

1957

053 - The Timeless Woman

Gertrud Von Le Fort

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_reprints



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Von Le Fort, Gertrud, "053 - The Timeless Woman" (1957). *Marian Reprints*. Paper 63.
http://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_reprints/63

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Marian Library Publications at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marian Reprints by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlange1@udayton.edu.



The Timeless Woman

By GERTRUD VON LE FORT

Number 53

ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Gertrud von Le Fort was born in Minden, Westphalia, in 1876. She attended Heidelberg, Berlin, and Marburg universities, specializing in history and philosophy. Her studies and travels in Italy led her into the Church in 1926.

Baroness von Le Fort's writings have been translated into many languages, and a number of them are well-known in the United States, including *Hymns to the Church*, *Song at the Scaffold*, *The Veil of Veronica*, *The Pope from the Ghetto*, and *The Eternal Woman*.

"The Timeless Woman" is a selection from the third part of *The Eternal Woman*, a study of the universal Christian symbolism of woman under the triple aspect of virgin, bride, and mother. It is reprinted with the permission of the Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee, and Koesel-Verlag, Munich.

In October, 1956, on the occasion of her eightieth birthday, Gertrud von Le Fort was awarded an honorary doctorate of theology by the University of Munich, a state institution, "for the unusual contribution of religious values contained in her writings and their theological relevance which has had a decisive influence on Christian life in Germany."

(published with ecclesiastical approval)

A
MARIAN
REPRINT

The Marian Library
University of Dayton
Dayton, Ohio

THE TIMELESS WOMAN

By GERTRUD VON LE FORT

The Christian interpretation of the life of a mother builds itself up in three steps, corresponding to the threefold form of the rosary in its joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries. As this great, popular, and at the same time highly contemplative prayer represents praying to Mary as Mother, so it likewise betokens the proper prayer of the mother. It is the chain of pearls that links the life of the Christian mother to that of the Eternal Mother. Into this threefold prayer the praying woman includes the mysteries of her own motherhood, that through the mystery of the Mother of all mothers they may be uplifted. The earthly mother also has received her child from God; as His gift she has carried it and given it birth. Like Mary, she has presented it to God in the temple, and like her she has found it again in the temple.

While the joyful mysteries contemplate the life proper to the Mother, the sorrowful mysteries consider only the life of the Son. They make no mention of the Mother; for she lives in her Child, and His sufferings are enclosed within her life as the sorrowful mysteries are included in the **Ave Maria**. As the mother could not of her own power form either the body or the soul of her child, so she is likewise unable to determine its destiny. The child comes into life; she but cherishes it, which means that sooner or later it will progress beyond the mother. It must advance beyond her. As every life is independent as an existence, so also it is independent as a mission.

The mother lives in the child, but the child does not live in the mother. Every mother's destiny is, in the last analysis, the unending renewal of the pangs of giving birth. To give life to a child means fundamentally that the child detaches itself from her life. In the anguish of birth only the first stage of this process accomplishes itself. For every mother, sooner or later the hour comes when she, like Mary, must seek her child, sorrowing; and

THE TIMELESS WOMAN

another, a heavier hour comes when the child may say: "What have I to do with you?" The Island Riches of which Ruth Schaumann writes in her book **Yves**, by which she designates that blessed solitude of mother and child, usually becomes for the mother at a certain time of her life, an island of painful loneliness. There is no loneliness on earth like that of a mother; she is not being parted from some other loved one, but the sword that pierces her heart separates her from her own flesh and blood.

Sooner or later, concealed or unconcealed, the image of the Sorrowful Mother, the *Pieta*, appears over the life of every mother. In the book of destiny the names of the sorrows of mothers are manifold. They include the suffering over the child that by a necessity of nature must go its own way, down to the estrangement between the generations, even to the complete loss of the child through misfortune, guilt, or death. Under the religious aspect all these griefs of the mother have but one name, the name by which Sigrid Undset entitled the third volume of her great novel. It is **The Cross**. Kristin Lavransdatter, who sacrificed for her children even her relationship to a loved husband, ends in complete estrangement from her older children. Her youngest and dearest child dies, while she herself dies for a strange child. With this conclusion the whole way of the sorrowful mother is traversed.

