

Mary and the Holy Spirit

I am getting down to bedrock principle. I am going to talk about the mighty things which must be present in your work if it is going to have a real impact. Your ambition is colossal: to conquer with a single blow, to convert a population in a week or so. It is magnificent and fantastic at the same time. But it does become possible if you can make yourselves the outlet point of the Holy Spirit. For he can convert at a stroke, in the twinkling of an eye.

I am going to talk over with you the mechanics of all that. I am going to speak about the highest things, the Most Blessed Trinity and Mary the great Mother of God. Have patience with me in this most difficult of tasks. I attempt what I have always tried to do, that is to reduce things to simplicity. I am encouraged to this by certain words of the Archbishop of Dublin which are given to you in the handbook. 'There cannot be in the Church's teaching an inner body of doctrine which only a few can grasp.'

As Mary is the spouse of the Holy Spirit, full of his grace, his inseparable partner in his external mission, it follows

that she has become like unto him to the ultimate extent that a creature can be. It is the teaching of the Church that she can be brought to the very borders of the infinite. From this we can go on to say that she furnishes the most complete human expression of him.

To this comes the objection that surely it is Jesus who most faithfully reflects the Holy Spirit. Of course the latter is in Jesus to an infinitely greater degree than he is in Mary, but this is not the point I am thinking in terms of human projection. Moreover, to regard Jesus as mirroring to us both the second and third Divine Persons would tend towards an identifying of those persons and not towards a desirable distinguishing of them. We serve this purpose when we consider Jesus as mirroring the Second Person (whom he is) and Mary as mirroring to us the Third Person, with whose role she is so divinely entwined.

While such images as the dove or the tongues of fire are presented to us as symbols of the Holy Spirit, it could not be said that they resemble him. On the other hand the Holy Spirit is establishing such an inexpressible union with Mary is necessarily making a real revelation of himself through her. At first sight this will disconcert those who have been only thinking of Mary as a mere channel of the graces of the Holy Spirit, whereas she is much more than that. I revert to the fact that Jesus is the Second Divine Person and that Mary in a lesser and purely human way, fulfils the same function in respect of the Third Person. A full understanding of this is of course beyond us, but some of it – even much of it – must be comprehensible for the reason that it is intended to be. All the divine truths are given to us to be part understood. Reason is supposed to reinforce faith, and that progressively.

That applies in the present case. The Holy Spirit would not be projecting himself through Mary in a human sense if that operation were altogether outside our ability to understand it. If that Holy Spirit purposes to make a human showing of himself to us, he would have to choose not mere pictorial or artistic symbols but a person. And that person would need to be at the very height of a human scale.

There would have to be a reasonable suitability or compatibility between himself and that medium whom he would thus choose to mirror him. As the second Divine Person did not disdain to use the humanity of Jesus Christ, and the womb of Mary for his intervention in human affairs, so there would be no incongruity in the Holy Spirit making a somewhat similar use of an exalted human being like the Blessed Virgin.

There is a distinction of course. From the moment when the Second Divine Person became incarnate, he was one with Jesus and does not now exist otherwise. Jesus is the Second Divine Person. Therefore he must render in a human way the very appearance of God the Son whom we will see in Heaven. Otherwise Jesus would not be fulfilling the divine intention of affording us the most complete portrait of the Second Person which finite resources can provide.

The mind struggles ineffectually with this idea that Jesus is expressing to us in a real way the very 'appearance' of the Second Divine Person. But there must be a truth here which we are bound to try to penetrate a little.

For instance, when the earthly contemporaries of Jesus entered Heaven and beheld him in all his glory as the Second Divine Person, he was still the same Jesus that they had known. His expression or transfiguration into

pure divinity did not mean that he presented himself to them as somebody different, to whom so to speak they had to be introduced to. No, they would quite naturally fall into the old respectful familiarity with him and speak to him much as they did after the Resurrection. This is what I mean by saying that Jesus while on earth would somehow have reflected to them the appearance of the Second Divine Person.

