

## THE PURITY OF MARY

BY

JOHN FAGAN



MARY, chosen to be the Mother of God; Mary, chosen and therefore fitted by God to be his Mother; Mary, treated ever afterwards by God in accordance with her sanctity, both personal and official; these are the connecting links in the chain of our knowledge of Mary. Just now our attention is directed to the third and final of these links—the definition of her Assumption into heaven. Here, to vary the metaphor, we have not merely a passion for tying up the loose ends of doctrine; what we see is rather the providential climax of a centuries-old process—the vindication of our Lady's place in Christian tradition.

Happily, just as we fix our minds on what may be called her external glories, there is a growing interest in her inner life, namely the devotion to her Immaculate Heart. This is an effort to seek for her personal worth. Here we are in fact studying the choicest fruit of the Redemption, by which both she and we are saved. One-sided stress on, e.g., the Assumption, might lead to a dehumanisation of Mary, just as in earlier days one-sided stress on the divinity of her Son led men to forget and even deny his humanity.

Mary is free of all sin, original and actual. Through the merits of her Son she is redeemed in the most excellent of all ways—by preservation. She exemplifies the proverb that prevention is better than cure. Yet the full and official recognition of this fact took over eighteen hundred years. The theological battle for her sinlessness was fought against the background of original sin and the universal need of redemption. At this point we may surely be allowed a good-natured smile at the old-fashioned protestant who delights to proclaim that the Church is for ever putting Mary in the place of God! A theological giant like St Thomas hesitated to pronounce her sinless from the first moment of her existence, simply because he could not reconcile this with an obvious fact—her need of redemption. Today religious truth is more fully developed; we are not better than such a man, but we are *better off*. We must rejoice in our good fortune and use it.

God specifically chose Mary to be his Mother. The spiritual riches he showered on her were all in view of her office. Yet it is not her function itself which makes her his special joy. It is rather her spiritual capacity to fulfil it. Astounding as it may seem, any one

of us in the state of grace is more intimate with God than was Mary by the bare fact of being his Mother. The unknown woman in the Gospel puts this in its classic form. 'Blessed is the womb that bore thee', she cries out in her enthusiasm. 'Yea rather', replies the Master, gently putting the matter in its right perspective, 'Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it.' Among those who have kept the Word of God none has done so more faithfully than Mary. She is no mere lay figure or remote co-operator. God uses all she has in the work of redemption. Her prayer and penance, not needed for her own sanctification, are used, under her Son, for our own. Her virtues are the pre-eminent model of ours. She is fully developed in her own right, so far as we may safely use this phrase.

Our topic is our Lady's purity; but the foregoing is not irrelevant. She typifies every virtue in such a way that it seems almost invidious to single out any one of them for special treatment. They are all seen to the best advantage in their proper and unifying place. Jewels are valuable, but their real worth appears only in their right setting.

Mary's virtue is all of a piece. It is above all positive. We speak of her special characteristic as freedom from sin; what we really mean is fulness of grace. Everything that can make for sanctification she had in superabundance. Moreover the special work of grace is charity. Mary's greatness lies in the fact that she loved God more than did any other human person before or since. As we have said, she had every virtue, natural and supernatural. She was a model of genuine justice, piety, temperance, etc. Yet the love of God which was the driving force of her life gave every one of her activities a new and added value. It became what St Paul calls the bond of perfection. Being, in his words again, 'rooted and grounded in charity', the most diverse elements in her life were brought under one heading. That whole life was basically one long act of the love of God.

Mary's purity, like all her virtues, is a positive thing. It is rather a blinding glare than a dull monotony. The same qualities which make us pleasing to God make her pleasing as well. She presents the perfect example of created personality, just as her Son presents the perfect example of human nature. Every perfection we should have she has, but in a superlative way. Her purity, like all purity, is a form of temperance, the right ordering and use of our 'lower' selves in accordance with the highest good. Human nature being what it is, every instinct clamours for fulfilment regardless of everything save itself. Before the Fall God gave us the power of effortless control in his service. To Mary he gave the same gift, for spiritually she is in the same position as Eve before her sin. With us it is the

work of a lifetime to subject ourselves to reason and to God. Mary from the beginning was able to integrate and direct all her faculties for the purpose of the one thing necessary. Nevertheless the virtue she exemplifies is the same one which is expected from us.

Sex in the narrow sense of the word had no place in the life of Mary. Not because it was evil, but because it had no purpose to fulfil in her God-given office; and where a thing cannot be used for God it is rightly left aside. Mary's purity was that of the pure in heart who see God. These are the people who are so eaten up with the desire for God that every lesser desire is swallowed up in the greater. They are not frustrated, because they know that what they are giving up is not worth having compared with the pearl of great price. St Thomas discerningly connects purity with love—*procedit a caritate*. Only a great love can supplant a smaller one. Mary was both the Bride and the Mother of God.

We must not forget that Mary is the model, not only of womanhood in general, but of married womanhood in particular. There is no genuine part of married life which does not come under her patronage, even though it may not have come within her personal experience. During the medieval controversies about the Immaculate Conception many thought that the ordinary sexual relationships of marriage actually transmitted original sin, the so-called contagion of the body. Whatever we may think of the value of this contention in making the Immaculate Conception seem impossible, we can certainly say that under the stress of argument the real truth emerged, viz., that original sin is simply passed on by descent from Adam. The machinery of reproduction among men is in itself as perfect as if sin had never existed. Is it fanciful to see this more rational view, safeguarding every aspect of marriage, as due to Mary's intercession? Eventually she crushes every error beneath her feet.

The foregoing notes contain nothing very extraordinary. During recent years we have seen too many well-meaning efforts to turn Mary into a virtual goddess. Her true glory is in being the handmaid of the Lord; and on this it is foolish to try to improve. We intend simply to stress the positive nature of Mary's purity, and to show it as part of her complete sacrifice of self to God, as also it must be in the lives of her children. We have so few details of our Lady's life that much of our writing about her must be simply deduction from general principles—a process with both advantages and dangers. We do however know that God allowed her to be suspected of a lapse from this very virtue. (cf. Matt. 1.) Let us follow ancient example and draw from this fact a spiritual lesson—

even if clumsily. The lesson is surely that when we look for the pattern of any virtue in Mary we must seek, not for its conventional appearance, but for its true nature. Like her, we must first ponder in our hearts.



## A MEDIEVAL SEQUENCE

### IN ASSUMPTIONE BEATAE VIRGINIS SEQUENTIA<sup>1</sup>



ALVE mater Salvatoris  
 Vas electum vas honoris  
 Vas caelestis gratiae.

Ab aeterno vas provisum  
 Vas insigne vas excisum  
 manu sapientiae.

Salve Verbi sacra parens  
 flos de spina spina carens,  
 flos spineti gloria.

Porta clausa fons ortorum  
 cella custos unguentorum  
 cella pigmentaria.

Salve decus virginum  
 mediatrix hominum  
 salutis puerpera.

Mirtus temperantiae  
 rosa patientiae  
 nardus odorifera.

Salve mater pietatis  
 et totius trinitatis  
 nobile triclinium.

<sup>1</sup>This Sequence occurs in the thirteenth-century Dominican Gradual called 'The Blackfriars Codex' (of Blackfriars, Oxford). Along with many others, it has been omitted from later Graduals, but it reveals the special honour accounted the feast of 15th August in the middle ages. It is in fact a shortened version of a Sequence by Adam of St Victor. The Sarum rite has preserved the complete version.