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*Lourdes*-- Witness to the  
Maternal Solitude of Mary

REV. JAMES E. EGAN, O.P., S.T.D.

Marian Reprint — 67

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Author of two previous *Marian Reprints* (No. 14, *Mother and Helpmate of Christ*, and No. 54, *Mary, Queen of the Universe*), Father James M. Egan, O.P., is no stranger to our readers.

Father Egan is a former editor of *The Thomist*, the Dominican quarterly of theology and philosophy. After theological studies at the Angelicum, Rome, he served on the Pontifical Theological Faculty of the Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D. C. Later he was a member of the faculty of the Angelicum, Albertus Magnus College, New Haven, Conn., and St. Mary's College, Monroe, Mich. Presently he is Chancellor of the School of Sacred Theology at St. Mary's, Notre Dame, Ind.

Articles by Father Egan have appeared in *Cross and Crown*, *The Thomist*, *Angelicum*, *Integrity*, and *Spiritual Life*. He has contributed a paper, "Naming in St. Thomas' Theology of the Trinity," to the Walter Farrell Memorial volume, *From an Abundant Spring* (Kenedy, 1952). At the 1957 convention of the Mariological Society of America, he delivered an address on the death of Mary in the writings of the Scholastics.

The present selection is a talk given by Father Egan at the Sixth Annual Marian Institute, held at the Marian Library, University of Dayton, June 13-14, 1958. The theme of the 1958 meeting was "The Meaning of Lourdes."

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# Lourdes—Witness to the Maternal Solitude of Mary

REV. JAMES E. EGAN, O.P., S.T.D.

AT ONE TIME, someone asked Bernadette whether or not the Virgin looked only at her during the apparitions. She said, "Oh, no, no, not at all. She looked at everyone and with so much love and affection! Sometimes, she seemed to look at one more than the rest as though she were recognizing a very special friend."

Now I think that testimony to the way in which the invisible Mary, invisible to everyone else except Bernadette, cast her loving gaze on all of those people who had gathered there to witness these marvels is or might be called a superficial witness of Lourdes to the maternal solicitude of Mary. We may be sure, however, that Mary looks with that love and kindness in her eyes at absolutely every human being that enters into this world. We may also be sure, and we may hope that we are among them, that there are some she looks upon as dear friends.

Before we finish, I shall try to point out a deeper testimony, a deeper witness of Lourdes, as I think, to the spiritual maternity of Mary. (We are primarily concerned here with the spiritual maternity of Mary.)

I think that it would have been quite possible for God to have chosen Mary to be the Mother of Jesus Christ, of His only begotten Son, and to have confined her mission to that particular function, to be the Mother. Ordinarily, as you know, a mother does not share, except from afar, in the life-work of her son; she is more or less on the sidelines, if she is wise. She conceives him, brings him into this world, nourishes him, guides him, accompanies him to the threshold of life, and then, normally speaking, hands him over to another woman, his wife, she who is to be his helpmate in his life's work.

Now we know from faith that Mary is truly the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Mother of God. She did for Him everything that any mother does for her child. She conceived Him under the power of



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the Holy Spirit, brought Him into this world, clothed Him, fed Him, and guided Him. She, too, accompanied Him through His early years, accompanied Him to the threshold of life. But it is a tremendously important insight into the complete function of Mary to realize that she was also to accompany Him over the threshold of life and to share intimately with Him in His life's work.

Now, at first sight, it might seem as though Mary also, like any other mother, was to stand on the sidelines. After that very revealing incident at the marriage feast of Cana where even then it seemed as though Christ were separating, putting a space, as it were, between Himself and His Mother, Mary appears actually only on the sidelines. We know of no other scenes of intimacy. There is one brief reference to the fact that she and the brethren of the Lord were standing on the outside of a crowd trying to get a brief moment of visitation with her Son. We find her again standing at the side of the road meeting Him briefly on the tragic journey between Pilate's hall and Calvary. And if we had only that, we might well say perhaps Mary is only standing on the sidelines of Her Son's career, of Her Son's life's work. But we have to remember that she was also standing beneath the cross. We have to ask ourselves, what, in the final analysis was the life-work of her Son? What was His special function? And while it was vast and various, we also know that none of it would have had meaning except in terms of the final moments of His life here on earth.

