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James E. O'Mahony

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JAMES E. O'MAHONY, O.F.M.Cap.

Number 11
ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Father James E. O'Mahony, O.F.M.Cap., is a well-known Irish Capuchin who has achieved international distinction as a writer and educator. Born in County Cork, Ireland, in 1897, he was educated by the Christian Brothers. He joined the Capuchin branch of the Franciscans in 1913 and attended University College, Cork, where he made a brilliant record. He continued his academic achievements at the National University, the Gregorianum (Rome), and at the Catholic University of Louvain where he was awarded the licentiate and doctorate in philosophy.

In 1928 Father James was appointed president of St. Bonaventure's University Hostel. Since 1937 he has been professor of philosophy at Cork University. Since he began writing in 1929, he has published more than twenty books in the fields of philosophy, religion, and history. Some of his better known works include Where is Thy God (1930), The Franciscans (1930), The Sacrament of Life (1932), Is Life Worth Living (1936), Christian Philosophy (1939), The Mother of Jesus (1944), The Person of Jesus (1944), As in a Mirror (1948).

"Sign in the Heavens" first appeared in the 25th anniversary issue of Ora Frères (October-November 1951). In it the author studies the "inexhaustible significance of Our Blessed Lady" in our age, the Age of Mary. Part of this article has already been incorporated in his recent work, The Secret of Holiness (1952). Father James is now working on a new book on Our Lady based on a theme similar to the present article.

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SIGN IN THE HEAVENS
JAMES E. O'MAHONY, O.F.M.Cap.

A little over a hundred years ago it was prophesied by a great client of our blessed Lady, Father William Joseph Chaminade, that a new era of devotion to the Mother of God was about to dawn upon the world. In a letter to the supreme pontiff of the time, dated September 16, 1838, this holy man went further. He foretold that the new era, this age of Mary, would herald in a signal triumph for Christ and His Church. Similar prophecies had already been made by St. Grignion de Montfort; but there is no reason to think that Father Chaminade was aware of these.

It is difficult to believe that men like these, whose lives were so eminent a witness to eternal truth, should have been entirely deceived. It is true that the Church, like her Master, cannot fail to be a sign of contradiction in a hostile world. But however dark the intervening years must seem to the outer eye, or the actual state of the world at the present moment, there are many signs by which we can recognize the dawn of the new era foretold by these men of God.

Never before perhaps in the entire course of history was the Church on earth so conscious of the inexhaustible significance of our blessed Lady; it is undeniable that there has been a signal increase of theological interest in all that concerns Mary. Some are perturbed by this in the fear that, in any way, it should delay the return of our separated brethren to the bosom of the Church. Others rejoice in the fact because of their sincere conviction that an increasing awareness of our blessed Lady which has its origin, as they believe, in the initiative of the Holy Spirit, cannot prove a permanent cause of separation between true Christians.

But whatever men's attitude may be, the fact itself of a renewed and an enlightened devotion to the Mother of Jesus remains. As our minds travel back the centuries we can recognize that she who, already in the fifth century, was declared Mother of God has become a veritable source of spreading light

. . . who
This work has to do —
Let all God's glory through,
God's glory which would go
Through her and from her flow
Off, and no way but so . . .

whose rays find welcome in the collective consciousness of the Catholic Church.

In the twelfth century St. Bernard gave a motto to succeeding ages: “Of Mary there never can be enough.” St. Francis of Assisi chose her as patron of his order; St. Bonaventure identified the Lady Poverty with the Virgin; the poet Dante expressed his faith of his age when he placed

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Mary nearest to God in the circle of the blessed, as “most like her divine Son in glory,” and sang:

In high heaven a blessed Dame
Resides, who mourns with such effectual grief
That hindrance, which I send thee to remove,
That God's stern judgement to her will inclines.

The prince of theologians, St. Thomas of Aquin, consecrated pages to her, the full import of which has scarcely yet been exhausted. Successive definitions by the Church have been proclaimed: in the nineteenth century it was the dogma of her Immaculate Conception; in our own day the glorious prerogative of her Assumption into heaven. “We proclaim, declare and define it to be a dogma revealed by God that the Immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever Virgin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven.” God has spoken; the consenting heart rejoices.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Church, throughout the long course of her history, has been gradually entering into conscious possession of what had already been revealed to her by God; and this is especially true of the significance of Mary. “It has been no small consolation to us,” writes the Holy Father, “to perceive that while the Catholic faith manifests itself more active in public life, devotion to the Virgin Mother of God daily grows more vigorous and fervent, and almost everywhere gives hope of a better and holier life.” It is lawful to think that, in all this, there is the hidden initiative of our blessed Lady.

