THE THEME OF EVE AND MARY IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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Justin

DISCUSSING in his *Dialogue with Trypho* how one of the Old Testament psalms should be interpreted, Justin Martyr (*c.* 100—*c.* 165) placed Eve and Mary in relationship to one another. The conjunction, though not repeated, is of profound significance in his theology. It was to be expanded later with ever-deepening insight and lyrical joy in the thought and prayer of the Church. To Justin, however, we must constantly return, asking whether the analogy between Eve and Mary is a proper one, and if it is, how far it can be elaborated. Justin is thus both a point of departure and a point of reference as we study the theme of Eve and Mary in the early christian Church.

These are Justin's words:

> He is born of the Virgin, in order that the disobedience caused by the serpent might be destroyed in the same manner in which it had originated. For Eve, an undefiled virgin, conceived the word of the serpent and brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary, filled with faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced to her the good tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her, and therefore the Holy One born of her would be the Son of God, answered: 'Be it done unto me according to thy word'. And, indeed, she gave birth to him, concerning whom we have shown so many passages of scripture were written, and by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who have become like the serpent, but frees from death those who repent of their sins and believe in Christ.[1]

The passage is more than a literary figure suggested by the two virgins, and is rather the flowering of a mind saturated with the bible. Redemption in Justin is not only enlightenment but also the salvation which is achieved through Christ's conflict and victory. In the language of this

[1] *Dialogue with Trypho*, 100.

passage, it is release from death. The mystery of salvation, as Justin wrote elsewhere, *is* the passion of Christ. So, if we are to understand what he means by connecting Eve and Mary, we must first understand the context in which he discusses their relationship. The context is his whole theology of redemption.

In the passage we are considering, Justin begins by speaking of the primal disobedience. The disobedience caused by the serpent, he says, has been destroyed by the very channel whereby it originated. Justin here sees redemption as a summing up or recapitulation in Christ of the primal human sin of disobedience. The *oikonomia* of God, or divine purpose of salvation, is coming to its *dénouement* with the coming of the one who was born of the Virgin. His virgin birth is a new beginning because it is continuous with the old creation and because it fulfils and transcends the old creation, bringing as it does the destruction of death and life in Christ. So we may speak of the virgin birth in Justin, first, as the recapitulation or summing up of the old creation.

When Justin compares Eve with Mary the Virgin, he speaks of her as 'a virgin and pure'. Eve is *aphthoros,* for she had not yet had intercourse with her husband. The adjective is more heavily nuanced than the translation allows. She is free in paradise from *phthora,* that which destroys, corrupts, or seduces. But when she listened to the corrupting word, when she conceived the word of the serpent, she brought forth disobedience and death. This is her destruction, and it involves the destruction of the whole human race.

The connection which Justin makes here between disobedience and death was to be more fully developed by Irenaeus a generation later. The truth about human existence, as Justin and Irenaeus understand it, is that God gives life, and man receives it, wholly dependent on the giver of life. To receive from God means also to live in obedience to his word. Obedience and life belong together. There is an inner connection between the ethical and physical aspects of our existence. To oppose the Creator is to oppose the one who has made and continues to sustain all things, to oppose reality. To disobey the Creator is to be cut off from the source of life, to die. Disobedience and death belong together.

Mary, furthermore, is called a Virgin of Israel. She is not just an isolated or enigmatic figure, but 'a virgin of their race'. If the reading is correct, Justin says that she traced her descent 'from Abraham'. She is a daughter of Israel. Justin says that Gabriel came to her. The interpreting angel of Daniel's vision came to Mary, as he had once before come to the

prophet,[2] teaching him how to understand. What happened to Mary, we might say, is to be interpreted out of the whole experience of Israel.

Mary is also described as the virgin of faith and joy. The joy she knew is the joy of the gospel, for Gabriel came to bring good tidings, *euangelizomenou*. He announced to her the good news that she was to give birth to the Son of God, through whom God would end the power of sin and death. In faith she heard and appropriated the word which God spoke to her, and she answered, 'May it be done to me according to your word'. We should not of course, forget that the *Dialogue* itself opens with Justin's account of his conversion. As he records, not far from the sea (perhaps at Ephesus) he had one day listened to the words of an elderly man, and through his words gained what he calls a knowledge of the Christ of God and the enjoyment of the happy life. We bear in mind that Justin wrote to inquirers, to those who were investigating 'our life and doctrines'. To hear the gospel in faith, as Mary heard it, is always to know more than mere intellectual happiness: it is to know the eschatological joy of the kingdom of God.

