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OUR LADY IN THE EARLY LATIN LITURGY

A college student of English History recently confessed: "I knew all about the persecutions under the Tudor Queen, Bloody Mary, but until I read Evelyn Waugh's *Edmund Campion* I didn't know there was a persecution under Elizabeth."

In like fashion innumerable non-Catholics will quote medieval exuberance in devotion to Our Lady, as if it started then. But ask them (and a good many Catholics also) if there was any recognition of Our Lady's singular prerogatives in the early Latin Church, and they will probably deny it, or at least confess that they don't know of any. All this has a lamentable effect on the Catholic image and is responsible for a totally false conception among non-Catholics of the Church's Marian cult. If they knew the truth they would not still quote the Blessed Virgin as an "obstacle to unity" among Christians.

For it is, of course, not such an obstacle to unity between Catholics and Greek (or Russian) Orthodox. Quite the contrary.

Because of the importance of dissolving false and hazy ideas about the early liturgical cult of the Blessed Virgin in the West, I will refrain from giving you a list of complicated details, hard to visualize and impossible to remember, which would be required to assess the date and composition of Our Lady's various feasts, which, in any case, are still being worked out. I propose rather to dwell on what is meant by 'the early Liturgy in the West,' what inspired it, and the vital fact that the one Marian Mass, early established and incontestable, which preceded all others, recognizes and proclaims liturgically all Our Lady's essential prerogatives. For this happy result we have to thank a series of devoted scholars, including the Benedictine Fathers John H. Capelle, Georges Frenaud, Bernard Botte, Ambrose Verheul, Simeon Daly, and Manuel Garrido of Silos.¹

¹ The names of Canon Jouassard, René Laurentin, and A. Chavasse should, of course, be added to the list.

I

First, then, a word about that term in our title, 'Liturgy.' It comes from two Greek words meaning 'a public work,' some service that would represent and serve the people as a community. Among the Greeks, fitting out a warship for the Expedition to Syracuse (415 B.C.) was regarded as a patriotic service or Liturgy. So was the equipment of a Pompé, or elaborate Delegation representing the City-State of its origin at one of the religious festivals, such as that of Olympian Zeus. For Christians it meant the public worship of the Church. Now it covers all our public worship as contained in the *Caeremoniale Episcoporum*.

When did the Latin Liturgy begin? For the first three centuries, while the Church was still an Underground Movement, the Church of the Catacombs, still using the Greek language that had become universal after the conquests of Alexander the Great, there were in the celebration of the Eucharist certain common features, as we can gather from the *Dialogue with Tryphon* of St. Justin Martyr († 163) and the younger Pliny's letter to the Emperor Trajan (ruled 98-117) on the Christian services he had been investigating in his province. They were the following: the reading of the Diptychs, the expulsion of the Catechumens and others after the Creed, the offering by the people of bread and wine (and other things needed to maintain the priests), the Preface, Consecration, Pater Noster, reception of the Eucharist, thanksgiving and dismissal; and also, as Pliny indicates, the collection.

Some of the earliest hymns and prayers seem to have become embedded in the New Testament and are being recovered. Others can be gleaned from the *Didaché*, the *Apostolic Constitution*, and Pope Clement's *Letter to the Corinthians* (Pope Clement ruled 99-100).

The first liturgical books in the West were the Sacramentaries. These were not at first complete missals as we know

them, although *Sacramenta* had by St. Augustine's time come to designate the Mass.

The earliest Sacramentary, the Leonine of the v-vi centuries, represents the pure Roman rite before additions were made from outside. It included 28 Masses for SS. Peter and Paul, but no Canon of the Mass, which would be in a separate book, as in our Pontifical Masses. There was also the liturgy of the Papal Court, representing the austere Roman rite which ultimately became absorbed by the other liturgies then current.

