



JMJ

Feast of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Dogma of the Incarnation Rests on the Dogma of the Divine Maternity of Mary

taken from “Mary in the Gospels”

by Fr. J. Spencer Northcote, D.D., 1885

Mary the Mother of God

“Mary, of whom was born Jesus.” St. Matthew 1:16.

I must detain you once more with some preliminary considerations before we proceed to examine the actual facts of our Lady’s life recorded in the Gospels. And I will preface what I have to say with a story which is told of some poor Catholic lad who was picking up what instruction he could get in reading and writing at one of the so-called ragged schools in London. It is said that a Protestant Bishop and other Anglican clergymen came on some occasion to examine the scholars, and that this boy was asked if he could say his prayers. He began at once to repeat the “Our Father,” for which he was duly praised, and then went on (as any well instructed Catholic child would not fail to do) to recite the “Hail Mary”. But here his reverend examiners interrupted him, exclaiming, “Oh no, not that; we don’t want to hear anything at all about her; can’t you say something else?” The boy did as he was bid, left the Angelical Salutation unfinished, and began the Apostles’ Creed. But now it was his turn to stop. He broke off in the middle of the second article – “and in Jesus Christ our Lord” – and asked for further instructions. “What am I to do now, Sir, for here she comes again you don’t want to hear about?”

I do not know whether this story is really authentic; certainly there is nothing at all improbable about it, and it very aptly illustrates a grave and serious truth which lies at the bottom of this whole subject, and which I want specially to insist upon at present; viz., that it is impossible to make any progress in the right understanding of the Christian Faith without encountering our Blessed Lady, and being forced to assign to her a very definite place in the scheme of Christian Doctrine. Her name appears in the very first page of the Evangelical records, in the first chapter of the first of the Gospels, and that which is there said of her is not only the sum and substance of all her greatness, it is also a very valuable compendium of the whole Christian creed: “Mary of whom was born Jesus”.

The whole of the Christian religion depends upon the doctrine of the Incarnation. “No other foundation can any man lay but that which is laid, Jesus Christ our Lord.” He is the cornerstone of the whole religious edifice. The union in Jesus Christ of the two natures, the Divine and the human, is (one may say) the whole of Christianity; everything depends upon it. His words and His works all have their value from the fact that they were done and spoken by One who was at the same time perfect God and perfect man, yet but one and the same Person. What would be His moral teaching or His example to us, except He were man even as we are men, with a body

and a soul like ours; a will, an understanding, a heart and affections like ours? Or, on the other hand, how should we have profited by His death except He had been God, and so His sufferings had been of infinite value?

It is easy to see that no Christian doctrine would have any meaning at all if this one doctrine were not first secured. Once admit a doubt upon this, and all becomes vague and uncertain. And hence it happens that, on the one hand, the Church so delights to proclaim and honor it; and, on the other, that heresy and infidelity are so unwearied in their attempts to corrupt, obscure or destroy it. The Church does all that she can to impress it deeply on men's minds and hearts. Three times a day is it proclaimed by the ringing of the Angelus bell, for the meditation of the faithful. Twice in the holy sacrifice of the Mass--in the Creed and in the last Gospel--does she bid us all fall down upon our knees to adore, at its bare announcement. There is no other mystery which can compare with this, in the honor with which the Church commemorates it; in fact, the whole Catholic religion is one continued proclamation of this truth, for it is the worship of God made man.

On the other hand, no other mystery has been ever so fiercely and so unceasingly attacked, sometimes on one side, sometimes on another, sometimes on all sides at once. I mean, sometimes by denying the perfection of the Divine Nature of Christ, sometimes of His Human Nature, sometimes of both. Even in the lifetime of the beloved disciple himself, there arose some who denied that Jesus had been a perfect man. They said that He had no real body at all, but only the appearance of one; or again, that He had a body, but not of flesh and blood like ours; one that was framed in the heavens, fashioned in some other way and of some other materials, so that He did not really suffer what He seemed to suffer; or, acknowledging that the body indeed was real and human, they maintained that He, the Divine Person, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, only took possession of it after it was born, and left it again before it was crucified. Presently, another set of heretics arose who denied the Divinity of our Lord. They said He was a real and perfect man, but not God; something more than an ordinary man, a singularly just and holy man, a prophet, one specially favored, inspired, dwelt in by the Holy Spirit, of God, yet still not really Himself a partaker in the Divine Nature, equal to God the Father in all things; or they allowed that He was God, but yet not the one true and living God. In one way or another they continually sought to dissolve (as Holy Scripture speaks [1 John iv. 3]) Jesus Christ, i.e., to separate His two natures of God and man, and to deny the perfection either of one or of the other.

