

THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD

By PETER DE ROSA

MARY, the handmaid of the Lord, is the model of the apostolate. 'Queen of Patriarchs, Queen of Prophets, Queen of Apostles': so runs the litany of Loretto. Is this the customary exaggerated language of Catholic piety or is it so firmly rooted in God's revelation that it is, if anything, a rather austere, prosaic expression of Mary's spiritual reality?

Richard Hutton, writing in the last century, said: 'Devotional writers in the Roman Church constantly speak as if it were almost their duty to believe as true all the rumours of a devotional tendency afloat in their communion until they are proved to be false'.¹ Is Mary's title, Queen of Apostles, one such rumour afloat on the high flood of Catholic emotion? It could be urged that she spoke but a few (majestic) words; she engaged, as far as we know, in no activity we would normally call apostolic; she left behind her no body of men or women to carry on a society she had founded, to abide by a rule which she composed.

How shall we justify the words of Karl Rahner: 'It is not simply by a pious turn of speech that Mary is called Queen of Apostles and Confessors; it is what she truly is. Her life is the archetypal apostolic event (in so far as there is an apostolate which is distinct from the mission of Christ himself), of which all earlier apostolate is a shadow and a forerunning (in the literal sense of the word), and from which all later apostolate proceeds as a participation'.²

Let us at least begin to justify this 'rumour' of a devotional tendency, long-accepted and long-loved in Catholic circles and certain never to be proven false.

The account of the annunciation in St Luke's gospel makes it plain that Mary's motherhood is no mere physical fact, nor is Mary herself the mere physical instrument of the incarnation. Her soul truly encounters God; there is a dialogue between her and him,

¹ *Essays Theological and Literary* Vol. I (London 1877), p. 346.

² *Mission and Grace* Vol. I (London 1963), pp. 180-181.

and her consent to the motherhood is but part of her total commitment in faith to the God of her people.

Mary is no blind tool of destiny. Like her father Abraham, she had faith in God and it was counted to her unto justice. Mary was in the patriarchal tradition.

Like the prophets, to her came the word of God in her 'inaugural vision'¹ at the annunciation. Mary was in the prophetic tradition.

She was more, of course, than a simple part of these traditions: she was in a sense the culmination of them. Her faith accomplishes the incarnation: her reception of the Word is the incarnation.

So far is Mary from being an impersonal instrument of God that her faith – and faith is that by which we are most engaged as persons – is the prototype of all faith in Christ. Martin Luther never tired of saying: 'All the faithful have had always one and the self-same gospel from the beginning of the world, and by that they were saved',² and 'Abraham's Christ is our Christ'.³ Faith, as we know, is in the Christ who is to come, or in Christ who has come and will come again. Now through faith Mary put on, in all literalness, that Christ in whom all men from the beginning to the end of time find salvation.

What is faith but the response to, and indeed the counterpart of, the incarnation of the Word? The Word emptied himself to put on our human nature and in faith we empty ourselves to put on Christ and share his divinity. But Mary's faith, her emptying of herself, brought about the event which the faith of the rest of men merely accepts. Our faith, in effect, is in a diminished sense a following of the pattern of her motherhood. 'My mother and my brethren are they who hear the word of God and do it'.⁴ 'Blessed art thou that hast believed', said Elizabeth to Mary, 'because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord'.⁵

We need not emphasize how Mary surpasses the prophets.

What shall we say of her, who was so specially favoured, that the true and substantial Word, and not his shadow or his voice, was not merely made in her but born of her, who was not merely the organ of God's message, but the origin of his human existence, the living fountain from which he drew his most precious blood, and the material of his most holy flesh?⁶

¹ Albert Gelin, *Hommes et femmes de la Bible* (Paris 1962), p. 224.

² *Commentary on Galatians*, 3 : 19 (London 1830).

³ *Ibid.* 3 : 8.

⁴ Lk 8, 21.

⁵ Lk 1, 45.

⁶ Newman, *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* (London 1852), Discourse XVIII, p. 430.

