

lead him on the one hand, and only so far as fidelity to human reason will permit him on the other, he draws the following prudent conclusions: first, that Mary being the Mother of God was higher and more privileged than any human creature; secondly, since he believed that others were sanctified and cleansed from original sin before birth, then he ought to say as much at least of her; lastly, that she was therefore set free from original sin before she came from her mother's womb, but at what point of time he was unable to declare. The Church has informed him and us, in words provided by St Thomas, on the point of time: not *before* her body was animated by her soul; not *after* her body was animated by her soul; but, in the *very instant* when soul and body were united, the redemptive grace of her Son saved her soul from contracting the stain of original sin with which her body, descended from Adam and Eve, was waiting to infect it.



MOTHER OF OUR CREATOR

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HAIL, then from us, O holy mystical Trinity, who has gathered us all together in this church of Mary, the Mother of God. Hail, from us Mary, Mother of God, majestic treasure of the whole world, the lamp unquenchable, the crown of virginity, the sceptre of orthodoxy, the indestructible temple, the dwelling of the Illimitable, Mother and Virgin, through whom he is called in the holy Gospels "Blessed who cometh in the name of the Lord". Hail, thou who didst contain him in thy holy virginal womb, who cannot be contained, thou through whom the Holy Trinity is glorified and adored throughout the world; through whom heaven rejoices, through whom the angels and archangels are glad; through whom devils are put to flight; through whom the tempter-devil fell from heaven; through whom the fallen creature is taken up into heaven; through whom all creation, held fast by the madness of idolatry has come to the

knowledge of the truth; through whom holy baptism has come to believers, and the oil of gladness; through whom churches are erected throughout the world; through whom the nations are brought to repentance. And what more shall I say? Through whom the only-begotten Son of God has shone forth, a light "to those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death", through whom the prophets foretold, through whom the apostles preached salvation to the nations; through whom the dead are raised, and kings reign.¹

These words were written over fifteen hundred years ago by one of the eastern Fathers of the Church, and yet they contain the same sentiments which arise in the hearts of all devotees of Mary during this, her special month of May. We praise and extol our heavenly Mother first of all for what she is in herself, always acknowledging however that what she is has been brought about by the grace of God; and then we proceed to remind her of all that she through her perfect correspondence to that grace has done for us.

When we speak of May Devotions our memory immediately recalls to us the voice of our parish priest giving out the notices for the week, or perhaps we glance at the times of the services as we are borne through the church porch by the exit crowd after Mass on Sunday. These devotions were sanctioned by Holy Mother Church in a brief of Pope Pius VII on 21 March, 1815, in which an indulgence of 300 days was granted to the faithful who practised them either in a church or in their homes. They consisted of prayers addressed to our Lady, usually the rosary and the litany, to which in our own times is often added Benediction. But it was about thirty years later that this form of Marian devotion was introduced into England by that indefatigable Rosminian, Father Gentili, and Mother Margaret Hallahan, O.P., was instrumental in bringing about the first post-Reformation procession of our Lady.

These special prayers and services held to honour Mary during May are not meant to be the summit of our devotion to the Mother of God, indeed they are only the starting point, for real devotion consists in an understanding of and a striving to imitate that to which we are devoted. Therefore they are only a means

¹ From sermon of St Cyril of Alexandria preached before the Fathers of the Council of Ephesus in 431. (Homily 4. *Acta Conciliorum Œcumenicorum*. 1, 1, 2, 102-103.)

to an end, namely a perfect understanding of Mary as she was on earth, her virtues, particularly her humility and obedience; her dealings with her fellow men, and perhaps most of all the selflessness with which she placed herself at the disposal of her Son. This understanding will lead to imitation which, in so far as it reaches perfection, will determine the greatness of our share in the happiness of our heavenly Mother. This month then is set aside for general devotion to our Lady; that is, no particular part of her life is chosen out to occupy our thought, but we practise then in a more concentrated way our normal devotion of extolling the praises of the Mother of God and strive to imitate more perfectly the virtues of her who is the model of virtue. Later in the year we see that the Church suggests for us a particular Marian devotion, that of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to which the month of August is dedicated. Surely it is most fitting that this devotion should thus be chosen out since Almighty God himself chose and fashioned her throughout eternity and made her, after the humanity of his Son, his most perfect creation, his spouse and his mother.

Separating these two months of Mary come two others which are dedicated to the Sacred Humanity of her Son: June, set aside long since to the devotion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and July almost rivalling it with the time-honoured cult of the Precious Blood.

