

THE MYSTERY AND 'THE MYSTERIES'

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AS October, the month of the Rosary, is here, our thoughts may well turn to the consideration of the position of our Blessed Lady in the life of the Church as a whole and in our own. In some minds this consideration arouses misgivings. Does the trend of modern Mariology tend to give her an exaggerated prominence, they ask? This fear is almost as old as heresy, yet it troubles even devout Catholics today. Are popular forms of devotion to our Lady such as the Family Rosary, Perpetual Novenas, the Fatima cultus, being used as escapes from the basic obligations of religion, leading away from God and not to him? Does the widespread de Montfort consecration with its stress on 'All through Mary' conflict with a spirituality which seeks to centre everything on the Mass? Isn't the use of the Rosary at Mass an obstacle to the spread of the liturgical spirit through a wider use of the Missal? Queries such as these may be only academic difficulties of the theorists. But they can also be genuine anxieties to pious souls to whom they present themselves in a practical and sometimes an acute form. They may be solved from various angles. Here we will merely suggest that the Rosary, so often the bone of contention, can prove the means of reconciliation both in theory and in practice; and that at what might be regarded as the heart of the matter, viz. the relation of the Rosary to the Mass.

To take this line is only to follow the lead given by the Popes. Leo XIII ordered the daily recitation of the Rosary during October either in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament exposed or during Mass, and this decree has not been rescinded by his liturgically-minded successors. In his Encyclical on the Liturgy, *Mediator Dei*, Pope Pius warmly encourages the use of the Missal, dialogue Masses and the like, as ways of enabling the faithful to take a more intelligent and active part in the Mass. But he goes on to say that such methods do not suit everyone, nor even the same people at all times, and that it is possible to achieve the same end

'in ways which many may find easier; for example, by devoutly meditating on the mysteries of Jesus Christ, or by performing other religious exercises and saying other prayers which, though different in form from liturgical prayers, are by their nature in keeping with them'. (M.D., 115.) Although the Rosary is not explicitly mentioned here, it clearly satisfies the conditions laid down. After such authoritative guidance who would make bold to suggest that there is any fundamental incompatibility between the forms of devotion and worship typified by the Rosary and the Mass? Rather should we set out to make plain the extent of their harmony and the way in which the one can serve to supplement the other and make it more fruitful.

In the Rosary the recitation of set vocal prayers is combined with meditation on certain events in our Lord's life. As a whole this does not form part of the Liturgy, yet each single prayer is found either in the Divine Office or the Mass itself. The mysteries which are considered are all incidents from the life, death, and resurrection of Christ which are also unfolded before us in the course of the Liturgical Year, and many of which are recalled in the Mass. But there is a difference. They are called 'mysteries' because the external, historical events enshrine and show forth a spiritual reality in such a way that 'each of them is, according to its nature and in its own way, the cause of our salvation'. (M.D., 176.) In the Rosary we recall these incidents to our minds, striving so far as in us lies to 'imitate what they contain' so as to 'obtain what they promise'. It might remain a cold and lifeless representation of past events, a subjective recollection. But in the Liturgy, on the other hand, the inner spiritual reality is made objectively present as the source of the grace which it represents and is intended to reproduce in us. Thus, far from there being any incompatibility between the Rosary and the Liturgy, they are identical in their 'subject matter' and complementary in their approach to it. The one promises and prepares for what the other produces, largely in the measure of our preparedness. St Gregory Nazienzen once told his congregation: 'We cannot offer a gift more pleasing to God than to offer ourselves with a perfect understanding of the Mystery'. Many persons

may find it easier to reach such an understanding of the mysteries of the Liturgy by meditating on them in the Rosary than by the use of the Missal and the Breviary, though those for whom both methods are possible will tell you how the one wonderfully illuminates and implements the other. The texts of the Mass and Office will often throw new light on some familiar scene from the Rosary, while the remembrance of the historical setting of a feast and its place in our Lord's life may serve to make plain the application which the Liturgy makes to our own. What is essential is that we should 'come into contact with his mysteries and, so to speak, live by them' (M.D., 176). The form of prayer which most helps us towards this is the best for us.

Although we speak of the 'mysteries' of Christ's life, they are, in a sense, only one, the mystery of the redemptive Incarnation. This is God's great 'Deed', of which Mother Julian speaks, planned from all eternity and only to be completed with the end of time. In the divine plan the Son of God and his Mother are necessarily and inseparably united. God became man in order that we might be redeemed and so that the merits of his human life should be the source of the sanctification of our own. Those merits were to be made available to us by his sacrificial death on the Cross and applied to us through the Mass which is the essence of Calvary's sacrifice perpetuated in our midst. Thus his life on earth and life in his Mystical Body, his sacrifice on the Cross and in the Mass, the meriting and the application of our redemption, are but different phases of the same process, various aspects of the one work. And as our Blessed Lady was vitally involved in the one, it is impossible for her to be separated from him in the other.

