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# Our Lady and the Holy Spirit

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## OUR LADY AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

### I

The theme which I was asked to treat here today seems to me to be a very timely one, and this for two reasons. On the one hand, we witness today among Christians a certain renewal of the interest, both theological and spiritual, in the Holy Spirit. There is a feeling—however vague and confused at times—that the neat and rigid theologies of the past were in a way one-sided. They were aimed at justifying and explicating the “institutional” rather than the “spiritual” aspect of the Church. As a reaction to this, there appeared a new thirst for the spiritual reality itself; hence this renewed interest in the Holy Spirit. No doubt this interest, this preoccupation with the spiritual, is not free from the spiritual confusion typical of our time. One ascribes to the Holy Spirit almost any movement or even fantasy of man’s mind and imagination; one justifies by Him all kinds of radicalisms and the pervasive “anti-institutionalism” of contemporary religious mentality. It is then the proper task for a theologian to ask the proper questions about the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, and this is my second reason, there is an equally obvious decline in Mariological interest. Those who in the past seemed almost to exaggerate the place of Mary in the economy of salvation and in the piety of the Church, are today somewhat apologetic about this. In the enormous theological production generated by Vatican II, the Mother of God is hardly mentioned. It seems as if the new emphasis and concerns of theology, its obsession with notions such as “world,” “relevance,” “justice,” etc., exclude, if not tacitly condemn, the previous emphasis on Christ’s Mother. Strange as it may seem, even the very modern and fashionable interest

in the woman's place in the Church, the world, and society, or the great wave of "feminism" has not revived Mariological interests. Certainly one can easily understand why! In her humility and silence, she can hardly serve as patron for the noisy and arrogant feminism of our time.

Now it is precisely this double phenomenon—a revival of Pneumatology and a decline of Mariology—that calls for their joint investigation. We must study the unique relationship between the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity and the unique person whom we still venerate, and I hope shall venerate eternally, as "... more honorable than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim..." I am convinced that Pneumatology and Mariology are organically connected in the *experience* of the Church and therefore must be connected in her theology. If indeed it is the Holy Spirit who *reveals* Mary to us, it is Mary who in a unique way is the revelation in the Church of the Holy Spirit. I am further convinced that the contemporary and confused interest in the Holy Spirit, valuable and promising as it is, will not lead to His genuine rediscovery unless it becomes at the same time an interest in the most spiritual one; that the Mariological decline will not be overcome unless Mariology is no longer viewed as a devotional department of the Church, but is integrated into Pneumatology.

## II

At this point a few words are necessary on the fate of Pneumatology in the history of Christian thought. One doesn't have to prove that in systematic theology the elaboration of Pneumatology has always been much less emphasized than, let's say, Christology or several other aspects of the *depositum fidei*. As everyone knows, even in the universal creed of the Church the word "God" has been omitted for reasons of ecclesiastical diplomacy in the article concerning the Third

Person. At a rather early date, the theology of the Holy Spirit was replaced in theological manuals with the theology of grace, a refined and detailed enumeration of all modes of sanctification. The Holy Spirit, to be sure, has never been denied the place which is His; formally, theology always remained trinitarian. Yet one cannot help thinking that something happened within the Christian society which shifted its attention, its love, its hope from that mysterious third hour, from those tongues of fire which manifested the Descent of the Paraclete. It is impossible for me to analyze this "something," be it in a short way. I will simply state what I consider to be the reason for this theological eclipse of the Holy Spirit. It was a shift from the eschatological inspiration of the early Church—and by eschatological I mean here the unique Christian experience of the Kingdom of God as, on the one hand the Kingdom "to come," and, on the other hand, as that same Kingdom present and actualized in Church. This eschatology in the early Church constituted the essential dimension of her entire life—sacraments, world, faith, piety—and shaped the entire mind of the Church; it was her attitude towards world, time, history, society, etc. This eschatology little by little was reduced to a brief theological chapter—"*de novissimis*"—dealing with the individual fate of man after death. The notions of the Kingdom, the consummation of all things in God, of the new creation and transfiguration, to be sure, remained part of the traditional vocabulary, but they ceased to be both the source and the object of theological elaboration.

Eschatology, however, is inseparable from Pneumatology, for it is the coming of the Holy Spirit, it is Pentecost that inaugurates the "new eon" and makes the Church and the life in the Church both communion with, and anticipation of the Kingdom of God. More than that, is the very fellowship, communion, *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit that are the very essence of the new life, of the Kingdom of God. It is He who makes all things new by referring them to the ultimate consummation

of all things in God. Pentecost is not only the historical source of the Church; it is her very life as the sacrament of the Kingdom. All this is confusedly felt today by all those who are tired of the institutional and non-eschatological character emphasized so much throughout the long historical pilgrimage of the Church and who are thirsty and hungry for the spiritual reality itself. The danger here, however, is that of a new divorce, a new dichotomy: the "spiritual" versus the "institutional"; the Holy Spirit versus the Church; the individual subjectivity of the spiritual experience versus Catholic faith and discipline. The danger is that one takes the Holy Spirit as a kind of *alibi* for mere dissent and rebellion, anarchy and subjectivism so as to confuse eschatology with human radicalism and utopianism.

