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OUR LADY'S PRESENT ROLE IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

INTRODUCTION

It is not overly apologetic to recall to you the difficulties one encounters in writing about Our Lady and her role in the communion of saints. Simple candor must acknowledge the problem inherent in a man writing about a woman, especially about a woman loved by God and chosen to be somehow or another significant for the salvation of all men. This predicament is most evident in the more mystical approaches to the study of Mary where Our Lady is so etherealized that her status as a woman utterly vanishes from before our eyes. Still and all, the mystical approach to Our Lady is based on a profound insight, that is, that Mary is incomparably beautiful in the physical and moral sphere, and thus one must relate to her on the level of intersubjective experience to understand her. A further refinement of this point indicates that Mary is much more comparable to Beatrice than to any woman a man might encounter today. In other words, she is the product of God's artistry. Employing the basic notions of S. K. Langer, we may say that Mary is the creation of an expressive form to present ideas of feeling.¹ Essentially, God is saying something through the life of Mary and the mysteries accomplished in and through her. It is this effort at communication that we are seeking to comprehend.

A factor both consoling and disturbing is that the topic we discuss today participates in the essential obscurity of all theology. This dilemma was graphically described to me by a professional mathematician and theologian. He was then engaged in his first experience of teaching theology. The teacher of mathematics, he said, walks into a classroom and thinks, "here

¹ Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art* (New York, 1957) 112.

is a body of knowledge which I know and the students do not. At the end of the course, they will know it too. In theology, however, the teacher realizes that here is a problem which he has considered. At the end of the course the students will have reflected on the problem likewise and very likely have generated a whole new series of problems."

Our aim in this paper is the intent of all theological effort: an individual and communal increase in the understanding, knowledge and wisdom suggested by Vatican I.² There will be a certain amount of groping in this paper because its background is a concern with ideas emerging in the secular interpretation of the gospel and an interest in the social developments of our age. I am also influenced by the fact that today no one world view has a monopoly on the truth. In the light of this evident sociological fact, it should be clear that Mariology deserves new examination by believers of all persuasions. In any case, the procedure in this paper will be to examine the idea of the communion of saints, to make some observations on unity (since the communion of saints is basically a form of unity), and then to turn to the role of Our Lady in the light of the preceding analysis.

The Communion of Saints

The insertion of the phrase "communion of saints" into the Apostles' Creed "probably goes back to the end of the fourth century."³ The total phrase does not appear "in its exact literal form either in the Bible or in the writers of the first three centuries."⁴ Obviously, the idea is present in Scripture. In both the Johannine and Pauline literature the idea involves a series of personal relationships. "For St. John the idea of relationship between persons seems primary, whereas for St. Paul that of participation in some object is in the foreground, though in

² DB (ed. 1963) 3020.

³ Emilien Lamirande, *The Communion of Saints*, tr. A. Manson (New York, 1966) 17.

some cases, as that of participation in Christ, it necessarily attracts the complementary idea of personal relationships."⁵ Through Alexander of Hales and Albert the Great there comes a synthesis of the two "main ideas about the communion of saints: a share in the same things, communion between persons."⁶

The Thomist interpretation of the phrase "communion of saints" unites and integrates the two aspects inherent in the words: one receives the sacraments and thus is in unity with the Church; the effect of this reception of the sacraments is that a believer now becomes a member of the communion of saints.⁷

Recent interpretations of the expression arise from a diversity in understanding the word "*sanctorum*" which may be translated either as a participation of or in holy things, or as a community of holy persons—Christians on earth, in purgatory, in heaven. If one is to turn to the official teaching of the Church, there is equal emphasis on both aspects of the locution—communion in the sacraments and the relations which exist among the members of the community.⁸ The catechism of the Council of Trent had emphasized Thomas' idea, that is, the very simple thought that the communion of saints is participation in Christ's life;⁹ this is the fundamental aspect. Later theologians stressed "reciprocal communion in good works and merit."¹⁰ This particular emphasis ignored the synthesis that had been worked out earlier.

