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Mother and Helpmate of Christ

JAMES M. EGAN, O.P.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Once devotion to the Blessed Virgin is established on a firm foundation for the individual, applying that devotion to daily life and the apostolate should follow naturally. Father James M. Egan, O.P., here provides the solid basis of Mariology, spotlighting Mary's role in the mission of Christ.

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Articles by Father Egan have appeared in Cross and Crown, The Thomist, Angelicum, and Integrity. He has contributed a paper, "Naming in St. Thomas' Theology of the Trinity," to the Walter Farrell Memorial volume. From an Abundant Spring (Kenedy, 1952). The present reprint is taken from Integrity, May, 1952.
Ordinarily a mother does not share in the lifework of her son except from afar, standing, as it were, on the sidelines. She brings him into this world, feeds and clothes him, accompanies him to the threshold of life and then hands him over to another woman—his wife. Mary was truly the Mother of Jesus, fulfilling for Him all the functions of a mother. She too brought Him into this world, fed and clothed Him, accompanied Him to the threshold of life, and passed over that threshold with Him to be intimately associated with Him in His life's work—the regeneration of the children of God.

In some mysterious way, it was true of Christ as it was true of every man, “that it is not good for man to be alone,” though it must be realized that the need for associating Mary with her Son is not His, but ours. Yet there is a deep connection meant by God in both the generation and the regeneration of His rational creatures.

THE MEANING OF WOMAN: The earliest pages of Sacred Scriptures present us with a picture of the loneliness of man. God formed Adam outside Paradise. After He led Adam into the garden of delights, He caused all the animals to pass before him that he might name them. As the last one passed by, Adam was keenly aware that “there was no one like himself,” he was a man alone in a world of irrational creatures. God had plans to remedy this situation, for “God cast a deep sleep upon Adam; and when he was fast asleep, He took one of his ribs, and filled up flesh for it.” Raising Adam, God presented this new creature to him; at last there was someone like himself, who was to be his helpmate. To remedy man's aloneness God made, not another man, but a woman. Male and female He made them from the beginning that they might transmit life to others like themselves.

And not just human life, but divine life too, As Scheeben says: “God wished to join His fertility to man's;” and so He gave to Adam and Eve the privilege of generating sons of God. The continuance of this privilege depended on their faithfulness to God. If they failed God, they would then be doomed to pass on sin and death. They did fail, and, as we shall see more fully below, God transferred the privilege of regenerating the sons of God to two others who were already dimly foretold in the first promise of a Savior. And once again the two are a man and a woman—a new Adam and a new Eve.

MOTHER OF CHRIST: At first glance, it might seem that having said of Mary that she is the Mother of Christ and therefore the Mother of
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God, that we have said all that could be said about her. And, in a sense, that is true, for certainly the divine maternity is Mary's greatest dignity and the source of all her other privileges. Yet it still remains to be seen whether, when we know that Mary is the Mother of God, we know all there is to be known about her.

We know that in the impossible supposition that we could be the cause of our own mother, we should shower her with every perfection. But can we even begin to imagine what a God would do for His Mother! Christ is God and Mary is His Mother. So much we know from divine revelation. Can any more light be found in the pages of Sacred Scripture and the living tradition of the Church? This is the great preoccupation of that branch of theology called Mariology. In the following pages we shall try to give some of the fruits of this quest that will enable us to appreciate more perfectly what God thinks of Our Lady.

Fortunately, a brief summary of Our Lady's privileges was given to us by the great Pontiff of the Immaculate Conception, Pius IX. In the very document in which he solemnly defined the first of Mary's privileges, he pointed to the scriptural foundations of all her privileges. Not only did he cite the texts but also threw upon them the light of traditional interpretation. What are these texts? How are they traditionally interpreted?

ALL BLESSED: The first text is a combination of two passages from Saint Luke's gospel, two greetings given to Mary by persons inspired of God. The angel Gabriel, coming to seek Mary's consent to the marriage of the Word of God and human nature, addressed her: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." Elizabeth, her cousin, at the first meeting with her who had conceived the Word in her virginal womb, exclaimed: "Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." In the fullness of grace given her that she might be a worthy Mother of God, Mary is blessed above all women. Especially is she exempt from the evils that God has inflicted on the human race and on women in a special way because of the deflection of the first man and woman.

