019 - The Witness of Our Lady

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ARCHBISHOP ALBAN GOODIER, S.J.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

During his lifetime, Archbishop Alban Goodier, S.J., had been called “the greatest living authority on the life of Christ.” The exceptionally large reading public which two of his more than twenty books have reached, *The Public Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ* and *The Passion and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, would surely qualify him also for the title “most widely read authority on the life of Christ.”

Archbishop Goodier joined the Society of Jesus in 1887, and after serving as rector of the Jesuit College in Bombay, India, was named Archbishop of Bombay in 1919. In 1926 he returned to his homeland, England, where he spent the latter years of his life in writing and preaching retreats.

“The Witness of Our Lady” is a chapter from Goodier’s *Witnesses to Christ* (Kenedy, 1939), published in the year of his death. The book is a series of sketches, written as “the testimony of those who witnessed the public life, passion, and death of Our Lord.”

*(published with ecclesiastical approval)*

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THE WITNESS OF OUR LADY
ARCHBISHOP ALBAN GOODIER, S.J.

It is commonly accepted by students of the Gospels that the first two chapters of the Gospel according to St. Luke come from, and have been virtually dictated by, Our Lady herself. The Evangelist expressly tells us, as if to account for some events which the others do not record, that he has taken his narrative 'from those who from the beginning were eye-witnesses.' He says that he gives it, not on his own authority, nor scarcely in his own words, but 'as it has been delivered unto' him. He says that he has been very careful to get at the exact truth, that he has 'diligently attained to all things from the beginning,' and that he writes in order that others may know that truth from its first sources. When, then, he plunges almost at once into the account of the Annunciation, we ask ourselves what other 'eye-witness' was there of that scene but Our Lady, and from whom else could he have received the story?

And this all the more since we know from St. Matthew that she concealed it even from St. Joseph. When, immediately after, he relates the story of the Visitation, who but Our Lady could have told him the exact words of the Magnificat? And who but she would have been so careful to let him know exactly how long she stayed with her cousin Elizabeth? When he tells of the Nativity, who but a mother would have thought of recording that little detail, almost the only one we know of the event, that 'she wrapped him up in swaddling-clothes, and laid him in a manger,' because it was the best thing she could do under the conditions? Then there follow the other scenes, the Loss and Finding of the Child in the Temple, with the concluding statement: 'And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them. And his mother kept all these words in her heart. And Jesus advanced in wisdom, and age, and grace with God and men.' These, and these only, are told us by St. Luke and by no one else; and are they not just those things which a mother would be likely to remember of the early years of her child? And are they not told in just a mother's language, especially the summary at the end?
Another fact in these two chapters confirms the impression that they have come directly from Our Lady herself; it is that through them both she is the prominent character. We are told things concerning her which no one but herself could have known, much less would have troubled to record; how she 'was frightened,' not at the apparition of the angel but at his message, and how she 'argued with herself what on earth it might mean'; how on other occasions she 'kept all these things, pondering them in her heart'; how she 'wondered at the things that were said.' Last of all, surely no one but Our Lady herself would have said of her that 'she understood not'; she knew so much more than anyone else ever knew or could know, yet, because of her knowledge, knew also how much she did not know.

With good reason, then, many call these two chapters the Gospel according to Our Lady. And if it is her Gospel, her own 'good tidings,' one asks oneself whether her message is in any way new; whether in any way it differs from, adds to, what has gone before. Now if we study her own words, if, for instance, we compare the Magnificat with other like canticles, there is one thing which strikes us at once. When we look back on the Old Testament, Moses, the Psalms, the Prophets, we find that their words are addressed, first of all; to the children of Israel. They are the Chosen People, they are the heirs of the Redemption, in them the rest of the world is to be saved. Even when we come to Zachary, the father of John the Baptist, it is still the children of Israel that are chiefly considered. Thus he sings in the Benedictus:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel  
Because he hath visited  
And redeemed his people  
And hath raised up a Power to save us  
In the house of David his servant

There is one striking exception; it is in the Canticle of Anna (I Samuel 2: 1-10) upon which Our Lady's Magnificat is built. In the Canticle, though spoken on the eve of the period of the kings of Israel, no mention is made of the Israelites apart from anyone else. The Lord, in this Canticle, is not only the God of Israel; He is God of all the world:
For the poles of the earth are the Lord's
And upon them he hath set the world.