But what are we to say of that other intervention which is so remarkable a feature of the present age? For the past hundred years her manifestations have been more frequent, more striking, than ever in the history of the Church. Into the very midst of this modern world, with its projects and its pride, she has come. In lonely places, in humble villages, on desolate mountain-sides she has appeared to children and simple people: at Lourdes, to speak to the humble Bernadette of the mystery of her Immaculate Conception; at La Salette, to weep over the sins and folly of mankind; at Fatima, to reveal the power of her rosary. These are but a few places, the better known, to which from heaven to earth our Lady has come as if to remind us that she must traverse the world from end to end in the interests of the Kingdom of God.

But why, it may be asked, this emphasis on the part of God Himself upon the mystery of Mary just now? Why this presence in the world of our blessed Lady, or rather this signal manifestation of a presence to which men are not sensitive enough? It is certain that in the economy of divine Providence there are profound reasons for the dogma of the Assumption and for the selection of the present age for its definition. But it is not less certain that a departure from the normal, on our Lady's
part, is also in absolute conformity with the designs of God. These are questions which the believing mind spontaneously asks and which it is not forbidden to answer for itself as best it may.

**Our Lady comes to earth to preach prayer and penance; that is true.** She comes because the great struggle of our time is for the possession of humanity; that is also true. Our Lady comes to warn her children against the emissaries of Satan; that again is true. But if the final truth, the deep secret, is to be surmised, it is because Mary would bring before the minds of men the mystery of the Church on earth. So intimately related are Mary and the Church, in the divine disposition of the universe, that there is no real understanding of the one without the other.

The foundation for this statement must be sought in the very real analogy that exists between the Church and Mary. The moment we think of the Church in its collective unity we are reminded of the bride of Christ, the bride "without spot or wrinkle"; but it is impossible to think of this spotless bride without thinking of Mary in whose person was concentrated all the grace and beauty that come of divine complacency. Analogy is compatible with difference, since it signifies unity in diversity, and differences there are between the Church and Mary; but these differences have their origin precisely in the very dependence of the church on Mary. Our blessed Lady is the Mother of Jesus not only in His natural body but also in His Mystical Body; and the Church exists to extend and continue, in a sense, the role assigned by God to Mary.

**But if we pursue this role of the Church on earth to its very source** we come back to Mary who was the associate of Christ in the work of redemption; we begin to realize that a true source exists not only in itself but also in its effects. The truth is that where the law of analogy finds application there is an order of things in which priority must be recognized; and this is true of the Church and Mary. We are prone to speak of Mary as a figure of the Church as if pre-eminence belonged to the Church. In reality it is not so. Pre-eminence belongs rightly to Mary who is the Ideal. In this instance the Ideal actualized in a living person, and she it is (in her unique relation to Christ) from whom the Church takes life and meaning.

The more this truth is pondered in the light of which Mary is the true prototype and divine ideal of the Church, the more insight will be gained into the exact relation which exists between the Church and Mary. The fact is that Mary already is what the Church has yet to be in the fulness of her being, the Bride of God in Christ, and it is as impossible to separate the Church from Mary as it is to disunite an image and the reality of which it is an image. But at the same time we begin to discern, in an age when such discernment is necessary, the vast resources
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of the Church of God; first, as they exist in the Virgin-Queen whose interest in the destiny of mankind is so manifest in our time; secondly, as they exist in the Church on earth in which the Virgin-Mother sees herself reflected.

This is a truth which, with the passage of the years, is bound to become prominent. Scheeben had already called attention to it. Speaking of the Virgin of virgins he wrote: "And such too is the Church which, animated by the Holy Spirit, is in Him and through Him the spiritual, virginal mother of all those whom in the power of the Holy Spirit she presents to God the Father as His children, and incorporates in the incarnate Son as members of His Mystical Body." We cannot but think that every visit of Mary from heaven to earth is a new token, a reminder, of the re-creation of humanity which took place in her and of the Mystical Body which, as St. Thomas remarks, is made in the likeness of the natural body of the Savior.