Through Mary the Son of God has become man. Through her he assumed our human nature and dwelt among us as one of us — *anthrōpos en anthrōpois*, as Justin expressed it in the *First Apology*. For Justin there can be redemption only if the Redeemer is God, for only the Giver of life can free us from death. But the Redeemer must also be man, and Jesus through Mary shared fully our human nature.

It is clear, however, that Mary has an active, personal role to play; her virginity, her faith, her joy, and above all her consent have value for the salvation of those who believe in Christ. Justin spends little time discussing Mary. What he says of her is as tantalizingly incomplete, but in its own way as suggestive as the description of the Sunday liturgy in the *Apology*. She learned God's will from Gabriel's message. And she assented to that will. Justin in this chapter closely connects Abraham with Mary. Both are bidden by God to participate in his purpose, each in a particular way; both hear the word of a promise; and both freely obey.

In concluding this study of Justin we note that Mary is the Virgin in whom the Spirit dwells. Gabriel announced to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her and the power of the Most High overshadow her. It must be conceded that the doctrine of the Spirit in Justin is undeveloped, for he identifies 'Spirit of the Lord' with 'Power of the Most High', and regards them as synonyms of the Word of God.

[2] Dan, 9, 21-27.

Nevertheless, even at this early stage we can see an idea which was to be developed by Irenaeus, that God is at work with his 'hands', the Spirit and the Word, both in creating the world and in the redemption of Christ. All who have been converted to God through Christ, Justin tells Trypho, are called to live without blame. In the account of the Sunday Eucharist in the *Apology*, Justin explains how the president of the assembly invited all present to imitate the examples of virtue set forth in the memoirs of the apostles. Thus christians are called to be blameless, *amōmoi* — the adjective is also used of Mary in one of the apocryphal acts of the apostles — and to seek virtue, *ta kala*. 'We christians are not only a people', he says, 'but a holy people'. It can hardly be supposed that Justin would have accorded to Mary anything less. She, indeed, has a fulness of faith, joy, and holiness, for that which was born of her was holy.

There remains, in our discussion of Justin Martyr, an important contemporary question to consider. The question is whether the theme of Eve and Mary in Justin implied a derogatory attitude to women and sexuality. In short, was Justin an anti-feminist?

It has frequently been pointed out, for example by Mary Daly, that the relationship of Jesus with various women was 'in such contrast with prevailing custom as to astonish onlookers'.[3] We know from Acts that women were amongst the earliest converts, displayed charismatic gifts, engaged in evangelism, dispensed hospitality, and taught. To read some of the early Fathers, however, is to feel sometimes as though they had never heard of Jesus of Nazareth. Tertullian, writing to his wife, assured her that none of the improper and voluptuous acts of their married life would be resumed in heaven, for God had not prepared for his own, things so frivolous and impure.[4]

What attitude to women lay behind Justin's formulation of christian teaching? Does he reflect something of the higher conception of woman which we find in Jesus or the more traditional views which re-emerged in Tertullian? There certainly seems to be an ascetical strain in Justin. For example, he describes approvingly in the *Apology* a christian youth who asked a surgeon to castrate him as a protection of sexual purity. He contrasted Mary, the pure Virgin, as the antitype to Eve who conceived the word of the serpent. The word *sullabousa* implies that he associated sexual intercourse with Eve.

It could be said, then, that Justin treated sexuality as part of our fallen nature, more specifically connecting it to Eve's disobedient act.

[3] Daly, Mary: *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York, 1968), p. 37.

[4] Sherwin Bailey, Derrick: *The Man-Woman relation in Christian thought* (London, 1959), p 45.

