

## OUR LADY OF GOOD COUNSEL

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OUR frequent salutation of the Blessed Virgin as Mother of Good Counsel in the Litany of Loreto makes us familiar with the above title, even if we are not acquainted with the picture which goes by the name of our Lady of Good Counsel. This ancient painting has been eloquently described as 'exquisitely humane and tender . . . the small Child has his right arm round his Mother's neck, his left hand catches at the edge of her dress. His little face is turned upwards towards her; he is certainly whispering to her—but, asking her something? Telling her some small childish sentence, or even word, or not even so much as a formed word, if you think of him as still too tiny a babe to make a whole word? . . . Anyhow, a mother's instinct always understands what her baby means, and often, what her grown son means, better even than his father does. . . . But here, in this picture, the gentle, attentive, down-turned face of Mary is certainly full of understanding; and what her Child is saying to her goes always to increase the treasure of that knowledge which she "kept" and "pondered in her heart", till it became an inexhaustible fount of wisdom from which she could draw Good Counsel to impart to those who should ask it of her.'<sup>1</sup>

They will tell you at Genazzano, a little town some thirty miles east of Rome, that the picture appeared there mysteriously, no one knows from where. It is said to be painted on a thin film of plaster, like a fresco without any supporting wall. But whatever be the true facts of the matter, it is not surprising that Genazzano has long been a place of devotion and pilgrimage for the people of the neighbourhood. And here we are reminded that not many miles away is the little town of Carpineto where Pope Leo XIII first saw the light of day. Remembering his own great love and devotion for the Mother of God, we cannot doubt that he never forgot how he had been born under her shadow. At any rate, he was who added to the Litany of Loreto the invocation *Mater Boni Consilii*. This was in April 1903, and it was almost his last

<sup>1</sup> C. C. Martindale. *Our Blessed Lady*, pp. 203-5.

act; he died in the following July. Remembering also what a great upholder of tradition he was, at a time when the danger of modernism was threatening the Church, we may rely upon it that there was nothing new or untraditional in this last act of his. In fact he did nothing more than restore to our Blessed Lady one of her most ancient titles.

In his study of the Litany of Loreto Fr de Santi, s.J.,<sup>2</sup> points out that most of its invocations are mere repetitions, in a shorter or simplified form, of the titles given to our Lady in litanies that are older by several centuries than the Litany of Loreto, which he is unable to trace back further than the beginning of the sixteenth century. He quotes an instance from an ancient codex he discovered in the library of St Mark's at Venice which dates from the end of the thirteenth century, though its contents may well be very much older. It contains a litany which runs to seventy-five invocations of the style given in the following examples:

Mother inviolate	Flower of Patriarchs
Immaculate Virgin	Treasure of Apostles
Stair of Heaven	Desire of Prophets
Gate of Paradise	Praise of Martyrs
Unfading Rose	Splendour of Virgins
Brightest Star of Heaven	Beauty of Angels
Our Advocate	Mistress of Angels
Temple of the Holy Ghost	Queen of Heaven
	Fountain of True Wisdom
	Mother of True Counsel

It is easy to recognize the origin of the Litany of Loreto. The mere list of these honorific titles bestowed on our Lady in ancient times disposes very effectively of the objection we sometimes hear, that the glorification of Mary is an exaggeration of modern times without any traditional grounds in the Church. And in this connection it may be remarked that even in those days the Church was on her guard against anything that savoured of exaggeration. It cannot escape notice that some of the above titles no longer find a place in the litany of our Lady, but are reserved for Christ her Son. Fr de Santi observes that in 1571 the Dominican Pius V issued a decree prohibiting all the offices of the Blessed Virgin then in use; on the ground that they contained statements which failed to meet with theological approbation. In their stead he

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, *sub v.*

substituted a new *Officium Beatae Virginis* from which had been cut out the offending expressions. The fact that the new office contained no litany apparently led to the conclusion in some quarters that the Litany of Loreto also fell under the ban. Consequently, in order that the ancient custom might be preserved of singing a litany to our Lady on Saturday evening, a new one in her honour was composed of salutations drawn from the Scriptures. This might suit the theologians but it did not suit the ordinary faithful, who are commonly very definite about their likes and dislikes, with a strong disinclination to be driven by the liturgical experts. The old Litany of Loreto crept back into use again, and this time all doubts about its strict orthodoxy were settled by the formal approval it received from Sixtus V in 1587.

