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Mater Dolorosa, Mater Misericordiae

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Here I want to offer an interpretation of one of the most striking but in some ways least congenial aspects of late medieval English (and European) piety. The late Middle Ages was one of the most exuberant and productive periods of Mariological devotion, which manifested itself in devotional treatises and prayers, in poetry, music and the visual arts. The theological content of much of this, however, is now looked on with some suspicion and incomprehension, and the extraordinary centrality of Mary in the religious consciousness of Christians in the period from Anselm to Luther would now be pretty generally attributed to a defective Christology. Thus the apparently almost desperate late medieval reliance on the Virgin Mary as intercessor, friend of sinners, Mother of Mercy, is often taken to have stemmed from a fear of Christ and a sense of his remoteness from sinful, frail humanity. Christ on the rainbow coming in judgement, the *Rex Tremendae Majestatis* of the *Dies Irae*, was the *Rex Iustitiae* who would weigh men and women by their actions, and before such a dreadful scrutiny, who could stand? The suffering, weak and tempted Christ of the Gethsemane narratives and the Epistle to the Hebrews, in the course of the great Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries, and in the millennium of missionary expansion that followed, had been divinised out of his humanity. Catholic Christology, while paying lip-service to that humanity, had succumbed to a practical Nestorianism.

Into the vacuum left by this process the longings of the collective Christian heart for an assurance that God was indeed compassionate, tender, understanding, *human*, forced the figure of Mary, and it was she, not Christ, who came to be addressed as Most Gracious Advocate, the Christian's Life, Sweetness and Hope. I suppose the most spectacular example of this transference is the use of the figure of Wisdom in such passages as Proverbs 8 in the Marian liturgy:¹ ironically, it could involve an infinite regress. Mary herself could become remote, seen as omniscient and so on: there are signs that the late medieval devotion to St Joseph was at least in part an attempt to compensate for this, and

Thomas à Kempis composed a prayer to Joseph asking him to 'render thy spouse, the most blessed Virgin, propitious to us, and obtain from her that we, unworthy though we are, may be adopted as her beloved children'.² This process is taken to have been as destructive for healthy Mariology as it was for Christology. Hilda Graef, in the standard English handbook to the history of Mariology, characterises much of the Marian piety of this period as 'pagan rather than Christian', and claims that 'the intimate union between Mary and the church, so clearly seen by the Fathers and still in the earlier Middle Ages, was increasingly replaced by the view of Mary as an individual—whether as the despairing Mother under the Cross or the Queen reigning in Heaven. This development from the objective to the subjective ... (led) to a decadence that finally induced the reformers to turn altogether away from Marian devotion.'³

Graef's indispensable book was first published in 1963, a year before the Second Vatican Council's epoch-making chapter on the Virgin Mary as Type of the Church in *Lumen Gentium*. Her dismissal of the decadence of late medieval Mariology bears some of the marks of a manifesto for the new, or revived, emphases of the sixties. While I would not wish to defend the madder extravagances of medieval Mariology, it does seem to me that Graef and many other interpreters of the Marian piety of the three centuries before the Reformation have read it unsympathetically, and, to that extent, wrongly. Medieval Mariology, like the medieval liturgy and most medieval preaching, operated within an essentially symbolic and metaphorical universe of discourse. By bringing to bear on this symbolic material post-Enlightenment notions of meaning and truth twentieth-century historians of doctrine, like sixteenth-century reformers, miss its meaning. In what follows I want to consider the presentation of the Virgin in devotional literature and iconography under two of her most typical medieval titles—that of *Mater Dolorosa*, and *Mater Misericordiae*: as I hope will emerge, these two titles have the advantage of allowing us to consider Mary in both the characters referred to by Hilda Graef, the 'despairing Mother under the Cross', and 'the Queen reigning in Heaven'. I shall discuss the two titles separately, attempting to draw out their main characteristics, and the difficulties they present to modern interpreters. I shall then try to suggest both the connections between the two titles, and a reading of them which, by attending to their symbolic character, meets at least some of the criticisms of their theological weaknesses. I shall suggest that, far from reflecting a radically defective Christology, the titles and the nexus of images and themes they stood for offer an unexpectedly rich and sympathetic attempt to explore the saving significance of the Incarnation.

The title *Mater Misericordiae* is, if you will forgive the unforgivable pun, one of the most pregnant in Catholic spirituality—enshrined in the

Salve Regina, certainly the most beautiful of Western Marian prayers, it remains current in a way that, in the English-speaking world at any rate, that of *Mater Dolorosa* does not. The precise origins and authorship of the *Salve* are unknown, though it is certainly an eleventh-century composition: by the mid-twelfth century its singing had become a regular part of the liturgical year at Cluny, and from there spread outwards, being taken up first by the Cistercians, and then by the Dominicans.⁴ The adoption of the *Salve* at Cluny is not difficult to understand, for there was already a cult of the mercy of Mary in the community—the effective founder of Cluny’s greatness, St. Odo, was accustomed to invoke her by the title *Mater Misericordiae*, and he was imitated by subsequent abbots.⁵ The *Salve* itself, however, did not at first call Mary Mother of Mercy, but Queen of Mercy—it originally ran ‘Salve, Regina Misericordiae, Vita, Dulcedo, et Spes nostra, Salve...’⁶ The insertion of the word ‘Mater’, with its overtones of tenderness and dependence, seems to have occurred some time in the thirteenth century; it was a natural outcome of the Cluniac patronage of the *Salve*, and that note of humanity and tenderness no doubt partly accounted for the astonishingly wide appeal of the prayer in its final form. Nevertheless, it is important to grasp that the notion of the Mother of Mercy throughout its early history retained the resonances implicit in the older form. Mary was Queen of Mercy because Jesus was King of Justice: the title carries the submerged notion that Mary is merciful where God, and Christ as Son of God, is severe. Mary averts the just anger of God, and compels or persuades her Son to be merciful.

