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MARY, MODEL OF MODERN WOMAN (Comments on Sr. Catherine's Paper)

Before commenting on, or responding to, Sister Catherine Sean's excellent presentation of "Mary, Model of Modern Woman," I should like to define my own understanding of my role here. In no way do I consider myself a theologian; my only qualification as respondent or reactor is the fact that I am a woman, a teacher-counselor, a Catholic Sister, who possesses the Gift of Faith and a love for the Blessed Virgin Mary, a most precious Franciscan heritage.

When Father Juniper Carol, O.F.M., first spoke to me regarding this paper, he very kindly lent me the most recent volume of *Marian Studies*. In reading through that issue, I must confess that I enjoyed most and derived most benefit from the paper given by Reverend Joseph E. Manton, who referred to himself as an "ordinary ecclesiastical G.I."¹ I mean no reflection upon the more learned and more professionally theological articles in that or any other issue—that are generally complex, involved, profound, and—very masculine.

An accompanying bibliography in Mariology by Father Eamon Carroll, O.Carm., *eleven* pages of Recommended Readings, made me acutely aware that you are indeed a very up-to-date, modern group—sincere believers in the science of "instant" production, even to "instant" theologians. My feminine instincts suggested that it might be well for me to offer you only some honest and spontaneous comments—those of an ordinary Catholic, lover of Mary, Our Mother, and Mother of the Church.

I agree with the substance of Sister Catherine Sean's paper, and am truly impressed by her selection and informed use of quotations from both theological and literary sources

¹ J. E. Manton, C.S.S.R., *Profile of Marian Devotion on the Parochial Level*, in *MS* 19 (1968) 41-48

I must disagree somewhat with the emphasis given to modern woman. Perhaps "disagree" is too strong a word, as I merely wish to say that I find the differences between the women of today and the Jewish women of Mary's day on earth—while many and great in some respects—do not change essentially our relationship to Mary Our Mother and Model.

Is it not possible that our insistence that we are the Hep, In, Go-Go, Mod, in fine, the new and different Generation, is in reality an outgrowth of our own insecurity, anxiety, quest for identity, a revolt from the stereotype, 19th Century, Victoria Regina? The porcelain Mary existed only in the eyes of the beholders. The 19th Century is dead, the porcelain queen is shattered, but let us not confuse the pietistic image with the real human woman, Theotokos of Ephesus.

Mary was indeed a woman of her own time. But was *her* life vastly different from that of many women of today? The banal truth indicates that her life was perhaps more like to modern woman's than to that of the woman of recently preceding generations.

At this point, let me explain that I am not unconscious of those sociologists and anthropologists who would infer that as the cycle of humanization and evolution runs full swing we are presently at that stage of progression or regression—however you may see it—that would possibly approximate the socio-psychological, cultural development of perhaps Mary's time.² I fear that I would be gently but firmly removed from this august company should I seriously quote Nietzsche, certainly no feminist, who held that the perfect woman is greater than the perfect man,³ or those such as Elizabeth Borgese who proclaim

² Elizabeth Mann Borgese, *Ascent of Woman* (New York, 1963) 9 ff, 48-49.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, quoted by Borgese, *op. cit.*, 34: "The perfect woman represents a higher type of human being than the perfect man. Zoology offers the means to prove this statement." Cf F Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: Why I Write Such Books*, tr W. Kaufmann (New York, 1967) 266-267. "Perhaps I am the first psychologist of the eternally feminine. Woman is indescribably more evil than man, also cleverer."

that in the future there will be but one sex and that will be feminine⁴—certainly in need of a model. I feel we should acknowledge these, and having done so, let us leave them to their own peculiar brand of misery and move on to more pertinent matters

The students of Human Behavior rightly call this the Age of Anxiety. We are anxious about many things, Oh, we of little Faith Did not Mary have every reason, humanly speaking, for anxiety? The generally accepted etiological factors of anxiety were at work in her life⁵ She, too, saw the modernization of her "Church," the updating, fulfillment of her Jewish heritage, and the casting of fire upon the earth Yet, she was at peace. Peace born of Faith Peace, which Pope Paul tells us, is an obligation