It is remarkable that so many people no longer Christian in anything but name continue to date history from the coming of Jesus Christ. It is testimony to the influence of Christianity upon the mind of the Western world. Other signs of the same instinctive appreciation of the significance of the Incarnation might be found.

But it must not be forgotten that this departure in history, when the Eternal entered into time, was inaugurated in the humble Virgin of Nazareth. Our blessed Lady stands at the very center of history. Her epoch is that "fulness of time" which contains within it the meaning of universal history. In her person the religious history of Israel found its climax and consummation; in Mary the new era of Christianity was begun; the Incarnation was a creative fiat by which the world of humanity was born anew. The Gospels are unambiguous. They tell of a messenger from heaven who sought the consent of Mary for the mystery of the Incarnation. Mary knew what that consent involved. But the entire adherence of her being to the divine design was in the words: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done to me according to thy word."

It is no mere coincidence that in this breathless moment, when the entire world is held in suspense, our minds return to the original creation of man. St. Thomas asks a striking question, in this context, and gives an answer still more striking. Did Adam, he asks, believe in the incarnation of the Son of God? To this question St. Thomas replies as follows: "He does seem to have had foreknowledge of the incarnation of Christ, from the fact that he said: Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, of which the Apostle says that this is a great sacrament... in Christ and the Church, and it is incredible that the first man should be ignorant about this sacrament."
creation of Eve was intended to represent prophetically and symbolically the future Church; and it is not difficult to see a reference to the second Eve in whose image the Church is made.

**No more constant tradition exists, in fact, than the contrast between**
the first and the second Eve. It goes back to St. Justin, who was converted to Christianity some twenty years after the death of St. John, and is therefore very close to apostolic times.

To appreciate the full significance of this parallel between the two Eves, we must go to sacred Scripture itself where our blessed Lord is spoken of as the new Adam. St. Paul speaks of Him in this way and says explicitly that the first Adam was a figure of Him who was to come (Rom. 5:14). "For by a man," he writes, "came death; and by a man the resurrection of the dead. And as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:21). But St. Paul is only echoing the Gospels themselves, making due allowances for his own personal revelation, where we find our blessed Lord speaking of Himself as the Son of Man. Son of Man He truly is since it is Mary who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is His unique parent.

**But the phrase itself, the Son of Man, is a link with the prophecies of**
the Old Testament in which the coming of the Desired of all nations is foretold. Of these are many. It will suffice to refer to one which is peculiarly relevant here. It is from the prophet Isaias in whose account Emmanuel, or God with us, is presented with the historical significance of a new creation. Isaias declares the coming of the Prince of Peace to be the end of an old era, the termination of war and strife and conflict, and he pictures the new creation as a return to its original state.

"For a child is born to us," we are told, "and a son is given to us, and the government is upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace" (Is. 9:6). It is in this atmosphere of a new beginning that one must consider the prophecy made by him concerning the Virgin who would give birth to the Prince of Peace. "Behold," he says, "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (Is. 7:14). In the original Hebrew the text is even more impressive because it reads: "Behold a virgin bearing and bringing forth a son." Of this event Isaias speaks as a prodigy on earth. In fact, he suggests that belief in it is a tradition amongst his people.

**But the really important thing to realize is that this prodigy has lost**
one of its truth, even at the present time. Mary is the virgin who, because she is the Mother of Jesus, is also the mother of Christians who are what they are because they are the members of His mystic Body. It is evident that the sons of the old Adam are just mortal men who live in darkness because of their sinful inheritance and that they need
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a new nature if they are to live a supernatural life. But a new nature presupposes a new birth and this birth is of water and the Holy Spirit. "The Church," says St. Augustine, "imitates the Mother of Christ, her Spouse and Lord. The Church also is both mother and virgin."

