

twist awry to a false delight.
 If this be all true, you should no more marvel
 at your rising than at a mountain
 torrent tumbling down the valley.
 A marvel it were if you, unhindered,
 140 stayed at rest instead below,
 as, flat on the floor, a living flame.'
 Then she turned again to the Light her eyes.

ANTONIO ROSMINI ON THE MAGNIFICAT

ROBERT SENCOURT

IN 1955 Italy in general and the province of Novara in particular have been celebrating the Centenary of the death of Antonio Rosmini. While some point to his sagacious views on the Risorgimento, and others turn back to his philosophy which anticipated the revival of Thomism, others venerate him as the founder of the Institute of Charity and a master of the spiritual life.

His work in this direction was indeed inspiring: and one could hardly find a better example of it than what he wrote on the *Magnificat* for his Convent at Domodossola, that the nuns might recite it with fuller attention, deeper faith and fuller joy. The essay gains in interest when we know that he wrote it in 1849 after he had failed in a negotiation with Pius IX who had felt compelled to flee from Rome and who then turned against the conciliatory policy he had shared with Rosmini, allowed his works to be attacked, and refused the Cardinalate he had previously offered. None of these disappointments shook the profound spiritual life of Rosmini.

Apart from the Mass and Benediction there is little in Catholic worship better known than the *Magnificat*. Rosmini writes of it nevertheless in a way to unveil significances which come to most as a surprise. He finds in the famous canticle, a compendium of ancient prophecy and of Church history: in it is the pith of the

Gospel wisdom with praise for the result. He arrived at these conclusions from studying it from the beginning to the end:

Soul, he reminds us is the principle of our natural life as spirit is that of our supernatural life. The Virgin's soul saw the greatness of the Lord because her very body was made his temple. But it was rather her *spirit* which was infused with celestial joy; with her soul she addressed herself to the Father while with her spirit she turned to the Son, her Saviour; for she was the first to rejoice in his salvation. In these words, too, she confessed her faith in his divinity—He was, in the psalmist's expression, her God and her Saviour. And when she added that he regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden, her thoughts ran down to the depths of her own nothingness at the same time as she felt herself to be immeasurably exalted.

'And now', continues Rosmini, 'now begins the magnificent prediction by which the Queen of Prophets, having drawn aside the veil of the future and looked beyond, proclaimed all that God, her Saviour and her Son was to accomplish in sanctifying men, in changing the face of the earth. 'All generations shall call me blessed.' Century after century proves the literal truth of that prophecy. 'Blessed' is the actual word which generation after generation applies to the Virgin-Mother. And what is blessedness? It is the effect and the reward of the purest holiness. But the holiness and the blessedness of Mary were the special gift of God Almighty; and never was he mightier than in the prerogative with which he endowed her. As Rosmini so exactly says: 'The Incarnation wrought in Mary was the greatest of all the divine works, because it was greater than the actual creation. And the Incarnation did not end in itself: it aimed at the sanctification of the world which is the object of the divine designs. It is achieved first through the Incarnation of the Son of God and then through the Holy Ghost proceeding from him to endue us with heavenly grace; and this gift of sanctifying grace is not for a period only; it is continued from generation to generation through God's love and mercy.' Its one condition is that souls should fear God: 'To fear God with that just fear which prompts men to refrain from sin is the beginning of greater mercies. And so Mary stood between the old and the new dispensations. She was, as it were, the last of the patriarchs—she was the first of her Saviour's disciples. In her culminated the mercy of the old dispensation;

in her was inaugurated the far greater mercies of the new.'

Rosmini proceeds to show how at this point the *Magnificat* reaches to vast new ideas, to new ranges of history. At that time great evils were afflicting the world. Like blind leading blind, so did the perverted wisdom of the world lead men astray. Tyranny was rampant, slaves treated vilely. In addition to false wisdom and arrogant power, there was misused wealth, misused by men who having no compassion for the poor, lived for every kind of luxury.

It was for the Gospel of Christ to change all this, and the prophetic spirit of the Virgin enabled both to foresee and to figure forth the message her Son was to proclaim to men. She felt its efficacy, she proclaimed its results. In the *Magnificat*, the pride of paganism is already overthrown: 'He hath shewed strength with his arm' but the arm of God is the Son of God. 'Arise, arise', so Isaiah had written, 'put on strength O Thou arm of the Lord, arise as in the days of old, in the ancient generations—and they that are redeemed by the Lord shall return and shall come into Sion, singing praises, and joy everlasting shall be upon their heads, they shall obtain joy and gladness, sorrow and mourning shall flee away.' Such is the beautiful text which Rosmini uses to amplify the verse which spoke of the strength in the arm of the Lord.

When our Lady sang 'He hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their hearts', she prophesied the overthrow of despots, the downfall of tyranny; and, proceeds Rosmini, she saw new nations arise, nations composed of those whom baptism, by regenerating, made submissive to the laws of meekness and of brotherhood preached by the Redeemer. The mighty were put down, the humble exalted, while charity gathered to its bosom the poor and the wretched, filling the hungry with good things.

Here we see how the *Magnificat* anticipates the beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek, blessed are the sorrowful, blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, blessed are they who are reviled and persecuted, with all manner of evil spoken against them. All these pronouncements, with all the changes of value they imply are already shadowed forth in the *Magnificat* of Mary. 'Long before her divine Son had preached the doctrine to others', wrote Rosmini, 'he had revealed it to his

beloved Mother, infused it into her heart, and yielded to her the honour of first proclaiming it.' She felt its efficacy and saw its application in herself at the same time as she expressed with skill and brevity a new dispensation for the world.

For how much history is condensed into her words. The successors of St Peter, the fisherman of Galilee, were to reign in Rome when those of Augustus had departed and had fallen. Slaves were to be freed, prisoners to be treated more humanely, orphans and widows provided for, the poor sheltered, institutes of charity and benevolence founded, misery widely alleviated; wherever the impulses of humanity and charity improve the lot of men and do away with exaggerated inequalities, we find a fulfilment of the *Magnificat*. In it is a programme for the reform of the world which, though carried on for approaching two thousand years, still has to reach out to the perfection of human society.

Even in the reference to Israel, Rosmini sees a hope that Jew and Gentile should be united, though not before the fullness of time. For God's mercy to Abraham was not to be quickly fulfilled: ages might pass first; but it was to last *forever*.

So it is shown how the *Magnificat* gradually unfolds the history of the Church throughout the centuries at the same time as it offers the Virgin's thanks for the Incarnation and provides a song of praise for every evening hour. Its reference to those that fear God is, as we saw, one with its insistence on God's mercy which is itself love descending from on high, till fear is merged in love; and then though it still retains whatever it had of affection, it loses the sense of dread and takes the form of reverence, of sacrifice, of a song of praise which ascribes all honour and glory to God alone. So Rosmini unlocks the secret of the *Magnificat* in unlocking his own which was a constant insistence on love. Divine Wisdom, he says, is a wisdom of the heart. It is not cold, like human learning, or vain theory, or prying of the intellect. It is all ardour, all life, all love; since God himself is love.

Such, then, is Rosmini's exegesis of the *Magnificat*. Well might he hope that it would lead those who recited the familiar words to do so with close attention, deeper faith and fuller joy.