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The Person of Mary and the Dogma of the Assumption

In the course of last September *The Tablet*, of London, England, published a letter to the Editor in which M. Robert Speaight * voiced his apprehension at the Holy Father's decision to proclaim the Assumption of Mary as a dogma of Faith. My attention was called to this letter, for reasons which will be plain from the following *mise au point* to the Editor of that distinguished Catholic weekly:

Quebec, September 27, 1950.

Dear Sir :

In his letter to *The Tablet* (Sept. 2) my friend Robert Speaight said: "When I was lately in Canada, I discussed the doctrine of the Assumption with a theologian who had been personally consulted by the Pope." It is true that I had been advised by due authority to expose to His Holiness in person the argument he refers to — which I did —, but it cannot be said that I was "consulted" by the Pope.

As to the argument itself — it was never intended to be more than possibly an addition to a wealth of already well established reasons — I held, my friend reports, that "the first Christians had always believed in the *existence* of Our Lady reunited to Her Son, and that this *existence* implied the union of soul and body." This reference does not quite (nor do I suggest that M. Speaight intended it to) convey the tenor of the argument in question. Actually, this argument does not take for granted that the early Christians believed in the *present* existence not only of the soul but even of the very *person* of Mary, of the Virgin, of the Mother of God. The chief aim of the argument (which appeared in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, Vol.V, n.1, under the title: *La personne de Marie dans le culte de l'Église et la définibilité de l'Assomption*) was to point out that any vestige of such a belief would be directly relevant to the Assumption, and then to suggest where, in Tradition, we might find intimations of that belief. This relevance can be derived from the rule of *suppositio nominum*, whose importance is recognized in the doctrine of the Trinity; and from the essential function of time in the act of Faith. (ST. THOMAS, *Q. D. de Veritate*, q.14, a.12, c.) If the soul and body of Mary were not now reunited, we could not predicate "existence" of her person nor of any attribute of the person. We could not say, v. g., The Mother of God *exists*, The Blessed Virgin we invoke *exists*; we could only say, The soul of the Mother of God *exists*. For, as St. Thomas emphatically and repeatedly points out: "Because to be a part is contrary to the very nature of person, the separated soul cannot be called the person—*Quia ratio partis contrariatur rationi personae . . . ideo anima separata non potest dici persona.*" (In *III Sentent.*, d.5, q.3, a.2. Also *Sum. theol.*, Ia, q.75, a.4, ad 2; In *I ad Cor.*, cap.15, lect.2; In *II de Anima*, lect.1; etc.) But why then do we invoke the other Saints as persons, and not merely as separated and subsisting souls? St. Thomas has faced this difficulty. Here is the objection as he phrased it: "The soul of Peter is not Peter. If therefore the souls of the saints pray for us, so long as they are separated from their bodies, we ought not to call upon Saint

* M. Speaight, who became a Catholic twenty years ago, is a highly esteemed visiting lecturer at Laval University. The series of lectures on *La nature et la grâce dans l'univers shakespearien*, which he delivered in the Faculty of Philosophy last Spring, appeared in the first issue of the *Laval théologique et philosophique* of the current year, Vol.VI, n.1, pp.63-127.

Peter, but on his soul, to pray for us: yet the Church does the contrary. The saints therefore do not pray for us, at least before the resurrection." To this he replies: "It is because the saints while living merited to pray for us, that we invoke them under the names by which they were known in this life, and by which they are better known to us: and also in order to indicate our belief in the resurrection, according to the saying of *Exod.*, III, 6, *I am the God of Abraham*, etc." (*Sum. theol.*, IIa IIae, q.83, a.11)

And so we may ask: Is not the *present* person, the present motherhood of Mary, the present relation of maternity, an object of the perennial Faith of the Church as expressed in her cult? If, indeed, the Church has from the outset invoked the Mother of God in her person, not merely for the extrinsic reasons which explain the custom of the Church with regard to all the Saints (*Sum. th.*, IIa IIae, q.83, a.11) — i. e. not simply by reference to her personal existence in the past or in the future, nor only because in using the names she bore in her life on earth we can more conveniently represent her to ourselves —, but with the intent of implying that we seek the intercession not merely of the soul, but of the person, of the Virgin-Mother who can *now* say "My Son," then the Church has at the same time implied the truth of the Assumption. (Perhaps we should point out, in this connection, that the doctrine of the Assumption does not concern Mary alone. None of the real relations between the humanity of Christ and His Mother such as the relations of origination and similitude, would now exist; nor would the temporal filiation of Christ — though it is never but a relation of reason — be true of the present. In this respect there would be in the glorified Saviour veritable privations with regard to that very principle of His temporal generation.)