The rending of a child from its mother fulfills itself most radically through death, by which the cross rises in its most unmistakable form, in the presence of a mother's love. It is in the death of the child, however, that the detachment of the child from its mother appears in its true religious significance. Like a falling light this meaning plunges from the fact of death through all the forms of maternal tragedy. As Mary's sorrow was fundamentally determined through the work of Redemption on the part of her divine Son, so the most profound interpretation of every maternal sorrow is associated with the designation of the child for God. The Son who was presented in the Temple is basically already the One who died on the cross, but He who died on the cross remains also the

THE TIMELESS WOMAN

One who was found in the Temple. As the second last decade of the joyful mysteries points toward the sorrowful mysteries, so likewise the last decade of the sorrowful rosary swings back as it were into the joyful, and beyond it. The glorious mysteries mean transfiguration. The Son, ascended into heaven, draws His Mother after Him. The unloosening of the child from its mother, understood in its ultimate religious significance as the destination of the child for God, concludes in God the final, the indissoluble union.

This union is twofold. The ascended Christ, who drew His Mother into heaven to be with Him, is also the Christ who continues to dwell upon earth, and Mary's life of glory companions her life in the Church. With the words from the cross: "Behold thy Mother, behold thy son," the dying Saviour summons the disciple to be Mary's spiritual son, and Mary to be the spiritual mother of the disciple. St. John stands for the Apostles in general, and all those whom the disciples of the Lord baptize for Christ are also the children of Mary. In that hour when her life as Mother of Christ seems fully concluded, she becomes in truth the universal Mother of Christians.

For the second time the words of the **Magnificat** are fulfilled: "And all generations shall call me blessed." The Gospel does not speak of Mary again; but the Acts of the Apostles show her to us, much as the great religious art of the Christian West has painted her: with the Apostles in Jerusalem, awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. As the words of the **Magnificat** fulfilled themselves a second time in Mary when she stood beneath the cross, so on the morning of Pentecost for the second time the Holy Spirit descends upon her, and the Mother of Christ becomes the great Mother figure of Christ's Church.

For the individual woman as a daughter of Mary, this means that in the Church, by reason of her religious mission, her apostolate as mother, the woman has her place beside the bearer of religious fatherhood, beside the priesthood of the man. Only in this apostolate are Christ's words: "Whoever receives one such little

THE TIMELESS WOMAN

child in my name receiveth me," fulfilled for the woman, not only in their supreme, but also in their actual sense. The life of the Church as religious life is the life of Christ growing within the human soul. As the global form of the earth, uplifted into a sacred symbol, appears in the cupola of a cathedral, so at this point the religious concept assumes the primal form in order to elevate it. We have seen the compassionate love of the maternal woman extend itself into a universal motherliness, through the need of her own child for care and protection. We see this universal motherhood uplifted by religious vocation into the service of the growing Christ within the souls of men. The ray from the crown of the Mother of Mercy parallels the radiance from the crown of the Mother of Divine Grace.

The woman as mother was not made the subject of a special act of consecration, nor does her apostolate receive this distinction. It is but a part of the Lay Apostolate in which every Christian may participate. The mother never fulfills herself in the mother, but in the child. The Great Sacrament rests upon the Son of the Mother, not upon the Mother herself, but by this very fact the mission of woman in the Church touches closely the essential duality of the Church herself. In her character as mother, the Church is a co-operating principle; the One who works within her is Christ Himself.

Here lies the most fundamental reason why it was fitting that the priesthood was never entrusted to the woman. It is the same reason that determined St. Paul to require that the woman be veiled when attending religious service. The priesthood could not be confided to woman, for thereby the very meaning of woman in the Church would have been annihilated. A part of the essential nature of the Church of which woman is the symbol would likewise have been annihilated. St. Paul's request does not indeed represent a custom dependent upon temporal conditions, but it portrays the demands of the supratemporal Church upon woman who, in her religious significance, is timeless woman.

THE TIMELESS WOMAN

Like natural birth, religious birth is profoundly concealed. The Church also can say of herself what God disclosed to Moses, namely, that He would allow all His glory to pass over him and let him preach the Name of the Lord; that to whomever He is gracious, He is gracious; and upon whomever He has mercy, He has mercy; but that no one may look upon His countenance. The essentially spiritual life of the Church is hidden; hence, the inevitable error of judgment in those who venture to pronounce upon and even criticize the religious life of the Church from without. This is an absurdity comparable only to that of demanding of the surgeon that his dissecting knife locate the soul within the body.

We have said that woman, by her apostolate as mother, comes into most intimate relationship with the inner life of the Church. She does this by means of her own hidden nature, for in the Church the apostolate of woman is first of all one of silence; and it is in the central enclosure of the sacred place that the religious character of woman necessarily carries its strongest emphasis. The apostolate of silence means that woman is called upon above all to represent the hidden life of Christ in the Church. Therefore, as the bearer of this religious mission, she is the daughter of Mary.

