

## XV

### THE MOTHER OF GOD

#### THE SON WHO CHOSE HIS MOTHER

OUR understanding of Our Blessed Lady depends totally upon our understanding of her Son. Everything about her flows from her being Christ's mother; as our understanding of Him grows, our understanding of her grows. Unless we have some knowledge of the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation, we can still love her but cannot know her; and we have already seen that loving without full knowledge is only a shadow of loving.

She is the mother of God. The child she conceived and bore is God the Son. In His divine nature He had existed eternally. But His human nature he owed to her as much as any man owes his human nature to his mother. There is nothing that makes my mother mine which is lacking in her relation to Him as man. As God He was born of the Father before all ages; as man He was born at a particular moment of time of the Virgin Mary. Do not think it sufficient to call her the mother of His human nature: natures, we have already noted, do not have mothers. She was mother, as yours or mine is, of the person born of her. And the Person was God the Son.

It is a special mark of the Catholic as distinct from what we may call the typical Protestant that he finds this truth almost shattering in its greatness, its immensity; whereas to the other it is simply a biographical fact about Christ which

one notes but does not linger upon. Naturally, he seems to say, if God was to become man, one would expect Him to have a mother; but having borne Him into the world, she had done her duty, and from now on our whole interest must be in Him, not her. When thought of at all, she must be thought of with respect. But she is not often thought of. Why should she be?

I have put this way of looking at her as a sort of rough outline of a whole state of mind. In its more extreme utterance it can be so comic that one almost forgets how tragic it is. On the outdoor platform I once had a questioner who said, solemnly: "I respect Christ's mother as I respect my own." The overwhelming temptation, when one hears such a remark, is to point to the difference between the two sons. But it is necessary to make clear why the difference makes a difference. We are not saying that mothers of holy children are better than mothers of less holy. The difference is not between one son who is holy and another who is less obviously so. It is between a Son who is God and a son who is man only.

In seeing what the difference is, a good starting point is the simple fact that this Son existed before His mother. So that He is the only Son who was in a position to choose who His mother should be: He could choose therefore what every son would choose if he could, the mother who would suit him best. Further, it goes with the very heart of sonship that a son wants to give his mother gifts; and Christ, being God, could give her all that she would want: to His giving power there was no limit. And what above all she wanted was union with God, the completest union possible to a human being of her will with God's will, grace therefore in her soul.

He was her Son, and He gave it lavishly. She responded totally, so that she was sinless. It was her response to the grace of God that made her supreme in holiness—higher even

than the highest angel, the Church tells us. We may pause for a moment to look at this truth. By nature she was lower than the least angel, for human nature as such is less than angelic. But, as we have already seen, any relation in the order of grace is higher than any in the order of nature. It is by grace that we are closer to God; by our response, that is, to the created share in His own life that God offers us. By grace Our Lady outranks all created beings. But only because she responded more perfectly. St. John Chrysostom says: "She would not have been blessed, though she had borne Him in the body, had she not heard the word of God and kept it."

#### IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND ASSUMPTION

We have considered one result of Our Lady's being the mother of God—all sons want to give their mothers gifts, this Son could give without any limit save her power to receive; and what in supreme measure He gave was sanctifying grace. But there is one special element in His power to give that we might easily overlook. Because He was God, He could give His mother gifts not only before He was born of her, but before she was born herself. This is the meaning of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

It is surprising how this phrase has caught the non-Catholic imagination, but more surprising how, for the non-Catholic who uses it, it has no trace of its true meaning. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it is used as if it meant the virgin birth of Christ. But it refers not to Christ's conception in Our Lady's womb, but to her conception in the womb of her own mother. It does not mean, either, that she was virginally conceived: she had a father and mother. It means that her Son's care for her and gifts to her began from the first moment of her existence.

For all of us conception comes when God creates a soul

and unites it with the bodily element formed in the mother's womb. But from the very first moment of her soul's creation, it had, by God's gift, not natural life only but supernatural life. What this means quite simply is that she whom God chose to be His mother never existed for an instant without sanctifying grace in her soul.

A century ago the Church made this doctrine the subject of an infallible definition. For century upon century before that Catholics had held it for certain truth. Once the Church had formulated with all possible clearness the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, so that Catholics could live day in and day out in the full awareness of who and what Christ is, they began to see it as unthinkable that He should have allowed his mother to exist for so much as an instant without sanctifying grace. Yet for many devoted lovers of the Blessed Virgin, a troubling question remains. Our Lady had said in the Magnificat: "My spirit doth rejoice in God my Saviour." How could God be her Saviour, what was there to save her from, if she had had grace always?