But three other things can be said which may be closer to the truth that Justin sought to express. First, the idea of Eve's conception bringing forth death may be compared to a theme commonly found in the history of religions. Sexuality means the begetting of children, and therefore implies the cycle of life and death. The womb, birth, and death — there is an integral relation between each of these in Eve and also in Mary; the difference between the two is that through the death of the one who was born of the womb of Mary, the death of those who are born of woman is destroyed.

Second, in many religions we also find the idea of orgasm as a little death. Sexual climax is an ecstasy, literally a going out of self, and therefore a prefigurement of death as the final rite of passage. The anti-life theme that runs through the ascetic literature of the age tended to absolutize death, and so it rejected the idea of little death, that is, it was sexually ascetic in its embrace of death as final and absolute. The asceticism that Justin appears to approve in the proposal for self-castration is to be explained by his fundamental understanding of the gospel as the annihilation through Christ of our death.

Third, and inseparably, Mary is not the denial of sexuality but the fulfilment of it. For Mary too there is an ecstasy, that enraptured self-forgetfulness and self-fulfilment of the ultimate surrender to God in which she said: 'I am the handmaid of the Lord'. Here sexual and spiritual ecstasy are united.

Irenaeus

We may speak of Irenaeus as the first major biblical theologian of the early Church. At least three circumstances contributed to this unique and distinctive position. First, by the time of Irenaeus a more or less complete canon of New Testament scriptures had been added to the sacred writings of the jews as the regulative source of christian teaching. Second, the gnostics, and more especially the teachers of the valentinian school, were themselves biblical theologians, in the sense that they made use of this available canon of scripture to substantiate and confirm their own oral teachings. Third, the gnostics' primary interest was soteriological. Irenaeus thus wrote in an age of cosmological speculation; in a milieu in which an authoritative tradition of apostolic teaching was more or less fully assembled; and in circumstances in which certain christian teachers were preoccupied with the way of salvation.

Irenaeus taught that with the coming of Jesus Christ history has entered a new phase. The divine plan, *oikonomia*, attained its fulfilment in an event which recapitulated Adam's creation:

> If, therefore, the first Adam had as his father a man and was born of a man's semen, there would be good grounds for asserting that the second Adam was generated by Joseph. But if the first Adam was taken from the earth and created by the Word of God, it was necessary that this very Word who recapitulates Adam in himself should be generated in the same way as Adam.[5]

The virgin birth was thus a sign of the true humanity of Jesus, for the earth of which Adam was made was 'virgin' in the sense that it was untilled:

> From this earth, then, while it was still virgin, God took dust and fashioned the man, the beginning of humanity. So the Lord, summing up afresh this man, reproduced the scheme of his incarnation, that he, being born of a virgin by the will and wisdom of God, might copy the incarnation of Adam, and man might be made, as it was written in the beginning, according to the image and likeness of God.[6]

The contrast between Irenaeus and the gnostics in their thinking about human existence is at once apparent. In the gnostic scheme salvation is a timeless category: the *oikonomia* is the ordering of salvation within the divine pleroma. Knowledge is of itself redemptive: knowledge, that is, of our origin in the divine being and of our true nature which the Son of God discloses to us. For Irenaeus, in contrast, the heart and centre of our redemption is historical. The critical question for Irenaeus is therefore the gnostics' denial of the incarnation, i.e. that the Saviour possessed a material, physical body, in their advocacy of salvation as liberation from matter and return to the light-world of the pleroma. Irenaeus writes:

> According to the opinion of no one of the heretics was the Word of God made flesh. For if anyone carefully examines the systems of them all, he will find that the Word of God is brought in by all of them as not having become incarnate and as impassible, as is also the Christ from above.[7]

Thus for Irenaeus it is of fundamental importance to stress the unity of God the Creator and God the Saviour, and also the unity of the first Adam and Jesus.

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[5] *Adv. Haer.*, 3, 21, 10.
[6] *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 32.
[7] *Adv. Haer.*, 3, 11, 3.

