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MARIAN LIBRARY STUDIES



The Marianist Spirit

V. Rev. John A. Elbert, S.M.

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About the Author

V. Rev. John A. Elbert, S.M., (Marianist) is a distinguished educator and scholar.

Immediately after his ordination to the priesthood in Fribourg, Switzerland in 1926, he was appointed professor of philosophy at the University of Dayton. Two years later he became the first principal of Purcell High School, Cincinnati, Ohio. From 1932-38 he was President of Trinity College, Sioux City, Iowa; in 1938 he was appointed President of the University of Dayton, a position he held for six years. From 1948 to 1958 he was Provincial of the Cincinnati Province of the Society of Mary. After his term of office had expired, he returned to the University of Dayton as Professor of Philosophy, and in 1961 he became the first Dean of the newly-founded Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

He has contributed to numerous scholarly periodicals and is the author of seven books:

- Devotion to Mary in the Twentieth Century (1940)
- Eternal Testament - Eucharistic Conferences (1931)
- Evolution of Newman's Concept of Faith (1934)
- Greater Love - Lenten Sermons (1937)
- Prayer in a Modern Age (1941)
- The Problem of the Independent College (1938)
- The Three Hours' Agony of Our Lord Jesus Christ (1936)

The present selection is taken from a forthcoming book *The Marianist Spirit* written in commemoration of the Bicentennial of the Birth of William Joseph Chaminade, Founder of the Society of Mary (Marianists).



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The Marianist Spirit

V. Rev. John A. Elbert, S.M.

The Marianist spirit has its first origin in God. It comes from Him, not as a separate grace but joined to God's greatest gift to the human family, His only-begotten Son. There are several stages in its advent. These are traced out clearly in the Sacred Writings, as promise and prophecy in the Old Testament and as fulfillment and fruition in the New Testament.

The Theologian-Evangelist reaches back into the shadow of eternity for the ultimate origins of this grace as it emerges in the mind of God:

*"In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God;
and the Word was God"* . . .

Here we are at the source of all things in heaven and earth, the Word of God. "All things," continues the Evangelist, "were made by him and without him was made nothing that was made" . . .

*"The Word was made flesh
and dwelt among us"* . . .

The Word, Son of God, became Son of Man, clothed in the flesh which He took from the Virgin Mary.

The Apostle of the Gentiles puts the divine epic in the prose of human language when he says simply:

"God sent his son made of a woman" . . .

That woman was Mary, Mother of Christ in the order of nature, Mother of Christians in the order of grace.

The Church completes and guarantees the testimony of the Evangelist and of the Apostle in her infallible teaching. By the same decree, she says, by which the Son of God was destined to be the Son of Man, Mary was destined to be His Mother. Not only the fact of the Marian character of God's decree but also the likeness, by reflection, of this character with that of the Word is stressed in the words of Pius IX when he proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in the Bull "Ineffabilis Deus":

"Both in her Offices and in the most holy Liturgy the Church has been accustomed to apply to the creation of Mary the language in which the Holy Scriptures set forth, the eternal generation of the Uncreated Wisdom, because Mary was predestined in the decree of the Incarnation of the same Wisdom."

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The Marianist character is, therefore, firmly anchored to the Word of God, "the same who was in the beginning with God," the same Word that "was made flesh and dwelt among us."

The divine plan, in which Mary was included from the beginning, is a unity, starting from the Creation, following through in the Incarnation and emerging in the Redemption as a new world of grace where Christ is the fountain-head and Mary the universal channel.

Such is the origin and the objective development of the Marianist character as it comes from the eternal Mind and emerges into the stream of time.

On the purely human level the Marianist spirit has its beginning in faith which is the foundation of the whole spiritual life and the root of all justification. The Marianist spirit is more especially akin to the gift of knowledge, that infused, supernatural essence which constitutes the spirit of faith. Through this gift of the Holy Ghost, one can see God, His Word and the Word-made-flesh, throughout the universe.

The most perfect creaturely reflection of God is Mary, Mother of God. In her one glimpses something of the divine exemplary causality which presided over the origin of the world and something of the Divine Wisdom that shaped its course and destiny. Here again we find our cue in Holy Writ. The Book of *Ecclesiasticus* opens with these profound words:

"All wisdom has one source; it dwelt with the Lord God before even time began. Sand thou mayest count, or the raindrops, or the days of the world's abiding; heaven-height thou mayest measure, or the wide earth, or the depth of the world beneath, ere God's wisdom thou canst trace to her origin, that was before all. First she is, of all created things; time never was when the riddle of thought went unread. (What is wisdom's fount? God's word above. What is her course? His eternal commandments.) Buried her roots beyond all search; wise her counsels beyond all knowing; too high her teaching to be plainly revealed, too manifold her movements to be understood. There is but one God, high creator of all things; sitting on his throne to govern us, a great king, worthy of all dread; he it was that created her, through his Holy Spirit. His eye took in the whole range of her being; and he has poured her out upon all his creation, upon all living things, upon all the souls that love him, in the measure of his gift to each." (Ecclus. 1:1-11)

This sublime ideal out of the mind of God finds its realization first and foremost in the Incarnate-Wisdom; secondarily and instrumentally also in Mary who is properly called "Seat of Wisdom."