The mistake would be to think that the Church, in her liturgy, is living in the past. In reality the Church is engaged in bringing Eternity into time. If we look at her liturgical year we shall see that it is itself unified in terms of three great feasts: the Epiphany, the Paschal Mystery, and Pentecost. The Epiphany is prepared by Bethlehem, and Bethlehem is itself the climax of Advent. In Advent the Church looks forward and it is remarkable that, from the very first Sunday of Advent, the Church is already speaking of the end of the world and the coming of the Savior. This conjunction is sufficiently striking to prompt the question: But why should they be spoken of in the same breath?

The answer is that the coming of the Savior, our blessed Lord, is not a thing of the past alone. Our blessed Lord is best described as He who is to come. It is true that, at Bethlehem, the Word of God was made flesh. It is an event of history, a historical fact, that our Lord was born during the reign of Augustus when Herod ruled as king over Judaea. But this event, in the economy of God's providing, is not of the past alone. It is the event of every moment; of the child in baptism; of the soul in Holy Communion; of the saint at the door of whose heart our Lord knocks in search of hospitality.

That is not all. Our Lord is He who is to come finally to judge the world. When we sing the Creed we begin by professing faith in Him, and we conclude upon a note of expectation. Our Lord is essentially He who is to come. When the Church enters upon Lent it is only a half truth to say that it is to commemorate the suffering Savior. The entire movement of the liturgy of the period beginning with the first Sunday when Christ is already portrayed as victor over Satan in the desert, is towards the Paschal Mystery in its twofold aspect of passion and resurrection.

It is related in the Acts of the Apostles that, in the year 60 A.D. a certain Roman official summed up the conflict between St. Paul and the Jews by saying that Paul was preaching the doctrine that a certain Jesus, who had died, was again alive. This summing up reflects the authentic outlook of the early Christians. It was not that they forgot (how could they) the passion of the Savior, no more than St. Paul himself did, but that the coming of Christ, the resurrection, was for them the vital thing. Christ is He who is to come, at Easter as well as at Christmas, and the aim of the entire period is that new birth to the life of the risen Christ in which, as St. Peter phrased it, we must die to sin in order to live unto justice or holiness.
It is not surprising then that the mind of the Church should specially concentrate on the feast of Pentecost. It is Pentecost that the Church celebrates her own birth. Pope Leo XIII says: "The Church which, already conceived, came forth from the side of the second Adam in His sleep on the cross, first showed herself before the eyes of men on the great day of Pentecost." It was then that the Spirit of God came upon her, overshadowed her with His presence, and sent her forth amongst the nations as the unfailing source of life eternal for the vast world of humanity.

But it is through Mary that Jesus comes. Such is the disposition of the eternal Father; and He does not change. It was Mary who fashioned Christ in His human nature under the power of the Holy Spirit; it is Mary who fashions Him in His members. What is true of our Lord's coming in the flesh is true, proportionately, of His spiritual coming in souls. The entire mystery of the Virgin-Mother is here. Just as it was in her that the Word of God became man, in order to be the life of mankind, so it is in her that the members of Christ are formed. Hence Mary has a role to play in the coming of Christ.

The mystery of our Lady is that she is present before Jesus is; and where she is, our Lord is He who is to come. She was present in Israel before His coming; she was on earth in His absence between the Ascension and Pentecost; the paradox is that Mary is a kind of presence of our Lord before He comes because her entire significance is bound up with Him.

The early Christians, in their great desire to be united to Christ, looked forward to a second coming when He would appear in all His glory. Their love of Him, the trials and persecutions to which they were subjected, made them long for the day of His coming. But as years went by the faithful became aware that the second coming was not to be as their enthusiasm had made them hope it would be; it was delayed.

But the longing did not cease, it could not cease, because it is the deep secret in the life of the Church on earth, So long as the Church is journeying through time it lives in the hope of that fulness of its being which it has not yet achieved. In this sense we are living, even now, in an age of hope and expectation.

But it is Mary who must always prepare the way for the coming of Christ. It is true, as we have already said, that the Lord has come. But it is also true that He has not been manifested, either in the lives of individuals or of nations, as He has a right to be. That is why He is hidden in the Church, and in the holy Eucharist which is the sacrament of our transformation into Him, and that is also why the presence of Mary is so necessary. It was she who, in the first instance, prepared the way. It was in her that the world was created anew, the world of God's
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grace, for it was in Mary that the definite alliance between God and Man took place in the incarnation of His Son.