While acknowledging with Fr. De Ghellinck¹¹ the difficulty of giving a precise definition to the phrase, Lamirande proposes the definition which would join the original components: sharing in the holy things of the Church plus the series of re-

⁴ Lamirande, *op. cit.*, 21.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 22.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, 28.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, 29.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, 52.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, 30.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, 52.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, 56.

lations that exist among the believers. "Christ, the head of the Church, is its vital centre, and the Holy Spirit is the active power that brings it into being. All reasonable creatures, angels and men, are organically one in the same economy, called by grace and the theological virtues to share in God's own life. The sacraments and the other means entrusted to the Church produce, foster or manifest this fraternal communion. Eschatology points to the goal: the communion of saints in its uttermost perfection."¹² Let us not quarrel with this descriptive definition for the moment, and move on to what Lamirande considers the foundations of a teaching about a community of saints.

Basis of Communion of Saints

Fundamentally, the communion of saints is the reflection of the communal life of the Trinity. There is the perfect sharing in the divine nature and perfect distinction among the Persons — a perfect and primordial communion and sharing. When the Father sent the Son, He sent Him precisely into the human community. And at the time of the resurrection-ascension event, the Spirit is sent to the human community now forming itself into a Church. The point of the coming of the Son and the Spirit is to effect a human communion and bring into existence a community comparable to the divine community. This intention is clear from the scriptural evidence that God will have us be His sons, participants in His own nature. Adoptive filiation was experienced by Israel, primarily in the exodus (*Ex.* 4:22; *Ho.* 11:1; *Jr.* 3:19; *Ws.* 18:13). Ultimately, awareness "of filial adoption becomes one of the essential elements of Jewish piety."¹⁴ The primal son of God in the strictest sense

¹² *Op. cit.*, 58.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, 66 ff.

¹⁴ Cf. P. Joseph Cahill, S.J., ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Desclée, Belgium), s.v. "Son," private ms. of forthcoming English translation.

is Jesus.¹⁵ The synoptics, the Johannine and Pauline literature all affirm that all men are called to be sons of God; man's ultimate destiny is to participate "in the nature of Him who has adopted him as His son (2 P. 1:4)."¹⁶

This called to community on the horizontal and vertical level is extended to the whole human race. Therefore, it would seem that the communion of saints has an essential openness to it in the sense that all men are called to be part of this community and they must have the real possibility of entering this community (I shall later propose that their entry into this communion of saints is achieved through charity). "The dogma of the communion of saints presupposes not only the unity of the Church of the New Testament but also the unity of the whole economy of salvation and the continuity between its different stages. In this light, the Church, the new Israel, the society instituted by Jesus Christ to be the field in which the redemptive activity should exercise its influence and the means of perpetuating its achievement, is seen to be embodied in a vaster setting."¹⁷

Lamirande, in common with others, holds that there is no communion of saints outside the Church.¹⁸ But the Church here must not be too narrowly defined. "The Church... is 'Jesus Christ spread abroad and communicated.'"¹⁹ Its essence is delineated in the pentecostal account. "The tongues of fire proclaim the gifts of tongues that are to come; we have here indeed a parable in action which signifies and ordains the world-wide preaching to the gentiles. For these gifts were in fact scattered on the Apostles simply that they might carry out a mission of unity: the Holy Spirit, manifested through them, is about to re-establish mutual comprehension among

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Lamirande, *op. cit.*, 83.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, 104.

¹⁹ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Catholicism*, tr. L. C. Sheppard (New York, 1964) 31, quoting Bossuet.

men, since each individual will understand in his own language the one truth which is to reunite him to his fellows. . . ."²⁰ The Church, the people of God, is intended to be a universal society in which all peoples are reunited. Thus, while the Church is in one aspect a visible institution and so, as Fr. de Lubac points out, a subject for sociological investigation, under another aspect the Church is "a vast spiritual organization, unseen even by those who are its members, which is known only to God."²¹

Now the point of these statements is simply to assert that the Church may be identified with the communion of saints. But one should keep in mind all the meanings of "Church" when he makes the identification. I would suggest that the point of the term communion of saints is not to designate particular collectivity here and now—that group which we identify as members of the Church—but rather to indicate God's plan for the human race as such. Insofar as the communion of saints designates a particular group of believers here and now, including anyone in the Church or connected with the goods of the Church, it is essentially an imperfect community because God calls *all* men to belong to this community. Insofar as the communion of saints denotes the call and plan of God for men to form a total human community, the phrase is an apt reminder of the social nature of Christianity, a notion we shall expand because it touches vitally the place of Mary in this communion of saints considered as a call to total human community.

