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MARY, THE MATERNAL INSTRUMENT IN GOD'S SAVING ACT

Presidential Address

by
Matthew F. Morry, O.P.*

It shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out a portion of my spirit on all mankind: Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams.

Yes, even on my servants and handmaids I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days, and they shall prophesy.

I will work wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below: blood, fire, and a cloud of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of that great and glorious day of the Lord. Then shall everyone be saved who calls on the name of the Lord.

(Acts 2:17-21; cf. Joel 3:1-5)

Joel pronounced the words; Isaiah experienced the visions (1:1ff.)—as did Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4-10), Ezechiel (Ez. 1:26-28), Onias (2 Mac. 15:14), Paul (Acts 16:9-10; 18:9), and many others whom God has raised up as instruments for His word of salvation. And, surely, the model par excellence of God's intervention in the midst of His People is Mary—the Mother of God and of His Church. For, in these latter days, her appearances at Guadalupe, Lourdes and Fatima are “prov-

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identical happenings," as the American Bishops characterize them.¹

It is *to* and *for* His people that God has come and has delivered His word, the word that will bring salvation and lead His people into His presence, into glory. This people to whom God has come is the Church, the Body of Christ. God has come to this people-in-pilgrimage, people seeking the fulfillment of His word, to this people who will come to possess His presence, to enjoy His glory.

The members of the Church enter this community through the call from God and by the faith response in Baptism: "You have been buried with Him in baptism; in which also you were raised with Him through faith in the energy of God, who raised Him from the dead" (Col. 2:12). The dynamism of the union of the members of the Body of Christ is this call from God to worship the Triune God in one faith: "There is but one body and one Spirit, just as there is but one hope given all of you by your call. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and works through all, and is in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). Baptism sets apart the members of the Body of Christ, not for isolation, but to express and communicate the life of Christ that is *in* each *with* each. As it is the love of God in Jesus which forms the members into the Body of Christ, so now the members must reach out to share and communicate this identity which is the life of God with all other human beings.

The solidarity (*koinonia*) of the People of God is precisely a spiritual solidarity of the members of the Church, members of the Body of Christ. There is one Body, so there is one People of God, the Church. Indeed, the solidarity of the members of the Church finds its full expression in the union of each member with God and with the other members of the Body of Christ. This *communion* continues to seek its realization here on earth, so that it may achieve fulfillment in the divine guarantee of eternal glory.²

¹*Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith* (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 21, 1973), no. 100.

²"Some Aspects of the Church Understood as *Communion*," letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith: see *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 1992, p.10ff.

Now, this Church is a living organism, and, as a living organism, it can become infirm, weakened; it can deteriorate. It can, however, also continue to grow and to reproduce, to reach out for and achieve that fulfillment and perfection to which it has been called from the Cross: "And I—once I am lifted up from the earth—will draw all men to myself" (Jn. 12:32). The Church, aware then that it is the life of God which pulsates in her members, experiences within herself that infinite transcendence that is the presence of God in her. The life of the Church is the twofold gift of God Himself: love and grace. Accordingly, as the individual member lives the life of the Church—lives in love and grace—that member stands in communion with the other members of the Body of Christ. Still, the fact is that the individual member, by not living in love and grace, may disrupt that communion with the other members. Then, the Church is weakened and stands in need of a renewal of its members. So, "God, who is over all, and works through all, and is in all" (Eph. 4:6) sends the needed ministrations to and through the members. When a member sins, he or she may turn to the Church and receive the necessary means of renewal from the Church. Here it is a question of using supernatural means to be restored to the supernatural order for the attaining of salvation and eternal life. God has "graced" the Church with the supernatural means of salvation—the sacraments—to enable the members to be restored to the supernatural order: "Rising from the dead . . . he sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through him set up his Body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation" (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 48).³ Thus, the solidarity, which is of the very being of the Church, is a dynamic basis for the continued striving for the goal to which we are called and have been raised: "For us, our homeland is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20-21; Eph. 1:10, 23; 2:5; Col. 1:20-21). In the Church the heavenly and the earthly meet, and we, the members, may not remain idle, at a standstill, but must continuously strive for that

³See also: Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 39; Jacques Maritain, *On the Church of Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 9-14, *passim*.

glory in heaven. We are the people of God in pilgrimage, chosen to fulfill the true call.⁴