Christ became Incarnate certainly to live among us, to be our Way and our Truth and our Life, to establish His Church as a visible society here below, and to do all of those things necessary to form the Apostles that they might carry on His life's work. But in the final analysis, the life's work, the career of Christ, can be summed up in the final hours of His life. He came in order to lay down His life, to shed the last drop of His blood as a redemption for mankind. That was Christ's life-work. And it is most significant that Mary was present at that moment.

We know that every detail of the life of Jesus Christ, of Joseph and Mary, was planned by God the Father, and it is most significant—that Joseph's function was limited to being the foster-father, to being

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God-the-Father's surrogate during the early years of Our Lord's life here below. He was to do all of the things that are necessary to protect a family. Without him there would have been no Holy Family. And so he was truly husband to Mary, truly foster-father to Jesus Christ. But his departure from this world is hidden in mystery. We are certain at the moment when Christ Himself began His public life, at the moment when the Father again reappeared in the life of His Son at His baptism, the function of the foster-father was over and Joseph had gone to Limbo.

Now if Mary had only the function of being the Mother of Christ, I am sure that God would have arranged that she too would have disappeared from the scene by the time that He performed the one thing that He came to perform, suffer and die for us. And so, by virtue of the fact that Mary is still present on earth, we realize that God has for her another function. She is not only the Mother; she is also the *helpmate* of Jesus Christ.

Now that is not surprising, because the first swift indication of God's plan for fallen mankind already includes within its framework the figure of a woman and a man. Just that brief reference in the third chapter of Genesis, verse 15, reveals this—where God lifts the veil for a moment on the age-long plans that He has in mind for the redemption of mankind, the restoration of mankind, and the destruction of the ravages of sin: "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, between her seed and thy seed." Right from the beginning there is the figure of the man and the woman. And, as time goes on and the mystery of God's dealings with men becomes clearer, we begin to realize how profound a mystery is involved here. To make the statement as bold as possible, I would say that just as in the case of the first man it was true, as God said, "It is not good for man to be alone"; so, in the case of the second Adam, in a very mysterious way, it was also true to say that it was not good for Him to be alone.

Let us pause for a moment on that which gives us, I think, a tremendous insight, not just in this very, very limited field, but in the overall dealings of God with men, in that intimate and mysterious relationship between the man and the woman. Let us briefly recall

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what the sacred writers tell us, quite symbolically perhaps, but nevertheless penetratingly, of God's ideas of the relationship between man and woman. You probably recall that God formed man as a potter might form a vase, breathed into him a spirit of life, a rational soul and then introduced him to paradise which He had prepared for him. And as He introduced him, the sacred writer presents God ruminating, as it were, and expressing His concern, "It is not good for man to be alone", but He doesn't do anything about it yet. Very, very significantly He waits awhile. And we have that strange scene of the parade of the animals. All of the animals that were present in paradise were led before Adam, and he was imposing a name on them—a symbolic way, at least, of expressing the dominion of man over the animals.

But I think it had another purpose, and I am very gratified to note that our present Holy Father has referred to the same thing. The first time I used this, I was a little bit hesitant because I said after the last animal passed, Adam, despite the fact that he was in the paradise of delights, felt a little bit downcast, a little bit sad, a little bit disappointed. Why? Because he found no one like unto himself.

Now I am sure that God was doing that to impress upon man what woman would mean to him. And so, the narrative continues, Adam was cast into a deep sleep, a rib or some part of him was taken, formed into another human form, a soul was infused into that matter, and Adam awakened, looked at this new creature and immediately recognized that this was someone like to himself because made to the image and likeness of God. This was the companion, this was the helpmate that was to share intimately in his life's work. And that is the function of every man and woman, to join together to complement each other in accomplishing the designs of God.

