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MARY AND THE CHURCH

(Sermon delivered by the Very Rev. John A. Elbert, S.M., Provincial Superior of the Marianists, during the Holy Hour services held in connection with the Ninth Annual Convention of The Mariological Society of America in Dayton, Ohio, on January 2, 1958.)

THE Church is Christ on earth, Christ in history. It is the Kingdom of God constituted by Him as the Head and all the faithful as the members. As such the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, the whole Christ, growing in time, to the full measure of perfection as the Kingdom of God in heaven.

The Mission of the Church is well defined: It comes from Christ Himself: It is a universal mission extending over the whole world. "Going therefore teach all nations" . . .

It is a divine mission, in its origin, in its content and in its guarantee.

"You have not chosen me," our Lord said to his Apostles, "but I have chosen you" . . . "Teach them whatsoever I have commanded you" . . .

"Behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" . . .

It is the purpose of the Church to make Jesus known in His life, His work, His words . . . to present Him to every creature as the object and as the test of faith.

Such is the Church and such is its mission. Now who is Mary, and what is her relation to this Church and to its mission?

Mary is the Mother of Jesus. By the will of God and her consent to that will, she became the Mother of Him who was destined to be Savior of the world and Head of a new creation in the order of grace. He is the fountain-head and she the channel of that new order.

For this dignity and this office as Mother of the Whole

Christ, her consent was sought by God Himself through the heavenly Messenger Gabriel. It is this union of her will with the will of God in the Incarnation that makes her the first co-operator with Jesus in the Redemption and in the Sanctification of the human race. It lays the foundation for her spiritual maternity, for her role in the Redemption and her universal mediation in the application of grace to every redeemed soul. Such is Mary, Mother of God, Mother of men, Co-Redeemer, Universal Mediatrix of Grace.

. . . .

In the very theme of this Convention there is the assumption of a relationship between Mary and the Church. Furthermore, the implication is that the relationship is intimate and that it is part of a general pattern and that it imparts to the Church a distinctive character, which can be called Marian.

It is not surprising that the Church should bear a Marian character. Her Founder had that character in His body and in His soul. He was bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh. He was like her in form and feature, for she was His only human parent. His human mind was led onward advancing in wisdom and knowledge through experience, under her tutelage.

The Precursor had the Marian mark upon his soul before his body beheld the light of day. All the Apostles, seeing the miracle that Jesus wrought at Cana, through the intercession of Mary, "believed in Him." She was, in double right, the Mother of the Beloved Disciple, who gazed with eagle-eye upon the Godhead and traced the eternal generation of her Son.

The Marian character, is, therefore, in evidence on all those who had a share in the beginnings of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Mary's relationship to the Church is, therefore, well grounded. We look for its basis in the Scripture, where it has

its guarantee in the word and in the work of God, foreseen by the Prophets of the Old Law, confirmed in the writings of the New Testament and enshrined in the sound traditions of the Church.

Mary's role, as we first come upon it in the Gospel, is to bring the Son of God to men. Her co-operation in the mystery of the Incarnation was truly on a biological level; but this phase receives its character and direction, even its very existence, from the exalted role that she was destined to play in the mystery of God's relation to men, beginning with the Creation through the Incarnation, the Redemption and the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the hearts and in the assemblies of men.

In the divine economy she is the chosen instrument to bring the Son of God to earth, to make of Him a true Son of Man, and to provide Him with a body apt for the work of our redemption and of our sanctification through His sufferings and death, and for His Eucharistic life on earth. The body of Christ which was formed in her at the Incarnation is the same which was destined to hang on the Cross for our salvation and which will abide in the Blessed Sacrament for our nourishment, unto the end of time and unto the ends of the earth. The Church expresses the faith of all her children when she sings: *Ave, verum corpus natum ex Maria Virgine*, "Hail, true body born of the Virgin Mary". . . .

. . . .

When we seek out the process by which Mary brings Jesus to men, we find that it is by presenting Him to individuals and to nations as the object of faith. It is not difficult to trace her path through the Gospel pages in the fulfillment of this God-given vocation. Once the mystery of the Incarnation had been accomplished, and the Angel had departed from her, "Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town of Juda" (*Luke 1:39*).