The annunciation was for Mary no passing event. Her self-emptying through faith was as total and enduring a commitment to the Father's plan for salvation as the incarnation effected by it is Christ's initiation of the covenant sealed eventually and for ever in his own blood. Her 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord' coincided even in point of time with her Son's 'Behold . . . I come to do thy will, O God'.¹

This is to say that Mary's motherhood, more than a physical fact as we have seen, is more too than an ephemeral, contingent circumstance of history. Her *fiat* is as continuing in its effects as God's *fiat* in creation, a word spoken and never withdrawn. This is why Mary's acceptance of the motherhood is her part in history, not as empirical fact, but as the gospel or good news, as the power of God unto salvation. 'He was conceived by the holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary'. She has by rights her place in the creed which sets forth salvation-history; for her faith completed that of Abraham which received the promise and embodied the Word which the prophets only whispered. Mary's role is also apostolic in a primary sense of the word.

An apostle is a patriarch and prophet of the New Testament, for his task is to keep alive faith in Christ and to be God's spokesman of the salvific event which has come so that men may find life in it.

Mary must be accounted the Queen of the Apostles. To begin with, as Newman pointed out, Mary ministers for ever to the Church's faith in the incarnation, for the Word was made flesh in her; and her personal pre-eminence in the Church is a perpetual witness to this cardinal fact. If, as I believe, docetism is the ever-present temptation of the christian, Mary testifies that 'It is no longer possible to say who God is in the full truth and reality of his actual life as he lives it, without saying that his eternal Word, in whom he utters and expresses himself, is man to all eternity'.² But Mary is more than a mere witness to the incarnation, in that, through giving flesh to the Word, she brings into being that humanity in which alone we find eternal life.

An apostle is essentially a servant, one who is for others. Even the Christ who was, according to St John the Evangelist, the Father's apostle, came to serve and not to be served. Mary's designation of herself as the handmaid of the Lord shows that she realised herself

¹ Heb 10, 5-8.

² Rahner, *Mary Mother of the Lord* (London 1963), p. 26.

to be someone with a ministerial function to fulfil, as well as a dignity to take delight in.

Mary did not receive the Word into herself for her own sake, but for all men and on their behalf. She was the final spokesman of an as yet unredeemed humanity, the representative link between mankind and its Saviour. The Word's wedding of our human nature, his becoming contractually one with us, is his 'Yes' echoing and informing the 'Yes' of Mary the virgin, his mother and his bride. She was his mother in that she bore him and his bride; in that she gave consent for us, the consent whereby he was indissolubly married to our flesh, our humanity, within her.

The Virgin Mary as the handmaid of the Lord epitomizes the Church apostolic, whose task is to give Christ to men. Mary's childbearing is the archetypal apostolic action: it is the permanent gift of Christ to the world. If, as Ambrose and Augustine and innumerable other Fathers claim, Christ built the Church in the image of his mother, the Church mirrors Mary best in the maternal ministry of the Word and the sacraments. This is her 'reasonable service'; is nothing else than simple prolongation of Mary's childbearing and embodying of the Word.

It has been remarked by Catholics and other fellow christians alike how fitting it is that the Second Vatican Council should have decided to consider Mary in the *schema* on the Church. For the Council fathers have been all along at pains to show that the Church is a servant and poor; and it is in this context that the Virgin Mary needs to be presented today: not in a *schema* for the bestowal of laudatory titles however inspiring and however true, but as a figure of the Church in an attitude of service.

We might easily be misled by the fact that the priest who, by reason of his vocation and his ordination, is the bishop's special apostolic envoy, is said to serve the local christian community. But this should not hide from us the fact that the priest, and the Church of which he is the ordained minister, exists to serve the whole community. Each child born into the world is called to the salvation of which the Church is the ministering mother. The Church, as Bonhoeffer said, is only her true self when she exists for humanity. The individual apostle might need to meditate long until he sees that the Church is as wide as mankind. Catholicism is not one religion among many and certainly not a sect. Hers is the religion of mankind, hidden under the dark folds of alien formulae and the imperfect rites of other faiths.

The Second Vatican Council is a source of inspiration not only to Catholics or even to all christians, but to the secular world as well. Pope John convinced everybody that the Church of which he was the earthly head is interested in humanity. There can be no question of abdicating this interest and turning the Church into any religious group whose survival is in question. Her renewal, as its architect proclaimed, has this purpose: that she may give herself in a more effective and salutary way to unredeemed humanity.