In some very mysterious way, that truth was valid even in the case of the Incarnate Son of God Himself. We all know that He was perfectly sufficient unto Himself, and so it wasn't He that needed the helpmate, the complement, but rather we. We, God felt, would feel more at home in the supernatural organization of His church if we felt that we had both a spiritual father and a spiritual mother. That

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is the reason why in the beginning He presented the two figures, the woman and her seed, both of whom would crush the serpent's head, would restore man's dignity and happiness. And we could go on and point out how time and time again that same theme recurs, vaguely: "The Virgin shall bear a child and His name shall be called Emmanuel." All the way up until the Apocalypse, the vision of the woman and the child; always the combination.

I am sure that all of this comes to one conclusion, that in God's predestination in God's design, Mary was to be not only the mother, but also the helpmate of Christ. If she had been simply the mother of Christ, if that had been her only function, she would have disappeared from the scene, I am sure, before Christ Himself began His life's work. If her function had been confined to that, she would still be called our mother or, although more accurately, she should have been called our grandmother. If she is just the mother of the one who has given us the spiritual life, rather than given it to us herself, then she would be more or less in the relationship of a mother once removed, and that is a grandmother. We would have honored her. We could have called her the cause and the source of our salvation; but I hope you see that it would have been just simply by giving birth, by giving a human nature, a nature that was capable of suffering and dying and redeeming us that Mary would have been at the source of our spiritual regeneration.

What I am trying to say here is that in the tradition of the Church and in the mind of the Church, Mary plays a more active, a more intimate part in our rebirth. And so she is a mother, not simply because she is the Mother of Jesus Christ, but because she is also our mother, doing for us certain things that parallel for us what Christ Himself did. In other words, Mary truly shared as a helpmate, as a complement, in the life's work of Him who was her Son. And as we shall see, if there was to be a helpmate, if Our Lord was to associate anyone with Himself, it would have to be His Mother. I am quite convinced that He did not have to associate Mary with Himself, but that if he was going to associate anyone with Himself, no one better than His Mother could share in His life's work.

Up to now I have been more or less just stating facts; but my



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job is to be something of a theologian, and a theologian has to give some reasons for his position and his opinion. And so I would like to indicate just very briefly the sources of this statement that Mary is truly our mother, not removed simply by being the Mother of Jesus Christ and the Mother of God, but also by being closely associated with Our Lord in the precise work that is the cause of our spiritual regeneration, of our spiritual rebirth.

In sacred scripture, the clearest indication of Mary's association comes right at the beginning of the Annunciation. When the angel Gabriel came to Mary in that tremendously gracious act of condescension on God's part and asked her, putting everything as it were at her free disposal, to be the Mother of God and at the same time the helpmate of His Divine Son in the work of redemption, actually the emphasis there, at that particular point, was more on the triumphant and glorious side. Let us not forget the key-test here is that first text, "I shall place enmities between thee and the woman, between her seed and thy seed" and the prediction of triumph. So the angel Gabriel presents first of all, you might say, the triumph aspect. Gabriel says, "He shall be called great and shall be called the Son of the Most High and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of David His Father, and He shall reign in the house of Jacob forever."

This is the child that Mary is asked to be mother of. Here there is no indication, no explicit indication, except perhaps to Mary herself, who knows the whole testament background of these statements, that there was to be suffering, misery, and tragedy. But it wasn't long before that aspect was brought home to her.

That very magnificent scene of the Presentation in the Temple, which, I am sure, most of you have difficulty in meditating on when you come to that part of the rosary, contains a tremendously important mystery when you understand the Old Testament background of it—the ideas that the first-born did not belong, in any strict way, to parents but rather to God Himself, and the important aspect of that ceremony was not so much the purification of the mother, but rather the presentation and consecration of the first-born to the service of the Father. Here you have the Son of God being presented back to

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God by His Mother and His foster-father. Both are present. Joseph is there together with Mary; they are His mother and father. But there is also Simeon there, a man enlightened by the Holy Spirit. And the text tells us that he blessed them. Having accepted this offering of the Son, he received Him into his arms, and uttered that wonderful *Nunc Dimittis*. He turned and blessed these parents, father and mother, Joseph and Mary, but (and this is most significant), he forgets Joseph and already singles out Mary. It is to Mary, His Mother, he turns. And don't forget this is a Jewish prophet who would normally turn to the father, would address himself to the father; but here he is going against all custom, you might say, and turns to Mary, His Mother, and says, "Behold this child is set for the fall and for the resurrection of many in Israel and for a sign which shall be contradicted. And thy own soul a sword shall pierce that out of many hearts thoughts may be revealed."