It will be clear that this idea has disturbing implications, which St Bernard, for example, does not hesitate to spell out. It is true, he says, that God gave us his Son to be the Advocate for sinners, yet sinners may well fear him, since ‘though he was made Man, he yet remained God. Do you want to have an advocate even with him? Have recourse to Mary’. Man, he says elsewhere, ‘needs a mediator with the Mediator’, and this is the ‘sweet and gentle’ Mary—as the *Salve* has it, ‘O Clemens, O Pia, O Dulcis Virgo’.⁷ This contrast was given startling and stark expression by many medieval writers, like the unknown author whose sermon on the Assumption was till 1952 accepted as the work of St Bonaventura, and who claimed that ‘The Blessed Virgin chose the best part because she was made Queen of Mercy, while her Son remained King of Justice; and mercy is better than justice’.⁸

The Mother of Mercy, then, is our defender in extremes. As the *Speculum Humanae Salvationes*, one of the most popular devotional texts of the later Middle ages, has it,

Godde has his regne departid in partis two jentillye,
That one kept for hymself, that other gyven til Oure Ladye.
He kepes til hymselfen justice, delyvered til his Modere mercye,

With the first he us menaces, with that other helps us Marye.⁹ In practical terms this meant Mary's protection against God's anger, expressed in the form of three arrows—famine, plague and war—with which he punishes the universal sins of pride, avarice and lust. This was conventionally represented in images of the Mother of Mercy with her cloak spread wide, under which cowering men and women shelter. God the Father or Christ were often portrayed above, discharging arrows which skid harmlessly off Mary's cloak. This was a potent image of Mary's role as protectress of her clients, and was at first taken up by the Cistercians to glorify their order, then by the Dominicans, and, through them, adopted as the emblem of many lay confraternities.

It had an irresistible universal appeal, however, and the use of the image for Dominican Rosary Confraternities, aimed at the widest possible clientele, helped universalise the image.¹⁰ While many of the surviving images of *Mater Misericordiae* are clearly exclusive—the sheltering souls under her mantle are members of religious orders, or clothed in the robes of a particular confraternity—there are also many in which the sheltering clients are clearly intended to represent the Christian people in general, the children of the *Mater Omnium*. Featured in statues, banners and paintings, it was also frequently reproduced for a mass audience in cheap woodcuts, and the very wide currency of the Dominican *Speculum*, which contained a woodcut of the image, extended its use.¹¹ In general the text of the *Speculum* laid great emphasis on Mary's intercession with her Son—as in the passage where it recounts a vision in which St Dominic sees

...Crist fro the heven, his right hand uplyftng
 Thre speres ageynst this werld and with wroth ihere shakyng
 But Oure Lady Marie als mediatrice came nere
 And softyned hire dere sons ire with hir succurable
 prayere...¹²

This maternal intercession with the Son was frequently expressed in another image, that of Mary displaying her breasts to her Son, reminding him that he was once a weak and defenceless human child dependent on her love, and reminding him too of her credentials in her role as advocate for sinners: this Latin hymn attached to a woodcut of the Assumption neatly epitomises this line of thought—

Si nos damnet reos Natus
 Noxa iudex implacatus
 Monstra, Mater, ubera!¹³

It would be misleading to suggest however, that defence against Christ's anger dominated the notion of Mother of Mercy, for in the popular piety encapsulated in the title the other elements loomed at least equally large—

A Diaboli infestatione, et a mundi tentationi.¹⁴

A recurrent theme in sermons, devotional works and the world of popular piety is that of rescue from the devil, or from the consequences of our own sins. The most common story here, used again and again in sermons, reproduced in paintings, stained glass, carvings (in both Notre Dame in Paris and Ely Cathedral) and woodcuts, dramatised and set to music, is the early medieval legend of Theophilus, a holy cleric devoted to the Virgin who becomes soured by disappointment when he is not chosen bishop, sells his soul to the devil, but is rescued by his heavenly patroness, who wrenches the contract from the devil, often kicking or stabbing him with the cross in the process.¹⁵

This power of the maternal mercy of Mary even in the teeth of the Devil is behind the title 'Empress of Hell' often given her in late medieval writing. It is beautifully revealed in a story from the section on the Assumption in the Golden Legend: I give it in Caxton's version.

