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The Nature of Our Lady's Grace

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THE NATURE OF OUR LADY'S GRACE

Scriptural accounts of the Blessed Virgin's saintly life, though not abundant, are striking. The New Testament displays her unwavering faith in God's mysteries, her entire conformity with God's will, her perfect virginity, her deep humility, her valiance in suffering. It also reveals something of God's extraordinary gifts of grace to Mary. Yet the description presents few details. Theological reflection and elaboration are needed. Investigation of the question over many hundreds of years has issued in considerable success.

The study of grace is always difficult, partly because of the very nature of the theme, partly because of God's sovereign freedom in conferring His gifts, "which He distributes just as He wishes" (1 *Cor.* 12:11). The difficulty increases when the theologian turns to Mary's grace, for in the supernatural world she occupies a unique position and performs a unique function. Her relationship with the Blessed Trinity is without parallel in the universe. In the glowing words of Pius XII, Our Lady, raised up to the very order of the hypostatic union, is the first-born daughter of the Father, the devoted mother of the Son, and the beloved spouse of the Holy Spirit.¹ How conceive, to say nothing of calculating, the perfection of grace in one who is daughter of God, mother of God, bride of God?

I. *Guiding Principles*

The divine maternity, Mary's supreme glory, is the norm and criterion for the study of all her perfections. It determines the

¹ *Bendito seia o Senhor*, May 13, 1946, in *AAS* 38 (1946) 266. On Mary and the hypostatic order, see the basic article by M. J. Nicholas, O.P., *L'appartenance de la Mère de Dieu à l'ordre hypostatique*, in *BSFEM* 3 (1937) 145-181; also M. Dionne, *La grâce de Marie est d'ordre hypostatique*, in *LTP* 10 (1954) 141-145.

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orientation of the whole science of Mariology.² It must, however, be understood not in some sterile, abstract sense, but in its true existential perspective. We cannot gain an intelligence of Mary's exceptional career in the history of salvation unless we perceive that she is the mother of God's Son who became incarnate to redeem the sinful race of Adam by a life of expiatory renouncement and by associating mankind, beginning with His very mother, in His own redemptive renouncements. The divine maternity is essentially ordered to the ends of our economy of salvation, the redemptive finalities to which the life of Christ Himself was ordered.³ The divine maternity, taken in this concrete, historical sense, offers four guiding lights that illuminate the question of Our Lady's grace and holiness. These are: (1) the requisite preparation and equipment for the divine motherhood, (2) the mother's close connection with her Son, source of all grace, (3) her mission in salvation, (4) the ardent love between mother and child.

God never assigns an office to any one without giving to that person the graces needed for carrying out his appointed duties. St. Paul grasped this clearly when he wrote: "Our competency is from God. He it is who made us competent ministers of a new covenant" (1 Cor. 3:5f.). St. Thomas repeats the same truth in his own way: "God so prepares and endows those whom He chooses for an office that they are made capable of discharging the office to which they are chosen."⁴ Theologians have often adapted this thought to bring out the supernatural perfections of Christ's human nature. The same norm must hold for every one who is called to high office in the economy of salvation; most certainly it must avail in the case of her who was called to be the mother work of redemption. As St. Thomas points out, "The Blessed

² Cf. G. de Yurre, *La maternidad divina y la gracia santificante*, in *EM* 5 (1946) 111.

³ See G. Brogile, S.J., *Le 'principe fondamental' de la théologie mariale*, in H. du Manoir, S.J. (ed.), *Maria Etudes sur la Sainte Vierge* 6 (Paris, 1961) 297-365.

⁴ *Summa Theologica* III, 27, 4.

of God and was invested with tremendous responsibility in the Virgin was chosen by God to be His mother. Hence there can be no doubt that God by His grace fitted her for this office."⁵ Application of this principle opens up one way leading to a more precise knowledge of the graces Mary received from God.

