

MOTHER OF GOD

The number of books on Mary is immense, significantly proving a realisation of her essential place in the Christian system. But for all their number, they leave a gap, and this masterly work of Father Cyril Bernard fits neatly into it. The great bulk of those books do not get down to the doctrinal bedrock on which all devotion stands; they take it for granted. They suppose that the foundation already exists in their readers' minds or is being simultaneously laid by other means. This is not really the case. Dogmatic publications exist in fair quantity, but they are catering for a select public; they express themselves in a technical way and will not be popularly read. Accordingly there is a void and the popular books hover precariously over it. It is true that they create a love for Our Lady and supply a wealth of ideas about her virtues and her influence. That is much but not enough. Something more than even supereminent virtues is needed to justify the degree of attention which the Catholic Church assigns to Mary. But most people are not able to supply that justification. Ever afraid of questioning or of attack, they betake themselves to the uncomfortable shelter of silence and there they stay.

INADEQUATE DEVOTION

If pressed out of it, what a poor showing there is! They would justify devotion to Mary on sentimental or unsubstantial grounds. They would most likely produce that oft-quoted analogy of going to the king's mother so that she will approach the aloof king on our behalf. But this is worthless, and perhaps harmful, as applied to our relations with Jesus and Mary. It supposes that we know the Mother better than the Son; or that she is approachable and He is not! These would be strange Christian ideas. What else could they evoke from the Protestant or other critic but astonishment and the retort that such recourse to Mary may no doubt be in order for Catholics who know her better than they know Our Lord; but that for themselves the position is the reverse. They know the Son better than the Mother, and therefore it would be waste of time, unnecessary, and for every other reason undesirable, to go to the Lord otherwise than directly!

What reply to that has uninformed devotion to offer?

If things are left in that position, double harm has been done. The Protestant is made to misconceive the Catholic doctrine of Mary. The Catholic's own

devotion, and even faith, are inwardly hurt by his sense of inability to justify it.

I have mentioned the Protestant because his attitude of negation towards Mary includes all lesser ones. But it would be unfair to the Protestant to represent him as the only dissentient in that regard. Whole countries can be specified where the general Marian attitude of the Catholics is negative or shamefaced or semi-Protestant. Even in the ranks of what would be regarded as good Catholics are many in whom their traditional or sentimental love for Mary is always "fighting it out" with the current objections.

Those outside the Church are usually left to suppose the worst that we have no solid foundation for what they would call our Mariolatry. Hence, they construct for themselves a many-storeyed edifice of misconception in regard to Mary.

MISCONCEPTIONS CORRECTED

They insist, for instance, that we put her on a level with Her Son. But we do not. We believe that He is God and that she is a creature, and that infinity yawns between. But it may also be that the Protestant valuation of Our Lord is too low, and that they are in fact placing Him where we place Our Lady. Therein they and not we would be the ones in fatal error.

They say that we credit her with more than a creature can have. Our answer is that her greatness and her office are part of God's principle of communicating Himself to creatures. This is the central Christian principle. It is the very essence of God's dealings with men that He grants to them certain offices and powers which are part of His own powers. How far does He go in this? Protestantism has no definite answer. Catholicism declares that the limit is Our Lady. She administers the high office which He has entrusted to her, but she remains a creature.

Protestants say, too, that we put her above Redemption, whereas we believe the very opposite. We hold her to have been more redeemed than any other creature; to have been, more than any other, the beneficiary of the Precious Blood; and that she continues, more than any other, dependent on Our Lord.

The doubting formulae go on: "Cannot God do without Mary?" Yes, just as He could have done without the Incarnation! But that is a contemplation we are unable to make. The facts are what they are. Our part is to build on them. If men leave Jesus Christ out they have broken the chain of salvation for themselves. If they put away Mary, they have not less effectively broken that chain forged by God Himself. It is folly to argue that they are entitled to drop her because she is less than Christ. That argument would logically carry them into a doctrinal abyss - to the repudiation of every earthly teacher and of the Bible itself. If Our Lady is a vital element in salvation, she must be recognised even though she be but human.