If there is one characteristic of this generation which is most unnerving to women, it is its mobility⁶ Women, by nature, begin to dig roots wherever they may be, and as soon as they alight. Before the man of the house has met the next door neighbor, his wife has borrowed a cup of sugar, exchanged recipes, and confidences, and looked over the neighborhood children as possible mates for her own Yet, how often must she pack quickly and flee into some Egypt—because her husband has had a dream (be it a daydream or not, makes little difference)—a dream of security, a dream of success Oh, for a model, a "material model"

To be truly feminine, to exert her strongest influence, a woman must be true to her nature. Oh, I see in your faces, "yes, let her keep her place—let her be true to her nature" In speaking of Roman Catholic Women, Dr Van Kersbergen

⁴ Borghese, *op. cit.*, 221, cf 216

⁵ Karen Horney, *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1939) 194-205; S Freud, *The Problem of Anxiety*, tr H Alden Bunker (New York, 1936) 72 This observation is so self-evident that it seems unnecessary to elaborate Consider the questioning husband, the days of search for a pre-teen run-away hidden in the Big City, the prophetic warnings, etc

⁶ Sol W Ginsburg, *A Psychiatrist's View on Social Issues* (New York, 1963) 202

says that she is definitely on the side of "being true to woman's nature," but fears that those who urge modern woman to be true to herself often base their counsel on an incomplete and highly inadequate view of human nature. She urges Catholic scholars to "enlarge and deepen the current concept of woman."

What is a true concept of woman? To answer adequately would involve more time than we are prepared to give—and even then we could not exhaust the field. You see, Gentlemen, we are a mystery, not only to men, but to ourselves as well. Briefly: Women are subjective, intuitive, and rational.⁸ Rudolph Allers says, "Woman have an individualizing outlook, men a generalizing one."⁹ Can't you see Mary's subjectivity working together with her intuitive rationality at the Marriage at Cana? And dare I say it—Christ's generalizing objectivity. First things first, or immediately pressing matters first—they needed wine. How womanly, how much a homemaker. And how the world is in need of homemakers, lovers, mothers—either in the spiritual or in the biological realm.

Mary, the homemaker. Mary, who went to visit an aging pregnant cousin simply to lend a helping hand; Mary, the woman who took pride in making her Child's garment "without seam;" Mary, who trained her young Son to be manly and neat. (Where did I get that?) Recall: On that magnificent day of His glorious resurrection and triumph over death, He

⁷ Lydwine Van Kersbergen, quoted in Elsie Thomas Culver, *Woman in the World of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967) 204.

⁸ Marion Turner Sheehan (ed.), *The Spiritual Woman: Trustee of the Future* (New York, 1955) 157. "Although both man and woman have logical minds, they are logical in different ways. Man usually uses reason to plan methodically, calculate, and deduce, woman's knowledge is apt to be more spontaneous, and her understanding influenced by heart and feelings. Because of her gift of the guardianship of life, she usually has an awareness of the human element in a situation. By nature, she is sympathetic, compassionate, intuitive, to be truly effective in her contribution to society, she combines intuition with reason. . . The foundation of woman's quickness of decision in the face of an immediate problem is her intuitive grasp of the concrete and the vital element of a situation."

⁹ Rudolph Allers, quoted by Sheehan, *ibid*.

"folded"¹⁰ the face covering of His burial cloth. I confess, I've always had to suppress a feminine snicker when, on Easter Morn, that passage is solemnly proclaimed. Why? Since Sociologists would insist that such attitude and direction set is born of Primary Relations and at an early age,¹¹ can't you hear Mary saying to Her Child. "Fold your clothes, make your bed, before you go out to play"—or rise from the dead? What an example to those modern women who fear that if they reprove a child "Why Johnny might not love me!"

And speaking of Johnny—Why can't Johnny read? Why can't Johnny write? Mauree Applegate, a noted educator and lecturer, says that it is because Johnny can't *think*.¹² His experiences in thinking have been vicarious via the idiot box. He's been so busy with TV, games, entertainment, being bored with being bored that he actually has not thought, and little has his mother with whom he should have close contact. But Mary listened, and pondered in her heart—she thought. Oh, I do believe that Mary is a "material model" for modern woman.

I disagree most strongly with the apparent approval given to the statement of Rev. Andrew Greeley to the effect that "Mary would have a tremendous amount to say about interracial justice or the plight of the migrant workers or the suffering people of the underdeveloped countries."¹³

In plain truth, I cannot imagine Mary, living on earth in any century, even the 21st, having a tremendous *amount* to say about any subject.