Inescapably, then, a cross is presented to Mary as a return for her offering of her Son to the Father. As Pope Leo XIII says, "At this moment Mary offered herself as she had at the Annunciation that God would do with her as He willed. Already she shared," Pope Leo continues, "she shared with Him the painful atonement." Now, finally, we come to the great scene on Calvary and, as we reflect on it, we realize inescapably that if anyone was to be associated with Christ in His life's work, it would almost necessarily have to be His Mother because His life's work was to suffer and die and no one except a mother can suffer and almost die together with her son. Father, sister, brother, friend, would all feel deeply the sorrow and the sadness of this scene; but it's only the mother, and especially the mother who is the only source of this flesh that is suffering, it is only that mother who could bear within herself all of the tortures and all of the sorrows of Calvary as though they were inflicted upon herself.

That is why Mary is standing at Calvary. She is the mother of this Son; she is now united together with Him in the great work of accomplishing our salvation. She is doing for us in her own way as mother what Christ is doing in His way. Christ is our spiritual Father, the source of our spiritual regeneration; and Mary is our

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mother, the source of our spiritual regeneration together with her Son. Again, of herself, nothing, except what she has from Him; but she has from Him the fact that she is His Mother and at the same time the deputation (I shouldn't use that word, it sounds a little bit too legal), the *function* of being also the mother of all the members of the Mystical Body. She conceived us at the moment she conceived Jesus Christ, because she consented at that moment to be the mother of Jesus, the mother of the head of the Mystical Body and the mother of all the members of the Mystical Body.

But as Saint Albert, (or at least the work that has been attributed to Saint Albert for a long time) says, "She who brought forth her first-born Son without pain could not and did not bring forth her other children except amidst pains and the sorrows and sufferings of Calvary." And so, having conceived us at the moment she conceived her Son, she gives birth to us at the moment she sacrifices her maternal rights over the life of her first-born Son.

Let us take a few moments to try and understand just a little bit more precisely what Mary did in order to become in fact our spiritual mother. After all, it is a question of a spiritual maternity just as it is a question in the case of Christ of a spiritual paternity. They are truly the parents, the principles of our spiritual life. Sanctifying grace, the gifts and the virtues, every grace that you and I have received from the moment of our baptism up until this present moment and hope to continue to receive until we receive the light of glory in heaven, is part of our life, our sharing in the divine life; but especially that first moment, that tremendous transformation when, having been children of sin and of Satan, of the old Adam and Eve, we are transformed, generated again, reborn, as Our Lord said, "of water and the Holy Spirit," that moment we have to connect with what Christ and Mary did on Calvary because all of it flows from what Christ and Mary did on Calvary.

Looking at it from the outside (let us say from the eyes of a Roman soldier), it was a fairly sordid spectacle. A group of people had come to such a pitch of hatred and passion against someone who is obviously noble and dignified and innocent that they succeeded in getting Him condemned to death, horribly scourged, crowned with

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thorns in mockery, dragged along a road outside the walls of Jerusalem up to the heights of Calvary, stretched out on a cross, nailed there, and then extended between heaven and earth, a spectacle to God and men; three hours of agonizing hanging on that cross, a loud cry, and then silence—silence from the victim while the earth itself cried out. And someone would have noticed that there was a woman standing there, not fainting, not weeping, not crying out, but sunk in deep and bitter anguish, never taking her eyes from the victim on the cross. Not the external suffering but, above all, the interior disposition of these two are the birth pangs of you and me.

Now while all this was one continuous action going over a period of hours, the theologians have to make an analysis, pull it apart a little bit to try and understand exactly what takes place. And following Saint Thomas very briefly, we say that there are four aspects to this activity on the part of Christ. By His passion and death Christ merited. He did something which was so pleasing to the Father that the Father was willing to reconcile Himself with mankind. By this suffering, by the suffering aspect of His activity, He satisfied the debt of punishment due to all sins.

