

A VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE

By JAMES WALSH

THE Epistle of the second Mass of Christmas reminds us that the Church, in commemorating the birth of Christ, is celebrating the birthday of all her members: 'The kindness of God our saviour has dawned on us, his great love for man . . . In accordance with his own merciful design he has saved us with the cleansing power which gives us new birth, and restores our nature through the Holy Spirit'.¹ The same creative power which overshadowed the Blessed Virgin in the moment of the Incarnation energises the waters of our Baptism:² 'He has given to the water what he gave to the mother'.³ The birth of a child is the manifestation of the creative power of parental love. The birth of Christ, who is the full expression of his Father's being,⁴ is the perfect manifestation to the world of the infinite creative love of him who is Creator and Father of all and the source of all parenthood.⁵ Before Christ's coming, God had established with his people a relationship whose substance and reality was to be found in this Son. Because of this Son, God proclaimed himself the mother as well as the father of his people, declaring a love that far exceeded the ideal love of the human parent for the child.⁶ This creative power of the divine love was given to Christ. By its means the Church was to be born and come to full maturity: 'All power is given to me'⁷ . . . as the Father sent me, so I send you'.⁸ Christ sends those whom his Father has chosen and has confided to the Son's care. As Son, he never arrogates to himself the title of Father, not even with respect to 'his own'. But by his Father's gift, the apostles, and all those who are to find faith in him through his apostles' words,⁹ belong to him. They are the many for whom he shall give his blood¹⁰ and lay down his life, in order to give them everlasting life.¹¹ All these are born from his side on Calvary, through the creative power of his Father's love. When Christ sends his apostles, he confers upon them this same power.

¹ Tit 3, 4-6.

³ *Ibid.* *Sermo* 25 (PL 54, 211).

⁶ Cf. *supra*, p. 256.

⁹ Jn 17, 20.

² St. Leo the Great, *Sermo* 24 (PL 54, 206).

⁴ Heb 1, 3.

⁷ Mt 28, 18.

¹⁰ Mk 14, 24.

⁵ Eph 3, 15.

⁸ Jn 20, 21.

¹¹ Jn 10, 15-16.

He is the link between the Father who sent him and those whom he sends at the behest of his Father.

The apostle, then, in being sent to share in the Father's work of love, is invested through the Son with the Father's creative power. He is called to work with the Father in bringing Christ to birth in the hearts of others. And in making the Father's will his own, he becomes the mother of Christ: 'If anyone does the will of my father in heaven, he is my mother'.¹

This is the traditional spiritual teaching of the Church: that there is a parallel between what happened historically at Bethlehem when the fullness of time was come, and what is fulfilled in every Christian soul whose baptism is fruitful: whose life, that is, is patterned after the life of the Word of God.² And, though without the historical birth of Christ there could have been no spiritual begetting, yet the spiritual birth surpasses the natural in its power and effect: 'The virgins are mothers of Christ with Mary if they do the will of his Father. For according to this precept, Mary herself is the mother of Christ in a more praiseworthy and blessed way'.³ Through the virgin birth of Christ, every Christian receives the divine creative power to become, in himself, the Mother of Christ: 'The child born within us is Jesus, and in each one who receives him he grows in various ways in wisdom and age and grace'.⁴ And God himself is the Father of the Christ in us: 'This birth comes from God. It is fulfilled every time the immortality of the spirit is conceived in the living earth which is the heart of a man; for then he is giving birth to holiness and purity'.⁵

When Christ comes to maturity in his heart, the Christian becomes aware that he is sent as Christ is sent: to co-operate with the Father in bringing Christ to birth in others. Paul says to his Galatians: 'My little children, I am in labour afresh until I can see Christ's image formed in you'.⁶ Gregory the Great develops the thought: 'He who is the brother and sister of Christ by believing, becomes the mother of Christ by preaching truth; for he gives birth to our Lord by bringing him into the hearts of his hearers. And he is the mother of Christ who by his words inspires the love of the Lord in the heart of his neighbour'.⁷

¹ Mt 12, 49.

² St. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virginitate* (PG 46, 324).

³ St. Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* (PL 40, 399).

⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentarium in Cantica Cantorum* (PG 46, 828).

⁵ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Virginitate* (PG 46, 280).

⁶ Gal 4, 19.

⁷ St. Gregory the Great, *3rd homily on the Gospels* (PL 76, 1086).

