

a comparable effect. It would be difficult to see *Umberto D* and feel quite the same afterwards.

If the Italians continue to make films in the same genre the results are almost bound to be anti-climax: it would be impossible to bear more, and if less were expressed there would be weakness. A new direction must be found; whether it will be in the direction of greater sophistication, fantasy, or possibly more deliberate symbolism remains to be seen, but we can only hope that the Italian directors will not capitulate to the commercial claims of co-production and be persuaded to dilute the strongly individual flavour of their best efforts or, worse still, to reproduce an inferior brand of spectacle in a neo-Hollywood manner. After the very high standards to which the acting, camera work and scripts of the recent Italian films have accustomed us, noisy superficiality or bogus actuality would be equally distasteful. Of late, films in Italy have been notable for facing facts; it would be tragic if their new direction were to be a flight from reality.

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#### CATECHISM FOR ADULTS: IV. 'BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY'

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**T**HE section of the creed introduced by the words 'conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary' consists of a relatively long Christological statement. This statement is an essential part of the original proclamation of the Gospel, and indeed, is found both in the Epistles of St Paul and the Acts of the Apostles. The reason for its inclusion in the creed is both because the Gospel cannot be expressed without it, and because it serves to refute any view of our Lord's life and suffering as only apparent and not real. The whole section is a witness to the historic reality of his words and actions. By the emphasis it lays on this section, the Church refutes the most pervasive of all heresies, Docetism. The term 'Docetism' is derived from the Greek word for 'suppose' or 'seem' and the heresy suggests that Christ only apparently possessed a human body or that only some of the events recorded in the Gospels are salvific. All Docetism pre-

supposes an idea of what salvation should be like, of what divine action cannot involve. From this ready-made standpoint it proceeds to select the elements in the Christian Gospel that it finds congenial and to reject the rest. The Christological section of the creed serves to remind Christians that it is the Gospel that judges the man and not man the Gospel. The article 'conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary' is introductory to this Christological section. It treats of the birth, of the supranatural origin of Christ and its doctrinal standpoint is the same as that of the rest of the section.

In its earliest form the article read 'born of the Virgin Mary'. The stress was laid on the Virgin Birth—that the man Jesus was born of a Jewish virgin called Mary. Both St Matthew and St Luke record this event as something that happened at a fixed point in history—it is no legend, its point does not lie in some deeper symbolic reference; it is fact, seen, remembered, and recorded. It is a fact that the prophet foretold. The holy child is born of a virgin, by the power of God. It is because it was by the power of God that the phrase 'conceived by the Holy Ghost' was added. The Son of Mary was not adopted at his birth, or later, as the Son of God; he is by right the Son. His conception is the deed by which God intervenes and is present to man.

Jesus is not only a teacher and a guide. His Gospel is good tidings. This is no mere re-interpretation of the law; for the great prophets the good tidings is the coming of the Lord God as a Mighty One to feed and to gather; it is the return of God to Zion. The Gospel means that the promised one has come. In St Mark's Gospel this is easy to see. Each episode witnesses to Jesus as the Messiah, and the Gospel as a whole shows the evolving realization on the part of the disciples of this fact and what it means. At first it is only the voice of the Father that proclaims him as the Son; then it is the demons, conquered by his word, that recognize him. It is not till the middle of the Gospel that St Peter proclaims him and that he is seen by the three, full of the glory of the Son, at the Transfiguration. To the high priest's question, our Lord himself gives an explicit reply, and as the last act of his life on earth begins, he declares himself as Messiah to the old Israel, but it is only at the last, in the moment of his extreme humiliation, that he is proclaimed before the world by the Gentile Centurion: 'Truly this man was the Son of God'.

The presence of the Son is verified in deeds of power, in teaching that has authority, in his whole life, but St Mark implies that men constantly fail to see him and the mystery of his person is only recognized by those to whom God gives the power to see, the gift of Faith. Then, as today, he is explained away—he is possessed, mad, the worldly Messiah, the royal figure, a prophet come again—each of these is refuted in the Gospel so that the wonder and amazement remain, waiting to be touched by faith.

He is for the Gospel the Son of Man, who must suffer and whose suffering is the key to his future triumph. His complete humanity is shown in countless incidents, yet he is never in the Gospel presented as just a man. He is always Jesus the Lord; as much so in St Mark as in St John.

It is sometimes felt that the language the Church uses to describe Christ is difficult to the point of obscurity. Why all this terminology? Would it not be better to stick to the simple Christ of the Gospels? The ordinary man, whoever he may be, is often supposed to want to get behind the Christ of the Churches, to learn about the real, easily understood Sage of Nazareth. But this is to misunderstand the situation. There is no simple Sage of Nazareth, save in the imaginations of a few earnest agnostics. The Christ St Paul writes about, the Christ of the Gospels, the Christ of every strata of witness that we have is not simple in the sense that he can be whittled down to join the company of great and good teachers. Each of the evangelists tells the story of a life and at the same time does a great deal more than that, for each of them witnesses to the presence in this life—in our space and time, in our flesh—of the Son of God. The point of the story they tell lies in their knowledge that he was not just a prophet, but the Lord of prophets. If men are to think of him at all, they must think of him as the Son of God, and do so seriously, so that it becomes inevitable that they use a theology, for that is the only way one can talk with any coherence about God.

The data is presented by the evangelists in terms of episodes, in concrete language. In the interests of truth the Church has been compelled to use more abstract forms. She has had to do this because she had to talk about Christ to men who were not brought up in the Jewish tradition, to men who liked analysis and speculation, to men who were only too liable to misinterpret the word of God. She had to teach these men, and though she added nothing

to the deposit of faith, she had to speak clearly and accurately in the language of the Hellenistic world.