In the Little Office of the Immaculate Conception, at the hour of Prime, there is an excerpt from this same passage of *Ecclesiasticus* which is applied to our Lady. The versicle that follows the hymn proclaims:

*“The Lord Himself created her in the Holy Spirit
And poured her out among all his works.”*

In making application of these words of Holy Writ to Mary, the author of the Little Office was simply following the lead of the Church. In the Mass of the feast of the Immaculate Conception, she chose a similar passage, this one from *Proverbs*, 8:22-35, for the epistle of the Mass. Therein wisdom is heralded as the exemplar in the mind of God and as the presiding spirit in the creation of the universe.

We know, of course, that the literal sense of the Holy Scripture, in the passages cited, does not refer to Mary. But in limiting ourselves to the mere letter of God's word, we run the risk of being short-sighted in our estimation of the place and role of Mary in the designs and in the manifest will of God. Certainly in their obviously figurative sense, the passages dealing with the reflection of divine wisdom in the works of God, find no more striking fulfillment on the purely human level than in the person and in the history of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

We need not have recourse to figure or symbol, in order to discover our Lady in the very cornerstone of the Christian faith, that is, in the mystery of the Incarnation. There she is seen distinctly in her own person and in her proper role, from that eternal moment when God chose to share with a woman the Sonship of the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity. No figure, no stretch of the human mind, can be as astounding as this fact, that Mary without ceasing to be creature became the Mother of God and that the Son of God, without ceasing to be God, became pre-eminently the Son of Man.

In history, Mary was prefigured in the first woman, Eve, as the feminine representative of the human race, who shared in the promises of God for the coming of the Redeemer. Thereafter she appeared in symbol over the centuries before His advent, to issue finally in her own person as the realization of those promises, like the dawn before the sunrise, the herald before the King. Last of all, throughout the Christian era, she is the assurance of man's salvation and the guarantee of his future glory.

Hence, following in the steps of the Church and in the traces of the greatest minds of Christendom, we can confidently proclaim: “The Lord possessed her in the beginning of his ways,” “He created her in the Holy Spirit,” and “He poured her out among all his works,” primarily the works of grace, then, also, the works of nature, abundantly in the works of human genius in all the arts, even in the seemingly accidental drift of human achievements in history.

It is not difficult for the eye of faith to perceive her in the inspired word of God, in the Old and New Testaments; in the creative works of human genius, in art, literature, music; and equally in the material world of the natural sciences and technology. For matter is not an alien element in the creation. . . . With form it is the total product of God's creative

power inspired by Wisdom. That is what we mean by saying: "He poured her out among all his works," the works of nature and of grace; the works which he has wrought in wisdom and in power.

The fact that God willed to have a creature cooperate freely with Him in the mystery of the Incarnation is indubitable. The divine procedure in the accomplishment of that high purpose, from its first decree in eternity to its fulfillment in time, is matter for our joyful speculation. One must, however, guard against a merely superficial interpretation of God's word and work in the attempt to identify the presence of our Lady in the wisdom and the riches of the heavens and the earth.

A great French literary critic, Taine, has said that a supreme artist such as Shakespeare in his work, is like God in His creation, everywhere present, nowhere visible. What the critic evidently means is that the author should not be sensed directly; he can, however, be apprehended indirectly, more especially, by reflection from his work.

God is the greatest of all artists. He Himself is everywhere present in His creation. He has put the seal of the Incarnate Word on every creature. He has put the Mother of His divine Son as a reflection of His Wisdom throughout the universe; as the constant echo of His voice in Revelation; as the herald of His coming into the world; as the identification of His Son's presence among men, in the stable of Bethlehem as on the gibbet of Calvary; finally, as the fulfillment of His mission everywhere throughout the world, in the work of His Apostles, His Artists, and of His Scholars.

The Catholic sense does not usually go wrong in seeking and finding Mary in all the phases and all the stages of God's relations with the human family. Any danger of error or exaggeration lies rather in the *procedure* which sometimes is unenlightened, more often superficial. The protection against divagations from true devotion is in a sound theology; then in an intuitive sense which penetrates beneath the surface and the mere outward forms of reality, to discover the hidden reflection of the Incarnate Wisdom, everywhere present in the universe, nowhere visible to the outward eye of sense and reason. The greatest theologians and the inspired artists of the whole Christian era have never failed to see her at the end of every process of thought and at the height of every inspiration of genius. Hence, the question is not, *can* we find Mary everywhere in God's creation, but rather, *how* do we discover her presence?

