

OUR LADY IN US

THE EDITOR

THE whole of the Catholic world has this year been directed by the Holy Father to centre its devotion on the Mother of God. The occasion is the centenary of the definition of the Immaculate Conception, and the effect is one more year in which the constantly developing doctrine of the place of Mary in the work of the redemption, and therefore in the daily life of man, is given impetus and hurried on apace. It might seem that we had progressed too far, that there was little more to be said or thought on this matter. But in fact the development, like true growth of any kind, is drawing its vigour from the centre and there is in these days an increasing sense of origins and sources which shows that the mind of the Church is not, like the mind of many men, moving on from one thing to another without retaining any unity or synthesis. The mind of the Church is the mind of the Word of God and therein all is one from the central reality to the outermost detail of idea or phrase.

When the unique mind of God formed man he had before him the whole work of redemption, and therefore he had his Mother in mind. God from the first moment of time saw his Mother as part of the pattern of the world he formed. Sometimes we meet critics who complain that the words from the eighth book of Proverbs, which are intended to express the eternity of the divine wisdom, are misapplied by the Church in the liturgy to our Lady: 'I was set up from eternity and of old before the earth was made. The depths were not as yet and I was already conceived. . . . I was with him forming all things, and was delighted every day, playing before him at all times. . . .' Many such phrases from Proverbs or Ecclesiasticus, the literal meaning of which is concerned with the wisdom of the Creator, have been applied in the liturgy to our Lady; and the application becomes clear when we realize that, before the world was made, God in his eternity looked with love upon his Mother as upon his Son.

If we turn to the early expression of man's attitude to God we are therefore not surprised to find things that represent not only the Word and Wisdom or the Son of God but also his Mother. Such representations and symbols are of course often disassociated from one another, distorted, materialized and misunderstood. But they do at least show that the divine pattern has its echo in the nature of man and that there lies within the human heart desires for the true Word of God and the Mother of the Word. In this instance these desires express themselves at every turn in terms of the 'divine mother', interwoven in the rites and ceremonies of primitive religious.

To view the gropings of man towards the motherhood of God from the point of view of the certain reality of Mary the mother of Jesus not only brings out many vestiges of truth in those religions but also helps us to understand the relation of mankind to the Mother of God. Thus the Great Mother reveals certain natural dispositions in man's nature which can only be actuated in truth by God or his mother. She was always connected with the fundamental movements of nature and with the beginnings of life. Men who are concerned with the primitive rhythm of life naturally look to the earth, or the spirit of the earth as maternal. We still inherit this attitude when we speak of mother nature or mother earth. The earth—or the whole of nature—brings forth as though from some hidden womb new life of all sorts, in particular the crops upon which man depends for his livelihood. Men were drawn instinctively to regard the earth as the universal mother from whom derived the fertility of the soil, of the crops and indeed of man himself. In itself, of course, the worship paid to this mysterious power was shot through with fear issuing in a type of slavery to the movements of the seasons and the consequent growth of the crops. They were enslaved to the Great Mother.

It is interesting to contrast this type of agricultural religion with that of the nomadic tribe of Israel. The latter, out on the hills and wandering in the desert, was far more conscious of sudden unexpected changes coming from the heavens. Thunder and lightning, the tempest and the gentle

dew and the tranquil stars over their tents at night—these drew their minds away from the slavery of mother earth, so often barren and unproductive on those rocky heights, back to the transcendent Father of the heavens. Even naturally these men were freer in their life and freer in their religion. Yet without the guidance of the revealed voice of the true God the Israelites with their nomadic neighbours would have found a goddess of fertility in their temples and high places. This was indeed one of their temptations—the green groves of the pagan goddess who so often called to them with the enticing voice of settled security of roof and field and undying river. It was God the Father of the tribe who led them out into the desert away from the enslavement to the mother. Yet the Jews, too, were waiting for the true fulfilment of their natural inclinations, a fulfilment as yet unguessed and realized only in the temptation to idolatry. The true religion had to be purged from the fear and the slavery that was an inheritance of the fall, before it was possible for the people of God to receive their Mother in freedom at the foot of the Cross, a Mother who was to be of their kind—not a god, yet the Mother of God.

A study of primitive religions, then, often offers strange parallels with Christian practice in devotion to our Lady. The goddess was the queen of the spirit world and invoked as a protection against evil spirits; she was connected with streams and rivers bringing fertility to land and pasture, with mountains and caves as representing the earth and the entrance into its interior. The reader need not be reminded that these ancient rites and beliefs were idolatrous. But that does not mean to say that the fact that our Lady has appeared close to streams or causing waters to flow from rocks, or on mountains and in caves, discloses a mere accidental similarity with those other religious associations. On the contrary, it would suggest that there is in man a psychological link with the real Mother of God which can be traced back to the unique will of God creating the whole universe and its entire history according to a single pattern. So our Lady fulfils all those myths and rites, but at the same time purifies them with the purity of truth. She does

not kill or trample on the instincts which led men to seek a Great Mother, but develops and perfects them in the liberty of the Spirit of God. Her poverty, chastity and obedience fully accord with human psychology; they do not lead to repression, the fearful fascination of the irrational powers of nature, a repression which breaks down in sudden outbursts of brutality. Evil inclinations, which are in fact the warping of good natural instincts, must of course be suppressed; and the immaculate Mother in her purity and obedience leads men to a true integrity by the suppression of evil. She shows how the natural rhythm of life should not be denied but elevated. She purifies man of his misconceptions regarding the principle of fertility in heavenly regions and she also purifies him in his daily Christian life.

It is not without significance then that the constantly increasing devotion to our Lady has been fostered particularly by her apparitions. These visions have always occurred to simple, unsophisticated people, innocent young peasants, and they have occurred in close connection with the elemental things which gave substance to the pagan's ways of worship. She appears, as we have noted, in grottoes or caves in the mountain-side, beside freshly flowing streams or by trees or bushes. There have been signs in the heavens and the sun itself has seemed to be affected. In the supernatural religion of her Son the Mother fulfils the natural instincts of man, retaining their simple elemental character yet purifying them, revealing the wholeness of her Son's religion, that Son who inherits the whole earth and all who dwell thereon. While men strive to save their complex civilization on the conscious level, depending on the accurate functioning of their mathematical calculations, the Mother appears to redeem their maltreated and abused instinctual life. Psychologists have become increasingly aware of the necessity of such a redemption, but the Handmaid of the Lord is effecting it.