056 - Our Lady of Lourdes, Guardian and Teacher of the Faith

Pierre-Marie Theas

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Our Lady of Lourdes,
Guardian and Teacher of the Faith
Pastoral Letter of His Excellency Pierre-Marie Theas,
Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes
Number 56
ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

The subject of the present Marian Reprint is a pastoral letter of his Excellency, the Most Rev. Pierre-Marie Theas, the Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes. Bearing the provocative title of Notre Dame de Lourdes, Gardienne et Educatrice de la Foi (Our Lady of Lourdes, Guardian and Teacher of the Faith), it was written in February, 1957, in order to announce the coming Lourdes Year and to point out at the same time the true significance of the shrine at Lourdes and of the countless pilgrimages which have had as their object the Grotto of Massabielle.

The very title of the pastoral letter is indicative of the real meaning of Lourdes, as seen by its present Bishop. The Lourdes Grotto is a special means whereby Almighty God through His Mother is pleased to preserve and augment the Catholic Faith.

After a short but penetrating analysis of the nature of faith, Bishop Theas demonstrates the powerful influence of Our Lady of Lourdes in dissipating the errors opposed to three great mysteries of the faith—grace, the Holy Eucharist, and the Church.

The entire pastoral letter, with its frequent allusions to the ceremonies which take place at the Grotto, is directed to the development of the proper spirit in which one should undertake a pilgrimage to Lourdes. Thus it is apropos not only in the Lourdes Year 1958, but any time.

We are grateful to his Excellency for permission to reprint his pastoral letter and to our translator Brother Patrick Philibin, S.M., of Chaminade High School, Dayton, Ohio.

(published with ecclesiastical approval)

The Marian Library University of Dayton Dayton, Ohio
OUR LADY OF LOURDES, GUARDIAN AND TEACHER OF THE FAITH

Brethren,

We are at the eve of the centenary of the apparitions of the Immaculate Virgin to Bernadette Soubirous.

Because this memorable anniversary comes at a time when the light of faith is dying in souls, is it not fitting to prepare for this jubilee year by invoking the Virgin most faithful and by contemplating Our Lady of Lourdes as guardian and teacher of the faith?

The Blessed Virgin is our Mother. Lourdes has proven to us that Mary loves our diocese, our world, and our century with a love of predilection. She is completely disposed, therefore, to procure for her children the treasure she knows to be the most precious, the most sacred, and the most indispensable for their happiness.

The only true richness of our soul consists in the state of grace, the supernatural life, and the friendship of God. But faith is the first condition of this life: it is "the foundation and root of all justification;" (Council of Trent) it is "the substance of things to be hoped for." (Hebrews XI, 1) Without doubt, charity is the queen of all virtues. It is inseparable from the state of grace and blends itself with holiness. Alone, it continues in the next life to be the measure of our happiness and glory. But charity presupposes faith; charity depends upon faith; charity is as it were, the expansion of faith. The ancients say that through grace man becomes the friend, the lover of God. Per gratiam homo efficitur Dei dilector. But this God whom we call our Father, this God who intimately reveals himself to us, is known by faith. It is faith which first apprehends Him, submitting to His word and holding for true what He has made known.

What is Faith?

It is adherence by the light of God and with the help of His grace to all that He reveals to us.

Faith is, first of all, the adherence of the intellect to an objective truth which we have learned from the revelation of God and which we hold to be true because of the authority of God who deigns to make it known to us and who can neither deceive nor be deceived.
OUR LADY OF LOURDES

Under the pretence that faith must be a personal and vital adherence, that it must be living and expanding, some have forgotten the intellectual character of faith. They have confused it with trust, obedience, or some other noble religious attitudes which normally flow from it, but do not constitute it. They made this error because they did not give enough attention to the fact that in an act of the intellect itself there is something vital and personal, free and meritorious; and that the act of the intellect is not forced by the evidence or by the strict logic of the reasoning process, but freely (and as reasonably as freely) it submits to the word of God. Faith bows before the dignity, the truthfulness, the holiness, the majesty of God, thus rendering to Him a priceless homage. This is the first of all the other donations that man will make of himself and it is the greatest, for it is the pride of his mind that he sacrifices.