We must therefore go very far back into the past in order to find the origin of this attribution to our Lady of a title like Mother of Good Counsel; and this is hardly surprising when we consider what she has always taught the faithful by word and by example in the gospel, which puts on to her lips that prudent and salutary counsel she gave at the marriage feast of Cana: 'Whatsoever he shall say to you, do ye'. It is not often that she speaks in the gospel: twice in John, first when she appeals to her Son to relieve the embarrassment of the bride and bridegroom at Cana, and again when she gives advice to the waiters; five times in the infancy narrative of Luke, twice to the angel at the annunciation, twice to Elizabeth at the visitation, and once to her Child at the finding in the temple. In Matthew and Mark we never hear her speak. In fact she does not appear at all in the gospel of Mark except once,<sup>3</sup> and then, as you might say, behind the scenes. It is on the occasion when our Lord is in a house with the enthusiastic Galileans crowded round him; a message is sent in that his Mother and brethren are outside seeking him. Contrary to what we might have expected, he does not spring up and ask the people to make way; but looking round calmly on those who sit about him, he declares that his mother and brethren are all those who do the will of his Father.

It would be very much beside the mark to suppose that, in asking: 'Who is my mother, and who are my brethren?',<sup>4</sup> he wishes to renounce his Mother; though he who demanded such absolute self-surrender from his followers was prompt to renounce

<sup>3</sup> Mark iii, 31-35.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. xiii, 48.

everything and everyone that came between him and the will of his Father. His natural clinging to her, as hers to him, was part of his sacrifice. Not that she ever showed the slightest inclination to come between him and his Father's will; quite the contrary. And therefore his declaration detracts nothing from her honour, but rather doubles it; for none knew better than he that no one heard the word of God so readily and did it so faithfully as she. So she is twice his Mother. It calls to mind what St Augustine has to say on this point in forceful words quoted by St Thomas: 'The blessedness of Mary comes rather from her believing in Christ than from her conceiving Christ. Her maternal relationship to him would have profited her nothing, had she not more blissfully mothered him in her heart than in her body'.<sup>5</sup>

Both Matthew and Luke have recorded this incident, and it is their only introduction of her into the gospel narrative after their account of the birth and childhood of Christ. In John, after the marriage feast of Cana she disappears altogether from view until Calvary, and the fourth gospel alone mentions her by name at the foot of the cross. I hope it is unnecessary to reassure my readers that, in recalling these details, it is far from my intention to suggest that there is little scriptural basis for the great honour we pay to our Blessed Lady. Indeed it is my purpose to show the opposite. It is surely impossible to read the gospels without being conscious that she is always present if only behind the scenes, which is the place she prefers. Like the evangelists, she insists that the gospel is 'the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God'. Her principal part in the gospel is to guarantee the truth and the reality of the Incarnation, for which the Church has had to fight all down her history. Jesus Christ is God, Mary is a woman, but she is his Mother. 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?' Mark makes the awe-struck villagers of Nazareth cry.<sup>6</sup> 'Isn't she one of us? Don't we know her? How came she to have such a son'?

Now when he decides to become man, God is in the unique position of being able to choose his own mother, and surely that fact imposes on our reason the necessity of drawing certain conclusions about what is fit and proper; *conveniens* as St Thomas would put it. The Church has never hesitated to draw those conclusions in developing the doctrine of the dignity and pre-eminence of the Mother of God. And little though the sum in

5 *De Virginitate*, cap iii; *Summa Theol.* III, xxx, 1.