To complete our study of Irenaeus two other passages must be considered. Each enlarges and enriches what we have already found in him concerning Mary. First, from Book V of the *Adversus haereses:*

> Just as Eve was led astray by the word of an angel, so that she fled from God when she had disobeyed his word, so Mary received the good tidings (*evangelizata est*) by the word of an angel: she was to bear God in her womb, obedient to his word. And though Eve had disobeyed God, Mary was persuaded to obey God, so that the Virgin Mary might become the advocate (*advocata*) of the virgin Eve. And just as the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin, so it is saved by means of a virgin. The disobedience of a virgin was balanced in the opposite scale by the obedience of a virgin.[8]

In this passage we see more clearly, first, what Irenaeus means by speaking of Mary as 'cause of salvation'. Mary stands at the beginning of a new age, the marks of which are her receiving of the good news, her obedience, and her part in salvation. 'The human race is saved by a virgin'. Such language is astonishing in the second century. Irenaeus implies that in generating Jesus she regenerates us; that she is, in the phrase of M. J. Nicolas, 'the principle of the regeneration of the human race'.[9]

Second, the contrast between the temptation in paradise and the annunciation is strongly accentuated: an angel led Eve astray, an angel brought Mary good tidings; Eve the disobedient is contrasted with Mary the advocate or patroness; Eve fled from God, Mary bore God in her womb; Eve was the cause of death, Mary the cause of life.

Thirdly, Mary is now called an 'advocate', a word that Irenaeus evidently liked, for he repeated it in our final passage. In the *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching,* ch 34, we find almost a catechetical summary of Irenaeus's teaching:

> And just as it was through a virgin who disobeyed that man was stricken and fell and died, so too it was through the Virgin, who obeyed the word of God, that man resuscitated by life received life. For the Lord came to seek back the lost sheep, and it was man who was lost; and therefore he did not become some other formation, but he likewise, of her that was descended from Adam, preserved the likeness of formation; for Adam had necessarily to be restored in Christ, that mortality be absorbed in immortality, and Eve in Mary, that a virgin, become the advocate of a virgin, should undo and destroy virginal disobedience by virginal obedience.

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[8] *Ibid.*, 5, 19, 1.

[9] Nicholas, M. J., O.P.: *Marie, Mère du Sauveur* (Paris, 1967), p 26.

In its details the passage is obscure, though the general drift is clear enough. Who is 'the man resuscitated by life'? Christ or the human race? The latter presumably; but the parallelism is typical of Irenaeus: *death through a virgin, life through the Virgin*. But this parallel is one facet, as it were, of the doctrine of recapitulation: Adam is restored in Christ, mortality is absorbed in immortality, and Eve is restored in Mary, Irenaeus, as always, insists on the true humanity of the Saviour. He did not become some other formation, but recapitulating the process of creation, he integrated himself with the human race. He is one with us, the likeness (*homoiotēs*), as Irenaeus says in Book III, being preserved.[10] The word of chief interest, to us, however, is 'advocate'. Does this imply, as the commentators in Migne's *Patrologia* suggest, that Irenaeus had some concept of Mary's heavenly intercession, and that he had received it from the apostles? Or is Irenaeus simply using the word in a general sense? If we may conjecture that the greek original is *paraklētos*, advocate, intercessor, speaker on someone's behalf, Irenaeus may not be saying more than that Mary marks a new phase in history: Mary stands, as it were, in the new creation where Eve stood in the old. We simply do not know. What we do know is that by the time of the Council of Ephesus (431), Mary is regularly invoked. In a sermon of Cyril of Alexandria, for instance, she is addressed in the following terms: 'Hail, thou who didst contain him in the holy virginal womb, who cannot be contained; thou through whom the holy Trinity is glorified and adored throughout the world . . . through whom the fallen creature is taken up into heaven', and so on.

Of the bishop's devotion to Mary we know nothing. All that we can safely say is that for him the question of salvation is the central one: *ad quid descendebat?* To what purpose did Christ 'come down'? His own answer is clear: 'By reason of his immeasurable love he became what we are, in order to make us what he himself is'.[11] This is not just the heart of Irenaeus; in a variety of forms it was the main theme of the theology of the early Church. The invocation of Mary, as it developed by the time of Cyril, is to be understood, therefore, in the context of salvation. As Irenaeus never ceases to stress, the Holy Spirit who restores communion between God and ourselves gives us also in the same act the gift of meeting one another in truth. To be in communion with Christ is to share also the company of all those who have faith in him.