There was a man the whiche was ravysshed in judgement tofore God, for he had moche synned. And the devyll was there and sayd, ye have no thyng on this soul but it ought for to byn myn ... for yf he hathe done ony good dedes the wycked dedes passeth the good withoute comparyson ... And our Lord sayd, bryng forthe the balaunce, and late all the good and evyl be weyed, and than veryte and ryghtwysnes sayd to the synner, renne with all thy thoughte to the Lady of mercye which sytteth by the Juge, and studye to call her to thy helpe, and whan he had done so, the blessyd vyrgyne Marye came to his helpe, and layde her hande upon the balaunce on the syde where as were but few good dedes, and the devyl enforced hym to draw on the other syde, but the moder of mercy wanne and obeyned and delyvered the synner. And thenne he came agayne to hymself and amended his lyfe.¹⁶

Caxton has here slightly altered his text: in the latin version *Veritas* and *Justitia* advise the sinner to flee not the the Lady of Mercy—i.e. the *Queen* of Mercy, but 'ad *matrem* misericordiae, quae juxta dominum sedet': Caxton's perhaps inadvertant moving of the image closer to the original version of the title neatly illustrates my point about the prevalence of the King of Justice/Queen of Mercy conception underlying the use of the title Mother of Mercy. And there is even an echo of this dubious contrast between the Mercy of Mary and the Justice of God in the late medieval liturgy itself. In 1348, during the Black Death at Avignon, Clement VI composed a votive Mass, 'pro mortalitate evitanda'. The Sequence of the Mass is an impassioned plea for Mary's help—

Eia, Mater terge fletum
tempestatis tolle fretum
cor moestorum redde laetum,

jam preces subveniant.
Proles parcit si peroras
mater ergo rumpe moras;
posce tuum Filium.

(Ah, Mother, wipe away the tears, raise up the tempest-tossed, make the heart of the mournful rejoice, let our prayers come quickly to you. He spares if you plead, therefore, Mother, put an end to delay, plead with your Son.)

The post-Communion prayer is even more pointed.

Exaudi nos, Deus salutaris noster: et, intercedente beata Dei genitrice Maria, populum tuum ab iracundiae horroribus liberum, et in misericordia tua fac tua largitate securum. Per Dominum ...

Certainly, the Mercy which is asked for here is God's own—*misericordia tua*—but it is Mary's prayers which are expected to avert the 'terrors of (God's) anger'. It is significant that when this Mass came to be revised for the post-Tridentine Missal, all reference to the Virgin was removed, thus eliminating any hint that Mary was more merciful than God himself. But such a suggestion does seem hard to avoid in considering the tradition I have been discussing: indeed, at its most blatant the cult of the Mother of Mercy became a lucky charm or a form of fire insurance for the impenitent. The Virgin herself complains of this, in a letter to Zwingli, in Erasmus's satirical dialogue, *A Pilgrimage for Religion's Sake*.

A prophane soldier, hired to butcher people, cries upon me, 'Blessed Virgin, give me rich booty'. A gambler cries, 'Help me, blessed saint; I'll share my winnings with you!' ... A woman who abandons herself to a life of shame cries, 'Give me a fat income!' If I refuse anything, they protest at once, 'Then you're no Mother of Mercy.'¹⁷

The devotion to Mary as *Mater Dolorosa* epitomises a dimension of late medieval religion which at first sight strikes a modern Anglo-saxon sensibility as strained and unhealthy, or at best sentimental. The whole tradition of the grief-stricken mother by the cross has deep roots in Christian tradition, both in the Latin west and in Eastern Christendom, especially Syria, none of which can be explored here.¹⁸ As it developed in the later middle-ages in Europe it had a variety of functions, high among them that of serving as an objective correlative for the discharge of grief and suffering in the face of successive waves of plague sweeping through Christendom. As one might expect, much of the writing and visual art in which the theme of Mary's sorrows was expressed is over-fervid, even

hysterical. But the essence of the devotion was that evident in what is arguably its noblest expression, the *Stabat Mater*. Here the Virgin's grief is presented, not as an end in itself, but as a means of arousing and focussing sympathetic suffering in the heart of the onlooker. In this literal *compassion*, this identification with the sufferings of Christ by sharing the grief of his Mother, lay salvation.

Eia Mater, fons amoris
Me sentire vim doloris
Fac, ut tecum lugeam.

(Come then Mother, the fount of love, make me feel the force of your grief, make me mourn with you.)

Fac me tecum pie flere,
Crucifixo condolere,
Donec ego vixero.

(Make me weep lovingly with you, make me feel the pains of the crucified, as long as I shall live.)

Juxta crucem tecum stare,
Et me tibi sociare
In planctu desidero.

(I long to stand with you by the cross, and to be your companion in your lamentation.)

Fac, ut portem Christi mortem,
Passionis fac consortem,
Et plagas recolorere.¹⁹

(Grant that I may carry within me the death of Christ, make me a partner in his passion, let me relive his wounds.)

This quest for a share in the sufferings of Christ, through identification with Mary, dominates the piety of Christian Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: it gives rise to literally thousands of treatises, hymns, poems, sermons, and devotional images, and the Sarum Missal, like other pre-Tridentine rites, provided a *Missa Compassionis sive Lamentationis beatae Mariae virginis*.²⁰ It was an integral part of the intense cultivation of passion piety, with its attendant realism, reflected in the changing iconography of the crucifix itself, which is so characteristic of the period. Its rationale was set out in the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, Nicholas Love's translation of which was the

most popular English book of the fifteenth century.