To what extent can we argue the same in respect of the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Spirit? Certainly to a large extent. Though not divine, Mary was immersed in the Godhead to the maximum extent to which that would be possible while still leaving her a creature. For practical purposes that would mean that we could apply to Mary and the Holy Spirit the same idea as in respect to Jesus and the Second Divine Person. The apostles on entering Heaven would see the Holy Spirit as so like to Mary that they have as it were to take a second look to distinguish them.

In the case of Jesus there will be no question of distinguishing him from the Second Divine Person whom he is, but only of seeing the divine essence. But the Holy Spirit and Mary, however like they may be to each other, are two different persons, the one divine, the other human. In this problem of, at the same time, identifying and separating two different things, here is an image which may help. The screen of a TV set has its own appearance, but once the transmission comes onto the screen, the appearance of the latter is lost in the picture. The example shows the effect of lesser merging with the greater.

But of course the case of the Holy Spirit and Mary is of a far higher order. Contrary to the TV case, the more

the Holy Spirit asserts himself in Mary, the more she is herself, the more she is Mary, the more characteristic she becomes. No longer is it a case of suppression but of accentuation. This divine manifestation is at its height in Mary but is not confined to her. It is part of the mystery of God's regard for the human personality. The more we abandon ourselves to him and lose ourselves in him, the more developed becomes our personality.

Those things stipulated, I now approach the question of the appearance of the Holy Spirit. Each of the three Divine Persons has his own utterly distinctive appearance. Diversity would be one of the notes of the Holy Trinity. We shall gaze on that appearance during all eternity. But it is not enough for us to relegate that matter of appearance to eternity as if it had no relation to our life on earth. Indeed it does concern us here below most intimately, because it certainly and vitally affects our attitude to those persons.

Every day of our lives we should enter into relation with each of those Divine Persons through the medium of adoration and prayer. Such an approach must have something to lean on. One cannot pray in a vacuum. That is without any notion as to where her or to whom our prayers are going. It may to some extent fill that emptiness by prefacing a name, that is by specifying to ourselves that we are about to address ourselves to one of the Divine Persons or the Blessed Virgin or a saint. But that is only a feeble step forward if we have no corresponding image to clothe the name with some substantiality. It is hard in all circumstances to perform the spiritual act of prayer. That difficulty is increased immeasurably if we have nothing but a name to address ourselves to, or if we have only unworthy symbols to propose to our imagination, for

example the Holy Trinity under the form of a luminous triangle or the Heavenly Father as a human eye.

The height we ordinarily reach in respect of the Father is as Michelangelo depicts him, that is an ancient with a patriarchal beard. For the Second Person we have a justified image, that of Jesus Christ. For the Holy Spirit we have the dove or a tongue of fire! That is not enough. Such symbols would fetter our communication with Heaven and reduce it to minimum dimension. It would be in the same order as looking at the beauties of nature through a bandage on our eyes or trying to talk through a gag.

Therefore it is a matter of really great importance that we institute a reasonable relation between ourselves and the Holy Spirit who is the agent of all the external works of the Trinity, the giver of every grace on which our life here and hereafter depends.

It is a startling thought that the Second Divine Person could have become incarnate in an animal, for example in a lamb – which is the biblical figure of the Son of God. If he had, the immolation of the lamb could have affected the Redemption, though it is hard to see how it could have established the Mystical Body or uplifted man to God.

Then that actual lamb, being God, would require our adoration. But in that presentation of himself by the Second Divine Person there would be such a lack of fitness as to rule it out. It is as much as our imagination can cope with to contemplate God allying himself in so intimate a way with humanity, and we cannot go further down the scale.