The second guiding thought is Mary's close connection with the source of grace. St. Thomas applies this idea to Christ's sacred humanity: "Christ had the fullness of grace . . . because He had grace in its highest degree, in the most perfect way it can be possessed. This appears from the nearness of Christ's soul to the cause of grace. For the nearer a recipient is to an inflowing cause, the more copiously it receives. And therefore the soul of Christ, which is more closely joined to God than all other rational creatures, receives the greatest possible outpouring of His grace."⁶ An obvious transition is made to Christ's mother: "The nearer a thing is to its principle in any order, the more it shares in the effect of that principle . . . But the Blessed Virgin Mary was nearest to Christ in His humanity, because He derived His human nature from her. And that is why she had to receive a greater fullness of grace from Christ than all others."⁷

Thus the divine maternity is the reason why God was so lavish with the grace He gave to Mary. Supreme holiness was required by the noble maternal function of rearing her Child and of contributing to the formation of His mind and character. To exert the maternal influence she ought to exert on her young Son, she had to possess an unparalleled fullness of grace. The example of her life had to be perfect, so that the Boy could receive without misgivings all that His mother could propose for His human education.

For once on this earth God wished to bring about a perfect supernatural accord between two beings, a perfect union of a soul with Christ. The intimacy between the Child and His mother,

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Summa Theologica* III, 7, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27, 5.

never to be troubled by any fault or imperfection, goes far to account for the fullness of grace bestowed on Mary. Particularly, however, God inundated her with His richest graces that she might accomplish the task He had allotted to her in His salvific plan. One of her greatest services is that she brought up the Boy in a family environment of unfailing sanctity, where His own sanctity could flower harmoniously in a human way.

Reflection on the divine maternity opens up limitless horizons in the study of Mary's grace. Her maternity permeates her whole person and throws light on her dignity, her supernatural perfections, her mission in life, her natural qualities, her very existence.⁸ Everything in Mary, and unquestionably her sanctity, is dominated by the divine maternity. The designation "capital grace" which is occasionally used in her regard seems incongruous; for not she, but Christ, is the head. But we can with propriety refer to her supernatural endowment as "maternal grace," which equips her for her universal function of mother of the whole Christ, head and members, and of all mankind.⁹

The third guiding principle is Mary's mission in the history of salvation. This mission, embracing her functions of coredemptrix and of mediatrix in the dispensing of graces, is thoroughly maternal, since she was made the associate of the Redeemer precisely because she was His mother. Such is the teaching of Leo XIII: "The Virgin was chosen to be the mother of God, and by this very fact was made His associate [*consors*] in saving the human race."¹⁰ Accordingly the divine maternity has a functional aspect that involves Mary's collaboration in the process of redemption. As associate of the Redeemer on Calvary, she had to be perfect in grace. To be able to offer, along with her Son, a sacrifice agreeable to the Father, she had to be completely worthy in the eyes of God.

⁸ Cf. N. di S. Brocardo, O.C.D., *La grazia di Marie e i suoi problemi*, in *ASC* 11 (1953) 30 f.

⁹ Cf. S. Gutiérrez, O.S.A., *La plenitud de gracia de la Santísima Virgen*, in *EM* 5 (1946) 181.

¹⁰ *Supremi Apostolatus*, Sept. 1, 1883, in *ASS* 16 (1883-84) 114.

The Blessed Virgin's activity as coredemptrix contributes greatly to our understanding of her fullness of grace. The redemptive sacrifice requires holiness in the person who offers it, as well as holiness in the act of offering. Christ, all-holy in His human nature, offered His sacrifice with consummate obedience and love. Associated with Christ in this sacrifice, Mary had to have all the holiness possible in a created person, and she had to make her maternal oblation with perfect obedience and love.

Consequently Mary's grace may not be isolated from her official mission. Grace was apportioned to her to enable her to accomplish that mission. Certainly all the grace she received is first of all hers; it sanctified her beyond all angels and men and transfigured her whole life. But in God's providence it was meant to redound to the benefit of all mankind; Mary's grace was designed for her exalted position as mother of the Savior and as coredemptrix of the race.

It goes without saying that, as Mary's grace is derived from her Son, so too the entire value of her coredemption comes from Him. Therefore both her grace and her coredemptive power attest that Jesus Christ is the one Mediator between God and men, the Mediator on whom the grace and the meditorial activity of all others totally depend.