The Gregorian Sacramentary was the Roman use with some additions. A copy of this was sent, on request, by Pope Adrian to Charlemagne (781-791) with the description "as composed by our illustrious predecessor" (i.e. Pope St. Gregory the Great, 590-604), although it had already been added to since his time. This Sacramentary, after some editing by the English scholar Alcuin, who was then teaching Classics to the reluctant Frankish Court, and with some additions from other Gallic sources became the Gelasian Sacramentary. There followed the exciting and romantic Mozarabic Liturgy, (of which the *Exsultet* in Holy Week is typical), and the *Breviarium*, mostly Frankish in origin. The Liturgy in Milan, (the Ambrosian), and the Spanish at Toledo also had, and still have retained their own peculiarities.

Gradually all the different sections for the celebrant, for the readers, and for the singers were gathered into a single volume which remained virtually unchanged from the revision by Pope St. Pius V († 1572) until the liturgical explosions of our own day.

II

Now we come to a vital principle in assessing the origins of a Marian cult in the early Liturgy of the West. Using the word cult as meaning cultivation, rapport, devotion, we ask: which came first cult or Liturgy? And if cult came first, what, in turn, gave birth to that cult? We shall see that it was the

accumulating popular pressure. Marian liturgical recognition was not occasioned by a series of feasts imposed from above: it was the acceptance of popular acclamation exerting pressure from below. As Father Laurentin says significantly: "Practically never do we assist at the institution of a feast: we find it emerging imperceptibly in the life of the Church."²

We make no excuse for taking a little time illustrating this principle from various sources because disappointment has been felt, and expressed, at the supposedly scanty traces of a Marian cult before the Council of Ephesus (431). And the critics mistakenly assume that it is a liturgical expression which comes first, "as on original source" (Pius XII), then the theological elaboration, and finally popular awareness.

Actually, the process is almost exactly the opposite. It was the faithful, drawing upon Holy Scripture, who first apprehended the Marian prerogatives: these were elaborated by the Fathers and Scripture Commentators (such as Origen † 254), and then, thirdly, the beliefs found their place in the Liturgy.

Thus Pope Pius XII declares—and the principle is of the first importance—"The Liturgy is not the mother of the Catholic Faith, but its child. Wherefore the holy Fathers and great Doctors of the Church did not draw the doctrine of the Assumption from the Liturgy, as an original source, but rather spoke of the doctrine as something well known and accepted by the faithful."³ The order, then, is recognition by the faithful, exposition by the Fathers and theologians, crystallization in the Liturgy.

The process is paralleled in Semantics. First comes the verbal exchange of ideas, however crudely put, (e.g. 'You Jane: me Tarzan'); then the rules of grammar; finally, officially sponsored use.

There is an interesting parallel also in the evolution of the English Common Law. I quote, "The only law recognized in

² Laurentin, *Court traité de théologie mariale* (Paris, 1959) 147.

³ Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, in *AAS* 42 (1950) 753.

the Middle Ages was the good old law, the inherited custom of the people, which was above and superior to the State, and which none, not even the King, could alter. None save God could make the law, which has existed from time immemorial, beyond human touch."⁴

The point here is: this was a grass roots law, from God, not invented by but apprehended by the people without direction from King or Parliament. So, in Our Lady's case, the grass roots devotion was something apprehended by the people before its literary expression in the Liturgy.

Let us hear some other important statements on the same theme. Cardinal Tisserant, concluding the Marian Congress at Lourdes, said,

the *sensus fidelium* has played an important part in the preparation for Marian dogma.⁵

Père Régamy has this:

popular devotion is always the source of initiative. The Liturgy takes up the theme and finally the theologians work out the explicit statement of Mary's prerogatives.⁶

At the Cambridge Conference in England Father Garvin said:

Though there was constraint on public recognition and ever-rapid development of a Marian *cultus*, it was equally natural that it should exist in its own distinct, veiled, and seminal manner.⁷

That word 'seminal' is expressive. As all truth existed in the *depositum* left with the Apostles to be developed when the

⁴ G. Barraclough, quoted by Sir Arthur Bryant, *Law and Legislation in Medieval England* (New York, 1967) 144, n. 2.

