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William R. O'Connor

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THE SPIRITUAL MATERNITY OF OUR LADY IN TRADITION

The invocation of Mary as our spiritual mother is sometimes regarded as a late development in the history of Christian devotion. According to Terrien, it was commonly said in the last century that the title "mother of men," or any other equally explicit, is not found in antiquity either in liturgical texts or in the monuments of the universal Church.¹ In Koehler's article on the spiritual maternity of Mary in *Maria*, after telling us that this doctrine is so well known and dear to Christian hearts that there is no need of a dogmatic definition to impose it, the author goes on to say that the invocation of Mary as our mother is not very ancient. The usage goes back only to the middle ages. St. Bernard, for instance, never calls Mary "mother."²

These admissions can easily create the impression that the spiritual motherhood of Mary is a comparatively late doctrine, one that was unknown in early tradition. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the status of this doctrine in tradition, especially in early tradition, in order to see how far back it really goes and in what sense it was understood in ancient as well as in modern times.

1. *The Eve-Mary Contrast*

A mother is one who generates and gives birth to children; she gives them life. From the beginning Mary was explicitly recognized as the mother of Christ. For a time, it is true, we

¹ J. B. Terrien, S.J., *La mère de Dieu et la mère des hommes d'après les Pères et la théologie*, part 2, *La mère des hommes*, vol. 1, Paris, 1902, p. 75.

² Th. Koehler, *Maternité spirituelle de Marie*, in *Maria, études sur la sainte Vierge*, edited by Hubert du Manoir, S.J., Paris, 1949, p. 575. See also G. Geenen, O.P., *Marie notre Mère*, in *Marianum*, vol. 10, 1948, p. 338. Geenen's article reappears in Du Manoir's *Maria*, pp. 837-849.

do not find her explicitly called the spiritual mother of men. Yet from the second century the function of generating men spiritually and of giving them a new life was expressly assigned to Mary. The early Fathers as well as later writers took delight in drawing out the contrast between Eve and Mary, the one the author of natural life by natural generation, the other the author of supernatural life for men through her generation of Christ, the second Adam. In this explicit recognition of her function as generator of supernatural life is implicitly contained the doctrine of Mary's spiritual motherhood for all mankind.

In the earliest documents of tradition we find this contrast set up between Eve and Mary: both were virgins when they brought forth offspring; Eve by her disobedience brought forth death, while Mary by her obedience brought forth life. St. Justin the Martyr (+ c. 165) in the second century points out the contrast: "Eve, when she was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. The Virgin Mary, however, received faith and joy when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her . . . and she replied, 'Be it done unto me according to thy word.'" By her obedience to the word of the angel Mary conceived, as it were, a new life for mankind.³

St. Irenaeus of Lyons (+ c. 202) likewise emphasizes the rôle of Mary as the new Eve: "Mary the virgin is found obedient, saying, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord. . . .' Eve, however, was disobedient, for she did not obey when as yet she was a virgin. As she, having indeed a husband, Adam, but being as yet a virgin, . . . having become disobedient became the cause of death both to herself and to the entire human race; so also Mary, having a betrothed husband and being neverthe-

³ *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, 100; *P. G.* 6, 710.

less a virgin, by her obedience became the cause of salvation both for herself and for the whole human race. . . ."⁴

In his *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* St. Irenaeus repeats this idea of Mary generating life for mankind: "As by a virgin who did not obey, man was struck and fell dead, in the same way through 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, in order that submerged mortality be absorbed by immortality; and to perfect Eve in Mary, in order that a virgin might loose and destroy the virginal disobedience by a virginal submission."⁵ Again in *Adversus Haereses* the same thought recurs: "How will man escape from the generation of death, if he does not pass into a new generation given by God in a wonderful and unexpected manner, but as a sign of salvation, a regeneration which is from the virgin through faith?"⁶ A little farther on in the same work Irenaeus, when speaking of the virginal birth of our Emmanuel, remarks parenthetically: "The pure one opening purely that pure womb which regenerates men unto God."⁷

Galtier has shown, against Dom Massuet, that the virgin here who regenerates men unto God is not the Church but Mary, whose virginal generation of Christ introduced salvation into the world, as the first generation of Adam introduced death.⁸ This is equivalently the doctrine of Mary's spiritual maternity. As Genevois explains this teaching of St. Irenaeus,

⁴ *Adversus Haereses*, 3, 22, 4; *P.G.* 7, 958. See also *Adversus Haereses*, 5, 19, 1; *P.G.* 7, 1175: "As the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin, so it is rescued by a virgin; virginal disobedience having been balanced in the opposite scale by virginal obedience." Cf. *ibid.*, 3, 21, 10; *P.G.* 7, 954.

⁵ *Demonstratio praedicationis apostolicae*, ex armeno vertit. . . . S. Weber, Fribourg, Herder, 1917, n. 33, pp. 33-34.

⁶ *Adversus Haereses*, 4, 33, 4; *P.G.* 7, 1074.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4, 33, 11; *P.G.* 7, 1080.

⁸ Paul Galtier, S.J., *La vierge qui nous régénère*, in *Recherches de science religieuse*, vol. 5, 1914, pp. 136-145.

Mary's faith in believing the word of the angel causes, not directly the regeneration of humanity, but the generation, the birth, of Christ, which is a regeneration, a second generation, because it is opposed to the birth of Adam, as Christ is opposed to Adam himself.⁹

These earliest testimonies show that Mary's spiritual maternity is involved in her divine maternity, and the *fiat* that consented to the latter also implied the former. Tertullian (+ c. 240) clearly teaches Mary's function as generator of life for mankind: "While Eve was yet a virgin the ensnaring word had crept into her ear which was to build the edifice of death. Into a virgin soul, in like manner, must be introduced that word of God which was to raise the fabric of life; so that what had been reduced to ruin by this sex might by the self-same sex be recovered to salvation. As Eve had believed the serpent, so Mary believed Gabriel. The delinquency which the one occasioned by believing, the other effaced by believing. . . . [Eve] gave birth to a fratricidal devil, while Mary on the contrary bore one who was one day to secure salvation to Israel, his own brother after the flesh and the murderer of himself."¹⁰ All that is lacking in these early testimonies is the term "our mother."

2. Origen

At this point we meet a serious challenge to the notion that the spiritual motherhood of Mary was not explicitly recognized in the early Church, at least during the first four centuries. Origen (+ 254) in the preface to his commentary on the gospel of St. John is the first among the Fathers, so far as extant testimony is concerned, to apply the term mother to Mary

⁹ M.-Albert Genevois, O.P., *La maternité universelle de Marie selon saint Irénée*, in *Revue Thomiste*, vol. 41 (nouvelle série 19), 1936, pp. 26-51; cf. p. 36.

