1955

041 - Our Lady's Serenity

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RONALD A. KNOX

Number 41

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Monsignor Knox’s more than forty published titles include the popular “Slow Motion” series, and apologetical, literary, religious, and exegetical works, with an occasional first-rate detective story thrown in for diversion. Born in 1888, the son of the Anglican Bishop of Manchester, he was received into the Catholic Church in 1917 and ordained in 1919. For many years he was chaplain of the Catholic students at Oxford. His greatest achievement has been his new translation of the Vulgate edition of the Old and New Testaments, a work commissioned by the Bishops of England in 1939.

“Our Lady’s Serenity” is the final chapter of Msgr. Knox’s most recent book, A Retreat for Lay People.

(published with ecclesiastical approval)
OUR LADY'S SERENITY

RONALD A. KNOX

I WANT TO GIVE YOU, FROM ONE particular angle, a human picture of Our Lady, drawn from real life; that is, drawn from the gospels, which are the only trustworthy evidence we have. As a rule, when we meditate about Our Blessed Lady, we consciously dramatize; her picture, her statues, the sort of romantic devotion she has inspired in the poetry of so many ages, encourage us to treat her as a symbol, rather than as a personality with personal traits, such as all human beings must have. We forget, for example, that she was a Jewess, and that probably as a matter of fact her beauty was of a more or less Jewish type—why shouldn't it be? No reason at all why it shouldn't be, but somehow the suggestion sounds vaguely blasphemous, simply because Fra Angelico and Raphael drew her from Gentile models. We never picture her, again, carrying a jug of water on her shoulder; it must have been a common enough sight, in first-century Nazareth, but is sounds wrong, because the pious statues have made us think of her carrying a rosary, as she did at Lourdes, instead of a great heavy jug of water. Again, it's perfectly possible that, like St. Peter, she talked with a bit of a Galilean brogue, not in the best style of Jerusalem. But we were rather shocked when Bernard Shaw made St. Joan of Arc talk the Lancashire dialect; and we instinctively think of Our Blessed Lady as a Queen, dressed like a Queen and talking like a Queen; the very idea that a smart person like Herodias or Herodias's daughter would have addressed her as "my good woman", and found her speech and manners as homely as those of any other Nazareth girl seems all wrong, somehow; and yet it's probably true.

I am not, I need hardly say, trying to shock you in this meditation, or give you some fresh, original picture of what Our Lady must have seemed like to her contemporaries. I am only going to draw attention to one human quality in her which stands out from her portrait in the gospels, side by side with all those heavenly privileges we have meditated on so often. It is a quality I will call serenity. It
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depends, of course, upon the supernatural endowments she had; and especially, as we shall have occasion to remind ourselves, on her possessing the spirit of faith in an eminent degree. But I want to think of it as a human quality, by human gestures and human lines on her face; a smile, one imagines, which perhaps came rarely, but when it did lingered on her face and threw into relief the thoughtfulness of her brow. And I think it is a useful quality for us to remember in her, because it is a quality we all need ourselves, and some of us haven't got. The great calmness of Our Lady, the imperturbable way in which she meets the situations which the gospel story has described for us.

YOU GET IT, OF COURSE, FROM THE VERY START, at the Annunciation. She was bewildered, St. Luke tells us, by the Angel's message, but she waited, and listened; and when she heard what the message was, she put the obvious objection, "How can that be, since I have no knowledge of man?" Now, I may be fanciful, but it seems to me that if you compare those few words with the sort of way in which Jewish women talk in the Old Testament, Ruth for example or Abigail, they form a very quiet piece of comment. From Ruth or Abigail you would have got a torrent of rhetoric, bordering on hysterics, with a lot about "God do so to me and more also" in it, at such a suggestion as the one St. Gabriel made. Our Lady simply says, "Yes, but how?" She wants to know, naturally; but she takes it very calmly after all; a Son who will be accounted the Son of the most High, and will rule over the house of Jacob forever; yes, to be sure, but how? Am I wrong in speaking of Our Blessed Lady's serenity?

You might mistake it, at first sight, for mere lack of imagination, but you get a more just view of it, this serenity of hers, when St. Gabriel has spoken again, and she answers him. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done unto me according to thy word"; joyful promises like Gabriel's or gloomy warnings like Simeon's, are just the same to her, as long as her mind is fixed in that resolution. The angel left her, and what then? You expect to read, "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart". But no; it is not the time for sitting down and thinking. Our Lady, like all very calm peo-
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people, had the knack of putting first things first; and before she did anything else, there was a visit to be paid. Among all the words Gabriel had spoken to her, the most significant, surely, and the most awe-inspiring ever addressed to a human being, there was one which had particularly caught her attention; not the one that catches our attention. “Thy cousin Elizabeth also is with child”; that meant action, going to see her and be with her in her confinement; so the day-dreams had to wait. She arose with haste; not with hurry, with haste; calm people don’t need to be in a hurry, because they hasten at the right moment, about the right things.

