

5. THE VENERATION OF THE MOTHER OF GOD.

Many are the types of our blessed Lady to be found in the Old Testament; e.g., Eve, the mother of all mankind; Noe's ark, wherein the human race was preserved from extinction; the Ark of the Covenant containing the manna; Judith who slew Holofernes, the arch-enemy of her people; Esther, who was exempted from the universal law (as Mary was from original sin), and by her mediation rescued her people from death; the mother of the Machabees, who witnessed the death of her seven sons, and whose heart, like Mary's, was pierced with seven swords, etc. The Gospels gave little information respecting the life of Our Lady; more concerning it may be learned from the revelations of the saints.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ, is usually called the Mother of God or the Most Blessed Virgin.

Elizabeth was the first to call Mary Mother of God (Luke i. 43). The Council of Ephesus, in 431, confirmed this title, Dei Genitrix, and condemned the contrary doctrine asserted by the heretic Nestorius. Mary gave birth to Him Who is God and man in one person. A child does not receive its soul from its mother, but from God, yet she of whom it is born is called its mother; in like manner Mary is justly termed the "Mother of God," although Christ did not derive from her His divine nature. Mary is also rightly called "the Blessed Virgin." The words she spoke to the angel announced her determination to preserve her virginity inviolate (Luke i. 34). Many ages before the prophet Isaias foretold that a virgin should conceive and bear a Son (Is. vii. 14). In her conception, in child-bearing, and after the birth of Jesus, Mary remained a virgin. As the bush burned with fire and was not consumed, so Mary's virginity was not impaired by the birth of Christ; as Our Lord appeared in the midst of the apostles although the doors of the room where they were assembled were shut, so He came into the world, and her chastity remained intact. So the sun shines through glass without in any wise changing it. Mary is the window of heaven, through which the true Light came into the world. Those who are spoken of in the Gospels as the brethren of Christ (Matt. xiii. 55) are His blood relations; it was

customary among the Jews to term near relatives brethren. Abraham called his nephew Lot by this name (Gen. xiii. 8). "Had Mary had other children who could have taken care of her, Our Lord upon the cross would not have commended her," as St. John Chrysostom remarks, "to the beloved disciple." Christ was called the "first-born," to indicate the fact that He was, according to Jewish law, sanctified to the Lord (Exod. xiii. 2). Christ was, in fact, the first-born among many brethren (Rom. viii. 29), that is, all Christian people, who are besides the children of Mary. Mary was espoused to Joseph by God's command, in order that she might not be stoned after the birth of Christ, and also in order to provide a guardian for her and the divine Child. The name Mary is a Hebrew word, meaning lady, or mistress.

We pay greater honor to Mary, the Mother of Christ, than to any other saint.

Even in her lifetime, Mary had great honor paid to her; at the Annunciation the angel addressed her as "full of grace," and "blessed among women" (Luke i. 28). It is a great honor if an angel appears to mortal men and affords them an opportunity of showing him reverence; yet at the Annunciation it was not man who revered the angel, but the angel who revered man. "Hence," St. Thomas Aquinas says, "we conclude that Mary excels the angels in dignity." How respectfully Elizabeth treated Mary; she called her blessed, and gave her the title of Mother of her Lord (Luke i. 42, 43). Mary herself foresaw that she would be praised by posterity, for she said: "From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed" (Luke i. 48). The Church invites us to honor the Mother of God with special devotion. The Hail Mary is almost invariably added to the Our Father; three times a day the Angelus bell reminds us of the mystery of the Incarnation, and bids us invoke the name of Mary; many festivals have been instituted in her honor, the Litany of Loretto is recited at the public services of the Church; the month of May, the fairest month in the year, is dedicated to her, and during October the Rosary is daily recited. Moreover, numerous churches are erected in all lands in honor of the Mother of God, not a few of these being renowned places of pilgrimage, where signal graces and favors are obtained; and the most glorious titles are given to her, such as: Channel of grace, Mother of mercy, Refuge of sinners, Help of Christians, Queen of heaven, etc. Yet the veneration we pay to Mary is distinct from

the adoration due to God. Exalted honor is due to Mary, but the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit alone, do we adore.