¹⁰ *De carne Christi*, 17; *P.L.* 2, 827-828.

in reference to others than her divine Son. His words are important: "Let us therefore dare to say that the first-fruits of all the Scriptures are the gospels, and the first-fruits of the gospels is that according to John; whose meaning no one can grasp who has not reclined upon the breast of Jesus and has not received from Jesus Mary, who has become his mother also." Origen then goes on to explain how Mary can be called the mother of any one else besides Jesus. It is true, Jesus was Mary's only son. Yet Christ on the cross said to her, "Behold thy son," indicating St. John; He did not say, "Behold, this one is also thy son." Christ's word then are equivalent to this: "Behold, this one (John) is the Jesus whom you have borne." How can this be? Origen explains: "Whoever is perfect no longer lives himself but Christ lives in him. Since Christ lives in him, it is said to Mary of him: 'Behold thy Son, Christ.' " ¹¹

The argument used by Origen is based upon the identification of a true and perfect Christian with Christ. It is true that Mary has but one Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. St. John, however, is identified with Christ, as is also every perfect Christian. In Origen's thought it is not exactly that John represents every Christian but that John and every perfect Christian are one with Christ that lies at the basis of his teaching on the spiritual motherhood of Mary.

It is strange how this testimony from Origen is passed over or neglected at times as if it had no bearing on the spiritual motherhood of Mary. Koehler tells us that he does not take any account of it because it is only a very suggestive affirmation of our identity with Christ, an identity that rests upon our membership in the mystical body. This identity is certainly at the basis of the spiritual maternity of Mary, but

¹¹ *In Evangelium Joannis*, I, Praefatio, 6; P.G. 14, 32.

Origen does not dream of the rôle of Mary as a spiritual mother in our regard.¹²

All we can say of an argument like this is that it lacks objectivity. We are dealing with the first patristic appearance of the term "mother" applied to Mary in reference to others than her Son Jesus Christ. Origen gives us a meaning of motherhood that is based upon the spiritual identification of St. John and of others with Christ. If this identity lies at the foundation of Mary's spiritual motherhood, how can it be passed by as of no importance? From an historical standpoint it must be taken into account as the first explicit mention by any of the early writers concerning Mary as our mother.

3. *Fourth and Fifth Century Testimonies*

Among the certainly authentic writings of the Syrian Father St. Ephrem (+ 373) in the fourth century we find Mary's spiritual motherhood at least equivalently asserted when he says: "Through Eve came death, and life through Mary."¹³ St. Ambrose (+ 379) in the same century also represents Mary as the second Eve: "When He was about to give salvation to the world, [Christ] came through a virgin, and loosed the fall of the woman by the virgin's childbirth."¹⁴ Apostrophizing the devil, St. Ambrose says: "Mary has conquered you, Mary who has given birth to the one who triumphs. . . . Christ visited a woman in Mary. . . . Mary was visited in order to liberate Eve."¹⁵ Mary's maternal office of bearing life to mankind is clearly asserted: "A virgin gave birth to the salvation of the world, a virgin bore the life

¹² Th. Koehler, *art. cit.*, p. 583, n. 43.

¹³ *S. Ephrem Syri hymni et sermones*, 4 vols., ed. T. J. Lamy, Mechliniae, 1882-1902; vol. 2, p. 526. See also I. Keuppens, *Mariologiae Compendium*, Mechliniae, 1938, p. 184, n. 59.

¹⁴ *Exhortatio virginitatis*, 4, 26; *P.L.* 16, 359.

¹⁵ *De obitu Theodosii oratio*, 44-47; *P.L.* 16, 1463-1465.

of all. . . . Through a man and a woman the flesh was ejected from paradise; through a virgin it has been joined to God.”¹⁶ Alluding to Mary as the model for virgins, St. Ambrose figuratively implies her spiritual motherhood: “Follow the good cloud, which bore within itself a fountain by which it watered the whole world.”¹⁷

St. John Chrysostom (+ 407), who lived most of his life in the fourth century, is another who dwells upon the Eve-Mary contrast: “A virgin expelled us from paradise; through a virgin we find eternal life.”¹⁸ St. Jerome (+ 420) does the same: “Eve continually gave birth in pain. After the virgin conceived in her womb and brought forth a child for us . . . the curse was broken. Death came through Eve; life through Mary.”¹⁹

If Origen is the first to call Mary the mother of others besides her divine Son, St. Epiphanius (+ 403) is the first, so far as we know, to give her the title of “mother of the living.” In his work *Against Heresies* he points out how Eve represented Mary when she was called the mother of the living in *Gen.* 3: 20. Eve was given this title after she had sinned. Is it not astonishing that so illustrious a title should have been given to her after her fall? Yet it is only according to sensible appearances that Eve is the mother of the whole human race: “In truth it was from Mary that life itself was generated for the world; she bore the living one and became the mother of the living. . . . Eve brought the cause of death to men, since through her, death entered into the

¹⁶ *Epistola* 63, 33; *P.L.* 16, 1249-1250.

¹⁷ *De institutione virginis*, 13, 82; *P.L.* 16, 340. In *Sermo* 45, 4; *P.L.* 17, 716, Eve is called the mother of the human race and Mary the mother of salvation (*Haec [Eva] mater humani generis dicitur, illa [Maria] salutis*). This sermon, however, is of doubtful authenticity.

¹⁸ *Expositio in Psalmum* 44: 7; *P.G.* 55, 193.

¹⁹ *Epistola* 22; *P.L.* 22, 408.

world. Mary, however, was the cause of life, through whom life is generated for us.”²⁰

St. Peter Chrysologus (+ 450), archbishop of Ravenna, in the fifth century, also speaks of Mary as the mother of the living. In explaining how she is blessed among women he says: “Eve, the cursed one, punished them [women] in their childbirths; but Mary, the blessed one, rejoices in them, and she is honored and esteemed by them. Now in truth has she become the mother of the living by grace who was the mother of the dying by nature.”²¹

4. *St. Augustine*

With St. Augustine (+ 430) Mary for the first time is called the spiritual mother of the members of Christ. In his work *On Holy Virginity* he develops the theme that the Church, like Mary, is a virgin and a mother. Mary bodily bore the head of the body which is the Church, and the Church spiritually bears the members of that head. According to the teaching of Christ, anyone who does the will of the Father in heaven in His brother, and sister, and mother. On this principle the whole Church is the mother of Christ because she gives birth by grace to His members; that is, His faithful ones. Likewise every devout soul is His mother by doing the will of the Father with most fruitful charity among those for whom she is in labor until Christ is formed in them (*Gal.* 4: 19). Mary in doing the will of God was corporally only the mother of Christ, but spiritually she was His sister and mother.²² Then St. Augustine adds: “On this account that

²⁰ *Adversus Haereses*, 3, 2; *P.G.* 42, 728-729.

²¹ *Sermo* 140; *P.L.* 52, 576: “Et facta est vere nunc mater viventium per gratiam, quae mater exstitit morientium per naturam.” This seems to mean that the mother of the living in *Gen.* 3: 20, was in reality the mother of the dying, while only in Mary have we a genuine mother of the living.