Those two aspects, merit and satisfaction, might be called the inner aspects of the activity of Christ submitting Himself to this trial. It is something which accompanied every action of Christ from the first instant of His conception. Everything that Christ did merited infinitely for us, satisfied for all our sins. As the theologians tell us, the simplest act of Christ as man had infinite value in the sight of the Father and could have merited for us and did, in a certain sense (but with a very special limitation), actually merit for us grace. The slightest shedding of His blood at His Circumcision, anytime in His life, any suffering, any labor that He underwent would have had infinite satisfactory value and so could have made up for the punishment. But the fact of the matter is that the Father was not going to be satisfied with one simple little act, with one simple little pain. He wanted everything. He wanted the supreme act of love, the supreme act of satisfaction. He would not accept, as it were, any action except those actions which objectively were the supreme action.

No other part of the life of Christ could have had meaning if

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He had not suffered and died. And so there is this other aspect of sacrifice and redemption—He had to offer a sacrifice to the Father, He had to redeem us, He had to pay a price for our release from sin, the dominion over Satan, which He did. Through these actions He gave back to the Father the most precious gift, His own human life. He paid the price of our redemption, the last drop of His blood. It was in so doing that Christ finally conquered sin and death and the devil, and won back for us the friendship and the love and the grace of God. This is Christ's paternal activity, this is the source of our grace, of our divine life. If Christ had not done this, if He had not merited and satisfied in a special way by offering up as a sacrifice for sinners His own life, the last drop of His blood in redemption, we would not be saved. We would not be regenerated. We would not be children of God.

Now we ask, did Mary do in her way the same thing? And the answer of the church is very definitely "yes." She merited. She, who was so intimately in love with God, so pure and so holy, was capable of meriting, as Pope Pius X said, "congruously," everything that Christ merited in justice. God could not refuse her (who had never refused Him anything) the request of divine life for her children. She certainly satisfied by adding her sufferings to the sufferings of Christ; and these were tremendous because they were the sufferings of a mother. No other sufferings could be as great, if Christ's is the greatest.

But now, we have to be careful. Did she also share in this last? Did she in some way redeem us by sacrifice and by paying a price? Now very frequently in spiritual writings and also in the statements of the Holy Father we read that Mary was willing to offer her life, she was willing to sacrifice her life. Her suffering was so intense that she almost died; she would have been willing to shed her blood had Christ in some way been prevented from shedding His. While it is metaphorically speaking a sacrifice, none of that would have satisfied God. It was not Mary's life that is the price of our redemption. It is not Mary's blood that is the price of our reconciliation. It is the life-blood of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God. That is the only victim, that is the only sacrifice, that is the only price that could be