The qualities of motherhood which abound in this divine creative love bestowed on the apostle belong to Christ himself. He spoke of his maternal love for those who, in rejecting him, rejected his Father.¹ And it is he who gives birth to the Church in the pains of his passion and death: 'You died in child-birth and brought forth by your death. In your desire to bring forth children unto life you tasted death'.² 'Jesus is our true Mother in kind', says the English mystic, Julian of Norwich, 'of our first making; and he is our true Mother in grace by his taking of our made kind. All the fair working and all the sweet kindly offices of most dear motherhood are appropriated to the second Person . . . The mother's service is nearest, readiest and surest; nearest: for it is most of kind; readiest: for it is most of love; surest: for it is most of truth. This office no one might or could ever do to the full, except he alone . . . Our true mother Jesus, he alone beareth us to joy and to endless living'.³ This concept of Christ's motherhood may not have an immediate appeal to the modern western mind. But it is one that can serve to deepen our appreciation of the title 'mother' and to teach us a little more about the spiritual birth and growth of Christ in the hearts of the faithful. The apostle needs an awareness and an understanding of the Christ in his heart and how he is to be formed, before he can bring him to birth in the hearts of others.

The birth of Christ is always a virgin birth. Every mother of Christ must be holy, as was Mary, with the holiness of Christ. Though Christ dwelt among men and was like to them in all things except sin,⁴ yet he sets himself apart; for he is consecrated to the service of God his Father. The function of priestly celibacy and consecrated virginity is to make manifest to the world this holiness and 'apartness', this spiritual virginity which is a mark of the true Church of Christ. So Paul tells the members of the Church at Corinth: 'I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you a chaste virgin to Christ'.⁵ The Church is 'a virgin in purity of heart and in the perfection of love'.⁶ The celibacy of the priest, the virginity of the vowed religious, is an image of the union of the divine and human natures in Christ's virginal conception and birth: 'The Lord appeared in our flesh and fulfilled in himself the perfect union of the human and divine; and since

¹ Mt 23, 37.

² St. Anselm, *Orationes*, 65 (PL 158, 981).

³ *The Revelations of Divine Love*, London 1961, pp. 162, 163.

⁴ Heb 4, 15.

⁵ 2 Cor 11, 2.

⁶ The Venerable Bede, *on St. John's Gospel* (PL 92, 675).

then, the eternal virginity of the heavenly life has graced mankind'.¹

The same demands made by the Father in the call and the sending of the incarnate Christ are made by Christ himself in the call and sending of the priest and the religious (and, indeed, of every Christian who is sufficiently aware of the spiritual birth and growth of Christ in him): 'As God's chosen children you must be like him. Order your lives in charity, upon the model of that Charity which Christ shewed to us, when he gave himself up on our behalf, a sacrifice breathing out fragrance as he offered it to God'.² This total dedication, this sacrificial single-minded love which inspired Christ's every thought and action from the moment of his incarnation to its consummation on Calvary, is the offering of the priest and the religious (and, in a different measure, the offering of all those who, though not called to the life of virginity, nevertheless realise the full implications of their baptism and wish to fulfil them).

Christ came to bear witness to the ineffable love of his Father for mankind; his witness is achieved in the union of the divine and human natures, a union sealed by his blood. Human perfection consists in the achievement, personal and collective, of this same union of love with the person of Christ: 'The true God became man that I might become God as fully as he has become man'. So it is that the ideal human achievement, the perfect witness, is martyrdom. The martyr is the true replica of the holiness of Christ the King of martyrs, of his single-minded sacrificial love. The standard of the Church's holiness has always been the perfect work of love which is martyrdom.³ For true charity demands the total death to self – the mind which Christ shewed from the moment of incarnation to his death on the Cross.⁴ It is because consecrated virginity proclaims this total renunciation, this *kenosis*, of Christ, that it is traditionally accepted as the equivalent of martyrdom.⁵ It is in some ways superior to actual martyrdom, because it is the full acceptance of the Incarnation on a day-to-day basis. The virgins are those who 'are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the living power of Jesus may be manifested in this mortal nature.⁶ Consecrated virginity is the manifestation,

¹ St. Ambrose, *De Virginibus* (PL 16, 192).

² Eph 5, 1–2.

³ Cf. Origen *Exhortatio ad Martyrium* (PG 11, 563 ff.).

⁴ Phil 2, 5 ff.

⁵ Cf. François Viller, *Martyre et Perfection* and *Le Martyre et l'ascèse*, in *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, 1925 pp. 3–25, 105–142.

⁶ 2 Cor 4, 10.

in the daily round, of Christ's sacrificial love. The virgins are those who allow the sufferings of Christ to overflow into their lives, for the salvation of others.¹

