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THE ONE BRIDE

The Church and Consecrated Virginity

Sister MARY JANE KLIMISCH, O.S.B.

Preface by Ignatius Hunt, O.S.B.

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To Mary, Queen of the *anwina*

This, Thy Church, is the one beloved Bride which Christ has purchased with His Blood and which He vivifies with His Spirit . . .

(Preface for Dedication of a Church.)

We should imitate the breadth of Christ's love, which is so vast that though He has only the one Bride, the Church, yet in her He loves every single human being.—Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*.

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PREFACE

WHEN SISTER MARY JANE sent me the manuscript for this book some months ago, humbly asking for an appraisal of it, I was immediately impressed by her clarity and depth of thought, by her contagious Christian joy, by the wide reading-background evidenced in her references and citations (always a key to good "book-making"), and by the timeliness of the theme.

In an age when almost every Christian value, even those regarded as most sacred and inviolate, is being subjected to fresh scrutiny, and very frequently with an attendant increased accuracy of expression, it is gratifying to find a work that throws into new perspective not one but two doctrines, both of them thoroughly basic to Christianity, and at the same time profoundly interwoven one with the other, viz. the doctrines of the Church and of the meaning of consecrated virginity within the Church.

Many have recently taken up the definition of the Church as "the People of God"—a highly valuable, irenically ecumenical, and also easily comprehensible notion. But in so doing there is the hazard of losing sight of other more difficult, yet no less essential and classical, manners of understanding the Church. Paul's "Body of Christ" doctrine has, for the moment, somewhat re-

ceded into the background; but so has the profoundly biblical notion of the Church as Christ's bride. In what is one of the most significant texts of the New Testament, Paul declares that he has betrothed the Corinthian church to one Man, viz. to Christ, to present her to Him as a chaste virgin (2 Cor 11:2). The local church in this instance without doubt is representative of the entire Church, and this bridal aspect of the Church is one that lies deeply embedded within her (cf. Eph 5:25-27; Apoc 21:2-9; 22:16). It goes beyond the marriage alliance described by such Old Testament writers as Hosea (2:19-20), Jeremiah (2:2), and Isaiah (54:5ff.), for the bridal notion of the Church, from the earliest times, was concretely and magnificently expressed through consecrated virginity.

This aspect of the Church has been nurtured and kept alive within Catholicism, difficult though it may have been, nor can it ever be relinquished, though its accidental adaptations have been and always will be manifold. For consecrated virginity, lived with a sense of purpose and with a realization of what it means, is a mighty *witness* in any society and in any age.

The authoress of this book knows what consecrated virginity means; she understands what religious life means; she has her hand on the inner pulse of the Church—and this I state even though I have never made her personal acquaintance.

This book will be read and pondered with great profit, and very often with real delight. Relevant, timely, it is a credit to the virginal life.

IGNATIUS HUNT, O.S.B.

Conception Abbey

Conception, Missouri

Feast of All Saints, November 1, 1964

INTRODUCTION

THE CHURCH is a source of perpetual freshness because the Spirit of the risen Christ, the renewing Spirit, dwells in her deepest center. To be a child of this Church as she renews her riches each day more and more is, indeed, a happy privilege.

In the present-day current of fresh theological air, updating, and noble strides toward unity, Pope Paul VI has outlined as one of the aims of the Second Vatican Council a deeper penetration into the Church's identity, especially in the various images in which the Scriptures present her, images reviewed in Pius XII's *Mystici Corporis*. The present Holy Father has declared the Church's fuller and firmer self-awareness to be the program, so to speak, of his pontificate. In his encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, he has reiterated this aim in detail and indicated the immense benefits which a deepened awareness will bring to the Church.

The present study, *The One Bride*, will attempt to explore the mystery of Christian virginity in the dimension of the Church's bridal alliance with Christ. Even though the study does not aim directly at searching into the Church's identity, it will be indirectly concerned with such an endeavor. If the heart of Christian virginity is found only *in medio Ecclesiae*, it follows that our first

task is to seek out the larger light of the Church's nature and in this light to see the lesser.

St. Ambrose has said that it is in souls that the Church is beautiful.¹ The Church, beloved and loving Bride, is realized in persons. She is not a mere collection of people. In a mysterious way, she is individualized in her members and exists wholly in every believer even though in varying degrees of perfection.² It is therefore profitable for the various members of the Church to inquire into their own vocation within the Church in order to discover its relationship with that of the Church. The present work will consider that "illustrious portion of the Church"³ which is called to be a living witness to Christ's nuptial union with His ecclesial Bride.

A stream of recent writing has put the spotlight on the nun in the world, the convent in the world, and almost every aspect of the religious life of today. Such writing has been chiefly concerned with the *function* of the religious life in relation to the contemporary world. The study of the *nature* of Christian virginity especially in its ecclesial dimension, however, is an almost untouched field. Or, more accurately, the findings of such studies have not as yet been woven together. In 1925, Athanasius Winter-sig placed the theme in a large frame of reference with his book, *Liturgie und Frauenseele*, a treatise on womanhood and the Church. Another more recent (1957) attempt to explore the virginal-ecclesial theme is a book written by Johannes Bieker, *Die Kirche und Die Ordensfrau*. In a paper given in 1963 at a convention of major religious superiors of women in the Philippines, Sister Ligouri del Rosario, a Benedictine from Manila, envisioned rich benefits to religious women and thus to the Church if the virginal-ecclesial mystery were received and comprehended in the early years of a Sister's formation.⁴ In an age when the Church is coming to life more fully in the hearts of men, those who are at her very center can no longer afford to be deprived of a clear focus on the inner meaning common to both the Church-Bride and her virgin daughters. The present study does

not pretend to give this focus in a wholly adequate way. It has been done in the hope of declaring a need and suggesting a beginning toward answering it.

At the outset of our task, we run head-on into trouble. Two key terms for this study, *virginity* and *bride of Christ*, at present share the plight of the man going to Jericho; they, too, have been robbed, beaten, and left half dead. Many thoughtful writers claim that the word *virginity* has come to imply an air of superiority or self-sufficiency, or that it even has the connotation of some kind of unfavorable judgment against married life.⁵ Originally stemming from *viridis* and indicating the freshness of an unfaded flower, the word deserves to be restored to its true meaning after the deformation it has suffered from the pharisaism and manichaeism of one age or another. For, even in the present day and age, *genuine* Christian virginity continues to exist and it is still fragrant, fresh, and appealing. Why must the word take on a distorted meaning rather than the genuine one? Similarly, the term *bride of Christ* has come to be regarded, in some cases, as a mere romantic image or poetic allusion. Or, if the virgin-bride mystery which the term genuinely signifies is still accepted notionally, it is often considered in the existential realm as a privilege peculiar to artistic temperaments and not one to be aspired to by the rest of mankind. The term is even considered, at times, to be a weak one, at least by anyone who forgets the Apocalyptic vision of the glorious lover, Christ, passing judgment on his Betrothed in the midst of history. (Cf. Apoc 1:13-17). It is hoped that this study will bring the two terms to an inn and help them to regain their original strength and wholeness.

As a guide for this work on virginity in its ecclesial dimension, we look to Mary. As both a type of the Church⁶ and a concrete person, Mary shows us more clearly what the Church is than do purely abstract concepts. The Mary-event reveals to us both what the Church is and how she functions. The entire *Ecclesia*, indeed, shines forth in Mary.⁷

We also look to Mary for a threefold method of exploring the

mystery of virginity. Her *Magnificat* reveals how steeped she was in Sacred Scripture and how she relied on God's word for nourishment and illumination. We are told, too, that Mary pondered certain events and sayings in her heart, an indication that she integrated them with the experience of God in her own life. Lastly, we notice in her spirited journey to Elizabeth a desire to share her good news with another in a deeply personal way. She was, in a sense, a living kerygma.

In our study, then, we shall adopt Mary's method. We shall depend on Sacred Scripture for lights on the virginal mystery, bring these lights to focus on the daily mystery of virginity as it is lived by so many, and finally, express our thoughts in an informal and designedly personal style, in a setting of exchange rather than in the impersonal style prescribed for scholarly essays.

Whereas Mary is our lodestar, we also find a pattern of work and life in Ruth, the young Moabite woman who was sent to gather after the reapers on a farmstead in Bethlehem. It is for us, like Ruth, to follow in the path of hardy, frontline harvesters (in our case, theological and biblical scholars), picking up the more than abundant sheaves which they, in their courtesy, have proportioned to the strength of reapers less gifted than they but not less hungry.

Ruth's story matches ours in still another way. As Naomi, her intuitive mother-in-law, prompted Ruth to go to the threshing floor to seek from Booz the answer not only to her need for food but her need for fulfillment and increase, so, at the end of these verbal gleanings on virginity, we shall find Mother Church directing us to the Eucharistic threshing floor to seek our ultimate fulfillment and fruitfulness in the person of Christ. The real synthesis of our study is not in a book but in a Banquet, just as the height of Ruth's life lay not in gathering sustenance from the harvest field but rather in knowing Booz, the lord of the harvest.

On, then, to pondering. The courage to attempt a study of so lofty a subject comes only from the certainty that we shall fail. Since the reality of Christian virginity is woven together with the

reality of Christ's marriage with His Church, it leads to limitless lands of exploration. One door opens up to another. But, in failing we shall triumph. We shall show, by our failure, that the mystery is endlessly great and cannot be circumscribed. As St. John stated in a kind of glad exhaustion at the close of his Gospel (21:25), what Christ does is more than can be contained in many books. In the abundant Christian life, too, we are forever breathlessly looking for containers in the manner of the widow to whom Eliseus (4 Kgs 4:1-7) brought an abundance of oil with which to pay her creditor. In parable, this is God's way of working among men. As the ecclesial and virginal mystery becomes too large for us, therefore, we shall have to leave off trying to express it and, instead, immerse ourselves in it, content to grow in a spirit of wonder and thanksgiving.

An enumeration of thanks, customary in a preface, would match, if not exceed, the litany of saints in length. Help and encouragement has indeed come from the living communion of saints: from friends, fellow-Sisters, and superiors in my own religious community; from typists and librarians; from countless Christian thinkers in the larger community of the Church and the world; and, finally, from a host of heavenly friends whose effective, and affective, companionship with all of us in our earthly endeavors is beyond question. I am especially grateful to four tiny friends—Margaret, Deborah, Jennifer, and Mary—who, on behalf of this study, lifted their hearts to God each evening in young and sacred dialog with Him. A classroom of seventh- and eighth-grade boys and girls also took a prayerful part in this work.

Father Odilo Burkhardt of Blue Cloud Abbey, Marvin, South Dakota, Father Bruno Lyons of Conception Abbey, Conception, Missouri, and Father F. Moriones of Kansas City, Missouri, gave me valuable information about patristic sources. Father Odo Gogel of Blue Cloud translated sections of von Balthasar's *Sponsa Verbi* from the German. Manuscript readers were Fathers Gerald Ecker and Ignatius Hunt of Conception Abbey, Conception,

Missouri, and Father Paschal Botz of St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota.

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In addition to the Confraternity permission, the author wishes to note with gratitude two others: one from the Oxford University Press to quote from an anthology of poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and another from Johannes Verlag, Basel, to quote, in translation, sections of *Sponsa Verbi* by Hans Urs von Balthasar.

NOTES

1. *Liber de Mysteriis*, PL 16, col. 418.
2. F. X. Durrwell, C.S.S.R., *In the Redeeming Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 271.
3. Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum*, PL 4, col. 443.
4. Cf. Sister M. Ligouri, O.S.B., "The Church and the Sister's Vocation," *Sponsa Regis*, 35:7, March 1964, pp. 185 f.
5. Cf. comments by Max Thurian in *Marriage and Celibacy* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1959), p. 58; p. 116.
6. St. Ambrose, *Expos. in Evgl. Luc.*, PL 15, col. 1555. Throughout our study we shall adhere to the patristic notion of *type*, a reality which in some way is what it symbolizes. *Type*, in the patristic mind, is a first unfolding, a first realization in time, of the divine idea which finds its definitive realization in a second reality. *Type* is also considered, in both biblical and patristic thought, as embodying the total life of a people. *Type* and *antitype*, therefore, become two moments in the fulfillment of one and the same mystery. For an elaboration of the patristic notion of *type*, see Yves Congar's "Marie et l'Eglise dans la pensée patristique," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 38, 1954, pp. 3-38. An abstract of this article appears in *Theology Digest*, 7, pp. 27-28.
7. Otto Semmelroth, *Mary, Archetype of the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 24.

THE

ONE

BRIDE

*... as dying and behold,
we live. . . .*

(2 Cor 6:9.)

1 PARADOX OF VIRGINITY

IN A SERMON given on the occasion of a final vow ceremony of religious women, Msgr. Ronald Knox wondered how a schoolgirl observer who lacked both a knowledge of the Christian religion and of the English language would describe the ceremony in her next letter home. Her description, Msgr. Knox surmised, would either say "One of the nuns was buried today" or "One of the nuns was married today." He concluded that the schoolgirl would have some ground for making either of these mistakes. The point of his story is that the ceremonies of religious profession are, and are meant to be, a cross between a funeral service and a wedding ceremony.¹

The present study pivots on the fact of this cross-relationship and asks over and over again, but at new levels: what is the meaning of the double theme of death and marriage in the life of Christian virgins vowed to God? The question might be answered simply by saying that the virgin, through an intensified commitment within the dying-rising pattern of baptism, allows the Church's own nuptial union to flower within her in the fullest degree and most direct manner possible to a human person.

Whereas the answer is true, it does not begin to disclose the immense riches hidden in the virginal reality.

Heart of Mystery

The real mystery of Christian virginity is to be found in the one marriage union of Christ with His Church. This is the "high mystery" (Eph 5:32, Knox tr.)² which sacramental marriage expresses in sign and which Christian virginity embodies and expresses in reality. Pope Pius XII makes the latter point clear in his encyclical letter *On Christian Virginity*: "To be living images of that perfect integrity which forms the bond of union between the Church and her divine Bridegroom is assuredly the supreme glory of the virgins."³

Although all Christians are inserted into the Church's bridal life through the sacrament of baptism, some of them are further called to a more intense flowering of the initial baptismal union. As a call to this fuller and more direct commitment to Christ, the life of consecrated virginity offers unmatched opportunities for a personal realization of the Church's corporate and one bridehood.

Sources of Light

Since we have stated our intention of discovering the deepest and fullest meaning of virginal bridehood and have, enjoying New Testament revelation, already found its locale in the larger concept of the Church's bridal union with Christ, we ask the Church for her own sources of illumination and for her modes of access to the truth. She directs us first to the Old Testament as a starting point, since whatever is now held by the Church as deed or happening is the fruit of God's word.

We approach the Old Testament, however, not in the manner of one seeking archival data in support of a thesis, and surely not as one going to view a museum piece. The Church herself shows us her own attitude by praying: "O Almighty and eternal God

. . . Who by the preaching of Thy prophets has declared *the mysteries of the present time*. . . ."⁴ Indeed, the whole of the Old Testament has been committed to writing so that God might continue to unfold His revelation in the present time, so that He might let us hear His voice *today*.⁵ Thus, we expect from the Old Testament an applicability which has perennial pertinence, what the French call *actualité*.⁶ The Old Testament is often described as a preparation for the New, as the dawn before the brightness. Hearing this, one might conclude that the Old Testament is over and done, and that, consequently, further penetration into its pages is pointless. Such is far from the case. The whole reality of the New Testament, along with the inspired writings and the traditions in which it is immersed, is related to the whole reality of the Old, along with its writings and traditions, and recognizable as making a single whole.⁷ This fact is verified in our own study when we discover, for example, that Yahweh's relationship with Israel in the Old Testament contained in itself a higher reality, at the same time developing in the course of providence into that reality. Its own fulfillment in the New Testament surpassed the initial reality, yet was immanent in it.⁸

If it seems that we are here laboring the point of the Old Testament's relevance, we do so for two reasons: (1) to account for the many journeys we shall take there throughout the course of this study, and (2) to establish our approach to virginity as theological rather than chronological. Back and forth, then, we shall go from Old Testament to New, and back again to the Old, in order to view the complete reality of Christian virginity.

Our second source, as we have implied, is the New Testament, which is itself three-dimensional. The Gospels reflect the actual life of Christ, the inspired text of Scripture, and the Church's teaching at the time the written record was made.⁹ From this it may be seen that Scripture and tradition bear an organic relationship of mutual inclusion.¹⁰ Our use of additional traditional, though non-scriptural, evidence will include various forms of the Church's teaching and preaching: papal writings, selections from

the fathers of the Church, and the Church's liturgy and ceremonies. Lastly, we shall consult recent theological thought which has clarified the Church's nature as expressed in the bridal covenant and has shown the relationship of Christian virginity to this alliance.

Old Testament and Virginal Life

Indicating, as we are, that we intend to view virginity through the larger perspective of the Church's bridal union with Christ, are we thus implying that the Old Testament has nothing to say directly of virginity as a way of life? Why have we chosen to study virginity in an apparently circuitous route, *via* the Church, rather than directly as an individual vocation?

In his recent book, *The Biblical Doctrine of Virginity*, Lucien Legrand points out that the Old Testament, as a whole, does not acknowledge any religious value in virginity. According to the old Semitic mentality, a woman was esteemed only as a mother, so that sometimes, by metonymy, she was called simply *rahama*, a womb. Virginity, like sterility, was considered to be a base condition, a deficiency, even a reproach. An instance of this attitude may be found in the account of Jephthe's daughter, who went to the mountain "to mourn" her virginity (cf. Jdg 11:37) before her father fulfilled his macabre promise. As for the male sex, so unusual to the Semitic mind was the idea of a virginal life that the Hebrew of the Old Testament has no word for *bachelor*. To the Hebrews, it was fecund matrimony which was honorable and a sign of God's blessing. (Cf. Ps 127:3-6.)¹¹

To some readers, Legrand's conclusion is not wholly satisfactory. It is difficult to see how the Hebrews *could* "acknowledge religious value" in virginity when such a value lay, for them, only in an age to come, in the Messianic era of grace. The fact is not so much that virginity was not esteemed by them but rather that, as a way of life, it was unheard of, at least for motives common within Christianity.¹² One prefers the more specific con-

clusion drawn by F. X. Durrwell, who says that in the Old Testament few examples of virginal life can be found because the Bridegroom had not yet come.¹³ The maternal Church of Israel was Christian only according to the flesh since in its flesh had been sown the promise of a Messiah. The concern of the Old Testament was therefore for fleshly alliances and offspring since its concepts were only in the process of being refined to include spiritual alliances and spiritual fecundity. Moreover, even in the New Testament physical integrity of itself is valueless without the fruitfulness of charity, as the parable of the wise and foolish virgins clearly shows.

If we desire a sampling of patristic thought regarding the absence of virginity as an individual ideal in Old Testament times, we find interesting comments expressed by St. Jerome. In his view, the time prior to Christ's coming was the time for filling up the earth in a physical sense. That, of course, required matrimony. According to Jerome, the New Testament is the time for virgin harvest. He goes on to emphasize the fact that, having now passed the preliminary stage, it is time that heaven be filled up through the practice of virginity.¹⁴ "Marriage fills the earth," he says; "virginity fills paradise."¹⁵ One wonders what wrathful denunciations Jerome would cast upon the present-day world were he still on this earth observing the current phenomenon of "over-population" on the one hand and shortage of religious vocations on the other.

