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Théodore Koehler
University of Dayton

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TO A GREAT SERVANT OF THE CHURCH

Henri Cardinal de Lubac, S.J.

(1896-1991)

On Tuesday, September 10, 1991, at 10 a.m., Cardinal Lustiger, archbishop of Paris, paid you homage in the name of the Church in this capital of France in which you died. He read aloud the statement in your last will about your funeral: “I want nothing else than the proclamation of the Gospel.” You desired no eulogy. Dear Father, I met you, in 1964, at the Seminary of the Missions, which is near the basilica of Our Lady of Fourvière, at Lyon. Working in the library, I recognized the sections that you built up to support your research which resulted in the many publications that have helped and still guide theologians in meeting the modern needs of the Church. These acquisitions evidenced the prestigious bibliography that you used. Your neighbor at the Seminary told me how you worked: “During weeks I heard nothing. He was studying; his room was silent. And suddenly, his typewriter began to rattle for hours, day after day.”

Your works will now be presented in many synthetical articles. I want to point out two studies devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary which could be overlooked. In 1953, your remarkable Méditation sur l’Eglise appeared, translated into English under a title that you did not like, The Splendor of the Church. This was a difficult time for you. In 1950, you had experienced the cross of pioneers. Mistakenly grouped with careless innovators, you had been deprived of your professorship, even though, in search of a theological renewal and with Tradition’s documents in hand, your studies—to name a few: Catholicism, The Discovery of God, Corpus Mysticum, The Drama of Atheist Humanism, The Mystery of the Supernatural—had pointed out ways towards the aggiornamento of the Church’s message to the needs of our time. Faithfully, the Theological Faculty of Lyon had maintained you “on leave.” Later, John XXIII, the pope of the aggiornamento (who as nuncio in Paris had admired you), named you consultant to the theological commission preparatory to Vatican II.

Méditation on the Church reveals your pain, coming not so much from the suspicions about your orthodoxy as from the rising danger of “false collectivisms,” of misused analogies by which the true sense of the Church was lost (p.17). You described “the man of the Church, the man of the Christian community (ecclesiasticus), ... the Christian in plenitude [who] ... loves the beauty of God’s house. The Church has
ravished his heart" (p. 186 ff.). We recognize you in this description. "[This man] is not an extremist and he is wary of overbiddings; nevertheless, aware that in the sacraments of the Church he received not a spirit of fear but of strength, he does not hesitate to join up for the defense or the honor of his faith. Knowing that it is possible to sin much by omission, he then speaks and acts boldly, opportune and inopportunistically, even at the risk of displeasing many, even at the risk of being misunderstood by those with whom he would be anxious to be in agreement (cf. 2 Tim 3,10-15 and 2-5)."

These quotations do not pretend to summarize the pages that you wrote with such great lucidity and heartiness, pages that end with your praise full of admiration and love for the Church, our mother: "Chaste mother . . . Fruitful mother . . . Universal mother . . . Venerable mother . . . Patient mother . . . Loving mother . . . Zealous mother . . . Wise mother . . . Sorrowful mother . . ., you give us each day the one who alone is the Way and the Truth. Through you we have in him hope and life. Your memory is sweeter than honey; he who listens to you will never know confusion (cf. Eccel 24, 17-21; Judith 13,25)."

You wanted to end this book with a chapter on the Church and the Virgin Mary. In this, you preluded Vatican II; its Constitution on the Church also ends with the chapter on the mystery of Mary seen in the mystery of Christ and his Church. In later editions of this book, you showed your constant desire to offer your readers up-to-date studies. While the first edition included 229 reference-notes, these now number 292, and a good portion of them grew in importance. For example, you used the work of the French Mariological Society on Mary and the Church—in particular, the report by Father Henri Barré (who preceded you to heaven in 1968) that you found so rich. You developed the great intuition of the Tradition: What is said of the Church in general is said of each of the faithful in particular and eminently of Mary.