The fourth guiding thought is the intimate love between the Son and His mother. Unlike our love, which derives personal integration or at least some passing satisfaction from what is loved, divine love receives no advantage from any quarter but only gives and enriches. It is the measure of all perfection in creatures. "God's love infuses and creates goodness in things."¹¹ It extends to the whole universe and is everywhere operative, though more in some parts than in others. It is the love of Him who possesses infinite goods to bestow. In the case of adorning and enriching His mother, Christ's love cannot but vie with His wealth.

Contemplation of these guiding principles, which have their

¹¹ St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica* I, 20, 2.

origin in the divine maternity, will do much to bring out and clarify for us the perfection of Mary's grace, holiness, and life of virtue.

II. Aspects of Our Lady's Grace

Holiness in the created order is a supernatural perfection that proceeds from grace, and includes all virtues. If we examine Mary's holiness and virtuous life, we can come to some appreciation of her grace.

What precisely is holiness? We may answer, in a general way, that holiness is the separation of a creature from profane usage by its consecration to God, that is, to His service and to divine worship. Whatever is devoted to God and belongs to Him is sacred and holy. Therefore God Himself is necessarily holy by His very nature, since all that is dedicated to Him, whether intelligent being or inanimate thing, becomes holy by pertaining to Him. He is the sole source from whom all holiness is derived.¹² In a rational creature, consequently, holiness is union with God, a participation in divinity. A man is holy because he is admitted into the life of God; only union with Him who is holy by nature can make us holy by grace.

A more comprehensive notion of holiness requires a distinction between its two essential aspects. In the first place, there is an objective holiness, or consecration, which is brought about by an action that dedicates a man or a thing to God. Such an object is God's property. The purpose of the consecration is to render the object fit for divine worship and for any mission or service God may prescribe. In itself, consecration does not necessarily require the collaboration of human freedom.

Subjective holiness, which can exist only in an intelligent being, is the effect of grace; it is caused, sustained, and nourished by grace. This grace, in itself, never fails, although it is submitted to the fluctuations of man's free response. The divine influence

¹² Cf. F. Bourassa, S.J., *Verum sacrificium*, in *SEcl* 3 (1950) 149 f.

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cannot be entirely effective unless it obtains such co-operation. God cannot take complete possession of a person unless the latter freely consents. Without this consent, the ultimate depth of the free being would elude God; but by the unreserved gift of the human will, the person wholly passes over to God.

Our Lady was called to be literally the mother of God the Savior. She was called to share actively in the events of Christ's life, to co-operate in the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption. To carry out this mission, the most important ever confided to a human being, she was invested with objective holiness; God consecrated her with a consecration that corresponds to her vocation. She also has subjective holiness; impelled by her intense personal love of God, itself the fruit of grace, she freely accepted the divine gift. Her high vocation required fullness of grace, and to the offered grace she presented a perfect receptivity.

The distinction between the two aspects of holiness, objective and subjective, suggests a solution to the problem, whether the divine maternity was formally sanctifying for Mary.¹³ On the one hand, the divine maternity must have been a source of holiness for Mary. On the other hand, holiness is formally caused by habitual grace—that is why this grace is called sanctifying. The perplexity is dissipated once we consider that the divine maternity involved a new and deeper consecration of Mary's person; the sanctification is objective. When Mary became mother of the divine Word, she was raised to a higher nobility, to an exceptional dignity. She received the highest consecration possible for a human person, and yet this new consecration did not formally sanctify her. Over and above this objective sanctification, a subjective sanctification inevitably ensued, by reason of the free acceptance Mary offered to the divine maternity.

¹³ Here I follow J. Galot, S.J., *La sainteté de Marie*, in H. du Manoir (ed.), *Maria. Etudes sur la Sainte Vierge* 6 (Paris, 1961) 432-434. On this controverted question see G. Van Ackeren, S.J., *Does the Divine Maternity Formally Sanctify Mary's Soul?*, in *MS* 6 (1955) 63-101.

