

Father & Son, and Mother

Dom Alberic Stacpoole OSB

*To the Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Walsingham, March 2007
Ecumenical Marian Pilgrimage Trust*

The deep truth of Godhead, the Trinity led by the Father (as St John explains throughout the 4th Gospel), of Christ Jesus in his two natures (Son of God/Son of Man), and of the place of Mary between the Creation in its sinfulness and her Immaculate Conception beyond all sin—which gives her such titles as Second Eve, Mediatrix of Grace, and Theotokos/Mother of the Godhead—leaves us in need. The unfolding sequence cannot be determined by the Evangelists, Apostles, holy historians or saints filled with the Holy Spirit or such as papal authority.

I would suggest then that the Church's liturgical sequence—which has Advent leading to Christmastide and Epiphany; and has Lent leading to the Passion and Eastertide—needs to be further widened to complete the true wholeness of experience.

The historical experience of the New Testament should surely begin with 25th March, when Luke tells us of the coming of Christ. The Matins Invitatory on feasts shows the real relationship:

1st January Let us honour the Virgin Mary, Mother of God
Let us adore her Son, Christ the Lord

8th December Let us honour Mary, conceived without sin
Let us adore her Son, Christ the Lord

25th March Let us honour Mary who received the message of an angel
Let us adore her Son, Christ the Lord

22nd August Let us honour Mary, crowned in glory
Let us adore her Son, Christ the Lord

Luke has the Angel Gabriel giving his greeting twice: *Be not afraid*. It is first to the priest chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense for all assembled at prayer. He, his wife and his son John are to be *filled with the Holy Spirit*. The angel declares: *I am Gabriel, who stands before the face of God*. It is secondly to a betrothed girl, Mary: he said again: *Be not afraid, for God is gracious to you, you will conceive and give birth to a son, Jesus, son of the Most High, and his reign shall never end*.

There follows a Trinitarian event, told by Gabriel: *The Holy Spirit will fill you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you; a child shall be born, called Son of God*. This event is confirmed when at the Visitation the priest's wife, filled with the Holy Spirit, cries out: *God's blessing is upon you and the fruit of your womb. Who am I that the Mother of my Lord should come?*

The Liturgy should logically begin with Mary conceiving the Christ Messiah and Redeeming Saviour. Nine months later Jesus is born to the world. Luke gives us the vital account. In Bethlehem Mary gave birth to her firstborn son: an angel of the Lord appeared and the Lord's glory shone forth. The angel said: *Be not afraid* and a heavenly host sang God's praises—the GLORIA—until they returned to heaven. Mary treasured up these things. Eight days later he was circumcised and given the name Jesus as given by the angel Gabriel before he was conceived. The purification was complete in accordance with the Law of Moses. As Jesus grew he advanced in wisdom and favour with God and men.

The Evangelists have given us a trio of Trinitarian Events.

The next is the Lord's baptism before his Mission begins. Jesus had joined a general baptism of the people. Luke tells us that he was praying when the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, and the Most High spoke out: *You are my beloved Son, in whom I delight.*

The third such example was the Transfiguration, when Jesus took his closest Apostles to a high hill to pray. The appearance of his face changed and his clothing became more dazzling than a bleacher could equal. He was accompanied by Moses and Elijah, also in glory and discussing the destiny Jesus had to fulfil in Jerusalem, his Passion. From a cloud came the voice of the Most High: *This is my Chosen Son; listen to him* Peter relates the event, saying that the Lord Jesus was invested with honour and glory by God the Father who called Christ *the Beloved, on whom my favour rests*. The Blessed Virgin was not at any of these occasions, though they indicate her Son's future glory. Jesus later told his seventy-two disciples: *I have seen Satan fall, like lightning from heaven*—which gives stress to his absolute range before his Resurrection.

The Conception of Our Lady

It seems essential that we confront Our Blessed Lady as Immaculately conceived, as sinless in her entire life/existence—not least in giving birth through the Holy Spirit. Among the Anglo-Saxon monasteries there was an honoured feast of Mary's Conception.

In St Anselm's Abbey, where his Chaplain Eadmer was Christ Church Canterbury's particular theologian and historian—who indeed wrote Anselm's fine biography, also wrote his *Tractatus de conceptione S. Mariae*, in harmony with Anselm's thought and developed a belief in the principle that Mary possesses all privileges possible to a creature which are in harmony with her office as Theotokos, Mother of God—and this led to the doctrine of Immaculate Conception, via the Doctor Marianus, John Duns Scotus (and others) till it was defined in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. This was then developed in the Blessed Virgin, being Mother of the Author of all Graces; so she duly obtains for us all graces through her maternal intercession—and thus she became called Mediatrix of All Graces, a title given a Mass and Office by Pope Benedict XV.

We might well hear Eadmer's words from his Treatise of 1120.

God's wisdom, which rules all things....gave indescribable joy when this Virgin, mother of such a Son, was conceived by nature's law within her mother's womb.

She was to house the *summum bonum*. She was the most secret resting-place for the Son of the Almighty. Mary, forecourt of the Throne of Mercy, built by the Holy Spirit, was free of servitude to sin. God prepared a Temple for himself, unharmed by the thorns of sin.

There are surely two aspects of the holy reality of Mary, each of which continuously cast principle one upon the other. One is what the New Testament tells us; the other what Church historians, theologians in their time, and development of doctrine tell us. The rich life of the Church encourages feast days that call forth deeper understanding and further acceptance.