The Unity of Human Society

Fr. de Lubac in his book *Catholicism* notes that the "Gospel is obsessed with the idea of the unity of human society."²² There is no need to develop scriptural indications of this unity.

²⁰ H. de Lubac, *op. cit.*, 34.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, 40.

²² *Op. cit.*, x.

The Genesis account stresses the natural unity. Later supernatural unity presupposes and requires an earlier natural unity. There is no possibility of disrupting the natural unity; the spiritual unity is disrupted by all the evils included under the theological term "sin," but most especially by hatred or indifference to our fellow human beings.²³ The process of redemption is one whereby man recovers a lost unity, his unity with God and his unity with his brothers. God's primary intention, as we discover this intention in Scripture and tradition, is the communication of Himself and the unity which exists within the Trinity. "This self-communication of God is addressed to every spiritual creature; by sanctifying grace here in this world, and by the direct sight and love of God and the perfect possession of Him in the next."²⁴ If the communication of unity is God's intention, then we may assert that any activity which promotes unity among men is somehow or another furthering God's plan for mankind, the establishment of the communion of saints.

The central event in this salvation history of which we are speaking is the Incarnation. In the Caiaphas narrative it is clearly pointed out that Jesus should die for the nation, but also to gather together in one group the children of God that were dispersed.²⁵ Hence the function of the Church is to "reveal to men that pristine unity that they have lost, to restore and complete it."²⁶ Any activity which discloses and nourishes this unity is an activity of the Church, whether it is Church-sponsored or not. Hence it would seem that the term communion of saints is best understood if we regard it as a dynamic process rather than a present static state. Understood in this light, the communion of saints looks primarily to the future and only secondarily to the present. And even as a term speaking of a

²³ *Op. cit.*, 20.

²⁴ Karl Rahner, S.J., *Mary, Mother of the Lord. Theological Meditations*, tr. W. J. O'Hara (New York, 1963) 11.

²⁵ H. de Lubac, *op. cit.*, 24.

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, 33.

present state of affairs the phrase should suggest to active members of the Church the mission of the Church—to remind and recall all men to unity. I propose this with the thought that how we think of a theological phrase often colors our activities.

Our Lady's Role

If this approach to the communion of saints is correct, then Mary has a very special role to play. Our Lady is herself a composite of the unity God intends for all mankind. She is the corporate personality perfectly representing the communion of saints. The theory of corporate personality, as Fr. de Fraine reminds us, is that the person in question primarily signifies certain individuals, for example, the royal head of the family insofar as that royal or kingly father includes the entire group within himself. The second aspect of corporate personality is that the community is summed up completely and concretely in one individual.²⁷ Our Lady, in this instance, is the corporate personality who includes the entire communion of saints within herself because she is the unity to which God calls all men. Secondly, she is the corporate personality which includes the entire communion of saints as a terminal state in herself insofar as she sums up completely and perfectly the communion of saints.

I would suggest that in this corporate personality there are two levels of unity which are the prototypes of the unity God wishes to achieve in the communion of saints and has, as a matter of fact, accomplished in Mary. There is furthermore the cause of unity eminently existing in the corporate personality. Let us turn to these levels of unity and their cause as they exist in Mary.

Types of Unity

There is, first of all, a psychological unity in Mary. By

²⁷ Jean de Fraine, S.J., *Adam and the Family of Man* (New York, 1966) *passim*.

psychological unity I mean the unity that exists within the spirit or psyche of the person when various tensions and even seeming contradictions can co-exist in harmony. Thus one has psychological unity not when tension is absent but when tensions are reconciled into an orchestrated harmony. It has even been suggested that the peculiar contribution of Christianity to western thought has been its reconciliations of seeming opposites as is clearly evident when we affirm that this man, Jesus Christ, is God. In the case of Mary she is, first of all, a virgin and at the same time a mother. She is totally human, yet from the standpoint of grace, God's communication of self, a perfect reflection of divine activity. She has passed through death, yet lives. With an earthly body she is in a heavenly state. The total reconciliation of these particular tensions existing within Mary proclaims one vital fact: that the "flesh is already saved."²⁸ She proclaims that the most extreme tensions are reconciled by correspondence with the divine initiative. In this sense we may say that the present life of Mary is that of a prophetess in action. By what she is and what she did she is affirming that God is present in the world, and He is present as the creator of unity both within the person and within the community.²⁹ And this unity is achieved not by the elimination of tensions but by their harmony.