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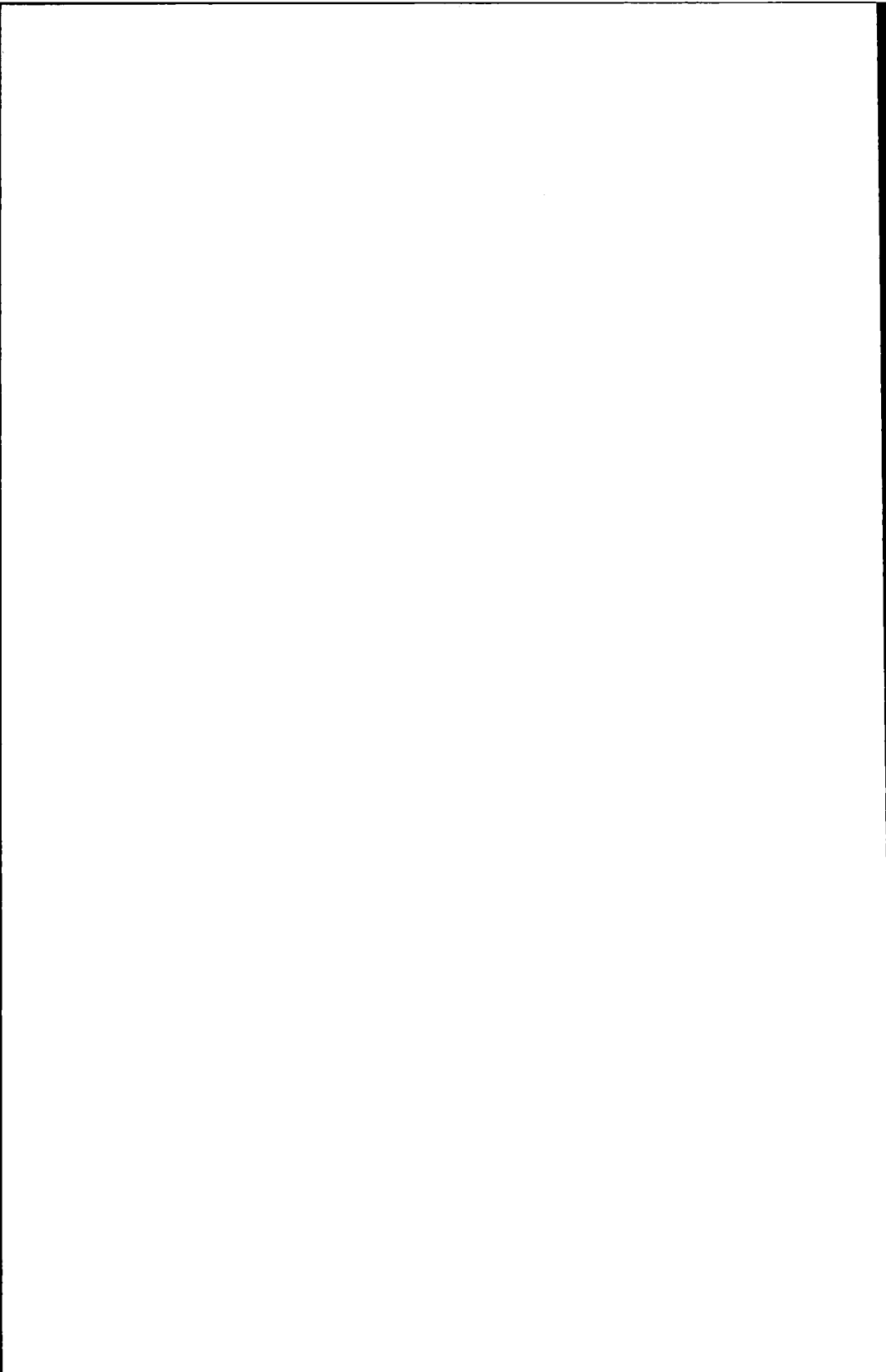
paid. And the only one who could pay it really, the only one who had complete dominion over it, was Jesus Christ Himself. He had a right to it, He, at the command of the Father, laid it down. So there is only one victim, only one sacrifice, only one price.