1. We hold Mary in such great veneration because she is the Mother of God and our Mother.

Whoever truly loves God must assuredly honor the Mother of God, and honor her, too, far above all the saints, the friends of God. The honor paid to the Queen-Mother is reflected upon the King, her Son. One may judge of the measure in which a man loves God by his devotion to Mary. In fact, the greater the saint, the more intensely does he love Mary. She is actually our Mother, for Our Lord gave her to us upon the cross when He said to St. John: "Behold thy Mother" (John xix. 27), John representing on Calvary all the followers of Christ. Mary is the second Eve, the Mother of all mankind; as the disobedience of Eve brought misery upon the human race, so the obedience of Mary restores it to a state of grace. Through one woman death came into the world, through another, life. And since Mary is our Mother, our salvation is more a matter of concern to her than to any of the saints. After Christ no one cares for us as she does. St. Bernard declares that the love of all the mothers in the world does not equal the love Mary bears to each one of her children. And the reason she cares so much for us is because of her love for God, and consequently her charity towards her neighbor exceeds that of any other saint. As the glory of the moon surpasses that of the stars, so the love of Mary for us exceeds that of the angels; it is a boundless ocean of love. Mary knows all our circumstances; this even the angels do (Luke xv. 7), and it cannot be supposed that they know more than does their Queen. A dutiful child delights to be with its mother, and the devout Christian rejoices to address to Mary, the Mother of God, his loving supplications.

2. Another reason why Mary is so highly honored throughout Christendom, is because God has exalted her above all men and angels.

Monarchs grant privileges to the towns where they were born, or where they were crowned; so the King of heaven has conferred special privileges and prerogatives on the Mother who bore Him.

Mary was, in fact, chosen by God to be the Mother of His Son, preserved from the stain of original sin, raised gloriously from the tomb, and crowned Queen of heaven.

No angel, not even the most perfect and greatest of the heavenly host, can say to God as Mary can: "Thou art my Son." O what a marvellous privilege is this! Mary is indeed the Mater admirabilis, and that not alone because she is at one and the same time Virgin and Mother, nor because she is Mother both of the creature and of the Creator, but pre-eminently because she gave birth to Him Who was the Author of her being. Mary is the wonder of wonders, and nothing in the universe, God only excepted, is more glorious than she is. Mary's spotless purity, her sinlessness, was first proclaimed by God in paradise (Gen. iii. 15), and afterwards by the archangel Gabriel (Luke i. 28). God said to the serpent, "She shall crush thy head." Had Mary been brought under the dominion of the devil by sin, she could not possibly have been his conqueror. Gabriel saluted Mary as "full of grace." The dignity of Christ alone demanded that His Mother should be entirely free from sin. When God raises any one to a high post, He fits him for it; and the Son of God, in choosing Mary to be His Mother, rendered her by the gifts of grace fit for this exalted dignity (St. Thomas Aquinas). Now we know that no one who built a house for his own use, would first put his greatest enemy in possession of it; much less would the Holy Spirit, Whose temple Mary was to be, allow the evil one to make her his own. The Fathers of the Church and the children of the Church in all ages, have given to Mary the title of immaculate both in their writings and in their prayers; and in 1854 the Holy Father declared her Immaculate Conception to be a dogma of the faith. Mary was therefore free from original and actual sin (Council of Trent, 6, 23); she is compared to a lily among thorns (Cant. ii. 2), a mirror without a flaw (Wisd. vii. 26). She advanced in perfection rapidly and continuously, like the vine (Ecclus. xxiv. 23) that grows higher and higher, till it attains the height of the tree to which it clings. She advanced all the more rapidly, because she was so near to the source of all grace, and was the recipient of greater and more abundant graces than other men. Mary was the most holy and perfect of all creatures; and her sanctity surpassed that of all other saints as much as the light of the moon exceeds in brilliance that of the planets. Even in the first moments of her existence, Mary's sanctity was greater than that of the most eminent saints