If Mary is the prototype of psychological unity, she is likewise the exemplar of spiritual unity. By spiritual unity I mean the situation that exists when the total person in corporeal form is in sound orientation not simply within himself but towards other persons and towards God. When Vatican II consistently proposes Mary's life "as a rule of life"³⁰ it is equivalently saying two things. First, Mary's "sanctity is wholly theological, for

²⁸ Rahner, *op. cit.*, 91.

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, 59.

³⁰ *Religious Life*, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, gen. ed. W.M. Abbott, tr. ed. J. Gallagher (New York, 1966) 481, #25.

it is the perfection of faith, hope and charity."³¹ Thus man is to reproduce this sanctity and in so doing achieves unity with God. Secondly, the Church is maintaining that one can no longer say anything about God, or how one relates to God, without saying something about man, that is, there is no theology without an anthropology. Spiritual unity is not achieved by a flight from the human condition but rather by an immersion within the human condition—its concerns, its fears, its hopes, its desires, its thoughts, its works, its methodology, its failure. Thus the praise of man is now the praise of God who identified Himself with man and then went on to typify the type of unity to which God calls man in the corporate personality of Mary. "That is ultimately why a mariology is possible, a teaching of faith concerning the Blessed Virgin Mother of Our Lord. That is why mariology is not merely a piece of the private life-story of Jesus of Nazareth, of no real ultimate significance for our salvation, but an affirmation of faith itself concerning a reality of the faith, without which there is no salvation."³² The point of Mary as the prototype of spiritual unity is that she is in perfect orientation vertically, with God, and horizontally, with the human community. She, a human person, has achieved perfectly her human task, that of giving the God-man to the world.³³ At the same time Mary is the reminder that the task of the Church on earth will be achieved when it gives the Eucharistic Christ to the world. And only through the accomplishment of this task will there be spiritual unity among men.

Given that Mary is the prototype of the psychological and spiritual unity that God wishes to achieve in the human community and has achieved in one human person, Mary is testimony to the ultimate cause of community and communion for she is witness to transcendence. She is, therefore, the reminder

³¹ H. de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church*, tr. M. Mason (Glen Rock, N.J., 1963) 233.

³² Rahner, *op. cit.*, 26.

³³ H. de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church*, 200.

that man is unified within himself, psychological unity, and within the human race, spiritual unity, only by unity with God. Thus she reminds us that we have "a transcendent destiny which presupposes the existence of a transcendent God."³⁴ This reminder of transcendence, as Fr. de Lubac points out, is against our current submission in time, our concern with philosophies of becoming, our hope in the future combined with our concern and anxiety for the morrow.³⁵ Thus amidst all the striving for unity in the world, we are reminded that the unity for which we strive has already been achieved by the work of God in the corporate personality of Our Lady. Representing the whole human race, she stands before God as a perfect unity. Though the human community is divided upon earth through the strife of race and ideology, and though the communion of saints is only very imperfectly realized, we all, members of the total human community, are already one in a community of grace and nature that has been actualized in the person of one of our race. As a witness to transcendence, Mary recalls divided humanity to the work God has already achieved in the human race. She further stands as testimony to the unity to which God calls man: the unity of the whole human race in the communion of saints.

Human Cause of Unity

In addition to being the psychological and spiritual example of the unity to which God calls the human race, Mary is also the exemplar of how this unity of the communion of saints and of the whole human race is to be achieved. The greatest unifying force within the human personality and the human race as such is love. Mary is the perfect prototype of the unifying force of love on the horizontal level—love of men for each other, for she gave her Son to men through His death and resurrection. "The consent she gave in faith and obedience

³⁴ H. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 199.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, 202.

belongs not only to her private life-story, but to the public history of redemption. . . ." ³⁶ It was her free consent given out of love that opened the world to the saving mystery of the Incarnation. Thus Mary stands as concrete testimony that the communion of saints will be realized only insofar as the operative force of love exists on the horizontal level.

