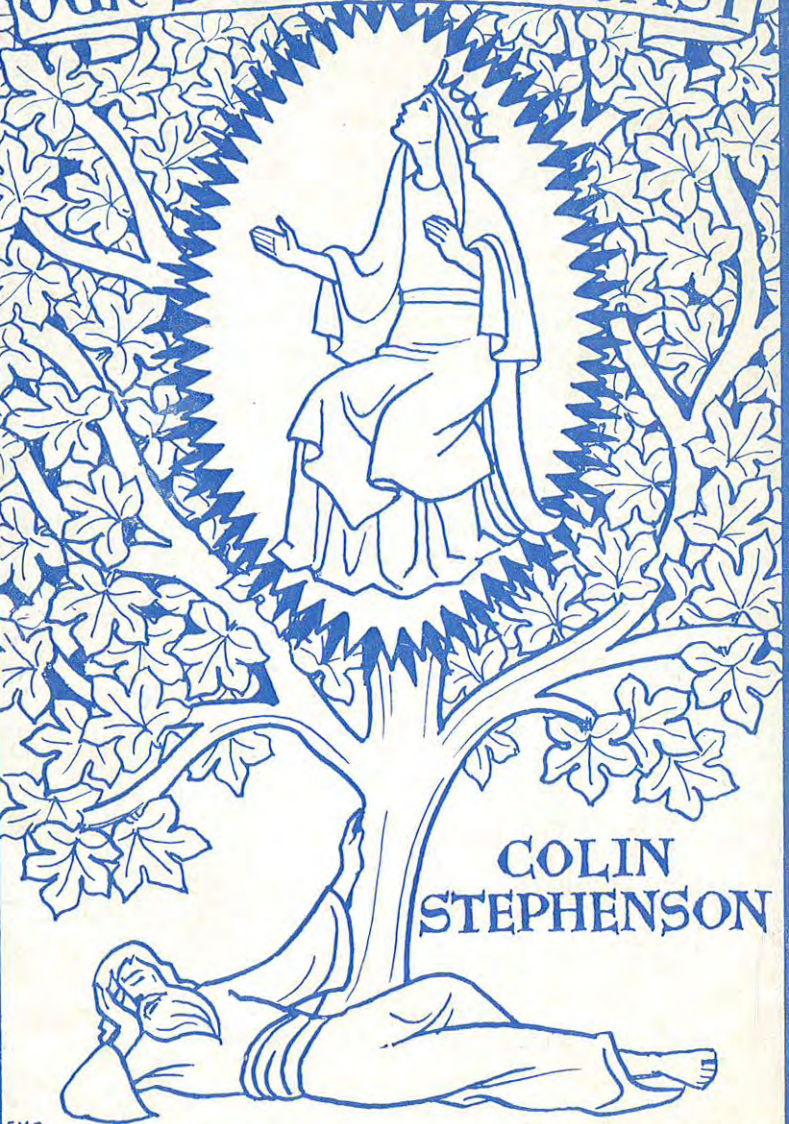


OUR SOLITARY BOAST



COLIN
STEPHENSON

Mother! Whose virgin bosom was uncrossed
With the least shade of thought to sin allied!
Woman! Above all women glorified;
Our tainted nature's solitary boast;
Purer than foam on central ocean tost,
Brighter than eastern skies at daybreak strewn
With fancied roses, than the unblemished moon
Before her wane begins on Heaven's blue coast;
Thy image falls on earth.

WORDSWORTH.

OUR SOLITARY BOAST

Why Christians honour our Lord's Mother

By

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HONOUR TO WHOM HONOUR IS DUE

God has so ordered his creation that where there is a child there must be a mother. When he took flesh there are many ways in which this miracle might have been accomplished. In fact, he entered this world as his creatures do. Having been conceived by the Holy Ghost in the womb of a woman, and maturing for nine months, he was born in a stable at Bethlehem.

When we wish to give a visible demonstration of this mystery of the Incarnation, or the flesh-taking of God, it is by the figure of a woman with a child in her arms. And when we confess our belief that the Child of Bethlehem was 'God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God', we do not have to be great theologians to realize that the woman from whom he took flesh, as we have taken flesh from our mothers, must occupy a very special place in the story of man's redemption. In fact, devotion to the Mother of our Lord is as old as Christianity itself, for what she was physically, the mother of the body of Christ, she remains spiritually, the mother of that body of Christ of which all we baptized are members. Thus there are two aspects under which Christians have honoured Mary—one as the simple Jewish maiden, 'the handmaid of the Lord', who was close to Jesus during his earthly life, the other as 'the woman in Heaven' exalted as the mother of Christ the King, having a tender love and care for all those who belong to him. She loves us because he loves us, we belong to her because we belong to him.