This homage is all the more meritorious inasmuch as the truths of our faith oblige us to conform our conduct to them, to mortify our passions, and to walk not in darkness but in the light.

Living and Dead Faith

When discord exists between one’s faith and life, when through sin the soul is deprived of the state of grace, faith still remains. If the sinner has not fallen into heresy, he will continue to adhere to Catholic dogma by virtue of an intimate disposition which is a gift of God. Do not underestimate this faith, which according to the Apostle St. James (II, 7), theological language, and the Council of Trent is called a dead faith because it is not able of itself to procure eternal life. In the encyclical Mystici Corporis, His Holiness Pius XII paternaly embraces these numberless souls who “having lost charity and sanctifying grace by sin, still have the faith and Christian hope.” He assures us that, “The Holy Spirit never ceases to impel them to a salutary fear and to excite them to prayer and repentance.” They belong to the Mystical Body under the title of “Sick members of Jesus Christ.”

This is precisely the grace of our pilgrimages (it is also a mission that is especially given to Our Lady of Lourdes) to transform this somnolent faith into charity, and to enliven the souls who up until now have not had the courage to break with sin.

Do we appreciate this free gift of faith, which we received
through Baptism and which constitutes an integral part of our supernatural life? Because it is a theological virtue, it directly unites us with God, and nothing can separate God and us. Becoming a living faith, a faith animated by charity, it produces in us in a manner always more intense, this presence of friendship, which, with the aptitude to see God face to face, is the basis of the supernatural life. Except for sanctifying grace itself, there is nothing more precious in our soul than the three virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

Do we appreciate them at their true value? Do we practice them often and with conviction? Let us often ask God to strengthen and deepen these virtues in us and to help them grow. We should offer through Our Lady of Lourdes the beautiful prayer of St. Thomas Aquinas: Fac me tibi semper magis credere, in te spem habere, te diligere.

We will ask especially for faith. Are we not the faithful, those who have the faith? We will ask for the life of faith, a living faith, in order to merit the blessing which Jesus indirectly addressed to His Mother when He said, "Happy are those who hear the word of God and do it." (Luke XI, 28)

We could never say enough about how much this gift and virtue of faith means to us in this life. Is it not through this virtue well understood, faithfully guarded, and carried to its limits that our soul attains here its fullness, that is to say, that it realizes fully the plan of God for it? On the contrary, let it become insipid, waver, or, above all, weaken and the entire supernatural edifice crumbles. Our supernatural faith is compromised and our apostolate perverted.

Lourdes, Land of Faith

Our Lady of Lourdes is the guardian of this treasure of faith; she is the inspiration and teacher of the virtue of faith. She has this office by right, by desire, and by love because she is our Mother. A mother watches over the possessions of her children even if the weakness of their age (let us understand this of the entire course of our mortal life) prevents them from appreciating what they have.

The true pilgrims of Lourdes are real witnesses. Isn’t their Christian faith, their Catholic faith, that which they have professed at Lourdes distinguished and characterized in the first place by its
OUR LADY OF LOURDES

purity, integrity, and serenity? Does it not happen at Lourdes that their faith, without ceasing to be obscure and thus meritorious, is penetrated by sweetness, unction, and gentleness.

At Lourdes the circumstances of the apparitions and the privileged poetry of the site have brought forth such a transparency of the supernatural that the most sublime mysteries can be seen, felt, and touched in their sensible expression. One must go back to Fra Angelico in order to find equal success with grace. In his paintings, design and color; here, Heaven and the very site itself, are placed at the Divine disposition.

In reality, at Lourdes is it not the invisible and sweet presence of Mary who, delicately and by mysterious paths, leads us to God? What a moving avowal of this fact is made by those who, at Lourdes, have passed from a dead to a living faith, from spiritual blindness to light, from unbelief to faith?