²² *De sancta virginitate*, 5; *P.L.* 40, 399.

one woman [Mary] not only in spirit but also in body is a mother and a virgin. She is mother indeed in spirit, not of our head, which is the Savior Himself, from whom rather she was spiritually born, since all who believe in Him, among whom is she herself, are rightly called the children of the bridegroom (*Matt.* 9: 15); but clearly she is the mother of His members, which we are, because she co-operated by her charity that faithful ones should be born in the Church, and the faithful are members of that head. In body, however, she is the mother of the head."²³

Mary, it is true, shares this spiritual motherhood of charity with the Church and with all devout souls, and St. Augustine is careful to point out that she is a mother of Christ in a way more full of praise and blessing inasmuch as she did the will of the Father than if she bore Him in body alone.²⁴ Spiritual motherhood ranks higher with him than mere bodily motherhood. At the same time St. Augustine directly associates the members with the head when Mary gave birth to Christ: "How do you not pertain to the childbirth of the virgin, when you are the members of Christ? Mary gave birth to your head, the Church gave birth to you. She also is a mother and virgin: a mother by the bowels of charity; a virgin by the integrity of faith and piety."²⁵ The association becomes an identity in the commentary on the gospel of St. John: "Let us then rejoice and give thanks, not only that we have become Christians, but Christ. . . . Admire, be glad, we have become

²³ *Ibid.*, 6. Philipp Friedrich in *Die Mariologie des hl. Augustinus*, Köln, 1907, pp. 258-259, denies the universal motherhood of Mary in the text just cited. He restricts her co-operation to the concrete cases she met, so far as the meaning of the text goes. This may be true, but from the citation that follows next in our text we can establish a firm basis for the universal motherhood of Mary.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5. Cf. *ibid.*, 3; *P.L.* 40, 398: "Beatior ergo Maria percipiendo fidem Christi, quam concipiendo carnem Christi. . . . Sic et materna propinquitas nihil Mariae profuisset, nisi felicius Christum corde quam carne gestasset."

²⁵ *Sermo* 192, 2; *P.L.* 38, 1012-1013.

Christ. If He is the head, we are the members; the whole man, He and we. . . . The fullness of Christ, then, is the head and members.”²⁶

St. Leo the Great (+ 461) in one of his Christmas sermons identifies even more closely the head and members in the birth of Christ: “While we adore the birth of our Savior, we celebrate our own beginning. The generation of Christ is the origin of the Christian people, and the birthday of the head is the birthday of the body. . . . The children of the Church, born in the waters of baptism, as they were crucified with Christ in His passion, and risen with Him in His resurrection, and placed on the right hand of the Father in his ascension, so were they engendered with Him in His nativity.”²⁷

The principle that underlies the thought of St. Augustine and of St. Leo is the identification of head and members in the unity of the body of Christ, which is the Church. From this principle it follows that the mother of the head must be the mother of the members, so that in engendering Christ, the head, Mary necessarily became the spiritual mother of those whom St. Paul calls his members. This principle will play an important part in the subsequent history of the doctrine.

5. Eastern Testimonies From the Seventh to the Ninth Centuries

In the seventh century we find St. Modestus, patriarch of Jerusalem (+ 634), giving us a thought that will bear rich fruit in St. Anselm. He speaks of our mystical recreation through Mary, the Mother of God: “The governor of the world through her saved the human race from the flood of

²⁶ *In Joannis Evangelium, Tractatus* 21, n. 8; *P.L.* 35, 1568.

²⁷ *Sermo* 26, *in nativitate Domini* 6, cap. 2; *P.L.* 54, 213: “Generatio enim Christi est origo populi Christiani, et natalis capitis est natalis corporis.”

impiety and sin, and gave it life."²⁸ "O most blessed dormition of the most glorious Mother of God, through whom we are mystically recreated and made the temple of the Holy Spirit."²⁹ "She fell asleep who gave birth to the life and resurrection of the world, by whose grace every intellectual and rational nature shares in eternal life."³⁰ Mary is "the salvation and patronage of all of us Christians."³¹

St. Germain of Constantinople (+ 733) in the eighth century gives to Mary titles that manifest a mother's care for her children. She is "the solace of Christians," the "refuge of sinners," the "spirit and breath of Christians." He begs her to "protect us by the wings of her goodness." She who is the "hope of Christians" bestows eternal life.³² St. Germain makes this moving appeal to Mary: "Whatever you ask of him [Christ], he gives to you who mourn for your children."³³ St. Andrew of Crete (+ c. 740) in the same century salutes Mary in these terms: "O queen of all men, who bore within you Wisdom itself and the subsisting Word. . . . O furnisher of life, and life of the living, and even author of life."³⁴ During the same period St. John of Damascus (+ 749), when giving the genealogy of Christ, has this to say of Anna, the mother of the Blessed Virgin: "Accordingly, it was grace (for this is the interpretation of Anna) that bore the mistress (for this is the meaning of the name Mary); for she truly became the mistress of all creatures when she became the mother of the creator."³⁵ Addressing Mary he prays: "Remain with us, our consolation, a solace for each one on earth. Leave us

²⁸ *Encomium in Beata Virgine*, 3; *P.G.* 86 (2), 3287.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7; *P.G.* 86 (2), 3294.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13; *P.G.* 86 (2), 3307.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6; *P.G.* 86 (2), 3294.

³² *In S. Mariae Zonam*; *P.G.* 98, 378-379.

³³ *In Dormitionem B. Mariae*, II; *P.G.* 98, 348.

³⁴ *In Dormitionem S. Mariae*, III; *P.G.* 97, 1107.

³⁵ *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 4, 14; *P.G.* 94, 1157.

not orphans, mother of that benign and merciful Son for whose sake we are in danger." Then, in the person of Mary addressing her Son at the time of her own death, St. John of Damascus has her say: "Be the solace of my migration for my dearest sons, whom you did not hesitate to call your brothers." ³⁶

Peter of Sicily, who supposedly was the author in the ninth century of a *History of the Manichaeans*, has preserved for us an interesting bit of information that directly bears upon our doctrine. A certain Timothy, who was suspected of heresy, was questioned by the patriarch of Constantinople: "Why do you not honor and venerate the holy mother of God?" Timothy cleared himself of the charge by replying: "Anathema to him who does not venerate the most holy Mother of God into whom our Lord Jesus Christ entered, the mother of us all." ³⁷

6. *Western Testimonies of the Eleventh Century*

Most of the testimonies we have seen down to the middle of the ninth century are from the East. Beginning with the eleventh century in the West Mary is addressed more and more by her clients as children address their mother. St. Peter Damian (+ 1072) repeats and extends a familiar theme: "Through this most blessed virgin not only was life restored to men which formerly was lost, but even the beatitude of the angels was increased." ³⁸ St. Fulbert of Chartres in the same century stresses Mary's maternal care for us when he asserts that we have many examples of the just obtaining more quickly through the intercession of the Mother of the Lord whatever they ask of Him, and of sinners obtaining mercy more often

³⁶ *Homilia II in Dormitionem Beatae Virginis Mariae*; P.G. 96, 733, 736.

³⁷ *Historia Manichaeorum*, 29; P.G. 104, 1284.

³⁸ *Sermo 46, In nativitate Beatissimae Virginis Mariae*; P.L. 144, 752.

through the same intercession.³⁹ He ends a particularly moving appeal to Mary by men and women in all conditions of life with this couplet:

"On thy birthday, dear Mother, come to our aid,
Increasing our virtues and wiping out sin."⁴⁰

The liturgy of the Church begins to reflect the spiritual motherhood of Mary through the use of the hymns *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, the *Salve Regina*, and the *Ave Maris Stella*, which are conservatively dated from the end of the eleventh or the beginning of the twelfth century. The *Alma Redemptoris Mater* invokes, it is true, her divine maternity, but in deeply human accents. In the *Salve Regina* Mary is greeted expressly as our mother: "Hail, mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, our hope . . . do thou, our advocate, turn thine eyes of mercy toward us." The theme of the *Ave Maris Stella* lies in the line: *Monstra te esse matrem*—"Show thyself a mother to us."

