

VESSEL OF ELECTION

By GEORGE CROFT

THE TITLE of this brief meditation is a hallowed one. Its words were those addressed to St Paul;¹ he was to be God's chosen instrument, under the guidance of the Spirit, in proclaiming Christ to the gentiles. They are expressive of the manner and the fruit of his conversion for himself and for others; of God's choice of him as his instrument, and of his reception of and response to that choice. Although this title is not found among the more traditional of those applied to our Lady,² the word vessel, 'Sacred vessel of all mysteries', 'Vessel of honour', 'Spiritual vessel', 'Singular vessel of devotion', appears in both ancient and more recent devotional expression, for example in the Litany of Loreto.³ Devout christian meditation on Mary's response to the Spirit, in her heart and in her virginal conception of Christ our Lord, was constantly expressed by the Fathers and writers of the Church, who

saw in the Spirit's intervention an action that consecrated and made fruitful Mary's virginity and transformed her into the 'Abode of the King' or 'Bridal Chamber of the Word', the 'Temple' or 'Tabernacle of the Lord', the 'Ark of the Covenant' or 'Ark of Holiness', titles rich in biblical echoes.⁴

It is upon the response of our Lady to the Spirit, and the exemplary and typical aspects of this for christian approach to Election, both individually and corporately, that we wish here to dwell. The place of such a reflection in conjunction with others on ignatian election needs no further comment.

Our Lady: sign of sure hope

The Fathers in Council declared that our Lady, virgin and mother, is a sign of sure hope, through her union with Christ, to God's people in pilgrimage.⁵ They also declared her life a 'pilgrimage of faith' in both joys and sorrows beside him.⁶ The Church is like Mary, in some sense both virgin and mother, in bringing forth to a new and immortal life, children who are conceived of the holy Spirit and born of God.⁷

¹ Acts 9, 15.

² Palmer, P.: *Mary in the documents of the Church* (London, 1953), pp 115 ff.

³ Rahner, H.: *Our Lady and the Church* (London, 1961), p 95.

⁴ *Marialis cultus*, 26. ⁵ *Lumen gentium*, 68. ⁶ *Ibid.*, 58. ⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

More recently yet, Mary, as model of the Church and intercessor for all christians, has been the subject of reflection also in the context of christian worship.⁸ Like her, the Church at worship is the *attentive* virgin, in faith and listening to the word of God; the Church is like the virgin at *prayer* (at the visitation, at Cana, and in the Cenacle); the Church is like our Lady in *presenting offerings*, as she did in the Temple and on Calvary. In all these ways, Mary is teacher of the spiritual life for individual christians.⁹

But Mary is, above all, the example of that worship that consists in making one's life an offering to God. . . . Mary's 'yes' is for all christians an example of obedience to the will of the Father, which is the way and means of one's own sanctification.¹⁰

It may be noted that these reflections upon the Mary-likeness in christians refer not simply to the thoughts they think, or even to the explicit prayers they say, but to the very style and characteristics of their devout behaviour and prayer as they respond to the Spirit, seeking worshipful, eucharistic, personal, and corporately dedicated union with Christ. That in human gift which responds to the Spirit, in order that individual and corporate life be more Christ-like, can properly, if not universally, be called marian. Whether or not this likeness is a matter of explicit devout awareness, it can be said to follow the intercession and example of Mary, being taught by her and learning from her; in some sense sharing her life also, besides that of Christ.

Mary is thus the sign and the model of the prayer and seeking of the christian, individually and in community. It is worthwhile asking, in what sense, if any, there might be a marian dimension of ignatian election. It might also be asked how, if at all, the characteristics of ignatian election might also be like those of the faithful who gather in prayer and worship in the Lord. Are there characteristics, even recognizable ones, which pertain to readiness for election? How are these comparable to those of the Church as a whole, or a particular assembly? Do both election and eucharistic gatherings manifest the Christ-centred marian qualities of attentive, prayerful, virginal and motherly presentation of offerings?

⁸ *Marialis cultus*, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

The Marian dimension of ignatian election

Concerning the first of these questions, the marian dimension of ignatian election is, of course, no more than implicit. In the text immediately concerned with election in the Exercises, our Lady is not mentioned.¹¹ It is appropriate, however, to recall here the intimate presence of our Lady with Christ our Lord as seen by Ignatius, not only in the meditations and prayers of all four weeks of the Exercises, but most especially in the triple colloquy.¹² This colloquy, it is indicated, is to be repeated not only in the meditation on the Two Standards, and the Three Classes, but also in that concerning the Three Degrees of Humility which immediately precedes what is said concerning election.¹³ It is also indicated as appropriate in the first contemplation of the third week, which immediately follows.¹⁴ It can be said, then, that the repeated emphasis given to the appropriateness of prayer which begins with an explicitly marian reference and all that this entails — the triple colloquy itself is so presented as to invite the ascent of prayer by the very way, through Mary, by which God became man and was presented incarnate in this world — embraces all that Ignatius says concerning the election and its times and methods.