Whence the mother of Samuel concludes her Canticle:

The Lord shall judge the ends of the earth
And he shall give empire to his kind
And shall exalt the horn of his Christ.

Still, even with Anna, and with some of the prophets whose vision also ranges throughout the world, the perspective is measured, as it were, with the eyes of one whose point of sight is the Temple of the God of Israel. When we come to the Canticle of Our Lady it is almost reversed. It is no longer 'the children of Israel' that occupy the centre of the picture, but the whole of the human race. She glorifies God for what He is, and for what He has done. She thanks Him for the great honour He has bestowed upon her, His hand-maiden; and the reason is, not that, like Judith and Esther, she may become another national heroine, but

Because from this moment
All generations shall call me blessed;
that is, all the race of men shall benefit from the honour that has been done to her. In other words, in Our Lady's 'good tidings,' for the first time it would seem, the fruits of the Redemption are announced to all the world, the 'children of Israel' are made to include the whole of mankind; and she confirms her message by the further announcement that

His mercy
Is from generation unto generations
To all them that revere him.

Only at the end does she speak of her own people. This, she seems to conclude, is the meaning of the prophecies, and the promises of the Lord God. Infinite in power, infinite in mercy, He is the God of all the world, in all place and for all time, and the opening of the floodgates is the special glory of the children of Israel:

He hath succoured Israel his servant
Remembering his mercy
As he spoke to our fathers
To Abraham and to his seed
Forever.
This is the first of the ‘good tidings’ according to the Gospel of Our Lady; she and her Son are not for the Jews only but for the whole human race. There is a second which confirms the first. The Jews of her time looked for the Kingdom of this world; the Messias was to restore the throne of David. Our Lady, too, looks for a kingdom of this world, but of what a different kind! Though the angel had spoken to her in the language of the prophets, and had described her Son as the ruling successor of David, she knew quite well the wide meaning of his words. Her Son’s kingdom would be one, not of might and conquest of other nations, as her people hoped, but one in which

He hath scattered the proud
In the conceit of their heart;
not one in which the victors will lord it over others, but in which

He hath put down the mighty from their seat
And hath exalted the humble;
not a kingdom of wealth and luxury, the only kind of kingdom her generation knew, but in whose realm

He hath filled the hungry with good things
And the rich he hath sent empty away.

So different was the Kingdom of her Son as Our Lady saw it. Her countrymen viewed it as a conqueror of the world, she saw it as the home of the lowly; they would proclaim it the seat of the mighty, she beheld only the meek and humble who would inherit the land; they put their trust in riches, she foretold that in her Son’s kingdom it would be those that had nothing who would possess all things.

These, then, would seem to be the two special messages announced in Our Lady’s good tidings, caught up from the Canticle of Anna, but refined to the purest gold. The Kingdom to be founded by her Son would be universal; it would be a Kingdom of the lowly, the meek, the needy, even as were its King and its Queen, who, nevertheless, would have their fill. But once it had been so announced we find it at once taken up and confirmed by others; it would almost seem that the angels themselves waited for her to open the new revelation. At the Annunciation the angel Gabriel had spoken only of the kingdom of David and the
people of Israel; now, a few months after Our Lady had spoken, another
angel brings the message in very different words. He comes to the
shepherds on the hillside and says:

Fear not
For behold I bring you good tidings of great joy
Which shall be to all the people,
not to the children of Israel only; and he ends his message with the song,
taking up the thoughts, and almost the words, of Our Lady herself:

Glory to God in the highest
And peace to all on the earth
Among men of his good pleasure.

Forty days later Our Lady records the meeting with the old man Simeon
in the court of the Temple. A year before Zachary had said:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel
Because he hath . . . raised up an horn of salvation
To us;

now the aged Simeon proclaims:

Now thou dost dismiss thy servant, O Lord
According to thy word in peace
Because my eyes have seen
The salvation which thou has prepared
Before the face of all peoples.

Before Zachary had spoken of

The orient from on high
(that) hath visited us
To enlighten them that sit in darkness;

now Simeon, with his new vision, tells us that this will be

A light to the revelation of the Gentiles

and on that account

The glory of thy people Israel.