It is in the Reign of God that lies the ultimate goal of God's saving act. Jesus has sent the Spirit, and we experience the force of the gifts of the Spirit. Yet, while we may know that the saving act is being fulfilled in the Church, we also realize that the ultimate perfection of the saving act—the possession of the glory, of the Reign of God—is not complete, actualized now. There is the dialectic of the eschatological state of the Church: the People of God *in pilgrimage* and Eternal Glory *possessed*.⁵ But the Church is the community called by God in which the Reign of God is present and ever-active to realize the final hour of the divine call. Although Jesus the Christ announced the presence of the Reign of God, He urged the members of His Body to communicate the Good News of eternal life in God's glory: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk. 16:15).

So, we are the eschatological people of God who are in an everlasting covenant with God (cf. Jer. 32:38). From all eternity, God chose us in Jesus "to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence" (Eph. 1:3-5, *passim*). As objects of such divine predilection, we experience, even now, the everlasting peace and happiness to which the elect are called. For, living "through love in his presence," we are being transformed into the likeness of our Head, Christ, whose members we are. This transforming into the likeness of our Head brings us, the members, closer into likeness to one another. The Church proclaims this communion in likeness in her profession: "We believe in . . . the communion of saints."⁶

How perfectly the Church understands Paul's instruction: "But I beg you brothers, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of the Spirit, to help me through my dangers by

⁴Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, nos. 13, 14, 48-51: "The Church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus, and in which by the grace of God we acquire holiness, will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven, . . ." (no.48).

⁵See Heb. 12:22-23; Phil. 3:20 ("But our citizenship is in heaven, . . ."); 1 Thess. 3:11-13; and Gal. 3:28.

⁶The Apostles Creed.

praying for me" (Rom. 15:30; cf. 2 Cor. 1:1-11). While Paul begs the prayers of the others, he in turn offers his trials, sufferings, and even death for the community: "Indeed while we are still alive, we are consigned to our death every day, for the sake of Jesus, so that in our mortal flesh the life of Jesus, too, may be openly shown. So death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4:11-12). So, in our likeness in Christ we are to be concerned about each other, to care for one another, to pray to God for all. Communion, then, is not simply a joining together for external expressions of common interests, but also an interacting among the members and with God in the Spirit. Communion is seeking to make all one in Christ, to hasten the final hour of our entry into eternal glory. There is intercession for one another before God, and there is God's involvement with us through His Spirit Who makes intercession for us (Rom. 8:26-27) and through Jesus who died for us and does not cease to plead for us: "The Spirit Himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16). In this solidarity—the communion of saints—the saints in heaven never cease "to intercede with the Father for us" (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 49).⁷ And we on earth pray to the saints in heaven to assist us in our pilgrimage. For the Church on earth, with unutterable yearning, seeks to be now what it shall become in the Eternal and Divine Presence.⁸

It is in Mary, her model—the Mother of God—that the Church experiences that perfection: "The Mother of Jesus in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven is the image and the beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come" (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 68). Through this model of faith and love, the Church knows even now, in the manner of the pilgrim, the peace and happiness of her eternal glory in God's presence. Indeed, Mary is the Mother of the Head of the Body which we are, and so she is the mother of the members, the Church. In her

⁷See note 4 above. Note a striking recognition of intercessory power/prayer: 2 Mac. 15:14; the need for it: 2 Mac. 12:43; 2 Cor. 1:1-11; 4:8-13.

⁸Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 50.

maternal role in God's saving act, Mary cares for and intercedes for the Pilgrim People of God in order to obtain for us the fruits of her Divine Son's saving act. Mary's solidarity with us is the will of God for us; for, from eternity, God called her to be the maternal instrument in His saving act.

It ought not to be cause for astonishment, then, that Mary remains "in contact" with the members of her Son's Body, the Church: "Taken up to heaven, she did not lay aside this saving office, but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation" (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 62). There are reports, now, that God has used and is using Mary to communicate His ways. These reports speak of visions, apparitions, messages! And, certainly, we may not deny that God Who in times past "at sundry times and in diverse manners spoke to the Fathers by the prophets, last of all in these days has spoken to us by His Son" (Heb. 1:1-2).