The place of Mary in the Christian Church has been

the subject of bitter controversy and, like all things which have been the subject of controversy, it has got out of focus and has become exaggerated by both sides, until the simple biblical and historical facts have become distorted. The Church of England has suffered in this way, but respect and honour for Christ's mother have always been implicit in her faith and in her formularies, and during the past hundred years much has been done to rectify the suspicion and neglect to which the Blessed Virgin had been subject as a result of unorthodox teaching. It was the notion that to honour Mary and to ask for her prayers was to detract from the One Mediator, which was, and is, the basis of Protestant objection to the cult of our Lady; but it would seem an odd way of honouring our Lord to be indifferent, or even hostile, to the mother who bore and nurtured him.

It is sometimes suggested that the honour due to Mary is an 'extra', which was added to Christianity in the middle ages, but the fact is that from the very beginning Christians had a devotion to the Mother of Jesus, and some of the earliest Christian paintings in the catacombs in Rome show a figure of our Lady with small, *orante* figures asking for her prayers. The ways in which this devotion has been expressed have differed from age to age and from country to country, but those in the main stream of historic Christianity have passed on the profound love and veneration for Mary which arises from her unique position as Mother of God, and have given honour where honour is due.

What the Bible Says

In a mystical reading of the Old Testament there are many types which are fulfilled in Mary. This

approach to the Scriptures, which is sometimes called Typology by theologians, sees in the recorded persons and events of the Old Testament symbols which point us forward to their fulfillment in the New Testament. Perhaps the most obvious example is the way in which the themes of sacrifice, which appear in such variety throughout the Old Testament, are all fulfilled in our Lord's death upon the Cross. In the same way, if we read with the eye of faith, we shall see our Lady foreshadowed in the unfolding of the Old Covenant.

She is the new Eve, the Mother of All Living, whose obedience is in direct contrast to the disobedience of the first Eve.

She is the Burning Bush, burning but not consumed, for her virginity was not altered by her maternity.

She is the Ark of the Covenant, the dwelling place of God.

She is Esther, the Queen who intercedes for her people.

These are but a few of the Old Testament types of the Blessed Virgin, but there are many passages and texts which have been used to point to her, such as the well known 'Behold a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son' (Isaiah 7, 14).

When we come to the New Testament it has often been objected that there is little said explicitly about our Lady, and that some of the words addressed to her by our Lord seem cold and rather forbidding. A careful study of the Gospels shows that this is not so.

The word 'woman' sounds rather rude and brusque in English, but the word translated in this way is not so in the original, and one could hardly in any case

believe that our Lord was the sort of boor who would be rude to his mother in public.

Once we have read the stories of Christ's birth in St Luke's gospel, we realize that our Lady herself must have been the main source of the information, and we can imagine that having revealed her relationship to Christ she then, of her own choice, steps aside and leaves us to ponder these things in our hearts, as she has done before us. Even if our Lord does sometimes seem to be correcting her, this was something he always did to those he loved, and his tone of voice and the expression of his face must have blotted out any idea of coldness. When on the cross he commends her to the Beloved Disciple, it has always been considered that St John represents the Church to whom is said, 'Behold thy Mother'. It is the transition of Our Lady of Nazareth to Our Lady of the Apostles, and so of the Catholic Church.

St Paul for one moment dwells on the identification of our Lady with the Church when he associates Christ's human Sonship with the divine Sonship which it guarantees to us (Gal. 4, 4). St John in his Revelation portrays the same mystery when he tells of the woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars (Rev. 12, 1). She whom we honour at the manger as Mother of God is she whom we honour as Mother of the Church. The heart of the Gospel is that 'the Word was made flesh', and we can never forget for one moment that he was not only the Son of God, but also the Son of Mary.

What Tradition Says

The Fathers are the Christian writers of the early centuries who expounded the Scriptures in the light

of the traditions handed down to them, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They all speak of our Lady with the deepest reverence and honour: of her virginity, of her divine maternity, of her place of privilege and her uniqueness. It would be impossible to try and give quotations for they are so many, but to mention such names as St Irenaeus, St Justin Martyr, St Cyril of Jerusalem, St Ephrem of Syria, St Jerome, St Ambrose and St Augustine is to give only a few of those who have expressed and elaborated everything about Mary we have already mentioned. As theologians have pondered upon the privileged position of Mary, they have gradually drawn out from the Scriptures and the Fathers certain aspects of this mystery which they think implicit in them. One of these has been her 'sinlessness', and they have considered that because of her vocation to give flesh to God, she was never touched by sin, and this special grace of God was bestowed upon her from the very moment of conception. What this means in simple terms is that what is done for us at the moment of our baptism was by the special intervention of God done for Mary at the very first moment of her conception. Likewise there has grown up within the Church the tradition that Mary's body did not corrupt in the grave, but was translated after her death to heaven, having assumed the glorious body which is promised to all those who fall asleep in the Lord at the Last Judgement. In fact, both in the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption the inference is that Mary, through the finger of God, is one step ahead of the ordinary man or woman. One cannot claim that these graces are unique, for Holy Scripture tells us that John the Baptist was sanctified from his mother's womb, and Enoch and Elijah were both assumed into heaven. Nor can we really believe that these things are essential

to the main tenets of the Catholic Faith, although the Roman Church in recent times has made them matters of faith on the same level as the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection of our Lord. Yet they are ancient and honoured traditions which contain nothing contrary to reason or the Holy Scriptures, and are in line with the great honour and love of Mary which has been handed down to us from early times.