at the close of their life. On account of her exalted sanctity she is compared to the tower of David (Cant. iv. 4), which rose in majestic stateliness on the highest summit of the mountains about Jerusalem. She is also called the mirror of justice. Of all created beings none ever loved God so intensely as Mary did, or cared so little for the things of earth. As the action of fire causes iron to glow with heat, so the Holy Spirit inflamed the heart of Mary with charity. On account of her great love she is called the house of gold. Mary was adorned with every virtue. She is the mystical rose, for as the rose surpasses all other flowers in the beauty of its coloring and the fragrance of its perfume, so Mary exceeds all the saints in the magnitude of her love for God, and the sweet odor of her virtues. She is the Queen of whom the Psalmist speaks (Ps. xlv. 11), clad in the golden garments of charity, surrounded by a variety of virtues. "Thus," Suarez declares, "she was dearer to God than all the other saints together." The body of the Blessed Virgin was assumed gloriously into heaven. It is said that the apostle Thomas, having arrived in Jerusalem too late to assist at her interment, was desirous to see her remains in the sepulchre; but when it was opened nothing was found there but the grave-clothes in which her body had been wrapped. Catherine Emmerich in her visions asserts that Our Blessed Lady died forty-eight years after the birth of Christ, at the age of sixty-four. Having gone from Ephesus to Jerusalem to follow again the footsteps of her Son in the way of the cross, she fell mortally sick and died of grief; hence her tomb was in Jerusalem. The feast of her Assumption is kept throughout the whole Church on the fifteenth of August. No one has ever claimed to possess a relic of her body. Mary shines in heaven with unrivalled splendor. The sun, moon, and stars of our solar system are symbols of Christ, His Mother and the saints. Mary is the Queen of angels, the Queen of all saints. In her more than in any other creature we gain a knowledge of the divine attributes. Most especially we see displayed in her glorious exaltation the infinite goodness of God, Who raises the poor man from the dunghill, that He may set him with princes and elevate him above the choirs of celestial spirits (Ps. cxii. 7, 8).

- 3. Finally, we entertain this great veneration for Mary, because her intercession is more powerful with God than that of any other saint.**

Mary's intercession has immense power with God. On earth her petitions were all-prevailing with Christ, as at the marriage-feast at Cana. And if Christ granted all His Mother's prayers on earth, how much the more will He do so in heaven. When the General Coriolanus could not be prevailed upon by the Senate and priests of Rome to withdraw his army from before the city, he yielded to the entreaties of his mother Veturia, although he knew that to do so would cost him his life. How much the more will Christ, the great Lawgiver, listen to the supplications of His Mother! If the prayers of the saints, His servants, have so much power with God, what must those of His Mother have! Being the prayers of a mother, they are less like a petition than a command. St. Bernard declares Mary to be omnipotent by means of her intercession; there is nothing that she cannot obtain for us. As at the court of an earthly monarch he is sure to succeed for whom the queen interests herself, so at the court of the King of kings those for whom Mary, the Queen of heaven, pleads, will not be disappointed of their desires. Thus Mary is our hope; because through her intercession we hope to procure the blessings which our poor prayers cannot obtain. Hence the saints speak of her as the dispenser of graces, for all the favors we receive from heaven come to us through her hands. "God," St. Peter Damian says, "would not become man until Mary had given her consent, in order that we might see that the salvation of mankind rested in her hands." She stood beneath the cross that we might know that without her mediation no one could be made partaker of the merits of the blood of Christ. God the Father sanctions, Christ grants, and Mary distributes the gifts of heaven to mankind. Thus Mary is the Mother of divine grace. No prayer she proffers is unanswered. "Who can doubt," exclaims St. Bernard, "that the Son will listen to His Mother—such a Son to such a Mother!" Remember how the same saint declares in the Memorare that it is a thing unheard of for any one to implore Mary's aid, and implore in vain. Even the least and shortest prayer to Mary does not go unrecompensed; she rewards the slightest intentions with the richest graces. Every time we salute her she does not fail to return our greeting. She is the Virgin most clement. There is not a trace of sternness about her; she is all clemency, loving kindness and gentleness. He would be wrong indeed who approached her with trembling.