⁵ Card. Tisserant, in *MEcl* 5, 57 ff.

⁶ Régamy, quoted by H. Daniel-Rops, *The Book of Mary* (New York, 1966) 97.

⁷ J. Garvin, *Devotion and Devotions to Our Lady*, in *Cambridge Summer School Lectures for 1933* (London, 1934) 229.

Jacobi which is "perhaps of the middle of the second century,"¹⁴ all of which stories, in spite of, or perhaps because of, their romantic padding, exhibit a real and universal desire to know more about the Mother of God, as an integral part of the Faith, and a vivid sense of her illustrious prerogatives.

Of which another reminder was the continually unrolling sequence of heresies, especially from the Gnostic school, and the consequent appeal to Our Lady's association with Christ, the Redeemer, to refute them all, so that it was sung of her "*Cunctas haereses sola interemisti in universo mundo.*"

The oldest surviving prayer to the Blessed Virgin, with its recognition of her power to act as Mediator, the *Sub tuum praesidium*, goes back to "the fourth, perhaps the third century."¹⁵ It can hardly have been unique. The written record of the first five centuries, such as it has come down to us, also indicates a robust appreciation of Our Lady's special graces and significance. Read, for example, the dramatization of the Annunciation scene in St. Ephrem and St. Peter Chrysologus¹⁶ (Bishop of Ravenna, 425-50) or the advice of St. Ambrose (340-397) to imitate her because "such was Mary that the life of her, by itself, is a code of training in virtue for all."¹⁷ Or follow a discussion of the events in her life, e.g. the Sword of Simeon, her Vow of Virginity, and her Assumption in St. Epiphanius († 403) and between St. Ambrose and his circle of friends¹⁸ especially St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and St. Paulinus of Nola († 431).

¹⁴ Laurentin, *op. cit.*, 143, quoting E. de Stricker, S.J.

¹⁵ Laurentin, *op. cit.*, 49. Pope Paul VI calls it: "this most ancient antiphon which, with some slight difference, forms part of the liturgical prayer in the East as well as the West," and refers to Dom F. Mercenier, O.S.B., *L'antienne mariale grecque la plus ancienne*, in *Msn* 52 (1939) 229-223. See the Holy Father's Letter *Signum magnum* of May 13, 1967, in *Our Lady's Digest*, (July-August, 1967) 108-118.

¹⁶ Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* 142; *PL* 52, 579.

¹⁷ St. Ambrose, *De virginibus*, lib. 2, cap. 2; *PL* 16, 210 D.

¹⁸ Cf. *PL* 33, 468-470, 644.

Then there was the Second Eve¹⁹ motif in Tertullian (b. circa 150), Irenaeus († c. 202) and Justin (v. sup.), filling Christian minds with Marian speculation based on Scripture, and going back to sub-apostolic times. Already, even before Ephesus, Mary was thought of as Virgin, Sinless, Advocate, actively associated with our Redemption, 'Mother of the Living,' 'Mother of the Church,' Queen, and Pattern of Christian living.

Moreover Our Lady's name would be pronounced and her divine Maternity recalled at every Baptism, and in the celebration of the Eucharist both in the Creed and in the commemoration of Saints in the Canon.²⁰

And we are still turning up instances of early devotion to the Blessed Mother. The Boston weekly paper, *The Pilot*, for July 8, 1967, reports that the British School of Archaeology found a 6th century portrait in mosaic of the Blessed Virgin as Mistress of the Seas,²¹ at Madaba in Jordan near the north end of the Dead Sea.

So the grass roots apprehending of the Blessed Mother by the people was gathering strength, working up energy for the explosion after Ephesus. As Mount Etna needs hidden fires before it erupts, as water had to collect in the rock in the desert before the rod of Moses could set it free, as the fingers of St. Bernadette did but release the steady flow of water that had been accumulating underground at Massabielle, so the energy of the Marian recognition gathered strength until, in God's Providence, it burst its bonds and spread across the ancient Christian world.

¹⁹ Cf. Laurentin, *op. cit.*, 38-40.