Let us first consider, in the context of the times and methods of election, whether the example of our Lady bears more upon one than another of them. It may seem somewhat surprising that whereas exercitants are bidden to contemplate our Lord risen from the dead and appearing to his Mother, she is not mentioned as exemplifying the first time of election along with St Paul and St Matthew.¹⁵ However, if the first time of election corresponds to the recognition of Christ in glory, the consolation of our Lord's risen presence, in the opinion of at least one saint, was not immediately or easily experienced by our Lady herself.¹⁶

Again, we can consider that our Lady's 'yes' at the Annunciation, which was the expression of her own election, came at the beginning of her joyful, and before her sorrowful, life as Mother of the Redeemer.

¹¹ Exx 169-89.

¹² Exx 63.

¹³ Exx 136, 149, 165.

¹⁴ Exx 199.

¹⁵ Exx 218, 175.

¹⁶ 'St Teresa writes (*Life*, Relation IV): 'He said to me that when he rose again he showed himself to our Lady, because she was in great trouble: for sorrow had so pierced her soul that she did not recover at once so as to have the fruition of that joy. He remained long with her then, because it was necessary to console her'. Rickaby, J.: *The Spiritual Exercises* (London, 1915), p 195.

Her experience of consolation and desolation, as far as we know it, followed on rather than preceded her election, we might say. If this be so, it is perhaps the third time of election, that of tranquillity and what leads into it, upon which Mary's example has the most appropriate bearing in christian life. This time is characterized by Ignatius as one when the soul is not agitated by divers spirits, but enjoys the use of its natural powers freely and quietly.¹⁷ This time entails relatively, if not completely, dispassionate affective balance and the whole use of natural rational powers in the choice of means leading from godly beginnings to godly ends. It is suggested here that the example of the life of our Lady, after her election's first expression, exemplifies also a true christian containment of affect, which christians can learn in contemplating the joyful, sorrowful and glorious moments of her life with Christ. Mary indeed experienced the extremes of affect of servants of God and followers of Christ. To greet God's choice (as she did at the Annunciation), and to experience his dereliction (as she did in Christ's passion), are ultimates of human exaltation and terror. Yet, christians may ponder, our Lady neither presumed in the joys of the Annunciation and Incarnation (saying: for the Almighty has done great things for me¹⁸), nor despaired in her sorrow as she stood by the cross of Jesus and saw her hope done to death.¹⁹ United with our Lord and those who followed him she prayed yet in hope:²⁰ a hope to be completed in her own sharing, body and soul, in the full stature of the risen Christ in glory. What christians may learn from our Lady has something intimately to do with the heights and depths of the affect to be experienced in the service of God and the following of Christ. She leads christians, by her example, into that tranquillity in which response to Christ is to be found: the accompaniment of God-given hope itself which she, first of all christians, herself exemplifies. *Spes nostra, salve* is not a prayer born of devout exaggeration. Her example then, may be said to bear at least implicitly upon the third time of election, if not on others.

We may also note, though without exclusive reference to ignatian election as distinct from any other christian response to the love of God, how the qualities ascribed to our Lady and to the Church are, certainly in general, true of anyone contemplating election in the ignatian sense.²¹ The approach to election is certainly *attentive* (to the word of

¹⁷ Exx 177.

¹⁸ Lk 1, 48.

¹⁹ Jn 19, 25.

²⁰ Acts 1, 14.

²¹ *Marialis cultus*, 17-20.

God) in its listening, and it is *prayerful*. The times of election are those of either certainty, or discernment, or of tranquillity and freedom and, inasmuch as these experiences are all expressive of faithful adherence to God alone, could be said to be *virginal*. The fruitfulness of election is spoken of by Ignatius solely in terms of the glory and praise of God and the salvation of the person concerned; the term *motherly* is appropriate here at least in terms of the fruitfulness of election, but scarcely otherwise. That the person seeking to make election is ready to *present offerings* (of himself) is plainer to see. What this juxtaposition supplies to ignatian expressions concerning election is to suggest the bridal, if not in some sense feminine, aspects of the spiritual dispositions and attitudes of the one seeking election. Election is anything but a taking of God's goodness by storm or force or quasi-masculine, spiritual or embodied assertiveness or manipulation. It is expressive of a readiness for marriage rather than conquest; and while it is certainly not like a declaration of war, neither is it analogous to a proposal of marriage, but rather to a possibly bridal response, to the invitation of God's loving choice.