And in these modern days all the old heresies which once succeeded one another with rapidity yet distinctness, are mixed in the minds of men pell-mell, and held (as it were) in solution in the world's atmosphere; so that it is true to say of a great number of Christians that to them our Divine Lord is a being of the imagination, which they paint to themselves, and, if forced, would put into words to others, rather by means of negations than by positive assertion. Instead of holding distinctly and positively, and with the firm assurance of Divine faith, that He is both God and man, and both in all perfection, they think of Him as God only when they find it inconvenient or difficult to think of Him as man, and they think of Him as man only when the sufferings and indignities inflicted upon Him make them wish to forget that He is God; thus destroying Him, as it were, by means of His double nature, and holding Him in suspense between the two. They never think of His actions, of His whole life, of everything He did and suffered, as having been done and suffered by one Person, who was at one and the same

moment both God and man; but they divide and multiply Him, thinking of Him as two Persons, and attributing one class of His actions exclusively to His Humanity and the other to His Divinity.

Now, the one true and only sovereign remedy against this decomposition of the fundamental dogma of the Christian religion (which, alas! is very common in these days) is to be found in the dogma of the Divine Maternity of Mary – “Mary, of whom was born Jesus”. Once get a man to believe and confess this in its true sense, and he cannot hold any false doctrine upon the Incarnation.

This is the foundation upon which it all rests – Jesus was “born of Mary”. He might have come into the world in some other way; He might have taken to Himself flesh and blood and the form of a man, by creating a full-grown body for Himself out of the slime of the earth, as He made Adam at the first, or, by a new creation, out of nothing. But if He had done this, men might have doubted whether indeed He were truly man; they might have said, He was only a man in outward appearance, just as the Angels sometimes under the Old Dispensation assumed this form, accidentally and externally only, for a time.

But now that we know that He was conceived in the Virgin’s womb – “born of the Virgin Mary,” as we say in the Creed; “made of a woman,” as says St. Paul – there is no room for cavilling; no excuse for disbelief. He must needs be a true and perfect Man, our brother, because, like one of ourselves, He was born of a woman; He had a mother; He was once carried in the womb, He was then a baby, an infant, a boy, a young man, and finally of mature age. On the other hand, He was something more than man, for His conception and birth were not altogether after the model of those of other men. His mother was a virgin, and always remained so, before, and in, and after the birth of her Son; and this could only be because her Son was God. “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee; therefore also the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”

Thus, then, my Brethren, it is a right belief about the Divine Maternity of Mary, which is the most perfect safeguard and security of the doctrine of the Incarnation. The prerogatives with which the Church invests her are essential to the Catholic faith, and integral to the worship of Christ. To honour “Mary, of whom was born Jesus,” is to profess Christianity in its most perfect and essential act. It confesses Jesus Christ to be man, for He is the son of woman; it confesses Him to be God, for this woman, this mother, is a Virgin; it confesses Him to be one person, God-man, because it is by one only nativity, by His conception and birth of the Virgin Mary, that these two natures (of God and man) were ever united in one Divine Person, Jesus Christ; and so this Virgin-Mother is the Mother of God. Wonderful titles! which sound like contradictions, and are mysteries; and though each by itself is a mystery and inexplicable, yet, if added to the other mystery, and so doubled, it really becomes less mysterious, more intelligible. A God-man! a Virgin-Mother! either title, taken alone, is beyond our comprehension; taken together, they in some sort explain one another – they are correlatives. Mary is a creature, a woman, a mother, and therefore her Son is man; but she is also a Virgin, and this because her Son is God, and with God all things are possible.

You see, then, how intimately connected is a right faith about the Incarnation with a right faith about our Blessed Lady; and when anybody professes to be scandalized at what he hears or reads in ordinary Catholic books of devotion about the dignity of our Blessed Lady, we may reasonably suspect one of two things; either indifference, or positive error and ignorance about

the great doctrine of the Incarnation. Yet surely neither ignorance nor indifference can ever be safe with reference to so fundamental a mystery.

The knowledge of the Incarnation is not a mere matter of learning and scholarship for those who are deeply read in theology. It should be the study of every one of us. All our eternal interests are at stake upon it--wrapped up and contained in it; there is nothing in the whole world which we are so concerned to know, and to know well, as the Incarnation; and I will add, nothing is more insisted on in Holy Scripture. If Holy Scripture is to be our guide, there can be no question but that a great deal depends upon a right faith and knowledge about the Incarnation. "This is life everlasting, to know Thee the only true and living God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." "Who is a liar but he who denieth that Jesus is the Christ? This is Antichrist, who denieth the Father and the Son." "Every spirit which confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is of God; and every spirit that dissolveth Jesus, is not of God." "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abideth in him, and he in God." "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ, is born of God": and "whatsoever is born of God, overcometh the world; and this is the victory which overcometh the world, our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" "No man, speaking by the Spirit of God, saith anathema to Jesus; and no man can say the Lord Jesus, but by the Holy Ghost." (1 John ii. 22; iv. 2, 3, 15; v. 1, 4, 5; 1 Cor. xii. 3.)

