

# The Woman of Triumph

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ST Paul would at least have recognised the architecture – the portico of fluted Ionic pillars; he would have recognised a Greek temple, doubtless of some God, whether known or unknown. But I'm not talking about Athens or even that capital of debauchery, Corinth. I have in mind a portico that overlooks the flood-plain of the River Thames, which stares, a little defensively, over the Victorian terraces of a very un-Palestinian Jericho, down to the railway, to Oxford's canal, to Oxford's river. Nowadays, I fear, that building is a nightclub, but when I was an undergraduate it was still a church, dedicated to: St Paul. And little did I know that one day I would be parish priest of the ancient parish of west Oxford, St Thomas the Martyr; and that St Paul's, once a daughter church of ours, would end up being called 'Freud's'. In its glory days, it was from St Paul's that a crown was sent, which now graces the brow of our Lady of Walsingham, called the Oxford Crown. In its glory days, St Paul's contained its own statue of our Lady ... of Victories. (Perhaps someone knows where that statue ended up.)

What a telling title: our Lady of Victories. So very Western Catholic; so Counter-Reformation; so baroque; so redolent of the triumphalist Anglo-Catholicism of the 1920s and 1930s. You couldn't possibly imagine, could you, the Byzantine Christians giving the *Theotokos* a title like that or could you ... perhaps you could ... just suppose one of those Greeks might have written a hymn to Mary as the *hupermachos strategos* with an *aprosmakheton kratos* (the Protecting General with an irresistible power); well, you know the hymn I mean; if the Orthodox had *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, they would probably have a translation of it beginning *Stand up, stand up, for Mary*. Or, taking my fantasy even further, imagine some Orthodox Sabine Baring Gould writing *Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the homophorion of Mary, going on before*.

Because, of course, the title *our Lady of Victories*, just like the Akathist hymn, does have its military associations. That great Pontiff, St Pius V, established the Feast of our Lady of Victories to celebrate the triumph of Christian arms at the battle of Lepanto, 7 October, a victory won by the countless rosaries which clanked through the hands of the Rosary Confraternities of Western Europe. They begged God for the safety of Christendom against the invading Turk. Gregory XIII pusillanimously renamed the feast as 'of the Rosary', and popped it onto the first Sunday of October (a stone's throw from the Feast of the Protecting Veil of the Mother of God in some Byzantine calendars) where it stayed until the reforms of St Pius X.

If the title of our Lady of Victories apparently seemed a bit over-the-top even to a sixteenth century pope, it seems all the more inapposite to our age. Triumphalism is a dirty word to the twenty-first century Church. And not only a dirty word, it's a forbidden concept. Not for us that great canvas of Rubens in the Prado—the Triumph of the Church—with the heretics squirming in helpless agony under the inexorable chariot wheels of *Ecclesia Triumphatrix*. Not for our age Tiepoto's ceiling in the Carmelite Church in Venice, with the imperious Madonna looking down an almost haughty nose as she's carried in glory by clouds and angels, riding, as if it were on a supercelestial surfboard, standing on the Holy House of Nazareth as it flies to Loretto. No: our age looks to a humbler Virgin; Mary the model of obedience; Mary, the norm of the disciple; Mary, the Woman of Faith. Triumphalism is not of our age. We've been cut down to size. *Ecclesia Triumphatrix* has been replaced by *Ecclesia Famulatrix*—although I bet Orthodoxy, not so quick to lose her nerve, still celebrates the Triumph of Orthodoxy. But for Westerners, the Church is the Servant Church, the only society, we have been informed, which exists to serve those who are *not* members.

But readers of Scripture might have their occasional nagging doubts about this proscribing of all Triumphalism. The *Magnificat*, for example, the song of the *tapeinos*, the lowly one, suggests that the Lord has *hupsosen*, highly exalted, her. And the woman of the Apocalypse, crowned with stars and adorned with the Sun, whether she be the Messiah's Mother or his nurturing community or both, seems to my eye to have had more than a dollop of Triumphalism ladled over her. Our Lady, after all, *is*, as we Latins have been taught to sing, victorious over heresies: "Thou alone hast put down all heresies in the whole world". The truth of *Theotokos* secures the incarnation of a real God against the heresy of Islam; it guarantees that the Rabbi from Nazareth possesses an unpronounceable Hebrew Name written but not spoken in four silent letters. Since God has entered his world in the flesh, that Kosmos, created by him and redeemed, is itself good; let Manichee therefore stop his mouth.

But Christian materialism—our emphasis on the reality of an incarnate God and the goodness of his created universe—is not the materialism of secular society. St Joseph was the foster-father of God, not his begetter; the chaste Guardian, not the bedfellow, of the Mother of God. This unambiguously masculine figure, whose calling was continent love, is God's witness against the sexual trophyism and appetite of the culture we live in. Dogmatically, St Joseph's witness is encapsulated in another title of our Lady, *Aeiparthenos*, Ever-Virgin; a title which features so much more largely in the authentic tradition of both East and West than it does in modern Anglican and Roman Eucharistic Prayers. I think we have lost just a bit of our nerve when it comes to talking about

virginity and purity. There is a demon I blame here: the Zeitgeist. He—or is it she—has engaged us in a sort of Socratic dialogue:

**Now: you Christians really do believe in the goodness of Marriage?**

er...yes...er...

**You believe in the sanctity of married sexuality?**

we...um...do ... er ...yes ...

**But all this talk about Virginity...it gives the impression that you regard Marriage as some sort of second-best; and what is second-best is not really terribly good at all. Is it? um...er...well ...**

And we Christians have, to a degree, fallen for this peculiar piece of logic. At least subconsciously. How often, Fathers, do you preach on Chastity? How often, brothers and sisters, do you hear your clergy teaching about Purity? How often, ecclesiastical synod-and-committee-people, have you processed Reports and Statements and paperwork on Virginity? The Zeitgeist, the Spirit of the Age, has used *our own* arguments to undermine the whole concept of Continence; and what have we ended up with? A society which respects, enhances, and protects Marriage as never before? You know that we haven't. We find ourselves with a culture in which fornication and adultery have become norms, and wedlock is treated as endlessly terminable and repeatable, and Marriage is redefined in terms of fluid Gender. (There is such skilled and calculated cynicism here that it almost makes you believe in a personal Devil.) Only now do we see, forty-two years after *Humanae Vitae*, that it is solely in the context of a society which exalts Continence and Virginity that Marriage itself has a chance of surviving.

In 1854, Pope Pius IX issued a dogmatic decree, over the small print of which Christians do make differing judgements. What is indisputable about it is that it did put the adjective *Immaculata* right at the centre of Western devotional culture. By doing so, it brought the Occident into line with the Orient; taught us timorous Westerners the importance of that great word-bag of alpha-privatives with which Byzantine hymnody adorns the Mother of God: *amomos, akhrantos, apsilos, apthartos*. I put it to you that Mary's perpetual Virginity, an immaculate purity of heart and mind, is not so much a title, a mere honorific, as it is a dogma. And not so much even a dogma as God's conquering and triumphant Truth, which alone can win the victory over the disorders of our culture.

The Immaculate and Ever-Virgin Lady of Victories, born aloft by the sculptors on billowing draperies, her bulgy baroque crown precariously perched upon her head, is the Woman of Triumph whom God is giving to this world. She treads down all the serpents of heresy; she crushes all the serpents of vice and corruption with her virgin and immaculate heel.