

# BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER

By JAMES WALSH

**F**EW WOULD deny that recent reform of the liturgy, particularly the wholesale introduction of the vernacular into the 'latin' mass and the new freedom concerning times of celebration, has had a profound effect on both content and forms of christian piety. The change – some would pessimistically call it a gradual disappearance – is particularly noticeable in eucharistic devotion, and perhaps most remarkably in the manifestation of devotion to the Mother of God. Until yesterday, the two substantialials in the community prayer of most active congregations of religious women were the little office of our Lady and five decades of the rosary. Today, the majority are reciting a truncated version, in the vernacular, of the office of the reformed roman breviary; whilst the rosary – if it is recited at all – is prayed in private. 'October devotions', for several generations a landmark in the devotional life of the english-speaking Church, are now almost a thing of the past; the evening service, and with it the public recitation of the rosary and other Marian devotions, has largely been replaced by the liturgy. In many churches the Lady statue, in the past frequently so decorated with flowers and surrounded by a blaze of votive candles, has lost its pride of place. The feast of our Lady of Sorrows has disappeared from the Passiontide liturgy, and with it the special devotions to *Maria desolata* on good friday evening. The great campaigns of the 1940s and 50s for the 'family rosary' have lost practically all their impetus; novenas to our Lady of perpetual succour and of the miraculous medal appear to many more and more anomalous in the modern liturgical context; and there is evidence that pilgrimages to Lourdes are undergoing a significant change of emphasis as well as losing their one-time popularity.

It can be freely admitted that devotion to our blessed Lady has not infrequently been infected by sentimentality and theological exaggeration: Mary as the life-line between the despairing sinner and the redeeming Christ; as the indulgent Mother, who stays the anger of the Father against his erring child. Often an inadequate theology of the holy Spirit has distorted the truth expressed in slogans such as 'To Jesus through Mary' and 'It is Mary who forms

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Christ in us', and severely limited our understanding of titles like 'co-redemptrix' and 'mediatrix of all graces'. The over-enthusiastic accommodation of scriptural texts from the sapiential books to our Lady in the late middle ages, which later found their way into liturgical feasts,<sup>1</sup> the theological indiscretions which accompanied the counter-reformation's necessary defence of 'Mary's honour' against the iconoclasm of the protestants and were prolonged into the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup> have sometimes given substance to charges of mariolatry. The reforms initiated by Pius XII and given vigorous momentum by the Council and its liturgical *Concilium* have isolated the individualistic and passive tendencies in nineteenth century devotion to the Mother of God, which, lacking a true scriptural and theological foundation, was all too easily identified with the mawkish sentimentality so often portrayed in 'repository' art, or in what may justly be called the romanticism of the genre of the novelette rather than true christian piety.

It is, however, one thing to purify and refine christian devotion, another to leave it to die of neglect by stigmatising its external manifestations as sentimental, exaggerated or untheological. Though the Council, with our non-catholic brethren in mind, 'earnestly exhorts theologians and preachers of the divine word that, in treating of the unique dignity of the Mother of God, they carefully and equally avoid falsity of exaggeration and an excess of narrow-mindedness', it also calls upon all the children of the Church 'to foster generously the cult, especially the liturgical cult, of the Blessed Virgin'.<sup>3</sup>

If one tries to express this exhortation 'to foster generously the liturgical cult of the Blessed Virgin' in simpler language, one can only do so in terms of the charity of Christ, and of the faith which that charity demands. Generosity is abundance of love; and christian love, like christian devotion, is understood and expressed only in the context of God's saving will as revealed in the loving, redeeming Christ. The woman in the jewish crowd who looked upon him and loved him as he spoke, instinctively saw our Lord, not as a lone figure, but in terms of his own human relationships; and it was in these terms that she honoured him: 'Blessed is the womb that carried

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Prov 8, 22-25, still the first lesson for the feasts of our Lady's Nativity and the Immaculate Conception.