We must not here be deceived about the nature of love, that is, to look at our Blessed Lady and assume that she simply made a will act and loved God and the task He asked her to perform. Mary must have loved her neighbor, and this in a high degree. And then God asked for the supreme manifestation of this love. Mary's consent then goes on to indicate what God can do when the power to love is put into execution. Very concretely, she was asked to love a Child. What would happen to and through this Child was quite in the hands of God and His providence.

There is no artificial substitute for love, not even a will act. A man does not normally decide to fall in love with a particular woman; it just happens. Given the happening, however, both the man and the woman must nourish and cherish this love. There must be visible accompaniments to the love—words of love, deeds of love, reassurances of love. Otherwise love is atrophied, ultimately dies or turns into indifference and possibly even worse. The total pattern of Mary indicates that she is no exception to this rule.

But further Mary is testimony to the power of God when He finds love, His power to go beyond the seemingly normal outcome of love. And this testimony will have man stand before the transcendent God in humility, praise, awe, and worship. Whether one stand before God as the publican saying, "Lord have mercy on me a sinner," or as Mary, the perfect human being, saying, "He who is mighty has done great things to me," the point is the same. Man stands before God who

³⁶ Rahner, *op. cit.*, 38.

can bring the unexpected and unmerited out of man if man chooses to exercise his powers of love.

Yet, this acknowledgment that it is God who unifies and saves is total affirmation of the human personality and its rights and duties. For it is only when man loves and gives visible accompaniments to his love through the concrete deeds suggested in the Bible that anything is achieved within the human community. It is not God who clothes the naked, consoles the bereaved, visits the prisoners, gives the drink of water, but man. This human love must be exercised just as concretely in deed as was the case with Mary who gave her body and affection to a Child.

Faced with this Christian proposal perfectly exemplified in Mary, man has three possible alternatives: love, hate, indifference. God's choice of Mary indicates that the great unitive and saving power is that of love. Mary's response to God comes not from hatred, assuredly not from indifference, but rather from her power to love.

Consequently, we may say that a large part of Mary's role in the process of achieving the communion of saints is to stand for and symbolize the power of love as opposed to its two alternatives—hatred or indifference. Thus wherever in this world that one finds love, it would seem that one finds the activity of the spirit attempting to realize the communion of saints. Nor must one think of love simply as that power which directs itself to God and hence makes one perform certain specific religious obligations. The power to love is a human power that operates in human conditions, with human beings as its term and object. A dramatic instance of what I am speaking of was presented in *Life* magazine October 28, 1966. The picture of the Viet Nam war shows a white soldier cradling an injured negro soldier in his arms. The negro soldier has his head and eyes completely bandaged. The care and concern of the white soldier, evident from the expression on his face, is far more evident from the fact that he is holding the negro soldier

in his arms—close to himself, affording all the protection, sympathy and love that he can give, the type of love God exhibited for the human race in selecting Mary, and the type of love that Mary exemplifies perfectly on the human level. I call this love uncovenanted because there was no structure, no law, no institution that legislated, proposed or even thought of God entering the human race through the choice and then the body of a woman. Nor is there any institution or structure which can stimulate the love of the white for the negro soldier. Thus it strikes me what God is saying through His entrance into the world by this uncovenanted form of love is that the destiny of the human race is unity, specifically unity through the power of love. I say further that this uncovenanted form of love is an indication to all men that the power of love is not necessarily confined to a particular group of believers nor even to a particular group assembled into a Church. Where love is present and operative on the human level, there the spirit is operating—the spirit of the Most High will overshadow you—and the communion of saints is coming into existence.

This love of which we are speaking is essentially creative. The love of God manifested in the human love of Mary brought the Word of God into human existence and essentially created a new situation for all mankind. While the love of a man for a woman is creative in the sense that it tends to the origin of new life, it is further creative in the sense that it makes a new being of two people who are in love. They now do not exist separately but as one being. They begin to think alike, speak alike and even, if some psychologists are correct, look alike. Mary's role in the communion of saint is to synthesize for all men the fact that love is creative and it alone will create the communion of saints.

If the communion of saints says something about the unity of the human race, then Mary says something about the fact that this unity will be achieved through love that is as concrete and effective as was her love. As the prototype of psychological

unity on the horizontal and vertical level she is the complete synthesis of the essence of Christianity and the aspirations of all mankind. As such she is the corporate personality manifesting the completeness of God's work while at the same time opening horizons of unity and love among all members of the human community.

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