²⁰ Sc. "Communicantes et memoriam venerantes in primis gloriosae Virginis Mariae, Genitricis Dei et D.N.J.C." Note also how St. Gregory the Great (in 1 Kings, 1:5) points to Mary's pre-eminence: "Is not that 'lofty mount' Mary, who, that she might attain to the conception of the Eternal Word, raised the level of her virtues above all the choirs of angels to the very throne of God?"

²¹ Medieval dock-side churches in England, still in use, were so dedicated to Our Lady and St. Nicholas.

III

Having shown that the Marian cult, that is, the cultivation of Mary, as many indications demonstrate, came first and her liturgical recognition later, we now have to investigate exactly how Our Lady figured in the Liturgy in the early Western Church.

In general, her four main feasts came from the East and their progress is not easy to disentangle. The date of each feast varied in different countries. For example, Father Laurentin²² reckons that in North Italy Our Lady's Mass was celebrated, in the middle of the fifth century, on the last Sunday of Advent; in sixth century Gaul, on the 18th the December; in Rome 550-595, on the first of January; in Spain in 656 on the 18th of December. Dom Frenaud²³ narrows down the dates of the four subsequent main feasts, imported from the East, as follows: Purification, (February 2nd), 640-2; Annunciation (March 25th) and Dormition (August 15th), 650; and the Nativity of Our Lady (September 8th), 660-70. To three of these Pope Sergius I (687-701), himself an Easterner, extended the Procession which already distinguished the Purification on February, whose Greek-inspired words and tunes still survive.

Had Rome then no native Mass of its own in honour of the Blessed Mother? To that question we can answer Yes: we even possess, thanks to M. l'Abbé Chavasse,²⁴ the actual prayers of that Mass in the austere Roman pattern, which preceded all other liturgical recognition of Mary in the West. They did more. They included, at least implicitly but usually explicitly, the whole range of Our Lady's prerogatives.

²² Laurentin, *op. cit.*, 147-148. See the entire Appendix.

²³ G. Frénaud, O.S.B., *Le culte de Notre-Dame dans l'ancienne liturgie latine*, in H. du Manoir, S.J. (Ed.), *Maria*, 6 (Paris, 1966) 157-192.

²⁴ A. Chavasse, *Le Sacramentaire Gélisien* (Paris, 1958) 381-383, 651-657. Cf. also H. A. Wilson, *The Gregorian Sacramentary under Charles the Great* (London, 1915); *Le Sacramentaire Gélisien*. Bibliothèque de Théologie, ser. IV, Vol. 1 (Paris-Tournay, 1959).

These prayers had been long lost since they had been scattered among or rendered unrecognizable by Gallican additions. So much so that for a time most people denied the existence of any separate Roman form of the Mass. But these 'farced' (i.e. stuffed, padded) prayers betrayed themselves by destroying the clear-cut rhythm or balance of the restrained and dignified Roman original. Credit of recognizing the precedence of the Roman Rite must go initially to Edmund Bishop,²⁵ the distinguished liturgical scholar at the turn of the century, who with Dom Hugh Connolly, championed the preeminence of the Roman Mass in the face of persistent opposition especially by Probst and Adrian Fortescue.

The characteristic format of these Roman prayers is recognizable in many of those that we still use, especially in the Collects for the Sundays after Pentecost, as you may prove for yourselves. It includes:

1. Address to God, with
2. An attribute (adjective, phrase or sentence beginning with a relative pronoun).
3. The main petition.
4. The hoped-for result.
5. Doxology.

Let us now examine the prayers of the Roman January Mass, which grew out of the Octave Mass for Christmas Day, for, at first, Our Lady's association with Christ in our redemption was considered so close that her feasts were included in His. This was not because they were considered relatively unimportant: on the contrary, as the Magi found the Child in His mother's arms, but still adored Him as the Son of God, so the early Church accepted Our Lady as a central figure in the existence and activity of the Redeemer of the World.