Theological Evidence

At this point, then, we might safely conclude that if we are looking in the Old Testament for the practice of virginity as an ideal way of life, we shall find little evidence of it except by way of anticipation of the Christian era.¹⁶ But if we search for theological rather than chronological evidence, if, in other words, we seek the heart or core of the virginal mystery as practiced in New Testament times, we shall see a limitless vista opening out to us

even in the pages of the Old Testament. For as we have already indicated, the mystery of virginity is one with the Church's bridal union with Christ. And this bridal alliance already began on Mount Sinai when Yahweh espoused Israel (the Church-before-the-Church).¹⁷ This union has been sketched with eloquent clarity in the Old Testament, especially in the prophetic writings. The Old Testament pulsates with the heart of virginity's meaning: fruitful bridal alliance of man with God. And, beyond the verbal description which the sacred writers have given us, the relationship itself was even partially realized by the Israel of old.

To the virgin Israel, then, let us go for the roots of the Christian virginal mystery. Like miners whose skip descends into a shaft leading to the earth's dark center, we too shall go down to the dark depths of Old Testament history faithfully hoping to tap a vein of precious metal which lies in quiet hiding there.

NOTES

1. Ronald Knox, *Occasional Sermons of Ronald A. Knox*, ed. Philip Caraman, S.J. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), p. 221.
2. *The Holy Bible*, trans. Ronald Knox. Copyright 1944, 1948 and 1950, Sheed and Ward, Inc., New York.
3. Pius XII, *On Christian Virginity* (Encyclical), *The Pope Speaks*, Vol. I (second quarter, 1954), p. 110.
4. *Roman Missal*, 12th Prophecy of Holy Saturday (omitted in the new Easter Vigil liturgy).
5. Cf. David M. Stanley, S.J., "The Fonts of Preaching," *Worship*, 37:3, February 1963, p. 169.
6. G. M. Behler, O.P., *Les Confessions de Jérémie* (Bible et Vie Chrétienne; Tournai: Editions Casterman, 1959).
7. Louis Bouyer, "Jewish and Christian Liturgies," *Cross Currents*, 13:3, Summer 1963, p. 336.
8. Vincent Rochford, "The Plan of God" in *Pattern of Scripture* by Cecily Hastings, Vincent Rochford and Alexander Jones (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), pp. 46-47.
9. Barnabas M. Ahern, C.P., *New Horizons* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1963), p. 74; p. 81.
10. Cf. George H. Tavard, "Tradition and Scripture," *Worship*, 35:6, May 1961, pp. 375-381.

11. Lucien Legrand, M.E.P., *The Biblical Doctrine of Virginity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 19-21.
12. Ignatius Hunt, O.S.B., *Understanding the Bible* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), p. 54.
13. F. X. Durrwell, C.S.S.R., *In the Redeeming Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 175.
14. Demetrius Dumm, O.S.B., *The Theological Basis of Virginity According to Saint Jerome* (Latrobe, Pa.: St. Vincent Archabbey, 1961), p. 21.
15. Saint Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, PL 23, col. 211.
16. Lucien Legrand (*op. cit.*) cites the virgin-prophet Jeremiah whose "forlorn celibacy" was an enacted prophecy of the final doom (p. 26). The individual practice of continence as a part of cultic "sanctification" in the Old Testament comes nearest to foreshadowing the transcendent value of virginity indicated by St. Paul in the New Testament. St. Paul says that the aim of the virgin is "to be holy in body and spirit." (1 Cor 7:34.) The aim of cultic continence in the Old Testament was not to remove a stain but to manifest the intensity of man's dedication to God's affairs and the assumption of his life into a higher sphere. Legrand finds in Psalm 73 the best explanation of the higher value of cultic continence: when the heart and flesh are consumed by the terrifying joy of facing the dazzling presence of the divine Shekinah, there is no thought even for the earthly joys and duties of marriage. (Cf. Legrand, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-78.)
17. Cf. Rochford, *op. cit.*, p. 47. St. Augustine, in fact, divides the gradual coming into being of the Church into three great phases: the "Church" of the devout heathen; the pre-Christian phase of the Christian Church in the form of the chosen race of Israel; and finally the emergence of the mature Church. The second phase, being more overtly bridal because of the covenant, is the point of departure in our present study.

. . . so tenderly he loves us,
the Lord of hosts.

(4 Kgs 19:31)

2 THE VIRGIN ISRAEL

GOD TUTORs mankind with infinite patience. As the gates of paradise closed on the first admirable exchange between creature and creator, as God's walk with Adam in the cool of the evening came to a man-erected dead end, God launched a program of redemption for the world He so loved. Little by little, step by step, He began to teach slow-learning and hard-hearted man that God is love, always and ever, and that God lives to love.

To respond to this love in a covenanted, bridal way and thus transmit it to mankind, God chose one special nation, Israel. The history of the Chosen People is one long record of God's effort to attune man to the divine thought, to the everlasting message of love. For the kind of love which, after generations, man would come to know as Christian would be so much a novelty, so revolutionary, that ages of reflection would be needed to prepare him for a reality so bold and so sublime.¹

In order to help us appreciate the progressive character of this message to Israel, and from Israel to the Church, "God's true Israel" (Gal 6:16-17, Knox tr.), it is advantageous for us to proceed stepwise through two preliminary ideas as they appear in the

Old Testament: (1) the barren woman made fruitful through divine intervention; and (2) ideal human marital love.

The Barren Made Fruitful

As early as the sixteenth chapter of Genesis we find the beginning of an episode concerning the barren Sarai, wife of Abraham, a story whose conclusion St. Paul invests with a triumphant ring in his letter to the Galatians and whose sublimity Christians of today greet annually with a certain amount of incomprehension and diffidence as it is read out to them on Laetare Sunday. The beginning of the Genesis account reads thus: "Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maid named Agar. Sarai said to Abram, 'The Lord has kept me from bearing; go in to my maid; perhaps I shall get children through her.'" (Gen 16:1-3.) Lest we complicate the story by attributing to Sarai some baseness of action, let us hasten to explain her conduct. Legal contracts unearthed in recent times at Nuzu² make it evident that a childless wife was actually obliged to do what Sarai did unless she preferred to have her husband choose another wife for himself. What Sarai did was nothing extraordinary, nor was it considered in any sense immoral. Rather, it was a custom sanctioned by all the force of the law.³ Indeed, substitute-motherhood forcefully demonstrates the great desire of Semitic women for children, even by proxy.⁴

As we meet Sarai again later in Genesis, we find her figuring in a startling conversation which took place between God and Abraham. "God said to Abraham, 'Sarai your wife you shall not call Sarai but Sara. I will bless her, and will also give you a son by her; yes, I will bless her, and she shall be the mother of nations, kings of peoples shall descend from her.' And as Abraham fell prostrate, he laughed and said to himself, 'Shall a son be born to one who is a hundred years old? Shall Sara who is ninety bear a child?'" (Gen 17:15-17.) We note here that now added to Sara's earlier infertility is the fact that she has passed the child-

bearing age. That she was actually ninety in our way of calculating is unlikely, however, since the chronology of Genesis is not historical.⁵ The essentials of the story come through clearly, nonetheless: Sarai's earlier barrenness, now made triply secure by her own post-menopausal infertility and Abraham's advanced age, suddenly turns into fruitfulness through divine intervention. The child, Isaac, is indeed a child of promise, and through his descendants Sara will enjoy an ever-widening motherhood, vaster by far than that experienced by Agar, who gave birth according to natural physical laws.

Another reference to barrenness occurs later in Genesis where we read that Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, Rebecca, because she was barren. And "the Lord answered Isaac and his wife Rebecca conceived." (25:21.) Here again we observe a case of barrenness, temporary or permanent, in which divine intervention effected fertility.

In the engaging account of the beloved Rachel which occurs still later in Genesis, we begin to get some glimpse of what might be called "the fierce Semitic desire for children."⁶ Even though Rachel was beautiful, gifted, and the light of Jacob's life, a thorn of the thorniest kind pierced her life and threatened, at times, to tear the whole Jacobine household into shreds. Scripture says simply: "When the Lord saw that Lia was disliked, he made her fruitful, while Rachel remained barren." (Gen 29:31.) This fact made Rachel furious. Her jealous anger, frustration, and humiliation are all wrapped up in one agonized cry to Jacob: "Give me children or I shall die." (Gen 30:2.) To help us comprehend what a price was set on parenthood by the ancient Semites, we have this explanation:

To be a parent was the entire purpose of living, and to die without children was indeed a curse. Through one's children a man's or a woman's memory remained in the world, among one's people. The Hebrews of this period had precious little revelation concerning the life after death. They knew that it existed, but they knew little more

than that. It was inevitable that the sum of their aspirations should be centered in their life in the world, and parenthood was the *fulfillment* of this life.⁷

To complete the point of Rachel's story without succumbing to the temptation to linger over the "birth-race"⁸ in Jacob's household, we shall conclude with the happy ending: "But God remembered Rachel; he heard her prayer and made her fruitful. She conceived and bore a son, and she said, 'God has taken away my reproach.' She named him Joseph, saying, 'May the Lord give me another son.'" (Gen 30:22-24.)

Two more instances of barren women who were made fruitful by special divine intervention will be cited briefly. In the book of Judges we read of Manoe's wife who was barren and had borne him no children. The angel of the Lord appeared to the woman, however, with the promise: "'Though you are barren and have had no children, yet you will conceive and bear a son. Now, then, be careful to take no wine or strong drink and to eat nothing unclean. As for the son you will conceive and bear, no razor shall touch his head, for this boy is to be consecrated to God from the womb. It is he who will begin the deliverance of Israel from the power of the Philistines.'" (Jdg 13:3-6.) The angel's promise was fulfilled when Manoe's wife, previously sterile, became the mother of Samson.

The first book of Kings relates the touching account of Elcana's wife, the barren Anna who, because of her childlessness, suffered bitter taunts from her rival, Phenenna, Elcana's other wife. After a trustful prayer in the sanctuary of Silo, for which Anna had a further humiliation in Heli's rash judgment of her, she finally won from the Lord the gift of a miracle son, Samuel. It is interesting to note that in the two foregoing accounts the child born of a once-barren womb had a special mission to perform on behalf of the Chosen People. From these and other references to barrenness-made-fruitful, we may conclude that God-given fertility is a favorite Old Testament theme; we shall notice its recurrence in

the Elizabeth-Zachary story in Luke.⁹ It is the primordial Hebrew picture of grace: God intervening to do what man cannot do,¹⁰ God building on nature and perfecting its faculties.

Ideal Human Love

The next idea we have proposed to examine in the Old Testament is that of ideal human marital love. One immediately thinks of the union of Booz and Ruth, of the older and younger Tobias families, and finally, of the idyllic and passionate exposé found in the Cantic of Canticles. We shall devote ourselves to the latter account.

What is the life-setting of the Song of Songs? What is the sense of the words as intended by the inspired writer in the concrete situation of his writing? An answer may be found in the fourfold reference of the prophet Jeremiah to "the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride" (Jer 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11), something which the prophet considers characteristic of normal, peaceful life. This "voice" would seem to be the then current wedding song of the Israelites, one voice resulting from the dialogic exchange of truth and fidelity between bride and groom. Because the Song of Songs fits precisely into this setting, we may logically conclude that it is a collection of such wedding songs. The evidence of early Egyptian literature which influenced that of the Israelites also suggests that the Cantic deals with human love. We may be fairly certain, then, that the Cantic is a series of real-life songs, wedding songs which have retained the verve and color which marked the institution of marriage in Israel.¹¹ Filled with imaginative language of uncanny charm and beauty, this superb poem simply extols human love. This is the literal meaning of the Cantic.

Without disturbing the Cantic's literal sense, however, it may be argued that "the theme of love in the Old Testament is a two-edged sword. If one edge cuts toward human love, the other cuts back toward divine love. Indeed, the covenant between Yahweh

and His people is consistently portrayed in the prophetic books as a marriage."¹² Likewise, with no offense to its literal meaning, readers will certainly find the Canticle to be a visible image of such beauty and intensity that they will be aided to pass more easily from the known to the unknown. The young peasant bride reaches the summit of human love. Israel, too, is called to a summit of love. And, in the New Testament, the bridal Church and virgin-brides within it are called to the summit of summits. Perceiving, in the Canticle, the height which human love may attain, one may more easily move on to the surpassing summit of a divine-human love alliance. It is not that one expands the sense of the Canticle's original utterance but rather that, seen within a larger context at a given point in time, the Canticle is approached and savored by us with a deeper understanding. The Canticle is probably post-exilic, but its chronology is less important for our present purposes than its theology.

Before leaving these pictures of ideal human love—a few among many others to be found in Old Testament literature—we shall mention the significance of an expression which recurs frequently in Deuteronomy, the only book of the law and covenant which introduces the theme of Yahweh's love of Israel. Relating God's mercies toward Israel, the sacred writer compares the divine protector to an eagle who, after inciting its young to venture into the air, now "hovers above them, now spreads its wings and takes them up to rest on its own shoulder." (Dt 32:11.) The Hebrew expression "to spread one's wings over" signified the marriage relationship. The prophet Ezekiel later uses the phrase to describe how God took Israel as His spouse: "I passed by and behold, you had reached the time of love, so I spread my cloak (wing) over you. . . ." (16:8.) Similarly, the term is used in the espousals of Ruth and Booz as Ruth says to Booz, "Spread your garment over me." (Ru 3:9.)¹³ We shall return later to this image as we note its importance in the announcement made by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary.

Divine-Human Alliance

Whereas the book of Deuteronomy does not express the love of Yahweh in nuptial terms, it does proclaim the theme of divine election as an act motivated by God's sheer antecedent love. Israel inherits Yahweh's love not out of merit but simply out of love, a love first promised to the fathers of Israel. (Cf. Dt 7:7-8.) Yahweh is pictured in the tender gesture of carrying Israel in his arms "as a man carries his son" (Dt 1:31), or, as we have mentioned, in the veiled nuptial imagery of the eagle hovering over the young. The reference to Yahweh as a "jealous God" comes near to a breakthrough of the nuptial idea. (Cf. Dt 4:24.) The trials of the desert as related in Deuteronomy are also seen as sent by Yahweh out of *love*.

Love is, therefore, one of the key ideas of Deuteronomy.¹⁴ It remained for the prophets, however, to describe this love for what it really was: a nuptial bond between Yahweh and the virgin Israel.

As we enter the climax of Old Testament revelation and begin to sense the beautiful burden of divine love to be sung out by the prophets, we are tempted to cut off our words and echo the command which prefaced Augustine's decisive encounter: *Take and read*. No second-hand account with its assorted references may hope to capture the reality which the prophets describe—the wedding and wedded life of Yahweh and Israel with its rapturous heights and sorrowful depths. If the Queen of Sheba realized, on her cultural tour of Solomon's temple, that half its beauty was lost in the preliminary verbal account she had heard of it, we are certain that our percentage of salvage from the prophets shall be even less than half. Out of chapter logic, therefore, rather than any hope of doing justice to their message, we shall go on to examine the writings of Hosea, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah for the culminating concept of Yahweh's nuptial union with Israel.

In the prophets, "the virgin of Israel" is a favorite title for

God's people. They are called the "virgin daughter of Sion" (Is 37:22), the "virgin daughter of My people" (Jer 14:17), the "virgin Israel" (Jer 31:4), to cite a few examples. Applied to Israel, Yahweh's bride, the name took on a special significance: Israel was a virgin who belonged to God and to Him alone.¹⁵

According to the prophets, the time of God's espousals with the virgin daughter of Sion was the time Israel spent in the desert of Sinai. The marriage contract was sealed on Mount Sinai in a solemn and even terrifying moment of covenant-making between God and Israel, His bride.¹⁶

Using the image of marriage, the prophet Ezekiel gives us a moving account of the history of God's relations with Israel. Going back to Egypt in his mind's eye, he first recalls Israel's birth as a nation. She was an unwanted infant who had been cast out to die: "On the day of your birth, your navel was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor were you salted or wrapt in swaddling clothes. No eye pitied you to do these things out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field." (16:4-5.) But God pitied the little waif abandoned in Egypt. "And when I passed by and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you, as you lay in your blood, 'Live and grow like a plant in the field.'" (16:6.)

Yahweh's love for this foundling knew no bounds. Ezekiel describes the transformation Yahweh effected in the little girl, Israel. He took her up, washed her, and cared for her. From the state of slave and foundling, Yahweh raised her to a condition of matchless beauty. Then He decided to take her for His own bride. In a stirring exodus, He snatched her from Egyptian bondage and idolatry and brought her to Mount Sinai where He married her, signing a covenant with her. Ezekiel relates the maiden's good fortune thus: "Grow thou didst and thrive, and camest to woman's estate . . . And already thou wert ripe for love; cloak of mine should be thrown about thee, to hide thy shame; my troth I plighted to thee . . ." (16:7-9, Knox tr.) The maiden Israel was now a bride and a queen, made fair, "utterly

fair," by the Lord God. In love a covenant had been set up to draw from Israel a reciprocal, bridal love. From then on she was not to look for human aid but rather to stake all on God. She was to follow Yahweh onward to a land of singular happiness. She was to reserve herself for her marriage with Him and look only to Him for her prosperity.¹⁷

For a time, Israel's response to Yahweh was wholehearted and full of devotion. But, as Ezekiel relates, it was not long before the young bride turned her eyes away from her Husband and ungratefully spurned His power and beauty. Falling in love with her own beauty, she began to play the harlot and adulteress by flirting with foreign powers and clinging to strange gods. The extent of her infidelity is repeatedly noted, especially by the prophet Jeremiah, who paints the bride's crime in all its ugliness. He laments over the Jewish parental practice of offering children in fiery oblations to the pagan god Moloch. The cult of Baal was even more extensive and revolting, abounding as it did in sacred prostitutes and licentious fertility rites. Jeremiah pleads with the faithless bride, threatens her, cries over her, but without any observable effect.¹⁸ At one time the thought of her baseness brings the prophet to a state of indignant despair: "If a man sends away his wife and, after leaving him she marries another man, does the first husband come back to her? . . . But you have sinned with many lovers, and yet you would return to me! says the Lord." (Jer 3:1.) Ezekiel, too, shows indignation over the bride's shameful conduct. Underneath the strong invective of his pen it is not difficult to detect a note of disappointed love: "I wreak fury and jealousy upon you." (Ez 16:38-39.)

At this point we turn to the prophet Hosea, earlier in time than Jeremiah and Ezekiel, for the revelation of a new dimension of divine love, that of mercy and forgiveness, or what the Hebrew calls *hesed*, the seed of *agape*.¹⁹ Through the bitter shame of his own experience with his faithless wife, Gomer, Hosea rises to a conception of divine love and patience not yet reached by any man.²⁰ From human coldness, the prophet's mind is taken to the

warmth of God's forgiving love. From the ugly word *adultery*, the loveliest image in the whole of Scripture is born.²¹ Nowhere in the Old Testament is the depth of Yahweh's love sounded with so little restraint and with such intensity of feeling as in Hosea.