It is at this point, it seems to me, that the need for Mariology becomes obvious. For, indeed, Mary, being in the tradition and experience of the Church the very "epiphany" of spirituality, being herself the first, the highest and the most perfect fruit of the Holy Spirit in the entire creation, reveals to us by her very presence the true nature and the true effects of that Descent of the Holy Spirit which is *the* source of the Church's life. To put it somewhat differently, Mariology, properly understood, is a kind of "criterion" for Pneumatology, a safeguard against a demonic confusion of spirits. In this short paper I can only enumerate without really explaining them, the various aspects of this unique relationship.

### III

The relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary is both *unique* and *archetypal*. It is unique in the sense that it reveals to us Mary as a unique human being, unique in herself as a person, unique in her relationship to Christ and to God, unique by her place in the Church, i.e. in her relationship to all of us and to each one of us. It is archetypal in the sense that it re-

veals the very nature of the Holy Spirit in His relationship with the creature, the true nature of what we call sanctification.

The story of Mary in the Gospel begins with her personal Pentecost. "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee" (*Lk.* 1:35). Already here we begin to understand something about both the Holy Spirit and Mary. In the first place and above everything else this descent of the Holy Spirit reveals a *personal* relationship. More than that, it *fulfills* Mary as a person; this means as an absolutely unique being, as totally *herself*. A certain type of theology and a certain type of piety went to extremes in stressing this uniqueness of Mary, and this at the expense of the archetypal character of her personal Pentecost. Yet it is precisely the proper function of the Holy Spirit to fulfill human beings as persons. He is to each one the very gift of uniqueness, of that uniqueness which constitutes the eternal and absolute value of each person. Thus, in the personal Pentecost of Mary, we have two revelations. It reveals Mary to herself; it fulfills her as a person with a unique, personal, and eternal vocation. At the same time, it reveals the Holy Spirit as that "tongue of fire" which always descends on each one and not on an apersonal "togetherness." It reveals God as always a unique and personal revelation to each one as if each person saw in God a unique face turned to him in an exclusive relationship, unique love, and most personal communion. Thus, two gifts.

The gift of Mary as a person. In the Holy Spirit we know her, not as a symbol, not as a theological idea, not as a principle, or tool, or illustration; we know *Her!* And to know her is one of the greatest joys available to man in the Church. If every friendship, every personal encounter, every communion, however limited, with another person is always experienced as a gift, as something enriching, as indeed the very content of life whereas solitude and loneliness is simply death, then what can we say about this unique friendship and communion which has been given to us in the Church by the Holy Spirit?

What was this slow growth of the Mariological veneration in the Church if not the growth of that knowledge, friendship, communion? No formal theology can explain this because it deals with unchanging relations and definitions; it can only establish and define the framework and the context. But the *content* is in the life of the Church, in the mystery of her worship which is an unending growth. If one had to prove with one simple proof the ongoing presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the Church, I would point to Mariology, to this ever-growing knowledge of Mary as a person. It is as if living with her in the same house and sharing in the same life, we always discover more and more reasons to love her and to treasure her personality.

The second gift is the gift of the Holy Spirit Himself as God *for me* and *to me*, as both the content and the fulfiller, as the very life of my life. The Holy Spirit has no icon of His own; no name of His own. Yet, the sanctification consists precisely in this: that each being and even each thing become such an icon and such a name. It is by becoming transparent to the Holy Spirit, by reflecting His goodness and beauty, by becoming fully life in Him and truly His fragrance that being become, on the one hand, fully themselves as persons and, on the other hand, truly the icons and the names of the Holy Spirit. Of this, Mary is indeed the first and the fullest epiphany. In this sense she is the first icon, the first gift, the first manifestation of the Holy Spirit. If He makes us to know her, she is the first in the entire creation to make us know Him. This is what makes Mariology the first and most important *locus* of Pneumatology.

The Holy Spirit is then Giver of Life, of life not as a mere existence but as content, as a personal fulfillment by a unique being of its "nature." The life which the Holy Spirit gives to Mary is Christ. Her divine motherhood is not one single event among many in her existence, an event which having taken place, leaves her, so to speak, available for other events

and other fulfillments. It is the decisive and all-embracing event which consumes the totality of her being, yet at the same time, makes and fulfills that being for all eternity. She is "nothing else," but this "nothing else" is not a negative definition but indeed a most positive one: to have Christ and "nothing else" as one's life is the ultimate wholeness, the absolute fulfilling of humanity.