To this divinely awakened mood of hope and expectation belongs the vision vouchsafed by God to the apostle St. John on the island of Patmos. The Church, in her liturgy, incorporates the vision and cites it in full in her Mass for the feast of the Miraculous Medal. "And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars . . . And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with an iron rod. And her son was taken up to God and to his throne . . . And there were given to the woman two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the desert, unto her place . . . And the serpent cast out of his mouth, after the woman, water, as it were a river: that he might cause her to be carried away by the river. And the earth helped the woman: and the earth opened her mouth and swallowed up the river which the dragon cast out of his mouth" (Apoc. 12).

It is not necessary to hold that this selection of the Patmos vision by the Church suffices to guarantee that, in its application, it is part of the sense (whether literal or spiritual) intended by the Holy Spirit; not infrequently the Church accommodates certain texts to suit her purpose. But it would be just as erroneous to maintain, as sometimes has been suggested, that our blessed Lady does not belong to this vision. The truth is that she is no more absent from it than she is from the Church; and the reason is the analogy which exists between the Church and Mary.

It is admittedly difficult to read aright the pages of the Apocalypse in which the Seer of Patmos is privileged to behold the secret of cosmic history. But it is impossible not to notice the parallel which exists between the vision of chapter 12, which is said to contain the key to the entire book, and that offered by the opening pages of sacred Scripture wherein the promise of the woman is made: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel" (Gen. 3:15).

In both instances the woman is associated with the Redeemer of the human race. It is certain that the woman referred to in Genesis is Mary; it has been suggested that in the Apocalypse it is the Church which is portrayed under the figure of the woman. But the real point is that we are under no necessity to choose between the Church and Mary for the simple reason that, by the very law of analogy, the mind moves from the Church to Mary and from Mary to the Church. It would have been natural, psychologically, that the mind of St. John, to whom Jesus had confided Mary, should have acted in harmony with a rhythm which is in the very nature of things.
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If we compare Scripture with Scripture, as Newman suggests, we shall find that it is so. Sacred Scripture is a unity; the unity of Scripture is Christ; and Jesus and Mary are inseparable. A war between the woman and the serpent is announced in Genesis. Who is the serpent? It is remarkable that it is Jesus who, during His earthly ministry, really unmasks him; and he appears in the Apocalypse as the ancient enemy. But how is he introduced? By the vision of the woman. The dragon attacks the woman, who is liberated, but the struggle goes on with her descendants. In Genesis it is by her offspring that the woman is destined to conquer; in the Apocalypse she has her child. But if the child is Christ, the woman is Mary.

Now it is no exaggeration to say that the Apocalypse, whose seals the Lamb alone can open, contains the key to universal history. Running through its pages, like a veritable streak of light, is the great theme of redemption in its three cosmic stages. There is, first, the mystery of "the Lamb which was slain from the beginning of the world." There is, secondly, the mystery of the woman "clothed with the sun" who is seen in travail on earth because the Seer's vision passes naturally from the Virgin-Mother to the suffering Church in time. There is, finally, the City of God of which it is said that it has the glory of God and that the Lamb is the lamp thereof. This is the City of God of which St. John says: "And he showed me the holy city . . . coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God." This is the measure of the final triumph of the Church.

The thought is inescapable that at the end of time, as in its dawn, humanity is presented with the Woman as a great Sign. If we would penetrate to the inner secret of this beginning and this ending, between which lies the movement of universal history, we must behold the purpose of creative and redemptive Wisdom. To this great secret the Apocalypse, unfolding its riches in an eternal present, holds the key.

The seals of this wondrous book shall not all be opened this side of the grave. But this much we do know. The real and inner drama of history is essentially a religious one. The great secret is redemption by means of the Church. But at the source of this redemption lies the Incarnation in which the Savior, in an unspeakable act of love, took unto Himself a bride for whom He would lay down His life. The Church, in a sense, has to become what she is; and what she is is hidden in the immaculate heart of Mary. "Blessed are they that wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb" (Apoc. 22:14). They too will be privileged to hear the dialogue of the Spirit and the Bride: "And the spirit and the bride say: Come. And he that heareth let him say: Come" (Apoc. 22:17). And they shall see the great Sign in the heavens; and be glad.
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