Why don’t we recognize it? There is at the Grotto of Massabielle, a forceful reminder of the simplicity and poverty of the Grotto of Bethlehem. Without placing the crib of the Incarnate Word and the apparitions of Massabielle on the same plane, let us remember that at Lourdes the Christian faith received something of the light of Christmas and that there is in the human framework and the story of Lourdes a little of that humble and divine poetry that St. Luke has so well expressed in his story of the Nativity. In his recent Christmas message, the Sovereign Pontiff invited the faithful of the world to present themselves with the smiling simplicity of shepherds at the crib of the Son of God. He gave them the assurance that the truths of salvation, denied, contested, or ignored by modern man would there shine brightly.

Isn’t this also true before the Grotto of Massabielle? Incontestably, at Lourdes, faith is purified; without ceasing to remain obscure, the faith is never overclouded. It brings peace.

It is through her purity, her holiness without any need for her to fight, that the faithful Virgin is victor over all heresies. At Lourdes, faith is triumphant, but serene. It is pleasant, for there, more than elsewhere, the mysteries proposed to it are sensible to the heart.

If we consider faith from the aspect of its object, it is necessary
to say that at Lourdes the perspectives of faith are at once very vast, very rich, and very simple. It is satisfying to the demands of the most able theologians, revealing to them a profundity and depth in the understanding of mysteries. Faith is also within the grasp of the most simple soul, thanks to the sensible expression that these mysteries have miraculously received there. This is why it is that the simple souls are the ones who never weary of going to Lourdes. It is they who unconsciously give the tone to the place, then direct and maintain it.

Their supernatural instinct is never at fault. Others, casting off all human respect and intellectual pride, join themselves to the people and pray with them and believe with them, for it has pleased You, O Lord "to reveal these things to the little and humble and to hide them from the strong and great." (Luke X, 21)

With the Pope, Doctor of the Truth

Humble souls never have difficulty submitting themselves to the authority of the Sovereign Pontiff. More than anyone else, the Holy Father knows the dangers which menace the Christian faith in a certain epoch and in the entire world in general. No one has received more grace for this. Recently the Holy Father pointed out some of these dangers. On last September 14, closing the sixth week of the pastoral adaptation, Pius XII recalls the condemnations in "Humani Generis" of August 12, 1950 against "the false opinions which threaten to undermine the foundations of Catholic doctrine."

He puts us again on guard against this "new theology" which "under the pretext of adapting itself to modern times . . . begins to mitigate the rigor and immutability of metaphysical principles, to make precise dogmatic definitions more yielding, to revise the meaning and contents of the supernatural and its intimate structure, to spiritualize and modernize the theology of the Holy Eucharist, to renovate and reconcile with modern thoughts and sentiments the doctrines of the Redemption, the nature and effects of sin and several other points." (Documentation Catholique, September 30, 1956, C. 1229)

Who does not see that these diverse errors are incapable of confronting the heavens of Lourdes where a light, clearer than that of candles, is projected on the triple mystery that they would like to change: the mystery of grace, the mystery of the Eucharist, the
OUR LADY OF LOURDES

mystery of the Church?

Lourdes and the Mystery of Grace

The last Christmas message, which by the depth and the scope of the subject treated was more on the order of a great doctrinal encyclical, stated precisely the errors concerning grace and sin. The Pope denounces idolatry of technology, the pretension of modern man to self-sufficiency. Intoxicated by his control over matter, he would like to assure by his own unaided efforts his own achievement and happiness. Thanks to the better and soon perfect knowledge of laws, not only physical, but also psychological and sociological, he would put himself in the most favorable conditions for acting. He would create for himself ideal institutions. The happiness of man, the good order of society, the righteousness of conduct, which are its condition, would be by this fact automatically, if not mechanically, assured.