After a period of patient and humble waiting until Gomer's lovers tire of her, Hosea welcomes back his erring wife and begins to reconstruct their marriage. By this reference to rescuing the faithless bride from Egypt (2:17), Hosea identifies his own faithless wife with Israel. The prophet describes the fresh marriage which God in His mercy will be led to establish with Israel: "I will espouse you to me forever: I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the Lord." (2:19-21.) The intimacies of this union are then enumerated. (2:21-24.) The Lord is, indeed, Israel's lover yet. Like Hosea, who so deeply and foolishly loves his wife that he cannot bring himself to dismiss her even when she is unfaithful, Yahweh is also seen to be tolerant, almost helpless, in the face of unforgivable disloyalty. But Hosea also records his mounting anger as love is rejected, anger which will be felt, both by Gomer and Israel, in the form of chastisement under which the heart of love beats strong.²²

Hosea's final verses are a quiet invitation to forgiveness and the promise of new love after estrangement. (14:5-10.) Thus, in addition to the gift of reconciling love, Yahweh promises to make his virgin-bride "blossom like the lily." (14:6.) To Hosea, then, we are indebted for an unparalleled description of the deep, forgiving love which Yahweh had for Israel, His bride, a truly prodigal love, selfless and outgoing. Hosea conveys his description through the use of the Hebrew word *ahabah*, a strong word which referred primarily to passionate love between a man and woman but which, from Hosea's time on, was seen to have a deep religious meaning.²³

The dire consequences of Israel's broken marriage with Yahweh and the hope rising out of its ruins are also described by Jeremiah and Isaiah. The haunting threnody of the Lamentations,

while sustaining the image of the virgin-bride, pictures Israel as a desolate widow. The mournful accent of these elegies stems from the nadir of Israel's doom: the expulsion of the Jewish people and the collapse of Judah, the destruction of the Holy City with its once splendid temple and, finally, the dispersion of the historic Israel as a political community. High points of hope come, however, especially in the thirty-second chapter of Jeremiah, with its pledge of restoration, and in the forty-ninth chapter of Isaiah where the unknown author of these latter chapters forecasts the return of the faithful remnant of Israel and Judah from the Babylonian exile. The writer of the following lines shows Yahweh to have particular affection for Sion, the temple city:

But Sion said, "The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me." Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. See, upon the palms of my hands I have written your name; your walls are ever before me. Your rebuilders make haste, as those who tore you down and laid you waste go forth from you; look about and see, they are all gathering and coming to you. As I live, says the Lord, you shall be arrayed with them all as with adornments, like a bride you shall fasten them on you. (49:14-19.)

As if return were not enough to expect from the forgiving Yahweh, Israel also hears good tidings of the children that shall have been born to her during her days of barrenness and exile: "Who has borne me these? I was bereft and barren [exiled and repudiated]; who has reared them? I was left all alone; where then do these come from?" (49:21.) In the fifty-fourth chapter of Isaiah the words of joy are sung directly to the returning exiles: "Raise a glad cry, you barren one who did not bear, break forth in jubilant song, you who were not in labor. For more numerous are the children of the deserted wife than the children of her who has a husband, says the Lord." (v. 1.) The home, the land, will be too small to receive all the children of the mother

Israel: "Enlarge the space for your tent, spread out your tent cloths unsparingly; lengthen your ropes and make firm your stakes. For you shall spread abroad to the right and to the left; your descendants shall dispossess the nations and shall people the desolate cities." (Is 54:2-3.)

Finally, with a picture of the New Jerusalem where Bridegroom and bride will once more possess each other in undying and fruitful love, the Old Testament stands on the brink of the New.

No more shall men call you "Forsaken," or your land "Desolate." But you shall be called "My Delight," and your land "Espoused." For the Lord delights in you, and makes your land His spouse. As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you; and as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall your God rejoice in you. (Is 62:4-6.)

Yahweh's love will achieve in the restoration something which it did not achieve in the history of Israel. For His is a love which not only overcomes refusal but mends it far beyond its first condition.

Through the vivid revelation of the Old Testament, we have now begun to see some of the height and depth of God's covenanted love for man. This divine nuptial love, so far beyond the grasp of men, did not become known in Israel through a reasoning process but only through Yahweh's revelation of Himself as loving. Although the earliest Israelite literature scarcely expresses this love, or does so only timidly and in veiled ways, when the prophets finally take up the theme the reality is revealed in almost overwhelming vigor and fullness.²⁴

Jeremiah spoke of the "everlasting love" with which Yahweh, the Bridegroom, loved His bride. This love, then, is never over and done. A love with such a past in the Old Testament cannot be without a future in the New. Each day it will go further and further with man until, in New Testament times, it will urge him

by grace to fulfill and incorporate in himself, both individually and ecclesially, the human-divine marriage mystery first written in the history of Israel. So, even if the prophets have given a clear and passionate expression of this love, they have not, for all that, exhausted its theme. Further heights and depths of the same divine love will be disclosed in the Gospels. Here love will be directed not only to a particular nation but to all nations and to all men. Furthermore, the divine marriage boldly announced by the prophets will not only continue but will expand and come to fulfillment. Already found in Yahweh's relations with Israel, the love yet to be revealed in Christ Jesus will truly be the "mystery which has been hidden for ages and generations" (Col 1:26-27), a mystery destined to shine out more and more in the whole economy of Christian salvation and reach its final splendor in an unending day of great light.

Partially and imperfectly realized in the Israel of old, this lofty nuptial union will be achieved and passed on to the New Israel through the Virgin Mary, fairest daughter of Israel. By her *fiat* Mary will open herself to God's new wedding with mankind. Through the fruit of Mary's womb, the bride, mankind, will become the Body-Bride, Christ's Church.

We are ready, now, to ponder Mary's living relationship with God Incarnate; with mankind and Christ's virgin-Bride, the Church; with all baptized Christians; and, finally, with those believing virgins who, living the Church's bridal life, continue to repeat Mary's *fiat* and to bring forth Christ anew through the ever fresh creative power of the Holy Spirit.

NOTES

1. Cf. John L. McKenzie, S.J., "An Everlasting Love," *The Way*, 4:2, April 1964, p. 87.

2. Ancient city of northern Mesopotamia—site of research excavations beginning about 1925.

3. Bruce Vawter, C.M., *A Path through Genesis* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), p. 139.

4. Ignatius Hunt, O.S.B., *The Book of Genesis*, Commentary I, Pamphlet Bible Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1961), p. 11.
5. Vawter, *op. cit.*, p. 162.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
8. Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Herbert McCabe, O.P., "Sex and the Sacred," *Life of the Spirit*, 16: 182, August-September 1961, p. 75.
11. Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., *The Book of Ecclesiastes and the Canticle of Canticles*, Commentary, Pamphlet Bible Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1961), pp. 53-54. In *The Men and Message of the Old Testament* (Collegetown: Liturgical Press, 1963), Father Peter Ellis says that so far no exegete has found an impregnable position in interpreting the Canticle. He favors the "allegorizing parable interpretation" and the literal. Cf. also John L. McKenzie's comment on the persuasive and convincing arguments for the literal interpretation: *art. cit.*, pp. 98-99.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
13. Joseph A. Grassi, M.M., "Virgin Daughter of Sion," *Worship*, 35:6, May 1961, p. 366.
14. McKenzie, *art. cit.*, p. 94.
15. Grassi, *art. cit.*, p. 366.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 364.
17. McCabe, *art. cit.*, p. 76.
18. Neal M. Flanagan, O.S.M., *The Book of Jeremia*, Commentary I, Pamphlet Bible Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1961), p. 9.
19. Cf. Pius XII's *Haurietis Aquas* (Encyclical Letter), *The Pope Speaks*, 2:3, Autumn 1956, p. 122; and also Bruce Vawter, C.M., *The Conscience of Israel* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 109.
20. Vawter, *The Conscience of Israel*, p. 114.
21. Alexander Jones, *God's Living Word* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 90.
22. McKenzie, *art. cit.*, pp. 92-93.
23. Frank B. Norris, S.S., "The Apostolate: A Scriptural Basis," *Worship*, 36:2, January 1962, p. 97.
24. McKenzie, *art. cit.*, p. 90.

*Even as he spoke to our fathers—
to Abraham and to his posterity
forever.* (Lk 1:55.)

3 THE VIRGIN MARY

THERE IS no part of human history unconnected with Christ. The whole of history is the projection of the unchanging thought of God, an eternal thought, of which Christ is the focal point in time and the juncture between time and eternity. Within God's eternal vision of salvation, however, Christ's entrance into history was to depend on the free and total *yes* of a specially chosen human being. To this person would be given the task of helping to reverse the fully free *no* with which man had terminated God's first dialog with him. To this person would be given the task of opening mankind to receive its own reshaping in a way beyond all imagining.

It was the Virgin Mary of Nazareth, full of grace, who fulfilled these tasks by her free and total *yes* to God's plan announced to her by an angel. In so doing, Mary became the personal point of contact between God and man, the creaturely center in whom the reality of the Redemption was first accomplished and then set in motion for all mankind. As such, she is the true creaturely nexus between all of pre-Christian and Christian history, even though Christ in His sacred humanity remains the exact and only point

at which the action that purifies mankind becomes a divine action and hence is possible and efficacious.¹

In delineating the various breakthroughs in word and deed which God made to man after the Fall in order to prepare him for the Incarnation, one is forced to resort to chronological analogies for the sake of time-bound creatures. We have already dwelt, for example, on Israel's election and her unfaithfulness in the Old Covenant. As we approach our study of the New Covenant, we may give the impression that God has amended or readjusted His first plan of salvation. Since in reality, however, God is immutable, and since He wills everything at once, we must avoid attributing to Him any amendment or revocation of an anterior decree. The device of chronological analogy is legitimate only in order to establish a relationship of cause and effect.²

Essentially unchangeable, God has unfolded His plan on the screen of time. For our sake, He has revealed His eternal vision little by little, depth by depth. From man's point of view, the working out of this plan may well read like a fascinating novel with its complex action and wide range of character and scenes. From God's viewpoint, however, the one and only theme has ever been "With age-old love I have loved you." (Jer 31:3.) Because of man's freedom, vacillating between goodness and nothingness, God's love assumes the appearance of reproach at one time, pity at another, chastisement at still another. Yet His meaning is always the same. This meaning is love. Even in the Old Testament some concept of God's unchanging love was possessed by a certain faithful few who knew Him as the God of every day, a concept beautifully expressed by the German *Alltagsgott*.³ In the New Testament, this concept comes through to men in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the same, "yesterday and today, yes, and forever." (Heb 13:8.)

No one shows the continuity of time itself and its relationship to eternity better than Mary. For, as Old Testament history culminates in her and New Testament history begins in her, Mary joins the Old and the New. Even beyond this temporal conti-

nuity, in Mary's womb time is joined with eternity through the Almighty Word made flesh.

The foregoing explanation serves to justify our chronological references as we continue to follow the unfolding of the one virginal mystery, the Church, rooted in eternity with Christ, and flowering in time. It also helps us to see more clearly Mary's important role in this unfolding. It helps us to appreciate the Church's choice of timeless and timely texts for certain Marian feasts. Destined to be God's partner in the new creation, Mary is compared with Wisdom, whom the Lord begot, "the firstborn of his ways, the forerunner of his prodigies of long ago." (Prov 8:22.) On the other hand, the ancestral record which Matthew traces from Joseph back to Abraham gives us some idea of Mary's significance for time. At first glance one is tempted to find this latter reading disappointingly prosaic as it appears in the liturgy to prepare us for the feast of Mary's Immaculate Conception. After grasping its main point—the continuity of the historical, fleshly people of God—one begins to see how it emphasizes Mary's importance for time. The spiritual scope of Mary's life is immense. It is, in fact, co-extensive with the whole history of salvation which links two worlds, the timely and the timeless.⁴

Another fact which emerges from our preliminary considerations here is this: in the unfolding of the virginal mystery as it now exists within the Church, we find Mary's meaning deeply relevant to the mystery both as it is lived out in individuals and as it unfolds in the life of the Church. In her fruitful virginity at one point in time, Mary both realized individually within herself the Church's function as virgin-bride and typified it for all mankind for the remaining days of time.

The Anawim

As a starting point in studying Mary's role as virgin-bride and mother, we have first chosen to place our focus not on the moment when the angel greeted her but rather on the spiritual climate in which she lived. The task of discovering this spiritual

climate is not guesswork or pious surmising. Mary was a precious part of the faithful remnant of Israel. She was the lowliest and loveliest of the Jewish *anawim*. Her "life-situation" flows from every line of her Magnificat, the song which celebrates the fulfillment of Israel's and Mary's hopes, the song which announces redemption for all generations. So vibrant is her Canticle with the *anawim* ideal that it might be called the triumphant hymn of the *anawim*, the pearl of their literature.

Who, then, are the *anawim*? And what is their spirit? In a sense, the *anawim* might be called the wise virgins of the Old Testament. They were the undivided and humble souls who staked all on Yahweh's promise. They were the true brides of Yahweh who remained faithful to His nuptial covenant with Israel and who stood on the threshold of the New Testament waiting and longing for the Bridegroom's coming. Their spirit might be called lowliness, openness, poverty, emptiness, readiness. Their secret might be termed: how to be little in God's hands. And yet, no single word or phrase suffices to describe the *anawim* or their spirit. One must push back to the roots of the *anawim* ideal.

The concept of the *anawim* has roots in the earth that was "waste and void"; it originated in the primeval darkness that covered the abyss when "the spirit of God was stirring above the waters." (Gen 1:1-2.) At that moment God worked on nothing and created all that is. At the conclusion of His work "God saw that all he had made was very good." (1:31.) There was nothing so apparently barren and unproductive as this first vast abyss; yet, look what came from it. God at work on nothing to produce all that is good: this is the record of God's creation, this is the record of every divine deed in history, this is the basic root of the *anawim* ideal.⁵

Yahweh's choice of Israel as His bridal partner in the plan of restoration already showed His predilection for what the world holds foolish. (Cf. 1 Cor 1:27.) The writer of Deuteronomy said of the Israelites: "It was not because you are the largest of all nations that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, for you

are really the smallest of all nations. It was because the Lord loved you." (7:7-9.) Yahweh's choice, already then, could be seen as something mysterious and opposed to ordinary standards. From Israel's selection one notes that, in God's process of selection, the choice is not a question of merit but of merciful love; it is the result of God's absolute sovereignty. (Cf. Exod 33:19.)

Israel, God's partner, was to be great not for what it would do but for what it would receive. Whatever Israel became or did was all to be the fruit of God's work. God would ever be in the midst of His people to produce good things from nothing and to renew after failure. He asked only one thing: that Israel would live in constant awareness of her dependence on Yahweh, that, in her abundant prosperity and favor, she would attribute all to His loving initiative and abiding faithfulness.

The sad unfolding of the story need not be recounted here in detail. Israel's self-reliance, ingratitude, and arrogance brought forth flagrant infidelities and incredible aberrations. Called to be a bride, Israel turned into a harlot and adulteress. Over and over, she re-enacted the initial drama of Adam and Eve who wanted to take rather than to receive.

But if Israel was unfaithful, Yahweh was not. Yahweh's love was more powerful than Israel's malice. Through the words of the prophets, Yahweh invited the faithless bride to return. God said in Isaiah's words: "By waiting and by calm you shall be saved, in quiet and in trust your strength lies." (Is 30:15.) Unlimited in His generosity and love, God began to sketch the lines of a new road to man's heart and the re-establishment, in an undreamed-of perspective, of His original dialogic union with man. Out of the sheer mystery of love, God proposed a New Covenant reaching beyond all threats from man's vacillating response. He revealed to Israel a new dimension of love which His heart would open to her in a coming era. This new dimension was *hesed*, merciful and forgiving love. A Hebrew word meaning mercy, *hesed* would become *charis* in Greek and finally the word *grace* in New Testament terminology.⁶ Jeremiah disclosed the

manner in which Yahweh would effect this merciful donation to mankind: "I will give them a heart to know Me." (24:7, Knox tr.) Captivated by the tenderness and intimacy of the coming New Covenant, Jeremiah makes *heart* a keyword in his writing, using it sixty-five times⁷ as he expresses the idea that religion is an inner reciprocity (*Herzengemeinschaft*.)⁸

The casualty of unfaithfulness had reduced Israel, after the exile, to a small remnant, a nucleus of holy men and women who persevered in relying on Yahweh's power and in waiting for His merciful promise. Fed on the sacred writings of the law and the prophets, the remnant group continued to believe that the ancient promises were about to be fulfilled.

With each new crisis, this faithful corps advanced into a fresh and purer understanding of God's new proposal. Since Yahweh did not want a forced or grudging submission, He waited with infinite patience for the deep spiritual formation of the remnant, the true Israel, so that the seed of His Incarnate Word would fall on good ground. His educational method was a patient one. Like the first exodus which led into a desert, another exodus brought the Chosen People, now a remnant, into the wilderness of captivity. Here again Yahweh continued to form them through a loving testing-period. Those who persevered in this formation and reached an attitude of total surrender to God were known as the *anawim*. They received their name from the later prophets, and their spirit is referred to as *anawah*, lowliness.⁹ They were to be the leaven of the New Israel. They were to furnish the first martyrs in the infant Church.

The *anawim* spirit pulses in the pages of all the major prophets and also in Joel, Amos, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Zechariah. A telling prayer found in Jeremiah refers to the return of the faithless bride from exile and reveals the *anawim* spirit in an almost unparalleled way: "Make me come back so that I may come back." (Jer 31:18.) Above all, the *anawim* spirit is to be found in the Psalter, aptly called the "book of the Poor"¹⁰ because it is the outpouring of hearts surrendered wholly to God.

Over and over the psalms disclose, sometimes in intense dialog with God, the *anawim* sense of human powerlessness mingled with strong trust in God. According to the psalms, the *anawim* soul was filled with readiness to serve, patience in waiting, and the clinging love of a child.¹¹ Psalm 72 cries out: "I know no other content but clinging to God." (v. 28.)¹² Psalm 130 contains, in summary, the "little way" of the *anawim*. There is a keyword in the book of psalms, *batah*, which means to believe, to count on, to hope. It implies confidence and security, certainty and joy, nostalgia and self-abandonment, virtues purified among the *anawim*. The whole complex of these attitudes is, in fact, very close to the concept of faith which we find in St. Paul.¹³ Moreover, the personal, trusting relationship of the *anawim* with a God who speaks to the heart spread itself out over the community. *Anawim* piety was not an isolated thing. It included the ideal Israel, even the real Israel, which the *anawim* bore within his heart in his dialog with Yahweh. Open to God, the *anawim* was open to others.¹⁴

All that was best in Israel's heritage was vital reality in the lives of the *anawim*. In fact, according to the prophets, the coming Messiah himself would reflect their beautiful spirit. He would exemplify patience which, in its finest meaning, signifies suffering. He would not force issues by playing the hero but would show a strength beyond heroism, the meekness of a lamb which is led.¹⁵ Originally a picture of the poor man (the *'anaw*), Psalm 21 would be prayed by the Messiah in His own death-agony.¹⁶ The Greek translation of the Bible expresses the pregnant term *'anaw*, which Christ applied to Himself (Mt 11:29), by the two words "gentle and humble."¹⁷

Mary, Fairest of the Anawim

Standing on the threshold of the new age, then, to greet the Messiah and to enter with Him into the new Kingdom was a band of simple *anawim*: Mary and Joseph, Zachary and Elizabeth,

Simeon the Just, Anna the Prophetess, John the Baptist, the shepherds, the Magi. These were the poor in spirit who formed the Messiah's court. Without realizing it, they were the visible continuity between the walled Jerusalem of the Old Testament and the Jerusalem of the New whose walls would be the ends of the earth.