The Liturgical Year and the role of Mary

The Year now begins on 1st January with the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (the Octave day of Christmas). It was once a Feast of the Lord; but the Presentation of Christ in the Temple has now gone to 2nd February, with the feast of Candlemas—which was, as it were, a “Lady Day”, the commemoration of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin (the fortieth day after her child's birth, in Luke's Gospel).

On 1st January, Matins honours the Virgin Mary as Mother of God, and the Mass Antiphon hails her thus: *The child to whom you gave birth is the King of heaven and earth for ever*. The Preface says this: *Through the power of the Holy Spirit, she became the Virgin Mother of your only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ...through whom the choirs of angels and all the powers of heaven worship your glory*. The Post-Communion proclaims the Virgin Mary to be *the Mother of Christ and the Mother of the Church*. But Bishop Athanasius is brought in the Matins Reading to say this in balance:

Though the Word took a body from Mary, the Trinity remains Trinity, And admits neither addition nor diminution. It is always perfect. In the Trinity One Godhead is acknowledged; and so in the Church one God is proclaimed, the Father of the Word.

As to theological development in the Church's life, two ecumenical councils of the Greek part of Catholicism—Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451—granted Our Lady the title THEOTOKOS/God-bearer. The Latin/Roman past used not the translation DEIPARA, but DEI GENITRIX/Mother-of-God with a slightly different emphasis. That we have today.

At the outset, I argued that the Christmas climax of our living Liturgy should be drawn back to 25th March when Luke's Gospel tells us of the Annunciation of Our Lady, which led to the Lord's Conception. It is interesting that when Our Lady appeared to the diminutive Marie Bernarde Soubirous, St Bernadette, on eighteen occasions in 1858, she kept asking, “Who are you?” on 25th March, the Annunciation, Our Lady appeared and granted her answer, four years as it was after the papal proclamation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. She said, on her 15th Apparition:

QUE SOY ERA IMMACULADA COUNCEPCION.

There was for her solemnity about that date—her holy conception of Christ.

The other time-pairing part of my argument is to say that the Ascension of the Lord and Assumption of Our Lady should be set beyond the Resurrection. The Crucifixion is told by John (19: 25-27) in an oblique way, Mary's name not being invoked but only her motherhood. *Near the Cross on which Jesus hung, his mother was standing with her sister...seeing his mother with the disciple he loved standing beside her, Jesus said, "Mother, there is your son", and to the disciple, "There is your mother".*

Mary appears just once more, in Luke's Ascension account (Acts 1: 14), again in an oblique way: *Apostles were constantly at prayer, together with a group of women, and Mary the mother of Jesus.* She came into the care of John, who of the Apostles was the only one not known as martyred. At the Last Supper, John was *the beloved disciple who reclined next to Jesus and who leaned on the Lord's breast to ask, "Who is then the betrayer, Lord?"*

Ascension and Assumption

Luke tells us that after the Passion, Jesus showed himself for just forty days (that symbolic length) to tell his followers about God's Kingdom. The Ascension narrative is told doubly by Luke, and him alone. In the Gospel, Jesus tells his Apostles: *The Father is to clothe you with power from on high.* He then blesses them in Bethany and is gone, leaving them joyful. In the Acts, Jesus says to them that the Father had decided events solely on His authority: *You will receive power as the Sprit comes on you.* Jesus was lifted from their sight, and two angels told them that he would come back similarly.

Christ's Ascension was the taking of our nature to the Right Hand of his Father—his nature adopted for us, and his promise that we come to live out. Paul lyrically tells us that we are to be citizens of heaven; and that *our deliverer, the Lord Jesus, is to transfigure our humble bodies, giving them a form like his own glorious body* (Philippians 3: 21)—for he promised this: *To anyone who is victorious, I will grant a place beside me, as I am beside my Father on his throne* (Revelation/Apocrypha 3: 31).

Mary's Assumption, when she has completed her earthly existence, is beyond our expectation. Pope Pius XII records it in his papal Constitution of 1st November 1950. The Latin is this:

IMMACULATAM DEIPARAM SEMPER VIRGINEM MARIAM...FUISSE CORPORE ET ANIMA AD CAELESTEM GLORIAM ASSUMPTAM.

It was necessarily after her Son's Ascension, but how long we know not—and clearly the titles assume "doing" and "done unto". The custom of the Eastern Orthodox Church is less precise, and is known as KOIMESIS or Dormition or "Falling Asleep". For Mother and Son, death is swallowed up in victory.

Before we consider the outcome of the life story of Mother and Son, we should turn to what refers to Heaven.

Matthew 20: 20 tells us of Salome, perhaps sister of Mary and probably mother of the brothers James and John, sons of Zebedee. With her sons she asks Jesus an amazing question as he was entering Jerusalem accompanied by the Twelve, who were to learn of the Passion and Resurrection. She asks for this favour: *Promise me that these two sons of mine may be next to you in your Kingdom, one on your right and the other on your left.* Jesus answered her indirectly: *As for seats on my right and on my left, these are not mine to grant. Such honours are for those to whom they have been assigned by my Father.* In Gethsemane he said as much of himself: *Father, Let this cup pass. But let it be as you and not I would have it.*

So, if the high-point of the Church's prayer that is initially Christmas were to become the earlier seriousness of Christ's conception, then the joy of the Resurrection might logically be brought forward to Christ's Ascension—which surely indicates that reality that gathers our nature to the proximity of divine nature, through Christ's Ascension, then Mary's Assumption, and then, by degrees, our deep holiness.

© Alberic Stacpoole 2007