Now, says the Pope, to reason thus is to attack the dignity of human nature, to refuse to reason its most precious and interior values—moral responsibility and the privilege of liberty. It is at the same time a misunderstanding of the limits of nature. Man throws himself against salutary resistances which come to him from the order inscribed by the Creator in the nature of things and traditions slowly elaborated and peculiar to each country. Man, moreover, is capable of failing, of misusing his liberty. Not only is man able to sin, but he is terribly disturbed by this disorder, this lack of balance between his superior inclinations and inferior instincts. It is the consequence of the fall of our first parents, aggravated by the “inexhaustible river” of our personal faults. From this we see the necessity of grace, not only to raise us to the supernatural order, but to cure in us that which is wounded, to straighten what is crooked. We should think of this peace to which the church attracts with so much insistence our preoccupation, efforts, and prayers. Peace will always be hard to attain; so obscured has the intelligence of man become by the disorder of sin that it discovers only with difficulty the necessary light and goodness.

Moreover, the heart of man has become, by this same disorder, the prey of covetousness, the gratification of which is incompatible with peace. Also, the Holy Father has told us that peace is at the
same time “the fruit of man’s effort” and “a precious gift of God.” Sin is a sad reality, but the Redemption and grace is sovereignly efficacious. This is what the light of Lourdes never ceases to show us.

The mystery of sin and grace are both contained in the words of the vision of March 25, 1858: “I am the Immaculate Conception.” These words heard by the child, untiringly repeated by her, affirm, in a setting and circumstances that make them understandable to all, the double reality of sin and grace.

The privilege which Mary proclaimed is an exceptional grace which represents in a high degree the supernatural order and recalls all the graces that are continually offered to us. Moreover, because the Immaculate Conception is a unique privilege, it reminds us of the common law: we are all born with original sin. No one is so strong as to be without sin. (John VIII, 7). That is why we reply “pray for us sinners” to the invocation, “Hail Mary, full of grace.”

We can never be too attentive to the apparition of March 25 in the course of which the Vision gave her name and identity. The Apparition came down from the rock where Bernadette usually saw her and went to the interior of the Grotto. Bernadette, advancing on her knees, went to join the apparition to the great surprise of the crowd which didn’t understand the change. The Lady then resembled the Miraculous Medal image, as if sending her blessing on the entire world. Joining her hands, after having smiled several times, “she became very solemn,” says Bernadette, “and seemed to humble herself.” Only then did she utter the blessed words, “I am the Immaculate Conception.”

Let us reflect upon these words and gestures; all the theology of the Magnificat is included here. The dignity of the human person is exalted to a degree never dreamed of. At the same time, its limits are fully acknowledged by the humble attitude of the Virgin who affirmed her total dependence upon God. This dependence is so much the more profound as the privileges given to the Blessed Virgin are the more exceptional. She has been lifted to such a degree of perfection and grace that tradition can say that she touches the confines of divinity. Thus we are given a concrete answer to the distressing question which stops so many souls on the way to the
OUR LADY OF LOURDES

faith: How could the finite coexist with the infinite? Who can, without staggering, try to represent to himself the Absolute.

It is first through Our Lord Jesus Christ and then through our Blessed Mother that the infinite has come close to us, has mixed with us, has become one of our own and encompassed humanity with a maternal tenderness.

It is through Jesus first and principally that we receive grace which, on one hand triumphs over sin, and on the other elevates us to the sublime order to which God has destined us. It is through Our Lady of Lourdes that this grace of redemption is continually offered to us: grace of purification and recovery, of opposition to sin, of reparation for sin, and of compassion for sinners.

The Mother of Mercy invites the pilgrims of Lourdes to this supreme form of charity which pities and relieves the most oppressive of miseries—that of sin. And when one thinks of the numberless crowds of sinners who at Lourdes pass from death to life, from mediocrity to fervor, one admires and proclaims with transports of joy the omnipotence and triumph of divine grace.