One is tempted to take each of these *anawim* individually and see how each was uniquely poor in spirit. But in focusing on Mary, the young Jewess of Nazareth, we shall be viewing the *anawim* spirit in its brightest light. No other was so truly poor in spirit, so keenly conscious of her need for God, so perfectly surrendered to His will, so ready for the Messiah. Surely when the prophet Zephaniah described the chosen remnant, his eye of vision must have rested on the Virgin Mary. He promised in the name of God:

But I will leave as a remnant in your midst a people humble and lowly, who shall take refuge in the name of the Lord: the remnant of Israel. They shall do no wrong and speak no lies; Nor shall there be found in their mouths a deceitful tongue; . . . On that day, it shall be said to Jerusalem: Fear not, O Sion, be not discouraged! The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior; He will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in His love, He will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals. (3:12-13, 16-18.)

These and other words spoken by Zephaniah jubilantly announce the Messianic age and strike harmonies similar to those which will some day resound in Gabriel's mighty announcement to the Virgin Mary.

Fully in accord with the *anawim's* total reliance on God, the prophets foretold that Israel would bring forth salvation not by human means but by the sheer power of God. It was the love of God for Israel that would cause a virgin to conceive and bring new life to the world. In Isaiah's words to Achaz: ". . . the Lord Himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel." (Is 7:14-15.)

This vision would be concretely realized in Mary, a Jewish *anawim* maiden. In Mary, the virgin motherhood of Israel would be summed up and represented; in her the marriage between Yahweh and His bride would be first consummated.¹⁸ Israel's role, the significance of its innumerable births, would be taken up by this one virgin of Israel and accomplished in her. The Church of the Old Testament would flow together, culminate, and attain its perfection in Mary.¹⁹

Mary's universal meaning is so significant for our theme that we shall now devote our attention to four realities in her life to see her own responding *anawim* spirit on the one hand and God's largesse on the other. From the wide scope of her glories which one might wish to explore, we shall choose Mary's immaculate conception, her faithful response to God's proposal, her faithful virginity, and finally her virginal motherhood.

Immaculate Conception

Enjoying the traditional teaching of the Church, we know with the certainty of faith that God began to prepare for the New Israel by preserving Mary, destined to be the mother of the Messiah, from the stain of original sin. Mary's preservation from sin was not merely from the moment of her birth, not even from a determined instant during her prenatal growth, but "in the first instant of her conception."²⁰ From the standpoint of mankind, this unfathomable gesture of merciful love towards Mary (in view of the New Israel) contrasts sharply with the beginning of the Israel of old. Yahweh had rescued the first Israel as a foundling child in Egypt, had washed her and brought her to a rich maturity before espousing her. In the case of the New Israel, God encompassed Mary with the fruits of Christ's redemption in an advance or prevenient way from the very beginning of her existence. The superabundant character of the coming new era is thus already demonstrated in Mary's earliest infant life.

In the immaculate conception of Mary we begin to glimpse

God's deep respect for the totality of the human person. God might have given His saving grace to Mary on the day of her birth or even *in utero*, as he did to John the Baptist. That He preserved Mary from sin, that He flooded her with grace from the first moment of her conception, indicates a deep mystery about the interaction of the forces of nature and grace.

St. Thomas tells us that the body is successively formed and disposed for the soul. Since God does not act idly or without purpose, one might ask what admirable interchange was taking place between the gift of saving grace and Mary's physical and psychological growth, which, so far as we know, proceeded through the zygote, embryo, and fetal stages according to the laws of human development. As an infant-to-be, Mary's heart must have begun to beat about the eighteenth day after her conception. Some time later her small chest must have moved in pre-respiratory activity. Laws of growth would indicate that she, too, developed through an elaborate stage of neuron patterning, through a period of anatomic and physiological fashioning. And all this while, a divine influx of grace inhabited her developing person, accompanying her prenatal growth in a mysterious but very real way. Perhaps it is the thought of this marvel which prompts the Church to pray, on Mary's feasts, for health of mind and body. No human creature has enjoyed wholeness (*salus*) to the degree or extent that Mary did.

And yet it is not the prodigy of grace and its commingling with Mary's personal development that should, of itself, receive our total admiration. This perfect advance application of the fruits of the Redemption took place in view of Mary's purpose in life: to become the Virgin-Mother of Christ and, as such, a type of the Church. God's first gesture of disposing Mary for this role would be followed by further "fullnesses" of grace: the presence of Christ in her womb, the virginal birth and motherhood, her assumption into glory. There would be no moment in her existence when it could not be fully said of her: "Thou hast found grace with God." (Lk 1:30-31.)²¹

Mary's immaculate conception bears within it the first flowering, so to speak, of *anarwim* soil, where greatness comes from God, not from man. He who is mighty does great things for her; holy is His name. God's gesture of love to Mary was His final antecedent grace flowing, in advance, from the redemptive death and resurrection of Christ and disposing her to be wholly receptive to the divine message to be brought to her by the angel Gabriel. This early and abundant grace would make Mary worthy to receive Christ in her womb as His mother and to live this motherhood fully. With the advance removal of the obstacle of original sin, a sin which, as a creature, Mary, too, was destined to inherit from Adam, she was totally free to open herself to the fullness of salvation by her *fiat* and, in so doing, to open all mankind to its life-giving fullness.

As a creature totally beyond the reach of sin, Mary thus proclaims, prefigures, and realizes in a wholly unique manner all the sanctity to be attained ultimately by the Church, the one Bride of the new creation.²² At the dawn of the new creation, Mary is "without spot or wrinkle." (Eph 5:27.) She is "clothed with the robe of salvation . . . and adorned as a bride with jewels." (Cf. Is 61:10.)²³ Already in the first moment of her life, she is an image of the Church. For the Church, too, is free from original sin in her very essence from the moment of existence, if this essence is understood as existence in Christ as His Mystical Body.²⁴ The Church, too, has within her the plenitude of grace. Being filled with Christ, the Church fills the faithful. Even in its state of earthly pilgrimage the Church may find Mary, in her immaculate conception, a valid ecclesial figure. But since the Church's objective holiness is as yet on the way toward subjective fulfillment in the lives of each of her members, since the Church is now giving form to the reality with which it is filled, Mary's immaculate conception best images the Church in its "pleromatic" state, that is, in its state of fulfillment. When the Church has fully become what she *is*, when her essential holiness is fulfilled in her children, then she, too, will be fully "without spot or wrinkle." The glori-

ous things said of Mary already at her conception will some day apply fully to the Church and to all Christians who, sharing in the Church's receptive bridehood, have completely put on Christ, the one holiness.

Blessed Is She Who Believes

Sublime though it is, the immaculate conception of Mary is not the climax, as we have previously indicated, but rather the starting-point of graces yet to be conferred on her. We shall next consider the singular grace of Mary's faith-response to God's plan. Theologians say that Mary conceived Christ *in mente* before she conceived Him in the flesh.²⁵ Coming from the active participation of her own will in response to God's will, Mary's surrender would be the final act by which she would manifest her womanly openness for the divine God-man espousal. In Mary, man would freely begin to put himself back into the hands of God. In Christ, the fruit of her womb, the return to the Father would be fully achieved for all men.

Mary's faith is, indeed, singularly important in the redemptive plan. The root of Eve's disobedience lay in her refusal to listen to God, in preferring the inferences she had drawn from her own speculations to the promises and warnings which God had issued. Consequently, man's return to God must start at the very point of deviation. Man must now freely renounce letting what seems evident to him prevail over the word God speaks to him. Faith is total commitment to God's word.²⁶ Eve's faithlessness had led to disobedience. Mary's faith would lead to perfect obedience. Because Mary in her immaculate conception had been totally repossessed, so to speak, by God, because in the light of this grace she was now able to act in the autonomy of perfect freedom, Mary could now effectively reverse Eve's unbelief and sinful assertion of autonomy. Mary could take part in the "re-forming" of man's will, to be completed in Christ's life of obedience to the Father's will. Eve had preferred her own opinion to

the divine word. Mary would not hesitate to believe the greatest mystery of all, the high and unimaginable secret of the divine plan.²⁷ She would open humanity to the One who would reverse man's self-sufficiency by a life of obedience unto death, by a life lived among men as one who serves. Truly blessed are we because Mary believed.

Among the reasons St. Thomas gives for the angel's announcement to Mary is that Mary would be informed in mind concerning Christ before conceiving Him in the flesh.²⁸ Since faith comes by hearing, the angel's instruction about the coming birth of the Son of God provided the matter for Mary's faithful assent. Mary thus conceived Christ spiritually through faith before she conceived Him in her womb. St. Augustine says: "Mary is more blessed in receiving the faith of Christ, than in conceiving the flesh of Christ. . . . Her nearness as a mother would have been no profit to Mary, had she not borne Christ in her heart after a more blessed manner than in her flesh."²⁹ Thus we see the wholly supernatural fruitfulness of faith which results in such a close union of the creature with his God that it comes to bear, within time, the very same fruit as does the virginal fruitfulness of God in eternity, namely, the Son of God.³⁰

Luke's beautiful account of Mary's visit to Elizabeth contains two special nuances indicating Mary's faith. These inferences may easily be eclipsed by the description of the joyous cousin-encounter itself or by Mary's vibrant greeting to Elizabeth with which the Holy Spirit synchronized the sanctification of the unborn John. One of these nuances is found in the phrase "with haste" which describes the manner in which Mary travelled on her ninety-mile trip from Nazareth to Ain Karim, her cousin's home. The Greek word implies "deep in thought," a period of contemplation of the things said and done in her, contemplation which is always the fruit of *faith* and love. The second inference is to be found after Luke's reference to the grace-filled meeting of the two women. Elizabeth then sang the praise of Mary's *faith*: "And blessed is she who has believed, because the things

promised her by the Lord shall be accomplished." (Lk 1:45.) The biblical word for faith (*'emeth*) basically means strength, a strength resting not on human security but on God.³¹

Mary's Faithful Virginity

Mary's consent to the divine design announced by the angel is said to have had two aspects: one spiritual—her active expression of faith³²—and one carnal, her passive availability to be the bearer of the God Incarnate.³³ Having already discussed her active expression of faith, we shall now proceed to the aspect of her passive availability, her virginity. In indicating a distinction here we are posing a theoretical situation only. Mary's faith and virginity are linked together in a single dynamic reality. Her faith expressed itself in her virginity; her virginity, on the other hand, was dependent on her faith. Together they formed her receptive, actively disposing cooperation with the entire plan of Redemption.

From the Old Testament we learn that, at all times, God was ready to give in proportion to man's openness to receive. But it is even truer to say that it was the increasing fullness of the gift that caused a progressive receptivity in man.³⁴ Thus, although virginity was not esteemed in early Israelite history, we do find a later Old Testament practice of it by *anarwim* souls who stood near the threshold of the coming Kingdom. In the days of Joseph and Mary, many of the holy covenanters along the Dead Sea lived a celibate life.³⁵ The virginity of Jeremiah, Joseph and Mary, John the Baptist, and other *anarwim* souls was a proleptic participation in the cross and announced the end of the world of the flesh and the dawn of a new creation.³⁶ Just as the fullness of grace was in Christ perfectly and absolutely, yet some beginning of this fullness preceded in His Mother relatively; so also the observance of the counsels, which is an effect of God's grace, began its perfection in Christ, but was begun after a fashion in His Virgin Mother³⁷ and in others who lived the *anarwim* ideal.

Although we do not know the extent of the individual practice of virginity at this time, we may safely conclude that it was part of the *anawim* poverty of spirit and utter confidence in God, the "lowliness" of which Mary herself would sing in the *Magnificat*. With the certainty of faith, virginal souls were thus already leaving all things for the sake of the coming Kingdom. Their whole life belonged to the coming King, and they waited expectantly for fruitfulness from Him.

Consequently, when the Virgin was asked to consent to the motherhood of the Son of God, her inquiry about the mode of this conception was to be expected. Knowing that her virginity had been entrusted to God, she realized that the Messiah could not come from human progeny. St. Thomas tells us that Mary's question "How shall this be done, for I know not man?" flowed from wonder rather than from unbelief.³⁸ What Luke's Gospel seems to describe by Mary's question is not a heroic form of the virtue of chastity but rather a sheer faith and hope which relied on God rather than on creatures. In the Old Testament, barren women had been made fruitful, but always within the framework of natural means. Here a virgin was to conceive and bear a son. Truly, how would this be done?

After explaining that the mode of conception was to be by the power of God, the angel referred to Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, who had conceived by the special intervention of God. His explanation was not given as a sufficient answer to Mary's question but rather as a figurative example of divine power.³⁹ With God, all things are possible. The barren Sara had brought forth a son. In Mary's case, it is not the mere fructification of a previously sterile natural union with natural issue following, great though this type of prodigy had been in Old Testament history. Mary's fructification is to take place without the customary human mode of conception but rather by the power of God. The conception and birth will be virginal. The offspring will be not merely a child of promise but the Promised One, not merely a son of man, but the Son of God, the Word made flesh.

From the angel's explanation, Mary might well have concluded that Christ would take flesh of a virgin to make clear from the very manner of His coming that his origin is not of this earth, not even from the noblest and holiest of human loves, but entirely from on high. Virginal motherhood would make plain, in the clearest fashion, that the Son of God comes wholly by God's decree and not from the world. Though Christ would take His nature from Mary's flesh and her race, yet, even in His humanity, He would be entirely the effect of the free action of the eternal God on high.⁴⁰ The initiative was wholly divine, not human.

Here, then, is Mary's opportunity freely to renounce letting what seems evident to her prevail over God's message spoken to her by the angel. Her own virginity becomes the occasion of a new act of faith, pure and entire, and lends itself admirably to enrichment with all the bounty of God. After being consecrated by active faith, her virginity is now ready to flower in divine motherhood.

The virginity of Mary must be viewed as an essential aspect of her faithful deliverance to God, her total reliance on divine power. It is certainly not to be looked upon as a mere expedient to enable the Incarnation to avoid human procreation as if sexuality were in some way tainted. It is rather the fact that in the marriage union partners do not merely "belong" to one another but even "become" one another. ". . . the two become one flesh." (Gen 2:24.) A radical mutual giving such as this would impair Mary's fullness of being and her total faithful dependence on God's action alone.⁴¹

Mary's virginity was part of the total faith and integrity necessary to encounter the total and supreme gift of Redemption. Here is the mystery of her virginity and of all virginity: pure and entire faith, itself a gift of God, which relies on God for its fruitfulness, a fruitfulness often hidden and unsuspected. "Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed." (Jn 20:29.)

St. Augustine saw as the inner reason of Mary's virginity her permanent role as type of the Church: "It behooved that our

Head, by a notable miracle, should be born, after the flesh, of a virgin, that He might thereby signify that His members would be born, after the Spirit, of a virgin Church."⁴² Tertullian also relates Mary's virginity to that of the Church: "Just as Christ became man through the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, we should all be reborn through the Holy Spirit and the virginal Church, the Mother of us all."⁴³

In summary, then, Mary's virginity was the manifestation of her faith, her total deliverance to God's redemptive plan, and her total dependence upon the action of God. Finally, because of all these things, her virginity would typify the faithful virgin Church who, in time, would continue to bear Christ and extend the fruit of His redemptive work to all men.

Virginal Motherhood

We have previously mentioned the nuptial meaning of the word *overshadow* which recurs throughout the Old Testament. Luke uses the word very deliberately in the Annunciation account. Its biblical overtones have, until recently, been overlooked.⁴⁴ In the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament the word is used frequently to express the coming of the bright cloud which the Rabbis called the *shekinah* or *dwelling*, and which is further defined as the majestic presence or manifestation of God descending to dwell with men. The book of Exodus says: "Then the cloud covered the Meeting Tent, and the glory of the Lord filled the Dwelling. Moses could not enter the Meeting Tent, because the cloud settled down upon [overshadowed] it and the glory of the Lord filled the Dwelling." (Exod 40:34-35.) *Overshadowing* is therefore intimately connected with the idea of God's presence fixing itself in a divine dwelling. This is the word Luke uses in the account of the Annunciation. St. John describes the Incarnation in a similar way: "The Word became flesh and set up his tent among us." (Jn 1:14.) The nuptial meaning of *overshadow* which we discovered earlier in the book of

Deuteronomy is here further linked with the idea of divine presence. St. John Damascene puts the two ideas together by saying that, at the Annunciation, "God's wisdom and power overshadowed her [Mary], like unto a Divine seed."⁴⁵ It is the creative overshadowing of the power of God, the Holy Spirit, that will bring about the presence of Christ in the womb of Mary. Until the birth of the Child, the home of the Presence will be Mary's womb. Mary will be the ark of the New Covenant, the tent of God's new dwelling with men.⁴⁶

After the angel had explained to Mary that the overshadowing Holy Spirit was to bring about Christ's conception in her womb, Mary replied: "I am still the handmaid of the Lord." Then, with words breathing deferential politeness, she added: "Please, let it be done to me according to your word." At that moment, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."⁴⁷

Although we have previously spoken of an active and passive aspect in regard to Mary's faith, we wish to make it clear that Mary's cooperation in Christ's conception itself was purely passive. St. Thomas says: "In Christ's conception itself she did not cooperate actively, but merely supplied the matter thereof. Nevertheless, before the conception she cooperated actively in the preparation of the matter so that it should be apt for conception."⁴⁸ Although Christ was conceived of the Virgin Mary materially, He was conceived of the Holy Spirit efficiently. The Holy Spirit was the active principle of Christ's conception, but not unto likeness of species, as a man is born of his father.⁴⁹ A contemporary theologian says that "Mary conceived the Son as seed of the Father through the action of the Holy Spirit. . . . The image of Mary is never forgotten in the trinitarian dimension of her espousal mystery, as also Christ in the earthly exile ever referred to the manifestation of the three-in-one life."⁵⁰

Thus, in Mary's own person the promise of Yahweh's covenant with Israel according to the nuptial theme was fully realized. In her the coexistence between God and man which had been broken in the beginning was achieved on a new plane. St. Thomas

speaks of the "spiritual wedlock between the Son of God and human nature" which took place in Mary's *fiat*.⁵¹ The Church fathers see the nuptial character of the Incarnation as resulting not only from the divine-human unity in Christ but also from "the nuptial willing of Mary," itself flowing from God's grace.⁵² St. Augustine describes the union thus: "The Word was the bridegroom, and human flesh the bride, and these two together are one Son of God who is also son of man. The womb of the Virgin Mary, in which He became Head of the Church, was His bridal chamber."⁵³ This spiritual wedding is referred to in the Church's liturgy for the Christmas season. In Mary's assent, all humanity said *yes* to God. Through Mary's receptivity, all humanity was linked with Christ's redemptive fullness. It would remain for mankind to be incorporated into this fullness. It would remain for mankind to affirm Mary's *fiat* by freely and repeatedly expressing its own *yes* within the Church and there becoming rooted in redemptive fullness.