<sup>2</sup> Some writers did not hesitate to decorate our Lady with such titles as 'divine person' and 'fourth person of the blessed Trinity'. Cf Malou, J., *L'Immaculate Conception* (Brussels, 1857), pp 175-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 67.

you, and the breasts that fed you'. He responded, we might say equally instinctively, in terms which extended and completed the relationship: 'Say rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it'.<sup>1</sup>

The first and basic human relationship is that of the mother and the new-born child. It expresses the essential human condition; and for St Paul, it proves the Incarnation to be an historical fact: 'When the time was ripe, God sent his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons'.<sup>2</sup> Though this is Paul's only reference to the mother of God, it is a summary expression of the history of salvation, of Mary's role in the unfolding of the divine plan, and of our own situation in it. The amalgam of pain, joy and love which the hour of childbirth, the time of deliverance, manifests most eloquently in human living, is equally true of the birth of the Church:

... you will weep and lament, whilst the world rejoices; you will be full of grief, but your grief will be turned into joy. A woman in labour is in pain because her hour has come; but when the child is born, she forgets her pain in her joy that a human being is born into the world. So it is with you: at the moment you are grief-stricken, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no-one shall rob you of your joy.<sup>3</sup>

Patient investigation and prayerful reflection on the scriptures as enshrined in the long tradition of the Church have enabled modern exegetes to show how this passage forms a link between the episodes in his gospel where John mentions Mary the mother of Jesus: at Cana, where the water is changed into wine,<sup>4</sup> and on Calvary, where the Mother of God is declared to be the mother of the beloved disciple.<sup>5</sup> It is now a common-place in Johannine studies that Jesus' 'hour'<sup>6</sup> is the time of his passion and resurrection, the focal point in the history of salvation.<sup>7</sup> At Cana, when Mary says to him, 'They have no wine', Jesus replied: 'Woman, what is there between you and me? My hour is not yet come'.<sup>8</sup> Like the answer already given to his mother in the temple - 'How was it that you were looking for me?

<sup>1</sup> Lk 11, 27-8.

<sup>2</sup> Gal 4,4.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 16, 20-22.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 2, 1-11.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Feuillet, A., 'L'heure de la femme (Jn 16, 21) et l'heure de la Mère de Jésus (Jn 19, 25-27)', *Biblica* vol 47 (1966), pp 169-184, 361-380, 557-573.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Jn 2,4; 7,6; 7,30; 8,20; 13,1; 17,1.

<sup>7</sup> Cf e.g. Cullmann, O., 'L'Évangile Johannique et l'Histoire du Salut', in *New Testament Studies* 11 (1964-5), pp 111-122.

<sup>8</sup> Jn 2, 3-4.

Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'<sup>1</sup> – these words indicate a separation between the mother and the Son during his public ministry, when he must testify to his mission by preaching and by signs which would win the belief of his followers, of those who would become members of his family by doing his Father's will.<sup>2</sup> The suffering which such separation implies for her – 'Son, why have you behaved in this way towards us? See in what anguish your father and I have been searching for you'<sup>3</sup> – is not without its immediate fruit at Cana. There is an implied parallel here between the earthly marriage and the heavenly marriage of which John speaks in his Apocalypse, 'the time of the marriage of the Lamb'.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Mary's efficacious intercession here is an earnest of her intercession in heaven.

The woman who must suffer when her hour is come, but who then rejoices because a human being is born into the world, is strongly reminiscent of Eve, 'the mother of all the living',<sup>5</sup> who must 'give birth to her children in pain',<sup>6</sup> and who cries out with joy 'because I have got a human being with the help of the Lord'.<sup>7</sup> When Christ's own hour of suffering is come, the fulness of the time of his redeeming love, he tells his mother that she is the woman who has acquired a son through her hour of suffering, which becomes one with his own: at the moment when the sign which is rejected becomes the One lifted up who draws all men to himself;<sup>8</sup> at the moment when the sword pierces her soul.<sup>9</sup>

By the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary, wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalen. When he saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother,  
'Woman, behold your son'.