From time immemorial Christians have been accustomed to have recourse to Mary in times of affliction and distress.

In the year 1683, when the Turks besieged Vienna, both in the beleaguered city and throughout Christendom the Rosary was recited to implore the aid of the Mother of God, and a signal victory was the result. Individual Christians also appeal to Mary for aid when private troubles press heavily upon them. She is called the Help of Christians, the Comforter of the afflicted, the Health of the sick. Christians call upon her in seasons of severe sickness. It is recorded of St. John Damascene, that when the caliph, enraged with him for having written in defence of the veneration of images, caused his right hand to be struck off, the saint prostrated himself before a statue of Our Lady, and was immediately healed. In the present day how numerous are the miraculous cures effected at Lourdes! To Mary also is due the conversion of many sinners who desire to amend their lives, for upon those who invoke her the light of the Holy Spirit is shed. Mary is the morning star; as that planet heralds the sunrise, so devotion to Mary is the forerunner of divine grace, the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit. She is compared to the dawn (Cant. vi. 9), because as the shades of night vanish before the rising sun, so sin departs from the soul that is devoted to Mary. The month of May is dedicated to her, because nature then awakens to a new life, and devotion to Mary brings fresh life to the soul dead in sin. Witness the miraculous conversion of the public sinner, Mary of Egypt, before an image of Our Lady in the Church of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem. Mary is ever desirous to effect our reconciliation with God, far more so than any earthly mother could be to establish peace between two members of her family who were at enmity with each other. Through her intercession Our Lord's anger is easily appeased. Alexander the Great once said: "A single tear from my mother's eyes will blot out many death-warrants." If a man, and a heathen to boot, will speak thus of his mother, what may we not expect from the divine Son of Mary? She is the Refuge of sinners; the Mother of mercy; from her as from an olive tree to which she is likened (Ecclus. xxiv. 19), the softening oil of mercy flows. She is our mediatrix; to her we fly in temptation; as the Jews on their entrance into the Promised Land (Numb. x. 35), and in their wars with the Philistines (1 Kings xiv.) carried with them the ark of the Lord to insure victory, so through Mary, the Ark of the Covenant of the New Testament, are we enabled to conquer our

spiritual foes. As the star guides the mariner, tossing on the stormy sea, to a safe haven, so Mary guides us over the tempestuous ocean of life to the celestial port. She is compared in Holy Scripture to a plane-tree in the streets (Ecclus. xxiv. 19), because as the tree protects the wayfarer from sun and rain, so Mary defends those who place themselves under her care from the assaults of the devil. To the enemy of mankind she is “terrible as an army set in array” (Cant, vi. 3). Various titles are given to Mary to indicate the circumstances in which we may invoke her aid and trust in her succor, such as: Mother of perpetual succor, Mother of good counsel, Mother of dolors, etc.

Devotion to the Mother of God is an excellent means of attaining sanctity here below and eternal happiness hereafter.

No one can fail to observe the filial affection and devotion which all the saints have displayed towards the Mother of God, and the signal success with which God has rewarded this devotion on their part. Among the most prominent of these was St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and in later times St. Alphonsus Liguori, the author of the “Glories of Mary.” Mary is the gate of heaven; a ladder connecting heaven and earth, by which the Lord of heaven came down to us, and by which we may ascend up to God. St. Alphonsus declares it to be his persuasion that hell cannot boast of containing one single soul who ever had a true and heartfelt devotion to Mary. St. Bernard asserts that those who honor her daily will assuredly be saved. St. Francis Borgia always feared for the salvation of that soul which had little or no devotion for the Mother of God.

Rev. Fr. Francis Spirago. The Catechism Explained (pp. 441-451).