

SEDES SAPIENTIÆ

NOTHING is more beautiful than the way in which the Church has drawn from the few light touches and scattered references in the Gospel story, the perfect image of Mary. The world leaves to theologians the study of those prerogatives which exalt Our Lady as the co-redeemer of mankind and give to her a share in the distribution of graces. All must agree in their admiration of the Catholic type of the Virgin Mother, in whom we recognize the supreme ideal of the superlatively perfect woman; yet with all our marvelling love, we fall short of complete understanding of her excelling dignity. Still, with all our limitations and without going beyond the simple Gospel narrative, we can find in Mary's character features of stupendous beauty. We should like to show here how the Gospel reveals her as a perfect type of wisdom.

Wisdom is the most excellent of the intellectual virtues. Its object is the consideration of the highest causes, and the most sublime aspects of things. It is a certain participation in the infinite and eternal Wisdom. St. Thomas observes that it judges and sets in order all the other virtues: for Christians, wisdom is a guiding principle of life, while for the pagan philosophers it was only a speculative power. Now, Our Lady was in a special way united to the Divine Wisdom; she is the mother and the spouse of the Eternal Wisdom: so the Gospel teaches. Again, if wisdom means the consideration, not only of the deductions and conclusions of science, but, in the first place, of scientific principles (*utitur principiis non solum concludendo, sed judicando de eis*), we find in the Gospel Our Lady possessed of all the revealed principles of the Redemption. We see her pondering in her heart the original circumstances of the Incarnation, and on the day of her Purification being given a glimpse of Calvary. On this hint of the Gospel concerning the inner life of Our Lady, Canon Sanday beautifully observes: " 'Mary kept all these sayings': *kept* means *continued to keep*; it is not the momentary wonder of which the Evan-

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gelist has just been speaking, when he says: 'All that heard it, wondered at the things which were spoken unto them by the shepherds': the tense used implies a sustained attitude of mind. This helps us to understand how the phrase comes to be repeated in connection with an incident that occurred twelve years later. All through that time—indeed, we may be sure, all through her life—the mother pondered deeply over the events described in the first two chapters of the Gospel."¹

The *Magnificat*, which according to this writer is far too lyrical and dramatic in character, and too expressive of the traditional Messianic idea to be considered the free composition of St. Luke, throws a new light on the wisdom of Mary. She enters into the thoughts and hopes of the wise men and saints of Israel, with an exultation equal to theirs ("*Abraham rejoiced to see my day*"); or rather, it seems that the thoughts and hopes of the patriarchs and prophets converge and culminate in the *Magnificat*, their ultimate expression. The prophets and patriarchs were, in Israel, what the sages were in heathen lands; they were all that and something much more besides.

As to the guiding and directive side of wisdom, it is almost superfluous to point to the scenes of the Gospel in which Mary stands out with dominating dignity and grace. In the Annunciation, Our Lady displays a wondrous self-control; her final consent is the result of a kind of treaty with the divine plenipotentiary. At the wedding-feast at Cana, we see her the embodiment of practical good sense, perfectly mistress of the situation and perfectly mistress of herself. Undismayed by the apparent check to her desires from Our Lord's words, "My hour is not yet come," she—knowing well that He would do what she wished—calmly gives her orders: "*Whatever He shall say to you, do ye.*" Not to multiply instances, I will only refer to what St. Thomas says about Our Lady's Purification: that she freely wished to observe the legal command for the same reasons as Our Lord Himself, one of which was "*ut legem approbaret*"—the

¹ *Expository Times*, "The Virgin Birth," by Canon Sanday.

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desire to show approval of the law. Thus, we learn from Our Lady two lessons: reverence for the law, and perfect obedience to the law; and both of these are fruits of the spirit of wisdom.

To the image of Our Lady drawn from these incidents, the Dominican way of honouring the Queen of Heaven adds something further: indeed, from the beginning the Blessed Virgin has always been regarded by the Friars Preachers not only as the perfect type, but also as the mistress of wisdom. There is a hint of this in the story of St. Albert the Great. We see him troubled and afraid on account of the wide vista of his knowledge and the devouring curiosity of his mind, insatiable and ever thirsting for more. It is Our Lady who not only reassures him and urges him to renew the study of wisdom (*sapientiæ studio incumbere*), but also shows herself to him in the light of a mistress of learning and the custodian of orthodoxy.

Another fact, more simple and familiar, and one which on that very account affords a still stronger proof, is the invocation *Ave Maria* in the margins of those manuscripts of St. Thomas found by Uccelli in the last century, inscribed as an appeal to Our Blessed Lady for inspiration.