It was only too easy for that world to regard Christ as a demi-God, subordinate to the Father; for its mind to recoil from the teaching that the Son of God was born of a virgin and died on the cross, and to wish to turn aside that crude offence by enveloping it in myth. To all this the Fathers of the Church had to reply, and from St Ignatius of Antioch to St Augustine of Hippo their witness remains the same. Jesus is Lord and his salvific work is the work of the Word made flesh.

At Nicea the Church declared him to be of one substance (*homoousion*) with the Father. He, the Son, is not merely 'like' the Father, he is the same reality as the Father, in that both are God in the unity of the Godhead. The Fathers of the Council were making clear that he is not a sort of second God on a lower plane. He is God in the same sense as the Father is God, and thus the ancient monotheistic foundation of the Christian faith remains intact. Their definition was supremely practical because the doctrine that he is true God is bound up in the function of Christ as the unique mediator of salvation. Any theory or language which tended to weaken or obscure this was rejected by the Fathers as false to tradition. The Council of Chalcedon confessed that 'He is perfect in his Godhead, likewise perfect in his humanity, true God and true man, consisting of a reasonable soul and body. That he is of one nature (consubstantial) with God according to his divinity, two natures without mixture—subsisting in one Person and hypostatic union.'

The Fathers in this dogmatic decree find a true balance between two incomplete and warring views. The presence of God in the flesh is, as it were, too great for men. Each sees only one facet. One type of mind is concerned with the living unity of God and tends to merge the humanity into the divinity, thus reaching out towards a mystical pantheism and dissolving history into symbolism. Another, sceptical about ontologies, sees the union between Jesus and the Father as moral, as one of likemindedness, and with heavy literalness destroys the personal unity of Christ.

To these the Fathers reply—their teaching, as Romano Guardini has pointed out, brings together the conflicting views into a living tension; a tension that is held together by the concept of 'person' with the *Unio hypostatica*, the existent 'I' of Christ, in which the

genuine unity of true God and true man is found.

It is not that the statement banishes the mystery, far less explains it away. The mystery is re-emphasized by being put into a proper focus, which involves the transcendence of limited viewpoints, in the vision of faith.

The Incarnation is, then, not a name for one of those myths in which we are told of the procreation of men by gods. Here no act of procreation is involved, only the intervention of the divine power. 'He was conceived by the Holy Ghost' and his conception and birth stand out as the supreme act of God's self-disclosure, and an act which has, in the Pauline phrase, a 'once for all' character. It is this unique character that establishes it as the mid-point of history, for the coming of Christ is the central point in that the decisive event has taken place. Christians, it is true, wait for the *parousia*, for the second coming, but it will only set the seal on what has already begun, conclude a victory already won.

It is because of this that the Church, existing in time, centres her worship round the life of Christ. The primitive Christian calendar stressed the great fifty days between Easter and Pentecost, and emphasized each Sunday, the reality of the victory and redemptive work of Christ. Gradually round this framework the liturgical cycle was built up. In Advent the Church waits for that deliverance which God has promised. At Christmas, the special feast of this article, she remembers that a Saviour has been given, born of Mary. With Ash Wednesday Lent begins, and by prayer and fasting the Church renounces the world and seeks the light that shines in the darkness. As Lent ends the statues and even the crucifix are veiled, for, before Christ comes, the presence of God is hidden. At Easter, with a sudden outburst of joy, the Church celebrates the victory of her Saviour and at Ascension time she glories in his exaltation. With Pentecost the great season ends and from this till Advent the liturgy teaches men about Christ ruling in his Church, which is his kingdom.

This cycle is no mere remembering of events long past, it is the Church's recognition that Christ, the Son of God, is still present, and the Church in his presence contemplates and savours the mysteries of his person and work.

The sign given to the angels was the child, wrapped in swaddling clothes. This child, for whom there was no room in the darkness of the world, was the Son of Mary. It was the Jewish girl

who was chosen when the fulness of time came. Prophets and Kings were passed by, for it was the lowliness of his handmaiden that God regarded. To her God condescended, and hence she is exalted above all creatures.

The innocence and purity of Mary are prophetic of the triumph of the saints. But their purity is that of sin forgiven, while hers is that of the immaculate virgin, who was in the first instance of her conception preserved untouched by any taint of original sin. By reason of her function God 'by a singular grace and privilege' created her soul in the integrity of its innocence. She is not, however, exempt for the economy of salvation, she is rather its supreme achievement, for God confers his grace upon Mary 'in consideration of the merit of Christ, Jesus the Saviour of mankind'. Her greatness is shown when she speaks the great words: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word'. She expresses, in her supreme faith and obedience, the response of redeemed creation to the love of God, and as her word is central for the whole redemptive process, so her word remains central in man's salvation. All approach, all response to God is conditioned by the response of Mary, so that the Church can say: 'Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.' To neglect this prayer is to forget the marriage feast of Cana, when the Son of God allows his majesty to be seen in response to her request, and to forget that from the Cross she is given as Mother. Mary listening to the prophecy of Simeon, and Mary whose soul was pierced, is the Mother who suffers with the Church. Apart from these blinding flashes, her life was hidden, one of complete dedication in which the self-centredness of sin is overcome in Christ. This woman, because she was full of grace, was at death taken by God to himself, her whole being, body and soul, being assumed into heaven. She is seen by the Church as the Queen of Saints, the Queen of Heaven, the greatest triumph of grace and, because of her nearness to Christ, the most powerful advocate.

Christian devotion has elaborated many titles for Mary, but the greatest of them is still 'The Mother of Jesus'. She is, as the ancient Church loved to say, 'the God bearer', the 'Mother of God'. The Church always clings to this great title for it knows that if it be questioned the Incarnation itself is put in doubt.