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Such seems to be the meaning of Christ's reply to the woman who had cried out in praise of His mother: "Blessed the womb that has borne you; blessed the breasts that have suckled you!" Our Lord answered: "Blessed, rather, are those that hear the word of God and observe it!" (*Lk* 11:27 f.). This declaration is applicable to Mary's attitude at the time of the angel's announcement. The sole fact of her motherhood could not take the place of hearing and keeping God's word. Our Lady is blessed because she accepted the divine message and conformed to it with an assent that held nothing back. The merit of the assent was reinforced by the free act of faith that presided over it. Earlier Elizabeth, under inspiration, had exclaimed: "Happy is she who believed that what was told her on behalf of the Lord would be fulfilled!" (*Lk* 1:45). Mary received the Lord's word with faith and entire submission. That is why her subjective holiness increased at that time, and that too, according to these two testimonies of the Gospel, is why she is blessed.

Therefore the two aspects of holiness must be kept distinct. Yet they are closely connected. Objective consecration furnishes the foundation for subjective holiness, the life of grace. It is a point of departure that needs to be completed by a holiness which implies the free will's co-operation. Mary's first consecration took place at the first instant of her existence, at her Immaculate Conception. It dominated the whole subjective development of her life of grace that followed. Her initial consecration was heightened by a new consecration when the Holy Spirit came upon her to bring about in her the incarnation of the Son of God. The consecration of the divine maternity equipped Mary to fulfill her maternal mission along with all the demands it involved in the sphere of collaboration with the work of redemption, and was the basis of an enormous augmentation of her subjective holiness.

Mary was conceived with a fulness of grace. With still greater fullness she reached the highpoint of her earthly life when she became the mother of Christ. With the greatest fullness of all she

was assumed into heaven. We need not attempt here to define the genuine meaning of the Greek text that is rendered in many versions as "Hail, full of grace" (*Lk* 1:28). We can be content to reflect on the office deputed to Mary at this sacred moment, the office of God's mother and associate for the world's salvation. She could not be worthy of such a commission or fit for it without a wealth of grace. St. Thomas is loyal to tradition when, after noting that Christ in His human nature had a fullness of grace so copious that it could overflow from Him into all men, he continues: "The Blessed Virgin Mary received such a fullness of grace that she was nearest of all to the Author of grace; for she received within herself Him who is full of all grace."¹⁴ Pius IX, in the document containing the solemn definition of the Immaculate Conception, expresses the firm Catholic conviction: "In this unique and majestic greeting, that had never been heard before, it is plain that the mother of God was the repository of all graces, that she was adorned with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, indeed that she was the almost measureless treasury and inexhaustible abyss of all these gifts."¹⁵

Fullness of grace is, of course, relative to the person of whom it is predicated. Mary's fullness of grace must correspond to the greatness and functions of the divine maternity.¹⁶ Only God can gauge its perfection. Yet we may confidently assert that her fullness of grace transcended the fullness of grace of all others. Pius IX sums up tradition in this matter: "Far beyond all angelic spirits and saints, God has wondrously endowed her with an abundance of all heavenly gifts so that she, forever free from all stain of sin in her beauty and perfection possessed a fullness of purity and holiness which, outside God, cannot be conceived, and which no one except God can grasp."¹⁷

¹⁴ *Summa Theologica* III, 27, 5 ad 1.

¹⁵ *Ineffabilis Deus*, in H. Marín, S.J., *Doctrina Pontificia*, vol. 4, *Documentos Marianos* (Madrid, 1954) no. 288.

¹⁶ Cf. St. Thomas, *loc. cit.*

¹⁷ *Ineffabilis Deus*, in Marín, *op. cit.*, no. 269. Cf. Frank Calkins, O.S.M.,

If Mary's fullness of grace is beyond comparison with that of other saints, perhaps it may be defined by comparison with that of Christ. The words of Pius IX suggest such a comparison. If we look up from below we behold Christ's and Mary's fullness of grace on the unscalable height of the hypostatic order. That is not surprising, for the mother stands in the circle of her Son. To be sure, the gap between the grace of Son and mother cannot be spanned. Yet Christ's absolutely highest fullness of grace is the model whose best image is found in the fullness of grace of His mother.