Gradually they came to see the answer, or rather the two-fold answer. To save men from their sins is a great mercy of God; but to save this one woman from ever sinning was a greater mercy, but still a mercy. Not only that. Sinless as she was, possessed of grace at every instant, she was still member of a fallen race, a race to which heaven was closed. The Saviour's redeeming act opened heaven to her as to all members of the race.

Roughly a hundred years after the definition of the Immaculate Conception came that of the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady. In the dogma, the word *assumption* has no relation to its ordinary English meaning of something one assumes because one cannot prove it. It means the taking of Our Lady, body and soul, into heaven. It is, if anything, earlier than the belief that she was conceived immaculate;

and it is not too much to say that it never raised any serious doubt, or even problem, in the minds of Catholics.

It was an almost inevitable result of living with the full truth about her Son. For the ordinary man, there was the simple feeling that Christ would want His mother with Him in heaven, not her soul only but herself, body and soul. Any son would want that, and this was the one Son who could have what He wanted. For the more instructed, probably, there was another element. It is a doctrine of the Church that all men would receive back the bodies from which their souls had been separated at death. The gap between was a result of sin, and Our Lady was sinless.

Men, of course, cannot pretend to know what God will or will not do. For all of us the temptation occasionally arises to decide some question with the confidence that the decision is God's, when all that we have done is to decide what we would do if we were God. But when the vast mass of Catholics see a conclusion as certain over a space of some fifteen hundred years, the risk is not great. It vanishes altogether when the Church gives its infallible definition.

#### OUR MOTHER

At the Annunciation, theologians hold that in saying "Be it done unto me according to thy word" Our Lady uttered the consent of the human race to the first step in its redemption. The Assumption means that in heaven she represents the human race redeemed: she alone is, body and soul, where all the saved will one day be. We must look a little more closely at her relation to the human race which at these two points she represents.

We call her our mother, and for most of us the matter requires no discussion. Yet it repays discussion. If we take for granted that she is our mother simply because she is

Christ's, we omit something that matters for our understanding of what she means to us. As her Son, He drew His natural life from her; but, because He was her Redeemer, she drew her supernatural life from Him: and it is in the supernatural order, the order of grace, that she is our mother.

How, in this order, does she become so? By her Son's appointment. In the Collect to her feast as Mediatrix of All Graces, the Church says it—"O Lord Jesus Christ, our Mediator with the Father, who hast deigned to appoint Thy most blessed Virgin Mother to be our Mother." The appointment was made upon Calvary. When Our Lord gave her the Apostle John to be her son, He was not simply making provision for her. For that He had no need to wait for Calvary. Calvary was the sacrifice of the race's redemption; everything that He did and said on the cross is related to that. So with His words to Our Lady and St. John. It was as part of His plan of redemption, that He was giving her to be the mother of John—not of John as himself but as man. From that moment she is the mother of us all.

What does motherhood carry with it? Essentially, love and total willingness to serve. Those two things Catholics have always seen in her, telling her their needs with complete confidence, inwardly conversing with her freely. That is, we pray to her; which means that we ask her to pray for us—for all kinds of things, but especially for grace, which is what mattered most to her (matters most to us too, though we do not always realize it). In the encyclical *Ad Diem* St. Pius X called her "the first steward in the dispensing of graces".

With this we come to an element in the Redemption which we too easily fail to notice. Christ redeemed us, but it is in God's plan that the application to individual souls of the Redemption Christ won should be by fellow members of the race: we are all called to be stewards in the dispensing of

graces. The principal ways for every one of us are love, prayer, suffering.

None of these things would be of any effect if Christ had not died for us; but in union with His redemptive act they are of immense power. From the beginning of the Christian Church, their effect is taken for granted. Thus St. Paul can tell his converts, to pray for others *precisely because* there is one Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. ii. 5). In other words, the fact that Our Lord is Mediator does not make our prayer for one another unnecessary; it makes it effective.

Everyone's prayers can help others, but the holier, the more. With Christ and in Christ we are all called upon to take a part in redeeming others. All are meant to take a part in His redeeming work, but Mary above all; for she was sinless, she was wholly love, she suffered supremely.

The Mystical Body exists for the application of Christ's redemption to the souls of men; as I have said, we are all called upon to help in the application, but she is *the* co-redemptrix. So that once again she represents the race, the redeemed race. So much of what we say when we speak of her and when we speak of the Church is interchangeable—we call her our mother, for instance, and in the next breath we speak of our holy mother the Church. The truth is that what the Church, the Mystical Body, does in its other members more or less well according to the individual's will to co-operate, she in her single person does continually and perfectly. She is the *first* steward in the dispensing of graces.