The same Evangelist who recounts the wondrous tidings of the coming of God on earth, tells us of the beginnings of Mary's apostolate, to bring Christ to men for the establishment of His kingdom attaching to "the throne of David his father," . . . "in the house of Jacob" and into a future that would have no end.

The visit of Mary with her cousin Elizabeth has all the elements of a true apostolate. There is first the merely natural phase of the event as she goes forth into the hill country of Judah, carrying the Son of God in her own body, in order to share with her kinswoman the joy in the expectation of Elizabeth's approaching motherhood.

But over and beyond the natural phenomena, the work of God is being set in motion, for at the moment that Mary's greeting sounds in the ears of Elizabeth, the future Precursor whom she bears, leaps for joy in the presence of his God. At one and the same moment he receives the use of reason and the gift of faith. The common tradition holds that John was cleansed from the stain of original sin and sanctified in his mother's womb when Mary brought Jesus to him.

Here, then, Mary fulfilled her first mission by presenting Jesus as the object of faith to the Precursor, when as yet neither he nor his Master had seen the light of day. The faith of the Baptist in the Son of Mary as God-Incarnate availed, not only for his personal sanctification, but for his exalted office making of him the original witness to the divinity of Christ and the steadfast confessor of the faith, in life and in death.

It is the same Evangelist, St. Luke, who also gives the next step in Mary's mission, the first after the birth of Christ. She had only just "brought forth her first-born son" (*Luke* 2:7) when angels announced His advent to the world of Jewry in the person of the humble shepherds who were in the vicinity of Bethlehem "keeping watch over their flocks by night"

(*Luke* 2:8). He is heralded as “a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” And for a sign of recognition they would “find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” “So they went with haste and they found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. *And when they had seen, they understood what had been told them* concerning this child.” In the presence of the faith of Mary, augmented now by that of Joseph, there emerged in the hearts of these Shepherds the true faith in the Son of God, Who had become Son of Mary for the salvation of the world. Thus she furnished to her own people the light of faith in Him, her Son, before He became “a light of revelation to the Gentiles.”

The extension of the faith through Mary beyond the boundaries of Judaism is taken up by St. Matthew as he recounts the story of the Magi which is eminently the Manifestation of Jesus as Son of God. The Evangelist gives all the significant details: “When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod behold there came Magi from the East to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is the newly-born king of the Jews?’” . . . (*Matt.* 2:1). They came, guided by the light of a star, seeking the king of the Jews . . . “they found the child with Mary his mother and falling down they worshipped him” . . . (*Matt.* 2:11). In the presence of Mary, the Son of David is revealed as the Son of God, and faith in Him is kindled in a world that was sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death.

The Church began in history when Jesus came forth from the desert after fasting forty days and forty nights. First He chose His Apostles. Three days later, we find Him at Cana in Galilee, guests with Mary at a wedding feast.

The miracle that Jesus wrought here at the request of His Mother is well known and has many implications, and consequently, many interpretations. Most important is the fact that Mary exhibited here at a most critical time, her true role

in the work of Christ and in the mission of the Church. It was a striking manifestation of the divine power of Jesus, exercised at the request of His Mother and producing the effect which is the proper mission of Mary. For in summing up the miracle the Evangelist says: "This first of his signs Jesus worked at Cana of Galilee and *he manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him*" (John 2:11).

At this point of the Gospel record, Mary's share in the life and work of her Son appears to go into eclipse until the fateful time when He begins the last stage of His public life, carrying the Cross of salvation to the Mount of Calvary.

. . . .

Mary's mission, like that of her Son, came out of eternity. It emerged in time with the words of her consent to the Incarnation of the Son of God when she said to the Angel of the Annunciation: "Be it done to me according to thy word."

Mary's mission in relation to the Church is not distinct from the mission of Jesus Christ. It forms but one with His and receives its efficacy from Him.

The mission of Jesus can be summed up in the announcement of the Angel Gabriel when the heavenly messenger explained to the Virgin of Nazareth the reason for the Son of God become Son of Man: He was to save his people from their sins. There are several stages in His earthly life which bring out the manner in which He accomplished the work of our salvation.