A man behoved to rayse up all the sharpenes of his mynde & open whyde the inere eghe of his soule in to be-holding of this lesside passione ... and ... make hym-selfe present in his thoughte as if he sawe fully with his bodyly eghe all the thyngys that be-fell abowte the crosse and the glorious passione of our Lord Ihesu ... For he that incerches it with depe thoghte and with all hys hert lastanelly, he sall fynde full mony thynges there-in stryande him to newe compassionne, new luffe, newe gostely comforthe, and so salle he be broghte in to a newe gostely swettnesse.²¹

Mary was a natural focus for this attempt, for she had stood by the cross, supported by John the beloved disciple, when the rest of the Apostles had fled. Her mother's grief could be dramatised so as to melt the hearts of those whom the stark facts of the crucifixion left untouched.

Quis est homo qui non fleret
Matrem Christi si videret
in tanto supplicio?²²

(Who is there would not weep, were he to see the Mother of Christ in so great anguish?)

The question was dramatised in a thousand forms—

I said I coud not wepe I was so harde hartid:
Shee answered me with wordys shortly that smarted,
'Lo! nature shall move thee thou must be converted,
Thyne owne fadder thys nyght is deed!'—lo thus she thwarted—
'So my son is bobbid
& of his lif robbid'.
Forsooth than I sobbid,
verifying the words she seid to me
who cannot weep may lern at mee.²³

Every parish church contained an image of this Mater Dolorosa, for all were dominated by the Rood across the chancel arch, invariably flanked by the mourning figures of Mary and the Beloved Disciple.

Other images, however, proliferated to sharpen the point. Of these the most widespread was the Pieta, which spread in England in the course of the fifteenth century: there was a typical one at Long Melford in Suffolk, 'a fair image of our Blessed Lady having the afflicted body of her dear Son, as he was taken down off the Cross lying along on her lap, the tears as it were running down pitifully upon her beautiful cheeks, as it seemed bedewing the said sweet body of her Son, and therefore named the *Image of our Lady of Pity*'.²⁴ We have the recorded response of an East Anglian bourgeois woman to one of these images. Margery Kempe

tells us that once she entered a church where there was an image of Pity, and

thorw the beholdyng of that pete hir mende was al holy occupied in the Passyon of owr Lord Ihesu Christ & in the compassyon of owr Lady, Seynt Mary, be wech sche was compellyd to cryn ful lowde & wepyn ful sor, as thei sche xulde a deyd. Than cam to hir the ... preste seying, 'Damsel, Ihesu is ded long sithyn.' Whan her crying was cesyd, sche seyde to the preste, 'Sir, hys deth is as fresch to me as he had deyd this same day, & so me thynkyth it awt to be to yow & to alle Cristen pepil. We awt euyr to han mende of hys kendnes & euyr thynkyn of the dolful deth that he deyd for vs'.²⁵

Crude devotional woodcuts of Our Lady of Pity circulated, surrounded by a border in which were portrayed the emblems of the passion, to enable the beholder to meditate on Christ's sufferings one by one, thus meeting Margery's demand that all Christians should think of 'the doleful deth that he deyd for us'. Such images were often accompanied by an indulgence—'Whosoever devoutly beholdith these armys of Cristis Passyon hath 32,755 yeris of pardon'. Very similar indulgenced woodcuts circulated under the same title of 'The image of pity' which portrayed not Mary with her Son's body, but only the wounded Christ, as Man of Sorrows; the point is important, for it emphasises that the essence of the cult of the Mater Dolorosa was to turn attention to the Christ of the passion, not to Mary as an end in herself.²⁶

That is not to say, of course, that the cult of Mary's sorrows did not take on a dynamic of its own. It would be easy to build up a dossier of material illustrating the extravagances to which the devotion led. In much of the literature produced under its influence Mary is an hysterical figure, who faints, shrieks, tears her hair and pleads for death: at times she resembles the banshee more than the austere sketched figure of the Fourth Gospel.²⁷ Moreover, the cult gave rise to some dubious theorising about the degree and character of Mary's co-redeeming activity on Calvary.²⁸ It was a common view that Mary suffered in her heart all the pains that her Son suffered in his body, and that she offered him to the Father as a sacrifice, thus gaining an intimate and unique participation in his saving work—as Arnold of Bonneval wrote, 'there was one single will of Christ and Mary, both together offered one holocaust to God: she in the blood of her heart, he in the blood of his flesh'. In this line of thought Mary is, in a unique way, 'adjutrix redemptionis per compassionem'.²⁹

At the very least, these aspects of the devotion might seem to justify Graef's worries about the individualistic and subjective character of late medieval Marian piety, as well as giving grounds for serious theological unease about the threat the cult of Mary posed to a correct

understanding of the work of Christ on Calvary. There is not space here to discuss these issues as thoroughly as they deserve, but they all seem to me in principal resolvable.

To take first the question of emotionalism and subjectivity. Late medieval piety in general has frequently been criticised for the emotionalism which characterises it. The affective tradition as a whole, with its dwelling on the physical details of the Passion and on the emotions aroused in the observer by those sufferings, has been seen as part of a general loss of nerve, an hysterical collapse in the face of the ills of existence. Even if we do not accept the grim estimate of late medieval religion offered in Huizinga's lurid masterpiece, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, the sort of criticism of the affective tradition offered in a book like Simon Tugwell's *Ways of Imperfection* remains formidable. From this perspective, it appears that late medieval piety tended to trap the believer in mere human emotion, substituting a haze of essentially natural feeling for the supernatural reality of faith, thereby reducing God 'to the dimensions of essentially unchanged human affections'.³⁰ To such criticisms of this 'devotionalism' one might add that of the apparent gulf between the restrained spirit of the best of the Liturgy and the often overblown extravagance of much of the material I have been discussing.