What the Church of England Says

The Council of Ephesus, which met in A.D. 431, said that Mary might rightly be called 'Mother of God'. The Church of England is committed by the 39 Articles to whole-hearted acceptance of the findings of this Council. The Puritans had a great animus against our Lord's Mother, and in the spree of iconoclasm which accompanied the puritan domination in this country, few images of our Lady were allowed to escape destruction. However, the Book of Common Prayer retained her main Feasts, such as The Annunciation, The Conception and the Purification, and some calendars, such as that of Oxford University and the Law Courts, retained the Assumption, although its omission from the Prayer Book Calendar is thought by some people to have been more from the inconvenience of having a Feast in the middle of harvest time than from theological objection.

The Prayer Book Collect for Christmas Day speaks of our Lord being born of a 'pure' Virgin, and each day at Evening Prayer her hymn *Magnificat* is said. It would be impossible to quote here the many expressions of devotion and reverence for Mary in the writings of the Anglican Divines, but perhaps it is in hymns that one gets the clearest expression of Anglican

devotion to our Lady. Such well known hymns as 'Her virgin eyes saw God Incarnate born' and 'Shall we not love thee, Mother dear,' representing different generations, express the deep and sober piety which is the true inheritance of Anglicans. In the past hundred years of the Catholic revival, much has been done to repair the indifference of the past, and now there are few churches which do not have some representation of our Lord's mother, either in wood, stone, painting or stained glass.

Some of the ancient Shrines of Mary have been restored and are again frequented by pilgrims. Perhaps the most remarkable restoration has been the Shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham in Norfolk, where a complete Shrine Church has been built, and where Anglicans throng from all over the world.

Ways of Honouring Mary

The classic prayer to our Lady is the 'Hail Mary': "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death."

Although this prayer is addressed to our Lady, it is primarily in honour of our Lord's Incarnation, of which she is the symbol. In this way it is used in the devotion known as 'The Angelus', which is said three times a day — morning, noon and evening, and in many places a bell is rung to remind the Faithful of this prayer time.

The 'Hail Mary' is also used in the Rosary, which is a method of prayer to encourage meditation on the main mysteries of our religion.

There are many other prayers and devotions for the use of those who wish to foster in their spiritual life a devotion to our Lord's mother.

It is perhaps hard to put into words the value of this in the devotional life of the Christian, but when one becomes conscious of the family nature of the Church, an easy familiarity with our Lady and the saints will be found to give our prayer life a balance which is lacking when this is absent.

In the same way, we should do well to observe devoutly the Feasts in our Lady's honour, and to remember that these are like the birthdays of the mother of a human family; and we can show no greater piety towards her than in going to the 'family table' and attending Mass and receiving Holy Communion.

There are many other Marian devotions such as visiting her Shrines and going on pilgrimage, joining in processions in her honour and lighting candles, and putting flowers around her image in church or in our own home. There are some people who object to these practices and to some of the expressions used about our Lady, which they find offensive or sentimental; but in a family, different members have different ways of expressing themselves, and perhaps if outsiders could hear us talking to our human mothers at moments of affection, they would say the same things.

Devotion to our Lady as the mother of Christians is essentially a family devotion. Mary herself said 'all generations shall call me blessed', but all generations have done better than this, and they have called her every 'pet name' imaginable. She is Our Lady of Good Counsel, the Mystic Rose, the Star of the Sea, Our Lady of Walsingham, Our Lady of Lourdes and of a

thousand places where she is particularly honoured. Those who do not understand the family, personal nature of these titles sometimes accuse us of thinking of her as different people when we invoke her by different names. If they did but know, the truth is even more astonishing than they suspect, for each of us has our own 'Our Lady', because she is your mother and my mother, and it is to you that Jesus is saying now

'Behold your Mother'.

FAMOUS ENGLISH SHRINES OF OUR LADY

Our Lady of Walsingham	Norfolk
Our Lady Undercroft	Canterbury, Kent
Our Lady of the Pew	Westminster, London
Our Lady of Glastonbury	Somerset
Our Lady of Ipswich	Suffolk
Our Lady of Willesden	London
Our Lady of Islington	London
Our Lady of Caversham	Berkshire
Our Lady of Barking	London
Our Lady of Winchester	Hants.
Our Lady in the Crypt	York
Our Lady of Thetford	Norfolk
Our Lady of Evesham	Worcs.

This list represents only a few of the many shrines set up by our forefathers and destroyed at the Reformation. Through the mercy of God, several of them have been restored.

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Some books on Devotion to Our Lady for further reading.

Mother of Jesus	Carlton
The Mystery of Mary	Bede Frost
The Mother of God	Edited E. L. Mascall
The Blessed Virgin and All the Company of Heaven...	Wingman
England's Nazareth	Hole & Stephenson