Certainly, she would be the most charitable and zealous woman alive. And she would in no way be opposed to the good that

¹⁰ John 20.7.

¹¹ Sr. Rosanne Jones, O S F, *Some American Religious Attitudes* (Unpublished Master's dissertation, Department of Sociology, St. Bonaventure University, 1963) 17. Cf. Helen Leland Witmer, *The Influence of Parental Attitudes in the Social Adjustment of the Individual*, in *American Sociological Review*, II, No. 5 (October, 1937) 756.

¹² Mauree Applegate, *Easy in English: An Imaginative Approach to the Teaching of the Language Arts* (New York, 1960) 51-77.

¹³ Andrew Greeley, quoted by Sr. Catherine Sean, *supra*.

is being done by activists in all such social fields as those to which Father Greeley alludes. But I cannot conceive of her being prominent in politics, or her name being a household word, due to her frequent appearances on TV, or her organization of protest groups, however justified or called for. She would leave the external publicized work to others. Frankly, in simple justice, even in this push-button age, she would not have time to fulfill her obligations as homemaker, wife, and mother, and at the same time champion such causes—in the long run—fleeting causes.

If Father Greeley were correct, then certainly Mary would have spoken up when she knew of the confrontation of Saint Peter by Saint Paul, yet there is no indication that she did—and she, of all people, knew the heart and mind of Christ. She could have rendered a quick decision. She thought and prayed.

Even today Mary would be a woman of supreme faith and prayer. She would give hours each day directly to prayer and meditation both in Church and in her home. She would practise the works of mercy, of course, but in her special unobtrusive way. She would visit the sick, the shut-ins, she would baby-sit, she would listen more than talk. She would be a real comfort to all who sought her counsel, but in a way that would make few, if any headlines. She would not be sought as a lecturer, or as the subject of a profile for TV specials.

Again, I say, Mary would not discourage lesser women, such as myself, from partaking in and making full use of all that is good as well as new in our modern media.

Yet, I, and all modern women, should look to her as our model, in the supreme virtues of humility, simplicity, prudence, and silence. I think we should find in Mary, our Mother, a counterbalance to our tendency to talk too much, to expect in convocations and dialogues more than they possibly can give us, as if they would in any way be a substitute for the fullness of Faith and Charity, arrived at only through supernatural union with God through faith and prayer. Let our external activities be always subordinate, if they are to give, to be fruitful. One

cannot give that which she does not possess. I'm sorry to sound so old-fashioned, but that is how I see Mary, as my model, and the model for modern woman.

Finally, I would like to refer to an article by Monsignor Shea, in *Marian Studies* of two years ago. In it he shows how continuous with tradition is the place of Our Blessed Lady in the Documents of Vatican II.¹⁴

It is true that Vatican II, in its renewal of the Church, has tried to make the Church more understandable and attractive to our modern world. But as Pope John XXIII stated, and Pope Paul has so often reiterated, there can be no change in doctrine.

Our presentation of doctrine can, perhaps, be made more attractive. Our devotion to Mary may be revised in its non-essential forms. Yet, even here, I believe that most of the forms, such as the Rosary, and the honor paid her statues and pictures, may be revised (not to say discarded) only with great prudence, and with new concrete forms attempted, only in complete accordance with the true doctrines regarding Mary, and the true time-tested and necessary devotion to her as our Model. As Father Carroll so aptly put it, "Many older forms of devotion have been dropped and nothing put in their place. Many people feel they have been asked to change horses in the middle of the stream only to discover there is no other horse."¹⁵

Our age is one of speed, change, landslides. It is Karl Stern who tells us that "in the history of spiritual landslides, there always comes a moment which is characterized by the search for the simple formula"¹⁶—The Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount. May not the answer now be simply—Mary?

¹⁴ G. W. Shea, *Mary in the Documents of Vatican II*, in *MS* 17 (1966) 20-26.

¹⁵ E. R. Carroll, O. Carm., *What Happened to Our Devotion to Mary?*, in *Our Lady's Digest*, 23 (Jan.-Feb., 1969) 188.

¹⁶ Karl Stern, *The Third Revolution: Psychiatry and Religion* (New York, 1954) 142.

Gentlemen, continue your profound theological discussions, but give to us Mary, simply, as a model. Let us meditate, let us think on the mysteries of the Rosary—there we will find peace, love, security, identity—*womanliness*.

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