

MARY'S ROLE IN THE LIFE OF A SECULAR

by Father Edward Leahy, OCD

I. INTRODUCTION

First of all, a greeting to you, Brothers and Sisters in Carmel. I offer it to you in the name and in the presence of her who is the subject of this lesson. It is always a holy privilege and a most pleasant assignment to write of that grateful love towards the Most Blessed Virgin, that is the essence of our revealed religion. The psalmist, describing his happiness at God's closeness to him and to his people, affirmed "for me the measuring lines have fallen on pleasant sites, but I have got the choicest portion of all." This thought expresses suitably how I feel to be writing on the role of Mary. May the Lord give me the right words and make them sound well.

II. THE HIGHEST CONTEMPLATIVE

The theme of this writing will be called "Contemplation and the Mother of Christ." It is a theme that appeals strongly to every Carmelite. I would prefer to describe my intent in this paper in simpler terms: Mary's role in the prayer-life of a Secular. Mary, true enough, is called: *Summa Contemplatrix*, the highest contemplative. That grand title, I suspect, doesn't help us much to become contemplative ourselves. She herself never heard the word contemplation. I have the feeling that the stages and divisions of prayer with which we are so familiar, the issue of where contemplation begins and the signs by which it can be recognized, were subjects about which she knew very little and cared not at all. I seriously doubt if she would want us to force our contemporary methods and states of prayer in an arbitrary fashion into her prayer life. For this reason I prefer to approach the prayer of Mary in the freshness of spirit that characterized the pre-scholastic period, considering prayer as a dimension of the Christian life. It is possible to speculate on the now widely popular forms of prayer known and practiced in the East, such as the Jesus prayer, as something that could offer real assistance to us in our efforts to understand how Mary actually did pray.

I would like to limit the scope of this paper to one form of prayer familiar to us and one that Mary herself must have known and practiced during her life, the prayer of the indwelling presence of God in the soul. In Mary we will try to see someone in whom this way of prayer, as a privileged source of spiritual growth, was realized in an altogether unique way. This will be our first point. After that we will have something to say on Mary's response to her singular awareness of the immediacy of God in her life. Finally we will see what there is in her life of prayer that can give direction to ours.

God's indwelling, the living God within us, in the center of our being, this truth, mentioned almost forty times in the Gospel of St. John, seems to us too good to be true. Theoretically we would agree with the notion of indwelling presence, but most of us most of the time act as though we did not. Consequently we lack that confidence and spontaneity that rightly belongs to us as children of God. Here indeed is one of the core Christian truths which, if only we would give it Newman's real assent, would make a positive difference in our lives. In a profound passage we listen to Jesus' proclamation: "If anyone loves me he will keep my word. My Father

will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him.”¹ Firstly the Lord simply describes the person who truly loves him; He will keep my word. In favor of this observant follower Our Lord makes the striking promise; clearly the authentic Christian is promised the presence of the Blessed Trinity. We will come to **him**. Note well the singular, “to him.”

III. PRESENCE OF GOD IN THE SOUL

Since our reflections on the indwelling presence are set on the context of traditional Carmelite spirituality, it is appropriate to spend a few moments on the Carmelite school of prayer and its specific characteristics. All of us are aware, for instance, that our Order’s tradition and teaching on the presence of God in the soul is both rich and inspiring. St. Teresa made this truth the foundation stone of much that she has written. Indeed, it is the basic thought of that great classic, the Interior Castle. She herself tells us of a vision granted to her while in prayer, of the beauty of a soul in whom God lived. Very simply she tells us that on Trinity Sunday, June 3rd, 1577, after she had been commanded by her superiors to write a book on prayer, and not knowing what to say, she was given the grace of an extraordinary illumination and intuition of the soul and its beauty. It was like a castle of many mansions, all filled with even greater light as one moved from the outer mansion. In the center which was all light and brilliance God himself dwelt. In the fervor of that inspiration she wrote her book, four hundred pages, describing with great clarity the grandeur of this palace and the means by which it can be entered. The power and introspection of this Spanish woman is unique and her imagination vivid. Water, fountains, rivers, bees, castles and many other Castilian images are used to illustrate her description.