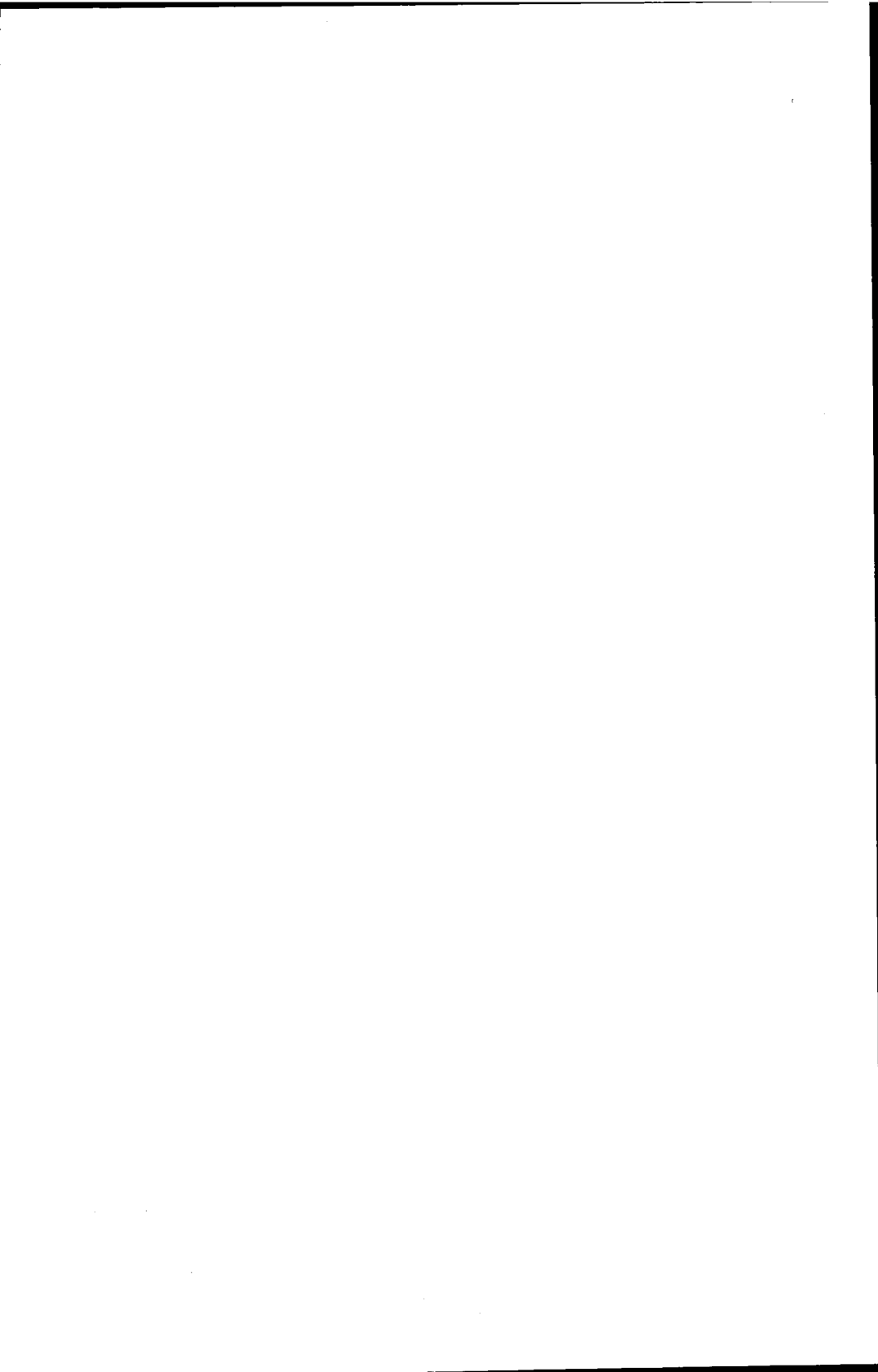
But here again, Mary did have a certain right. This is her Son's life. She is His Mother; and a mother has a certain right that her son's life be not snatched away from him unjustly, be not condemned innocently, be not asked to shed the last drop of his blood. And yet, she who loved Him so intensely loved us also. She knew that there was only one way in which she could have more children, spiritual children, you and me, and that was by sacrificing her First-born Son. And so she did sacrifice Him, not as a priest sacrifices (Christ did that.); but she sacrificed Him as a mother would sacrifice Him, offering Him up freely and joyfully, despite the sorrow, because she knew this was what was required for the reconciliation of mankind.

She offered the last drop of His blood, immolated Him as a mother does. By sacrificing her rights, by reuniting herself with the sentiments of Christ, she paid the price, not of her own suffering, but the price which God the Father demanded, the price of the Precious Blood of her Son. And so, in that way, Mary, while meriting and satisfying by virtue of her own tremendous charity and love of God and of man, by virtue of her willingly accepting this tremendous sorrow, also shares in our spiritual regeneration. She paid the price and offered the sacrifice as a mother can.

In a very brief and very sketchy way, this is the basic reality of what we mean when we say that Mary is truly our mother, that she is associated with Christ, that she is His helpmate, that she is the new Eve who together with the new Adam, by virtue of this compassion, this passion and compassion, has redeemed us and has restored to us the life of grace.







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