To get some idea of the blessedness that Mary enjoyed, we must once more return to the first page of Sacred Scripture, to the tragic scene wherein God confronts His sinful children and their tempter and imposes the penalties that their rebellion brings down upon them. We recall what immediately preceded this scene. The tempter had approached Eve with the suggestion that God had forbidden her and Adam to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge lest they should become like God Himself. Eve gave in to the suggestion and then gave Adam also to eat. This, the first sin, carried with it an immediate punishment—the loss
of grace and the friendship of God, the loss of all other great gifts that God had conferred on our first parents. Moreover, this loss affected not only them personally, but also all of their offspring, for were they not the parents of all the living? Original sin, ignorance in the reason, weakness in the will, rebellion of the lower appetites against the control of the higher faculties—all these were immediate consequences of this first sin.

When God came as usual to visit His creatures, they tried to hide in shame. But He summoned them before Him and made them recount what had happened. He then began to impose the penalties on the culprits. We may pass over for the moment God's punishment of the tempter, for it contains the other important text concerning the Blessed Virgin.

Then turning to the woman God said: "I will multiply thy sorrow and thy conceptions; in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children and thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee." This was to be the special penalty of woman, bringing forth her children in pain and sorrow, and subject to the dominion of man, who is also a sinner.

And then to the man God said: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth out of which thou wast taken; for dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return."

**TWO EXCEPTIONS:** These were the penalties of sin from which no one, except by special dispensation of God's providence and intervention of His power, could escape. The Church teaches us that two did escape this fatal heritage of Adam and Eve—Christ, who is the Son of God made man, and Mary, from whom He took His most pure human nature. This tremendous privilege was given Mary that she might be a worthy mother to the Son of the Eternal Father. It is this privilege which is expressed in the words: "Hail, full of grace, blessed art thou amongst women." Mary was never in any way subjected to sin or to the Devil through sin.

At the moment of conception in the womb of her mother, Mary, like every child of Adam and Eve, should have contracted the hereditary stain of enmity to God; but God at that same moment prevented her from contracting it. This is mysterious, but certainly in no sense impossible. We believe that when God created Adam, He created him in a state of grace and friendship, this state to be the heritage of every child of man. In Mary's case, her soul, when it was created by God in the material prepared by her parents, was also clothed with glory of God's grace, thus excluding the slightest trace of sinfulness.
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Mary was not only freed from the stain of original sin, she was also preserved sinless throughout her whole life. No shadow of actual sin, mortal or venial, ever dimmed the beauty of her soul; moreover, she was never to experience the rebellion of lower nature, so strong was the power of God’s grace within her. Mary’s love for God was completely faithful; she was the new Eve who never hesitated in her dedication of herself to the service of her God. Mary’s immaculate conception, her fullness of grace, were the two basic privileges that her Divine Son gave to His Mother.

EVER A VIRGIN: Mary was also exempt from the special penalties imposed on other women. Her marriage to Saint Joseph was a true marriage, but we know it was also a virginal marriage. While Saint Joseph was head of the household, as God had originally established the position of the father in the family, he too had received from God the great grace that he might fulfill his function with graciousness and humility.

Furthermore, it has always been the teaching of the Church that Our Lady was a virgin before the birth of her Son, at the birth, and after the birth. She conceived of the Holy Ghost and not by the power of man. Yet she is truly a mother, for she supplied the material element of the human nature that was assumed by the Word of God when He became flesh. At the moment of birth, her Divine Child passed through her flesh as a ray of light passes through a pane of glass, never violating the virginal integrity of her flesh.

Finally, we have no doubt but that Our Lord was not only the first-born child of Mary, but the only begotten. Mary had no other children, for she remained a virgin forever. She alone had the great privilege of being both a virgin and a mother. This is evident from the reply of the angel to Mary when she requested enlightenment on how she, who had dedicated herself a virgin to God, could become a mother. “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee; and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy Which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”

THOU SHALT NOT TASTE CORRUPTION: One further privilege of Our Lady is hidden in the truth that she was blessed amongst women, the latest privilege to be solemnly defined by the authority of the Church—her bodily assumption into Heaven. We saw that one of the chief penalties of original sin was death and corruption, the return to dust from which man came. Could she who was ever free from sin be allowed by her Divine Son to taste the corruption of the grave? The solemn reply of the Church is—No, Mary, body and soul, is in Heaven
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by the side of her Son.