Let it not be said, then, that these are idle subtleties, which ordinary Christians need not trouble themselves about. No; the Athanasian Creed speaks truly as well as plainly when it says, "It is necessary to everlasting salvation that a man believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ"; and no man can believe it rightly, and at the same time think slightingly of her in whom the mystery was wrought, "Mary, of whom was born Jesus". With reason did a Christian controversialist of the third century, arguing against those who denied that Mary was really the Mother of Jesus, vehemently contend that the doctrine he was defending was no idle speculative question, but one in which the whole Christian religion was engaged. "If you deny," he said, "that God was born of Mary, then you must deny also that it was God who suffered and died on the Cross, for suffering and death are only possible to one who has first been born. Then the whole worth and value, the very name, of the Cross disappears; and if the Cross is taken away, neither did Christ rise from the dead. And if Christ be not risen, then is there no future resurrection for any of us; and if so, no judgment, for it is clear that if I do not rise again after death, neither shall I be judged; and if there be no future judgment, there is no obligation to keep the commandments of God. 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.' All these things hang together -- follow from one another by a necessary consequence.

Contrariwise, if you confess the Divine Maternity of Mary, then follows the reality of the Passion; from the Passion, the Resurrection; from the Resurrection, the universal judgment; and so all the commandments of God are saved, and their obligation enforced. For as all the law and the prophets are contained in these two commandments, Thou shalt love God, and Thou shalt love thy neighbor, so all our hope is suspended from the child-bearing of Mary." And this is why the Church lays so much stress upon the reality of that birth, singing -- "Ave verum Corpus natum De Maria Virgine; Veri passum, immolatum In cruce pro homine." "Hail, true Body born of the Virgin Mary, which really suffered and was offered on the Cross for man."

The greatness, and the glory which we reverence in Mary are really dependent upon the truths contained in that one word *Deipara*, Mother of God; but I ask you also to consider for

yourselves, and to meditate upon what the truths contained in that word really are. Even Calvin himself could say, that “it is impossible for us to recognize the blessing which Jesus has brought us, without at the same time recognizing how much God has honored and enriched Mary, by having chosen her to be the Mother of His only Son.”

When, therefore, a man professes himself to be indifferent, insensible about anything that can be said of Mary, it is not upon Mary, but really upon Jesus--upon God – his Savior, that his insensibility falls; he is wanting in faith, or in love, with reference to the Incarnation. He has never tried to realize to himself what is meant by the Son of God becoming man; or, having thought of it, his affections have not been warmed towards it, and he treats it as a common ordinary thing. If, indeed, the Word being made flesh be an ordinary thing, then Mary, in whom that mystery was accomplished, may have been altogether an ordinary being, endowed with no special privileges, and deserving no special honor. But if, on the contrary, that mystery be the crowning work of God’s creation, the end for which all things were and are, then surely it is only reasonable to expect that she, on whose will it once depended, at whose word it began to be, in whose womb it was brought to maturity, should be a being of high and singular gifts, endowed with many and great prerogatives, and to be revered with no common honor. No honor, no privilege (provided only that it be possible and lawful in a creature) can be thought extravagant and out of place in one who alone of the whole human race was deemed worthy to have a Son common to herself and the Eternal Father, the Creator and Lord of all things. Once believe that He whom Mary bore in her womb and brought forth was God of God, very God of very God, and all honor that man can pay her seems comparatively small. Though a man should have the wisdom of angels and of men, the eloquence of the prophets and doctors of the Church, and as many tongues as there are stars in the firmament or grains of sand on the seashore, he could never exhaust – he could never even adequately express – all that is contained in that one fact – Mary was the Mother of Jesus, who was the Almighty God.

And hence it is that Holy Scripture repeats this title so invariably whenever it speaks of Mary. Of other distinguished persons it gives us the birth and parentage, or relations to others and general condition in life, once for all, and ever after speaks of them only by name. But Mary is always presented to us in mysterious isolation from all other surrounding objects or persons save Jesus alone, and from Him she is never separated.

“Mary, the Mother of Jesus,” this is her ordinary title in the Gospels; and this not only during His life, and to distinguish her from other Marys, but also after His Resurrection and Ascension, and when she is in the company of the apostles on the Day of Pentecost, and no other women are named. Her Maternity of Jesus was not a mere event in her life, – a quality that belonged to her, – it was her whole history, and the very cause of her being. She was created for this special purpose and no other. She is the Mother of God, just as men are men, and angels are angels. This is the whole account of her being, the definition of her essence, so that she stands alone, forming as it were a class by herself in the hierarchy of created beings, distinct from every other, and, by this special relation, above every other, because brought so much nearer to God than any other; as an old writer has said, “Just as one being is called an angel of God, another a prophet, a herald, a preacher, and so forth, and each is reckoned by his own name according to his rank and dignity, so thou, O Blessed Virgin, shalt be called by a singular and special name, the Mother of God.”

** A dogma, in the technical use of the word, is a truth revealed by God, and proposed as such by the magisterium of the Church to the faithful, with the obligation of believing it. Thus understood, a dogma is a divine truth and, therefore, immutable (Vatican Council, 1868). The modernists, having reduced dogma to a symbolic expression of religious sentiment in continual development or to a practical rule or norm of religious consciousness, have admitted an intrinsic evolution of dogma which must correspond to the indefinite phases of that sentiment and of that consciousness. These errors were condemned by Saint Pius X (encyclical Pascendi and decree Lamentabili).*

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Ora pro nobis!

Patrick Henry