In the Living Flame of Love, precisely where St. John of the Cross describes the highest favors of divine communication, he affirms that there is really no need to marvel about these favors, because they are all contained implicitly in the promise made by Jesus of the indwelling presence of the Blessed Trinity in the soul. Even in the last stanza of his poem which refers to the most unspeakable graces, the breathing and awakening of God in the bosom of the soul, these, according to him, are no more than the complete flowering of the initial grace of indwelling. In our own time yet there is that most privileged witness to this grace-filled truth in the person of another Carmelite, Sister Elizabeth of the Blessed Trinity. Not merely has she given emphasis to this point, she has added a dimension of beauty to it, in that she enjoyed a mystical experience of God’s presence continually. Then, who does not know of the humble Carmelite brother, Lawrence of the Resurrection and his book of reflections on the practice of the presence of God?

As we go deeper into the prayer life of Carmel we encounter the gracious presence of her in whom we Carmelites are all one, Mary most holy. As by Baptism we are made children of God, so by our profession as Carmelites we become children of Mary. Mary takes possession of us and makes us her own. All Carmel belongs to Mary, so goes the thoughts of the ancients. Carmel is full of the spirit and presence of Mary. This is true in a special way of the interior life of the Order. Mary in Carmel is an atmosphere, a presence, a hidden energy. But perhaps these reflections apply in a fuller way to the life of a Secular Carmelite, for the similarity of vocations is the same. Mary was a laywoman. She never lived in a convent or monastery, never said Mass. In addition she was a wife and mother. You would do well to attend to this fact when you reflect

¹John 15:23.

on her role in our Order and especially in your life. Article 7 of the OCDS Rule of Life states that the Blessed Virgin holds a particular place in the life of Carmelites. She is the mother of the whole Order, the model of fidelity to grace and constancy in God's service. In the climate of today's thinking it is easy to neglect her. If we Carmelites choose to neglect her in our explicit life of faith we will do great injury to our vocation and remain deaf to God's loving appeal. We will fail to be committed to our life of prayer. There is an essential link between love for the Blessed Mother and mature Carmelite life. What this really means is that Mary is the most powerful means of uniting us to Christ. As Abbot Marmion says so simply and so beautifully; if a person loves Mary, Jesus will grow in his heart. So, if we truly want to find the Son of God we must look for Him as the son of Mary. Like the shepherds the first Christmas we will always find him with Mary his mother.

There is a book in the Jewish Jesus, entitled: *Thus Jesus Prayed*. But how did Mary pray? We know little enough about her interior life or what graces she received. Indeed, we know little about Mary herself, the most celebrated of all women. We know much more about women of less importance, yet so little about her. Is this privation? Knowing much about someone is not the same as knowing them. Often knowing too much about a person is an obstacle to knowing the person himself. It is not a question of how much we know, rather than of what we know. The little we have about Mary is sufficient to give a clear and authentic image of her life. Mary, the *orante*, is a favorite subject for painters and poets, each trying to recapture, in his own way, the ethereal beauty of her, whom all generations call blessed. This consideration leads to one aspect of Mary's prayer and contemplation that offers inspiration for the prayer life of Carmelites.

IV. PONDERING IN HER HEART

Scripture takes note of Mary's capacity for pondering. "But Mary kept these words, pondering them in her heart." This intimate picture from the pen of Luke has some significance, because it is almost certain he got his information from none other than Mary herself. On two separate occasions in the second chapter of his Gospel he shows us the Mother of God lost in wonder and admiration of the great events into which she was drawn. After the birth of Christ and when the shepherds had left we are told "Mary kept these things, pondering them in her heart." Again, after the return to Nazareth and the finding of Jesus in the temple we have: "his mother kept these words in her heart." This is part of the mystery of Mary. She pondered, not anxiously but trustingly, not fearful as one does in some dilemma, looking for an answer to some vexing question. These events into which she was drawn were for her a deep experience.