<sup>1</sup> Lk 2, 49.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Jn 2, 1-12; Mt 12, 46-50. It is important to notice, however, that here we have no rigid separation, for Mary immediately accompanies her Son and his disciples to Capernaum. Besides being a temporary separation, which is to end on Calvary, it is also full of promise. Though the phrase 'what is there between you and me?' is constantly used in the bible to indicate repulse or refusal (cf Jg 11, 12; 2 Sam 16, 10; 1 Kg 17, 18; 2 Kg 3, 13; 9, 18; Jer 2, 18; Mk 1, 24; 5, 7; Lk 4, 34; 8, 28), Jesus, by working the miracle, underlines his implicit promise to his Mother of a future re-union; and she seems to expect this double sign, when she says to the stewards: 'Do whatever he tells you'. Cf Laurentin, R., *Court Traité sur la Vierge Marie* (5e éd Paris, 1967), pp 34-5.

<sup>3</sup> Lk 2, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Apoc 19, 7-8; 21, 2. Cf Cullman, O., *Les sacrements dans l'Évangile johannique* (Paris, 1951), pp 36-41.

<sup>5</sup> Gen 3, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Gen 3, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Gen 4, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Cf Jn 12, 31-32.

<sup>9</sup> Lk 2, 34-5.

Then he said to the disciple,

‘Behold your mother’.

And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.<sup>1</sup>

Mary here receives the name ‘woman’; she becomes the new Eve, the new mother of all those who are to have eternal life.<sup>2</sup> She is here associated in the divine plan with Christ the creator of the new humanity, the source and the first-fruits, in his resurrection, of the life-giving spirit – the last Adam, the heavenly man.<sup>3</sup> Just as she freely co-operated with the holy Spirit, through her *fiat* in the incarnation of the Son of God, so here, as she freely accepts to share his sufferings, she co-operates with Jesus in the work of the re-creation of the human race. This redemptive, loving hour of his becomes hers also; she efficaciously wills, as he does, and through his willing, that the people of this new race increase and multiply. As St Augustine says:<sup>4</sup>

This woman is mother and virgin spiritually as well as physically. She is not the mother of our head in spirit, because he is the Saviour, and she herself is born of him in the spirit . . . but she is clearly the mother of his members, of us, that is; because she so shared in his charity that the faithful are born of her in the Church – the members of Christ the head.

The glorification of Mary – ultimately, what is meant by her liturgical cult – is thus seen by John as a reflection of the glory of the cross: ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you, since you have given him power over all mankind to give eternal life to all those whom you have entrusted to him’.<sup>5</sup> This glory, in Mary’s case the spiritual motherhood of the messianic people, in God’s mysterious design comes only through suffering: ‘As it was his purpose to bring a great many of his sons into glory, it was fitting that God, for whom everything exists and through whom everything exists, should make perfect through suffering the leader who would take them to their salvation. For the one who sanctifies and the ones who are sanctified are of the same stock; that is why he openly calls them brothers . . . Here I am with the children God has given me’.<sup>6</sup> Prophetically, this suffering, which is the prelude to

<sup>1</sup> Jn 19, 25–7.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Jn 3, 13–18.

<sup>3</sup> Cf 1 Cor 15, 45–9.

<sup>4</sup> *De Sancta Virginitate* ch VI: PL 40, 399.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 17, 1–2.

<sup>6</sup> Heb 2, 10–13. Cf Lk 22, 25–7.

the fulness of salvation, is portrayed in the image of the pains of childbirth:

As soon as Sion was in labour  
She brought forth her sons . . .

and, as in our Lord's own allegorical reference<sup>1</sup> to his resurrection, the birth is followed by the joy and gladness of the mother and the new people of God:

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,  
all you who love her;  
Rejoice with her in joy  
all you who mourned over her;  
that you may be suckled and filled  
from her consoling breast . . .  
You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice.<sup>2</sup>

So Mary symbolizes the new Jerusalem, Sion, who gives birth to the new people. She is therefore, as the dogmatic constitution on the Church notes, 'the model of the Church in the matter of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ . . . The Church, moreover, contemplating the mystery of Mary's holiness, imitating her charity, and faithfully fulfilling the Father's will, becomes a mother by accepting God's word in faith . . . imitating the mother of her Lord, and by the power of the holy Spirit, the Church preserves with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope and a sincere charity'.<sup>3</sup>

In the Church's liturgy, the 'wonderful works of God' – re-creation, regeneration, redemption, glorification, are not only recalled but re-enacted, so that this new life, this efficacious sacrificial love, is communicated to her children; they, in turn, deepen their understanding in faith of this love by their contemplation of these works as they are revealed in the whole Christ. The purpose of this communication and loving contemplation is participation in his redemptive mission: 'Simon, son of John, do you love me? . . . feed my sheep'.<sup>4</sup> Just as devotion to our blessed Lady has to be purified to the point at which the truly maternal (as opposed to maternalistic) relationship is understood and achieved, so too its purpose – the building up of Christ's body in the re-fashioning of christian life and love – needs constant purification: and it is on this level precisely

<sup>1</sup> Jn 16, 21-22.

