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THE FUNCTION OF OUR LADY'S FAITH IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

THE true Church of Jesus Christ recognizes in Mary's faith the exemplar and the cause of that belief in God or acceptance of His message which is to be found among the children of men. Mary's faith is the exemplar for the virtue and the act of faith among men precisely because it is and it always will have been the most perfect and laudable in the history of God's supernatural kingdom. Other virtues, as, for instance, that of charity, existed in the human nature of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and are to be found in Him in a perfection utterly greater than that in which they exist in any other person. Thus these virtues find their highest expression in Our Lord. The model or the supreme embodiment of these virtues is to be found in Him rather than in any other.

Such, however, is not the case with regard to the virtue of divine faith. Because of the fact that He enjoyed the beatific vision, faith could never exist in Our Lord's human nature. We must look elsewhere, then, for the most perfect embodiment of this particular virtue. And, since the spiritual perfection of Mary is ineffably higher than that of any other creature, the highest perfection or intensity of divine faith is to be found in the earthly life of Our Lady. Her faith is thus the exemplar or the model for the faith of all men.

It must be understood also that Our Lady's faith is not only the exemplar, but also in a very definite way the instrumental cause of faith and of all the other supernatural benefits which have come to the human race through the passion and death of Christ. It is a commonplace of Catholic Mariology that it was precisely by her consent to the Incarnation that Mary obtained the position in which she could function as

the Mediatrix of all graces, the position in which she could be said to be the instrumental cause of the granting of the grace of faith and of all other graces to the children of men. Yet, alluding precisely to this act of acceptance, St. Elizabeth designated Our Lady as "beata quae credidisti."

Indeed, as St. Luke describes it in his Gospel, Our Lady's assent to the Incarnation was an act of divine faith commanded, of course, by charity. "Blessed art thou that hast believed,"¹ were the words St. Elizabeth spoke to her. It is likewise important to note that the priest Zachary was stricken with a temporary dumbness because he did not believe when the angel of God brought a message to him.² In both instances faith or belief was the response demanded by God Himself from the persons to whom the angel carried His communication.

Thus it was through an act of faith that Mary became the mother of Christ, the Incarnate Word. By the selfsame act, she became the mother of Christ in His mystical body, the Catholic Church. The faith of Mary was, in the designs of God's providence, instrumental in bringing into existence the society which is correctly designated as the *congregatio fidelium*. By reason of this causality Mary is correctly and properly designated as the cause and the basis of the Church's belief, as the defender of the faith. It is for this cause that the Church hails her as the one "who alone has overcome all heresies throughout the entire world."³

¹ Luke, 1: 45.

² Cf. Luke, 1: 20.

³ In substance this statement of one of Mary's chief prerogatives was first sung as a liturgical text, according to Batiffol, at the dedication of the Roman Pantheon as a Christian Church. Cf. his *History of the Roman Breviary*, translated by Baylay (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), p. 113. It was part of a response, composed, it is said, by a blind chanter. Pope Leo XIII used it in his encyclical *Adjutricem populi* and Pius XI in his *Mortalium animos*. Cf. Fenton, *Our Lady and the Extirpation of Heresy*, in *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, 114 (June, 1946), 442 ff.

Mary's causative and protective activity in regard to the faith of the Church automatically involves a care for the purity of that faith. Pope Leo XIII took explicit cognizance of this fact in his famous encyclical *Adjutricem populi*:

"No one will fail to remark how much the merits of the venerable Fathers and Doctors of the Church, who spent their lives in the defense and explanation of the Catholic faith, redound to the Virgin Mother of God. For from her, the Seat of Divine Wisdom, as they themselves gratefully tell us, a strong current of the most sublime wisdom has coursed through their writings. And they were quick to acknowledge that not by them but by her have iniquitous errors been overcome."⁴

One of the most interesting and enlightening sections of theological teaching about Our Lady's faith and about her influence upon the faith of the Catholic Church is to be found in the writings of the classical ecclesiologists, from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. The great Dominican Cardinal John de Turrecremata, teaching about the permanence or indefectibility of the Church, held that during the period that intervened between Our Lord's death and His resurrection the Blessed Virgin was the only creature in whom the true faith of Christ was to be found in its entirety and purity.⁵

Turrecremata proposed this thesis as something which St. Anselm appears to teach in his *Cur Deus Homo*. He describes it as something held explicitly and unquestionably by Alexander of Hales and by William Durandus. He obviously made this teaching his own, but he was careful to accept it

⁴ The translation is from *The Rosary of Mary. Translations of the Encyclical and Apostolic Letters of Pope Leo XIII*, collected by William Raymond Lawler, O.P. (Paterson, New Jersey: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1945), p. 133.

⁵ Cf. Turrecremata's *Summa de ecclesia* (Venetiis, 1561), Lib. I, chapters 27 and 30, pp. 32^r, 35^v.

only on the authority of "many theologians" and on what he considered the symbolism of the rites of the *Tenebrae*.