Thus, here again, we find revealed and given to us a double mystery, a double gift. On the one hand, this divine motherhood of Mary is a unique revelation of the Holy Spirit about her and about Christ. Their relationship is revealed to us as an object of eternal contemplation and joy, as that which makes us and is to make us rejoice eternally in the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, we have here the revelation of the new creation, and this means of the Church, and of the life of each one of us in the Church, as having Christ for its content and fulfillment—Christ and "nothing else." The gift of the Holy Spirit is thus a gift of wholeness. As Giver of Life, He gives to each one as his personal life and as his personal fulfillment the One in whom "was life and that life was the light of men" (*Jn.* 1:4). By the Holy Spirit, Christ is unique to Mary as her Son, and therefore her life. By the Holy Spirit, Christ is unique to each one of us as our life. But then Mary is truly the icon and the epiphany of the Church—of the Church as life in Christ and of the Church as Christ's life in us, of the Church as indeed wholeness.

If today we experience a painful divorce and a discrepancy between the "institutional" and the "spiritual" aspects of the Church—between the Church as structure, hierarchy, authority, dogma, and the Church as life, freedom, growth, beauty, joy—it is, I am convinced, because we have forgotten the reality in which this dichotomy is always transcended and overcome: the mystery of Mary whom the Holy Spirit makes the personal focus, icon and fulfillment of the Church. How truly sad and tragical are the modern attempts to rediscuss and redefine



the Church in terms of sociological structures, and the poor human dichotomies of authority and freedom, uniformity and pluralism, to reduce her to all that which Nietzsche called "... human, all too human." I am sure that the great ecclesiological crisis of our time can find its solution only when we relate again the mystery of the Church to the mystery of Mary, and this means the mystery of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit comes "on the last and great day of Pentecost." He is the Giver and the Revealer of the "last things." He comes at the end, or rather, His coming, because it reveals the "last things," is the fulfillment, is always the end, the eschaton. The end, however, in the Christian faith is the Kingdom of God, the fulfillment and consummation of all things in God, the ultimate revelation of "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit." The end is thus always the beginning of all things made new. And the first revelation of these "last things," of that consummation in God, the first epiphany by the Holy Spirit of the reality of the Kingdom is *Mary*. If we know "something" about the Kingdom of God, about what it means to be consummated in God, to be deified, to be risen in glory, to be nothing but light, peace, and joy, to be fully one's self and yet to be fully united to God, to be "nothing else" and yet "everything," to be creation and yet to be ascended to Heaven, immortal and full of life, we know it first of all because in the Church we know Mary. Without this "existential" knowledge, without her constant presence in the Church as her prayer and beauty, movement and peace, joy and fullness, all this would have remained mere doctrinal "propositions," something that cannot be existentially verified and truly appropriated not only as dogma but as, above all, experience and knowledge. Indeed, it is not accidental that whenever and wherever Mariology declines, and this means the veneration of Mary and the joy about Mary, there also declines the eschatological joy of the Christian faith. The Church begins to

be viewed as an agency for social reform and worldly service, and "secularism" makes its triumphant, although sickening, entrance.

This "secular" Christianity of which we hear so much today is first of all a Christianity without the experience of the "last things," and this means without the Holy Spirit and without Mary. If we think that we can help the world (not even to speak of its salvation) by the boredom and the verbiage of our social and political pronouncements, of our miserable efforts to out-shout the secular professionals of all kinds of secular "liberations," we are in, sooner or later, for a terrible disillusion. For it is the Church's knowledge of the "last things" that is the only source for her *praxis* in the world. It is faith, hope and love stemming from that knowledge and from that experience that alone can teach the Church and each Christian what they are to do in this ever-changing world and its history. More than anything else, we need today a re-plunging, a re-immersion into the Church's experience of the eschaton. Any other knowledge can come to us by natural means, but this unique knowledge is impossible without the Church and is her exclusive gift to the world. This immersion, however, will not be possible without the rediscovery of the eschatological dimensions of the mystery of Mary, without our learning to contemplate and experience in her the mystery of the Kingdom as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

#### IV

I have said enough, I hope, to show at least one thing: that Pneumatology and Mariology, far from being two distinct and separate areas of Christian theology and experience are, on the contrary, connected with one another in a most organic and essential way. The proper study and understanding of one can never be full or even adequate without the other. If Mariology declines today, it is probably because for too long a time

it was disconnected from Pneumatology and began to be choked within itself by its own closed horizon. If the modern revival of the interest in the Holy Spirit and, more generally, in the "spiritual" seems so often to orient itself at wrong directions and tragical and dangerous dead ends, it is probably because of its disconnection from the spiritual experience of the Church, experience at whose very center stands the Church's knowledge of Mary.

Today, more than ever, we are called to "try the spirits whether they are of God because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (I *Jn.* 4:1). How are we to try them if not by the very faith and experience of the Church? More than ever, it is time for us to rediscover in the mystery of Mary a sure and inspiring criterion for such a trial and to joyfully accept her as the greatest gift and revelation of the Holy Spirit.

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