So Mary's response to God's offer and indeed her characteristic attitude was one of openness. We could take this scene from the Gospel for the revitalization of our own prayer life. Mary wondered. Thus we have the thoughtful virgin the wondering contemplative. She meditated in her heart. How much natural beauty there is in this item of news. A lovely authentic picture. Yes, we say, this is how it must have been. For how could a mother and such a mother fail to live in memory that great personal event she had experienced in real life. Jesus had been born in this way, in these circumstances. How could He fail to be born again in the heart of a happy mother? Memory first of all, then consciousness, understanding and finally wonder, contemplation, are

not these phases of the spiritual life of Mary a model of that interior process that ought to take place in the life of every follower of Christ?

How are we to find this pondering virgin? Father Marie Eugene speaks precisely about this point in his writings on Mary. He calls it “the contemplative discovery of Mary.”² How, he says, does Mary discover herself to those who live the contemplative vocation? Speaking to his own brothers and sisters in Carmel he says: “the sons of Elijah, Carmelites are contemplatives and their motto, following Elijah, is to stand in the presence of the living God. Because a Carmelite is vowed also to the Blessed Virgin he ought to seek her living presence in the same manner.” He says God is present in the soul in three ways, power, essence and grace. Of Mary we can also affirm a certain mode of presence, the precise determination of which there is no unanimity, though all affirm the fact itself.

Surely the most beautiful response on Mary’s part is to be found in the Cantic of Mary, the *Magnificat*. St. Luke tells us that, following the annunciation and Mary’s acceptance of her role as Mother of God, she went to visit her cousin. This was the most important thing she could think of doing. Here we are offered a vision of the innermost thoughts of Mary after she had opened her heart to the message of Gabriel. This epic gave rise to one of the loveliest religious poems ever written, the *Magnificat*. We catch the rhythm of her spirit in the exuberance of a unique moment. My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My soul exults with overflowing delight. She was the bearer of the Lord’s body to man, the first monstrosity, and this was the first Corpus Christi procession, as well as the first announcement of the good news.

Very simply the liturgy reminds us that for Mary the birth of Christ deepened her love for God and increased her holiness.

V. THE VISITATION

The Gospels say nothing more about Mary’s visit to her cousin beyond the fact that it lasted three months. She made herself available to her cousin in that beautiful way as happens when friends are present to each other. For Mary as for her cousin this encounter and this presence became a deep experience of the loving kindness of God and an equally profound recognition of his favors. And so we understand why the Church in her liturgy keeps us mindful of this visit. The *Magnificat* was not said once and for all in the garden at Ein Karim. It is put in the mouth of the Church for all time, teaching us that every journey towards God should end in a *magnificat*. The idea of presence, the presence of God, of people to each other, seems to be gaining much attention as a help in the ways of prayer in our time. We are told that in some ways our presence to each other, especially when we are inwardly present, helps to give meaning and reality to our presence to God. There is the story of the rainmaker. A Chinese village suffering from a long drought sought for rain from magicians and sorcerers, to no avail. Finally, the villagers approached a little man and begged him to come to their village and bring them rain. He asked only for a little hut outside the village. There he sat for three days and the rains came.³ When

² *I am a Daughter of the Church*, ch. 5.

³ This rainmaker did not “do things” - he was only present.

their quiet presence comes upon people,⁴ things happen. It is difficult to judge the importance of the “rainmaker” for he does nothing. Mary is the greatest “rainmaker” the world has ever seen. In her earthly life she did not do much in human terms, but she was a presence, so that wherever she appeared the Holy Spirit burst forth in new and exciting ways, as the Holy Spirit was present to Mary in a unique way.

It is a law of the action of God in our lives that he frequently illumines for a person such and such a mystery of faith. By the Spirit he assures to every one of us a particular gift. To one it is an understanding of the passion of Christ, to another the Church or one of the divine attributes. St. Thérèse is said to have received mercy as her portion. On her deathbed St. Teresa rejoiced to call herself a daughter of the Church. This special heritage is a precious gift. It is constituted by a distinct perception which contains a characteristic attitude of soul towards a special devotion. Among contemplatives there are some like St. John who receive Mary as their portion. Like the beloved disciple they enjoy her presence. This presence is a special favor. It exacts the complete gift of oneself to Mary. Life with Mary, in Mary and through Mary becomes a living program for these people. The discovery of Mary has led them to a complete Marian life. In Carmel these souls are many at all times. It is an honor for Carmel to have in its literature (unhappily too little known) writings that have defined the characteristic traits of this profoundly Marian life, well before Grignon de Montfort made it known to the mass of Christian people.