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10 *Adv. Haer.*, 3, 22, 1.

11 *Ibid.*, 5, Pref.

Athanasius

Athanasius is the third of the theologians whom we have chosen for insight in understanding the theme of Eve and Mary. A key figure in the faith and life of the fourth-century Church, Athanasius brought to its fullest expression the orthodox tradition of redemption, that is, the doctrine of redemption in its biblical form.

It is typical of his whole way of thinking to focus attention on Christ as God and man. If he is not God, then there is no salvation for us. Only God can save. So the *homoousios* (one in being) with God is essential. And if he is not man, *we* are not saved, we who share this embodied existence together. So the *homoousios* with man, with all who live and breathe and suffer and sin and die — that, too, is essential. Thus in the *De Incarnatione Verbi* he explains that on the cross 'two opposite marvels took place at once: the death of all was consummated in the Lord's body; yet because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished'.[12] Or, in the celebrated phrase from the same book, 'The Word was made man in order that we might be made divine'.[13]

We shall understand Athanasius only when we have learned that for him theology is not the 'smooth sophistry' of the arian teachers but *doxology* — the joyful reflection on our salvation in Christ. The Word is not for him the universal reason of the philosophers but the incarnate and exalted Christ, preached by the apostles and present with us still in the words of the *kerygma* or apostolic proclamation, 'through which', as he wrote in the fourth *Discourse against the Arians,* 'those who observe them shall reap salvation'. Thus the dominant theme which we find in the bishop of Alexandria is the same as we found earlier in the bishop of Lyons — the meaning of our redemption in Christ.

Athanasius, however, had to do battle on two theological fronts, against not only Arius but also Apollinarius. Against Arius, he insisted that if Christ were not God, if he were only a created being, then we have no salvation. We remain 'mortal as before'. Against Apollinarius, he insisted that the Lord became *man*: he did not simply appear to be human, he became 'flesh'.

The term which he prefers, to express this double reality, is 'appropriation', *idiopoiēsis*. On the one side Athanasius speaks of that act of God-in-Christ in which God appropriates, makes his own, our human nature in its wholeness. From first to last everything in the life of Christ is a manifestation of this *idiopoiēsis:* his birth, words, signs,

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[12] *De Incarnatione*, 20.

[13] *Ibid.*, 54.

ministry, death and resurrection. The whole life of Christ is a work of reconciliation and redemption. 'So that the work of his Father for us should not be frustrated', he says in the *De Incarnatione,* 'he takes to himself a body, a body like our own'. Or again, in a typical phrase from the first *Discourse against the Arians,* 'he deified what he put on'.

On the other side, *idiopoiēsis* also refers to that act of man-in-Christ in which we human beings appropriate God's grace and blessing.

What Athanasius says concerning Mary is brief, but of significance. First, Mary has Adam's human nature, and therefore, through his birth of Mary, Christ shares ours. Second, the virgin birth is thus explained by Athanasius on fairly traditional anti-docetic grounds; but now, in opposition to the Arians, it is emphatically set forth as a sign of Christ's divine nature. In the *De Incarnatione* he writes:

> He formed his own body from the Virgin; and that is no small proof of his godhead, since he who made that was the Maker of all else. And would not anyone infer from the fact of that body being begotten of a virgin only, without human father, that he who appeared in it was also the Maker and Lord of all beside?[14]

Third, according to Athanasius, Christ has taken our nature in the virgin birth, appropriating our human existence from Mary in order to redeem it as man, so that we might become divine. A typical but critical passage comes in the third *Discourse against the Arians*:

> 'Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even though their sin, unlike that of Adam, was not a matter of breaking a law' [Rom 5, 14]. Thus human beings remained as mortal and liable to corruption as before, for they give admission to the passions which belong to them by nature. Now that the Word has been made man and has appropriated our physical existence (*sarx*), these things no longer affect our body, because of the Word that dwells in it. They are destroyed by him. From now on human beings are no longer sinners and mortal because of their passions. The power of the Word has brought them to life and they are immortal and incorruptible. Since his physical existence (*sarx*) was begotten of Mary, Mother of God, he himself is described as having been begotten, even though it is he who causes others to come into being. He has taken to himself our coming into being, so that we may not return to the earth as mere earth, but rather attach ourselves to the heavenly Word and be brought to heaven by him. His taking to himself of the other passions of our body is not without reason either: he wills that we shall participate in eternal life no longer

[14] *Ibid.*, 18.