<sup>2</sup> Isai 66, 7-14. Cf Isai 26, 17-18; Mic 4, 9-10; Hos 13, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 64.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 21, 15-17.

that we encounter the suffering of the cross – the painful effort to give of one's strength in every human situation, in faith that the strength is itself derived from Christ's suffering love; and in hope that this loving will indeed communicate this life.

This transmission of life is to be seen and achieved in every kind of human loving: pre-eminently in the creative love of husband and wife as it mysteriously mirrors the mystery of the relationship between Christ and his Church,<sup>1</sup> and exemplifying, ideally, precisely because of its creative power, the living union between the human and the divine.

We see in Mary, in her *fiat*, deriving from Christ's obediential union with the Father, the basic principle of all christian loving, and the tensions and contradictions which it exposes in ourselves: our ignorance or limited understanding of each other's true roles, our fear of ourselves and each other, our fear of commitment, of involvement, our selfish determination that the other should be entirely absorbed in us, should conform themselves to our unconformed desires; that the other should be present to us, or separate from us, not according to Christ's pattern, but according to our own unregenerate will. All these contradictions are to be progressively understood (beginning, perhaps from the point of non-comprehension – 'and they did not understand what he said to them'<sup>2</sup>) as the material of the suffering which is the prelude to fulness of christian love in any and all of its modalities: an awareness which itself becomes true compassion – the power, Christ-given, to 'suffer with'.

This specifically christian awareness, though it begins with physical presence, and from time to time, because of human limitation, may demand a renewal of such presence, will ultimately transcend it and continue to grow without it, because it becomes infused with the loving fidelity which is the effect of faith, hope and charity. It is simply that participation in Christ's redeeming love, the knowledge and acceptance of the divine plan of salvation, means that we strive to love all whom God loves. In the ineffable providence of Christ's relationship with us in the Church, he is loving, in and with us, all those whom we seek to love and whom he calls us to love, in strength and in sweetness, in him. He loves those whom in human fashion he has not yet known, in the human relationships we form and develop with 'our neighbour' according to the various modalities of human loving. In the same way, through his power, we can love

<sup>1</sup> Cf Eph 5, 22–23.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 2, 50.

those to whom our parents, brothers and sisters, husbands, wives and friends, extend their love, even when we do not know these in human fashion.

It is this ever-expanding loving awareness in faith and hope which give us our strongest clue to the happiness of heaven: 'You will see me again, and your heart will rejoice'. It is often the suffering of separation, the wounds which misunderstanding, lack of love and rejection, apparent or real, inflict on us, which enables us to drive forward to that union which transcends time and place, but which, in the blessed humanity of Christ, is enhanced by real presence in the fullest sense of the phrase.

It is vital, however, in living according to this pattern – 'to know what it means to share his sufferings, to be made like him in the pattern of his death, in order to share his glorious resurrection from the dead'<sup>1</sup> – to realize that the christian calling demands that we accept love as well as give it. The doctrine of the communion of saints is unintelligible without this truth. Mary is the first of those who love us in Christ, even as she is the first fruits of his compassionate, healing, redeeming mission. She explains to us, more clearly than any other, 'the length and breadth and height and depth of the love of Christ which surpasses human knowledge',<sup>2</sup> re-enacted in our liturgy and the constant object of our contemplation. She loves, and is to be loved, in these terms. This is her maternal mission, in which all christian women, says St Augustine, married or unmarried, are called to share.<sup>3</sup>

Our suffering for and compassionate love of one another is the substance of our devotion to her.

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<sup>1</sup> Phil 3, 10–11.

<sup>2</sup> Eph 3, 18–20.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, PL 40, 400.