A fellow-christian has put this point most tellingly:

Under John XXIII we have had the great spectacle of the Vatican urging on its Church a 'renewal' – and no one can tell where the 'renewal' will stop. Essentially this deeper movement results from a desire to honour and to hear the secular modern world. The Church must *listen* to the world before it attempts to interpret the world's own spiritual experience – experience which the world already enjoys, but which it may not acknowledge as in any sense Christian. Here, the whole emphasis is on the Church as mankind's servant.¹

Mary, whose faith found fruition in the great childbearing, speaks simply and decisively to the Church about the apostolic ministry. This ministry, in which all God's children have a share by reason of their baptism and confirmation, is to be the handmaid of the Lord. It is when the Church serves that she is most like Mary who spoke on behalf of unredeemed humanity the word which issued in the Saviour.

The Church, we said, is catholic in that she exists to give Christ to all men and for no other purpose, certainly not to parade in spiritual caricature of a long-departed imperial pomp. 'The Church is set in the midst of the world not to protect its life but to give its life away, that men may know that God loves them'.²

This is why the Church is a mother and poor as was the Virgin Mother of God. She ministers to us as Mary ministered to Christ, and so to all mankind. She radiates truth and life to us without hindrance, as Mary made of herself pure openness to the life-giving action of God at the moment of the incarnation.

The Church's apostolicity is a part of her poverty, of her giving

¹ David L. Edwards, *The Honest to God Debate* (London 1963), p. 20.

² Bruce Kenrick Collins: quoted in Douglas Rhymes' *No New Morality* (London 1964), p. 86.

her life away. Her nature, like that of Mary her prototype, is to be nothing in herself but to channel God's grace to men in perfect self-forgetfulness. Self-forgetfulness was ever the dearest part of motherhood.

Each apostolic venture should implicitly embrace the whole world. Nothing is less Catholic than a severely parochial outlook, nothing further removed from the pentecostal spirit than the assumption that the Church was made to be a comfortable little coterie for those already within the fold.

When Mary said, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word',¹ she let herself be invaded by the Spirit of God. By so saying she became the initial and archetypal Christ-bearer and apostle; in receiving God's Son into her sacred womb she opened all humanity to the power and influence of God our Saviour.

Mary's consent to motherhood is her grace-inspired cooperation in the work of salvation; and yet the virginal manner of it shows even more vividly the gratuitousness of the Word's becoming flesh. The virginal motherhood is not simply a miracle; it points to, and symbolizes the great complex truth of revealed religion, that man is saved by the unmerited intervention of God and the free cooperation of the creature.

That Christ had no human father, that he was born not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man but solely of God, indicates the divine initiative of grace. That Christ had a mother who consented to be such indicates the creature's free correspondence with grace.

The virginity of Mary is a mystery of our faith; this is to say that meditation upon it is for us a source of light and strength. Her vow, implicit in the words, 'How shall this be done, because I know not man?',² was not merely a counsel of perfection or a sacrifice on her part; it was integral to the divine decree to save the human race.

Conjoined with her motherhood, her virginity highlights the divine character of Christ as well as his manhood. More than this, the human impossibility of such a manner of birth shows that there is operative here not the power of man but the power of God. Here is something beyond the forces of nature. She 'conceived by the Holy Ghost'.

The virgin birth epitomizes God's dealings with men. 'God

¹ Lk 1, 38.

² Lk 1, 34.

created us without us; but he does not redeem us without us', wrote St Augustine. Even so, he adds elsewhere, when God rewards us he is only crowning his own gifts. Everything comes to us as a gift. Every act of ours if it avails to salvation has God for its Father. Yet the divine seed is received in the womb of our will when we say 'Yes' to him, and grows to maturity there.

Apostolic action is an overflowing into practical concern for others of the christian life lived at its deepest, most authentic level. It is the normal deployment of the graces and gifts within us in the service of those with whom we wish to share the Christ of faith.

That the apostolate is a mothering activity modelled on Mary's childbearing is easy enough to see, now that her pre-eminence is so clearly set out in Catholic teaching. But even the apostle of the gentiles used the image of maternity to describe his own ministry. He wrote tenderly to the wayward galatians: 'My little children, of whom I am in labour again, until Christ be formed in you'.¹

The apostolate has also, however, a virginal element about it. We need to remind ourselves constantly that the initiative in converting the unbeliever or the sinner is not ours but God's. Even our desire to do good is God's gift to us; and we must present the good news to others, humbly acknowledging that it is only by the power of God that our work will bear any fruit. Christ, in whatever soul he is formed, is conceived by the Holy Ghost.