The same thought of fitness will carry us on to the accrediting to the humanity of Jesus Christ of such a degree of quality in every respect as would constitute a

real suitability for unity with the Godhead. An adequate suitability from our point of view would have to include not only holiness and sublime human quality but also physical form. This is where our imagination fails. We cannot understand how the divine essence can be mirrored in a human appearance. But just as our reason can point to God whom we cannot picture to ourselves, so reason tells us that Jesus Christ must afford to us an adequate human resemblance to the Second Divine Person.

Now let us apply the same line of reasoning to the different case of the Holy Spirit and Mary. It is different because the Holy Spirit stopped short of becoming incarnate in her. He left her in all respects a human personality, a pure creature. Her role in the Incarnation and Redemption was to be a completely human one. This was necessary according to God's perception of that great drama. He contrived that Mary's part, while seeming in many respects to merge into the divinity, nevertheless remains human. But it is evident that this transaction takes place at the highest possible peak of human possibility, so close to God that we cannot raise our minds that far. But it is the essential principle of the Redemption that Mary's part was human. She was to act on behalf of all mankind.

However, granted that she is not divine, does not the same set of considerations apply to her as I have suggested in regard to Jesus Christ? Would not the same argument of fitness apply to her union with the Holy Spirit? Since this union is as intense as God can make it in the circumstances, may we not validly reason that Mary is made and meant to display to us a likeness to the Holy Spirit analogous to the likeness of Jesus Christ to the Second Divine Person?

Side by side with this function of, so to speak, interpreting the Holy Spirit to us, it would seem as if Mary

has an additional function of an intriguing character. In becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, God has assumed the male form. This causes some to contend that woman has been relegated to an inferior place in the divine economy. But this could not in any circumstances be the divine proposition. God is not of the male gender and would have no reason for promoting the male species to superiority. Indeed it may well happen that when the final toll is taken, the majority of Heaven's inhabitants will be women. If for certain reasons of convenience he effects the incarnation in a man, it is most probable that he will adjust the balance elsewhere in the temporal order.

The very words used in regard to the original entry of man and woman into the world contain the inference of essential equality: 'The male and female, he created them' (Gn 1:27). The form of their bodies and the structure of their minds point to the same. The differences are functional only. Nor can we suppose the souls of one sex as inferior to those of the other sex.

It is true that there are evident differences in function. Some of these are seized on as indicating a male superiority, i.e. greater physical strength and certain mental aspects. But it is conceivable that these could be illusory and could even bear in the opposite direction. For example, why attach any importance to mere physical strength which could then be used to argue that the animal is superior to man! The same could apply to the intellect. If the man could be alleged to present a superiority in certain directions, might not the real position be the same as the case of the bigger muscles, namely that what is at stake is only a function or office and not real quality; and that the woman's office might be more delicate and unobtrusive but on no lower level of essential quality.

Man has an office to discharge in the world which requires certain attributes to fulfil, and the same applies to the case of the woman. To the end of the chapter man will be the exerciser of force and the things which follow from it. But these do not stand for virtue. Man's office may rank higher – just as money does – in the crude valuations of mankind but not in the mind of God. The precious items in his coinage are faith and pure love. Therefore woman's array of qualities is certainly not inferior in his eyes. It would not be wise for woman to be beguiled by the more tangible and worldly signs.

However, it is a fact that God became incarnate as a man. Does this not show him as bringing the male sex to an elevation above that of the woman? A man and not a woman became God. In what possible way can that apparent radical disparity be evened out?

It seems to me that we have the easiest answer in the Blessed Virgin and in the ideas which I have been suggesting. If God has become incarnate in a male person he has established with a woman the next-possible relation. The reason, moreover, for concluding that special relation with a male person was not that of granting a higher degree of honour or preference to the male sex but was done for other sufficient reasons, some of which we can discern. For instance, the redemptive role to which Our Lord was assigned was such that we cannot see a woman cast to it, at least not in the time of Christ. Follow his path and it will be realised how ill-tuned a woman would be to it. It would have outraged every principle of thought of that time to have a woman conform to its details. There is no need to fill in that picture.