There are two ways of meeting these criticisms. The first is to point to those aspects of the liturgy which offered a basis for the extra-liturgical developments of the Virgin's cult. I would point here to the *Improperia*, or *Reproaches*, on Good Friday, and the lessons from the *Lamentations* read at *Tenebrae*, in Holy Week. As is well known, much of the devotional poetry of the Passion composed and used in prayer in the middle ages derived its pattern from the *Reproaches*, where Christ from the cross reminds his people of God's generosity to them, and contrasts it with their treatment of their Saviour, the object being to elicit sorrow and repentance.³¹ The same dynamic is evident in the '*Planctus Mariae*', the literary form at the root of the cult of the *Mater Dolorosa*.³² Even more strikingly, the use of *Lamentations* in the Holy Week Liturgy offers a precise emotional precedent for the tone and character of the devotion to the *Mater Dolorosa*. Many of the strictures of emotionalism and extravagance which can be applied to the bulk of the material could apply just as much to the *Lamentations*, in which Jerusalem, portrayed as a weeping woman, bewails her desolation. The appropriation of passage after passage of the *Lamentations* to the details of the passion provided ample precedent for the poems of complaint and reproach placed in the mouth of the *Mater Dolorosa*—

Weeping she has wept in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks; there is none to comfort her among all those who were dear to her ... O all you that pass by, attend, and see if there be any sorrow like my sorrow ... Let your tears run

down like a torrent by day and by night, and let not the apple of your eye cease ... Jerusalem, Jerusalem, be converted to the Lord thy God. Mourn, o my people, as a Virgin: howl, ye shepherds in ashes and haircloth: for the great and exceeding bitter day of the Lord is coming.³³

But in any case it is quite mistaken to see, in the appeal to *compassion* in the affective tradition in which the cult of the Mater Dolorosa was so important a part, mere emotionalism. Much more was at stake. The ability to feel compassion with Christ was not simply a sign that one was in touch with one's feelings: it was a sign that one was a real human being, and therefore part of the humanity which Christ had redeemed. Christ had suffered for us because he had a brother's love for us: in reciprocating that brotherly love, by penitent compassion, we claim our birth-right, we join the human race. So Stephen Hawes' Christ appeals to us

See me, be kinde:

Againe my paine retaine in minde:

My sweete bloode on the Roode did thee goode, my
Brother...

Thus for thee I smerted,

Why art thou hard herted

Be by me converted...³⁴

The key words here are 'kinde' and 'brother'. *Kind* in the fifteenth century had the meaning we give it—gentle, friendly, affectionate. More importantly, it also carried the sense 'natural'. To be kind meant not merely to be nice, but to be human, to be of the same species: in our context, in a word, to show oneself truly Christ's brother or sister. This theme crops up again and again in the passion devotions of the time, and in it Mary had a distinctive role:

Show that thou art moder one,

And he for thee take our bone

That for us thy child becom,

And of thee our kunde nom.³⁵

Mary's motherhood, displayed as she stood sorrowing by the cross, and in heaven as she exposes her breasts to Christ as Mother of Mercy, was the instrument by which he had become of one kind with us, and the proof that he had done so.

Thou my suster and moder

And thy sone my broder

Who shulde thenne dred?

Whoso haveth the king to broder

And eek the quene to moder

Well oughthe for to spede.

Dame, suster and moder,
Say thy sone, my broder,
That is domes-mon,
That for thee that him bere
To me be debonere—
My robe he haveth opon.³⁶

The appeal to Mary's intercession here is not the expression of a sense of distance from Christ, but precisely the opposite—the symbolic expression of a sense of closeness to him. She is not the bridge we must cross before we can draw near to him, but the bridge by which he has already chosen once and for all to draw near to us. Her symbolic function in the cult both of *Mater Dolorosa* and *Mater Misericordiae* is to stand as assurance that God indeed has become of one kind with us, and is kindly disposed towards us.

The theological source for this is to be found in St. Anselm, and in particular in the third of his enormously influential prayers to the Virgin. It is necessary to quote at some length.

Blessed assurance, safe refuge, the mother of God is our mother. The mother of him in whom alone we have hope, whom alone we fear, is our mother. The mother of him who alone saves and condemns is our mother. You are blessed and exalted not for yourself alone but for us too. What great and loving thing is this that I see coming to us through you? Seeing it I rejoice, and hardly dare to speak of it. For if you, Lady, are his mother, surely then your sons are his brothers? ... For he was born of a mother to take our nature, and to make us, by restoring our life, sons of his mother. He invites us to confess ourselves his brethren. So our judge is our brother, the saviour of the world is our brother, and finally God through Mary is our brother With what affection should we love this brother and mother, with what familiarity should we commit ourselves to them, with what security may we flee to them! For our good brother forgives us when we sin... The good mother prays and beseeches for us, she asks and pleads that he may hear us favourably.³⁷

It is quite clear here that the 'asking and pleading' of the Virgin carries no suggestion that her will towards us is better than that of Christ—he is not an angry, remote judge to be placated. Instead her pleading is the symbolic externalisation of his own humanity, a pictorial representation of the fact that his humanity is our hope. The pleading of Mary is the pleading of Christ's own heart—