The birth of Christ, then, in the hearts of all true believers – 'virgins in faith' – (but more especially in the hearts of those 'who are become sterile for the kingdom of God'²) is to establish what Christ himself came to re-establish: the true relationship between Creator and creature, Father and child, Bridegroom and bride. 'As Christ comes into the world he says, No sacrifice, no offering was thy demand; thou hast endowed me, instead, with a body . . . See then, I said, I am coming to fulfil what is written of me, where the book lies unrolled: to do thy will, O my God'.³ Through the birth of Christ in us at baptism, we become docile creatures, obedient children, faithful brides; we receive Christ's innocence and holiness. But Christ comes from heaven into our hearts *propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem* – for the salvation of all human-kind. The acceptance of Christ, in the priestly or religious vocation especially, is the positive acceptance of the fullest share in the redemptive work of love by which men are born into the Church. The baptised, in receiving Christ, are initiated into the freedom of Christ. But it is when they are called and sent as Christ was sent that they become 'disciples in earnest' in their fidelity to his command.⁴ Christ's freedom as a human being consists essentially in his positive determination of himself to do always what pleases his Father⁵ – 'behold I come to do thy will'. The priestly orders, the vows of religious, are an assimilation to the salvific obedience of Christ, and the free binding of the self to the uttermost limits of self-renunciation in sacrifice and service: 'His nature is from the first, divine, and yet he did not see, in the rank of Godhead, a prize to be coveted; he dispossessed himself . . . and then he lowered his own dignity, accepted an obedience which brought him to death, death on a cross'.⁶ When Paul reflects on the vocation of Christ's apostles, he says that they appear destined by God to be in the lowest place of all, like men under sentence of death.⁷ They share with Christ all that he accepts from the hand of the Father for the sake of the brethren: becoming altogether like them, feeling for them, their true representative before God, making atonement for them.⁸ They are ready to be exhibited as

¹ 2 Cor 1, 5, 6.

² Mt 19, 12.

³ Heb 10, 5–7.

⁴ Jn 8, 31.

⁵ Jn 8, 29.

⁶ Phil 2, 6–8.

⁷ 1 Cor 4, 9 ff.

⁸ Heb 2, 17.

captives in Christ's triumph,¹ his humble and suffering servants.

So often the glory of the priest or the religious would seem to reside in the authority which the Church confers on them, and in the consequent respect which Christ's faithful accord them, as though the priest were set apart in order to lord it over others, to have them make way for him and doff their hats to him. The reverse is the truth. The glory of Christ, the dignity accorded him by his Father, is enshrined in the obedience and humility which brought him to share every human weakness and the summation of them all – death: 'That is why God has raised him to such a height'.²

In his acceptance of the Incarnation, the apostle learns true knowledge of himself; he has Christ to his credit only because he casts away whatever else may appear to sustain him or give him dignity and self respect.³ Christ lives in him only because he is nailed with Christ to the cross.⁴ The incarnate Christ has constructed out of human weakness the lamp in which his Father's glory can shine out.⁵ Human nature, with all its limitations and torments is now the vehicle of the Lord's glory;⁶ it is the Christopher, the bearer of Christ.

The Christ whom the apostle is sent to bring forth in the hearts of others is the Christ he carries in his own heart: the suffering servant of the all-wise Creator, the obedient son of the all-loving Father, the Christ whose love for his own is that of a mother for her hapless children. Ultimately, the priest is worthy of the name 'Father' only in so far as, in his own likeness to Christ, he shares in the creative love of God. It is the same with the religious who bears the name 'brother', 'mother' or 'sister'. Each title signifies a vital relationship with Christ in *his* relationship with his Father; and the titles are valid only in terms of the work of love which the Father sent his Son to do.

The apostle must first experience for himself and in himself that God has sent his Son to be the redeemer of the world.⁷ Only then can he testify to the truth before others. It is the Christ that is formed in him, whom he has learnt to recognise, that he begets in others: the Christ who is crucified and glorified by suffering humility and obedience. Christ is always the radiance of his Father's splendour⁸ and gives glory to the Father in every aspect of the work

¹ 1 Cor 4, 9 ff.

² Phil 2, 9 ff.

³ Phil 3, 4-9.

⁴ Gal 2, 19-20.

⁵ 2 Cor 4, 6 ff.

⁶ 2 Cor 12, 9.

⁷ 1 Jn 4, 14.

⁸ Heb 1, 3.

which his Father sent him to achieve.¹ It is impossible for the apostle to fulfil this mission without detaching himself from self-love and self-aggrandisement in any and every form. In sharing the fatherhood of God and the motherhood of Christ, he is essentially committed to Christ's humility and obedience. The Christ he accepts is the Word made flesh in the womb of the Virgin, the Christ who is born in utter helplessness at Bethlehem. So Paul names himself 'slave of our Lord', and the title Christ's mother gives herself is 'handmaid'.

Over the centuries the Church has been divinely taught to recognise her mission and its fulfilment in Mary the Mother of God. The ideal of the apostolate – Christ's humble obedience and single-minded sacrificial love – is discovered in her progress from Nazareth to Calvary. The eulogies of divine wisdom, the attributes of Christ's motherhood belong, as of right, to her who is the Seat of Wisdom and the mother of fair Love. The Fathers have not hesitated to say that the Church is born of her, since the whole Christ is born of her.² And the Christ who is born in us will come to maturity in us and, through us, in others, only if our witness is one with the witness of the Queen of Martyrs: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; may it be done unto me according to thy word'.

¹ 2 Jn 17, 4.

² Cf. Hugo Rahner, S. J., *Our Lady and the Church*, (London, 1961), pp. 33-57.