All Carmel, we are told, belongs to Mary. She is the mother whose welcoming embrace enfolded us all when we took our first timorous steps across the threshold of the venerable house and into that great family of so many saints we know and so many more we do not. And as the years go on, Mary continues to walk with us. Her presence to us is as unobtrusive as the air we breathe, yet as necessary for our spiritual growth as is the air for our continued physical existence. We should train ourselves to live in her company and meet her constantly along the road of life. At every turn, life links us Carmelites to Mary. We can think of her in the past, at Nazareth, at the stable in Bethlehem. This is not sentimentality. One cannot grasp the meaning of her son without thinking carefully about his birth. In thinking and praying about his birth and about his mother we come to know them best as someone we can approach. We should also think about Mary in the present considering what there is about her life that could give meaning to our own. Above all we can take some scene of Mary in prayer in our efforts towards revitalizing our own life of prayer. The thought of Mary in meditation, or pondering in her heart can create an atmosphere of stillness and peace in which prayer becomes easy as well as fruitful. We live in an activist Church with emphasis on commitment, social change, brand new ways of spreading the Gospel. Instinctively we link this work with talking to, influencing, preaching to people. It seems a paradox to define it in terms of silence, the silence of learning and listening, or what someone called “the silence of deep interest.” This is central to prayer and has profound implications in our mission of teaching it. People need to listen to each other, to let each other be, to give each other space to live in. Only a contemplative silence can make us open and ready to receive the word of God and communicate it to others. Indeed, the deepest communication is often enough achieved without any words.

⁴the presence of “rainmakers.”

VI. SIGN OF THE TIMES

It is a Christian duty to be attentive to the signs of the times so that, noting certain characteristics of modern culture, we may be able to serve the cause of good. One of those signs of authentic renewal is a reawakened interest in prayer. Many people, disillusioned by the tinsel and superficiality of modern culture, are turning to prayer. It is true that the more you read the Gospels in silence and prayer the more you find yourself alienated from what goes on around you. You are living in a different world. There is a flourishing movement, indeed many of them, in which prayer is the center and vital force. People are hungering for prayer. So many Americans are beginning to feel, for the first time, a need for the inner life. They have an overwhelming need for God, which is the basis of all true prayer. One wonders how this hunger is going to be satisfied. It would be comforting to think such a need would be filled by the Order of Our Blessed Lady of Mount Carmel. Certainly Mary herself will have to become a vital force in this great program. She is called the secret joy of the Church. To find her we have to persevere in a quiet meditation on what God has given us in her. The part she will play in our lives will be different for each one of us. You can't use force or even persuasion with this or that devotion. However, it remains true that each of us should ask ourselves if we have a preferential love for Mary. As we grow in our life as Carmelites, Mary should come to mean something very special to us. We are thankful to God for the many favors he has given to her, for her privileges, but much more so because he has allowed us to share in her life. It is this sharing concept, in regard to Mary, rather than the concept of her privileges that exercises the strongest appeal. Her life is described by Vatican II as a pilgrimage of faith and that concept places her in our midst as one of us. As in her faith, so also in her prayer we are able to see in her what we ourselves hope to become. The poet W. B. Yeats sums up this thought of what Mary is and what she invites us to become.

“We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer, life because of our quiet.”

He who finds me finds life. When we know Mary we have found the key to all the mysteries of Christ. Because Mary entered deeply into the mystery of salvation, in a certain sense she gathers all the great truths of faith around her and awakens their resonance when she is the object of preaching and veneration. She will always be our model and teacher towards finding God in the heart, or as Teresa has it, the center of the soul. She carried Jesus the God-Man in her body for nine months, she carried him in her heart and her memory for the rest of her life. In the heart of our search for prayer and for God's presence in us may we find the mother of him in whom we are all one.

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Please refer to Article 7 of the *OCDS Rule of Life*.
2. The Holy Bible.
3. *I Want to See God-I Am a Daughter of the Church*, by Father P. Marie Eugene, OCD. Christian Classics.