.....O Sone allasse!
Thou art his brother; his moder I was;
Thou soked my pappe, thou loved man so;

Thou died for him; mine hert he has,
Quia amore langueo.³⁸

It will have been noticed that I have moved from discussing the Mater Dolorosa once more to discuss the Mater Misericordiae. In fact the two are inextricably linked in the material I have been considering. For it was supremely in her moment of sorrow under the cross that Mary's motherhood of humanity, and of the God-Man, converge. The scriptural basis for that was the Johannine account of Christ's committal of Mary and the beloved disciple to each other, understood by the medieval church as constituting a new familial relationship between his own mother and mankind in general. The notion that it was at the Cross that Mary became truly Mother proved a richly suggestive if sometimes dubiously orthodox notion. It was universally accepted that she had suffered no birth-pangs when Jesus was born, but had brought him into the world without effort, pain, or distress. Now, at the Cross, she learned what it was to be a woman, 'in that hour she had true birth-pangs'.³⁹ While this idea was on the face of it used to exalt Mary, it also had the effect of suggesting that in some way the Cross deepened her humanity; her suffering there makes her more securely a symbol of our common redeemed human nature, and this becomes the meaning of her intercession. In one of the most beautiful of the English *Mater Dolorosa* poems, the fourteenth century lyric 'Stond well Moder under rode', Christ gently teaches his mother the meaning of his death. At the beginning of the poem she is grief-stricken and uncomprehending, preoccupied with his pain and its effect on herself. Christ bids her rejoice, for by his death all humanity will be saved. She responds

Sone, I see thy body biswongen,
Fet and honden thourghout stongen;
No wonder thagh me be wo.

Christ's reply is astonishingly direct
Moder, now I shall the telle:
If I ne deye, thou goest to helle
I thole ded for thine sake.

One could hardly wish for a more direct proof that Mary is here seen as part of humanity at large, in need of redemption. Immediately, she appeals to her frail human nature to explain her lack of self-control in the face of her grief.

Sone, thou art so meke and minde
Ne wit me naught, it is my kinde
That I for thee this sorowe make.

Christ immediately responds by suggesting that the pain she now feels deepens her human knowledge, for now for the first time she knows what other women suffer as they bear their children.

Moder, now thou might well leren
What sorewe haveth that children beren,
What sorewe it is with childe gon.

....

Moder, rew of moder care,
For now thou wost of moder fare,
Thou(gh) thou be clene maiden-mon.

And it is at this point, having as it were earned the right to speak for suffering and redeemed humanity as she joins both in the suffering of her Son and of woman-kind, that Mary becomes Mother of Mercy: she immediately begins to intercede:

Sone, help at alle nede
Alle tho that to me grede,
Maiden, wif, and fol wimmon.⁴⁰

This remarkable poem allows us some sense of the way in which the sorrowing motherhood of Mary allowed medieval Christians to explore the meaning of Christian participation in Christ's sufferings. In it we can see the tradition wrestling with the nature of the union between God and suffering humanity which that suffering had effected, and the way in which our understanding of our own humanity is enhanced by that union. Because, for the most part, the tradition dealt with these issues symbolically, we need to make an effort to grasp just what is going on.

Inevitably, within such a symbolic structure there are tensions, even contradictions. I have been arguing that Mary in this tradition is essentially an inclusive and representative figure, the icon and the means of Christ's rootedness in human kind. It would be possible to cite much material stressing the distinctiveness and uniqueness of Mary, in which her privileges are stressed so much as to hinder this inclusive function. It is hard to see, of course, how the figure of Mary could have served its symbolic function at all unless that figure had been thrown into high relief and become the focus of reflection and elaboration. My own conviction remains, nevertheless, that the central thrust of the tradition is in the direction I have indicated.⁴¹

And, as it happens, we do have a source in which this dimension of the devotion to the sufferings of Mary is explicitly discussed. A number of passages in the *Revelation of Love* of Julian of Norwich suggest that the account I have been offering of the meaning of the cult of the sorrowing Mother of God was one which medieval Christians recognised and accepted. This dimension of Julian's book deserves a paper in itself: here I can do no more than sketch its outlines. In the longer (and later) version of her book, the eighth revelation deals with the 'last pitious peynes of Christe deyeng', and the compassion which the lovers of Christ feel with and for him. This compassion is evoked in language directly drawing on the texts from Lamentations used in *Tenebrae* in Holy Week,

which I have already suggested may have helped form the Mater Dolorosa tradition.⁴² And, as one would expect in the light of the tradition I have described, at the centre of the chapters dealing with this compassion of saviour and creature, Julian sets the Mater Dolorosa:

Here I saw a part of the compassion of our lady Seynt Mary, for Christe and she were so onyd in love that the gretnes of his lovyng was cause of the mekylhode of hyr payne; for in thys I saw a substance of kynd love, continyyd be grace, that creatures have to hym; which kynde love was most fulcomely shewyd in his swete moder, and overpassyng, for so much as she lovid him more than al others, hir panys passyd al others; for ever the heyer, the myghtyer, the sweter that the love be, the mor sorow it is to the lover to se that body in payne that is lovid. And al his disciples and al his trew lovers suffrid panys more than ther owne bodyly deyng ... Here saw I a gret onyng betwyx Christ and us, to myn understandyng; for when he was in payne, we were in payne. And al cretures that might suffre payne suffrid with him.⁴³