As a significant digression, we shall mention here two complementary aspects in the spiritual marriage which took place between God and man in Mary's womb. There was first the aspect of divine condescension, a movement of descent and an initial willing of the *kenosis* ("*non horruisti Virginis uterum*") which prepared for the second aspect, the ultimate movement of ascent and ennoblement which man would enjoy when Christ's redemptive act would be completed, so to speak, in the glorious Resurrection.⁵⁴ Of what did Christ empty Himself? Certainly not of his divine condition, but rather of the glory to which He, as Son of God, was entitled. "Born of a woman, born under the Law" (Gal 4:4-5), the earthly Christ began to pattern His life on the ordinary human way of living. His initial willing of the *kenosis* would be lived out in servitude and final submission. His taking on flesh in Mary's womb was the initial step to this servitude. His carnal condition, begun in Mary, would eventually bring Him to death. In turn, death would set Him free from the flesh. The *kenosis* of the earthly Christ would end when, vic-

toriously risen, He would enter into glory.⁵⁵ The dying-rising passover theme thus asserts itself at the very outset of Christ's earthly life. It is a pattern important to us for our later considerations of Christian baptismal life.

Canticle of Fulfillment

Soon after the Word of God took flesh in Mary's womb, Mary began to compose her song of thanksgiving from the abundance of joy in her own heart and from the scriptural *anawim* soil in which she was rooted. Her *Magnificat* is consequently surrounded with a aura of tranquil joy and thanksgiving.

Line by line one hears a re-echoing of Old Testament texts which had expressed the hopes of Israel. There are overtones from the prophets Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Isaiah. There are parallels with the thanksgiving songs of Miriam and Judith. There are texts similar to the Psalms, the book of the *anawim*, from which Mary had learned that humility brings joy because it opens the heart to God.

Mary's song, however, reminds us most of a thanksgiving song composed by Anna who, after many years of barrenness, gave birth to Samuel. Looking upon her deliverance from sorrow in the perspective of the world's salvation from sin, Anna had exclaimed that it was to persons like herself, poor and lowly in spirit, that God gave His best gifts. (Cf. Wis 2:1-10.)⁵⁶ The *Magnificat* is an exalted echo of Anna's joy-song.

In her *Magnificat*, therefore, Mary did not express new ideals of holiness but faithfully summarized the *anawim* way of life. Since the *anawim* ideal would expand into the beatitudes of the New Testament, Mary showed herself an adherent of true Israelite tradition which regarded Yahweh as holding history's threads in His hands and unfolding their meaning in ever more wondrous and unexpected ways. A true daughter of Israel, Mary reflected the Israelite concept of history in her Canticle, a Canticle which looked to the present, past, and future. For the

Israelites, history was not lifeless matter but almost a patrimony in which one lived, a mystery into which one was initiated.⁵⁷ Yahweh revealed Himself in history, not merely as the Creator who guides history in creative transcendence, but as someone who Himself takes part in the unfolding play of history.⁵⁸ Through His covenant, through the words He spoke to the prophets, and now, through His becoming flesh, God was truly mindful of His servant Israel. Mary's *Magnificat* celebrated the supreme moment of a history considered as a presence slowly revealing itself by taking its place at man's side.

Mary's Permanent Virginity

Before considering Mary's motherhood of redeemed mankind and of the Church, let us turn our attention momentarily to the marvel of Mary's permanent virginity and its large meaning, which is so often obscured.

Certain fathers of the Church consider woman as symbolic of creation. The integrity of creation is, for them, symbolized in the integrity of woman or, more concretely, in the virgin. The fruitfulness of creation they see symbolized in the fruitfulness of woman or, to be concrete, in the mother.

Like the earth, at once virginal and fruitful, Eve in paradise shared the simultaneous integrity and fruitfulness of creation. The fathers regard her as a virgin in paradise, even though she had Adam for a husband.

In Mary, these fathers see a concretization of the original integrity of creation, to be restored in the new era.⁵⁹ Since, in sinless Eve, the perfections of virgin, spouse, and mother were not contradictory but complementary, so too, in Mary's virginal motherhood (with its bridal surrender to God), the perfection of virginity and motherhood are united in absolute integrity.

In Mary's being, in all her acts and relations to God, Mary is absolutely intact, whole, and integral. To say this symbolically is to say that Mary is a virgin. The integrity implied by her

virginity includes physical integrity, but it is far more extensive than this. It includes her total freedom from all sin, the integrity of salvation in her. It includes her total faithful assent to God's plan for her and for mankind. It is thus the integrity of obedience.

The disobedience of Eve resulted in the loss of her virginity in this large sense.⁶⁰ For sin distorts and divides the personality and turns it away from its God-given purpose. It disrupts the harmony of a man with himself, with God, with nature and with his fellowman. The early chapters of Genesis record this fourfold disruption. The English word *sin* helps to convey the divisive effect of *sundering* one from the other (as in the German *Sünde*).⁶¹ In formal language, the Council of Trent declared that it was "holiness and justice" that were lost by the first sin.⁶² And holiness is integrity or wholeness in the context of the divine plan.

Eve's sin lay in using her freedom without regard to God's will. The Virgin Mary, on the other hand, exercised her freedom in full accord with God's will. The obedience of Mary made possible that initial harmony or integrity of virginity and motherhood which had previously been severed by Eve's sin. The new Eve thus demonstrated in a surpassing way the virginal freshness and fruitfulness of the first creation.⁶³

Hence we see that Mary's permanent virginity is not to be regarded solely on the anatomical level, but rather on metaphysical and theological levels.⁶⁴ St. Augustine implies the larger meaning of virginity when he says: "There cannot be many in the Church who are physically virgins, but spiritually every one of the *faithful* should be a virgin. . . ."⁶⁵ And for our times, Pius XII has often indicated the transcendent character of virginity, on one occasion declaring that the fecundity of consecrated virginity which transcends the biological order and reaches into the spirit is "the most sublime fecundity and the most desirable that man can see."⁶⁶ Gertrude von le Fort says simply that "a virgin must accept the idea of spiritual motherhood, while the mother must repeatedly turn to spiritual virginity."⁶⁷

Accordingly, the two perfections of virginity and motherhood which were one in paradise have been reunited in the Christian era of grace. Mary's life typifies their perfect union, a union to be manifested variously in the life of the Church, the virginal Bride of Christ who will be, at one and the same time, virginal and fruitful, and whose permanent virginity flows from the integrity of her faith or, as Origen expresses it, from "the rightness of her beliefs and practices."⁸⁸ It is not without significance, therefore, that the Church looks to Mary for the preservation of integrity. "You alone have destroyed all heresies," the Church says of Mary in the Saturday Mass of the Septuagesima season.

Through Mary's virginal motherhood we see the extent of virginity's meaning. We learn that virginity is never merely negative and empty but is rather a filling with Christ's own redemptive fullness which, in turn, demands the focus of the whole human being in bridal response. Virginity is not sterility; it is fruitful or it is nothing. Its fruitfulness is made possible by faith in the Power of God, the overshadowing Spirit who, in the new creation, continues His creative work in the Church. (*Veni, Creator Spiritus!*)

To the person who sacrifices himself in the Christian virginal life, virginity brings not destruction but fulfillment and spiritual increase. Mary desired to be but the servant of the Lord (*Behold, thy handmaid!*). When she relied on divine fecundity rather than on human, she fulfilled herself in Christ in a way no other human mother could dream of doing. She became mother of God and mother of all men.

Mary showed, too, that both virginity and motherhood are always something more than biological states or processes. Every virgin must, in a sense, be a mother; every mother, in her surrender to God, a virgin. Virginity is not the avoidance of motherhood but its fulfillment on a higher plane. Indeed, in Mary, the Hebrew idea of a woman's value in the light of motherhood is not destroyed but abundantly fulfilled. In the Christian economy, through spiritual motherhood virgins, too, continue to bear

fruit. If the life of Christian virgins is loveless and fruitless, they are foolish virgins with lamps but no light. Physical integrity alone is not sufficient to bring wisdom. Only faith, issuing in love and obedience, makes virgins wise. To the woman extolling Mary's divine motherhood Jesus says: "Rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it." (Lk 11:28.)

All-Embracing Motherhood

As she is Mother of Christ, the Son of God, Mary's motherhood extends to all the redeemed, to all mankind. As she is Mother of Christ who is Head of the Church,⁶⁹ her motherhood extends to all the members of the Church, or, better, she is simply the mother of the whole Christ.⁷⁰ Each of these aspects of Mary's motherhood deserves to be considered here at least briefly.

Mother of Mankind

In Mary, the mission of Israel to bring together mankind and God was brought to fulfillment. In her womb, God espoused mankind through joining His divinity with humanity in the Word made flesh. The Church sings in her Christmas liturgy: "O admirable interchange!"

Mary's title as Mother of mankind, Mother of the redeemed, is not, however, a mere title. In the prayer which accompanies the Marian antiphon of the Advent season the Church prays: "O God, who by the fruitful virginity of blessed Mary hast given to mankind the rewards of eternal salvation. . . ." It is within Mary's bridal response, her *fiat*, that mankind takes on the fruits of salvation and thus becomes the Church. "To as many as *received* Him, He gave the power of becoming sons of God." (Jn 1:12.) Mary's *fiat* is thus, in a sense, *completed* by mankind as it receives Christ and thus becomes the Church. Her motherhood of mankind is realized more and more as the Church progresses toward its *pleroma*.

Mother of the Church

At the central hour of Christ's redemptive work, at the hour when this Church flowed forth from the side of Christ, Our Lord proclaimed and confirmed Mary for what she already was: "Woman, behold thy son." (Jn 19:26-27.) St. Ambrose says briefly that in this word of the dying Lord is fulfilled "the mystery of the Church."⁷¹

Although the Church had been sown by the Spirit in Mary's womb from the first, it needed the husbandry of the Passion to make it bear fruit.⁷² In a passage describing the Church as the Bride of Christ, St. Augustine says: "If a man should give his own blood for his bride, he would not live to take her for his wife. But our Lord, dying without fear, gave His blood for her [the Church] whom He was to obtain at His resurrection, and whom He had united to Himself in the Virgin's womb."⁷³ Mary stood beneath the cross voluntarily offering the sacrifice of her Son. Through co-experiencing (*fiat*) His redemptive death within her own being, she received the plenitude of redemption for the entire Church.⁷⁴ Her motherhood from that moment on was a motherhood of the fruitful, virginal Church united to Christ in His ever-actual posture of redemption. For the Church, in assuming and imparting the redemption of Christ, also gives birth. How is this done?

Let us look for a moment at the parallel between the Incarnation and the Resurrection. From Mary's inert virginal womb (symbolizing the weakness of the flesh), the Spirit created anew. On the cross, Christ succumbed to the weakness of the flesh, but he arose from the inert tomb by the *dynamis* (Power) of God. (Cf. 2 Cor 13:4.) From the inert womb of Mary and the inert tomb of Christ, life came forth through the creative power of the Spirit. Pope St. Leo says that "it is the same Spirit that gives power to the fountain of baptism as gave power to the Virgin to conceive."⁷⁵ The same Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ, is now

the active principle in the Church's virginal fecundity, in the Church's mothering of Christians in their new life as sons of God, in the Church's assimilation of Christ's riches of being and of life. At the baptismal font men are "born again of water and the Spirit." (Jn 3:5.) The power of the water is derived from the Spirit. It is the power of which the Church sings on Easter night.⁷⁶ An inscription in the baptistery of St. John Lateran says: "At this spring, the Church, our Mother, bears in her virginal womb the sons whom she has conceived under the breath of God."⁷⁷

As a child of Adam puts on the death and resurrection of Christ at the baptismal font and becomes a child of God, Christ's words to Mary on Calvary, "Woman, behold thy son!" are realized anew. Origen says: "Since Christ lives in him [the baptized], the word to Mary applies to him: 'Behold thy son—the anointed Christ.'"⁷⁸ In a spiritual sense, baptism is forever a continuation of the birth of Christ, conceived by the Spirit and born of a virgin. At the wedding festival of grace in the soul of the newly baptized, the Mother of Jesus is there along with Mother Church. For, already in her womb, Mary held the redeeming Christ whom we "put on" at our Christian rebirth. Hence St. Leo concludes that "the mass of us rising from the river of baptism have all been born with Christ at His birth."⁷⁹ Irenaeus likewise says: "Chastely Christ opened the chaste womb, so that thence men might similarly be reborn."⁸⁰

Prefigured in Sara, realized in Mary, and continued in the Church, a prolific virginal fertility now blossoms in the world. Little wonder, then, that on one of her special ecclesial feasts, Laetare Sunday, the Church cries out: "Rejoice thou barren, that dost not bear; . . . For many are the children of the desolate, more than of her that has a husband." (Is 54:1; Gal 4:27.) And St. Ambrose exclaims: "Where is there a woman like to the Church in multitude of children?"⁸¹

Sara's fruitfulness exceeded that of Agar; Mary's exceeds that of Sara; and Christ fulfills all virginal fecundity on the cross. The

ever-virgin Church continues in time to give birth by communicating to her children (in the dynamism of the Spirit) the redemptive work of Christ received first by Mary in her faithful and lasting *fiat*. Baptism becomes the first meeting-point of mankind with the redeeming Christ.

Each Christian, then, shares in Mary's *fiat* and in the virgin-fruitfulness of the Church to the extent that the redeeming Christ is rooted in his own life and from there is shown forth to the world in the Church's role of witness. It remains for us now to examine more closely the nature of the Church's virginal motherhood in order to discover in what manner He who is mighty continues to do great things in Mary, in the Church, and in the Christian.

NOTES

1. Emile Mersch, S.J., *The Theology of the Mystical Body* (St. Louis: Herder, 1951), p. 279.
2. John F. Bonnefoy, O.F.M., "The Predestination of Our Blessed Lady," *Mariology*, II, ed. Juniper B. Carol (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1957), p. 155.
3. A. Wendel, *Das Frei Laiengebet in Vorexilischen Israel* (Leipzig, 1932).
4. Bernard Murchland, C.S.C. (ed.), *God Speaks* (Chicago: Fides, 1959), p. 193.
5. Barnabas M. Ahern, C.P., "Mary and the Poor of Israel," *Cross and Crown*, 11:3, September 1959, p. 279.
6. Marc Oraison, *Illusion and Anxiety* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 56.
7. Julien Harvey, "The Prayer of Jeremias," *The Way*, 3:3, p. 171.
8. Notscher, *Das Buch Jeremias* (Bonn, 1934), p. 235.
9. Ahern, *art. cit.*, p. 282.
10. A. Causse, *Les Pauvres d'Israel* (Paris: Librairie Istra, 1922), p. 81.
11. Ahern, *art. cit.*, pp. 284-285.
12. Ages later, St. Bernard defined a virgin's love as "adhering to the Word with all her power, living for Him, being ruled by Him."
13. A. Gelin, *The Religion of Israel* (New York: Hawthorn, 1959), p. 63.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
15. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 32.
16. Cf. Hugo Rahner's analysis of this psalm in connection with the mean-

ing of Christ's passion and death: "On the Biblical Basis of the Sacred Heart Devotion" in *Heart of the Saviour*, ed. Josef Stierli (New York: Herder and Herder, 1957), pp. 25-26.

17. Gelin, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

18. Herbert McCabe, O.P., "What Is the Church?" *Life of the Spirit*, 15:80, June 1961, p. 533.

19. F. X. Durrwell, C.S.S.R., *In the Redeeming Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) p. 274.

20. Pius IX: Apostolic Letter *Ineffabilis Deus*, December 8, 1854, *Papal Documents of Mary*, ed. William J. Doheny and Joseph P. Kelly (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1954), p. 25.

21. For a concise explanation of Mary's fullness of grace (along with "greater" and "greatest" fullness) see "Mary's Fullness of Grace" by Frank P. Calkins, O.S.M., *Mariology*, II, pp. 297 ff.

22. Cf. Louis Bouyer, *The Seat of Wisdom* (New York: Pantheon, 1962), pp. 120-127.

23. Cf. Introit for Feast of Immaculate Conception.

24. Otto Semmelroth, *Mary: Archetype of the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 146-147.

25. Cf. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 30, a. 1.

26. Bouyer, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

28. St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, III, q. 30, a. 1.

29. St. Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate*, PL 40, col. 398.

30. Bouyer, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

31. Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., *The Gospel of Saint Luke*, Commentary (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1960), pp. 14-15.

32. In some patristic writings Mary is held as *receptive cause* of our salvation because of her receptivity based on active belief. Having totally opened herself and all mankind to the redemption, she may truly be called the *Cause of our Joy*.

33. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Sponsa Verbi* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1961), p. 171.

34. Bouyer, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

35. Stuhlmueller, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

36. Lucien Legrand, M.E.P., *The Biblical Doctrine of Virginity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 149.

37. Cf. St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, III, q. 28, a. 4.

38. St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, III, q. 30, a. 4.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Karl Rahner, S.J., *Mary, Mother of the Lord* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1962), p. 69.

41. Bouyer, *op. cit.*, p. 54; 150.

42. St. Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate*, PL 40, col. 399.

43. Tertullian, *De Carne Christi*, PL 2, col. 782.

44. Alexander Jones, "The Tool of God" in *Pattern of Scripture* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), pp. 89-90.
45. John Damascene, *De Fide Orthod.*, PL 94, col. 986.
46. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91.
47. Stuhlmueller, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
48. St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, III, q. 32, a. 4.
49. Cf. *Ibid.*, q. 32, a. 3.
50. Von Balthasar, *Sponsa Verbi*, p. 170.
51. St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, III, q. 30, a. 1.
52. Von Balthasar, *Sponsa Verbi*, p. 171.
53. St. Augustine, *Tract. VIII in Joannis Evangelium*, PL 35, col. 1452.
54. Bouyer, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
55. F. X. Durrwell, C.S.S.R., *The Resurrection* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), pp. 43-49.
56. Stuhlmueller, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
57. Gelin, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
58. E. Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 5.
59. Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, PG 7, and Justin, *Dialogue* 100, PG 6.
60. Werner Dettloff, O.F.M., "The Virgin Birth," *Theology Digest*, 7, pp. 55-56; 58.
61. Bruce Vawter, C.M., "Missing the Mark," *The Way*, 2:1, January 1962, p. 24.
62. *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, ed. H. Denzinger (Freiburg: Herder, 1953), n. 788.
63. "Eve, an undefiled virgin, gave birth to disobedience and death by conceiving the word of the serpent. But Mary, the Virgin, responded to the Angel Gabriel who brought her glad tidings by saying, 'Let it be done to me according to thy word,' and thus she conceived in faith and joy." (Justin: *Dialogue* 100, PG 6, col. 712.) In Justin's work, Mary is opposed to Eve for the first time in ancient Christian literature. Cf. Berthold Altaner's *Patrology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1960), p. 126.
64. Dettloff, *art. cit.*, p. 58.
65. St. Augustine, *Sermo 341*, PL 39, col. 1496.
66. Pius XII, "Discourse to Doctors," May 19, 1956, *AAS*, 48, pp. 467-74.
67. Gertrude von le Fort, *The Eternal Woman* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1954), p. 107.
68. Origen, *In Joan. frg. 45* (*Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*), 4:540, 15-17. Novatian also attributes the "perpetual virginity" of the Bride of Christ to the perfection and completeness of her doctrine. Cf. Johannes Quasten's *Patrology*, II (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1958), p. 23.
69. Cf. Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*: "Within Mary's virginal womb, Christ already bore the exalted title of Head of the Church." See also St.