Corporate christian response and Marian example

Marialis cultus draws our christian attention to the siting of contemporary marian devotion not only in a renewed contemplation of her joyful, sorrowful, and glorious participation in the mysteries of Christ himself (Part III), but more concretely into contemporary christian behaviour, attitudes, and experience in worship and liturgy (Part I). It is in this latter context that the qualities singled out as characterizing our Lady and the Church in connection with ignatian election are made explicit. I would like now to suggest some questions, with reference to prayerful and eucharistic gatherings, which I believe to be equally relevant to matters concerning ignatian election. If indeed it can be said, as I maintain, that what ever there is in human gift as response to the Spirit, for the purposes of a more Christ-like individual and corporate life, can properly, if not universally, be called marian, then it follows that there is a marian dimension not only to individual responsiveness in election or conversion, but also in corporate prayerful and eucharistic gatherings of the faithful. One can now ask whether or not what recognizably characterizes such a gathering is not also marian: when, for example, those taking part are drawn afterwards to declare, that this was an occasion helpful to devotion and renewal of life, might it not be this very marian dimension which is also being

sought after, implicitly at least, as though somehow the possible object of subsequent comment? Were this so, one could venture to reflect that the criteria by which christians are led to assess the quality of their worship include these qualities of attentiveness, prayerfulness, virginal fidelity and motherly encouragement of others' responsiveness, as well as the presentation of gifts of self, which characterize both Mary and the Church as a whole. What disposes to united liturgical or worshipful gathering can, evidently also on occasion, be shot through with many personal and interpersonal dynamics of only confusedly godly origin and aim; but it is these marian qualities which stand out; they are the criteria which assist the faithful to understand what helps them more, and what helps them less, towards union with Christ. These qualities are the glass, to use the beautiful simile of the medieval carol concerning our Lady's virginal bearing of Christ, through which the sun shines. At all events, it is certain that the faithful gathered at prayer distinguish with great clarity between, for example, the functions of debate, controversy and various degrees of polarization and division, and the characteristics of prayer itself. Of things disposing to prayer, these are among the least helpful; if indeed they, or anything that is angry or aggressive or prevailing in its own right in the repertoire of human affectivity, can ever be said to help prayer at all. The qualities that accompany groups of christians at prayer or worship will be the more conducive to prayer in the measure that they manifest the marian qualities we are considering; and, we might add, in the measure that they resemble the dispositions of the third, at least if not of the other, times of election. Though it must be added that the marian contemplations of the Exercises, beginning from those on Incarnation and Nativity at the beginning of the week of election, often provide the key to the exercitant's understanding of the alternation of his own consolation and desolation. For Mary, as for the majority of exercitants, the 'third time' ultimately becomes fused with the second.

With regard to the marian quality of 'the presenting of the offerings' mentioned in *Marialis cultus*, one is forcibly reminded how, in recent psychological speculation about the characteristics of maturity of human conscience, the quality of oblation concerning full-grown human moral behaviour has been singled out.²² This quality is opposed to that of seemingly moral action which may result, as is well known, from the pre-rational constraint of intra- or inter-personal origins.

²² Plé, A.: 'Moral acts and the pseudo-morality of the unconscious', in *Cross-currents of psychiatry and catholic morality* (ed. Birmingham and Cunneen, New York, 1964), pp 252 ff.

Conclusion

We have been discussing here, with reference to the teaching both of the Council and of the encyclical *Marialis cultus*, a similarity among christians who are seeking to make an election in the ignatian sense, or prayerfully or worshipfully gathered, which is demonstrably, if not recognizably, related to the example and life of Mary, Mother of God. We have suggested that there are marian characteristics that can be predicated of ignatian election, though Ignatius makes no specific or explicit reference to these when dealing directly with election; and that these include qualities to which the term bridal, if not in some sense feminine, can be applied. It is also suggested that christian experience at prayer and worship may also be guided by a discerning search for the recognizably marian dimension, as opposed to anything not disposing to union with Christ. It is not suggested that the presence of a Mary-likeness is necessarily, or only, fostered by explicit mention of, or prayer to, our Lady. What we are referring to is perhaps more like a family likeness among christians (Mary has indeed even been called by some the corporate personality of christians²³), of which the bearer may not be the most apt detector in himself. But it is, none the less, a thankful and irreplaceable aspect of christian gift and readiness for election in any christian's individual or corporate response to God's loving and saving presence.

²³ "The whole concept of the Church in the New Testament is simply this: it is the total recipient of all the saving activity of Jesus. St Paul speaks of that Church as being the fulness of Jesus, as Jesus is the fulness of the Father. Actually, our blessed Mother as the prime recipient of this fulness, and as the one who received it most totally is what you might almost call a corporate personality, embodying in herself every grace that was to be given to the Church, because she embodies in herself every perfect response that the Church could ever make to God. Therefore whatever goodness is in the Church resides primarily, as in a corporate personality, in our Lady herself". Barnabas Mary Ahern, C.P., in *Sign* (May, 1968).