior social position. No queen, as the wife of a king of Israel, ever had much influence in public affairs, except perhaps for the unspeakable queen Jezebel. Since kings like David and Solomon had so many wives, this is not surprising. But while a king might have many wives, he only had one mother, and the queen mother did have a position of great prestige and influence. The Book of Kings nearly always tells us the name of the king's mother when it announces his accession to the throne; and it describes the scene when Solomon received his mother, Bethsabee, when she came to make a request

—he rose from his throne and bowed to her and seated her at his right hand.

And that surely is the great position our Lady occupies, as the most perfect representative of God's Wisdom. She is the Queen Mother of Christ our King, deep in the counsels of God. That, perhaps we can say, is at least partly how her Assumption fits into the designs of grace. As Solomon rose and received his mother, so Christ in his glory stooped down and took up his Mother to sit enthroned beside him.

Christ is the Wisdom of God, his Mother perfectly reflects the Wisdom of God. Let us try and fix the meaning of this by looking at a saying of our Lord's in St John's gospel, 'He that comes to me shall not hunger, and he that believes in me shall never thirst'. The divine Wisdom, when we possess it as it is, will satisfy our uttermost desires. But our Lord is here alluding to, and apparently reversing, some words from the Old Testament, from the same book and chapter from which I took my text, in which Wisdom says: 'They that eat me shall yet hunger, and they that drink me shall yet thirst.' Before we possess the Wisdom of God incarnate as he is in himself, before we see him as he is, in St John's words, we are given a foretaste of that Wisdom which does not satisfy, but only whets our appetites; the better we try to get to know the Mother of God, the harder we study in the book of God's Wisdom which she is in person, then the more eager we shall be and the readier we shall be to have our hunger and thirst for ever satisfied at Christ's table in his kingdom.