It is perfectly certain from this section of his writings that John de Turrecremata believed that no person could be a member of the Catholic Church unless that person truly possessed divine Catholic faith. The profession of that faith was manifestly not sufficient for membership according to this view. In holding that Our Lady was the only one in whom the true faith was preserved during the time between Our Lord's death and His resurrection, Turrecremata automatically held that she was at that period the only member of the Church or that, "*in sola beata Virgine, in qua integra et imperturbata mansit fides christiana, fuit ecclesia.*"⁶

Thus, according to Turrecremata, there was a time during which the actual Church militant consisted solely in the Blessed Virgin herself. He mentions with manifest approval the dictum of Durandus, according to whom the last candle in the *tenebrae* ceremonies "signifies the faith of Christ, which remained in the Virgin alone, through whom afterwards all of the faithful have been instructed and enlightened."⁷

For the great Dominican Cardinal, and for the other theologians of his ecclesiological tradition, this position was an integral and highly important part of the defense of the Church's indefectibility. Turrecremata emphasized the two-fold origin of the Church militant as sharply and as accurately as any other theologian in Catholic theological history has ever done. Thus, when he spoke of the origin of the Church, he distinguished sedulously between that which took place during the first generation of the human race and that which occurred in the time of the Incarnation.⁸

Under this latter heading, Turrecremata distinguished four

⁶ Cap. 27, p. 32^r.

⁷ Cap. 30, p. 35^v.

⁸ Cf. chapters 22 and 24.

ways of considering the beginning of the Church. He believed that the Church militant of the New Testament could be said to have taken its origin in the first preaching and invitation issued by Our Lord to the men and women who were to become His disciples, in its complete firmness of faith on the day of Pentecost, and in the death of Christ. However, he was convinced that the Church militant of the New Testament could be said to have begun "primarily with the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Lord's Mother, who is believed to have been the first to have had explicit faith in the actually incarnate Word of God."⁹

It was an essential part of Turrecremata's ecclesiology to show that, once it had started, the true Church militant had never, even for a moment, ceased to exist. He held this thesis with respect to the Church militant or the kingdom of God of the Old Testament just as firmly as for that of the New. It was in upholding this particular thesis, and in trying to show that the Church had not ceased to exist during the hours intervening between Our Lord's death and His resurrection that Turrecremata brought in his teaching about Our Lady's faith in the resurrection.

It is interesting to note, however, that three of the most distinguished counter-Reformation ecclesiologists, men who differed from one another rather sharply on important opinions about the concept of Church membership, were in thorough agreement in rejecting Turrecremata's thesis that Mary was, even for a time, the only member of the true *ecclesia*. Nevertheless these three men, St. Robert Bellarmine, Francis Suarez, and Francis Sylvius, showed that they, too, attributed a special function to Our Lady's faith in the resurrection during the time Our Lord's body was in the tomb.

St. Robert was the first of these theologians. He deals with this question at the very end of his book *De ecclesia*

⁹ Cap. 24, p. 267.

militante, at the conclusion of the chapter in which he treats of objections against his thesis "that all the pastors of the Church have never been in error at the same time."¹⁰ Thus, where Turrecremata saw this thesis as a part of the Catholic teaching on the Church's indefectibility, St. Robert Bellarmine considered it as belonging to the proof of the Church's infallibility.

St. Robert all too frequently gives a somewhat cavalier treatment to the theologians whose arguments or conclusions he rejects. He is definitely severe against Turrecremata in this instance. He professes himself astounded "that John de Turrecremata, because of the highly superficial argument about the candle [in the service of *tenebrae*] declares it to be contrary to the faith of the universal Church to deny that the faith remained in the Blessed Virgin alone on the day of Our Lord's passion."¹¹

Actually, Turrecremata's position was not nearly as strong on this point as St. Robert supposed it to be. Turrecremata had manifestly considered the practice of the Church at the *tenebrae* service in his own time as clearly indicative of the lesson Durandus had drawn from it. He had likewise asserted that this practice was general in the Church. He seems not, however, to have considered his own conclusion on this point as by any means an expression of the faith of the universal Church.¹²

St. Robert makes no mention whatsoever of Durandus at this point. He presents, and he obviously prefers, another interpretation of this section of the liturgy, an interpretation which he attributes to Rupert of Deutz. Rupert explained the mystical symbolism of the *tenebrae* service in quite an-

¹⁰ Cap. 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Cf. *Summa de ecclesia*, cap. 30, p. 35^v.

other way, a way that had nothing to do directly with the faith of Our Lady.¹³

Tostatus of Avila, however, had explained this same phenomenon in terms of Our Lady's belief. St. Robert adverts to the fact that Tostatus had claimed that this shows only that the Church believed Mary to have been the only member of the kingdom of God to have had an explicit faith in her Son's resurrection during the time that elapsed between the crucifixion and the resurrection. St. Robert accepts this teaching and adopts it as his own.¹⁴

Oddly enough, St. Robert seems in this place to contradict his own teaching. His book *De ecclesia militante* is, in the ultimate analysis, only a long demonstration that a man can be truly a member of Our Lord's true Church without having the virtue of divine faith.¹⁵ The two paragraphs that deal with Our Lady's belief in her Divine Son's resurrection constitute the ending of this book. In these paragraphs, however, St. Robert makes the assertion that if the faith had remained in Mary alone, then the Church would have perished.¹⁶ Thus he seems to infer that, after all, true inward faith is requisite for membership in the Catholic Church.