It is interesting to note that in the definition of the Assumption there is no mention of the death of Mary. The question whether she died or not is left open, although tradition has it that Mary did die, even as Christ died, but that death was no more powerful over her than over Christ. Shortly after death, soul and body were reunited and taken into Heaven.

There is an important point here that must be made clear. There are two elements in death that normally are closely connected; there is the separation of body and soul and there is the corruption of the body left without its vital principle. Both elements are natural consequences of man's nature; his soul is an immortal spirit, his body is corruptible matter. Naturally the soul does not have the power to communicate its immortality to the body. We believe that one of the great gifts God gave to Adam and Eve was precisely a special power of immortality for their own nature. This gift was lost by sin. Hence death and corruption are now consequences of sin.

AN ANTICIPATED RESURRECTION: By supernatural right, then, Christ and Mary should not have been subjected to death. Yet Christ came to save mankind by suffering and dying; He had then to choose "passible" flesh, a body that was capable of suffering and of dying too. It was fitting that His Mother should have the same kind of nature, especially, as we shall see since she was to be an associate in the work of redemption. This is why we may be quite sure that Mary did die. Yet the sign that the death of Christ and of Mary was not a punishment of sin is given in the fact that God did not let their bodies see corruption. They did not return to dust. In the case of Christ, as well as in that of His Mother, body and soul were reunited and now are present in the Kingdom of Heaven. She who had the inestimable privilege of being redeemed at the first instant of her existence by the foreseen merits of her Son, now enjoys the fullness of that redemption by an anticipated resurrection, and is for us a pledge of everlasting life. The following lines of Chesterton express this truth in a slightly different way:

Up through the empty house of stars,
Being what great heart you are,
Up the inhuman steeps of space,
As on a stairway go in grace,
Carrying the firelight on your face
Beyond the loneliest star.

It is a great consolation to all the children of Eve to know that one of her daughters carries the firelight of human love reflected in her lovely
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face into the Kingdom of Heaven itself. Mary is still a mother, with a mother’s smile.

MOTHER OF GOD: Sometimes when we consider the circumstances of Christ’s coming into the world we tend to emphasize its hiddenness, its loneliness. We are particularly hard on the poor inn-keeper who had no room. We think of Christ as homeless. Yet we should realize that Christ on His coming found the perfect home, the only home He ever wants, in the loving heart of Mary. To borrow the words of another poet, Caryll Houselander:

The circle of a young girl’s arms
Made of this world,
The strange and sorrowful world,
A cradle for God.

All during His life on earth, frequently during the long years at Nazareth, as they both went about their tasks, less frequently during the years of mission, sorrowfully on the road to Calvary, and as He looked down from the Cross, Christ found in the face of Mary “a flying home, a wandering home,” for Himself.

These are just some of the things that God did for His Mother. All these great privileges were given to her that she might be a worthy Mother of God. But once again we must ask, was that all Mary was? At first, it might seem so. Does she not, as any other mother, appear on the sidelines, on the fringe of the crowd around Jesus, after the public mission of Christ begins. True, she stands beside the Cross of Christ, but what mother would not? Was she there only as the Sorrowful Mother? Or was she there also as the helpmate of Christ? We must now turn to the question whose answer will be full of extraordinary meaning for each of us. We well know that Mary, simply by being the Mother of Christ, would also be our Mother. But is there another aspect in which she is, one might say, more immediately and intimately our Mother, not only by the remote maternity of Christ, but also by a spiritual motherhood that links us directly to her?