I am inclined to think that the hesitation which some Dominican authors seem to have had about the privilege of her Immaculate Conception was a result of so candid and rigid an adherence to principles that it merited the smile of the Saints and of Our Lady herself rather than their frown of surprise. Was not that hesitation the homage of a scrupulous orthodoxy, clinging to the belief that Mary, just as every other child of God, was redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ?

The devotion of the Dominican Order to the Mother of God is, therefore, of quite an ideal character. It shows her double function as Mother of the Eternal Wisdom and Spouse of the Holy Ghost prolonged throughout the ages.

There is among all the faithful a deep-rooted conviction that Our Lady has something to do with the justification and salvation of every man, that she has an essential place in the divine economy of grace. This traditional belief gives rise in

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the present day to a feeling of expectation for a more solemn recognition by the Church of her office as "Mother of Grace." Needless to say the Dominican school is ready to support and promote this movement. But it is especially inclined to contemplate this Maternity of Grace in the Blessed Virgin, in its relation to Light and Wisdom.

Because we owe to her the wonderful account of the Incarnation given to us by St. Luke, we, in a sense, profess to derive from her the very principles of Revelation: consequently, we, in some way, trace back to her testimony the conclusions which Theology draws from revealed principles. In a sense, to her we are indebted for Revelation, considered not only as a grace (because she gave us the Word-made-flesh, which was the supreme Revelation), but also as a divine science. I feel tempted here to quote from Professor Sanday an ingenious inference, which seems almost to prove that the details given by St. Luke could have come only from a woman, that that woman could only have been a confidant of Our Lady's, and that she was, in fact, Joanna, the wife of Chuza. But I wish rather to lay stress upon St. Luke's account as bearing on the dogma of the two natures in Christ, a dogma without which the Gospel is a dead letter, and so conclude that the testimony of Our Blessed Lady is one of the chief foundations of Theology.

Our Lady is not only mistress of divine science in that fundamental sense, but she is also, if I may use the expression, a *type of Theology*. Our Lord, by uniting in Himself the human and divine, is the Supreme Type of all supernatural life, of the sacramental system, of the constitution and the sanctifying power of the Church, as well as of the interior life of individual souls, so that every moral process in the Church is but a reflected image of His Incarnation. So also, Our Blessed Lady, by the wonderful contrast of her prerogatives, by her virginity and her maternity, by her humility and her exaltation above all women, by her holiness and her sorrows, becomes, after Christ, a type of the divine life. In the faith and moral ideas of Christians, the Virgin Mother of God corresponds to God-made-Man. In other words, we do not hesitate to say that, just as St. Paul is said

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to complete the Gospel, so Our Lady completes Christ, reflecting certain delicate rays of moral beauty, shed by the divine glory in the Person of Our Blessed Lord.

Again, being a theological type, Our Lady is the standard, the badge and touch-stone of orthodoxy. To know what is true and reject what is false, it is frequently enough to turn to the mystery of the Divine Motherhood: heresies cannot stand being confronted with it; they dissolve before that test and it is in this sense, apart from her intercession, that the Church gives her the praise: *Tu sola interemisti hæreses in universo mundo*. We can unhesitatingly declare that, in actual practice, our instincts will be blunted, and our virtues will lack grace and dignity if our devotion to Our Lady is cold.

We may well link up with the title *Seat of Wisdom*, which belongs to Our Lady, a mysterious prerogative proclaimed by innumerable Saints who have excelled in their devotion to her, and which, though not embodied in the text-books of the schools, is recognized by the faithful in the conversion of thousands of hopeless cases. Our Lady seems to have been entrusted by God with a kind of dispensing power over those terrible and inexorable laws of the moral order, which, after long abuse of grace and much hardness of heart, would, without her help, shut out all hope for the sinner. Often, at a death-bed where the priest has failed to elicit repentance, the sinner has been suddenly converted by the invisible effect of a prayer to Mary. Often, too, those who had lost all faith and yet had kept a trace of love for Her have found in that love the last means of their salvation.

The invocation *Refugium peccatorum* implies, and sums up, all that can be added to these considerations: indeed it may in a sense be said to be included in the title *Sedes Sapientiæ*, because the derogation of a law is pre-eminently an act of wisdom; for to draw good from evil, to make a saint out of a hopeless sinner, is the triumph of wisdom.

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(Edited and revised by Bernard Delany, O.P.)