6 Mark vi, 3.

words of what the gospels tell us directly about her is, it is more than enough to provide us with an intimate knowledge of her such as all the books written of her by pious but uninspired writers could never hope to convey. When God speaks, even through the instrumentality of imperfect but inspired human authors, he says much in few words; and what he says goes straight to the heart of the matter. As the author of Hebrews says: 'The word of God is more piercing than a two-edged sword, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart'.<sup>7</sup> A parallel example could be taken from the case of our Lady's husband, St Joseph, whose person and character we seem to know so intimately; a knowledge gathered from the few words the gospels contain about him, and certainly not from the bulky volumes that pious authors have padded out with fanciful and unreliable details culled from apocryphal sources. Joseph, unlike his biographers, is the man of silence who passes through the four gospels without ever opening his mouth. But his silence speaks louder than words and reminds us of the lines of Francis Thompson:

'For ah! we know not what each other says,  
These things and I; in sound *I* speak—  
*Their* sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.'

Or maybe the matter is put better still by the word of St Peter Damian in one of his sermons:

'Silence itself cries out that some greatness is nigh'.

Mary does not keep silence in the gospels, but on the rare occasions when she speaks her words teach the same lesson as the silence of Joseph, the lesson that is always on the lips of their Son: that it is the creature's part to work for the establishment of the Kingdom (or rather the Kingship) of God. What is the good of being a king if none of your subjects takes any notice of what you say? The Kingdom of God comes, as our Lord says, when God's will is done here below as it is done by God's friends in heaven; that is, voluntarily, promptly and with delight. This is Mary's first and last counsel to us: first, when she bows to the mighty revelation spoken by the angel at her annunciation: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord'. I am God's slave, she says, and what is a slave but one who exists not on his own account but for the sake of his master? It is the lesson of Psalm 99 of Sunday Lauds: *ipse*

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews iv, 12.

*fecit nos et non ipsi nos*, 'He made us and we are for him'.<sup>8</sup> It is the sentiment expressed so finely in one of Shakespeare's sonnets, though he had not our Lady in mind:

'Being your slave, what should I do  
But tend upon the time and hour of your desire?  
I have no precious time at all to spend  
Nor services to do save you require.'

It is her last word of counsel, too, when she makes her final appearance in the gospel, but this time it is a word of action and not of speech. The beloved disciple, a very aged man recalling the tragic memory of Calvary seventy years after the event, still sees the Mother of Jesus at the foot of the cross; with admirable reticence he sets down the words: 'Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother', and he leaves it at that. Fr Vincent McNabb used to say that the operative word in this sentence is 'stood'. She did not, as the old painters liked to imagine, fall in a faint or lean on that son to whom Christ had committed her care. In that hour she was the *mulier fortis*, the support of all his friends who were gathered there. She made no weeping protest against the injustice of what was being done; she did not, as other mothers would have done, attack the soldiery or the Jews. Like a soldier, she stood at the foot of the cross, calmly accepting what she knew better than John, who was one day to write it in his gospel, that 'God so loved the world as to give his only begotten son'. If it was his Father's will, then it was his Mother's will because she had taken up her stand as God's handmaid, and she never departed from it. *Sicut oculi ancillae in manibus dominae suae ita oculi nostri ad Dominum Deum nostrum.*<sup>9</sup>

This is the dominant principle of her life, and she shows it again in the canticle we call the Magnificat. Elizabeth, Luke tells us, is a very aged woman; but she shouts out her congratulations to Mary in a fashion very unlike an old woman. In striking contrast the young maiden replies quietly: Why congratulate me? I have done nothing worthy of praise.

'My soul declareth the greatness of Jahweh;  
The joy of my spirit is in God, who is my saviour;  
Because he hath deigned to notice his lowly handmaid.

<sup>8</sup> The tautology of the Vulgate and Douay rendering, *ipse fecit nos et non ipsi nos*, 'He made us and not we ourselves', is due to a corruption of the Hebrew text.