Lourdes and the Mystery of the Eucharist

Faith in the Eucharist is not weak at Lourdes. It is, on the contrary, affirmed daily there, and in the most stirring and solemn manner. Nowhere will you find emphasis as vibrant, as enthusiastic and as drawing as at Lourdes during the processions of the Blessed Sacrament. As St. Pius X wrote to Bishop Schoepfer, "this sanctuary shines on the face of the Catholic world both as the center of Marian cult and as the most glorious throne of the mystery of the Eucharist." Lourdes is truly the city of the Blessed Sacrament.

The Eucharist will always remain the mystery of mysteries. If faith consists essentially in the adherence of the intellect to a truth and a truth which goes beyond us, which is shown to us not by the logic of a reasoning, nor by the evidence of the senses, nor by a direct intellectual intuition, but by the testimony alone of God, on the word of God, then we must say that nowhere does this word weigh more than in the mystery of the Eucharist.

Eucharistic faith is the Christian faith in its fullness, because of the purity of its motive and because of the richness of its object.
OUR LADY OF LOURDES

Spiritual writers and theologians take pleasure in recalling that this mystery is the epitome of our faith: it supposes everything else; it is the acme of this gift which God never ceases to give humanity; from heaven to the crib, from the crib to the cross, from the cross to the altar. It is these great mysteries of salvation; it is everything that God wanted to reveal to us concerning His intimate life that we affirm when we proclaim, “Blessed be Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar.”

At Lourdes, the eucharistic cult seems to be bound more inseparably with all the other aspects of dogma: the mystery of the cross, mediation, and the divine and human maternities of the Blessed Virgin.

On the other hand, because of this supernatural transparency which is the privilege of Lourdes, the Eucharistic faith loses its obscurity and disconcerting austerity for the intellect, and, above all, for the imagination and senses. The traditional chants of the Blessed Sacrament processions, the acclamations of the Host, and prayers for the sick and the church take on a spontaneity and sensible joy, as well as a sacred dignity and fervor, that is found nowhere else in the same degree. It is beyond doubt that Our Lady of Lourdes has contributed and will contribute efficaciously to maintain the Eucharistic faith in the minds and hearts of the faithful. She brightens this faith and brings it to its fulfillment, that is, to frequent and fervent Communions and to living Eucharistic piety. This is at the same time the summary and crown of the Christian life.

Lourdes and the Mystery of the Church

The Christian faith of which Our Lady of Lourdes is the guardian is essentially the Catholic faith. She helps us adhere to the truths revealed by God, but presented, proposed, and defined as such by the Church. The Church, in reality, has received the complete and universal mission to teach, that is, to guard the deposit of faith, to interpret the Scriptures (which always ought to be learned at the feet of Holy Mother the Church), and to express and formulate traditions. The Church, through the liturgy, breaks the bread of doctrine while taking into account the differences of race, capacities, times, and places. We must be grateful to the Church for fulfilling with vigilance, sometimes with jealousy, the mission of distributing
OUR LADY OF LOURDES

the bread of truth to her children. The Church has found a faithful climate for this at Lourdes.

How could the instructions be numbered which, under so many forms, and in so many pilgrimages, are given each year in the Sanctuaries, open air, and many meeting rooms? We can say that, outside of Rome, the center of Christianity, the instruction given here is more clear, pure, and authentic than anywhere else. Incontestably, the Blessed Virgin inspires the minds and touches the hearts. At Lourdes, the ministers of the word avoid exaggerating and hardening the truth just as they guard against minimizing or sweetening it. The task of speakers and preachers is not so much to attack error as to proclaim the word of God. The best way to scatter darkness is to make the light shine. The characteristic of the preaching at Lourdes is the purest orthodoxy. All the errors condemned by the Pope in his recent Christmas message die of emptiness when they come into contact with the Grotto. Never at Lourdes has the menace of false piety troubled souls. All the devotions and innovations which were not in line with faith have disappeared in the light of the heaven of Lourdes. The Blessed Virgin has the interests of her Son so much at heart that she vigilantly maintains the pilgrims, priests and faithful, in the strictest and most trusting union with the Church. Who is there who has not experienced at the moment when the invocations rise from the vast esplanade towards the Blessed Sacrament (perhaps the most solemn moment of the day at Lourdes) an impression of order, of continuity, and of plentitude when the acclamation resounds: Our Lady of Lourdes, bless the Pope, the vicar of Jesus Christ. His absence would have left an emptiness in the intellect and ever more so in the heart.