This is not only a spur to preparing ourselves for the apostolate by a holy and prayerful life, as Mary, unknown to herself, prepared to be the mother of the Lord. It is a source of comfort, too, in the midst of the actual work of saving souls. This is a wholly supernatural task, and it is the beginning of wisdom to know that it is beyond our powers, that it needs and will receive the special help of God.

Faced with impossible problems we do not give up in despair, but say with complete confidence, 'How shall this be done?' The answer will be, 'The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee', and Christ will be formed in men anew.

'Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word'. So Mary committed herself to the virginal motherhood of Jesus, the Saviour. Her commitment was complete even from the beginning, as was that of St Paul on the road to Damascus when he said, 'Lord, what wilt thou have me do?'² All that remained

¹ Gal 4, 19.

² Acts 9, 6.

was for Christ to reveal to Paul how much suffering he would have to undergo for his name's sake.¹

With Mary, too, no new dedication of herself was needed after the annunciation; only the daily living out of that original and unconditional surrender. The slaughter of the holy innocents, the prophecy of Simeon, the flight, and the temporary exile in a foreign land: these were only stages in the working out and the clarification of her vocation which she had already fully accepted in the quiet of Nazareth when God spoke secretly to her. Calvary, too, was separated from Nazareth only by time, not by intent.

St Luke is more or less explicit in affirming that there was a progression in Mary's understanding of the character of her Son's messianic mission. Does this mean that at the annunciation she realised nothing of the kind of Saviour that her Son would be?

The answer to this difficult question is to some extent conditioned by the answer we give to another question, more difficult still: how clearly did Mary grasp that her Son was God's Son in the strictest and unique sense? We can say that St Luke uses terms capable of revealing to Mary at least something of the unprecedented and ineffable mystery to be accomplished in her. To take but one example, the words, 'The power of the Most High shall overshadow thee'² could have been understood by her to signify that the divine Presence which dwelt in the Holy of Holies had come to rest in personal and adorable form within her.³

It would seem that the more clearly Mary understood her Son to be divine the more she must have sensed, even from the beginning, that he was to be the suffering Servant of Yahweh.

Her Son was to be called Jesus, the Saviour. At that moment when the fulness of time was come, when the great historical scheme of salvation was approaching its climax, God's Son was willing to make himself dependent upon her.

We speak of the joy of the annunciation, and so exclude the cross. This is partly because we do not understand well enough the proximity of joy and sorrow. But there is a further thing: we cannot see the cross at the annunciation because we see it starkly set upon the heights of Calvary. Mary, on the other hand, had intimations of a cross as being from the beginning integral to God's plan for

¹ Acts 9, 16.

² Lk 1, 35.

³ S. Lyonnet, S.J. *Le récit de l'Annonciation et la Maternité de la Sainte Vierge* (Rome, 1956), pp. 13-15.

man's salvation. The outline of the plan was evident enough to her in her acceptance of the motherhood, as we shall try to show. This enabled her to see in the first place the whole of Christ's life as one mystery or saving event, and also implicitly, through her confidence in the divine power, the consummating triumph of Easter.

Where were the intimations of the cross? Where else but in her matchless experience of the helplessness of God? She knew in one instant that her generation's expectations of a conquering messiah were mistaken, and that God would succour his people by his very weakness. His was to be no earthly kingdom, and this she must have divined through knowing herself to be the antithesis of worldly greatness. 'He hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaid'.

We naturally look on Mary as the Queen of Angels and of Patriarchs, as the Queen of Heaven: she thought of herself as a village girl, without worth or learning, wanting to love God. Before she uttered her *fiat*, she understood that she was being asked to bear for mankind the God who wanted to partake of her humble condition, to consent to God becoming weak among weak men. She who only knew her lowliness, who was troubled at being called the 'highly favoured one' and 'blessed among women', how could she not feel anguish at this divine request? Joined to the Christ more nearly than any other mother to her son, because of his human fatherlessness, she accepted in faith the cross of that motherhood.

No apostolate can leave the cross out of account. It is not merely that great efforts will be demanded of us, the quiet, regular little meetings in the sacristy or in a corner of the church hall or under the presbytery stairs. It is not enough to say that the spreading of gospel-charity by visiting homes and hospitals and prisons will bring us pain, nor the going about our daily task in the home or outside, conscious of the need to bring Christ to men.

The real trial, if only we could perceive it as did Mary the handmaid of the Lord, is that we have nothing to give to men but the weakness of God as revealed in Christ.