

MARY KEPT HENS AT NAZARETH

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Monsignor Alfred O' Rahilly, frequently quoted in the Legion Handbook, says that we may piously believe that Our Lady kept hens at Nazareth. This is an unexpected idea. Did anyone think of it before? I cannot remember any of the countless pictures of Our Lady which thus represented her. Yet it gently touches an important chord. For we must not imagine her as in any way removed from our condition. There is a danger of that by reason of her exalted qualities and role. She is so close to God that she cannot come any closer. To be brought any more into God would mean an incarnation, and such was not the plan of God. Mary had an altogether special part of her own to play and it was dependent on her being a pure creature.

But she was raised to the very edge of the divinity. Understanding this and seeing the uniqueness of the place assigned to her in the whole scheme of grace, we might tend towards the error of regarding her as remote from ourselves; as a lofty, aloof personage who is gracious enough to receive our petitions and generous enough to grant them. The contemplation of her as Queen might make her less a Mother to us. This must not be; the vital note is that of mother.

The fact is that the plunging of her into God does not remove her from our condition, but does the contrary. It brings her nearer to us. It makes her more a woman than any other woman, more a mother than any other, more human in the ideal sense of the word than the rest of mankind. This is a strange but a justified idea. She is more loving, solicitous, understanding, than any other woman of all time. She combines things which are usually opposites. She is set above the Angels and occupies the throne beside her Son, but she is the humble maid. She is mother and yet she is virgin. She has the brightest intellect, but she is the simplest person of all. She was united to the Holy Trinity. She was Queen of the Angels, of the entire universe, of all men - but she kept hens!

Not Merely a Hobby

This idea gives us a right perspective on her life. Let us pursue it a little. She did not keep hens merely as a hobby, while being at the same time in a dreamy almost ecstatic state. No, the cackle of those hens makes a harmony. It strikes a right keynote, and false notions have to re-adjust themselves.

Did she have a vegetable patch? Most likely. If she had the ground it would be her housewife's instinct to use it, realising that God intended it to be put to service. This point is no mere trifle; it is dwelt on in Scripture. Remember the story of the talent that was hidden in the ground so that it brought forth no increase. God condemned that servant. Could anyone imagine Our Blessed Lady saying to God at the Judgment: "Yes I have a strip of ground but really it was not worth the trouble of cultivating it; it was easier to buy the vegetables in the village"?

Consider also those vegetables were to nourish her Son, so that there was a sort of necessity that she should have a part in producing them.

According to the circumstances Mary would be found doing all the things which the normal woman would do, and interesting herself in a practical way in everyone and everything around her. In this we have come to a sort of central point, of which the chickens and the vegetable garden would only be the signs. She was housewife and mother at Nazareth as a preparation for being Mother of the whole world. For it is God's method to use this life in every way as a preparation for the next. If we are to have a special role in the next world, we enter on it here and, so to speak, serve an apprenticeship to it. Mary was the perfect citizen at Nazareth in order that she would be the perfect mother and model in heaven, loving each of her children individually and being utterly concerned in all their affairs. Note that it is not enough to love people in bulk. It could be no more than a sentimental transaction. The ordinary king and queen are said to love their subjects, but how many of them do they know individually? It is, after

all, a vague, unreal form of love which never gets down to the individual person.

Taking Trouble is Her Trade

Not of that general, remote type is Our Lady's love for mankind. Being in God, she sees each one separately, distinctly, in minute detail. She knows all about us, almost infinitely more than would the most attentive mother on earth. And she devotes herself to each one as if there were no other person. Indeed she goes far beyond that. She loves and tends each one of us as if we were her own Son, Jesus: which in truth we are through the wonder of the Mystical Body.

Taking trouble with us would be her trade, even what might seem to us as unnecessary trouble. She could not be uninterested in anything which bore on us. She could not take the easy way out of any situation or leave things in a state of undevelopment. In Nazareth she would not be indifferent to defects of any kind, and the same would hold good in her wider world of today. Even local disfigurements would hurt her because each one of them stands for human indifference or helplessness. They are there because people are so undeveloped in taste or so apathetic as not to be disturbed by them. Or perhaps the people do see the misery but are not in a position to do anything about it. In either event Mary is troubled. In the first case because that stagnation of mind most probably denotes a stagnation of soul also. In the second case, it is a minor tragedy that people are helpless to rectify things which are wrong, and that there is no one to come to their rescue.