7. St. Anselm

With St. Anselm (+ 1109) at the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century a new era opens in which all reserve is cast aside and Mary is fondly and regularly addressed as our mother. Resuming a thought of St. Modestus of Jerusalem of the seventh century, St. Anselm speaks of our recreation through Mary in very explicit terms: "Every nature has been created by God, and God was born of Mary. God created all things, and Mary gave birth to God. God, Who made all things, made Himself from Mary; and so, all things which He had made, He remade. He who was able to make all things from nothing was not willing to remake them, when they were violated, without Mary. God then is the

³⁹ *Sermo* 5, *De nativitate Mariae Virginis*; P.L. 141, 325.

⁴⁰ *Sermo* 6, *In ortu almae Virginis*; P.L. 141, 331.

father of created things, and Mary the mother of recreated things. God is the father of the constitution of all, and Mary is the mother of the restitution of all. God generated Him through whom all things are made, and Mary bore Him through Whom all things are saved. God generated Him without Whom there is nothing at all; and Mary bore Him without Whom nothing is well off at all.”⁴¹

In contemplating the passion of Christ St. Anselm exclaims: “Why, O my soul, . . . have you not suffered with the most chaste virgin, His most worthy mother, your most benign mistress?”⁴² Mary is the “mother of justification and of the justified, the generator of reconciliation and of the reconciled, the parent of salvation and of the saved. . . . The mother of God is our mother; the mother of Him in Whom alone we hope and Whom alone we fear is our mother; the mother, I say, of Him Who alone saves, alone condemns, is our mother. . . . If you, Lady, are His mother, are not your other sons His brothers? . . . He Who shared our nature by maternal generation and made us to be sons of His mother by the restoration of life, He invites us to confess that we are His brothers. Our judge therefore is our brother; the Savior of the world is our brother; finally our God has become our brother through Mary. . . . With what affection should we love this brother and this mother? . . . May the good mother pray and beseech for us; may she ask and obtain what is expedient for us. . . . O Mary, how indebted we are to you, our lady mother through whom we have such a brother!” Mary is “our better mother,” she is “Mother Mary.”⁴³ We owe to St. Anselm the terms which have been

⁴¹ *Oratio* 52; *P.L.* 158, 956.

⁴² *Oratio* 20; *P.L.* 158, 903. Geenen’s translation (“Sa mère très digne, ta mère très benigne”), *art. cit.*, p. 344, does not correspond with the text: “Cur non es compassa castissimae Virgini, dignissimae matri ejus benignissimae Dominae tuae.”

⁴³ *Oratio* 52; *P.L.* 158, 957-959.

consecrated by loving usage: *mater nostra, bona mater, Maria mater.*

Eadmer of Canterbury (+ 1124) reflects the language and thought of his master, St. Anselm. He tells us: "Mary by her merits in repairing all things is the mother and mistress of things."⁴⁴ She is the "mother of mercy" because she is the mother of God;⁴⁵ and by a "maternal right" does she preside over heaven and earth with her son.⁴⁶ In his work on the conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which at one time was attributed to St. Anselm, Eadmer speaks of Mary as the "mother of mercy" and continues: "O Lady, if your Son has become our brother through you, have you not become our mother through Him? This is what He said to John when He was about to die for us on the cross; to John, I say, who had nothing else than ourselves in the nature of His condition: 'Behold,' he said, 'your mother.' O sinful man, rejoice and exult, for there is no reason to despair or to fear; whatever your judgment will be depends entirely upon the sentence of your brother and of your mother. . . . Your judge; that is, your brother, has taught you to fly to the aid of His mother, and the same one, your mother, has admonished you to cling faithfully to the protection of the wings of her Son. . . ." ⁴⁷

8. *The School of St. Bernard*

St. Bernard (+ 1153) is the marian doctor *par excellence*, yet we do not find him expressly calling Mary his mother. At the same time he abounds in extolling the virtues and

⁴⁴ *Liber de excellentia Virginis Mariae*, 11; P.L. 159, 578.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 579.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 575: "... jure materno coelo terraeque cum eodem filio suo praesidentem. . . ."

⁴⁷ *De conceptione Beatae Mariae Virginis* (inter opera spuria S. Anselmi); P.L. 159, 315. Geenen's translation ("réfugie-toi dans le secours de ta Mère"), *art. cit.*, p. 344, does not correspond with the text of Migne: "frater tuus docuit te fugere ad subsidium matris suae" [italics mine].

qualities that make Mary a spiritual mother. He does not hesitate to call her the "generator of life" and the "mother of salvation."⁴⁸ She has generated life and glory for all generations: "All generations will call you blessed because you have generated life and glory for all generations. . . . Rightly do the eyes of every creature look up to you because in you, and by you, and of you the benign hand of the Almighty has recreated whatever it had created."⁴⁹ He implicitly calls her the mother of mankind when he says: "O woman singularly to be venerated, admirable above all women, the restorer of her parents, the vivifier of their posterity."⁵⁰ The same thought recurs: "In the eternal Word of God we were all made, and behold we die; in your brief reply [to the angel at the Annunciation] we are to be remade, in order that we may be called back to life."⁵¹

If St. Bernard was reticent in the use of the term "mother," the school of St. Bernard cast all such reticence aside. We find, for example, the Cistercian abbot, St. Aelred of England (+ 1167), speaking of Mary in these terms: "Is she not our mother? Certainly, brethren, she is truly our mother. Through her we are born, through her we are nourished, through her we grow. . . . We are born through the blessed Mary much better than through Eve, by the fact that Christ was born of her. . . . She is our mother, the mother of our life, the mother of our incorruption, the mother of our light. She who is the mother of Christ is the mother of our wisdom,

⁴⁸ *In adventu Domini*, 2; *P.L.* 183, 43.

⁴⁹ *In festo Pentecostes*, 2; *P.L.* 183, 328. St. Bernard repeats here an Anselmian theme. We find it again in Nicholas of Clairvaux, *Sermo* 11, *De annuntiatione B. M. V.*; *P.L.* 144, 558 (among the sermons attributed to St. Peter Damian): ". . . by her and in her and from her and with her all this is decided to be done, so that, as without him [God] nothing was made, so without her [Mary] nothing was remade." This theme has often been repeated in succeeding centuries. Cf. Geenen, *art. cit.*, p. 343, n. 22.