To be sure, in that ancient prayer: "qui vere eam Genetricem Dei credimus, ejus apud te intercessionibus adjuvemur" it may not be quite plain to us that the *substantia nominis* of the words *Genetrix Dei* and of the pronoun *ejus* is none other than the physical person (as opposed to a person present only in mental representation), but the Living Voice of the Church may well determine for us what these words stand for. Only the authority of the Church could make it plain to us that when we confess: "The Mother of God exists" we make an act of theological Faith. That is why the essay already referred to concluded: "It belongs to the Teaching Authority of the Church to declare what has been the substance of the names of Christ in His relation to the Blessed Virgin, and accordingly, the substance of the names of Mary in the usage of Tradition. Then should we know with divine certitude that the Assumption has been capable of definition as a dogma of Faith."

Mr. Speaight is quite right when he says "there is a difference between believing and being forced to believe." Now that we are bound to believe, we are free from every possible doubt concerning the deepest reason why we know the Assumption is true and essential to our Faith and practice. Now we know this truth, not just because the Feast of the Assumption is an ancient one, not only because the theologians have come to this conclusion, nor even merely because to deny it would be impious and blasphemous; we know it with a certitude far greater than that of indubitable sense experience or reasoning, for we believe *because God has said it is so*, as the Living Voice shall tell us: *quia visum est Spiritui Sancto et nobis*. (*Acts*, xv, 28) And why should not the "episcopal enthusiasm"¹ remind us of that sound, *tanquam advenientis spiritus vehementis?* (*Acts*, II, 2)

Nor should we be too surprised at the embarrassment we may feel for our beliefs in the face of the world. There is no doubt that the declaration announced for November 1st brings home to us with renewed force the hard sayings: *God*

1. M. Speaight had written: "I know Catholics of sincere faith who are gravely troubled by the promulgation of the dogma. Their doubts will not be dispelled by a sentimental theology or by reports of episcopal enthusiasm."

has turned our worldly wisdom to folly; So much wiser than men is God's foolishness; He has chosen what the world holds foolish (I Cor., 1). Yet all this is as nothing compared to the outstanding privilege of this age of uncertainty: to know we believe and to confess, with a certainty beyond all certitude, that it has pleased God to exalt the person of his humble handmaid to the fulness of glory, even now.

Yours faithfully,

C. D. K.

Some three weeks later I learned

"that in its present form the argument is very incomplete, because you don't say anything about the other Saints in heaven who are invoked as persons and not as souls while their bodies nevertheless are venerated as relics. I think your argument would strike many people as diminishing the condition of the Blessed in heaven who are nevertheless freely prayed to and conceived of as fully active. And I think, before your letter appears, you should deal with this question of the other Saints who surely exist as *persons*?"

To this I replied :

Strange as it may seem, St. Thomas — surely he is the most reliable guide in these matters — and every one of his disciples have always held firmly that the "other Saints" do not now exist as persons. To "subsist" and "to be a person" are not the same. The separated soul, although it subsists and acts, is not a person, but only part of the person that was. And the Angelic Doctor states it quite plainly: "*anima separata non potest dici persona.*" On page 2 of my letter I gave the reasons why the Church nevertheless does invoke all the Saints as persons. I have recopied this page, inserting St. Thomas's own words¹.

Now that the Assumption is to be defined as a Dogma of Faith, is it not fitting that we should state plainly this striking difference between Mary and the other Saints? I do not quite understand why the argument in question should "strike many people as diminishing the condition of the Blessed in heaven who are nevertheless freely prayed to and conceived of as fully active." The mere fact that they are not yet resurrected is no reason why their glorified soul should not be fully active and efficaciously pray for us in virtue of the merits acquired in earthly life.

If we fail to bring out the striking consequences of this distinction between soul and person, do we not rather diminish the difference between the present condition of Mary and that of the other Saints? Surely it is not a small thing that God deigned to reveal — now having it defined as a Dogma of Faith. All this may appear fussy, but we must not forget that, after all, it is He who started it.