The spirit of Mary is supposed to be our spirit. We are meant to take after our Mother. She rears us spiritually. To the extent that we are wanting in her spirit we fail. In the main the world is failing in that respect. Loving the individual and being interested in him is indeed the very reverse of the modern outlook which is that of seeing people as a crowd and dealing with them in bulk. There is more talk today than in any previous age about fraternity and the serving of men, but it never gets down to the man. Problems are left as mass-problems. They are approached on bloodless lines; and as blood is a necessary ingredient of life, these problems elude solution. This in turn means that they will come to be regarded as normal or unsolvable, so that even that cold, official treatment will not be given to them. Then they begin to rot and corrupt everything around them.

Putting Idealism to Sleep

The bloodless approach ends up in the handling of people on paper and without personal interest. Pass Acts of Parliament ordering people. Put tariffs on. Subsidise industries. Issue beautiful literature. Prove conclusively that good conduct is a paying proposition; that if all work together harmoniously the world would be a new Garden of Eden; and so forth!

After that elaborate impersonal process has run its course, one is surprised to find that the laws have not been efficacious, nor the tariffs, nor the good advice. In the main people have continued on in their wilful selfish way; the right chords have not been touched in them. The stirrings of idealism have been effectively put to sleep. The difficulties have not eased. The solutions have not been found. The community does no more than survive in convulsions. As a wise man said to me one time: "The bloodless approach gets only the tenth part of a man."

As roughly typical of what is happening in every department of life, may I give the following. Recently I was privileged to talk to a large gathering of Agricultural Instructors, a responsible and expert body. My theme was that they should make full use of their tactical position in the rural community to propagate what we have been calling True Devotion to the Nation, i.e., that patriotism is not merely a war-time virtue, but far more a work of peace; that each individual is responsible for his neighbour; that he must serve his community with self-sacrifice - and that this is the only realistic way of fulfilling the Christian programme of loving all men.

At once several spoke, saying that they would not have regarded this as coming within their scope and that they had never thought of going beyond the purely technical in their function. But then the few who were Legionaries among them intervened and propounded the fullness of our idea. This afforded striking evidence of the necessity of the Legion to a community and to the nation. Is it possible that outside the Legion few possess an understanding of what full duty is or what patriotism means, or on what those things are based?

True Devotion to the Nation Necessary

In my subsequent comments I suggested to them that their method was the bloodless one; that the mercenary motive would not produce important results; and that True Devotion to the Nation, with its combination of the spiritual and mundane, was necessary to them even on the professional plane.

I suggested that the typical contact which they were having with the agricultural community would be something like this: "You must plough deeper and closer furrows. You must use such and such a seed, also a new fertiliser, which are a little dearer but will give better yield. Doing these things you will make more money."

That line of talk certainly states a fact, but analyse its impact on the ultra-conservative rural mind. He reacts against it instinctively. He does not want to be moved. What was good enough for his father before him is good enough for him. His brain freezes, for it has been reduced to the lowest level of thought, in which uncertain profit contends against extra work and risk. Possibly it is demonstrated to him that with the expenditure of more money and effort he will do better financially. But how far does that carry one with people whose idea of an advantageous transaction is that of making without any extra trouble? Moreover, he will quote local examples to prove that the fine new plans can go wrong, but we will not produce what he also knows, namely that human defect had entered into those cases.

From the expressions on the faces of those instructors it was evident that my little word-picture had touched a nerve-centre. Apparently that was their experience in the average contact. They were pushing at a locked door in people's minds; they were not using the key which would open it. They were speaking the wrong language to persons whose notion of improvement is not that of making more effort but of making less, whose ambition is in fact easy money. From their own angle, those farmers are right. Why should they make slaves of themselves for money alone, and that is more or less what is being put up to them. They are able to live in their own simple way as things are. They are reasonably content. Why should they disturb all this for the sake of problematical gains?