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 122.

*That is why all generations shall call me fortunate.*

*For he that is mighty hath done great things unto me. Holy be his name.'*

Another aspect of Mary's prudent counsel to us emerges from the gospel account of her visit to Elizabeth; it is the lesson of the pre-eminent claims of that fraternal charity on which her Son insists so vehemently. The angel's communication to her at the annunciation was of a character that would seem great enough to shatter the foundations of the human mind; great enough, at any rate, to render the mind oblivious to everything else. We might have expected that Mary would have remained a long time rapt in the contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation. But she is not only Mother of Good Counsel; she is also *Virgo Prudentissima*, and prudence is the virtue which infallibly directs the mind as to the right reason of the things that ought to be done, *recta ratio agibilium*. It not only guides the good man to do good things, but to do them at the right time and in the right manner. From the simple gospel account it would seem that, when 'the angel departed from her', the chief thing Mary remembered was the news that her aged kinswoman was at last to be blessed with her long-deferred hope of a son. Will not Elisabeth need strong young hands to help her? Mary does not delay: 'rising up in those days she went with haste into the hill country, into a city of Juda.' You would think that it was merely a matter of walking to the neighbouring village, whereas the traditional site of John the Baptist's birth is said to be some sixty miles from Nazareth as the crow flies, and some would put it further away still. St Ambrose, in the homily we read on the Friday ember day of Advent, draws a touching picture of the young maiden hurrying off to visit her kinswoman, *non quasi incredula de oraculo, nec quasi incerta de nuntio, nec quasi dubitans de exemplo; sed quasi laeta pro voto, religiosa pro officio, festina prae gaudio*. The reason of her hurry, he says, is not that she is incredulous, uncertain, or doubtful about the good news the angel has brought, as was the aged Zachary, Elisabeth's husband. Her happiness at the long-delayed fulfilment of her kinswoman's desire, the impulse to fulfil the pious duty of aiding the aged woman, lend wings of joy to her feet. Then, thinking of Mary climbing the hills of Juda, St Ambrose goes on to ask: 'Whither should anyone full of God strive to go with haste except to the higher places? *Nescit tarda molimina Sancti*

*Spiritus gratia.* The grace of the Holy Ghost knows nothing of sluggish effort.'

Here we are reminded that our Lady is the Mother of Good Counsel, as she is the mother of all the virtues and gifts, because she was full of God or full of the grace of the Holy Ghost from which all the supernatural virtues and gifts take their rise. Her fulness of grace was for a twofold purpose, as St Thomas says: 'The Blessed Virgin Mary obtained so great a plenitude of grace to make her fit to come into such close proximity with him who is the author of grace, and to receive within herself him who is full of every grace; so by being his mother in some measure causing grace to flow into every one.'<sup>10</sup> In the preceding pages we have also considered how she is a moral cause of grace for us by the wonderful example she sets in her correspondence with that special grace of the Holy Ghost which in theology is called counsel. For the most part we have shown the words and deeds of our Lady under the aspect of what is called active counsel, that is, the giving of advice for those in search of sanctity. Her words and actions do that, indeed, as her devoted servant Bernard says: 'When you follow Mary you will not go astray.' We can borrow the lines of another Bernard, a contemporary of St Bernard, who expressed the same thought in more pleasing form, though he was addressing Nature:

Go thou, I follow;

For no man goes astray in following thee.