It should be clear to an enlightened faith that the works of God have but one purpose: to reproduce, each in its own way, the Incarnate Word.

Mary as the human masterpiece of God's work fulfills this purpose eminently. She gave to the world the whole Christ, placing no obstacles for the transmission of His divine nature through her as a transparent medium, and furnishing the necessary biological and psychological ele-

ments for His humanity. She provided in its entirety the Body that was immolated for us on Calvary which is the same Body that feeds the unnumbered multitudes throughout all ages in the Eucharist.

It was a woman, therefore, who made the original Christ. With greater reason it requires a woman to make a Christian, who is another Christ, a Christian nation which is a corporate Christ, and a Christian world which is the Kingdom of Christ, the Church.

What woman has the power and the stature to do any and all of these wonders? The answer to this question is logically inevitable: the same woman who made the first Christian, the first Christian nations, the first Christian world, and the first Christian Church.

God has done His part to share with all men the mother of His only-begotten Son. Our claim to that mother must be achieved just as every worthwhile privilege is achieved by individuals and by nations. In order to see and capture the vision of the Mother of God in any one of her forms as she is concealed and revealed in the work and in the word of God and in the world of human genius, it is absolutely necessary that we look for her using our God-given double vision, the eye of faith and the eye of reason simultaneously. Needless to say, the Mother of God should not be foisted on to a work of nature or of art as an alien element like a crown of electric lights on a masterpiece of sculpture. Her presence must emerge naturally from the nature of the subject and not be imposed upon it by a weak or undisciplined mind. On the other hand, it may happen, as in some of our modern abstract or symbolic art, that she has been too effectively concealed by the maker.

In the divine Revelation we must seek the Mother of God in the known will of God, as delivered to us by His Son and as carried out by His Spirit in the Church. In the Creation she will appear as an exemplary cause, a reflection of that Wisdom which God possessed in the beginning of His ways, before the world was made. In this connection it is well to recall that the exemplary cause is the formal cause, as the formal cause exists in the mind of the agent. In addition, one should at this point of our consideration remember that God is not the form of any created thing. If, therefore, we look for an exemplar of all created things, visible and invisible, we must not look beyond the sacred humanity of Jesus Christ. That sacred humanity, the fruit of the womb of the Virgin, bears the marks of its origin and fills to overflowing the soul of her who conceived Him in her heart before she conceived Him in her body. What is more natural then, that Mary should appear everywhere in the work of God and of men as the highest exemplar after the Son of Man, her Son, who created her in the Holy Spirit and poured her out among all his works?

There may be those, even in Catholic circles, who think that one can attribute too much to Mary. In the Protestant heart there is the fear of

placing her on a level with her divine Son, making her the equal of God.

Such persons evidently do not have a proper foundation in elementary theology. St. Thomas in the first part of his *Summa Theologica*, warns the reader that God cannot be known by us through His essence. We can express something about the essence of God only by negation. Any positive concept of ours, derived as it must be from sense impressions and perceptions, necessarily falls infinitely short of the truth about God's real nature.

Putting it differently: we can experience and conceive in our minds, only the relative not the Absolute; we can encompass only the finite not the Infinite. Those who seek to experience the absolute or those who attempt to conceive the infinite, bog down, the former in a slough of despairing irrationalism, the latter teeter crazily over the edge of a precipice in reaching for the Infinite and in pretending to express the Ineffable.

Hence, any positive dignity, grace, or favor that we can experience or conceive and attribute to Mary in theology or in devotion, is necessarily finite. Putting it negatively: What we can experience, conceive, or utter, is not God. St. Augustine was halted on the brink of that abyss; others plunged to their ruin in its depths. Says the great Bishop of Hippo in his *CONFESSIONS*:

"When I compassed Thee in my mind, it was not Thee but an idol of my brain; and this figment was my God!"

"Cum Te cogitabam, non Tu eras, sed vanum phantasma. Et error meus erat deus meus."

Mary is a creature. For the very reason that she is the highest in the scale of creatures, she is more dependent on God than any other and more indebted to Him according to the measure of what she has received from Him. In other words, God is the source of all that she has and He is the end to whom all praise of her is directed. God has given her so much, she has the greatest debt to pay and the greatest number of talents to account for. Time was too short to make adequate payment of that debt. . . . That is what makes her eternity a never-ending Magnificat.

Mary was the first to recognize God's work in herself and proclaimed it aloud to a waiting world. That world of nineteen centuries has taken up the refrain, calling her blessed among women throughout the ages. In her we see most clearly, in human measure, God in His word and in His work. The more power, dignity, and splendor we see in her, the more are we constrained to recognize, in our turn, the only possible source of such creatural excellence. That is why the Church will withhold no creatural title from her whom God gave the title and dignity of Mother of His Son. The titles that centuries of Christian devotion have given to Mary, especially in the Litany of Loreto are all very real but they are all finite.

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