III. *Growth of Grace in Mary*

Nothing, perhaps, so clearly points up the difference between Christ's and Mary's fullness of grace as the progressive development of her holiness. Christ's grace could not increase, for grace is proportionate to the beatific vision which He possessed in consummate form all during His terrestrial life, even though some of its effects were for a time suspended. But Mary was a wayfarer toward eternal life, advancing from perfection to perfection, from one fullness of grace to another, until the moment of her departure from earth.

The divine maternity was decisive in the sanctification of the Blessed Virgin. Tradition is explicit on the truth that when Mary became the mother of Christ she received an immeasurable increase in her fullness of grace. Other times of outstanding importance in the maturing of her grace were the day of Calvary, when she offered her greatest sacrifice and became definitively the mother of the children of God, and the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit took firmer possession of her who had always been His dearly beloved spouse. On such days her fullness of grace expanded sharply by immense bounds. But it also grew from day to day, for every day was rich in the virtuous acts of routine life.

Sacred Scripture tells us very little about Mary's history, but that little sets her before us in the practice of many virtues. She is

praised by Elizabeth for the greatness of her faith. She has unabated confidence in God at the time of Joseph's bewilderment. Her love for God is expressed by her simple statement that she is the little slave girl of the Lord and by her complete conformity with His will. Prudence and modesty mark her conversation with the angel. With zeal for God's law she meticulously observes the Mosaic prescriptions at the time of her purification. As a young mother, she takes devoted care of her infant Child. Her love for others is illustrated by her concern at the wedding feast in Cana. She remains steadfast at the foot of the cross in her unbreakable sacrificial will. These are only a few items in her life; but they indicate her constancy in acts that are worthy of the mother of God.

Not for one day did Mary stand still, not once did she take a single step backward. There were no obstacles in her that could impede her ascent toward God, no concupiscence to slow down the flight of her soul, no risk of losing grace, no cowardice of heart that shrinks from self-donation to God. To her, more than to all others, the biblical praise may be applied: "Many women have done well; but you have excelled them all" (*Prov* 31:29).

In the divine plan Mary's life and grace, united to those of Christ, were oriented toward Calvary. During the many years she had to plod the weary way of lowliness and toil, she was being educated by God for her most dreadful hour, for her appointment with the Cross, the hour of the collapse of all human hopes. Inexorably the hour approached and struck. At last she stood there, mother of a Man condemned to the gallows by verdict of the highest judge in the land. How far off, now, that joyful cry she had uttered in her youth: "Behold, from this hour onward age after age will call me blessed" (*Lk* 1:48). How niggardly that prophecy had been fulfilled for her during her whole life up to this time! The pitiful little crib in Bethlehem, the escape into godless Egypt, the obscurity of despised Nazareth, the neglect of her during her Son's public life—all this was the hollow echo of the blessedness foretold for her. In the offering she was now called

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upon to make, Mary had to gather together all that her previous life had amassed of grace, faith, hope, and love, and she had to carry them to the extreme limit. Her love for God reached its highest point, and she offered her Son to death. At the same time her love for all men achieved its maximum intensity, not only in the forgiveness she accorded to all her Son's enemies, which in the circumstances was heroic, but in her will to contribute by her sacrifice to the salvation of mankind. At the hour of the redemptive sacrifice Mary's grace and holiness soared to new, unimaginable heights.

On Calvary the mother's faith, hope, and love were subjected to their severest test, but triumphed all the more at her Son's resurrection. And now her grace entered a new phase, for neither the Resurrection nor Pentecost halted its development. But this development was no longer in the order of objective redemption, for that was accomplished. It was a development in the new mission assigned to Mary as mother of Christians, for her co-operation in subjective redemption. Our Lady's grace and her virtues continued to flower ever more during the latter years of her sojourn on earth.

V. Gifts of Grace and Mystical Life

When we speak of the Blessed Virgin's grace we mean first of all her sanctifying grace. All other graces have their root and their finality in sanctifying grace, and without it they are of little profit to the possessor. But we should not overlook the glorious retinue that accompanies sanctifying grace: the infused virtues of faith, hope, and charity, the infused moral virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit. As the years lengthened, her faith in the divine mysteries deepened, her hope in God became stronger, her love for the Blessed Trinity intensified, and all the other virtues and gifts developed for an ever richer supernatural life.