The phrase 'substance of kynde love, continued by grace', is not easy to interpret, but it clearly refers to the refinement and perfection of *natural* love and sorrow by grace—the chapter as a whole describes how nature, sky and earth as well as Jesus' human lovers, 'faledyn for sorow *in hyr kynde* in the time of Crists dying ... for sorrow of his penys'. Julian does not flinch from the dangers of 'unchanged human affections'. For her, the compassion of Mary reveals 'a gret onyng betwyx Christ and us'. When he was in pain we were *all* in pain, and with us all created things. One could hardly have a more striking demonstration of the inclusive and symbolic reading of the anguish of the Mater Dolorosa. Her uniqueness is recognised, but it is a matter of degree; she stands for all creation 'oned' with God in the figure on the Cross, a 'onyng' in which the 'substance of kynd love', the response of each created thing according to its nature, has a part.

The inclusive character of the Mater Dolorosa is further brought out in the eleventh revelation, where Christ shows Julian the image of Mary as she stood 'in the tyme of his passion', and the 'hey, marvelous, singular love that he hath to this swete mayden, his blissid moder'. Immediately, however, Julian adds that in Mary 'our Lord God spekyth to al mankynde that shal be save as it were al to one person, as if he seyde: "Wilt thou seen in hir how thou art lovid?"'. And Julian adds in commentary

But herof am I not lerid to longen to seen hir bodyly presense while I am here, but the vertues of hir blissid soule: her truth, her wisdam, her charite; whereby *I may leryn to know myselfe* and reverently drede my God'.⁴⁴

It may be felt that by invoking Julian's account of salvation in connection with this Marian piety, I am carrying out a sleight of hand. Simon Tugwell has argued for Julian's radical transcendence of the devotionalist tradition in which she was nurtured, and which underlay so much of the piety we have been considering. Certainly Julian stands like an oak among scrub in comparison to any other theological writer of the period. But we should not make too sharp a distinction between her teaching and the popular devotional world of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century East Anglia: consider, for example, her sympathy for Margery Kempe, steeped and perhaps trapped in the more extreme forms of that popular emotional piety.⁴⁵ Julian, like most of her Christian contemporaries, gives an important place to feeling, and to the religious value of the pain of human love and human sorrow. 'Nature shall move thee', declares the Mater Dolorosa in one of the poems I have quoted, and Julian's extended discussion of the place of 'kynd' in our salvation, while developing that notion with a subtlety and profundity beyond the reach of any of her English contemporaries, nevertheless takes it as an axiom. I am not, of course, claiming that Julian is in some sense 'typical', only that, writing out of the heart of the piety I have been discussing, this seemed to her its inner meaning: for her there was no conflict between the cult of the feelings of Mary and the Gospel of Incarnation. Julian's Mariology, far from being a compensation for a remote and Nestorian Christology, serves as a profound and beautiful means of expounding the reality of Christ's redeeming humanity.

It may be retorted to all this that had the synoptic picture of Jesus and the Epistle to the Hebrews been taken seriously, the humanity of Christ would not have needed to be explored by focussing on the apocryphally embellished picture of Mary. This seems to me an objection based on an anachronism. For us, to attend to the real humanity of Jesus involves taking seriously his human psychology, his frailty, his fallibility, his individuality. Our definition of what it is to be human is essentially psychological. It was not so for the piety I have been discussing. John Bossy has recently argued that 'kinship' is the key to a correct understanding of the late medieval church's sense of the human community, and of its relationship with God.⁴⁶ If this is true, one would expect late medieval Christians seeking to grasp the reality of the Incarnation not to explore the psychology and individuality of the God-man (though they did not neglect this either). Instead they attended to the fact that God had human relatives and friends. Bossy considers that the expanding cult of the Holy Family, in particular of Christ's grandmother St Anne, and that of the saints in general, were expressions of this notion. Even if this theory is too tidy to be fully convincing as the key to an immensely rich and complex religious culture, it seems to me that Bossy is offering us a profound insight, abundantly born out by the

material I have been discussing. At any rate, there is more than enough evidence to suggest that we need to scrap the notion that this dimension of medieval piety was in some sense a compensation for a defective Christology. That English pre-reformation Christology was partial and one-sided was certainly true: all Christologies, like all anthropologies, are partial. But if our exploration of these devotions has not been entirely astray, it seems clear that in the late middle ages the cult of the Virgin nevertheless expressed a vivid and life-giving grasp of the reality of the Incarnation, in terms of human kinship and human 'kindness'.

This lecture was given on 27 January 1988 at Blackfriars, Oxford.