⁵⁰ *De laudibus Virginis Mariae*, *Homilia* 2; *P.L.* 183, 63.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, *Homilia* 4; *P.L.* 183, 83.

the mother of our justice, the mother of our sanctification, the mother of our redemption. She is therefore more a mother to us than the mother of our flesh. . . . Follow your mother.”⁵² At the end of the twelfth century, Adam of Perseigne says of Mary: “You are the mother of the exile and the mother of the king; the mother of the guilty one and the mother of the judge; the mother of God and the mother of man. Through you the guilty one becomes the brother of the judge. . . . Since you are the mother of both, you have both for your sons, and through you the only begotten Son becomes the brother of the adopted son.”⁵³ In a work of dubious authenticity but which evidently belongs to the school of St. Bernard, we read this appeal: “Mother Eve, mother of sorrow, who first condemned your children before you bore them, embrace with all your daughters the feet of this new mother, because she removes the ancient bitterness and disgrace, she rescinds the handwriting of damnation and wipes out the proscription.”⁵⁴ Another spurious work, formerly attributed to St. Ildephonsus of Toledo (+ 667), reflects the thought and style of St. Bernard: “You who are the fount of salvation and of all grace, the way of peace and the port of pardon, hear the complaints of your family.”⁵⁵

A friend of St. Bernard, the Premonstratensian Philip of Harveng (+ 1183), in his commentary on the Canticle of Canticles develops the thought that the Son of God in the Incarnation became the spouse and son of His mother. He became the spouse “by joining a virgin to Himself in a kind of conjugal union . . . generating in her, or through her, spiritual sons by a spiritual efficacy, so that both He and she

⁵² *Sermo* 20, *In nativitate B. Mariae*, 2; *P.L.* 195, 323. This whole section is occupied with the theme that Mary is “our good mother” (*bona mater nostra*).

⁵³ *Mariale*, 1; *P.L.* 211, 703.

⁵⁴ *De laude Mariae Virginis*; *P.L.* 182, 1144.

⁵⁵ *De corona Virginis*, 7; *P.L.* 96, 296.

enjoy fruit and filial posterity.”⁵⁶ Later in the same work Philip represents Mary as saying: “By a kind of childbirth I form you in my entrails, or rather in my way of life, after the fashion of a mother. Indeed to one of you the spouse says: ‘Behold your mother.’ ”⁵⁷

9. *Rupert of Deutz*

The words of Christ to St. John which have just been mentioned serve to introduce an earlier writer of the twelfth century, Rupert of Deutz (+ 1135), who plays an important part in the development of the doctrine of Mary’s spiritual motherhood. In his commentary on the gospel of St. John he remarks on the words of Christ on the Cross to Mary and to St. John: “By what right is the disciple whom Jesus loved the son of the mother of the Lord, or she his mother? It is by the fact that she then bore without pain the cause of the salvation of all when she gave birth to God made man from her flesh; and now with great pain she was in labor when, as we have just been told, she stood by His cross. . . . Accordingly, because the Blessed Virgin truly [bore] there pains as of a woman in labor and in the passion of her only begotten Son gave birth to the salvation of us all, she is clearly the mother of us all. Because then it was said by Him [Christ] of this disciple: ‘Woman, behold your son,’ most justly did he [John] have the care of his mother. Likewise the words to the disciple, ‘Behold your mother,’ could rightly be said of any other disciple, if he were present. Although, as we have said, she is the mother of us all, yet more fittingly was she as a virgin commended to this virgin. . . .”⁵⁸

This is certainly not the first time that the spiritual motherhood of Mary in regard to others than St. John was recognized

⁵⁶ *In Cantica Cantorum*, 1, 1; *P.L.* 203, 192.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 19; *P.L.* 203, 230.

⁵⁸ *In Evangelium S. Joannis*, 13; *P.L.* 169, 789-790.

in the words of Christ on the cross. In the Eastern Church George of Nicomedia in the ninth century represents Christ as saying to Mary: "I wish the rest of the disciples likewise to be commended to you through him [John];" and to John: "Now I constitute her [Mary] as a parent and guide not only of yourself but of the rest of the disciples, and I absolutely wish her to be honored with the prerogative of mother. Although I forbade you to call any one your father on earth, still I wish this mother to be honored and called such by you. . . ." ⁵⁹ In the third century, as we have seen, Origen accommodates these words of Christ to every perfect Christian.

We cannot even be sure that the testimony of Rupert of Deutz is the first of its kind in the Western Church, as some maintain.⁶⁰ Philip of Harveng, who died in 1183, alludes to this extension of Mary's spiritual motherhood; and Eadmer of Canterbury, a contemporary of Rupert of Deutz, openly teaches that Mary has become our mother through Christ, our brother, and in support of his contention he cites the words of Christ to John, "Behold your mother."⁶¹ For Eadmer, who died in 1124, John bore a representative character at the foot of the Cross, since he "had nothing else than ourselves in the nature of his condition" at the time. Gerhoh of Reichersberg, who died in 1169, calls Mary the "mother of the apostles, to one of whom it was said, 'Behold your mother.'" Then he continues: "What was said to one could have been said to all the holy apostles, the Fathers of the new Church. Because Christ prayed that all may be one who were to believe through their word, what was said to the one beloved disciple who loved Christ belongs to all the faithful who love Christ

⁵⁹ *Oratio 8, in sanctissimam Mariam assistentem cruci; P.G. 100, 1476-1477.*

⁶⁰ For example, Carlo Audisio, S.D.B., *La missione di Maria Santissima verso gli uomini secondo Ruperto di Deutz*, Torino, 1949, p. 19: "Ruperto di Deutz . . . primo testimone della chiesa occidentale. . ."

⁶¹ *De conceptione Beatae Mariae Virginis; P.L. 159, 315.*

with all their heart. That blessed mother standing by the Cross bore them all when, knowing that her only Son was suffering to liberate and save them, she was in torture, with the sword of compassion piercing her soul, in order to bring them forth. It is not then with a vain hope that we cry to her, not only *Ave maris stella, Dei mater alma*, but also that which follows: *Monstra te esse matrem*; because of her two-fold maternity; one, whereby she bore her only Son without pain; the other, whereby she bore to herself and to the same only Son many sons with great pain and sorrow.”⁶²

The West was accustomed to an extension of the words of Christ on the Cross to others besides Mary and St. John. St. Ambrose (+ 379) in the fourth century had already accommodated these words to the Church when he taught that everyone can be a son of thunder like St. John if he is a son of the Church. In this case Christ “says also to you from the gibbet of the cross, ‘Behold your mother,’ and to the Church, ‘Behold your son.’”⁶³ That the Church is our mother is a frequent theme with St. Augustine. He in turn simply reflects the thought of St. Cyprian: “One cannot have God as his father who has not the Church as his mother.”⁶⁴

10. *The Thirteenth Century*

St. Albert the Great sets the pace in the thirteenth century in extolling Mary’s spiritual maternity. For him “the Blessed Virgin is the mother of all the good . . . she was predestined before the ages to be the principle from which every created thing was to be recreated.”⁶⁵ Mary, “inasmuch as she

⁶² *De gloria et honore Filii hominis*, 10, 1-2; *P.L.* 194, 1105.

⁶³ *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, 7, 5; *P.L.* 15, 1787.

⁶⁴ *De Catholicae Ecclesiae unitate*, 6; *P.L.* 4, 502: “Habere non potest Deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem.”