But the virtue of counsel bears a much wider meaning than merely giving advice to others. *Physician, heal thyself* was already an old proverb when our Lord used it in speaking to his fellow Nazarenes. Primarily, counsel is one of those good habits of the mind which are the necessary accompaniment of the virtue of prudence. The prudent man is one who is promptly and easily able to form a just estimate of the value of human actions in their relation to the right end of human life; and who further not only does the right thing, but does it in the right way, without any rash precipitancy, inconsiderateness, or inconsistency. Prudence is the *recta ratio agibilium*, right reason applied to moral action. But before a man can form such an estimate or act in such a way, he requires to take counsel with himself in the light of reason, experience and faith, and to hold an enquiry of reason concerning

<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theol.* III, xxvii, 5 ad 1m.



the proper means to be adopted in order to gain his end in a suitable manner. If after such an enquiry he remains uncertain or in doubt, the prudent man will take counsel of those wiser than himself. And when the end of our desire is a supernatural end, and therefore shrouded in mystery, the means towards it must be supernatural also, for merely natural action cannot rise higher than the natural sphere; and all the more need there is to seek counsel from those whose dwelling place is in the supernatural sphere. This is where the Holy Ghost comes to our aid with sanctifying grace, from which flows the infused supernatural virtue of prudence along with its accompanying virtue of counsel. Nor is that all; for, although the infused virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance endow us with the supernatural disposition of mind and will which is sufficient to deal with the ordinary chances of life, in the life of every man seeking heaven there will come occasions of such seriousness as call for more special help of grace. Such occasions arise when not merely our right reason and good will perfected by the virtues direct us to good action, but when God himself inspires us follow his special direction. In order that we may follow the divine direction voluntarily, promptly and with delight, the Holy Ghost bestows on the soul along with sanctifying grace his seven precious gifts. St Thomas describes them as supernatural dispositions of mind and will by means of which the soul is rendered easily and sweetly movable by the inspirations of the Holy Ghost. Not that he moves us like automata or inanimate things; his grace moves us through the gift in such a way that it is also our own voluntary movement. *Disponit omnia suaviter, in numero, pondere et mensura.*

There are seven gifts, as there are seven principal virtues and seven sacraments, for seven is the mystical number of completion and perfection; nothing is left unprovided for in the supernatural order. And for each of the virtues, faith, hope, charity, prudence, fortitude, justice and temperance, there is a corresponding gift. The gift of counsel corresponds to the cardinal virtue of prudence, and its particular purpose is to dispose the mind to obey the inspirations of the Holy Ghost in searching for the appropriate means that will most effectively carry out the will of God. 'Those who are the children of God are led by the Spirit of God', says St Paul.<sup>11</sup> And St Thomas adds that our mind, when

<sup>11</sup> Rom. viii, 14.

under the direction of the Holy Ghost, is rendered fit to direct not only itself but the minds of others.<sup>12</sup>

Here, then, is Mary's secret. She is the Mother of Good Counsel because she is full of God, perfect in every virtue, and absolutely obedient to every inspiration of the *Holy Ghost who came upon* her and of the *power of the Most High which overshadowed*<sup>13</sup> her. In this as in every other respect she walked faithfully in the footsteps of her beloved Son, who was conceived in her by the operation of the Holy Ghost and in whom, as St Thomas says, 'it is manifest that the gifts (of the Holy Ghost) were present in a most excellent way'. The gospel assures us that consequently Christ in his human nature was always most perfectly under the movement of the Holy Ghost. After his long and mysterious wait at Nazareth—like the man who had waited thirty-eight years for the movement of the waters—eventually 'being full of the Holy Ghost, Jesus returned from the Jordan' (where he had received the impulse of the Spirit of God) 'and was led by the Spirit into the desert'. After the conflict in the desert 'Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee . . . and taught in their synagogues'. The gospels seems to suggest that his inaugural sermon was the one he preached in the synagogue of his own village of Nazareth; and what is his text? 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. Wherefore he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor: he hath sent me to heal the contrite of heart, to preach deliverance to captives and sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord and the day of reward.'<sup>14</sup> The text is from Isaias lxi, 1 and 2, and it is worth noting that some significant words are omitted either by St Luke, or by our Lord, or by both. The words are 'the day of the vengeance of our God'.

<sup>12</sup> II-II, lii, 2, 3m.

<sup>13</sup> Luke i, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Luke iv, 1, 14, 15, 18, 19.