When we examine this statement carefully, we find that the great Doctor of the Church has in no way weakened or compromised his own position. As the assertion stands, it seems to form a part of an *ad hominem* argument. Turrecremata had insisted that Our Lady was the only person who had retained the true faith during the hours between Good Friday afternoon and the dawn of Easter Sunday. He had likewise taught that the true Church, the kingdom of God on earth, had consisted during that period of Our Lady alone.

¹³ Cf. *De ecclesia militante*, loc. cit.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. the end of chapter 2.

¹⁶ Cf. cap. 17.

St. Robert seems merely to have summarized Turrecremata's teaching in order to deny it completely. He insisted that it was dangerous to hold that Mary was the only person to have possessed the true faith, and the only member of the true Church, during those hours.¹⁷

Although his opinions in the field of ecclesiology differed sharply from those of St. Robert, Francis Suarez was in complete agreement with his fellow Jesuit on the question of Mary's faith. In his treatise *de ecclesia* Suarez offered a much more complete and detailed exposition of the question than St. Robert had given. He shows the scriptural and patristic background against which the opinion of Turrecremata had been formulated and defended, and, at the same time, he points out the obvious and insuperable difficulties that stand in the way of an acceptance of Turrecremata's position. Where St. Robert had concentrated on showing that members of God's kingdom who were absent from Jerusalem during the period under consideration could not have lost the divine faith which they had previously possessed unwittingly and through no fault of their own, Suarez insists more upon the fact that the apostles, particularly St. Peter, cannot be said to have abandoned the faith during those hours.¹⁸

Like Suarez and Turrecremata before him, Francis Sylvius dealt with the question of Our Lady's faith in the resurrection as a part of his explanation of the Church's continuity. Sylvius, however, arranged his material in the form of an answer to an objection against his own position. He based this objection on a statement contained in a treatise then attributed to St. Bernard.¹⁹

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁸ Cf. Suarez' *Opus de triplici virtute theologica*, (Lugduni, 1621), De fide, disp. 9, sect. 3, p. 165.

¹⁹ Cf. Sylvius' *De praecipuis fidei nostrae orthodoxae controversiis cum nostris haereticis*, Lib. 3, q. 3, a. 5, in the *Opera omnia* (Antwerpiae, 1698), 5, 268 f.

As happens very frequently, we find that Sylvius combines the material which had previously been elaborated by St. Robert and by Suarez. He insists upon the fact that neither the apostles nor the Jews outside Jerusalem had abandoned the faith and upon the fact that neither group had at that time ceased to belong to the kingdom of God on earth. At the same time, he teaches that Our Lady was the only person who had an explicit and firm faith that Our Lord was actually going to rise again on the third day. The rest of those who retained the true faith had only an implicit faith in the resurrection, and a faith which was, according to Sylvius, not as firm as that possessed by Mary.²⁰

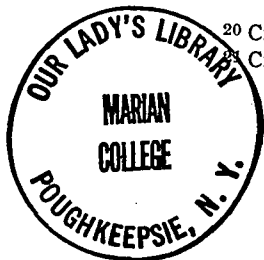
St. Robert considered it dangerous to teach the opinion which he connected with the name of Turrecremata. Suarez believed this teaching improbable.²¹ Sylvius, without attaching any definite note to his own teaching, makes it quite evident that he considers the opposite opinion utterly devoid of any serious foundation.

We still may say, without fear of serious contradiction, that it is incorrect to teach that true inward faith remained with Our Lady alone during the interval between Our Lord's crucifixion and His resurrection. There would be no excuse whatsoever for teaching that Mary was the only member of the true Church militant, of God's kingdom on earth, during that same period.

It is true, however, that during those sad hours Mary's faith was outstanding above the belief of all the other disciples of Christ in its clarity and in its firmness. Then as always she was exalted above all others in the intensity of her charity. Now she enjoys the beatific vision in a higher degree of perfection than any other mere creature. Then, at the very moment of the sacrifice of Calvary, her faith, the preparation

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 269.

²¹ Cf. St. Robert, *loc. cit.*, Suarez, *loc. cit.*



for the beatific vision, was glorious within the Church of God by reason of its beauty and its strength.

The compassion of Mary, the acts by which she merited the full perfection and completeness of her glory as Queen of Christ's kingdom, consisted in acts of charity elicited in the light of that great faith. When the glory and the effectiveness of that faith are taken into consideration, there seems small wonder that many among the world's great theologians should have written thus about it.

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