St. Elizabeth, Good Holy Woman, Isn’t Calm at all; she cries out in a loud voice, “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb; how have I deserved to be thus visited by the mother of my Lord?” and so on. And all this excitement on her part makes a sort of agitated antiphon to usher in the marble-like phrases of the Magnificat. Let me remind you of the canticle of Anna, the mother of Samuel, to justify that estimate of Our Lady’s canticle. “My heart thrills with joy in the Lord; pride in the God I worship lifts up my head; now I can flout my enemies, happy in thy gift of redress! Who so holy as the Lord? None — there is none else; there is no stronghold that can compare with our God. Boast no more, boast no more, those lips must talk in another strain; the Lord is all-knowing, and overrules the devices of men”, and so on. The critics, heaven help them, will always tell you that the Magnificat is so like Anna’s song. But it isn’t a bit; there may be a reminiscent phrase here and there; but the tone, the tone is all different. Anna is triumphing over a rival, volubly, scathingly; Our Lady gives you a quiet piece of devotional theology on the same theme, with her own part pushed, as far as possible, into the background. The redemption of Israel has come, that is all that matters; and even that is nothing to be surprised at; the thing was promised to Abraham, centuries ago. Notice how Zachary’s Benedictus — and what is more pardonable than a father’s pride? — all leads up to the part St. John the Baptist is to play; the last four verses are a paean about his mission. But the Magnificat starts with Our Lady herself, and leads away from the subject as soon as possible. It goes off into generalities;
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God has been very good to her, but then, how good God is! There is nothing surprising about it.

The scene changes, and we are at Bethlehem. Our Lady doesn't speak in this part of the story, but there is one description which gives you, I think, such a view of Our Lady's serenity as nothing else does; "she brought forth a son, her first-born, whom she wrapped in his swaddling-clothes, and laid in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn". "And she wrapped him in his swaddling-clothes, and she laid him in a manger" -- that Hebrew "and" is specially designed to give you the impression that this verb is the natural consequence of the one before. She had a baby, and naturally she proceeded to wrap him in his swaddling-clothes; the thing has got to be done. Having done that, she naturally proceeded to lay him in a manger; of course it is rather more convenient to have more elaborate appliances, but, what would you? By bad luck, the inn was full up, so one had to make the best of the stable—fortunately, with a good roomy manger in it. . . . I don't see any reason to doubt that St. Luke got his gospel of the Infancy from Our Lady herself; whether at first-hand or at second-hand doesn't matter, but he evidently was in Palestine while St. Paul was in prison at Caesarea, so why not first-hand? Can't you hear Our Lady describing the scene to him, catch her serene accents when he tells you, without comment, what kind of cradle it was that the Maker of the World had? "It was so convenient, really, with all that straw about; and very quiet, you know. It was clever of the people at the inn to think about it, wasn't it?" Our Lady is such poles apart from those agitated sisters of hers, God bless them, who are always running around in circles and complaining because everything isn't just right! And it isn't only her sisters; her brothers do a good deal, for that matter.

SO CALM SHE IS, ALL THROUGH; "ALL THOSE who heard it were full of amazement at the story which the shepherds told them, but Mary treasured up all these sayings and reflected on them in her heart". Everybody else rushing round Bethlehem, and button-holing people with "I say, have you heard?"—and Mary is in the stable, where the shepherds have left no other trace than the meditative look in her bright, mother's eyes. But there are other things to be thought of; eight days old, the boy must be circumcized; forty days...
old, her first-born, he must be taken up to Jerusalem to be presented in the Temple, the angels have strange stories to tell about him, but obviously one must do the obvious things... And so she finds more food for wonderment, Simeon’s canticle and Simeon’s prophecy; not to speak of the flight into Egypt, which St. Luke does not mention. But they settle down at Nazareth to the common business of living; it was not till Our Lord was twelve years old that anything happened which Our Lady thought worth putting down in a book of reminiscences. One knows a lot of mothers, God bless them, who think their own children are so remarkable, and say such remarkable things; but Our Lady, you see, takes it all very quietly. “Oh, yes”, she tells St. Luke (I picture him as an eager reporter, trying to prompt her memory) — “oh, yes, there was that time he got lost on the pilgrimage; that made one think”. And so St. Luke gets the story of the Finding in the Temple out of her. “Seeing him, they marvelled”; one knew there must be some good reason, of course; it wasn’t like him to give any anxiety. There is nothing agitated, nothing hysterical about Our Lady’s question; it just gives the minimum statement of the situation; “My son, why hast thou treated us so? Think, what anguish of mind thy father and I have endured searching for thee!” And here, just as at the Annunciation, an answer is all she wants; it is an answer she doesn’t profess to understand, but she only wanted to know there was one. There would be plenty of time to think it over later. “His mother kept in her heart the memory of all this”; primarily, I think that is just St. Luke giving you his sources, but no doubt as before there is the implication that Our Lady thought it became clearer to her. There are such a lot of things which do become clearer, if you let the experience of living give you the clue to them gradually, turning them over in your mind and assimilating them with the digestive juices of prayer.