⁶⁵ *Mariale (Opera Omnia)*, ed. Borgnet, Parisiis, 1898, vol. 37), q. 145. Text in Keuppens, *op. cit.*, p. 212, n. 233.

was the co-operator (*adjutrix*) of the redemption by compassion, became in this way the mother of all by recreation.”⁶⁶ She “bore her firstborn Son without pain in His nativity; afterwards she bore the whole 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.”⁶⁷

Mary “changed the name of Eve, not the word but the reality; for the latter generated all men for the world, but the former for heaven; the latter was a carnal mother, the former the mother of mercy; the latter the principle of mortality, the former the principle of regeneration.”⁶⁸ Mary “is the mother of all the good, and the mother of grace, and the mother of mercy.”⁶⁹ “At the time of the passion, where she was present as the mother of mercy, . . . she also shared in the passion, and she became a co-operator (*adjutrix*) in the redemption, and the mother of regeneration. Hence it was there, because of her spiritual fecundity whereby she was made the spiritual mother of the human race, that she called and regenerated us all, not however without the pains of childbirth, into eternal life in her son and through her son.”⁷⁰ “The Blessed Virgin has this in common with the Pope: the solicitude of all the Churches; . . . because the Pope is the father of fathers, but she is the mother of all Christians; nay more, of all the good.”⁷¹ She is the “mother of virtues”;⁷² she is the “spiritual mother of all men,” the “spiritual mother of all the

⁶⁶ *Mariale*, q. 150; Keuppens, p. 215, n. 256.

⁶⁷ *Mariale*, q. 148; Keuppens, p. 215, n. 257.

⁶⁸ *Mariale*, q. 29; Keuppens, p. 215, n. 258.

⁶⁹ *Mariale*, q. 147; Keuppens, p. 216, n. 266.

⁷⁰ *Mariale*, q. 29; Keuppens, p. 217, n. 269. Cf. B. H. Merkelbach, O.P., *Mariologia*, Parisiis, 1939, p. 299.

⁷¹ *Mariale*, q. 36; Keuppens, p. 217, n. 270.

⁷² *Sermo in nativitate Beatae Mariae Virginis*, 1, 3; Keuppens, p. 218, n. 276.

faithful," the "mother of all Christians."⁷³ In explaining the spiritual motherhood of Mary St. Albert distinguishes three stages: first, her co-operation in the Incarnation whereby, in willingly becoming the Mother of our head and Redeemer, she became the spiritual mother of all His members; second, her co-operation in the passion of her Son on Calvary whereby she bore the pain of the cross in her soul; a compassion which her suffering Son recognized and as a consequence gave her not only to John but to the whole human race as a spiritual mother; third, her co-operation in the diffusion of the fruits of the redemption that is constantly going on in heaven.⁷⁴

St. Bonaventure (+ 1274) is well acquainted with our doctrine: "Because the Virgin Mary conceived Him Who is the head of all the elect and Whose members are the rest of the saved, she must have had an immense charity and benevolence to love all the elect with a maternal affection."⁷⁵ The idea is genuinely Augustinian: the mother of the head is the mother of the members.

The only place in the writing of St. Thomas Aquinas (+ 1274) where Mary is called our mother is in a prayer of doubtful authenticity, where she is called the "mother of all believers." We cannot even be sure of this, because in another reading she is called the "mother of the creator of all," rather than "of all believers."⁷⁶

The thirteenth century mystics, who were profoundly influenced by St. Bernard, do not cease to address Mary as their mother. St. Gertrude the Great (+ 1301) prays to her in

⁷³ *Mariale*, q. 11, q. 43, q. 145, q. 166. For these texts see M.-M. Desmarais, O.P., *S. Albert le Grand docteur de la médiation mariale*, Publications de l'Institut d'Études Médiévales d'Ottawa, 4; Ottawa, 1935, p. 129, n. 3.

⁷⁴ Cf. Desmarais, *op. cit.*, 128-132.

⁷⁵ *Sermo* 26, *In nativitate Domini*; *Opera Omnia*, Quaracchi, 1882-1902, vol. 9, p. 125.

⁷⁶ *Piae preces*, 10, *Ad Beatam Mariam Virginem ab omni religioso dicenda*; *Opuscula alia dubia*, Parma, vol. 24, p. 243.

these terms: "You have become the mother of all those of whom your only Son has not disdained to become the brother; so, by love of Him, receive me, unworthy that I am, in your maternal care; . . . become the mother of my faith . . . in order that you may always be my most dearly loved mother."⁷⁷ In the writings of St. Mechtilde of Magdeburg (+ 1280) Mary is the "mother of orphans," the "mother of exiles," our "mother and nurse"; and she speaks of her "maternal fidelity," her "matronly goodness."⁷⁸

11. *The Fifteenth Century*

From the fifteenth century on, affection for Mary as our spiritual mother increases in intensity of expression. John Gerson (+ 1429), Chancellor of the University of Paris, asks: "What can the mother of mercy deny to you, if she has consented that her own Son be offered to so great misery for you?"⁷⁹ Mary is the "good mother" who "wished to pay the price of redemption for her sons."⁸⁰ "Mary is the mother of grace,"⁸¹ and Gerson exhorts us to fly to the court of mercy "where for advocate and patroness we have our sister and the mother of our judge, Who cannot spurn us because He is our flesh and our brother. Let us go to this mother to obtain mercy."⁸²

St. Bernardine of Siena (+ 1444), the doctor of Mary's mediation, dwells lovingly upon her spiritual motherhood. Mary is the "mother of every grace" whom Christ gave to be "a mother for Himself and for the whole heavenly court"; she is

⁷⁷ *Exercitia spiritualia*, ed. Solesmes, Paris, 1875; vol. 1, p. 623.

⁷⁸ *Lux divinitatis*, 1, 20; *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae*, ed. Solesmes, Paris, 1877; vol. 2, p. 475, 666. Cf. Geenen, *art. cit.*, p. 345, n. 26, for references in this and the preceding note.

⁷⁹ Text in Keuppens, *op. cit.*, p. 229, n. 338.

⁸⁰ Keuppens, p. 229, n. 341.

⁸¹ Keuppens, p. 230, n. 348.

⁸² Keuppens, p. 231, n. 354.

especially the "mother of all who love Christ by the infusion of invisible grace." Even the souls in Purgatory are her children: "The Blessed Virgin delivers them from their torments, especially those who were devoted to her . . . ; yet [she delivers] all who are there because they are her children, since they are the children of grace."⁸³ As a good Franciscan, he continues the Augustinian tradition: "She [Mary] had in her womb, that is, in her intimate, maternal affection, the Son of God and the whole mystical Christ; that is, the head with the whole body of the elect."⁸⁴ By giving her consent to the Incarnation she sought and procured the salvation of all the elect, "so that from that moment she bore them all in her womb, as a mother in the truest sense bears her children."⁸⁵

When he explains the words of Christ on the Cross: "Woman, behold thy son," St. Bernardine rules out not only natural sonship but also any mere adopted sonship, as well as the type of sonship that comes from following one's doctrine. Christ did not say that John was *as it were* her son, but, "Woman, behold thy son." St. Bernardine goes on to explain: "Mystically, therefore, we understand in John all the souls of the elect, of whom the Blessed Virgin has become the mother by love; for 'son' in Greek is a name of love. All love of Christ passes into love of the Virgin, so that . . . one has the Virgin as his mother more than the woman who bore him in sin. . . . The evil woman, Eve, [was a mother] by the corruption of nature; the good woman, Mary, is the mother of grace, the mother of mercy. The mother of grace is given [to John] instead of his natural mother, yet both the natural mother remains and the mother of grace. John's natural

⁸³ Text in Lorenzo Di Fonzo, O.F.M.Conv., *La mariologia di S. Bernardino da Siena*, Roma, 1947; p. 40. Mary is the "mother of all" in *Sermo* 5 of the De La Haye edition of the works of St. Bernardine of Siena, Paris, 1635, vol. 4, p. 92; cf. Keuppens, *op. cit.*, p. 232, n. 360.