Augustine, *Tract. VIII in Joannis Evangelium*, PL 35, col. 1452: "The womb of the Virgin Mary, in which He became Head of the Church. . . ."

70. In *De Unitate Ecclesiae*, PL 43, col. 395, St. Augustine says: "Christ complete is both Head and Body; the Head is the only Son of God; His Body is the Church. One is the Bridegroom, the other is the Bride, two in one flesh."

71. St. Ambrose, *Expositio Evang. Sec. Luc.*, PL 15, col. 1838.

72. Durrwell, *The Resurrection*, p. 202.

73. St. Augustine, *Tract. VIII in Joannis Evangelium*, PL 35, col. 1452.

74. Semmelroth, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

75. St. Leo, *Sermo 24*, PL 54, col. 206.

76. Hugo Rahner, *Our Lady and the Church* (New York: Pantheon, 1961), p. 69.

77. Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Splendor of the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), p. 245. (Hugo Rahner, in *Our Lady and the Church*, p. 62, attributes these words to St. Leo the Great.)

78. Origen, *Comment. in Joan.*, PG 14, col. 32.

79. St. Leo, *Sermo 26: In Nativitate Domini*, PL 54, col. 213.

80. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, PG 7, col. 1080.

81. St. Ambrose, *De Virginibus I*, PL 16, col. 208.

*And I will set you as a signet ring;
for I have chosen you, says the Lord
of hosts. (Ag 2:23.)*

4 THE CHURCH, VIRGIN-BRIDE

Notion of Covenant

THE ISRAEL of old was a covenanted people, and so is the Church. Both owe their origin, their life, and their all to the covenant God made with them, a covenant which Sacred Scripture describes in nuptial terms.

One of the central concepts of the Israelite and the whole Jewish-Christian tradition is, therefore, that of covenant,¹ a two-fold bond of love woven on the axis of divine invitation and human response. In order to fathom the nature of the Church as virgin-bride, we must begin with the notion of covenant. Everything is in this word.²

We have already lingered long on the love-bond which Yahweh set up with Israel on Mount Sinai. God's covenant with Israel was truly unique, but many covenants anterior to it help to explain both the Sinai alliance itself and the new and eternal covenant toward which it led and in which it culminated. We shall derive fruit for our present theme, therefore, if we push back even farther into the Old Testament for shafts of light on the covenant idea.

Pact with Adam

A covenant relationship between God the creator and man the creature is implied in the pact God made with Adam in the garden of paradise. In the Yahwist account of creation, the writer instinctively pictures God issuing His orders in the negative terms of a covenant: ". . . from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat." (Gen 2:17.) It was only natural for the Yahwist writer, who lived in the time of the Sinai covenant, to color his account with his own experience.⁸ Here in paradise, then, is an implied, if not explicit, covenant between God and man.

Pledge to Noah

Another early instance of the covenant idea is the promise God made to Noah after the cataclysm of the deluge. This alliance reached beyond the human world and in some way embraced the material universe, as the bow in the clouds indicates. In some strange way, God's blessing upon Noah affected the earth and the seasons. It drew into its orbit the motley array of birds, beasts, and creeping things which tumbled out of the ark after Noah's dove had verified the possibility of disembarking. (Cf. Gen:9.) A contemporary poet, Carmen Bernos De Gasztold, has captured some of the all-embracing character of God's promise to Noah as she records, in a set of simple fables, what the ark animals have to say on behalf of their rational brothers.

The theme of nature's part in man's restoration, first found in the flood account, is taken up again elsewhere in Scripture. When the prophet Hosea announced a new covenant, he saw it to be so rich that nature would also be made a part of it. (Cf. 2:4-20.) Again sung out from the belly of a raging, fiery furnace by three intrepid youths (Dan 3:57 ff.), the theme of universal redemption finally receives its full scriptural development in the thought of St. Paul.

The impact of this theme upon Christian living is shown best, perhaps, by the ever gay and poor Francis of Assisi who shared his redemptive joy with Sister Water and Brother Fire. In our day, the theme waits to burst forth in cosmic splendor. Its flames have been fanned especially through the energetic and paschal insights of Teilhard de Chardin. From his earliest childhood, the remarkable Teilhard felt a fundamental joy in certain material objects, or rather, in something that "shone" at the heart of these things.⁴

Coming back to the theme in Genesis, we note that God Himself called His covenant with Noah a pledge "with creation." Noah's universe was washed clean as Christ would some day wash the whole earth in the redemptive flood of baptism. The liberation which the universe has continually yearned to realize through man's redemption is coming to fulfillment day by day in the New Covenant. The immense role open to the Church in bringing all creation to its true fruit-bearing will unfold later in this study.

Promise to Abraham

From God's covenant with Noah and all of nature, let us pass on to the direct forerunner of the Sinai alliance, God's covenant with Abraham. We shall limit ourselves to the features which show some progression over previous divine-human agreements. Repeating the essential framework of divine initiative (God's word) and human response (Abram's answer), the covenant with Abraham shows a dialogic character ("Then God said". . ."and Abram answered"). Moreover, God's covenant with Abraham was sealed in sacrificial blood and a divine flame and was visibly prolonged through the rite of circumcision, an identifying inscription in the flesh of man. Finally, the covenant contained the promise of a visible reward and a blessing of human fertility extending far beyond Abraham's own lifetime. To a Semite,

whose great hope lay in his posterity, the covenant-promise of countless progeny must have been particularly attractive.

Perhaps most significant in God's covenant with Abraham, however, is the divine appeal to faith: "Leave your country . . . for the land which I will show thee," the Lord said to Abram. (Gen 12:1.) Here is the fundamental call to faith, a call to leave the visible and familiar and enter into what is divinely promised but unknown. Throughout the covenant-making and its testing period, Abraham's faith was not wanting. At God's command, this man of faith was ready to sacrifice his own beloved son, the firstfruit of the covenant and the key to its ultimate fulfillment. Abraham's unwavering faith was rewarded with an immeasurable increase of blessings. In New Covenant days, St. Paul would not have Jew or Gentile forget the debt owed to "our father Abraham." (Rom 4:12.)

Love-Pact with Israel

The oath God made with Abraham was the basis for the momentous and irrevocable alliance formed on Mount Sinai against a background of thunder and lightning which accented the holiness of God and the solemnity of the occasion. In this pact of love with Israel, the divine gratuity is more evident than ever before. The Israelites were singled out, not through any merit on their part, but rather, as Deuteronomy recalls, because of Yahweh's love and His fidelity to the oath He had made with their fathers. (Cf. Dt 7:8.) The call of the Israelites began to take shape in the liberating gesture of the first passover: their ransom from Egyptian bondage and idolatry.

Unique features of the Sinai covenant are these: the role of Moses as mediator for the people; covenant ratification in the sprinkling of blood and the sharing of a sacred meal; the law given on tables of stone as a tangible pledge of fidelity to the covenant; the solemn covenant-form and reading; the intimate converse of Moses with the Lord; the revelation of the divine name; and the

All God's dealings with men show forth this fundamental rhythm: a divine call on the one hand and a human response on the other, the latter flowing from the energies transmitted by the divine call. "Whom shall I send?" God would one day ask Isaiah. "Here I am. Send me," Isaiah would answer. (Cf. Is 6:8.) In this ebb and flow of invitation and response, involving God and the individual or God and the community, the whole of Old Testament revelation has taken place.

Covenant is simply God's love for man being extended to him in the shape of a formal agreement. If man gives his consent, if he says *yes* to the covenant, he lets himself be bound by divine love. He opens himself to infinity. But, wielding his God-given autonomy in the arrogance of his first parents, man may choose to say *no* to the covenant. A negative response rejects the offer of love and locks a man in on himself to live a prisoner to his own limitations.

Reciprocal Love

God asked Moses to tell the Israelites: "If you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine." (Exod 19:5-6.) Even though God launches the initiative in a covenant, He lets man's responding love determine the intensity and extent of divine gifts. He who chooses would be chosen. He who gives would be sought. This mutuality and reciprocal rhythm is the dynamic pattern of true love. It is the pattern of marriage.

The word *response* contains the heart of the covenant as a nuptial bond. The origin of the word itself is found under the word *spouse*. There is something final in the word *spouse* like the expression *fiat*, Let it be done! For the word *spouse*, coming from the old French *spose* or the Latin *spondere*, *sponsus*, means *Spoken!* It signifies something spoken or pledged, as the expression *to espouse a cause* implies. The present tense of the French verbal form *épouser*, with various prefixes, is used to build English

words such as *respond*, *sponsor*, *despondent*. The word *respond* contains the idea of answering, replying, or even promising. Larger meanings of the word include the notion of an act of response which flows from another's pressure or persuasion. Certain forms of the verb even contain the idea of *answering oneself*. The French phrase *nos coeurs se répondent* reflects this idea of a heart-to-heart relationship made one through the answering act.⁷

The word *response* is thus well stamped with nuptial nuances. Used in reference to covenant, the word conveys the meaning of a mutual answering act, a reply, a reciprocal relationship of love. It is this type of response in love which expresses the nuptial character of covenant.

We shall soon see that the primary and fundamental nuptial relationship is that of God loving man in covenant, a love made progressively more unitive by the Sinai alliance, the Incarnation (the marriage of God with humanity through Christ), and finally the New and Everlasting Covenant which is Christ's loving union with His bridal Church. All lesser unions share, reflect, and help to express this fundamental union of God with man.

The prophets' presentation of the covenant as a marriage union is not, therefore, to equate it with a mere domestic bond. Nor is it a metaphorical way of explaining Yahweh's relationship with Israel. The prophets seized upon the essence of the covenant—undivided, reciprocal love—and saw Yahweh's union with Israel for what it really was, a marriage union. We who now enjoy New Testament revelation see how this alliance of old developed and flowered into a covenant surpassingly great. We still anticipate its final manifestation in the "marriage with the Lamb." (Apoc 19:7.) So, although domestic bonds help to interpret the greatest of all marriages—God's wedding with mankind—the fundamental marriage will ever be the divine-human alliance in its various progressive forms.

The meaning and culmination of all salvation history may thus be seen as the realization of a marriage covenant in which God

takes the initiative, and man, as responding bride, opens himself to God and presses on toward Him with the longing cry: *Come.*⁸

Man's Response

As one who receives, man is always a bride in his relationships with God. Whenever God speaks to man, He expects a bridal response from him. Response is not a mere word of reply, however. Nor is it mere momentary acceptance. Genuine response to God is living and continual.

It remains for us now to examine the quality of various responses which men have made to God throughout salvation history. While focusing on the element of human response, we hope not to eclipse the other and prior element of divine initiative. For human response, even though it is freely autonomous, flows only from the grace of God's initial overture.

Throughout the many centuries of God's unfolding revelation, a successively deeper and more perfect response has been asked for, finally reaching its perfection in the response of Jesus Christ Himself to the Father. We shall here examine four responses prior, in time, to that of Jesus Christ but leading, nonetheless, to His perfect response. Arriving at Christ's perfect *yes*, we shall then go on to see how the Church and the Christian are given this very *yes* with which to make their response to God.

Abraham Believed

What does God look for in the response of his creature, man? First and fundamentally, *faith*. We have already noted Abraham's faith in the promise God made to him. The perfection of Abraham's faith lay in his total commitment to the God who spoke to him. The patriarch's whole life was a responding life: Abraham set forth, Abraham journeyed, Abraham moved on. Scripture further records that Abraham did all these things because *he believed*. When asked to sacrifice his only son Isaac, in whom the

fulfillment of the promise was rooted, Abraham might well have considered the request a cruel joke. Or he might at least have begun a bargaining plea, hoping to come out as successfully as he did on behalf of his relatives in Sodom. He might have reminded God of Isaac's key role in the covenant's success. He did none of these things. Scripture records with poignant brevity: "And he went." The hill of sacrifice was long and steep. It was Abraham's faith that brought him to the top. Here God's meaning clearly rewarded him.

Through Abraham's faith he became "the father of us all." (Rom 4:17.) The fulfillment of God's promise was thus "the outcome of faith." (Rom 4:16.)

As He Was Bidden

Whereas Abraham is extolled for his faith, Moses is cited not for his faith but rather for doing "as Yahweh commanded." The key to the fulfillment of both vocations, however, is faith. The faith of Moses is implied in his obedience—faith in action, faith manifested. Moses could not have fulfilled his vocation as leader of the Chosen People on any terms other than faith in its most comprehensive meaning. Moses' call to lead the sons of Israel out of Egypt was answered only in faith. His dealings with the Pharaohs, the flight from Egypt toward an unknown land of promise, the wanderings in the desert—all these steps in Israel's progressive election were built on faith. When Moses observed the apostasy of his people at the very moment when God was calling them into a covenant with Himself, nothing short of faith in the divine promise could have sufficed to keep him a loyal leader to this stiff-necked and hard-hearted lot.⁹ In the absence of Moses, the Chosen People had failed in faith and had demanded of Aaron a golden calf, an obvious god, to lead them. Moses had to keep on believing that, despite their unbelief, these were God's elect people.

The New Testament writer of Hebrews verifies the faith of the

early patriarchs and leaders at the same time that he explains their interim role in God's plan: "These also, one and all, though commemorated for their faith, did not receive the promised blessings because, having us in mind, God had a better plan, that only in our company would they reach perfection." (Heb 11:39-40.)

"You would not listen"

As we have noted elsewhere, the response of the virgin-bride Israel to the bridegroom, Yahweh, was at best a wavering one. It fluctuated between the supernatural vision given to them as a chosen race and their natural outlook as an ambitious nation.

Their beginning was good. To Moses the Israelites had promised: "Everything Yahweh has said, we will do." (Exod 14:8.) The moment they made this positive response, they began to *be*. Their early apostasy at Sinai at the very moment of the covenant-making was symptomatic, however, of a long line of subsequent and odious infidelities.

As time went on and Israel's fidelity was further put to test, the vigor of her first response weakened. Rather than depend on God, Israel began to chart her own path of survival by alliances with foreign powers. She began to worship man-made, obvious gods. Yahweh made his voice of warning sound through the prophets. But the oscillating and compromising behavior continued. The prophet Elias asked: "How long will you limp upon two diverse opinions? If Yahweh be God, follow him, but if Baal, follow him!" (3 Kgs 18:21.) Israel began her downfall by being neither hot nor cold.

Her *no* became stronger and definitive, finally bringing her to the nation's inevitable collapse.¹⁰ Through the brooding words of Jeremiah, God Himself lamented: "I spoke to you untiringly, but you would not listen . . . you would not listen." (Jer 25:3-7.)

Since the prophets had perceived Israel's bond with God to be a nuptial union, her defection was called *adultery*. Yet, all was not lost. Yahweh answered faithlessness with faithfulness. Man

could refuse God's love; he could not, however, destroy it. Yahweh issued another "smaller" call to repentance. The truest Israel, the remnant band, answered the call. The holy and insignificant *anawim* repented for all. These blessed poor of the Old Testament eagerly waited for the universal and lasting alliance of the New. Through a strong and tenacious *yes* with which they replied to God in a series of purifying crises, they became a strong bridge to the coming Kingdom. They became the nucleus of the true and all-embracing Israel of God. Although the new Israel would be distinct from the faithless nation of the Old Covenant, she would nevertheless be a continuation of God's people because of the faithful remnant liaison, the tiny but true Israel. As a nation, Israel failed as a covenant partner. As a people of God, however, she continues to exist in the unlimited future of the New Covenant. (Cf. Rom 11.)

"Be it done to me"

For a human response that is unexcelled, we look to Mary. To God's challenging word of invitation and promise, Mary's response was an unhesitating *fiat*: "Yes, behold the handmaid of the Lord, Be it done to me according to your word." (Lk 1:38.)

To God's word asking for her involvement in the destiny of a divine child to be conceived by the power of God, Mary showed herself responsible. With her clear perspective of God as Lord and herself as the servant of the Lord, Mary saw only one answer fitting for this relationship. The answer was *yes*.

If Abraham and Moses were men of faith, Mary was the perfect woman of faith. As the vehicle of his admiration, St. Luke uses Elizabeth, who exclaims of Mary: "Blessed is she who has believed." (Lk 1:45.) Mary's own *Magnificat* is a song of faith. It shows the vitality, joy, exuberance, and freedom which come to one who says a faithful *yes* to God.

Mary's response to the angel's announcement contained all the rest of her *fiats*. Although these *fiats* were asked for and given

one by one throughout her life, they were never less total, never less ready than the large *fiat* which she gave at the Annunciation. Her permanent virginity, both as Virgin and Mother, remained the sign of her total *yes* based on active faith in the divine plan. Even so, however, a second stage of covenant-fulfillment in which Mary's *fiat* was asked for and given must here be specifically mentioned, namely, her response to Christ's redemptive sacrifice. This acceptance was already mysteriously given to the angel who spoke of "a Savior . . . who is the Messiah-Lord!" (Lk 2:11.) For Mary, and those steeped in Scripture, a savior could mean nothing less than one who takes away sin. For those who held Israel in bondage were not merely political enemies. As Mary stood by the cross of her Son, she reaffirmed the first *yes* she had given to God at the annunciation. She now said *yes* to the final, climaxing moment of redemption.

On Calvary Mary became a type of the Church imparting salvation insofar as, by reuniting her will to Christ and assuming His sacrificial work ("Behold thy son!"), she received the fruit of this work for herself and for the whole Church. When the Church was born on the cross, Mary was there being "pierced" with Christ, helping to "bear" the Church in her Son's birth-giving moment.

Even though her relationship to Christ and the Church is wholly that of virgin-mother, Mary's disposition is always one of true bridal surrender. On Calvary this was not less true. Leo XIII calls Mary "the worthy co-operator (*ministra*) in the accomplishment of the mysteries of salvation."¹¹ Her cooperation with Christ's redemption was receptive in the highest meaning of the word, as an active yielding and acceptance. Mary showed that readiness for self-sacrifice and openness to the Spirit from on high is a most decisive human act. She willed what her Son willed even to death.

In the twofold "Behold . . . son and mother," Mary actively appropriated Christ's redemption for herself and for the whole Church. At that moment she became an eminent vessel for the

graces which the Church would receive from Christ. Receiving only to give, her active reception flows forth in a productive relationship with the Church in which she continues to collaborate with the redeeming Christ, always supposing His activity as principal cause. She thus remains the transcendent archetype of the Church both as redeemed and as redeeming¹² because of the vigor and totality of her *yes*.¹³

Mary's fruitful response to God was given at every moment of her life. It was made explicit in worldwide significance at the moment of the Incarnation and at the moment of Christ's saving death. It continues as Mary, now in glory, is fully united with her Son in His glory and in His ever-actual posture of redemption.

At the Incarnation Mary gave her *yes* for all mankind. On Calvary Mary gave her *yes* for all the redeemed. She continues to say *yes* as, through the Church, the number of mankind becomes one with the number of believers in whom the saving work of Christ is realized. True Marian spirituality is, for this reason, more than mere enthusiasm for Mary. It is laying hold of her bridal surrender and faith in order to synchronize her *yes* with that of the believing Church and the believing Christian.

Christ's Response

Christ announced that He came into this world to accomplish the will of the One who sent Him. (Cf. Jn 4:34-35.) All previous and subsequent responses by which men have pleased or shall please God take their origin from Jesus Christ, the one perfect response to the Father.