I FANCY ST. LUKE GOT A GOOD DEAL MORE OUT OF HER, but nothing, as we know, in which her name figures, except one story which seemed as if it was told against her; her name was even left out of the list of women who watched the Crucifixion, till St. John gave it away after her death. St. John has given us one other reminiscence of her, too; Cana of Galilee. If there is any truth in all I have been saying, how admirably in character that story is! The
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servants at the feast bustling to and fro, with their faces getting longer and the cups emptier. Did Our Lady just notice it, or did the servants come and tell her? I suppose she was the kind of person people did come and confide in when things were going wrong; a calm person is such a stand-by. Anyway, she doesn't waste words: "They have no wine". You will remember that the sisters of Lazarus were like that; they just sent and told Our Lord "He whom thou lovest is sick", leaving St. Augustine to supply the explanation; "It is enough that you should know; you do not abandon those you love". So here, Our Lady will tell him, and leave it at that; leave the problem in the best hands, the only hands that can deal with it; somehow, it will be all right. Our Lord's answer is one we always find difficult to focus right; the Aramaic idiom is untranslatable, and we cannot see the smile with which, quite certainly, it was accompanied. It was one of those teasing answers, with which Our Lord used to test the faith of those he loved; St. Peter, St. Martha, the Syrophenician woman, "You're always at me about something!" is perhaps the nearest paraphrase. Our Lady goes by the smile, not by the words; but she doesn't make any promise to the servants, she just turns and says, "Do whatever he tells you". It was her life's motto, and she preached it to the servants at Cana of Galilee, and through them to us. "Do whatever he tells you; it will be all right; you see!"

I have tried to give you a portrait of Our Lady, but has it been exactly a retreat meditation? . . . surely a retreat meditation ought to give us hints about our own lives, and how to make the best of them? Well, I've been trying to let Our Blessed Lady do that, and save me the trouble. But if you must have the T's crossed and the I's dotted, this is how I should interpret the message of her biography. "To you sometimes, as to me at the Annunciation, good news comes; news (perhaps) of some honor or privilege conferred on yourself. It may seem, to your modesty, incredible that you should have been chosen to do this, or that; there must be some mistake . . . Never mind, leave it in God's hands; he knows what he is doing. Meanwhile, the opportunity is put into your hands of doing something for other people; make haste, and do it; it is an excellent antidote against unprofitable day-dreaming. You will meet people who shout
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congratulations at you; don’t take the note from them; be content to admire, in a cool hour of reflection, the Almighty Providence which is content to make use of such instruments as yourself. Other times will come, when you have a very different experience; when you will have to put up with discomforts, with rough and ready substitutes for the privileges, the conveniences of which you have been accustomed. You will be tempted to feel, rationally or irrationally, that other people are to blame; to wring your hands and go about protesting. Don’t; make the best of what comes to hand, and thank God that what comes to hand is as good as it is. There is tragedy in all lives; and a chill of presentiment will fall over yours, now and again, as you foresee evil times coming for yourself, or for those you love. Do not give way to these imaginary despairs; leave your solicitations to ferment in the mind, where prayer, and the experience of life, will gradually show them to you in a juster proportion. There will be times, too, when you are anxious to secure some favour from God for yourself, or more probably for other people you are interested in. And it will seem as if your prayers were going unnoticed; you will be tempted to grow fretful and to remonstrate with God as if you were being illtreated. Don’t; go on leaving things in his hands, very quietly, very serenely; he grants our request more readily when he sees that we are not impatient in preferring them. And, in everything you do, the less you appear the better”.

So I interpret her; but it is not easy advice she gives, and we must certainly have recourse to her if we are to win the grace to carry it out. Let us leave it in her hands, then, to advise us and to help us carry out her advice; let us go to her with our troubles, our faults, our inadequacies, and put them in her hands, confident that her serene competence will know how to deal with them. She will not fail us, she has a mother’s wisdom, and a mother’s love.

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