How well the presence of a Legate of the Holy Father for exceptional solemnities, responds to the most profound and dear wishes of the pilgrims of Our Lady of Lourdes.

When our Bishops come to Lourdes with their delegations (sometimes very imposing), they have the impression that they have been followed by their entire diocese, that here as nowhere else they are united to their flock in intimate trust and holy familiarity because pastors and flocks are reunited in the presence of Our Lady. Yes, truly at Lourdes the Christian people are gathered close
to their hierarchy and to the Roman Pontiff. Here they are more aware of that which is the object of faith: the reality of the Mystical Body, the mysterious and inexpressible bonds which unite the members of the true church, and in the first place, the bonds which attach the faithful, not only to Jesus Christ, but to the visible head of each particular church and to the Vicar of Christ, who is at the same time Bishop of Rome and Bishop of the entire Catholic Church.

As you can see, at Lourdes the great Christian mysteries of grace, of the Eucharist, and of the Church are revealed in a clearer light.

Let us invoke the Virgin of Massabielle as the guardian and teacher of our faith.

The Faithful Virgin

When our enraptured eyes look upon the white statue girded in blue which stands in the hollow of the rock, from our hearts must arise with greater spontaneity the invocation of the Litany of Loretto: Virgo fidelis, ora pro nobis—Virgin most Faithful, pray for us. Mary is surely the faithful Virgin, the model of perfect faith. That is why she is able to ask and obtain for us the preservation and growth of this treasure. The Gospel declares her blessed because she believed; she believed in the accomplishment of what had been told to her on the part of the Lord (Luke I, 45). She believed the word of God as transmitted by the angel, as we must believe the word of God as it comes from the Church. For her as for us, but in a different manner, there was an area of darkness. This gave her the merit of faith. How solemn and mysterious are the words of the angel: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” (Luke I, 35) The day came when this faith caused her sorrow; she did not understand the attitude of her Son, a child, when He remained at the Temple. How natural is the reproach that she addressed to Him, “My Son, why have you done this? Your father and I have sought you sorrowing.” (Luke II, 48) But above all can we imagine the interior struggle of Mary as she stood at the foot of the cross? What heroic faith she had to have to maintain in her heart, in spite of all the contrary and crushing appearances, a most confident hope in the Resurrection. Her faith, perfect and unalterable in all points, was subject to the
OUR LADY OF LOURDES

difficulties and trials to which ours is submitted.

We know now why we should not separate the two titles: Virgin most faithful and Our Lady of Lourdes. O Mary, Model of faith during your earthly life, and now guardian and teacher of the faith at Lourdes, purify and augment our faith.

The City of the Credo

A Bishop of one of the most Catholic countries of the world and an indomitable defender of the Catholic faith, says with insistence each time that he comes in pilgrimage, "Lourdes is the City of the Credo." Let us take away as our last picture of Lourdes this gathering of pilgrims who, candle in hand, sing each evening the Credo in the sacred and universal language of the Church. It is the symbol of the unity of the faith in the midst of a great diversity of races and nations on this large esplanade, before the Basilica of the Rosary, in the presence of Bishops who represent the magisterium of the Church, and who at the end will give their blessing. Have you noticed how much the Blessed Virgin has humbled herself? After the triumphant resounding of the Ave Marias which accompanied the torch light processions, She who has so often been proclaimed Queen, is mentioned in the great formula of faith with the simple words: Natus ex Maria Virgine: born of the Virgin Mary. Here we sense that Mary is present in the world of realities and that she is all powerful because of her humility. Let us ask her again to protect us and to watch over our faith. If we pray to her and have real confidence in her, she will take us by the hand and lead us to the Beatific Vision in the beatitude of heaven. Faith will be no more and Mary will be in a secondary and accidental way (but how precious!) an eternal source of gratitude and joy.