²⁵ E. Bishop, articles in *The Downside Review*, but especially in *The Dublin Review* (1894) 245. See also the correspondence in *The Tablet* (London, 1911).

Note, now, the balance and rhythm of these prayers, which consist of two Orations (as in our Wednesdays in Lent), the Oration *super sindonem*, Secret, Preface, Post-Communion, or *Oratio ad complendum*. I abridge slightly, and cite only one sentence of the Preface:

Collect 1

Omnipotens sempiterne Deus
qui terrenis corporibus Verbi
Tui Veritatem
per venerabilem Mariam con-
jungi voluisti,
petimus immensam clementiam
Tuam ut quod in ejus venera-
tione deposcimus
Te propitiante mereamur con-
sequi.

Almighty everlasting God
Who wished your actual Word
to be united to material things
through the holy Mary,
We beseech your inexhaustible
mercy,
that what we ask, as we venerate
her,
we may by your favour deserve
to obtain.

Collect 2

Exaudi nos, Domine Sancte Pater
omnipotens aeternae Deus,
Qui beatae Mariae uteri obum-
bratione cunctum mundum illu-
minare dignatus es,
Majestatem tuam supplices de-
precamur,
ut quod meritis nostris non
valemus ejus adipisci praesidiis
mereamur.

Hear, us, Lord, holy Father,
omnipotent eternal God,
Who deigned to illuminate the
whole world by overshadowing
the womb of blessed Mary,
we humbly beseech your
Majesty,
that what we cannot gain by our
own merits,
we may, through her advocacy,
deserve to obtain.

Oratio super sindonem

Te quaesumus, Domine,
famulantes,
ut beatae Mariae nos gaudia
comitentur,
cujus merita deleantur nostra
chirographa peccatorum.

Worshipping Thee, we beseech
Thee, O Lord
that the joys of blessed Mary
may accompany us,
by whose merits the handwriting
of our sins is blotted out.

Ad complendum
Adesto quaesumus Domine
fidelibus tuis
ut quae sumpserunt fideliter
et mente sibi et corpore
beatae Mariae intercessione
custodiant.

Assist Thy servants, we beseech
Thee O Lord
that what they have received
with faith,
they may, by the intercession of
blessed Mary,
retain in soul and body.

Secret

Altari tuo proposita munera
Spiritus Sanctus benignus
assumat,
Qui beatae Mariae viscera
splendoris tui veritate replevit.

May the Holy Spirit accept the
gifts offered on the altar,
He who filled the womb of
blessed Mary with your own
actual splendour.

From the *Preface*, this sentence:

Duobus enim gavisus est
muneribus,
Miratur quod Virgo concepit,
laetatur quod dedit
Redemptorem
quem laudant angeli.

For two graces she rejoices:
the wonder of conceiving while
still a virgin,
and the joy of providing the
Redeemer,
whom the angels praise.

Startling as it may seem to some, we have in this Mass liturgical reference to (and in consequence evidence of a much older belief in) the following prerogatives of Mary, which are not shared by any other saint:

Her maternity, virginal and divine,
Her reception of the true Son of God, Splendour of the Father,
through the Holy Spirit, in order to shed light on the world,
thus perfectly uniting spiritual and material.
Her co-redemption, mediation, merits and intercession, destroying
the handwritten accusation of our sins against us.
She is co-redeemer through her own merits, as well as furnishing
the world with its Redeemer.

All of which is clearly in line with the Marian summary of

Pope St. Pius X in his encyclical, *Ad diem illum*, and the passages on Our Lady in the Second Vatican Council.

No less emphatic is Pope Paul VI, speaking in May, 1967, just before his visit to Fatima:

Recognition and love of the most Blessed Virgin are fully in accordance with the teaching of the Holy Gospels, as it has been more precisely understood and explained by tradition, both in the East as in the West.

In brief, then, awareness and recognition of Mary's singular prerogatives, traceable in the Western Church from the beginning, is ultimately apparent, full-fledged and confident, in the first native exemplar of the Liturgy of the West.

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