You invited us to read the Canticle of Canticles in the light of this paradigm and to remember first of all that "the Canticle was admitted and maintained in the Jewish canon of the Scriptures only because it symbolizes the relationship of love between God and his people" (pp. 288-89, 1968 ed.). Therefore, in the Christian commentaries, the Canticle became the song of love between Christ and the Church. Yet what is true of the Church is also true of each faithful member; the Canticle is the song of the mystical union of Christ with each Christian soul. Finally, especially in the Middle Ages—for example, with Rupert of Deutz—the Canticle received a Marian commentary and you gave abundant references: "Indeed Mary could only be seen as the beloved bride par excellence of the Divine Bridegroom . . . She alone realizes its ideal figure, in its 'beauty without stain, in the eschatological order.'" She is above all others the anima decora, the soul radiant of beauty. Origen celebrated her chaste union with the Word. She is called mons montium, virgo virginum, sancta sanctorum [Rupert]. This song of love is, therefore, first of all—speculisime—the song of Mary [Alain de Lille, L. Fr. d'Argentan]. "All the mysteries of this book—
although they are perfectly fitting, either to the universal Church or to each faithful soul in the Church to express in a spiritual way (thanks to our mystical understanding) the mutual dilection of the Bridegroom and the Bride, seem, nevertheless, to be more *specially* appropriate for the Blessed Virgin Mary, since she was above all the souls, in a singular way, full of *special* dilection and deserved above all the others to be *specially* loved by the Bridegroom“ [Geoffrey of Admont]. But you underlined that in the Tradition there is only one Bride. In the Canticle, as in the Apocalypse, “the same Christ speaks to the same Bride: ‘Here I come soon.’ The whole revelation, the whole history of salvation end here in one same song of love, prelude to the same eternal song.” You quote the intuition of the Tradition: Mary becomes the Church and each member of the Church; so also the Church and each of the faithful become Mary, since the mystery of the Church is the continuation of the mystery of Mary in the mystery of the Son of God, our Savior (cf. pp. 300-301, 1968 ed.).

At the request of Father Hubert Du Manoir you wrote the preface to the sixth volume of the encyclopedia *Maria* (1961). There you show again your great care for a true theology and its unity: “the mystery of Christ is one” (p. 11). Thus “the mystery of Mary must always be considered within the ‘Mystery,’ as Saint Paul says in a single word that comprehends all” (p. 10). You call it “the fundamental principle of Mariology,” to cut short the vain attempts of a strictly deductive Marian theology. There again you preview Vatican II; according to the title of chapter 8 of *Lumen gentium*, the mystery of Mary is part of the mystery of Christ and of his Church. For you, the grandiose sign of Apocalypse XII, the woman clothed in the sun, suggests strongly “the close union of the Church and Mary in the biblical revelation.” Your knowledge of the Tradition protests against any “narrowly literal” exegesis that would make us forget this union: “an immense part of our traditional heritage would be compromised in its form as well as in its content” (p. 9).

Finally, the faith of all members of the Church is only one and the same faith. Therefore, for you, “the theologians know that their science, which fulfills in the life of the Church a necessary role, does not place them apart from and above the other Christians in the domain of faith” (p. 11). Yes, for you, theologians learn to believe at the school of their brothers and sisters, in particular from the contemplatives. With the faithful also they pray, knowing that “their faith would be only vain science . . . if, in its act itself, it would not spring out in prayer” (p. 12). Thank you, therefore, for having taken as conclusion a prayer, the prayer of the poet Paul Claudel, “to the Virgin-Mother who holds her child in her arms and looks to him while presenting him to us.”

You now contemplate the Virgin Mary and the Church in the light of your face-to-face encounter with the Father. You are with your friend, cardinal himself, Hans Urs von Balthasar, who, for your eightieth birthday in 1976, dedicated to you an analysis of your works. He admired in them the opus of a “universalist,” in which the mystery of the Church became preponderant: a vision of the content of our faith
that could meet the fully consummated faith of the Church in her holiness, itself fully perfected—subjectively in the humble servant Mary and objectively in the service instituted in the Church for the integrity of the Word and the Sacraments (cf. Henri de Lubac, p. 95). Both of you contemplate this mystery with another seminary professor tardily named cardinal, Charles Journet, who also dedicated his life, his work, to the Church. You disagreed with him about your colleague Teilhard de Chardin, whom you dearly defended; now, as Dante said about the whole heavenly court—the Church on high, you all look together on its Queen and with her you see God.

Théodore Koehler, Marianist