

MORE WOMAN THAN ANY OTHER WOMAN

The Virgin Mary was the most perfect creature who ever came from the hands of God; yet her stay in the world was barely noticed by her contemporaries!

Despite the fact that she was so elevated by grace as to approach the borders of the divine, she remained none-the-less a woman. It was her divinely planned role to be true woman and true mother, and it would mar our relations with her for us to lose sight of that. All the wonders accomplished in her did not diminish her womanhood, but indeed intensified it; so that she was more a woman than any other woman. This sounds startling, but it is a truth proceeding from the circumstances that, unlike any other, she did not suffer from the warping of original sin. She began as a perfect woman. Then she became subject to the law of graces; her practice of virtue brought increase. She grew in holiness. With apparent contradiction in terms, her perfection became each new moment more perfect. When her earthly career finished, she was so full of grace that she had reached the limit of the human condition. She had responded faithfully to God's giving. He had His way fully with her.

MARY, PATTERN OF ALL WOMANHOOD

She was the original pattern in God's mind for all woman-kind. No other has achieved it. All other women fall short in some respects and in varying degrees. Some are too feminine. Others are insufficiently feminine. Softness need not mean gentleness, nor hardness strength. Interest may be only curiosity. Sentiment may not mean love. Prudery is not modesty. Prudence may be only worldly caution. Courage may be really recklessness. Calm may mask indifference. Honesty be no more than shrewdness. Refinement may cover a multitude of sins. And so on through the gamut of human qualities.

But there is in all these things an ideal point where balance lies. To fall short of it means defect. To go beyond it means defect. So if we were to think of the human race as a great mass inside a circle, all of its members would be at various distances and directions from that perfect point, the exact centre. Mary is that centre, and there is no other with her or indeed anywhere near her.

Let us have an enquiring, reverent look at this extra-ordinary creature: So great that it has been said that the angels rejoice more in her birth than in their own creation. So modest and normal that she could live under the intimate gaze of 3,000 Nazareans without attracting undue notice.

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What did she look like? We must not be misled by those pious pictures of her which show good-looking faces without character. Neither was she the spectacular type which would draw the eyes of everyone in a street. That would not be fitting. Obviously her beauty would be of a different sort, a quieter, nobler, unobtrusive kind. Truly there would be a perfection of feature. But her face would possess a spiritual quality which would be its supreme attraction, but which would at the same time tend to veil the physical beauty. Plainly no artist could be expected to depict such a combined projection of nature and grace.

Therefore in Our Lady we have to consider the presence and the inter-action of those two types of beauty - or perhaps more than two? We will have an exquisite regularity of form - and then the Mother of God looking out through that lovely frame. The total effect of this would not, I imagine, be one of challenging beauty. Rather would it be submerged in that superior but elusive manifestation. To use an inadequate image, if ordinary light were to shine strongly from a face, it would make it difficult to distinguish the features.

It would not be anything in the nature of common light which would radiate from Our Lady's face, but a quality or characteristic which would go beyond description and beyond imagining. Such words as "kindliness" or the Litany word "amiability" are ineffective, but contain the idea. Her aspect would be sweet, gentle, loving, maternal, unselfish, interested in you in limitless way. So that if you met her and spoke to her, your whole being would expand toward her. She would lay hands on your heart.

A PICTURE OF MARY

Probably she would not even be smiling. The expression would go deeper than that. I do not mean that she would never smile. Of course she would. But the abiding note would be that interest, love, motherhood, and - hidden in all those things - strength. For she was a tremendous character, the strongest after her Son that ever lived. And in this connection it is to be remembered that it was from her that He got His human character and disposition. God did not do violence to that part of human generation.

Strength of character and mind was her special feature. She was an unparalleled person. The Immaculate Conception put her mind and body into a superior category to all others. She was intellectual, not in the ordinary sense of that word which concentrates rather on what the mind knows than on its essential quality. Degree of knowledge is a different thing from purity and perfection of intellect. So let it suffice to say that her mind was supremely great. She did not possess knowledge useless to her. But she had every quality in its highest form and in strict proportion, unlike ourselves in whom everything is unbalanced. She was that perfect centre which we always manage to miss.

She was educated in the precincts of the Temple. She was there from three years of age. This meant that she received an education at the very height of that imparted to women of her time. It would be the equivalent of our best University training, but more suited to a woman's future. She would have a knowledge of the Scriptures, for this would be strictly necessary to her mission. Her acute memory and intelligence would lay open to her all the richness and hidden meanings. She probed the prophecies and sensed more of the symbolism than any of the scribes or scholars. One thing they did not reveal to her: that she herself was the promised Virgin, the Woman of Genesis.

ARTS AND CRAFTS

Unquestionably she would have been versed in some of the arts and handicrafts. She probably spoke several languages, because Jews were a far-flung people. She would be capable in weaving, knitting, needlework, embroidery, and probably in drawing and painting. Her supreme genius would have to assert itself in all those departments, but it would not be in our modern technical method which to ideal standards probably represent exaggeration, and to Heaven perhaps a distortion. She would be expert in those arts in a healthy, rational way which would not be conspicuous. The purest water, you will realise, and the clearest glass, approach invisibility, and the same would apply to her qualities.

Most likely she was musical; that she sang much and merrily as a girl, and then to her Babe. Afterwards - we know not. The holy home was definitely not the seat of gloom. But likewise it was too much a place of destiny for light-hearted singing.

What way did she talk? It must have been according to the best rules of speech. For it was she who taught Our Lord to speak, and that had to be well. When men exclaimed of him "that never did man speak as He did," they were no doubt referring to the subject matter. But we may be sure that it was expressed in a worthy way, both as to accent and manner. Undoubtedly Mary came back to her native place speaking with the choicest Jerusalem accent, and exhibiting cultivated manners. Normally this would draw down on the returned one the imputation of airs, pretence, affectation. But not on her. Her transparent sincerity would ward off any such criticisms.

She would have been a good pen-woman, notable in a time of general illiteracy. She must have written many letters. It would be lovely to see one; what would the hand-writing experts make of it? Botticelli's picture and others show her often as with pen and ink bottle. One Sicilian town claims to have an actual letter of hers written to thank them for some service to the infant Church.

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THE HUMAN MARY

How would she be dressed? After her marriage to St. Joseph she was not so well off. Some say they were very poor, but this is not certain, though they may have been in difficulties during the Egyptian exile. It is sure that at her marriage she was elegantly clad, as every Jewish maiden had to be. It is evident that at the Cana wedding feast her position was one of respect and authority. At all times and in all circumstances she would be neatly, tastefully dressed; even though her clothing might be mended and patched. Cloth had to last long in those days where it was all labouriously made by hand.

She did not go barefoot, though many of the apparitions show her thus. Presumably she used the national footwear, sandals. A shoe of hers is preserved at Soissons in France which is reputed to have worked many miracles. Probably people in those days, as ever since, had two outfits, one of common wear and one for celebrations.

It is necessary when considering Mary to preserve that balance already insisted on. The contemplating of her as co-operator with the Holy Trinity, as Mediatrix of all Graces, and as Mother of every man - must not lead us to dehumanise her; that would be disastrous. So side by side with that vital, higher aspect, we must dwell on her as the real woman, with the woman's mind and qualities and with all the woman's problems. So far from being removed from us by her closeness in soul and blood to God, she is thereby brought the nearer to us. For she is our Mother in the most intimate solicitous, more understanding, more necessary.

It is imperative to know her.