HELPMATE OF CHRIST: For light on this aspect of Mary’s dignity let us return once again to the letter of the Holy Father, Pius IX, on the Immaculate Conception and the second text of Sacred Scripture that he cites. This one comes from the Book of Genesis and concerns the fate of the tempter. For before He imposed penalties on Adam and Eve, God punished the serpent, ending with the words: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed; he shall crush thy head and thou shalt lie in wait for his heel.” The punishment of the serpent contains the promise of his conquerors—the woman and her seed.
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Once again, basing himself on tradition, the Holy Father explains this text as indicating the intimate association of Christ and Mary in their complete triumph over the Devil. Mary, together with her Son, and in complete subordination to Him, is to exercise continued enmity against the Devil. This is the other side of Mary’s dignity; she who was all blessed, was never in the slightest degree subject to the Devil; she who is the helpmate of Christ will crush the head of the serpent together with her Son. From the earliest times in the Church, the relation of Mary to Christ has been that not only of mother to son, but also of the new Eve to the new Adam. Saint Irenaeus (who died about 202) wrote of Mary: “As by a virgin who did not obey, man was struck and fell dead, in the same way by a virgin who obeyed the word of God, life received life in man risen again. It was necessary and fitting to perfect Adam again in Christ . . . and to perfect Eve in Mary, in order that a virgin might loose and destroy the virginal disobedience by a virginal submission.” This thought developed through the ages, reappeared in various writings, and was perfectly expressed by Saint Albert the Great; Mary “inasmuch as she was the co-operator of the redemption by her compassion, became thus the Mother of all by re-creation.”

MOTHER OF ALL THE LIVING: Mary was predestined by God to take an active part, in her own way, in the lifework of her Son. His mission, we know, was to be the mediator between God and man, to reconcile God and man, to take upon Himself the penalty for our sins, to merit for us the Kingdom of Heaven, to satisfy for the debt of punishment due to sin, to make intercession for us with the Father. It was to this same task that Mary was called as a helpmate; She did for us in her own way all that Christ did for us. Understand, we are not saying that Mary of herself was anything. What she was able to do for us, she did by the grace of her Son. He gave her the grace to be the principle of our regeneration together with Him. It was a manifestation of His great love for His Mother and His great mercy toward us.

When did Mary become our spiritual Mother and how does she exercise this function? Saint Albert writes: “She bore her firstborn Son without pain in His nativity; afterward she bore the whole human race simultaneously in the Passion of her Son, where she became a helpmate to Him like unto Himself, where as the very mother of mercy she helped the Father of Mercies in the highest work of mercy, and together with Him regenerated all men.”

Even so, we must not leap to the conclusion that Mary became our spiritual Mother only on Calvary. Her predestination parallels that of her Son. Now we believe that from the first moment of His conception every action of Christ was of infinite value in the eyes of His Father and
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more than sufficient to redeem mankind. Yet Christ’s lifework was under the command of His Father, Who willed that our redemption be wrought through the Cross. So it was by His death that Christ won life for us, even though His whole life was a holocaust to the Father.

Somewhat similarly, Mary became our spiritual Mother the moment she gave her consent to be the Mother of Christ. From prophecy and inner illumination Mary knew that she was to be both the mother and the helpmate of the Incarnate Word. By her consent, she accepted both these functions, to be fulfilled “according to Thy word.” The “behold I come” with which Christ entered the world is echoed in the “be it done to me” of Mary. At that moment Mary became the Mother of Christ and the Mother of all men.

CO-REDEMPTRIX: Yet she who brought forth Christ without pain, was not to bring us forth except in pain. Her first function, as our spiritual Mother, was to win for us with Christ the grace of regeneration; and the exercise of this function meant Calvary.

At this point we should pause to contemplate the marvelous ingenuity of God’s wisdom. The climax, as it were, of Christ’s work, was to suffer and die on the Cross, and through His suffering and death brings men back to life. According to the will of the Father, it was only the suffering and death that could reconcile sinful man to a just and merciful God. If Christ is to have a helpmate, it must be someone who can suffer and die with Him. Who but a mother can suffer and almost die while she must stand and watch her son suffer? This is her flesh and bone that is being bruised, this is her blood that is being shed, this is her beloved child who bows his head and dies. If this be true of any mother, it is a thousand times truer of Mary. She is fully willing that this happen, she is willing to sacrifice one Son for all her sons, but this does not alleviate the pain one bit.

By her compassion at the foot of the Cross Mary becomes our Co-Redemptrix, winning for us the grace of regeneration and all the other graces that precede and follow regeneration. She also won for herself the right to distribute these graces to her children. She is the almoner of grace to all men wherever they are, still intent on the womanly duty of distributing the treasure of her Son.

All the tremendous graces and privileges that were showered on Mary by her Son were given to her that she might perfectly fulfill two simple tasks of being the mother and helpmate of Christ. She is still faithful to these tasks, which is why we call upon her to be “our life, our sweetness, and our hope.”
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