Thus, from the Magnificat to the Canticle of Simeon, the air of the
Gospel is filled with the light of a new day, seeming to set that section
apart from all the rest. Our Lady and her message have altered the whole
of our perspective as to God, and the Kingdom of His Son. But she did not conclude her account of Simeon with this prophecy alone. She had added another; and this, no less than the first, she had also 'kept in her heart' through the ensuing years. All these good things were to come to men, salvation for all people, light to all the nations, protection for the lowly, inheritance for the meek, plenty for those in need, but at a price; and that price her Son, and she herself, were to pay. First, He would be a sign that would be contradicted; though He would save many by His coming, yet would many also fall on His account. And second, her own soul a sword would pierce; though 'all generations would call her blessed,' yet would she suffer unto death that out of the hearts of many realisation such as this might be revealed. These were the 'things' at which, she tells us, she 'wondered,' and which she 'kept in her heart' through the years, pondering them, seeing their fulfillment in the many events that followed.

For instance when, but a short time later, the children in Bethlehem were put to death on her own Child's account, she reminded herself that He was 'a sign to be contradicted,' and the thought of the weeping mothers drove the first sword deep into her own mother's heart. When the three homeless strangers wandered in a foreign land, she could not but remember again the 'sign to be contradicted,' and the sword pierced deeper still. And if we go through the rest of the little we know of the life of her Son, with this clue in our hands we may learn much of the still more hidden life of the mother. Wherever we find the sign being contradicted we have but to bear in mind that 'the mother of Jesus was there,' that when He suffered, at that moment, too, the sword pierced her heart, and we shall discover very much about her. She was with Him in Nazareth, and we are expressly told that He took her with Him when He made His home in Capharnaum.

Hence in her own city, Nazareth, when the people despised Him because He was only the Son of such a mother, Our Lady looked from her cottage door and the sword went in a little deeper. When on that account they would take Him and do Him to death, she followed the tumult down the street and the sword went deeper still. In Capharnaum the Herodians and Pharisees conspired that they might destroy Him;
she knew what was happening, from the trouble in the streets, from her Son's indignation and vehemence, from her own mother's instinct, and the sword of sorrow pierced her again. So we might go on till Calvary, and there at last, the supreme sacrifice was made. The sign was contradicted with a final denial, but it was for the resurrection of many; the sword of sorrow pierced through and could go no further, but, by it, out of many hearts what thoughts have been revealed!

'Mary kept all these things in her heart.' And through all the ages since she has kept them. She who first called down the blessing of her Son on 'all generations,' 'from generation unto generations,' has kept her own words in her heart, and has ever remained 'the handmaid of the Lord,' the channel of His 'mercy'; the history of Christendom might be re-written to prove the truth of her prophecy and her care. It is not without a purpose that St. Luke includes her by name with the apostles and disciples at Pentecost, waiting in prayer for the coming of the Holy Ghost; it was fitting that the Queen of the nations that were to be should be present with these messengers of the Kingdom on the day of their final commission. She was with them then, she has been with their successors ever since. In each generation she continues to prove to her own that she still keeps them in her heart, and, in return, each generation continues to call her blessed, 'Mother of God,' 'Help of Christians,' 'Immaculate.'

What but this is the significance of Lourdes, the latest of the glories of Mary? For a century fresh troubles had befallen her beloved mankind, and she would give them proof that she still kept them in her heart. Since then, when old wounds were healed, new troubles have arisen, and she still reminds us, year after year, that she does not forget, she still keeps us in her heart.

Why do the nations rage?
And why do peoples mediate vain things?
In the midst of the storm Our Lady stands upon the rock, and humility speaks to humility the message that, if men will hear it, will heal this wounded world. She tells a little child that, if the nations will come to her, the proud shall be scattered in the conceit of their hearts, the tyrant
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shall be put down from his seat, the glutted with wealth shall be sent empty away and instead the hungry shall be filled. This is the abiding miracle of Lourdes, the Gospel of Our Lady brought down to our day, and its fulfilment proved before our eyes. Other miracles she may bestow upon her clients as she will out of her bounty; they do not demand them, they thank her for them when they come, but they know that they are, what her Son's miracles were, 'signs' and no more. They are the outward signs of that inward grace which she bestows on all the world for its healing.

There is pride of life, leading to every other evil and rivalry among nations; at the feet of Our Lady, for everyone to see who will, all nations are as one. There is untold tyranny and oppression; about her feet all are equal. There is swollen wealth, with its heel on grinding poverty; with Mary of Lourdes, who is at once Mary of Nazareth and Mary Queen of heaven, wealth is a word without meaning, poverty is happy and possesses all things.
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