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GERALD VANN, O.P.

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*The Month* (London) praises Father Vann’s books in these words: “The special quality of his spiritual writing is that it is at once realistic and poetic — with the realism that belongs to pure poetry. He can shake our religious reactions out of the rut of habit by a vivid insight.”

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THE WISDOM OF OUR LADY

GERALD VANN, O.P.

We are all very familiar with the story in the Gospel about the centurion who asked our Lord to heal his servant; but do we reflect sufficiently on the startling implications of what he says? He begs our Lord not to come to his house: he is not worthy, but in any case there is no need — they both know what authority means: he for his part has only to give a command for it to be carried out, and it is the same with our Lord. The same, but how different! The centurion can put his men to material tasks: Christ, he realizes, with no need of material means at all, can simply command and the very forces of nature will obey him. Surely it is this deep insight, coming from a Roman, which causes our Lord to be amazed, as the Evangelist tells us He was. For the two worlds are set in contrast: the world of material power, the world of spiritual power. Pagan Rome had conquered the world and imposed on it the PAX ROMANA, an external order; Christian Rome was to convert the world and bestow on it that inner peace of heart which the world cannot give. You can conquer the world with the sword, you can convert it only with the spirit.

There have been times, indeed, when rich material means have been used in attempts to further the Church’s ends. It is debatable whether they have ever in any ultimate sense succeeded. The poor men, armed only with the power of the spirit: they are the ones who win the world for Christ. Like the Apostles they mediate the power of Christ because they share in the mind and the heart of Christ; and what is it that enables them to do that?

MARY, OUR GUIDE

In this Marian year we are to look more than ever to Our Lady for inspiration and guidance; and she more than any other human being shared her Son’s mind and heart. As the years went by, the years of His childhood and early manhood, she grew to be more and more like Him. It is worth our while to try to understand how that happened.

She grew: that is the first important thing. We are told that the child Jesus grew in strength and wisdom; but so did His mother. It would be wrong to suppose that she understood everything from the very beginning: exactly what He and His mission, His future, were. On the contrary the Gospel tells us: they did not understand the child’s words when at last they found Him in the Temple; they wondered over the words of Simeon. But when Our Lady takes her part in the final unfolding of the story, in the Passion, there is no hint of uncertainty, no questioning, then: as they meet in the city on the way to the hill of Calvary no word is spoken between them, and that fine modern
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dramatization of our Lord’s life, THE MAN BORN TO BE KING, with deep insight tells us why when it causes Our Lady to say to her companion: “We have no need of words, my Son and I.”

MIND AND HEART OF MARY

Now what was it that enabled Our Lady to grow thus to such complete unity of mind and heart? You can answer, correctly, that it was the abundance of grace given her; it was the fact that she lived so long with Him, learning from Him far more that He learned from her; you can say quite simply that it was the fact that she was His mother, with a mother’s intuitive understanding of all that concerns her Son. Yes, but what was it in her that made the grace so abundantly operative, the lessons so deeply assimilated, the intuitive understanding so sure?

There are four qualities which we could single out. You find them, in degree, in all those who help to bring the healing power of the Word to the world, all the saints; and it is important that we for our part should understand them, for that bringing of God to man is a work in which every Christian has to try to share in some small way.

1: MARY’S INNER STILLNESS

You find the first quality at the very beginning of the story when the angel comes to Mary. It is in the very atmosphere of the scene. She is alone in the little room in the small village house: everything is still. But of course with her it is primarily an inner stillness — that sort of stillness which outward silence can help but cannot create. She would have been just as attentive, as receptive, if the angel had come to her in the market place. But it would have been harder. We know that all too well, we who live in a noisy, chaotic, feverish world. It is hard for us to be still in mind and heart; and yet without that stillness we cannot really see, we cannot really listen. The Scriptures, the saints, the poets, all in different ways tell us the same thing: unless you learn that inner stillness you will never learn to be wise.

2: MARY’S QUIET REFLECTION

The second quality is made possible by the first. We learn about it from the words of the Gospel: Mary did not understand from the beginning, but, we are told, she treasured up these things and reflected on them in her heart. Life is all the time bringing us experience which can be the material of wisdom, but it will be that only if we are quiet enough to reflect on it, and to reflect on it not just in a speculative way like a philosopher or a mathematician but deeply and personally, in our hearts. Faith is not only an attitude of mind towards truth, it is an attitude of will towards a Person, and we never arrive at any deep understanding of a person unless our hearts as well as our minds are engaged. The saints are people who have pondered deeply, not just over an abstract truth, but over a Person loved. Mary did not learn about
her Son, she learned her Son.

3: MARY'S SELFLESS DEDICATION

The third quality is also implicit in the beginning of the story: it is her selfless dedication to her destiny, to her vocation, which means the life and work of her Son, for a mother’s vocation is always wrapped up in the vocation of her Son, to nurse and cuddle him when he is a baby, to teach and train him as a boy; to encourage him as he comes to manhood to embark on his own life, and finally to send him away from her to make that life for himself while she retires into the background until such time as she may be needed.