This intimates the maternal apostolate of woman in its ultimate depth. Only a time like that of the recent past, which often has failed both in a religious and in a natural sense, could conclude from this apostolate that it meant under-rating woman. One could never dare to combat this error with the feeble assurance that here woman had labored and spoken within the Church for she has never done so within the sacred precincts of the priesthood. The direct charismatic vocation, which in individual cases as in that of St. Catherine of Siena has broken woman's silence in the Church, fulfills itself only in extraordinary situations. It is never according to the usual order of things; and here this order means that, also in the life of the Church, the sources of things lie in hidden places.

In relation to this thought, we come upon an extraordinary

THE TIMELESS WOMAN

piece of writing. In **The Tidings Brought to Mary**, Paul Claudel, with a depth that is almost terrifying, portrays the significance of woman in the Church. His writings differ from all other contemporary poetry and dramatic art, in fact from nearly all the writings of the past few centuries, not only as a result of the determining influence of generally Christian and religious thinking, but because it is permeated with the concept of dogma. In this lies the unique sublimity that is characteristic of Paul Claudel; this too is the cause of his extreme loneliness.

Under the symbol of the awakening of Mara's dead child through Violaine, the leper, **The Tidings Brought to Mary** portrays the birth of life as coming from the utmost depths of the religious principle. Violaine, the broken vessel of the sacrifice is made worthy of this birth after having offered to God the surrender of her entire life, and accepted the terrible illness that means complete expulsion from human companionship. According to Claudel, the man is the active power in the Church. "O God, I thank you for having created me a father of churches," says the architect, Pierre de Craon. "Man is the priest: but woman's gift is to sacrifice herself." The mystery of religious motherhood touches the priestly mystery of the Consecration through Violaine's miracle, which remains hidden yet transforms everything. The dark eyes of the awakened child become luminous like the eyes of Violaine before her illness; but Mara, the defiant, the selfish one, from whom the child inherited her black eyes, finds forgiveness and solace at last in that she may be a sister to Violaine. Souls are transformed. Violaine's miracle happens in the blessed night of Christmas.

Always and everywhere, contact with the Church means participation in her universality. Beneath the cross where Mary was proclaimed the spiritual Mother of all Christians, stands not only the woman who has offered her own child to God, but also the woman who has sacrificed to God the wish or the hope for a child of her own, or who was willing to give a child to God. The mother of Christ growing within the soul is the mother who folds the hands

THE TIMELESS WOMAN

of her child in prayer; it is also the nun who lovingly gives support to her spiritual daughters on the heights of the religious life. It is Monica, the great saint of Mothers, who by her prayers gave life to her son a second time, and changed Augustine into Saint Augustine. It is also the virginal saint, Catherine of Siena, as **dolcissima mamma** "sweetest mother" to her spiritual son. It is the lonely woman upon her sickbed who can carry Christ within her own soul.

Contact with the Church, as we indicated above, always implies a certain universality. Hence in the religious sphere, the mother becomes the all-inclusive form of woman's life, in fact the absolute form. This absolute position into which the Church places the mother means that the all-embracing form of motherhood, because it is all embracing, must include also the virgin. Upon the summit of the religious mission of woman, the conclusion swings back to the beginning. Over the timeless woman the image of the Eternal Woman appears. The religious mother concept of the Church is indissolubly bound to her who as Virgin is Mother and as Mother is Virgin.

Here the tremendous meaning of the dogma for every individual woman's life unfolds once more. The all-embracing form implies also the all-encompassing task. For the woman who prays, the contemplative prayer of the rosary represents her own life as affiliated with the life of Mary. The rosary, as the great mother-prayer to a Mother, introduces every separate maternal mystery of Mary with the invocation of the Virgin; but every such invocation is followed by the contemplation of a mystery of motherhood.

