Mary and the Church

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Mary and The Church

by KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.

In the grill room of the Hotel Commodore, 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 the people; in that 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 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-day 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.