The Sacred Heart. At once we see before us a statue clothed in red and white, with long flowing locks and an expression of forced sympathy if not downright unconcern. How unlike our Blessed Lord! How unlike the man who worked hard in an unknown village for thirty years for us, the man who lived an intensely active life for three years, walking the countryside, homeless; trying to tell uninterested and worldly people about the kingdom of their Father in heaven! Yet we know that this man was the eternal God who had entered our life by taking to himself our human nature. This man who always seemed to take the side of sinners and wrongdoers was God, this man who befriended outcasts and strangers was God; he who embraced little children, who had his own special friends, who dared to discuss the minute details of the law with the most learned, was all the time the eternal God who had become man for our salvation. And only too well do we know that this God-Man, after three years were over, proved to us why he came to earth

at all: 'This is the greatest love a man can show, that he should lay down his life for his friends.'²

A love of the Sacred Heart means a love of Jesus himself: a love of Jesus working, living, suffering, dying, that will be quick to notice how selfless, patient, approachable, meek and humble he was and yet at the same time how full he was of manly courage and bravery. This devotion will not be found in prayer-books; it will spend itself in the service of our fellow men, both those who are actual members of the Mystical Body and those who are only members in potentiality, but nevertheless real ones. Most of all, perhaps, it will reveal itself by our thinking those 'thoughts of peace'³ and striving to pass them on to other hearts in these days of discord and misunderstanding amongst men.

From the Heart itself we pass on to its life-stream, the Precious Blood: that blood of which Mary was the sole human agent and that blood which must have torn her mother's heart whenever she saw it being shed. This blood which, as we know, is the price by which we were ransomed, was not only poured forth on Calvary. Although the gospels only record the Circumcision, we can be sure that Jesus as a tiny child fell and grazed himself many times, that as a boy working in St Joseph's carpenter's shop he cut himself with chisel or saw, and many other occasions whilst playing with his friends which caused the precious stream to flow. There is also something else to consider: it is blood which enables our limbs to work; a member is useless to the body if the arteries supplying it with blood are empty. Therefore every action which our Lord performed can be traced ultimately to the efficacy of the Precious Blood. But of course our thoughts on this subject always fly to Calvary, to the scene where the immense love of Jesus was poured forth even to the last drop, and perhaps if, or when, we have attained the perfection of the devotion to the Sacred Heart as much as is possible in this life, we shall want to repay that love with a similar one—that of giving our life for him.

To close these four months we have in August the devotion to the sinless heart of Mary. If it was not for this heart perhaps the other three would have different subjects for our meditation. It is quite true that it was God's plan that Mary should be the mother of his Son, but this did not rob her of her free will; if it had done

² John xv, 13.

³ Jeremias xxix, 11.

we could not claim her as a member of our race. When Gabriel brought God's message to her our Lady could have refused: it was only because she wanted with all her heart to do the will of God, however impossible it seemed, that she pronounced the *fiat* which moulded the destiny of the ages.⁴ Mary's heart was empty of all things except God. This heart was not held down to earth by distractions of any kind—our Lady had them, of course—she was a woman, a wife, a mother, she had a home, a family, relations, friends, next-door neighbours; but where Mary differed from us in this matter is that she gave them all to God to settle and did not spend time solving them for herself.

This sinlessness of hers in which she was created through the foreseen merits of her divine Son and in which she persevered by her dogged correspondence to God's grace is the source of many of her other privileges. Mary was preserved from the first moment of her existence from all stain of sin because she was to be the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. 'Therefore may God forbid that anyone should attempt to defraud Holy Mary of her privileges of divine grace and her special glory. For by a unique favour of our Lord and God she is confessed to be the most true and blessed Mother of God. She is truly the Mother of God not merely in name as a certain impious heresy claims, because she gave birth to a man who later became God, as we call the mother of priests and bishops such, because she gave birth not to a priest or a bishop but to a child who later became one. Not thus, I say, is Holy Mary the Mother of God, but rather because in her sacred womb was accomplished the mystery that, by reason of a singular and unique Unity of Person, even as the Word is flesh in flesh, so the man is God in God.'⁵

A person so full of the love of God as Mary was could not contain this love within herself. We know that our Lady was not an active missionary, she did not go about Galilee preaching the doctrine of her Son, but what she did do was more important. Because all her life was spent in his hidden service with no thought of self she was able in that supreme moment of trial to offer her dearest possession to God. And because of this sacrifice which her motherly heart freely made, our Holy Mother the Church has

4 'Through the Annunciation, the consent of the Virgin given in place of the whole human race was awaited.' (St Thomas. *Sum. Theol.* III. q. 30 a. 1.)