A Little From Each Can Amount To a New Order

No sufficient motive has been proposed to those men. The motive which would count has not been put into the scale, namely Christian idealism, the welfare of the community, the brightening of things around them, the providing of a future for their own families, the making of the country a little more prosperous, the sending of a current of extra industry moving - all of which, like the Gulf Stream, would carry diversified warmth with it and help to raise living above the level of mere existing. Even a little contribution from each one could add up to a New Order.

Though I have been talking in terms of one section of the community, I think that my contentions would apply to all sections. We are satisfied with insufficiency. We do not see the imperative need for developing either ourselves or others to the fullness of our capacity. A certain proportion, moved by intense worldly ambitions, strive enterprisingly, but the rest, for want of an adequate motive, are content to stagnate. Necessarily the tide of life forces us forward, but we yield to it grudgingly and only partially. Life in general is lived at a fraction of its real possibility.

This would be bad enough if it were a matter of this world only, that is if the end of life terminated all. But unhappily in one sense that is not the case, for the doings of this life carry on into eternity. It is true that we can triumph in failure. The most fruitful life may be a voyage through shallows and misery, but such would only be the case if we are interiorly rising superior to the failure and making spiritual profit out of it. This would not apply to the state of undevelopment and disheartenment to which I have been pointing. And what else but indifference and sin will rush in to fill a spiritual and idealistic vacuum?

A Hurt To The Whole World

Too often nothing but the minimum is proposed to the people, which means that they are being subjected to that process of mental freezing. Minds cannot possess or project a character which has not been offered to them. The apparent failure has been a real failure. Human possibilities are not being elicited. Talents are being left unprofitably in the ground. Genius is going to waste. Heroism is

unexploited, Idealism is perverted by the atmosphere and frequently turned to wrong causes. And worst of all, potential sanctity is left to be overgrown by the weeds and stifled.

It is no case of the span of this life only, but of all eternity. Nor is it a matter of a local loss, but a hurt to the whole world by depriving the Mystical Body of quality. All those stagnant souls should be at work. Potential in each one is the mission of influencing the world. Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" contains many beautiful lines. One verse is appropriate here:

"Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear.
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

It becomes infinitely tragic when that undiscovered gem could be a Francis of Assisi; or when the flower that wastes its sweetness could be a Little Flower. Yet that is what is happening all around us in every department of life. The economic worldly failures are symptoms of moral defects. The natural waste is being paralleled in the spiritual order. The social misbehaviour is simultaneously taking place in the soul.

One is struck by the suitability of the Legion as a means of bringing this tangle into order and sense. It has the motive power and the man power. It is not merely a multitude of workers, which could mean but little. The Legion is the supernatural principle applied in detail to the persons and problems around us. It is the Catholic doctrine put into action through an excellent system - as our late beloved Holy Father said. It is truth combined with charity. And so it should share the Church's attribute of being gold with the strength of steel.

Words of Pope John XXIII

Is it an excess thus to measure the Legion against human disorder? Well, here are other words of Pope John XXIII, spoken on the 13th July, 1960, to a pilgrimage of French legionaries: "The Legion of Mary shows forth the true face of the Catholic Church." Even distantly to approximate a society to the Church is to ennoble that society. Perhaps, too, those august words suggest that the Legion presents the Church with its different features in due proportion; that the Legion acts correctly in basing itself on the doctrines of the Mystical Body and Our Lady's mediation; and that the Legion is a worthy instrument of the Church's action?

Can the face of the Church become obscured? Not to the eye of God, but it can to the eye of man. For instance if it is not shown at all to those outside. Or if it is only partially shown, as happens when our own people remain ignorant and indifferent so that they are only seeing the Church through a glass darkly. Or if that face is shown dirty and disfigured by our own poor living.

So out we must go to exhibit the lovely face of true Catholicism to all. We must seek out each individual in the spirit of Christian love. We must try to bring to them their glorious heritage of living in Christ. We must breathe on them the warmth of genuine interest. We must be the channel of Mary's Motherhood. We must nourish them on doctrine, teaching them the full implications of the Mystical Body.

Doing these things, we will enable Our Lord to live in men, to rule them and through them to conquer. But in spite of all our numbers and organisations, we will succeed in none of our aims unless we have that spirit of Mary in us. And I sum up the spirit of Mary in what I said at the beginning: Though she was intimately united to the Holy Trinity, she kept her at Nazareth.