Congenial reviewers had already pointed out that, rigorous as it may seem, the argument in question could be convincing only to the few, "inasmuch as it is based on the Thomistic notion of person." Actually, the notion is a common one in Christian Philosophy. At all events, this doctrine of the human person and its relevance to the Assumption of Mary, has been incorporated in the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, of November 1st, 1950, not by a reference to St. Thomas, but

1. Namely the quotations from *In III Sentent.*, and from *Ila Ilae*.

by citations from St. Bonaventure and St. John Damascene. The Seraphic Doctor could hardly be more explicit:

Cum enim . . . beatitudo [Virginis] non esset consummata nisi *personaliter* ibi esset, et *persona non sit anima, sed coniunctum*, patet quod secundum coniunctum, id est corpus et animam, ibi est: alioquin consummatam non haberet fruitionem.¹

Since her blessedness would not be complete unless she were there [i.e. with her beloved] as a person, and the person is not the soul, but the conjunct, it is plain she is there according to the conjunct, i.e. in body and soul: otherwise, her fruition would not be complete.

The same Constitution had already quoted from St. John Damascene a passage which would be ineffective unless we understand it in the light of the distinction so plainly stated in the words of St. Bonaventure. Here is the text which the Holy Father quotes from that great Doctor of the Church :

Oportebat eam, quae in partu illaesam servaverat virginitatem, suum corpus sine ulla corruptione etiam post mortem conservare. Oportebat eam, quae Creatorem ut puerum in sinu gestaverat, in divinis tabernaculis commorari. Oportebat sponsam, quam Pater desponsaverat, in thalamis caelestibus habitare. Oportebat eam, quae Filium suum in cruce conspexerat, et, quem pariendo effugerat doloris gladium, pectore exceperat, ipsum Patri consistentem contemplari. Oportebat Dei Matrem ea, quae Filii sunt, possidere et ab omni creatura tamquam Dei Matrem et ancillam excoli.²

It was fitting that she, who had kept her virginity intact in childbirth, should keep her own body free from all corruption even after death. It was fitting that she, who had carried the Creator as a child at her breast, should dwell in the divine tabernacles. It was fitting that the spouse, whom the Father had taken to Himself, should live in the divine mansions. It was fitting that she, who had seen her Son upon the cross and who had thereby received into her heart the sword of sorrow which she had escaped in the act of giving birth to Him, should look upon Him as He sits at the right hand of the Father. It was fitting that God's Mother should possess what belongs to her Son, and that she should be honored by every creature as the Mother and as the Handmaid of God.

St. John Damascene makes the truth of all these statements depend upon the truth of the Assumption — of the presence of Mary as a person, as the Virgin, the Mother, the Spouse. The very last assertion is perhaps the most striking. We are made to understand that the Church does hold that there is a peculiar relationship between the cult of the Mother, Handmaid of God and the Assumption. If Mary had not enjoyed this privilege, would it have been true to say, strictly, that she is "honoured

1. *Constitutio Apostolica qua fidei dogma definitur Deiparam Virginem Mariam corpore et anima fuisse ad caelestem gloriam assumptam. Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 4 Novembris, 1950, p.765. (Italics mine)

2. *Ibid.*, p.761. We quote the translation made by the REV. JOSEPH C. FENTON, Editor of the *American Ecclesiastical Review*, and which appeared in *The Cathedral Bulletin*, N. Y., December 1950, pp.13-35. (Italics mine)

["excoli"] by every creature as the Mother and Handmaid of God"? Surely not in the sense which the Church has actually intended: namely as a person who, even now, in the present time — and not just by reference to her past life on earth or to our human mode of knowing — is an existing person, the Mother and Handmaid of God. The Assumption, then, may be called the dogma of Mary's presence.

That the relations we referred to — the real relations between Mary and her Son as well as the relation of reason between the Person of Christ and His Mother — cannot be true unless she is now present in body and soul, is also made plain by the opinion of St. Bernardine of Siena, which is reported by Pius XII in the following terms:

Similitudo nempe divinae Matris divinae Filii, ad animi corporisque nobilitatem dignitatemque quod attinet — ob quam quidem similitudinem ne cogitare quidem possumus caelestem Reginam a caelesti Rege separari — omnino postulat ut Maria "esse non debeat, nisi ubi est Christus".¹

The likeness between God's Mother and her divine Son, in the way of the nobility and dignity of body and of soul — a likeness that forbids us to think of the heavenly Queen as being separated from the heavenly King — makes it entirely imperative that Mary "should be only where Christ is."

In other words, it is only because the Virgin-Mother is now present, in person ("*personaliter ibi est*"), as Virgin and Mother — and not merely her soul — that the relations of origination and likeness between her and the humanity of Christ are realities in this day. This passage, as well as the other two already quoted, clearly implies that if only the soul of Mary were in Heaven, it would not be true to say that Mary herself, that the Virgin, the Mother, the Queen, is with her Son and intercedes for us. If *She* is to be *there*, she must now exist as a person — *i.e. secundum corpus et animam*.

C. D. K.

1. *Ibid.*, pp.765-766. (FENTON transl.)