For the Church, the possibility of theophanies, visions, apparitions, and messages is a principle of her faith and communion with God: God calls the Church to share His glory in an eternal manner, and God has not abandoned His pilgrim people but remains present to them through faith, hope and love. And, we the Church, in our certitude of faith, receive, acknowledge and know God's unutterable word to us concerning our personal salvation in the mystery of the Incarnation. The visions, the appearances and messages of God in times past pale before the divine intervention in our historical moment: God has spoken to us by His Son! And, it is for our personal salvation.

What we note here is the fact that apparitions/visions, in the context of the ongoing saving act in the Church, are a reasonable element of God's intervention. The intervention through an apparition or vision, however, is not a presumption, much as we may long for release from afflictions, trials, stress and the like. God makes it clear to us that it is both His idea and His initiative: "My thoughts are not your thoughts; nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Isa. 55:8). Further, the response of the *believer* to a report of an apparition is to be based upon and guided by the direction and judgment of the Church. Within the context of the direction and judg-

ment of the Church, the response of the believer to such phenomena may reflect a degree of acceptance or total rejection.

Doubts do arise concerning apparitions. The Sacred Scriptures note the reluctance to believe of the Apostle Thomas: "The other disciples kept telling him: 'We have seen the Lord!' His answer was, 'I will never believe it without probing the nail-prints in his hands, without putting my finger in the nail-marks and my hand into his side'" (Jn. 20:25; see also Jn. 14:8-11). St. Paul, however, affirms that God may reveal Himself precisely through appearances; from the things created we can come to know the invisible God (Rom. 1:19-20).

A significant point: God's appearances, the apparitions, are realities for salvation. This mode of God's intervention for salvation is made into an historical moment of His people. Further, God is able and is free to use whatever instrument He chooses (a specific member of the Church, e.g., Mary) to remind, to announce, to command what is required of the Church at a concrete moment in history for His saving act to achieve its perfection.⁹ Certainly, the need for such action on the part of God must be evident. In the Old Covenant, God's interventions directed the attention of His people to the Messiah to come. In the New Covenant, God's interventions direct our attention to the fact that the Messiah has come and salvation has been won, but still each one must fill up what is necessary that the saving act be received and accepted, so that every member may attain personal eternal fulfillment, eternal glory!¹⁰ In times past, God intervened

⁹God chooses His instruments. Thus, He chooses the Apostles to be His witnesses to faith for the Church: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8); see also Acts 2:1-13; Lk. 24:48; Mt. 28:18-20. God chooses them to be witnesses to His Resurrection: Acts 1:21; 13:30f.; 1 Cor. 15:3ff. God makes His choices freely: 1 Cor. 2:11-16; Col. 1:16-17; Rom. 11:33-36; Isa. 40:12-17.

¹⁰Col. 1:24: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of His body, which is the Church, . . ." See Eph. 4:15-16 and 1 Pt. 2:9-10.

and spoke to us through the prophets. In our day, God intervened and spoke to us through His Son, and He still speaks to us now, to the Pilgrim People—the Church—who are still on the way.¹¹

One may ask: Do we need such divine interventions now? After all, Christ died once for all. Are not the members of the Body of Christ one, in union with God and with one another? The answer may be discerned in the very identity of the Church and its members, as we have noted. We profess the Church is one and holy. Still, the Church is also a living organism subject to weakness and deterioration because of the actions of the members. The members sin. So, now, the Church stands in need of the healing ministrations of God to restore its vitality for its continuing progress to eternal life. Still, the manner of God's healing remains in His free determination of how it will be brought about: the influence of a personal gift—a grace, a vision. There is no question that God is *able* to reveal Himself, to reveal the elements of His saving act. It is evident to the believer that God has revealed Himself in historical moments to His pilgrim people. It is reasonable to acknowledge that God continues now to reveal Himself to the Church through specific, individual members. This assurance is based upon God's guarantee to us, "I am with you always." The revelations of God, of the Old Covenant and of the New Covenant, flow from the need of the Pilgrim People of God for such divine interventions to enter into eternal glory. God in His absolute freedom determines how He acts and what actions He undertakes to respond to the needs of His people. (Note: it is God Who freely responds, Who freely acts, and acts freely for *His* aims. It is God present in His apparitions.)