In the stories of our Lord's infancy we repeatedly read: 'They found the Child with his mother'. He *needed* her. Humanly speaking he could not have existed without her. On Calvary she stood by his Cross, not just as a spectator or a sympathiser but as an actor, playing a part in the drama, second only to his own. Before he could die, he had to be born, and he had asked her consent before becoming incarnate in her womb. While the angel awaited her *Fiat*, the fate of the human race hung in the balance. Had she refused

it, the redemption as God had planned it could not have taken place. By her acquiescence she became a subordinate but necessary agent in the whole process of redemption, a secondary but universal source of every grace which should be given to men. Her Son's dependence on her and submission to her throughout his earthly life, have a parallel relationship in the life of grace which continues for all eternity. If the mysteries of the Rosary are meditated from this point of view, it will become clear how our Blessed Lady is intimately involved in the whole liturgy, and how all genuine devotion to her *must* bring us nearer to her Son and make us ready to receive the graces of the liturgy which we owe to her as well as to him.

The same holds good as regards the Mass in particular. It is no 'distraction' to be thinking of our Lady or praying to her during the Holy Sacrifice. As she stood on Calvary, so must she be spiritually present wherever the Mass is offered. Her part in the Sacrifice is the same now as then. Jesus is her Son as well as God's and she has rights over him. As his Mother, she delivered him for us really and freely in union with his Father in heaven. In union with Christ himself she offered for our salvation the life she had given him, the body and blood which had been formed from her substance and which she had carried in her womb. Above all, she was one with him in the inner offering which this sacrifice expressed and which remains the same in the Mass though the outward expression is changed. Man had sinned by an act of refusal and rebellion, the refusal to accept his dependence on God his Creator and rebellion against his command. It was the denial of the obedience and worship which he owes and which God insists he shall give. The redemption was to be effected by the reversal of this act; by God becoming man, accepting the condition of the sinful creature, and becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. It was by this final act of obedience and worship that man would be effectively redeemed, but every act of Christ's life from the first moment of his Incarnation was an expression of obedience to his Father's will, the worship of God through the willing acceptance of all that the position of creature involves. And in all this his Mother's life

was only the echo of his own. Her: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord: Be it done unto me according to thy word', completely sums up the attitude of man in the face of his Creator. That attitude is the essential feature of all worship and sacrifice, of Christ's, our Lady's and ours. That is what sharing in the Mass really means. Not just following the prayers in the Missal or even joining in the chant, but uniting ourselves 'closely and of set purpose with the High Priest and his minister on earth . . . offering ourselves as a spiritual victim . . . in union with our divine Head crucified' (cf. M.D., 110, 105). On the Cross our Lord suffered for us and in our place, while in her willing co-operation in the Incarnation and the Redemption our Blessed Lady spoke in our name and represented us all. Now it is for us freely to ratify what they did on our behalf. We shall not find a surer way of doing this than to echo our Lady's *Fiat* by our loving acceptance of God's will in all the details of our life, and by that obedience to his law which Fr Martindale has aptly called 'worship in the sphere of behaviour'. Then the Mass will be for us, as Calvary was for her, only the culmination and final consecration of a life wholly offered to God in union with the sacrifice of his Son.

Here again the Rosary can be an immense help. The complete cycle of its mysteries can be seen in terms of the one mystery of the redemptive Incarnation; of the preparation for Christ's sacrifice, its actual realisation, and its reward and consummation in the glory of heaven, already enjoyed in soul and body by Jesus and Mary and held in store for us all. By pondering on our Lady's share in this sacrifice, we shall come to understand the part she still plays in the application of its merits and the nature of the co-operation which is demanded of us. Meditation on the historical details of Calvary can bring home to us what sharing in the Mass means. The mere physical presence which the Church imposes in fulfilment of the obligation is not enough. The bad thief hung close to Christ in his agony, but he was not promised Paradise as was his repentant companion. There were many spectators who never dreamt that it was God who was dying, and dying for them. Even Christ's friends who were full of grief and sympathy had no understanding of

what was at stake. They were united to Christ's sacrifice by a virtual intention and so shared in its merits, but they did not do so deliberately and consciously. Only his Mother understood all and deliberately willed and shared in his offering. If the place of the Mass in our lives is to be what God intends, she, and no one less, must be our model.

One final point. We have spoken of acquiescence, acceptance, obedience. These must not be understood to imply passivity in the sense of inaction. Rather they imply receptivity, open-ness to God's action, that docility which is the essence of the gifts of the Holy Ghost. Once we surrender to God, he can use us, act through us. Our Lady's *Fiat* resulted in the Incarnation and her becoming Mother of God. Through our Lord's submission to the death of the Cross our redemption was effected. Our Lady's compassion made her Mother of all men. The Mass has been called the highest act of contemplation. It is also the most powerful form of apostolate. It is only to the degree that our selves and our lives are given over to God in union with our Lord in the Mass that our work for souls will bear fruit. We must humbly offer ourselves as God's servants, as Mary did, before he will make us partners in his work.

Lourdes, Fatima, Consecrations to our Blessed Lady, the Angelus, the Rosary and the rest: all these devotions lead to and are fulfilled in the Mass. Anything which really draws us closer to Mary will end by bringing us to her side at the foot of the Cross. But of them all the Rosary is surely the most comprehensive and the most precious. Educative in the truest sense of the word, it leads the mind to understand and the will to embrace the inner truth of the mysteries which it contemplates and which the Mass and the Liturgy fulfil. The Mass attended in the spirit of the Rosary and the Rosary prayed in the spirit of the Mass would do much towards bringing about what the Holy Father says should be the aim of the people's participation in the Liturgy in any form: 'that the souls of those present be united as closely as possible to the divine Redeemer, that their lives may become holier and holier, and the glory of the heavenly Father be ever increased.' (M.D., 118.)