First, He carried out the Father's decree when He was conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, taking on human form and subjecting Himself to His own creatures. Secondly, He went about His "Father's business," teaching, preaching, working wonders, in a public ministry that was limited in time and in scope. Thirdly, He did the Father's will in His sufferings and death, becoming obedient even to the death of the cross.

All phases of Christ's mission are necessary. In this sense they are equally important. But if we ask: when and under what conditions did He really accomplish His mission "saving his people from their sins," then we must look more closely at His life as set down in the Gospel record.

It was not when He learned at His Mother's knee. It was not when He worked at His Father's bench. It was not when He spoke as no other had spoken before; not even when He wrought wonders, cured the sick, opened eyes, raised the dead. *It was when He was weak, immobilized, helpless, forsaken, nailed to a cross.*

The apostolate of Mary is a sharing in the apostolate of Christ. It must, therefore, resemble His in its origin, in its character and in its fulfillment. That is why we look for and find the high mark and confirmation of her mission as the Mother of all the redeemed, the true mother of the Church, at the foot of the Cross when she received that Church from the pierced side of the dead Christ as it issued from His heart with the last drops of His precious blood and with the water of regeneration for the taking away of the sins of the world.

Mary's close ties with the beginnings of the public life of the Church are also a matter of record in the New Testament writings.

After His Resurrection, during forty days Jesus showed Himself alive by many proofs, appearing to the Apostles "and speaking of the Kingdom of God" (*Acts* 1:3). The Apostles in their part "began to ask him, saying: 'Lord, wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'"

Jesus does not then correct them as to the true nature of His kingdom or on the time of its inauguration. They were simply to wait to be endued with the power of the Holy Spirit in order to become His witnesses in the world.

After the Ascension of Christ into heaven, following His instructions, the Apostles returned to Jerusalem, to the upper

chamber of the Last Supper, and here the eleven "with one mind continued steadfastly in prayer with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brethren" (*Acts* 1:14).

"And when the Days of Pentecost were drawing to a close, they were all together in one place," the same place and the same people, and specifically "Mary, the Mother of Jesus," when "the sound of a violent wind" filled the whole house and "parted tongues of fire" settled upon each one; "And," says the Acts of the Apostles, "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (*Acts* 2:4).

Thus was the Church of Jesus Christ ushered into the world under the impulse of the Holy Spirit in the presence of the Mother of God, equipped with the twin virtues of faith and courage to carry out the mission of the Master under the eye of her who first brought Him into the world.

Since that time no century of the Church's history is without the clearly-marked trail of the mission of Mary. After bearing her spiritual children in pain and sorrow at the foot of the Cross, she continues to watch over them as the Valiant Woman overcoming all heresies and guiding her own in the paths of repentance, gathering in the truant nations that stray from the sheepfold of the divine Shepherd. None are beyond her reach and none are beyond her influence. All individuals and nations need her in order to receive and to maintain that life which the Incarnate Word came to bring. "I am come," He says, "that men may have life and have it more abundantly."

He is the Source of that life, but He communicates it, as He communicated Himself, through Mary. That is *why* the Son of God became Son of Mary, "to save His people from their sins." That is *how* the Son of God saves His people, by becoming the Son of Mary. That is how He communicates life to men through that Body born of the Virgin, immolated on the Cross and broken on the Altar.

As a member of the human race, as a creature of God, as a child of the Heavenly Father, Mary therefore had one supreme mission: to bring the Son of God to earth, to rear Him, to yield Him, a willing Sacrifice for the sins of the world, to establish His Kingdom in the hearts of men of her generation, especially the Apostles, and to establish His reign among all peoples unto the end of time.

Her vocation is, therefore, to be the Mother of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, as she was the Mother of Christ in the flesh, Mother who received the newborn Church at the foot of the Cross, and set it on its path under the impulse of her heavenly Spouse, Who is the Spirit of Truth and of Love and Who abides in the Church forever. Under His inspiration and through her Immaculate Conception, Mary, Spouse of the Holy Ghost, remains the touchstone of the true faith, the conqueror of all heresy, the advocate with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the souls of men and of nations. We join with the authoritative voice of the Church in prayer saying: "Eja ergo, advocata nostra, illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte, et Jesum benedictum fructum ventris tui nobis post hoc exilium ostende." . . . Turn, then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us, and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O Clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary. . . .