But says our objector: 'Could God not find another appropriate way in which he can assign to a woman the

role of Redeemer?' Of course God's omnipotence would not be at a loss. But certainly it would have entailed a drastic re-adjustment of the first-chosen plan – and this for no other purpose in the mind of the objector but to deprive man of a supposed ascendancy in order to give it to woman! This would surely be feminism with a vengeance! And it would only have transferred the grievance to the man!

Perhaps then it may be admitted that the time and circumstances required that the incarnation be effected in a man. But that did not confer on the male sex a moral superiority or supremacy. Furthermore, that eminent theologian, René Laurentin, urges that in Jesus Christ are to be found all the feminine qualities, so that in him woman is exalted equally with man. Though true, this is a rather abstruse idea which few will be able to grasp. Moreover not every woman would regard representation in a man as sufficient. It would be good if a more evident and acceptable solution was available.

I suggest that we have it in the idea of Mary's cooperation. This does not over-ride the explanation of Laurentin but supplements it. To whatever indefinite extent that Jesus does not in himself stand for and exalt womanhood, Mary fulfils that purpose. She does not do it in her capacity as the Maid of Nazareth but – if we can distinguish – in her role as Spouse of the Holy Spirit. Through Mary, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity makes a presentation of himself to us analogous to that which the Second Divine Person offers through Jesus Christ.

A further purpose in view would be the supremely important one of making clearly manifest to us the differentiation of the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. It is not enough to regard God in a confused manner

as somehow Three. We must as best we can resolve the Trinity into its Persons, each of whom plays a distinct part in regard to us and our salvation; and with each of whom we should have specific, understood relations.

Jesus does this in respect of the Second Divine Person whom he actually is. In Jesus is also the Holy Spirit, but to be content with this would be that lack of differentiation which we are seeking to avoid, and which Mary enters in to clarify. Through Mary that differentiation is established in simple, vivid fashion.

Merely to make that differentiation between the Three Divine Persons would be an advance. But here I am thinking in terms of a sort of clothing of each Divine Person with flesh, that is the attributing to each one of a character, a personality, which we can understand and which will enable us to address them without straining, and which after a fashion makes them present to us.

If, following the theme of this discussion, we see in Jesus the Second Divine Person, we have certainly succeeded in dispelling in our minds and indefiniteness which we might have had regarding the Trinity. Moreover we can see the Godhead in its approaches to humanity manifesting itself in Jesus as a man and in Mary as a woman.

This line of thought enables us to see especially in the Holy Spirit what we may call the feminine side of God and which otherwise we might overlook. Mary, so far as creature could be, was made like to the Holy Spirit and would accordingly reflect him to the fullest extent humanly possible.

The Immaculate Conception was Mary's spiritual birth. Is it not permissible to suggest that like any progenitor the Holy Spirit imprinted on her his own image and appearance? This would be accentuated by her subsequent

growth in grace which was to make her a worthy mother of Jesus and a fit co-operator of the Holy Spirit himself. He reveals himself through her to such an extent that in her we almost see him. It is this sort of language that the well-known and approved 'revelations' of St Bridget of Sweden speak of Mary: 'He who sees me may see the divinity and humanity in me as a mirror, and me in God. For whosoever sees God sees the Three Persons in him; and whosoever sees me sees as it were the Three Persons. For the Deity folded me in itself with my soul and body and filled me with every virtue.' (Cardinal Vaughan's Preface to the *True Devotion to Mary*).

And of course this works out the same in reverse. If Mary has been made as far as possible to resemble the Holy Spirit, it follows that the Holy Spirit is like her. She affords in a human way a comprehensive portrait of him, but one which lives and which takes in the inner virtue as well as the outer appearance.