Mary's fullness of grace does not entail a host of extraordinary marvels not required by her position and mission. For instance, we

need not imagine that she had the use of reason from the first instant of her life. This idea has been proposed in the past as well as more recently.¹⁸ It is at best a gratuitous assumption. To receive the initial grace destined for her, Mary did not have to be conscious of it or straightway to give her free consent to it, any more than an infant has to be conscious and free in order to receive truly the grace of baptism. The argument that she could thus begin to merit immediately is feeble in the extreme. Length of time is not requisite for greatness of merit; if more time were needed, why should God not have prolonged her life for a decade or a century, or even up to and beyond the 969 years of Methuselah? The purpose of the Immaculate Conception was not a sudden elevation of Mary's intellect and consciousness to adulthood. It was a privilege accorded to a newly conceived infant in the human conditions of her life's inception, when she was incapable of knowing and willing. The grace conferred on Mary at her first instant would later influence her consciousness and would invite, and abundantly obtain, the full co-operation of her will; it was bestowed for a whole lifetime, not just for the first moment. It developed in her harmoniously with her physical growth.¹⁹

The correct concern to recognize all the supernatural perfection God lavished on Mary ought not to issue in the contention that she possessed unusual gifts which are not in line with her particular state. Some theologians have attributed to her certain charisms attending other missions than the one entrusted to Mary. They seem to fear that they would be failing in proper love for her if they denied to her graces that pertain to the priestly office, the apostolic office of government, and yet others. They feel obliged

Mary's Fullness of Grace, in J. B. Carol O.F.M. (ed.), *Mariology* 2 (Milwaukee, 1957) 297-312.

¹⁸ Among others, by L. Colomer, O.F.M., *El primer momento de la Virgen*, in *EM* 14 (1955) 271 f.

¹⁹ This point and some others to be considered are well presented by J. Galot, S.J., *La sainteté de Marie*, in H. du Manoir (ed.), *Maria. Etudes sur la Sainte Vierge* 6 (Paris, 1961) 442-447.

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to include in her holiness all the supernatural gifts that have ever been granted to any or all the other saints.

What should be our attitude in this regard?²⁰ We do well to follow the lead of St. Thomas. He lays down his principle: "She who brought forth 'the Father's only-begotten Son, full of grace and truth' (*Jn* 1:14), received greater privileges of grace than all others."²¹ Then he draws an inference: "There is no doubt that the Blessed Virgin received in high degree the gift of wisdom and the grace of miracles, and also the grace of prophecy." But at once he adds a prudent restriction: "She did not, however, receive these graces and others like them so as to put them to every use . . . but only as befitted her condition of life." With the finality of the divine maternity in mind, as well as the fact that Mary was a woman and a wayfarer, St. Thomas applies his principle: "She had the use of wisdom in contemplation . . . but not for the purpose of teaching, because that was not suitable for the female sex . . . The working of miracles was not for her during her lifetime, because at that period the teaching of Christ was to be confirmed by miracles, and so it was fitting that only Christ and His disciples, who were the bearers of His doctrine, should work miracles."²²

On the basis of such sound reasoning we should be slow to ascribe to Mary gifts of grace that are not in accord with the purpose of the divine maternity or that are proper to authoritative officials in the Church. We do not hurt Mary if we say that she did not possess this or that particular gift which God has conferred on some saint for some special mission. Rising high above all such charisms is the grace of the divine motherhood. Mary received in teeming abundance all the graces that empowered her to discharge the task that was hers in the work of salvation and,

²⁰ C. Feckes, *Die Gnadenausstattung Mariens*, in P. Sträter, S.J. (ed.), *Katholische Marienkunde*, vol. 2, *Maria in der Glaubenswissenschaft* (Paderborn, 1947) 156 ff., answers this questions fairly and reasonably.

²¹ *Summa Theologica* III, 27, 1.

²² *Ibid.*, a. 5 ad 3.

since she brought to these graces a co-operation that knew no reluctance, she carried out her function perfectly and in it was sanctified to the maximum degree. We do not have to suppose that in her mission as mother of Christ, as coredeemress, and subsequently as mother of Christians, she possessed the special gifts of apostles such as St. Paul or of doctors of the Church such as St. Augustine. Her greatness is attuned to her own mission. She was not meant by God to be a supernatural warehouse of all possible charisms and graces. She did not have to perform every kind of task, but only the one to which she had been appointed.