That litany of error would be prolonged. It will be seen that even the slightest degree of knowledge would be able to deal with it. But either that knowledge does not exist or else it is not produced. This is pathetic. For the number of those outside the Church, that is of those who do not know the name of Mary or who repudiate her, is five times the number of the Catholics. If Catholics themselves are not sufficiently versed about Our Lady's place, how can they hope to win those others over to her? Winning them to Mary is a necessary part of winning them to the Church.

Moreover, a secondary injustice is done to all those souls in not trying to help them to find their Mother. For, recognised or not, Mary is the mother of every man. This was a favourite theme of Pope Leo XIII. He insisted that in the heart of every man lay the germ of love for her, ready to be awakened.

In the second place, Catholics are not properly Catholic at all, and they are not going to get out of religion what they are intended to receive, if their appreciation of Mary's role is radically insufficient. It would mean shipwreck to exclude her altogether. So doing, we would repeat the old mistake; we would turn away Him for whom we have been waiting. It would be another tragedy for us to know so little about Mary as to make her something different from what she has been set by God to be. If our idea of her role is deficient, we do not repair it by multiplying our prayers to her; this is definitely a department where quantity does not substitute for quality.

Furthermore, one does not really praise Mary by declaring that she can secure from God whatever she asks. For St. Teresa says that St. Peter of Alcantara obtains infallibly what he prays for. And it would be unwise to conclude from this that St. Peter was the only saint with equal privilege. What of St. Teresa herself? Is she less than he? After all, every saint is in God and asks according to God's Will, and therefore must be heard! To go no further than to place Our Lady in this category, even at the summit of it, would be a diminution of her and not a justification of her. A Mary thus reduced would not be the Virgin of Prophecy and of the Annunciation.

MARY INAUGURATES THE REIGN OF GRACE

Let there be no mistake about it. Mary belongs to the inner core of salvation in the sense that not only was she the Mother and the Partner of Our Divine Lord in all the mysteries of salvation, including the administration of its graces, but that she served uniquely to initiate the whole process of Restoration. As even Calvin said: "She is called Blessed because, in receiving by faith the Blessing proposed to her, she opened to God a Way for the accomplishment of His work". This is an echo of the oldest of all the prophecies: "I will set enmities between thee and the Woman." No doubt Calvin and his spiritual kin - and along

MARY SHALL REIGN

with them many an unequipped Catholic - would draw back from the rich interpretation which Catholic thought gives to that prophecy. But disaster lies there. The rejection of Mary has consequences more serious than the loss of an earthly mother's care. Her maternal work frustrated, everything starts to go wrong. The Church says that she solves all dogmatic crises: overthrows all heresies. Likewise does she bring healing in all other issues. To think of her seems to put things into right relation. Her presence is discernible at all important moments. Now, as of old, she inaugurates the reign of grace. Where she comes, the Lord is born. As she brings Him, so she takes Him away with her. She speaks and His power is manifested. It is always through her that people believe in Him and become His disciples.

All this follows from her motherhood, insisted on by Our Blessed Lord at the very moment of Redemption: "Behold thy Mother." In union with her, Jesus gives every grace. She is mother in a total sense and necessary to the spiritual life of every man.

But if Mary is intended to mother us, so are we obliged by divine rule to reciprocate. We must acknowledge that indispensable motherhood by having a proper idea of it. We must love her with our understanding, with our heart and feelings, with our voice and actions; and by apostleship - which is an inseparable part of union with her.

The basis of our relation with Mary must be appreciation of her maternal office. It is this that mainly matters. For instance, we do not really praise Our Lord until we have recognised His divinity; it is the vital fact. The vital fact in Our Lady is her divinely-arranged part in the total scheme of salvation. Only when we have put her virtues in that setting have we begun to honour them at all.

UNION WITH MARY

Mary is so much part of God's idea that without her we do not grasp His idea. She is, as the Church sings, at the beginning of God's ways with us. And she accompanies us every step of that way. If we find we have diverged from her, it is a sign that we have left the Christian road. She is one of the special outward marks of grace and orthodoxy. We cannot receive the kisses of the Babe without touching His Mother. We cannot hope to have His blood drip transformingly upon us unless we stand beside her at the Cross.

People may think they are receiving grace without devotion to her, and in a limited way this is so. For, although they reject her, she cannot reject them. She does her best with those refractory ones. But oh what a difference between that and the fruitful union of loving child and Mother most powerful!