⁸⁴ Text in Lorenzo Di Fonzo, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

mother was Mary Salome; the Blessed Virgin is his mother in the order of grace. Eve is the mother of all by nature; the Virgin Mary is the mother of all who love Christ by the infusion of invisible grace. . . . Christ hanging on the cross before He died wished to manifest His love in every way; hence, if He gave the power to become the sons of God to those who believe in His name, which takes place not by nature but altogether by grace, why would He not have given to us to be sons of His mother, which takes place by grace, which is of infinite power? . . . Christ does not disdain that we should be His brethren through grace, in order that together with Him the eternal inheritance may be ours.”⁸⁶

It is clear that for St. Bernardine of Siena the spiritual motherhood of Mary is founded upon a communication of grace from her divine Son to us. When he says that neither nature nor *adoption* causes this motherhood, he makes clear that he has in mind the purely legal adoption which gives a title to earthly goods. He is not excluding the fact that by sanctifying grace we can and do become adopted sons of God. John represents all the elect; he and they are the spiritual sons of Mary because through her they have received supernatural life, which is life in a truer and higher sense than natural life. This life consists in the presence of sanctifying grace, which comes to us as a gift from Mary’s divine Son.

Mary’s maternal care for her children has never been expressed more tenderly than in these words which St. Bernardine puts on the lips of Christ as He hung on the Cross: “O my sweetest mother, the little flock of your children cannot now be deprived of your company. . . . It would be too hard if they were to be deprived at once of Me, their shepherd and father, and of you, their teacher and mother. Many people are still to be won for Me through those who will proceed from your loving womb. . . . Most sweet mother, you have

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

access to the chamber of my heart, so that coming in to Me and going out to your sons you can carry out what you will and dispense it to your sons.”⁸⁷

St. Antoninus of Florence (+ 1459) greets Mary as the sole mother of all men. He reasons as follows: “It is because she has borne corporally a man, Christ, and in this man she has borne spiritually all the rest. . . . It makes little difference that many saints have preceded her in this mortal life. If there is question of the order of nature, a son cannot exist in time before his mother; but it is different in order of grace. All the saints who have preceded Christ were saved by their faith, explicit or implicit, in the incarnate Word who one day was to be born of the Virgin; and it is in view of His plenitude that they received grace. In the same way as spiritual regeneration by grace proceeds, for the saints of the New Testament, from their living faith in the Word made man in the womb of Mary, so the saints of the Old Law owe their regeneration to their faith in the incarnation of the Word; the incarnation of which Mary was the free instrument. Hence the Blessed Virgin is without exception or restriction a mother for all men who are regenerated by grace.”⁸⁸

Dionysius the Carthusian (+ 1471) recalls the ancient theme that Mary is the mother of the Church: “Almighty God chose from eternity the Blessed Mary for mother and advocate, for guardian and mediatrix, of all the faithful and of the whole Church.”⁸⁹ He believes that she must have had a knowledge of the secrets of the Incarnation and of the other sacraments of the New Law, “otherwise, how could she be regarded as the mother of grace and redemptrix of the world?”⁹⁰ In his exposition of the hymn *Ave maris stella* he

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁸⁸ *Summa Theologica*, p. 4, tit. 15, c. 14, n. 3; cf. Terrien, *La mère des hommes*, vol. 2, p. 100.

⁸⁹ Text in Keuppens, *op. cit.*, p. 233, n. 362.

⁹⁰ Keuppens, p. 233, n. 368.

states that Mary is called the "queen of mercy, the mother of grace and salvation, . . . for God does not wish us to have anything that does not pass through the hands of Mary."⁹¹ During the three days when the body of Christ was in the tomb Mary exercised most difficult and perfect acts of virtue, so that she merited a kingdom of mercy over the human race and "became the mother of grace, the queen of piety, the mistress of the world, the princess of the heavens, and the ruler of the angels."⁹² Finally, "it is not an irrational belief that after the sending of the Paraclete all the apostles and disciples of Christ had recourse to Mary as to a mother most sweet and a most wise teacher in their activities and in doubtful matters, and for the most part (*plerumque*) they followed her direction."⁹³

It has been said that Dionysius the Carthusian is the first to interpret the text of *John* 19: 27, directly and expressly of Mary's spiritual maternity in our regard: "The beloved disciple designates any one of the faithful; when Jesus said, 'Behold your mother,' He gave Mary as mother to each one of Christians."⁹⁴ We have seen, however, that George of Nicomedia in the ninth century included the rest of the disciples in these words of Christ and that they were accommodated to at least all the faithful by St. Bernardine of Siena (+ 1444), Gerhoh of Reichersberg (+ 1169), Rupert of Deutz (+ 1135), Eadmer of Canterbury (+ 1124), and by Origen (+ 254). It cannot be denied that the doctrine of Mary's spiritual motherhood over men was seen as somehow contained in the words of Christ on the Cross long before the fifteenth century both in the East and in the West.

⁹¹ Keuppens, p. 234, n. 370.

⁹² Keuppens, p. 234, n. 373.

⁹³ Keuppens, p. 234, n. 374.

⁹⁴ Cf. F. Ceuppens, O.P., *Theologia Biblica*, vol. 4, *Mariologia Biblica*, Romae, 1948, p. 203.

12. *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*

During this period devotion to Mary as our spiritual mother spread rapidly and widely. We can give only a few samples of the tender appeals made to her by her children. St. Thomas of Villanova (+ 1555) in discussing the words of Christ in *John* 2: 3, "Woman, what is it to me and to thee?" has the Blessed Mother reply in these terms: "O my Son, I am their mother, the advocate of sinners; I cannot be disinterested in them."⁹⁵ St. Francis de Sales (+ 1622) prays to her: "Remember, Mary, that you are my mother and that I am your son; you are the common mother of all poor human beings, and especially my mother: accept me as your son."⁹⁶ St. Robert Bellarmine (+ 1621) makes this observation upon the words "Behold thy mother" of *John* 19: 27: "Unless I am mistaken, we also can obtain by our prayers from the benignity of the Word, Who was incarnate for our sake and crucified for us out of His immense love, that He also say to us: 'Behold your mother'; and to His mother: 'Behold your son.'"⁹⁷ Cornelius a Lapide (+ 1637) describes the Mother of God as a "mother of a family who wisely distributes to her children the graces which belong to their particular professions."⁹⁸ Contenson (+ 1674) in commenting upon the text, "Behold thy mother," lends to Christ these words: "He alone will be considered as the son of my sorrows who will have Mary for his mother. . . . Mary is the administratrix of the whole Church. The same one who is the mother of God is also the mother of Christians."⁹⁹

In 1673 a small book appeared at Ghent entitled, *Salutary Admonitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Her Indiscrete*

⁹⁵ Text in Geenen, *art. cit.*, p. 347.