The apparition is an activity which God may use to intervene in an historical moment to offer assistance, support, di-

¹¹The Church recognizes that the interventions of God are for the good of the Church (Gen. 18:1ff.; Ex. 13:21ff.). The great appearance of God to His people, in Jesus, is prepared for in different ways: appearance of angels, Lk. 1:11ff.; angels at the Incarnation, Lk. 1:26ff.; cloud at the Transfiguration, Mt. 17:5-8; Mk. 9:7-8; Lk. 9:34-36; angels at the Resurrection, Mk. 16:5-7; Mt. 28:2-7; Lk. 24:4-7; Jn. 20:12-13; tongues of fire at Pentecost, Acts 2:3-4.

rection and guidance to His Church so that she may continue to respond in a positive manner to His salvific action and may continue to concretize the solidarity of God and His Church in its pilgrimage to attain its goal of complete and eternal fulfillment of the divine call to Glory. An apparition seeks to achieve the completion of restoring all things in Christ through the perfecting of the saving act of Jesus. Apparitions are concrete realities in the dynamism of exercising, strengthening and continually perfecting the solidarity of the members of the Body of Christ in God, so that the members, united with one another and with God, may be an effective and singular expression and communication of the communion of saints.¹²

To understand the phenomenon of God revealing Himself we must understand the parties involved: God and the Church—His People, members of the Body of Christ. God: source of life, being and love; God the Savior; God our glory; God, in Whom we live and move and have our being. The Church: people called to an eternal destiny of entering into the glory of Jesus the Christ; the People of God in communion with God and with one another; the Church in its eschatological state, people-in-pilgrimage seeking eternal glory as their end; the Church, the communion of the members of the Body of Christ, caring and praying for one another; the Church experiencing her ultimate perfection in Mary, the maternal instrument in God's saving act. Through Mary, God reveals Himself in His Son in the Incarnation and has revealed Himself in visions to certain instruments.

In 254, Gregory of Nyssa received in a vision a creed from the Blessed Virgin to keep him from an intellectual error. In 1531, in Mexico, Juan Diego received a vision of Our Lady with her message of unity for the people of her Son. Again at Lourdes, the Marian vision was summoning the people into

¹²So, the members are partakers of the divine presence: Jn. 11:40; Lk. 3:21-22; Acts 12:7, 5:19. With faith, God's people experience the divine power: Jn. 2:11; with faith, God's people experience God's glory: Jn. 11:40; Phil. 3:21; Col. 3:4; 2 Thess. 2:14; Rom. 8:17; and, there is the divine call to glory: 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Cor. 4:17; 2 Tim. 2:10; 1 Pt. 5:4, 10.

the world of holiness (the world of her Son); and at Fatima,¹³ she was recalling us all to the need for prayer and penance. The American Bishops refer to such realities as "providential happenings."¹⁴ To the doubts of the skeptic, the rationalist, or the humanist concerning such visions, the observation of Cardinal Newman is apropos: "Let them grant that He Who had done the greater [the Incarnation] may do the less."¹⁵

Note, it is God Who convokes those in His image and likeness to respond to His call to worship Him in one faith, one Lord, one baptism. It is God Who calls us to glory in Jesus the Christ.¹⁶ It is God Who raises up in the Word from the Cross ("... and I, when I am lifted up, will draw all to myself" [Jn. 12:32]). It is God Who sends His Holy Spirit to vivify and strengthen the members of the Body of Christ for their continuing journey into God's presence. God it is Who sends His Holy Spirit as the gift of love to complete our likeness to the image of His Son. It is God Who grants to each of us the gift of faith in Baptism through which we enter into the death of Jesus the Christ and thus are enabled to respond to God's call and word.

God says: "I will pour out a portion of my spirit on all mankind" (Acts 2:17). When the Spirit came upon Mary, His maternal instrument, she gave us a model of response to God's call and word: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk. 1:27). While the apparition/vision is the vehicle/instrument of God's intervention, Mary's *fiat* remains the model for the Church's and our personal response in faith.

¹³Thomas McGlynn, *Vision of Fatima*. (New York: Garden City Books, 1951) reports on Sr. Lucy speaking to him: "In your writing please stress the spiritual meaning of things, in order to raise minds which today have become so materialistic to regions of the supernatural; so that they may understand the true meaning and purpose of the coming of Our Lady to earth, which is to bring souls to Heaven, to draw them to God" (p.206).

¹⁴See note 1 above.

¹⁵John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England: Addressed to the Brothers of the Oratory in the Summer of 1851* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1903), 313; see pp. 298-313, passim.

¹⁶See note 12 above; see also Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27; and Eph. 4:24.