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Kilian McDonnell OSB

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kmcdonnell@csbsju.edu

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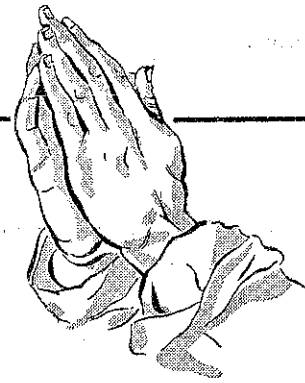


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Mary and The Church

by KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.

In the grill room of the Hotel Comodore, Monsignor (now Bishop) Sheen met Louis Budenz, then editor of the Communist paper *Daily Worker*, for a discussion of Communism and Catholicism. After they had discussed Communist philosophy over their dinner, the Monsignor, "pushing aside the remaining cutlery on the table as though to waive any argumentation . . . bent forward and exclaimed, 'Let us now talk of the Blessed Virgin!'"

It would be superficial to see in the Monsignor's daring merely an appeal to memories of a Catholicism Budenz had rejected years ago. Beyond and deeper than the tenderness the Catholic—even the fallen-away Catholic—instinctively feels for the Mother of God, there is another instinct: the man who understands Mary will understand the Church; he who loves Mary will love the Church. It was no flanking movement the Monsignor launched by bringing up the topic of Mary. Rather was it a frontal attack. To speak of Mary was to speak of the Church.

Here the Monsignor was no innovator but the voice of a tradition which very likely goes back to the apostle St. John, who wrote: "A great sign appeared in the heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon was under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." A number of scholars believe that the woman St. John is referring to is both Mary and the Church, or rather Mary as a sign, a symbol, of the Church.

In some of the ancient basilicas there are large paintings of a woman over the altar. When moderns see the pictures they frequently say, "Oh yes, that is the Blessed Virgin." This is not quite right. The representation is not of Mary as an isolated individual. Indeed it is really a picture of the Church represented by the person of Mary.

When we read the ancient authors, we are struck by their unconcern to distinguish clearly between Mary and the Church. The sermon of St. Cyril of Alexandria preached in 431 is an example. As we read along we think he

is speaking of Mary: "Hail to thee, Mary, Mother of God, light not to be extinguished, vessel containing the uncontainable. Through thee, churches are founded in the entire world, and nations are brought to conversion." But all of a sudden, as though he had not changed his topic, he speaks of the Church: "May we be granted the privilege of praising the ever virgin Mary, namely, the holy Church."

St. Cyril knew as well as we that Mary was not identical with the Church, that the one was not the other. He spoke in this manner because what happens to Mary will happen to the Church. In her single person she experiences in advance what the whole Church experiences later.

Before the Church ever existed, Mary was the holy one, the Immaculate. The Church is now holy and immaculate in her teaching and sacraments, though unfortunately not in the lives of all her members. Before the Church existed, Mary was united to Christ in oneness of love, in oneness of body. She carried Him within, physically. There is now a oneness between Christ and the Church. The very definition of the Church is in terms of the Body of Christ. She is the Mystical Body of Christ. Before the Church existed, Mary suffered and co-operated with God in working out man's salvation. Now the Church bleeds and suffers and co-operates with Christ in leading souls to the Father. And finally, before the Church, Mary, body and soul, rejoices in heaven. One day the members of the Church will likewise be perfectly joined to God in body as well as in spirit.

Mary, then, is a type of the Church. She points to the Church because what she experiences the Church later experiences. Mary is a symbol of the Church because she realized within herself what it is the vocation of the Church to realize: freedom from sin, holiness, oneness with Christ, suffering, the joy of bringing others to God, and, lastly, a transfiguration of body and soul in the light of glory.

To say that Mary is a symbol of the Church is not to make a minor goddess of her, nor to give her honor which is due only to God. The ancients knew this. St. Epiphanius, writing in the fourth century, assured Mary a place of honor while giving us warning: "God came down from heaven, the Word clothed Himself with flesh from a virgin. Not assuredly, that the virgin should be adored, nor to make her a god. . . . Let Mary be held in honor, but let the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be adored. Let no one adore Mary."

If we think of Mary as a sign of the Church, we will never do her the dishonor of isolating her from her Son, from the Body of Christ, the Church. We will not proclaim her sanctity as an autonomous reality, an autonomy she would be the first to reject. We will not forget that subordination to her Son which is her first vocation, her final destiny, her everlasting claim to blessedness.

Since Mary is a symbol of the Church, since she gives us her Son and is subject to Him, there will be nothing hesitant about our devotion to Mary, nothing embarrassed about our love for her in the presence of non-Catholics and unbelievers. The love we feel for this Mother is not something we nourish in secret but hide in public. To the world, from the rooftops, we proclaim that her Son has exalted her above all men. "You are all beautiful, oh Mary!"

Occasionally the wiser ones of the world say that we would make more converts to Catholicism if we would speak less of Mary. I do not believe it. Mary is the sign which points to the Church. If you understand Mary you will understand the Church; if you love Mary you will love the Church.

Mary is not a wall that separates; she is the wall that gathers in and encloses. If Mary is spoken of as the sign pointing to the Church, then Mary, who seems to be one of the great stumbling blocks to non-Catholics, will be the instrument of their conversion.