- 1 Formerly used in the Roman rite, for example, as the Epistle for the feast of the Immaculate Conception; it is still an optional reading in the Common of the B.V.M.
- 2 The best general introduction to the history of Marian doctrine in the later Middle Ages in English is Hilda Graef, *Mary, A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, vol i, (London, 1963). For Joseph, Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. iv. *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300—1700)*, p. 42.
- 3 Graef, *op. cit.* pp 263—4.
- 4 On the *Salve*, Herbert Thurston, *Familiar Prayers*, (ed. P. Grosjean London, 1953), pp 225—45, and *Enciclopedia Cattolica* vol. x, (1953) cols. 1719—21; P. Perdrizet, *La Vierge de Misericorde: Etude d'un theme iconographique*, (Paris, 1908), p 13.
- 5 Graef, *op. cit.*, pp 203—4.
- 6 Thurston, *op. cit.*, p 116.
- 7 Graef, *op. cit.* pp 235—41.
- 8 *ibid.* p. 289.
- 9 Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, (New Haven and London, 1980), pp 165—6: A. Henry, (ed.), *The Mirour of Mans Salvacioun: A Middle English Translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, (Scolar Press, 1986) p 191.
- 10 Perdrizet, *La Vierge de Misericorde, passim*: Baxandall, *Limewood Sculptors*, pp 165—72.
- 11 *Mirour of Mans Salvacioun*, p 190.
- 12 *ibid.* p 187.
- 13 Perdrizet, *La Vierge de Misericorde*, p 247 n 1.
- 14 *Mirour* p 197.
- 15 For the Theophilus legend, see Jacobi a Voragine, *Legenda Aurea Vulgo Historia Lombardica Dicta* (3 ed. Th Graesse, Dresden 1890 reprinted Osnabruck 1969), pp 593—4; Marina Warner, *Alone of all her Sex; The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Paperback ed. London 1985) pp 323—4.
- 16 Caxton version quoted from Daniel Rock, *The Church of Our Fathers* (ed G.W. Hart and W.H. Frere, London 1905) vol. iii p 161n. Latin version, *Legenda Aurea* (ed. Graesse) p 515.
- 17 Text of the Mass in F.H. Dickenson (ed.), *Missale ad Usum Insignis et Praeclarae Ecclesiae Sarum.*, (Burntisland, 1861—83, Gregg reprint 1969) pp 886^c—890^f. An English version will be found in F.E. Warren, *The Sarum Missal in English*, (Alcuin Club 1911) vol 2 pp 227—234. The passage from Erasmus is quoted from C.R. Thompson, *Ten Colloquies of Erasmus*, (Indianapolis 1957) p 60.

- 18 Graef, *op. cit.* pp 81—2, 122—3, 228; Marina Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, pp 206—223.
- 19 Text edited by C. Blume & H.M. Bannister in *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi* (Leipzig, 1886—1922) liv. (1915) pp 312—8.
- 20 *Missale ad Usum ... Sarum* pp 919*—923*.
- 21 I quote from the version in C. Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers* (London 1895) vol I p 198.
- 22 These lines are, of course, from the Stabat Mater.
- 23 Carleton Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century*, Oxford 1939) pp 17—8.
- 24 The description is from Roger Martyn's account of Long Melford Parish Church before the Reformation, printed in Sir William Parker, *The History of Long Melford* (London 1873) pp 70—3.
- 25 S.B. Meech (ed.) *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Early English Texts Society 1940) p 148.
- 26 See the example reproduced opposite p 87 of Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London 1972).
- 27 F. Antal, 'The Maenad under the Cross', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, Vol I (1937—8) pp 79—83. Graef, *op. cit.* pp 261—3, and compare the relatively restrained account of the Virgin's behaviour under the Cross given by Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* pp 192—3.
- 28 Graef, *op. cit.* pp 267 ff.
- 29 *ibid* p 273.
- 30 Simon Tugwell O.P., *Ways of Imperfection* (London 1984) p 165.
- 31 The best treatment of this subject is J.A.W. Bennett, *The Poetry of the Passion*.
- 32 Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford 1968) p 255 ff.
- 33 These passages are selected from the first and third nocturnes of Tenebrae in the Post-Tridentine Breviary from Maundy Thursday onwards.
- 34 R.T. Davies, *Medieval English Lyrics* (London 1963) p 259.
- 35 M.S. Luria and R.L. Hoffman, *Middle English Lyrics* (New York 1974) number 185 p 174.
- 36 *ibid* number 184, p 173.
- 37 I have used the translation by Benedicta Ward, *The Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1986) pp 122—4.
- 38 Luria and Hoffman, *Middle English Lyrics* number 196 p 188.
- 39 Graef, *op. cit.* p 228.
- 40 Luria and Hoffman, *Middle English Lyrics*, number 226 pp 215—217.
- 41 The *Speculum*, one of the principal popular vehicles for the spread of the devotion to the Mother of Mercy, also devotes a good deal of space to Mary as Mater Dolorosa, describing the extraordinary participation of Mary in her Son's sufferings. Yet the terms in which this unique compassion is described make it clear that we can and should emulate it. Thus a description of Mary's unique suffering resolves itself into a convention by which all Christians share her grief. *The Mirour of Mans Salvacioun* pp 159—161.
- 42 I take Julian to be conscious of the resonances of such phrases as 'I thowte: "is any payne like this?" ... there was no payne that might be suffrid leke to that sorow that I had to se him in payne'. Marion Glassgoe (ed.) *Julian of Norwich, A Revelation of Divine Love* (University of Exeter 1976) p 20.
- 43 *ibid.* pp 20—1.
- 44 *ibid.* pp 27—8.
- 45 On Margery, David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London 1961); C. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: the Book and World of Margery Kempe*, (Cornell U.P. 1983). For Julian's encounter with Margery, see *The Book of Margery Kempe* pp 42—3.
- 46 His argument, which is of course far more nuanced than my summary suggests, is brilliantly set out in *Christianity in the West* (Oxford 1986).