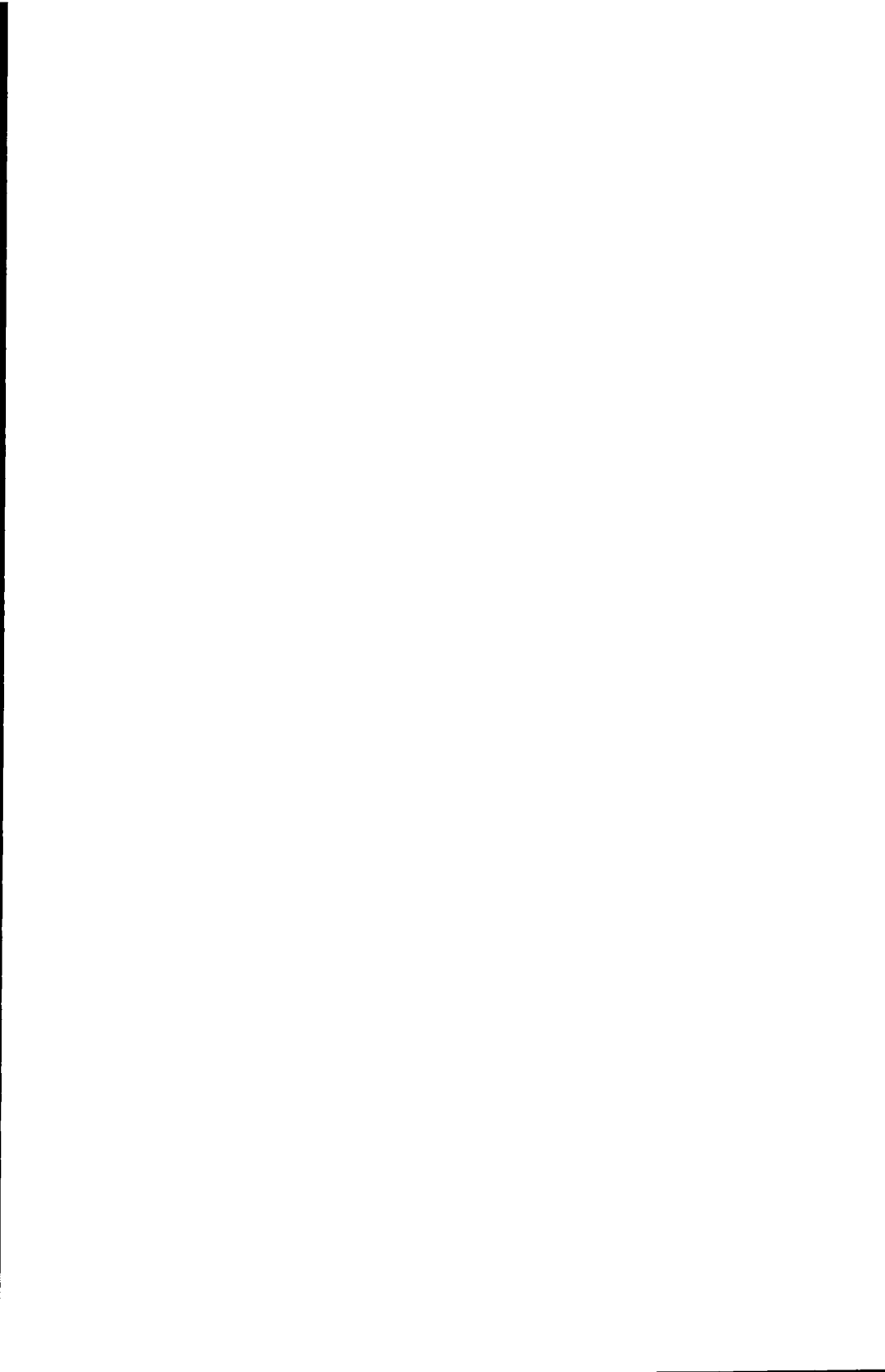
As the renewal of culture depends on whether the other half of reality, the woman's countenance, becomes visible again in the face of the creative man, so the true salvation of the world depends on whether Mary's features grow visible also in his face. The announcement made to Mary is fundamentally an annunciation to the whole human race. The bride who in the eyes of man represents the virgin and the mother, represents also the Virgin Mother; she

THE TIMELESS WOMAN

represents, in fact, the Marian influence in the life and work of man, and she does it as the half part of his own reality.

We have come to the ultimate consideration. Woman's mission, winging far beyond the woman herself, touches the mystery of the world. The Annunciation to Mary is a message to every creature but to the creature as represented in Mary. The renewal of the eternal image through the Marian mission of the woman completes itself in the vicarious role of her who represents the creature. Mary stands for her daughters, but her daughters must also stand for her. In Claudel's poetry the apocalyptic line curves into the atmosphere of Advent. It is Advent until the coming of Christ on Judgment Day! But again, as always, the Annunciation to Mary precedes the fulfillment through Christ, vision follows upon concealment, as Redemption does upon the humility of acquiescence, as the unfolding of heaven upon its willing acceptance, upon the "Yes" of the creature.