If that union exist, it will be fully utilised by the Mother for the purposes of her maternity. That is, not only to make us holy as one would fill a vessel, but to

reach out through us to other souls. If she is not able to reach out through us, she is not able to work in us, for this communication to others is the characteristic gesture, the essence, of Christianity. Our Lord's own image of the Mystical vine is to be borne in mind. Out of the roots issues the trunk, and out of the trunk spring the branches and sub-branches, on and on in ever-continuing, expanding fruitfulness, if a part stop at itself, it is a failure. The life-giving series must go on unendingly until the whole world is encompassed, until every man has had the fulness of the Gospel delivered to him, inclusive of that part which says: "Behold thy Mother."

Possessors of knowledge are fond of supposing that "people will not understand" and that it would be waste of time to try to explain "these lofty doctrines." Unpardonably, they act accordingly. But what is incomprehensible about Our Lady's mission? It is fundamental in religion and therefore it is meant to be understood by all. I have yet to encounter the person who was unable to absorb it when it was explained. And explained it must be. For the average idea of Mary's place is stark in its poverty. It is that Mary bore a Son who was God and that ever since He likes to listen to her petitions - just as any great man would like to please his mother! Of course that is true, but it is part of the truth. Mary's place in the Catholic system is too commanding, too primary, to be contained in that degree of logic.

Here are some tremendous words of Cardinal Suenens: "The majority of Christians will claim that people are not ready to listen, but the amazing truth is that Christians themselves are not willing to speak." Especially, as I have been contending, they are not prepared to speak about Mary because they are so conscious of their ignorance about her. Perhaps if the word about Mary were uttered, all the other words of the Christian message would come pouring out. For Mary is pivotal - now as she was from the first in the divine idea of Redemption. She was part of the foretelling of the Messiah, and in due course she was part of His earthly mission; as she is now of His heavenly reigning. She is utterly less than He, but she has been assumed into His destiny and in the special form that she has always to give Him, to initiate His steps, to indicate to him what is needful. That is the Providential programme: we should accommodate ourselves to it.

We must make Mary better understood. The Church places these words on the lips of the Blessed Virgin: "Those who explain me shall shine for all eternity."

MORE WOMAN THAN ANY OTHER WOMAN

The Virgin Mary was the most perfect creature who ever came from the hands of God; yet her stay in the world was barely noticed by her contemporaries!

Despite the fact that she was so elevated by grace as to approach the borders of the divine, she remained none-the-less a woman. It was her divinely planned role to be true woman and true mother, and it would mar our relations with her for us to lose sight of that. All the wonders accomplished in her did not diminish her womanhood, but indeed intensified it; so that she was more a woman than any other woman. This sounds startling, but it is a truth proceeding from the circumstances that, unlike any other, she did not suffer from the warping of original sin. She began as a perfect woman. Then she became subject to the law of graces; her practice of virtue brought increase. She grew in holiness. With apparent contradiction in terms, her perfection became each new moment more perfect. When her earthly career finished, she was so full of grace that she had reached the limit of the human condition. She had responded faithfully to God's giving. He had His way fully with her.

MARY, PATTERN OF ALL WOMANHOOD

She was the original pattern in God's mind for all woman-kind. No other has achieved it. All other women fall short in some respects and in varying degrees. Some are too feminine. Others are insufficiently feminine. Softness need not mean gentleness, nor hardness strength. Interest may be only curiosity. Sentiment may not mean love. Prudery is not modesty. Prudence may be only worldly caution. Courage may be really recklessness. Calm may mask indifference. Honesty be no more than shrewdness. Refinement may cover a multitude of sins. And so on through the gamut of human qualities.

But there is in all these things an ideal point where balance lies. To fall short of it means defect. To go beyond it means defect. So if we were to think of the human race as a great mass inside a circle, all of its members would be at various distances and directions from that perfect point, the exact centre. Mary is that centre, and there is no other with her or indeed anywhere near her.

Let us have an enquiring, reverent look at this extra-ordinary creature: So great that it has been said that the angels rejoice more in her birth than in their own creation. So modest and normal that she could live under the intimate gaze of 3,000 Nazareans without attracting undue notice.