5 The Commonitory of St Vincent of Lerins, Chapter 15.

given to Mary the title of Co-Redemptrix, the one who worked with the Redeemer. Since our Lady continues her work for us in heaven, for as Queen she stands at the right hand of the King always asking him to give us all the graces which she as a good mother perceives her children to need, we can truly give her the title of Mediatrix of all graces. 'It is clear then that we are very far from attributing to the Mother of God the power of producing supernatural grace, a power which belongs to God alone. Because, however, she transcends all others in holiness and in the intimacy of her union with Christ, and because she has been drawn by Christ into association with the work of human salvation, she merits for us congruously, as they say, what Christ merited for us condignly, and she is the principal Minister of the graces to be distributed.'⁶

The purity, the integrity, the perfection of the heart of Mary made it fitting that this organ of the human body, symbol as it is of love, should not in her case be overcome by the after-death penalty of our race that is the corruption of the grave; and so a short time after her death this most pure body was re-united to its complement in heaven, her perfect soul. Our Holy Father Pope Pius XII before defining the dogma of our Lady's Assumption spoke the following words: 'Therefore, the venerable Mother of God, united with Jesus Christ in a mysterious way from all eternity "in one and the same decree" of predestination, in her conception immaculate, a virgin inviolate in her divine motherhood, a noble associate of the Divine Redeemer, who won complete victory over sin and its consequences, received at last the supreme culmination of her privileges: to be preserved from the corruption of the sepulchre, and, like her Son before her, with death vanquished, to be carried aloft in body and soul to the exalted glory of heaven, and there as Queen to be resplendent at the right hand of her very own Son, the immortal King of the ages.'⁷

There then in heaven is Mary our mother and just as she carried out the will of her Son whilst on earth so she continues to please him in heaven. 'Woman, behold thy son',⁸ said our Lord to his mother when he was hanging on the cross. At that moment

⁶ A.A.S. Pius X. 1905, 150-155.

⁷ A.A.S. *Commentarium Officiale*. 32 (1950), 753-771. John xix, 26.

⁸ John xix, 26.

Mary became the mother of a countless number of souls, and now from her throne of glory she is ever making intercession for them, ever preparing a place for them, so that one day all her children may find an everlasting resting place in their Father's home.

'An angel chieftain was sent from heaven to greet the Forth-bringer of God with Hail! Then seeing thee, O Lord, take flesh he is wonder-rapt, and standing crieth out with no lips of flesh to her:

Hail! by whom true hap had dawned.

Hail! by whom mishap has waned.

Hail! sinful Adam's recalling.

Hail! Eve's tears redeeming.

Hail! height untrodden by thought of men.

Hail! depth unscanned by angels' ken.

Hail! for the kingly throne art thou.

Hail! for who beareth all thou bearest?

Hail! O star that bore the Sun.

Hail! the womb of God enfleshed.

Hail! through whom things made are all new made.

Hail! through whom becomes a Babe their Maker.

Hail! through whom the Maker is adored.

All we who psalm thy Son give praise to thee as to the living temple, O God's Forth-bringer; when within thy womb dwelt the Lord who holdeth all in his hand, he hallowed, honoured thee, and taught all to cry to thee:

Hail! tabernacle of God and the Word.

Hail! holy beyond all holy ones.

Hail! ark gilded by the Holy Ghost.

Hail! unfailing treasure-house of life.

Hail! precious diadem of godly Sovereigns.

Hail! worshipful honour of a worthy priesthood.

Hail! the Church's unassailable tower.

Hail! indestructible wall of the Kingdom.

Hail! thou whereby war-trophies are set up.

Hail! whereby foes are stricken.

Hail! my body's healing.

Hail! my soul's saving.

O Mother whom all must hymn, O thou who hast brought forth the Word most holy beyond all the holiest, take our present

offering, keep all from every hurt, and deliver from all wrath to come those who cry to thee. Alleluia.⁹

Nature seems to set forth her treasures in a scheme resembling that of our Holy Mother the Church. In May everything has come to life again; the young green of the trees and the fresh scent of flowers assures us that winter is now past. She who is Queen of the May ushered in him who is the life and light of the whole world and by so doing lifted the curse of darkness brought upon us by our first mother Eve, and so very appropriately we celebrate the feast of her Queenship on the last day of the month.

June brings perfection, everything at its best, each glorifying its Creator according to its kind, each reflecting a ray of beauty from the Sacred Heart. An air of expectancy fills July; myriads of flowers have shed their petals and the fruit is forming secretly just as the merits and the fruits of the Precious Blood which are applied to our souls at Baptism must remain there and ripen, until God's time comes for us to scatter them abroad. Our cycle is completed by the month of August when nature is in her glory: all the labour of ploughing and planting is forgotten, for the fields are now ripe to the harvest, all that remains to be done is to gather it into the barns. The heart of Mary certainly yielded the hundredfold, 'full to the brim, pressed down and flowing over'.¹⁰ What a proud Farmer Almighty God must be when he beholds this work of his hands, now reigning with him in heaven.

We too belong to the harvest, whether we are a full sheaf or just a seed dying in the ground. May she, who brought forth the Flower of David, bring to perfection what has been planted in our hearts, so that we also may be sowers and not only doers of that Word who came to earth in our flesh, to give his life (Heart) as a redemption (Blood) for many.

⁹ From the early 6th-century Akathistos Hymn. Translation by Vincent McNabb, O.P. (Blackfriars, Oxford, 1947.)

¹⁰ Luke vi, 38.