MARIAN REPRINTS

- NO. 1—MARY'S PLACE IN OUR LIFE—Rev. T. J. Jorgensen, S.J.
NO. 2—THE MEANING OF MARY—Lois Schumacher
LITANY FOR OUR TIMES—Robert L. Reynolds
NO. 3—MARY AND THE APOSTOLATE—Rev. Emil Neubert, S.M.
NO. 4—THE IMITATION OF MARY—Rev. Placid Huault, S.M.
NO. 5—MARY, ASSUMED INTO HEAVEN—Rev. Lawrence Everett, C.S.S.R.
NO. 6—FATIMA—IN BATTLE ARRAY—Rev. Joseph Agius, O.P.
NO. 7—MEN, MARY, AND MANLINESS—Ed Willock
NO. 8—MARY, CONCEIVED WITHOUT SIN—Rev. Francis Connell, C.S.S.R.
NO. 9—RUSSIA AND THE IMMACULATE HEART—Pius XII
NO. 10—MARY OUR INSPIRATION TO ACTION—Bro. Robert Knopp, S.M.
NO. 11—SIGN IN THE HEAVENS—Rev. James O'Mahony, O.F.M.Cap.
NO. 12—SOUL OF MARIAN DEVOTION—Rev. Edmund Baumeister, S.M.
NO. 13—THE ASSUMPTION AND THE MODERN WORLD—Bishop Fulton J. Sheen
NO. 14—MOTHER AND HELPMATE OF CHRIST—Rev. James Egan, O.P.
NO. 15—MARY, PATRONESS OF CATHOLIC ACTION—John J. Griffin
NO. 16—THE MYSTERY OF MARY—Rev. Emil Neubert, S.M.
NO. 17—THE BLESSED VIRGIN IN THE LITURGY—Rev. Clifford Howell, S.J.
NO. 18—OUR LADY OF RUSSIA—Catherine de Hueck Doherty
NO. 19—THE WITNESS OF OUR LADY—Archbishop Alban Goodier, S.J.
NO. 20—FULGENS CORONA—Pius XII
NO. 21—THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND THE UNITED STATES—
Rev. Ralph Ohlmann, O.F.M.
NO. 22—THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND THE APOSTOLATE—
Rev. Philip Hoelle, S.M.
NO. 23—INEFFABILIS DEUS—Pius IX
NO. 24—MARY'S APOSTOLIC ROLE IN HISTORY—Bro. John Totten, S.M.
NO. 25—AD DIEM ILLUM—Pius X
NO. 26—KNOW YOUR MOTHER BETTER: A MARIAN BIBLIOGRAPHY—
Bro. Stanley Mathews, S.M.
NO. 27—THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND MARY'S DEATH—Rev. J. B. Carol, O.F.M.
NO. 28—IMMACULATE MOTHER OF GOD—James Francis Cardinal McIntyre
NO. 29—THE WISDOM OF OUR LADY—Gerald Yann, O.P.
NO. 30—AD CAELI REGINAM—Pius XII
NO. 31—OUR LADY AT HOME—Richard T. A. Murphy, O.P.
NO. 32—THE BROWN SCAPULAR OF CARMEL—Henry M. Esteve, O. Carm.
NO. 33—MARY'S ROLE IN THE MYSTICAL BODY—Thomas A. Stanley, S.M.
NO. 34—MARY AND THE FULLNESS OF TIME—Jean Danielou, S.J.
NO. 35—PROTESTANTISM AND THE MOTHER OF GOD—Kenneth F. Dougherty, S.A.
NO. 36—THE LEGION OF MARY—Edward B. Kotter
NO. 37—DEVELOPING A SOUND MARIAN SPIRITUALITY—William G. Most
NO. 38—LAETITIAE SANCTAE—Leo XIII
NO. 39—THE MOTHERHOOD OF MARY—Emil Neubert, S.M.
NO. 40—THE HAIL MARY—James G. Shaw
NO. 41—OUR LADY'S SERENITY—Ronald A. Knox
NO. 42—OUR LADY AND THE HOLY SPIRIT—Bishop Leon J. Suenens
NO. 43—CHRIST'S DEVOTION TO MARY—Joseph J. Panzer, S.M.
NO. 44—MARY, OUR SPIRITUAL MOTHER—William G. Most
NO. 45—MARY IN THE EASTERN CHURCH—Stephen C. Gulovich
NO. 46—MARY'S MEDIATION AND THE POPES—Eamon R. Carroll, O. Carm.
NO. 47—FILIAL PIETY: MARIAN AND FAMILY—Gerald J. Schnepf, S.M.
NO. 48—MARY AND THE HISTORY OF WOMEN—E. A. Leonard
NO. 49—OUR LADY, MODEL OF FAITH—Jean Galot, S.J.
NO. 50—OUR LADY, SYMBOL OF HOPE—Jean Galot, S.J.
NO. 51—MARY, MODEL OF CHARITY—Henri Holstein, S. J.
NO. 52—SPIRIT OF THE LEGION OF MARY—Frank Duff