In the eternal society of the Godhead, the Father receives an indescribably full response from the Word. That same Word made flesh spent Himself lifting up the human race to the dynamic dialog which He shares with the Father and Holy Spirit. In the framework of Mary's *yes*, Christ, the Son of God, began His human career of positive response to the Father.¹⁴

Not only is Jesus Christ the perfect positive response to God's initiative or invitation. He is at once the emergence into history of God's invitation to live in communion with Him, and also the perfect human response to this invitation.¹⁵ In the New Testament, Christ Himself became the embodiment of the loving covenant between man and God. God's fidelity and man's would both be realized together in the history of Jesus Christ.

Throughout His redeeming life Christ was possessed with the thought of total response. He had come in order to respond to His Father's will even to death on a cross. As Incarnate Son, as God-man, Christ's intimacy of life with the Father entered into the sphere of true dependence. For, indeed, to be man is to be a creature. To be a creature is to be dependent and thus able to respond in sacrifice.¹⁶ Christ's divine-human life became one of self-giving response, of sacrificial offering to the Father: "He offered Himself without blemish to the Father." (Heb 9:14.)

Throughout His whole life, Christ was being "delivered up" to His Father's will. The "handing over" (*traditus*) to Judas, which the Holy Week liturgy seems to repeat endlessly, was the summit in a series of deliverances which had become the fabric of Christ's earthly life. Further delivered to human instruments of torture in the person of Pilate, Herod, and Caiphaz, and finally delivered up to death, Christ answered *Amen* to all these deliverances. The Thursday Supper celebrated, in advance, His climactic deliverance on Calvary: "My body, which is being delivered for you; My blood of the New Covenant which shall be shed for you." (Lk 22:19-20.) In fact, the term *handed over*, which became a *terminus technicus* for the treacherous act of Judas, is applied over and over in the economy of salvation. The Father handed over Christ for us all (cf. Rom 8:22); Christ handed Himself over to the Father (cf. Gal 2:20 and Eph 5:25); likewise, Christ is handed over for our sins and raised for our justification. (Cf. Rom 4:25.) In the New Covenant, Christ continues to hand Himself over for man's redemption. Christians, in turn, hand themselves over in faith to Christ's activity in baptism.

They deliver themselves up to Christ in a life of virginal oblation. At the end of time, Christ will hand over the finished universe to the Father.

As we have said, the climactic moment of deliverance was the moment when, in awful stillness, Christ yielded up His spirit to the Father. As the Sinai covenant was ratified in sacrificial blood which marked the Israelites for God, so the New and Eternal Covenant was realized and ratified by Christ in His redemptive shedding of blood on the cross. At the moment when blood and water flowed from the pierced side of Christ, the Church, beautiful Bride, was born and marked for God. She came to birth in water and in blood, in the Spirit and in the Lord. Just as the Israelites, in the passover-event, were led to freedom through the mark of blood and the water of the Red Sea, so Christ's Bride was freed from the bondage of sin in Christ's own passover, made visible by blood and water.¹⁷

Since response calls forth response, the God-man's sacrifice was consummated only in His resurrection, the act by which the Father's responding acceptance was shown and which, with Christ's death, forms a single redemptive reality. In His priestly prayer (Jn 17:1ff.), Christ had asked that His offering might be taken to God and that, by being thus accepted, it might be fruitful for Him and for those who believe in Him. To this end He asked that the glory of God should descend on His sacrifice and impregnate it.¹⁸ The return of man to God, taking place first in Jesus, was completed only when the "likeness of sinful flesh" was consumed in the transformation of His human nature which took place in the Resurrection.¹⁹ In the Resurrection, the glory of God was poured out upon Christ through the transforming Spirit, in whose power the Father raised Christ to a new life. Born of the Virgin as a son of David by the power of the Spirit, on Easter day He was reborn into new life as the Son of God by the power of the same Spirit.²⁰ It is the same Spirit of the risen Christ who gives life to the Church-Bride, who makes the Church

fruitful, and who bears witness to Christ to the ends of the world.

All of Christ's appearances after His resurrection make explicit reference to the Church. They show His disciples in a direct and tangible way how Christ will remain with them "all days." (Mt 28:20.) Christ stresses that He will be visible in principle only to believers: "Be not unbelieving, but believing." (Jn 20:28.) Those who believe say, "It is the Lord." (Jn 21:7.) Those who know Him in faithful companionship say, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (Lk 24:32.)

The faith given to the Church is a divine gift guaranteed by the risen Christ: "He has risen, as he said." (Mt 28:6.) The historical Church, a universal Bride, is called to continue, through faith and the sacraments, the life of Christ with men. On Pentecost the Spirit will be visibly manifested as the Church's active principle. But all that the Spirit will do in the Church will be drawn out of Christ's redemptive work. For Christ declared: "He shall receive of mine." (Jn 16:14-15.)

Throughout His life among men on earth Christ did not waver between *yes* and *no* in responding to His Father. That is why we, children of the Church, speak our *Amen* through Him when we give glory to God. (Cf. 2 Cor 1:19-20.) In the Church, the Christian people of God join Christ in His perfect and everlasting response: *Yes, Amen!*

The Church's Response

The man Jesus, the Son of God, is in His humanity the only way to the actuality of the Redemption. "For there is one God, and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Tim 2:5.)

The covenant of old, so often breaking down, found definitive success in Christ. It is therefore only through Christ, the personal visible embodiment of the New Covenant, that anyone enters into communion with the living God. Since the historical

man Jesus is the primordial sacrament making visible to men the saving action of God, human encounter with Him is the sacrament of encounter with God.²¹ It is the way a man lays hold of Christ's perfect response to the Father.

As Jesus Christ is the sacrament of man's encounter with God, so the Church is the sacrament of man's encounter with Christ. St. Leo the Great declares: "What was visible in Christ has now passed over into the sacraments of the Church."²² The Church is the historical embodiment of Christ in the world. The Church shows to the world what the risen Christ showed to Thomas: the victorious and efficacious wounds in His hands and side. The Church does this so that, believing, the world may have life in Christ's name.

Just as the Israel of old was born in an exodus from tyranny and bondage, so the Church has been born to a life of freedom through Christ's exodus from death to life. On the cross, Christ immersed the Church "in the bath of water by means of the word." (Eph 5:26.) He united Himself with her as with a chaste virgin-bride (cf. 2 Cor 11:2), a bride dead to the flesh and alive in the Spirit of God.²³

Because she is one with Christ, her Head and Bridegroom, the Church acts in Christ. Her official actions, the sacraments, are Christ's own actions touching men of all times personally and palpably. It is the Church-Bride who makes the mediation of grace by the man Jesus a lasting reality.²⁴

But the Church, constituted by faith and the sacraments, is not only a mediator of salvation. She is also the realization of salvation within herself. Through Christ, her Bridegroom, salvation has truly come to her. In her members, however, this salvation must be assimilated in the perspective of history. Out of this tension between what has fully come and what is yet to unfold from this coming, the days allotted to the Church are determined.²⁵ The Church journeys on in faith, day by day, becoming what she is. Day by day, in her members, she comes nearer to her *pleroma* in Christ.

Although the Church is not only a mystery of faith, it is precisely the Church as a mystery of faith which shows her bridal character. Salvation is marital. God wants to save His bride, mankind, not by overpowering her will, but rather by summoning her to make her own free choice. As a Bride, the Church is asked to assent to the work of the Bridegroom. By this faithful assent, itself a grace coming from Christ, the Church receives in the sacraments the fruits of the Redemption and an intimate share in Christ's life. In so receiving she, as a Bride, is perfected. She is filled with Christ.

The Church lives as a Bride because of the *fiat* she pronounces to her Bridegroom. Her life is one with Him in the oneness of the Mystical Body. In the Old Testament, Israel was Yahweh's bride but not yet His Body. In the New Testament, the new Israel is, at one and the same time, both Christ's Bride and His Body. Bossuet describes the unity of this truth when he says:

Fundamentally it is all the same thing: Jesus Christ loved the Church and made her His Bride; Jesus Christ has fulfilled His marriage with the Church and has made her His Body. This is the truth: "Two in one flesh, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23) as was said of Adam and Eve. And, says the Apostle, it is a great sacrament in Jesus Christ and His Church (Eph 5:32). Thus the unity of body is the supreme confirmation of the name of Bride. Praise be to God for linking together these ever-adorable truths!²⁶

As Bride and Body, the Church continually confronts Christ to lay hold of the work accomplished by Him. She accepts His work as her work, not only by receiving it but by imparting it. It is this free and total bridal response which is termed the Marian element in the Church,²⁷ a disposition of complete openness and readiness for the Divine Seed²⁸ which falls on the good ground of faith. Mary's virginity was the fruit of faith and a sign of her total commitment to God. The Church, too, is virginally free for Christ, always open to His word, which takes root in her soil and

bears fruit. In her bridehood, the Church, too, is simultaneously virgin, bride, and mother.

Mary, Virgin of virgins, expressed this threefold role of the Church as its primordial image. Christian virgins who have pledged their virginity to Christ within the Church similarly share and manifest the Church's virginal, bridal, and motherly nature.

As there is only one priesthood in the Church, so there is only one bridehood. Through baptism and confirmation, all Christians share in the one priesthood in some degree. Through holy orders, certain Christians are called to share in the one priesthood in the highest degree. Likewise, all Christians, through their baptism in Christ, share in the Church's bridehood as they fulfill, in both a personal and social way, their total and unique commitment to Him. Through consecrated virginity, certain baptized Christians are called to share in the Church's one bridehood in the fullest way. They are called to embody the Church's own bridal mystery in their whole person.

Consequently the Church is, in the words of St. Peter Damian, "mysteriously total" in each Christian.²⁹ Each Christian has a priestly function and a bridal function, if these terms are understood in their largest meaning. As the Church radiates, in the person of her baptized children, the nature which she is, she becomes clothed in unity and variety.

For, whether the Church is manifesting priesthood or bridehood, she has only one fundamental function, the function of *loving service*. This is, in the end, the way in which the Church brings Christ to the world, to history, to human society. Each member of the Church is a servant of Christ by being a servant to all Christ's members. The Church's hierarchy structures and organizes this service (cf. Eph 4:12) while becoming to the flock the most exemplary pattern of service.

To be a member of the Church means to be a loving servant of God. Christians who are called to represent Christ as the Head of the Church in certain hierarchical positions receive the responsi-

bility of service a second time and in a higher manner. Their authority as priests or bishops is within the general order of Christian service, not outside it. The call to service is, for them, intensified; it becomes Christ's own care for the brethren. Nor is service merely an optional personal quality to be developed by those in authority; it is an essential constituent of any authority which is Christian. For in His life on earth Jesus was among us as one who serves.³⁰ He continues this life of service within the Church in various degrees of intensity according to the Church's structure. It is the Church, then, who determines with what radiance and warmth the loving face of Christ will shine forth in this very day, in this nation, in this village, in this countryside.

Christian virgins, who represent the Church as Body or Bride rather than as Head or Bridegroom, are by no means exempt from a life of witnessing service. On the contrary, they also assume a role of intensified service because of their identification with the Bride who follows her serving Bridegroom. Their basic service to the Church is their dedicated life which gives living testimony to Christ's nuptial union with His Church. In addition, they serve their fellowman in any way in which the Church's authority has specified that Christian *agape* will be expressed by them in the world: worship, missionary labors, social service, teaching, caring for the sick, artistic and creative work, the hidden service of prayer, penance, and suffering.³¹ These are ways in which they are committed to show the loving face of Christ to the world and to proclaim the Easter news again and again.

To accept and live more generously this role of witnessing service may demand from the contemporary Church a profound conversion. Both Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI have tried to make clear to Christians, in different but complementary ways, that it is love, flowing forth in service, that will make all things new and all men one. The Church is the representative of Christ in the world. Her first task is to show forth Christ as One who loves and serves. Love is above all charisms. Love, spread abroad, is the prelude to faith.

The notion of Christian service flowing from love brings us to the heart of the Church's nuptial life. All that the believing Bride is and does she receives from her Bridegroom, who is with her "as one who serves." The Bride responds to Him by serving and caring for Him in His members. Christ and His Bride celebrate their union in the Church by mutual service, He to His Bride, and she to her Bridegroom.

If love serves, it also sacrifices. Christ loves and serves His Church "even unto death." In the Eucharist, His sacrificial death is actualized each day "until He comes." St. Paul says that "a man . . . keeps [his own flesh and blood] fed and warmed." Referring to the love of husband and wife, he adds: ". . . and so it is with Christ and his Church." (Eph 5:29.) It is in the Eucharist that the Church-Bride is fed and given the warmth of divine love. It is in the Eucharist that Christ shows to what extent He cares (*carus*-dear) for His Bride.

How does the Church-Bride respond to the Eucharist? The terms of the New Covenant have been reduced to one: *love*. The Church's only answer to Christ's sacrificial love, delivered to her in the Eucharist, is the answer of love. At the Last Supper the twelve apostles were invited to adhere personally to the New Covenant and to ratify it by sharing it as friends. The whole purpose of the New Covenant is unity in love. St. Paul described the Eucharist as "the one bread which makes us one body." (1 Cor 10:17.) It is in the Eucharist that the Church-Bride receives the strength to love all men with Christ's own love. Personal encounter with Christ in the Eucharist always links the Christian both with God and with all other men. The Christian, like the biblical man, is never alone before God. He is always among brothers, for he is a man of the covenant.³² He is responsible for his brothers as Moses was for his or the remnant of Israel were for theirs. If the Eucharist deepens a man's union with Christ, it must, as a consequence, deepen his genuine love for others and union with them. The two realities are essentially one and cannot be torn apart. "See how these Christians love one another." The

Church is identified through love made visible among her members. Love reveals the Church; lack of it conceals the Church.

In summary, then, the Church responds to the Eucharist by loving as Christ loves and by showing the face of the Bridegroom to the world. Where this love is lacking, where the Christian deviates from his task of love or compromises it, the Church's witnessing mission is, in some degree, thwarted, and her task in the world is both lengthened and made more laborious.

Along with the bread of life, Christ also feeds His Church-Bride with Scripture, the bread of light. How does the Church respond to the word of God? As the corporate Church, she lets this living word fall on the good soil of faith, where it may spring up and bring forth fruit. She likewise expands the scriptural word of God, not by revealing new things, but by bringing the Spirit to light up the truths that are already present. She helps to let the sacred word advance and declare itself more clearly.

The scriptural word is continually alive in the Church's center where, in the Eucharist as sacrament and sacrifice, it receives a constant, living impact toward fruitfulness.³⁸ The scriptural word is alive whenever the Christian, through a faithful response in his own life, sends this word back to God loaded with love and good works. God sends forth His revelatory word to His Bride in the hope that it may not return to Him fruitless. (Cf. Is 55: 11.)

Response of the Christian

Each Christian is given the voice of Christ with which to make his response to the Father. No mere human response on purely human initiative could link a man with God. And we have seen that it is in the Church that a man encounters Christ, his link with God. If the Church is the sacrament of every man's encounter with Christ, so the Christian himself in turn becomes a *sacrament*, a sign of Christ, insofar as he realizes within himself the features of Christ, his Brother, and manifests them to the world. He becomes, *in medio Ecclesiae*, a mirror to the world of the loving face of Christ.

The earthly career of Jesus Christ was not merely an object lesson to the Christian on how to respond to God. Christ's own response has been given to the Church-Bride who, in the Spirit, continues to cry out: *Abba, Father!* Each man is invited to identify his own voice with the one perfect *yes* of Christ which rises up in the Church.

If a man fully responds to God only through Christ in the Church, it is necessary that a living contact be made with the Church. The Church is at once a society and a living and life-giving Body. Contact with the Church may be made, therefore, only in a living, personal, and social way. How is this done? Through the sacraments which link man at once with Christ and with the society of the Church.

In the fundamental sacrament of baptism, the timid, vacillating response of man is exchanged for the firm and loving voice of Christ as he says *yes* and *Amen* to the Father. The Apocalypse, in fact, speaks of Jesus Himself as the *Amen*, "the true and faithful witness, the origin of God's creation." (Apoc 3:14-15.) In baptism the Christian becomes an object of the same saving activity by which the Father "handed over His Son for our sins and raised Him for our justification." (Rom 4:25.) Through baptism, the Christian begins to share in Christ's own sonship and to move, with Christ, toward the Father in positive response. In the one sonship of Christ, the Christian truly "rises up" and goes to his Father. "Through Him [Christ]," says St. Paul, "we both have access in one Spirit to the Father." (Eph 2:18.) In his complete person, the Christian is united with Christ's own person in the saving act of His death and resurrection. By faith, the Christian lives "in the Son of God." (Cf. Gal 2:20.) He is thus totally committed to Christ. The dynamic dying-rising act of Christ will flower by becoming co-active with the Christian's own daily dyings and risings. For the Spirit who acts in Christ now acts in the Christian.

As in Mary's receptivity, the Christian's *Amen* in Christ is something active and dynamic, not passive and static. In the dynamism of baptism, the Christian—through the power of the

Spirit within him—personally confirms and accepts all that God offers him as a free cooperator or *synergos*, to use a term the Greek fathers were fond of.³⁴

It is important to note that, through faith and baptism, the Christian receives the *Amen* of Christ both individually and socially. He receives it in the family of God, the Mystical Body, which will assist him in becoming a perfect resonance for the *yes* of Christ. Depending on the depth of its faith and love, his individual *yes*, consequently, either helps or hinders the Church's response.

To respond fully to someone means to be present to that person. Christ is fully present to man in the sacraments. Man fruitfully realizes this presence, however, only when he reaches out to it in faith. Although Christ's love is directed to individual members through the believing Church and is thus prior to any human response, yet a fruitful sacrament—beyond a valid sacrament—implies mutual availability in an encounter involving both the Giver and the receiver.³⁵

If genuine encounter implies a person-to-person meeting, it also implies mutual freedom. God, whose freedom is His Love, respects human freedom. St. John's Prologue makes clear that the effectiveness of the Word's coming depends on man's acceptance: "To them that received Him. . . ." (Jn 1:12.)

The true Christian response, then, is not one merely modelled on that of Christ or merely echoing Christ's response apart from Him. It is a response belonging wholly to Christ, wholly to the Christian, and wholly to the one ecclesial Bride.

Conclusion

"There is no way open to the Christian," says a contemporary theologian, "but to re-affirm in a thousand ways, in fresh and poetic speech, that God has spoken a Word to His people which may not return to Him barren. (Cf. Is 55:10 f.) This Word re-

quires an answer from man in the spirit of divine love which impelled it."³⁶

The covenant is God's chosen way of both speaking his word to man and answering it. The covenant-idea, as we have seen, is essentially one of divine invitation and human response woven together in a marvelous interchange.

The definitive covenant of salvation history is the New and Eternal Covenant, the Church. All covenants anterior to the Church foreshadowed and helped to shape the New Covenant as a seedling does its flower.

Men say *yes* to God collectively and individually only through the New Covenant or, better, only through Christ, the Word-made-Flesh, who is the embodiment of both divine invitation and perfect human response in the New Covenant. The prophets of old discovered Yahweh's covenant with Israel to be a nuptial alliance. God's covenant with the New Israel continues, in a surpassing way, the essential character of a divine-human marriage. In the New Covenant, Christ is the Bridegroom and the Church is the Body-Bride.