⁹⁶ Text in Geenen, p. 347-348.

⁹⁷ *De septem verbis Christi in cruce*, c. 12; cited in lesson 7 of the third nocturn of the office for the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, August 22.

⁹⁸ Text in Geenen, p. 348.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Clients.¹⁰⁰ Its author was Adam Widenfeld, a lawyer of Cologne who was in sympathy with the Jansenists. The following year the book was translated into French. The sixth admonition is this: "Praise that is given to me as to myself is vain. Praise that is given to me as the mother and handmaid of the Lord is holy." Widenfeld distinguished between the cult of Mary as mother of God or handmaid of the Lord, which alone is legitimate, and that rendered to Mary as such. He would deny the cult due to Mary because of her own excellence and sanctity. He would also restrict our devotion to her solely as the mother of God; he would in effect rule out any veneration of her as the spiritual mother of men. The condemnation of Widenfeld's sixth admonition by the Holy Office on December 7, 1690, with the approval of Alexander VIII, was a powerful aid to devotion to Mary.¹⁰¹ Its influence is directly seen in St. Grignon de Monfort's *Treatise on True Devotion to the Holy Virgin* in 1712: a true client of Mary serves her not from a spirit of gain and of interest, not even for his temporal or eternal benefit, corporal or spiritual, but solely because she deserves to be served, and God alone in her. Mary is lovable for her own sake because she is not only the mother of God but our mother, as every mother is loved regardless of benefits already received from her or still expected. This is a purely disinterested love of friendship and benevolence as opposed to a love of concupiscence.¹⁰²

If we leave to one side as worthy of special consideration the teaching of the *magisterium* of the Church on the spiritual motherhood of Mary, we can sum up the testimony of tradition in the words of the Marianist, the Venerable William Chaminade, who died in 1850. He insisted that the name "mother of Christians" is not a metaphor, nor can its meaning

¹⁰⁰ *Monita salutaria B. V. Mariae ad cultores suos indiscretos.*

¹⁰¹ *D.B.* n. 1316.

¹⁰² Cf. Geenen, *art. cit.*, pp. 349-350.

be restricted to merely adopted motherhood. In explaining what this title means Père Chaminade accurately reflects the long tradition that has been rapidly reviewed in this study. His words are these: "The most holy Virgin is not only our mother . . . because she has adopted us as her children but . . . because she has given us birth spiritually, as she has truly given birth to Christ. . . . If we were children of Mary since Calvary, the words of Jesus to His mother: 'Woman, behold thy son,' would constitute only an adoption more or less close. Where in this hypothesis would the words of St. Luke be verified: Her firstborn son? Why say firstborn, if He is the only born? He would be the only born if we were only adopted children of Mary, since adoption does not make one to be born of the person who adopts. Besides, the holy Virgin would not in this case rigorously fulfill in our regard the functions of the new Eve. Furthermore, the bond that adoption establishes between Mary and us would not suffice for all our needs. We need a mother, truly and properly so-called, in the order of faith as in the order of nature. . . . The most holy Virgin is truly our mother; we all have life in Jesus Christ, Who took life in the womb of Mary. We are united in Christ, consequently we also take our spiritual life in Mary. . . . In accepting the honor of divine maternity she accepts the double quality of mother of Jesus Christ taken individually and of mother of Jesus Christ considered in the fullness of His body which is the Church. . . . In conceiving naturally the Savior in her virginal womb, she then conceived spiritually in her soul, by her love and by her faith, Christians, members of the Church, and, consequently, members of Jesus Christ. . . . In saying to the disciple: Behold your mother, Christ wished to say: Behold her who has begotten you spiritually in faith when she conceived Me corporally in her virginal womb; she is your

mother, as she is Mine; not indeed by the same title, no doubt, but nevertheless by a title of generation."¹⁰³

Conclusion

In closing a more or less chronological survey of the tradition of the Church on the spiritual maternity of Mary, it may be helpful if we can put together a common doctrine from the testimonies we have seen.

In the first place, tradition teaches that Mary became our spiritual mother at Nazareth at the moment of the Incarnation. At that moment she regenerated us by the fact that she engendered our Regenerator. Mary is our spiritual mother because she is the new Eve, the mother of Him Who came to give us spiritual life. This basic truth is clearly taught in the earliest testimonies of tradition. At the same time it was also recognized, especially by St. Augustine, that the Incarnate Word is indissolubly united with His members. In forming within her Christ, the head of the body which is the Church, Mary in a spiritual or mystical way has engendered also the members of this body. The mother of the head is the mother of all those who are identified with the head in the unity of a common body.

In the second place, tradition attaches the spiritual motherhood of Mary to Calvary, where by her compassion she underwent pains that many have likened to the pains of childbirth

¹⁰³ Text in Geenen, pp. 351-352. Besides the various authors referred to in the course of our paper, the following may also be consulted with profit: N. García Garcés, C.M.F., *Mater Corredemptrix* . . . , Taurini-Romae, 1940; G. Roschini, O.S.M., *Mariologia*, vol. 2 (pars prima), ed. 2, Romae, 1947, p. 199-227; G. Alastruey, *Tratado de la Virgen Santísima*, ed. 2, Madrid, 1947, pp. 747-768; J. M. Bover, S.J., *La maternidad espiritual de María en los Padres Griegos*, in *Estudios Marianos*, vol. 7, Madrid, 1948, pp. 91-104; J. Garreta, *La maternidad espiritual de María en los Padres Latinos*, *ibid.*, pp. 105-120; N. Pérez, S.J., *La maternidad espiritual en la teología y literatura española*, *ibid.*, pp. 287-298.

which Mary bore within her soul as she agonized with her Son. By these parturition pains at the foot of the cross Mary was in labor with us all. As Gerhoh of Reichersberg sums up the tradition on this point: "That blessed mother standing by the cross bore them all when, knowing that her only son was suffering to liberate and save them, she was in torture, with the sword of compassion piercing her soul, in order to bring them forth." Tradition has seen in the words of Christ to John, "Behold thy mother," an acknowledgment of Mary's spiritual motherhood over men by the part she played in their Redemption on the hill of Calvary.

In the third place, tradition recognizes that Mary's spiritual motherhood is still functioning in our regard in heaven. A mother has the care of her children closest to her heart. If Mary was our spiritual mother at Nazareth and on Calvary, she cannot lose interest in her children now that she is in heaven. Tradition begs of her to show herself a mother to us now, by her intercessory prayer and by distributing the fruits of the Redemption so bitterly won for us by her divine Son. As Christ is constantly being formed in the souls of her children, she may be said to be still in labor until the new birth is brought to completion. This is why tradition hails her as the mother of mercy, the mother of grace and of all virtues. As a mother has the care of her children always in her mind and constantly dispenses to them what they need for life, so Mary, our spiritual mother, exercises a maternal care over all her children and dispenses to them through her all-powerful intercession the graces and aids they need for salvation.

REV. DR. WILLIAM R. O'CONNOR,
ST. JOSEPH'S SEMINARY,
YONKERS, N. Y.