If we consider Mary's grace in the perspective of her mission, we can readily discern the relation between her divine maternity and her grace. Although the divine maternity did not formally sanctify her, it thoroughly consecrated her entire person. It also placed her in ideal conditions for the greatest development of her life of grace and for the greatest intensification of her love for God. As she progressed in knowledge of her Son, her love for God tended to blend more and more with her love for Jesus; thus she loved God with all the ardor of maternal love. In the intimacy of the family circle at Nazareth, Mary's advance in grace was powerfully promoted by her close association with Christ over the long years.

This maternal environment helps to clarify Mary's mystical life. Her experience of God was primarily the fruit of her maternal contact with Jesus. We have no solid basis for projecting her mystical life beyond her life of faith. A number of theologians have wished to attribute to her the beatific vision, at least on certain occasions, such as the Incarnation or at the birth of Christ.²³ This position, which is backed up by no evidence, seems to be hardly compatible with the state of faith that is one of the prominent marks of her greatness. When Elizabeth extolled her,

²³ Cf. F. J. Connell, C.S.S.R., *Our Lady's Knowledge*, in J. B. Carol (ed.), *Mariology 2* (Milwaukee, 1957) 314-317 and the references there given.

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she proclaimed that Mary was blessed for having believed. The moment of the Annunciation was a moment of ardent faith, not of vision.

In vain shall we scrutinize the career of Mary in the expectation of finding extraordinary mystical phenomena, such as ecstasies or revelations never before or since heard of and unknown to the Church. The message delivered by the angel Gabriel and the prophecy of Simon were indeed special revelations. But Jesus was for her a living teaching and her greatest revelation. And her ecstasy was not the kind that involves loss of consciousness, but the ever deepening wonder she experienced as she progressively discovered all that her Son was. The very simplicity of Mary's words and conduct in the few scenes recorded by the evangelists invite us to sobriety when we turn our thoughts to the mystical life of God's mother.

Perhaps we shall not stray from truth if we say that Mary's mystical life was simply her life of faith and charity pervaded by the fire of maternal love, and thereby reaching the deepest recesses of her soul. It was a life supernaturally vitalized by graces of enlightenment, spiritual energy, and love, which enabled Mary to penetrate more and more into the mystery of Christ. We detect in it no traces of exotic marvels which so easily stir the imagination and lead people to gather in crowds to slake their thirst for sensationalism. The authentic marvel of Mary's mystical life was its perfect conformity to God within the ambit of faith that is at once luminous and obscure, and the astounding phenomenon of a mother's love that focused on her Son who was her Creator, her Saviour, and her God.

When we cast a backward glance at the Blessed Virgin's supernatural endowment, we see that her grace, from its beginning in the Immaculate Conception to its consummation at the Assumption, is not an indiscriminate piling up of gifts from God, but a harmonious masterpiece of divine power and love.

This unity is clear in her immunity from sin and from subjec-

tion to the devil. Although Mary was a child of Adam, she did not inherit his sin; that was her first victory. Although she had to lead her life in the darkness of faith, in poverty, lowliness, and suffering, yet she remained completely pure and stainless; that was her daily victory. Although she may have passed through the somber gate of death, yet death could not hold her captive; and that was her final victory.

However, we gain a more adequate notion of Mary's grace if we view it in the light of her close union with God and her deep sharing in God's life. From the first instant of her existence she was God's dearest and most precious daughter through the fullness of the grace of the Immaculate Conception. Uninterruptedly she grew toward God during a long life that was rich in blessings, virtuous acts, and heroic accomplishment of the momentous mission confided to her. When at length her earthly course was run, she was taken up, glorified in soul and body, into God's eternal life. The verse of her song turned out to be wonderfully true; "How sublime is what He has done for me—the Mighty One, whose name is 'Holy!'" (*Lk* 1:49). When we first met her she was the lowly slave girl of the Lord. But now we know her as the mother of all mankind and the Queen of heaven.

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