> as human beings but as those who belong to the Word. For we do not die as we once did by reason of our origin in Adam. Our Adamic origin and all the frailty of our physical existence (*sarx*) have been transferred to the Word. We rise from the earth. Atonement has been made for the curse that came on account of sin by reason of him who was made a curse for us and dwelt with us.[15]

From this we may draw a summary of the doctrine of redemption according to Athanasius. First, the fundamental principle of human existence is death. Second, the Word who brings all life into being has himself appropriated our physical existence through his birth of Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, and so he has destroyed the powers of death and sin from within. Third, in himself the Word not only mediates salvation, but is our salvation. The 'attributes of our flesh' become his in the incarnation, but now they no longer affect us, and we rise in accordance with the power of the Word to become immortal and incorruptible. Through our attachment to the Word we participate in eternal life.

As we saw, Irenaeus referred to Mary as the *advocate,* which seems to mean something like 'the one who is besought'. If Athanasius refrains from using this kind of language, does this mean that any idea of invoking Mary is alien to his thought or to his school of thought? By no means. There is clear evidence that late in the fourth century an anaphora of the type of Basil of Caesarea was in use in the coptic Church. In its general structure the anaphora may quite possibly be the work of the great cappadocian Father. Since Basil and Athanasius died within six years of one another, we may conjecture that the coptic Church, a conservative Church liturgically, used this liturgy, or something close to it, by the end of Athanasius's life. There is a presumably earlier fragment of the anaphora in which the following petition is included in the intercessions:

> Remember, O Lord, . . . especially the holy and glorious Mother of God, Mary ever-Virgin; by her prayers have mercy on us all, and save us for the sake of the holy Name, which we invoke.

In its position, after the consecration, this prayer is both impressive and significant. In a revealing phrase Metropolitan Anthony Bloom says, concerning prayer for the dead: 'The living are related to the dead for whom they pray. In the dead we no longer belong completely to this

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[15] *Contra Arianos*, 3, 33.

world, in us the dead still belong to history'.[16] In remembering the holy and glorious Theotokos, the alexandrian Church — if, indeed, it used this prayer — rejoiced with Mary in the reality of salvation. Such a liturgical prayer implies a recognition of Mary's part in the work of salvation. The Church does pray for Mary: 'Remember, O Lord, Mary ever-Virgin'. In so doing it reveals, in the phrase of Bengel, an eighteenth-century lutheran scholar, that Mary here is to be seen as the daughter of grace, not as the mother of grace: for she too is saved only by the loving-kindness of the Word. A future development of ecumenical liturgy may well be this glad recalling of Mary as the sign of salvation.

As theology developed, after Athanasius, many of these ideas on which the paper has touched are enlarged with profundity, jubilation, and at times excess.

1. The Church continued to emphasize Mary's ever-virginity, as in Epiphanius, not from any sense that sexuality is impure but as a defence against docetic views.

2. Also as in Epiphanius, the idea of the new Eve giving birth to the new Adam is to be found.

3. Of great importance, and this is found widely, is the idea of Mary as the remnant of Israel. In Cyril of Jerusalem and John of Damascus, Mary is the sign that barren Israel has become fruitful; and Nicolas Cabasilas discusses her faithful assent as a collaboration or *sunergeia* in the work of salvation. Mary is a participant in the incarnation.

4. The idea of Mary's virginity as witnessing primarily to the new creation in Christ is to be found almost universally.

5. Lastly, and this must be set against an undeniably anti-feminist trend in some of the early tradition, the balance of Eve and Mary in some remarkable ways implies a restoration of human worth to women as a whole.

[16] Bloom, Anthony, and LeFebvre, Georges: *Courage to Pray* (London, 1973), p 60.