4: MARY'S ROCKLIKE STRENGTH

So, after the early years, we hear no more of Our Lady, save for one passing reference, until the end, when indeed she is needed and is there to help Him fulfill His task to the end. Now if you want to help somebody you must love him, but also you must be strong: and this is the fourth quality, that strength which is so apparent in her in the Passion story. No words, but also no tears, no betrayal of anguish which would only increase His own. She stands rocklike in her strength beside Him, beside the Cross, as though to pour her strength into Him; and in her strength she stands there till the end.

Stillness, reflection, dedication, strength: these are the qualities which gave Mary wisdom. The Mother of God is now also the mother of men; and she brings this same wisdom, these same qualities to her work for men, her unique sharing in the saving of men. And we who are to invoke her with especial intensity are meant surely to beg of her to obtain for us some share in these same qualities, that we too in our feeble ways may have some share also in the work.

St. John tells us of two disciples, Andrew and another, who followed our Lord as He passed by, and He turned and said to them: “What seek ye?” And they, wiser perhaps than they knew, replied: “Where dwel lest Thou?” as though to say: We are not seeking a WHAT, we are seeking a WHO, a person. And when, long after, they had learnt that Person, gradually, day by day, and when finally the Spirit at Pentecost fully instructed their hearts so that they fully lived their knowledge, they became filled with power to preach the wonderful works of God, and the sound of their preaching went forth into the whole earth. In the power of the Word they brought the Word to the world.

APOSTLES MUST IMITATE MARY

We are not saints, and most of us are not preachers or teachers; but we all in one way or another have to try to be apostles, have to try to bring men to the knowledge and love of the Word. To do that for modern man, we have to express the truths of our faith, not in formulas which are familiar enough to us but are unintelligible to others, but in
modern everyday language, our own language, their own language, and that is not easy. It means that we have to understand these truths very deeply; we have to assimilate them, live with them, till they become part of us or rather till we become part of them. And in the last resort, when you say "truths" you mean truth, the Truth, you mean the Word, you mean God. So that the best of all ways of becoming apostles, and the only way of becoming apostles like those Apostles of old, is to learn God, to live in and with God.

So we return to the qualities of mind and heart of Mary, the Mother of God. If you are to learn God you must first **be still in mind and heart**, no matter what the noise and confusion which surround you. Still in mind: able to look and listen and ponder; still in heart: not torn this way and that by conflicting desires, but your heart set on the one thing necessary, filled with a longing for God so great that all other desires are absorbed into it and become part of it. Secondly, you must **learn to ponder in your heart**, alone with God, trying to see life as it comes to you and those you love as part of the slow working out of man's redemption. That will help you to do the third thing: to **praise and accept God's will** as it comes to you day by day, and to see your vocation whatever it may be as a means of furthering his work in the world. Whatever your walk in life you are all the time influencing people by what you say and what you do and what you are; and if your heart is with God you will in fact be an apostle, you will in fact do apostolic things, and when you talk, whether your talk is sad or gay, serious or flippant, whether you laugh with others or cry with them, you will in fact be talking to other hearts about God. For if once you let God take possession of you He will use you all the time for the saving of men; and of course **you will be strong**. All those who have learnt to think deeply and live deeply, to be wise, are strong in some ways; but those who have learnt to think and live with God, to share His wisdom, are strong with His strength; and it is that strength that the apostle needs.

**PRAY FOR US, SINNERS**

Every time we say the HAIL MARY we acknowledge the fact that we are sinners. We are NOT wise and deep and strong; we are foolish and shallow and weak. But indeed unless we began from that acknowledge we should get nowhere. What we have to do is hope that in spite of our weakness and shallowness we may be allowed to do some little good in the world, and that gradually we may become a little wiser, a little deeper, a little stronger. Mary praised God because He had looked favorably upon her lowliness; it is for us in this Marian year to beg her to intercede for us, that He may look on our lowliness, too, and, despite ourselves, make something of us in the end, something that will both praise Him and be of service to our fellowmen.
MARIAN REPRINTS

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No. 2 — The Meaning of Mary—Lois Schumacher
Litany for Our Times—Robert L. Reynolds
No. 3 — Mary and the Apostolate—Rev. Emil Neubert, S.M.
No. 4 — The Imitation of Mary—Rev. Placid Huault, S.M.
No. 5 — Mary, Assumed into Heaven—Rev. Lawrence Everett, C.SS.R.
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No. 9 — Russia and the Immaculate Heart—Pius XII
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No. 21 — The Immaculate Conception and the United States—Rev. Ralph
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No. 25 — Ad Diem Illum—Pius X
No. 26 — Know Your Mother Better: a Marian bibliography—Bro. Stanley
Mathews, S.M.
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No. 28 — Immaculate Mother of God—James Francis Cardinal McIntyre