In the foregoing considerations lies an additional gleam of illumination in respect of that sublime woman whom the Blessed Trinity chose before the ages as its co-operator in the drama of mankind, weaving her destiny inextricably with the Redeemer. She covers the unbridgeable gap between fallen man and his Creator and she makes Redemption possible. She is the true Mother of the Second Divine Person, giving him to us in a form which enables all of us to love him, and some to love him supremely.

Then we find her accomplishing an almost equivalent purpose in regard to the Third Divine Person. Here is a little course of reflection. The Catechism, or rather it is a stage beyond that, teaches that the Father begets the Son, and that at once the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father

and the Son. He is engendered as it were by the look of each person upon the other and their consequent mutual love. This Trinitarian operation began before time or rather it never began, and it continues always in progress. This is too devastating a thought for us to dwell on. Our minds can no more stand up to it than our eyes can gaze at the sun.

The Father carried this operation into time when he caused his Son, the Second Divine Person to take flesh in Mary. He effected this by the power of the Holy Spirit who performs all the external works of the Trinity. This meant that a human being was introduced in an especially intimate way into the life of the Holy Trinity. She became truly the mother of the God-man Jesus Christ and freely co-operated with the power of the Holy Spirit in the sublime mystery of the Incarnation. As Mary is forever the Mother of Jesus Christ, so likewise is she forevermore the co-operator with the Holy Spirit in all the works of salvation. This would certainly constitute her as Mediatrix of all graces.

Could we not think even deeper and say that as she freely co-operated in the Incarnation of the Son of God, she is thereby, through the divine good pleasure, associated with the Father and the Son in their giving of the Holy Spirit in all works of sanctification just as through her free will she gave Jesus Christ to the world. This is a point of magnitude and the reason, which transcends all other reasons, why she is styled Helpmate, Advocate, Co-operatrix, Mediatrix.

This manifest role of hers, which exhibits her in a characteristic relation with each Divine Person, has caused her to be described by the Church as the Complement of the Holy Trinity. This is an expression which must be

taken in the fullest sense for she has been incorporated in an external but vital way into the operations of the Trinity. Most of this we cannot understand. But what is understandable must be probed into because it is necessary to our spiritual life. We must have an idea of the Three Divine Persons and we must grasp Mary's extraordinary part, one aspect of which is that she does manage to draw each person from the divine distances and to impart to each one a substantiality which renders us able to deal familiarly with him, even to the extent of conversing in the forms of advanced human love, and even to the extent of baby talk and childlike gestures. It is to Mary that we owe the establishment of such a choice relation, a relation of love and not of fear.

I would say that as a result of trying to associate the Holy Spirit with the Blessed Virgin in the foregoing lines, I have managed to draw the Holy Spirit from utter vagueness and to make him in my imagination a very real person with an element of the substantial. I see him as possessing characteristics akin to those of the Blessed Virgin, shading into her a great deal but always as a distinct personality, definitely feminine (though custom forces me to say 'he') and combining the exquisiteness which we see in the Blessed Virgin with an infinite power and love. For the purpose of the mechanics of communication, this represents a palpable advance. One prays to a gracious, radiant, loving being and no longer to a formidable shadow.

Here perhaps it will be said that the Holy Spirit, being the Spouse of Mary, cannot be imagined as with feminine characteristics. But the term 'Spouse of Mary' is not supposed to contain the meaning that the Holy Spirit is the husband of Mary or the Father of Jesus Christ. He

is neither of those things. He is the agency and power through whom the Father produces his son in Mary. For this reason many writers have sought for another term than that of spouse to describe his relation to Mary.

In what manner does Mary affect our thinking in regard to the Father? Well, if we have reached the stage of familiarity with some members of a family, a comparable link is thereby established with another member whom we have not seen. Through Mary we have come into an intimacy with the Second and Third Persons of the Divine Family, and that intimacy reaches out and attaches itself also to the Father. It is necessary to get closer to him by reason of the insufficiency of the prevailing image of him. But that must be for another day.