Then everyone may say with Bernadette, "Up there I will find my Mother in all the brilliance of her glory."

Given at Lourdes, on the feast of St. Bernadette, February 18, 1957.

PIERRE-MARIE THEAS
Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes
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NO. 15—MARY, PATRONESS OF CATHOLIC ACTION—John J. Griffin
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NO. 17—THE BLESSED VIRGIN IN THE LITURGY—Rev. John J. Griffin
NO. 18—OUR LADY OF RUSSIA—Catherine de Hueck Doherty
NO. 19—THE WITNESS OF OUR LADY—Archbishop Alban Goodier, S.J.
NO. 20—FULGENS CORONA—Pius XII
NO. 21—THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND THE UNITED STATES—
Rev. Ralph Ohlmann, O.F.M.
NO. 22—THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND THE APOSTOLATE—
Rev. Philip Hoette, S.M.
NO. 23—INEFFABILIS DEUS—Pius IX
NO. 24—MARY'S APOSTOLIC ROLE IN HISTORY—Bro. John Totten, S.M.
NO. 25—AD DIEM ILLUM—Pius X
NO. 26—KNOW YOUR MOTHER BETTER: A MARIAN BIBLIOGRAPHY—
Bro. Stanley Mathews, S.M.
NO. 27—THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND MARY'S DEATH—Rev. J. B. Carol, O.F.M.
NO. 28—IMMACULATE MOTHER OF GOD—James Francis Cardinal McIntyre
NO. 29—THE WISDOM OF OUR LADY—Gerald Yan, O.P.
NO. 30—AD CAELI REGINAM—Pius XII
NO. 31—OUR LADY AT HOME—Richard T. A. Murphy, O.P.
NO. 33—MARY'S ROLE IN THE MYSTICAL BODY—Thomas A. Stanley, S.M.
NO. 34—MARY AND THE FULLNESS OF TIME—Jean Danielou, S.J.
NO. 35—PROTESTANTISM AND THE MOTHER OF GOD—Kenneth F. Dougherty, S.A.
NO. 36—THE LEGION OF MARY—Edward B. Kotter
NO. 37—DEVELOPING A SOUND MARIAN SPIRITUALITY—William G. Most
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NO. 39—THE MOTHERHOOD OF MARY—Emil Neubert, S.M.
NO. 40—THE HAIL MARY—James G. Shaw
NO. 41—OUR LADY'S SERENITY—Ronald A. Knox
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NO. 43—CHRIST'S DEVOTION TO MARY—Joseph J. Panzer, S.M.
NO. 44—MARY, OUR SPIRITUAL MOTHER—William G. Most
NO. 45—MARY IN THE EASTERN CHURCH—Stephen C. Gulovich
NO. 47—FILIAL PIETY: MARIAN AND FAMILY—Gerald J. Schnepf, S.M.
NO. 48—MARY AND THE HISTORY OF WOMEN—E. A. Leonard
NO. 49—OUR LADY, MODEL OF FAITH—Jean Galot, S.J.
NO. 50—OUR LADY, SYMBOL OF HOPE—Jean Galot, S.J.
NO. 51—MARY, MODEL OF CHARITY—Henri Holstein, S. J.
NO. 52—SPIRIT OF THE LEGION OF MARY—Frank Duff
NO. 53—THE TIMELESS WOMAN—Gertrud von LeFort
NO. 54—MARY, QUEEN OF THE UNIVERSE—James M. Egan, O.P.
NO. 55—THE LOURDES PILGRIMAGE—Pius XII