Mankind is called to share in the New Covenant through the Church. In the one bridehood of the Church, all baptized Christians become brides of Christ. The totality and perfection of their faithful response within the One Bride determine how deeply they share in this divine-human bond of love which the Church is.

NOTES

1. R. A. F. MacKenzie, *Faith and History in the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 37.

2. André de Bovis, *What Is the Church?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1961), p. 23.

3. Cf. MacKenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

4. Cf. Claude Tresmontant, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: His Thought* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1959), p. 7.

5. David M. Stanley, S.J., "The Fonts of Preaching," *Worship*, 37:3, February 1963, p. 170.
6. John M. Oesterreicher, *The Israel of God* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 49.
7. Joseph T. Shipley, *Dictionary of Word Origins* (Ames, Iowa: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1959), p. 333.
8. H. M. Koester, *Die Magd des Herrn. Theologische Versuche und Ueberlegungen* (Limburg, 1947), p. 77.
9. Frederick L. Moriarty, S.J., "Faith in Israel," *The Way*, 4:1, January 1964, pp. 4-8.
10. Geoffrey Wood, "Man's Response to God's Word," *The Bible Today*, December 1963, pp. 577-578.
11. Leo XIII, *Adiutricem populi* (Encyclical), *Acta Sanctae Sedis*, 1895-96.
12. Cf. Cyril Vollert, S.J., "Mary and the Church," *Mariology*, II, ed. Juniper B. Carol (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1957), pp. 593-595.
13. We are aware of the two apparently conflicting schools of thought regarding Mary's role, one emphasizing her productive collaboration in Christ's redeeming work, the other her receptive cooperation, which merely accepts the fruits of the redemption in the name of all mankind. We have already indicated elsewhere that we are using the word *receptivity* in its largest sense as including activity. Thus, in Mary's case, her receptivity is full cooperation in the redemptive work of her Son through willing what He willed. Her receptivity also includes the activity of reproducing this redemptive work in the Church, but with Christ always as its principal cause.
14. Wood, *art. cit.*, p. 578.
15. E. Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 13.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.
17. Cf. Barnabas M. Ahern, C.P., *New Horizons* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1963), pp. 45 ff.
18. F. X. Durrwell, C.S.S.R., *The Resurrection* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), p. 105.
19. Myles Bourke, "Christ's Passage to the Father," *Catholic World*, 194:1, October 1961, p. 33.
20. Durrwell, *The Resurrection*, p. 127.
21. Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-15.
22. Leo the Great, *Sermo 64: De Ascensione Domini*, PL 54, col. 398.
23. F. X. Durrwell, C.S.S.R., *In the Redeeming Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 169.
24. Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
25. Gregory Baum, O.S.A., *The Jews and the Gospel* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1960), p. 75.

26. Jacques Bossuet, "Lettre à une Demoiselle de Metz" (Lettre IV), *La Correspondance de Bossuet* (Paris: Ed. Urbain et Levesque, 1909), p. 22.
27. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The One Spirituality of the Church," *Theology Digest*, 10:4, Autumn 1962, pp. 190-194.
28. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 58.
29. St. Peter Damian, *Liber Qui Dicitur Dominus Vobiscum*, PL 145, col. 235.
30. Yves Congar, O.P., "Authority as Service," *Perspectives*, 8:6, November-December 1963, pp. 167-170.
31. The Hebrew word for service or work is *avodah*; the corresponding Greek term is *leitourgia*. Not the least of the virgin's *service*, then, is her work of worship. Cf. Oesterreicher, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
32. A. Gelin, *The Religion of Israel* (New York: Hawthorn, 1959), p. 104.
33. Cf. A. Jones, *God's Living Word* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 191.
34. Otto Semmelroth, *Mary: Archetype of the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 64.
35. Cf. Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-140.
36. Gerard S. Sloyan, "God's Secret Designs Summed Up in Christ: The Heart of Catechizing," *The Bible Today*, October 1963, p. 412.

He who believes in me, as the Scripture says, "From within him there shall flow rivers of living water." (Jn 7:38.)

5 BAPTISM

"It is Easter day! Throughout the world the mysteries of baptism are being celebrated, and dedicated virgins are receiving the veil!"¹

Christianity is at once paschal, baptismal, and nuptial. In His passover, Christ passed from the death of sin to the vibrant life of heaven; this is the *paschal* or Easter mystery of Christianity. Through baptism into Christ, a Christian shares and reproduces the paschal mystery in his own *baptismal* life. He does so in a union rooted in the one essential *nuptial* union of God and man: the New Covenant, the marriage of Christ with His Church. Let us unpack the contents of each of these realities which converge in the mystery of baptism.

Christ's Passover and Ours

The saving mystery of Christ's passover, His redeeming amalgam of dying and rising, was achieved for all men. "Since one died for all, therefore all died." (2 Cor 5:14.) Mankind had been tutored to this notion of one-for-all in the ancient Hebrew concept of corporate personality. The patriarch and his stock were

considered as one. So interwoven were their fates that they formed one body—in a way, one person. The ancestor not only contained the issue of his loins; his descendants spoke and acted through him. In this way generation was bound to generation, and time was bridged.² Likewise, in the New Testament, the baptized Christian takes on the efficacy of a corporate personality, that of Christ who “by dying destroyed our death, and by rising restored life.” (Easter Preface)

Through the sacrament of baptism, an individual takes on the efficacy of Christ’s own death and resurrection, which enables him, in Christ, to make his own passage to the Father. Through the sacrament of baptism, an individual becomes a Christian and a member of the Church. The gifts he receives in the sacrament are directed toward both his own salvation and the achievement of the Church’s mission.

The first gift of baptism is death to original sin and entry into divine life. This is the first basic *passover* of the baptized. But, because the Christian receives the same Spirit which led Christ to die to sin and rise to the glorified life, the Christian is charged with a lasting momentum to carry out the dying-rising pattern of Christ’s life in his own. And this is not a matter of mere external imitation. The baptized Christian dies and rises with Christ, as Paul’s compound verbs make so emphatic: co-dying, co-suffering, co-buried, co-glorified. (Cf. Rom 6:3–9; Rom 8:17.) For, in the sacrament of baptism, the whole body-person of the Christian is united with the whole body-person of Christ.³ Baptism is man’s first corporal contact with the living, glorified Lord. Tertullian’s words that “the flesh is the hinge of salvation”⁴ may be applied here in the fullest sense: it is in baptism that the body-person of an individual makes contact with the saving body-person of Christ Himself. And, because of this, Christ and the Christian now share the same life-principle, the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit brought Christ to a triumph over the flesh (*sarx*) and restored the integrity which sin had destroyed, so the Spirit now works in the Christian to bring about this same integrity. In a

lifelong rhythm, the Spirit will reproduce Christ's dying-rising activity in the baptized person until he, too, becomes wholly transfigured with Christ's own glorious triumph. This is the lifelong *communication* which baptism initiates and propels throughout the Christian's life. The full effect of this activity will be visible only on the final day, the *parousia*, when the body of the Christian will rise and fully show forth the glory of the Lord.

Baptismal life for the Christian, then, is far more than an external imitation of Christ's life. It is far more than a mere psychological consent to the saving mystery of Christ. It is rather a total personal assimilation of Christ's dying and rising in the Christian's own life as Christ now identifies the dyings and risings of the Christian as His own. The identification is intimate and reciprocal and is well illustrated by the lesser union of a man and wife in marriage. Paul says that the baptized belongs "to another who has risen from the dead, in order that we [Christ and the baptized] may bring forth fruit unto God." (Rom 7:4.) If Christ died and rose with vicarious efficacy, so may the Church, His Bride, now die and live in Christ for one and for all. This is the way Christians form one body with Christ and with one another. This is the way they become "alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Rom 6:11.)

The Baptismal Gift to the Christian

In order to reach an understanding of religious profession, the "second baptism" of a Christian virgin being dedicated to God through vows, one must first have a clear notion of the virgin's first baptism, the fundamental and basic baptism of every Christian. For any subsequent grace which comes to a baptized person is dependent upon his sacramental status as a baptized member of the Church. Baptism is, indeed, a blessing on the whole of life. Together with confirmation, baptism makes the Christian fit for all the other marvels of the kingdom of Christ and for all the other gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Let us now examine aspects of the baptismal gift which have particular relevance to our later subject of "second baptism."

Gratuity

If we have previously stressed the divine initiative in the covenants of old, we cannot diminish this emphasis in all that pertains to the New Covenant into which the Christian is inserted through baptism. Before man says *yes* to God in faith, God first says *yes* to man. Although the intensity and antecedent character of divine initiative never changes, since it flows from absolute Love, yet, as man's response improves through the growth of grace, the abundance of this divine initiative and its utter graciousness become ever more apparent. The gratuity of God always includes not only a wholly free gift but also an inner dynamism which causes the gift to increase and multiply.

Baptism is an eminent example of this type of divine giving. Although its gratuity is always beyond our grasp, one glimpses it best perhaps in the practice of infant baptism. Through the baptizing and believing Church, God pledges and bestows His covenant-love upon a tiny human partner whose dormant personality is not yet even capable of an encounter or response. From human experience we know that a mother does not withhold her loving care from her baby even though the child is too tiny to make answer to her love. This is Christ's own manner of acting in His Church as infants are given the baptismal gift. The gift is given in its fullness even though a personal response cannot yet be made. In fact, baptism produces within the infant the ontological foundation which will make future response possible. Baptism contains an inner dynamism of sanctifying grace which will enable the child to encounter Christ, to make answer to God's love, when his psyche awakes at the dawn of reason. Thus, the baptismal grace is, for the infant, a prevenient or antecedent gift enabling him to say *yes* when he comes into his natural powers through which grace will work. Adults must freely will

and accept divine grace when it is given. A baptized infant does this according to his growth in religious awareness.⁵

Infant baptism reminds us of Ezekiel's picture of the foundling Israel, rescued and made fair by Yahweh so that He might marry her when she reached the age of love. Psalm 138 says that God knew us when we were still "shapeless." His love follows us and accommodates itself to the various stages of our emerging personality. From the earliest dawn of our life, God has set his heart upon us with a view toward electing us for a nuptial covenant. For most persons the hour of this election is infant baptism, even though the full unfolding of baptism in the human personality depends on the growth and maturation of the baptized person.

Since divine initiative requires a response from created beings, an infant's godparents speak the response which the child is expected to reaffirm in his later life. Applied to godparents, the happy phrase, *to stand up for* a child being baptized, well describes both the paschal and witnessing character of the sacrament. The Easter hymn, *Christ ist erstanden*, might be an excellent baptismal hymn, celebrating, as it does, the *standing strength* of Christ's resurrection which is given to the baptized. The standing posture of the godparents, then, is deeply significant.

Similarly, the act of these godparents toting a tiny child to the church to be baptized has deeper significance than a mere act of human transportation. St. Augustine remarks that, to little children, "Mother Church lends the feet of others that they may come, the heart of others that they may believe, the tongue of others that they may affirm their faith."⁶ Carrying an infant to the baptismal font makes visible the supporting gesture of faith which the godparents, as responsible members of the Church, supply for the child's sacramental encounter in the largest issue of his life. The communion of saints within the Mystical Body entitles the godparents to receive a gift, an inheritance, in the child's name. For this reason, St. Thomas says that "children can be considered to have an intention in virtue not of their own personal act . . . but of the act of those who bring them to be baptized."⁷ The faith of the Church, expressed by both the faith

of the godparents and the sacramental act, thus makes up for the infant's inability to respond. His sponsors make answer to the covenanted love God offers him. His sponsors enter him into an inward share both in the privileges and in the responsibilities of the covenant between Christ and the Church. An account in the Gospels shows a group of men carrying a paralyzed friend to Jesus. "And Jesus, *seeing their faith*, said to the paralytic, 'Take courage, son, thy sins are forgiven thee.'" (Mt 9:2-3.) The faith of others becomes the basis of a divine gift to someone in need. This is also the picture of infant baptism, an action of Christ in the Church which someone has described as "brilliantly anti-Pelagian."

The full fruitfulness of baptism is still dependent upon the free personal commitment of the believing child to the person of Christ. The response which the godparents make on the child's behalf is most often ratified gradually and imperceptibly as the child grows in understanding, religious awareness, and personal responsibility. The practice of making this ratification formal and decisive, however, as in the public renewal of baptismal vows in the Easter vigil service, has much to be said in its favor.

We have seen that baptism is a gratuitous divine favor which sets up a current of blessings and tasks for the whole of a Christian's life. Now let us look at the baptismal gift as it comes to inhere in the Christian. The gift is a rich complex including the removal of original sin, incorporation of the person into Christ and the Church, bestowal of a share in the divine nature, a permanent baptismal imprint, the dynamic gift of sanctifying grace, and lasting capacities for faith, hope, and love toward God and man.

Baptismal Imprint

A wise French peasant priest, Abbé Pouget, said that a fifth Gospel exists, open in every man: "It is his poor human life, since Christ is there."⁸ From the moment of baptism, an imprint of the

image of Christ is marked on the inner life of the Christian. Through this seal, made by the Holy Spirit, the entire person of the Christian is taken over by Christ. St. Ambrose exclaimed that "It is you, O Christ, that I find in your sacraments."⁹ These words may be applied most radically to the baptismal event. In baptism the Christian receives the root of his life, so to speak. In turn, his own life unfolds as a flowering of this Christ-root. St. Thomas does in fact call the baptismal character "the root of the spiritual life."¹⁰ Whose image is this? To this question the baptized Christian has only one reply: the image of Christ. Throughout his life this permanent image will be intensified and beautified by further sacramental encounters and by the lifelong sacrament of Christian living. The image may, on the other hand, become obscured, covered over, even finally hidden away from the person's conscious life. It will never be erased, however; it will never be effaced. For it is an indelible seal branded, in the fire of the Spirit, into the fabric of the Christian's being and life.

By rooting an individual in Christ, the baptismal character also identifies the Christian as a member of the Church. It makes lasting his inner belonging to a brotherly community, the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. It is this Christ-signature which makes the baptized person co-responsible for and involved in the Church and in her mission of manifesting in history the love and victory of the risen Christ.

How shall all this be done? How does the living imprint of baptism operate in a Christian from day to day? How does baptism involve the Christian in the Church's witnessing mission? By its very rite, baptism typifies the death and resurrection of Christ. Its character shares in this dynamic typology by bestowing a consecration and power derived from the dying-rising Christ.¹¹ Since whatever we are making explicit concerning baptism we do with a view toward its later expansion in the heart of our theme—the virginal life in its ecclesial dimension—we need to say something further about the dynamism of the baptismal character. The baptismal character is both *consecration* to Christ in the saving act of His death and resurrection and *power* to

reproduce this twofold activity (though single reality) in the Christian's own life and in the supernatural society of the Church.

It is important to reiterate here that the revelation of God's word to men, in both the Old and the New Covenant, presented two facets: one—His plan of salvation whose content centers in the covenant; the other—His self-revelation or communication which is the end or purpose of the covenant.¹² One might say, in nuptial terms, that the one facet concerns rescuing the bride and adorning her; the second concerns the union of the covenant partners, the embrace of divine love. For the baptized Christian, these two complementary facets converge in the single reality of *justification*. Justification includes both a cleansing from sin—through Christ's saving death and resurrection—and an adorning with the risen life of Christ. This adornment brings the Christian both a capacity for God and a corresponding power to become progressively what he is: a son in Christ's sonship. Progressively realizing his identity in Christ, who alone is holy, the Christian achieves his sanctification and, at the same time, helps to fulfill and give witness to the Church.

Day-to-day sanctification poses the dynamic dualism of continual dying and rising. To what does the Christian continue to die? To what does he live? We need to detail the answer to these questions.

Dying with Christ

During his days on earth, the baptized Christian must live in the Spirit of the risen Christ and simultaneously live also a fully human life in the flesh. The baptismal life is thus a daily struggle which the Holy Spirit's triumphant presence creates in the baptized person as Christ's risen life conflicts with the remnants of death which original sin has left in man. Baptismal life is a progressive departure from the death of sin (which *flesh* in its Pauline meaning signifies) and an entrance into the world of Christ's risen life (which *grace* in its largest meaning signifies). St. Paul uses the words *spirit* and *flesh* to signify two differing states of the

whole man. The *spirit* signifies man's faculties opened to the Spirit, the risen life of grace. *Flesh*, for St. Paul, signifies man's faculties in various degrees of rebellion against God.

The word *flesh* connotes the effects of original sin, the wound which, though fully healed for us in Christ's saving death and resurrection, has left in man a retinue of weaknesses to be further healed progressively in each individual's historical life through a decisive assimilation of Christ's victory. In the sphere of a Christian's union with the risen Christ through the Spirit, death can no longer have dominion over him. Evil and death may still strike him, however, in the sphere of his fleshly alienation from God. The Christian life is an opportunity for the Christian to let the Spirit's reign triumph in his person, and freely to cede to the Spirit whatever is not yet fully His.

Christian mortification is a baptismal process, therefore, a series of small dyings in Christ through which both the Christian and the Church are made more alive to God. All genuine mortification must, for this reason, have a christological and ecclesial reference. It can never be merely a psychological or disciplinary measure.¹³

Baptismal life on earth, then, becomes a life of creative tension between these two polarities: spirit and flesh. The Spirit, at work in the Christian, transfigures him with risen life to the extent that sin and *sarx* (flesh), which are hostile to the Spirit, give way. The Christian life is a dynamic dichotomy created by the "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17) at war against the old. One of the lengthier writings of St. Paul which describes this process (2 Cor 4:10-14) has been neatly labelled by a scripturist: *Durch Tod zum Leben* ("from death to life").

Rising with Christ

We are now ready to look more closely at the positive endowments of baptism, the endowments which make the Christian

more and more "alive to God." Since these endowments are a compenetrating unity, we shall first place our focus on the three divine gifts: faith, hope, and charity. For we shall see later how these three virtues become permanently operative in the Christian virgin through the disposition of the three vows.

In the New Testament, the word of God gradually led man to the innermost chamber of mystery and awakened him to hitherto hidden splendors of divine love. For, however splendid God's self-disclosure was to men in the covenant of old, it remained for the New Covenant to open the mystery of divine love as a dynamic love-fellowship of three Divine Persons. It remained for the New Testament to disclose that there is a self-giving within the Godhead itself which constitutes the very nature of God. The supreme synthesis of this disclosure is to be found in St. John's record of the word and the deed which was the Last Supper. (Jn 14 ff.) It is in the abundance of the threefold Life and Love of God, revealed at Christ's Supper with His friends, that all men are invited to share.

How is this to be done? Fundamentally, by the gift of sacramental baptism. Baptism places a man *in Christ* and thus within the stream of God's dynamic self-giving. Baptism makes a man by grace what Christ is by nature: a son. As a son in the sonship of Christ, the Christian cries out—or rather, the Spirit cries out in him—*Abba, Father!* Through his union with Christ, the Christian shares Christ's own dialog with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Through this relationship in grace, through this dialog of love—with its manifold implications for the Christian's whole religious and moral life—the frame of his human personality, fashioned in the divine image, reaches its fulfillment.¹⁴ As a person in the Person of Christ, the Christian becomes an articulation of divine life. In Paddy Chayefsky's play *Gideon*, God says to Gideon: "I demand a splendid love from you."¹⁵ Baptism brings to the Christian God's own love with which to love. There is no love more splendid than this.

Faith, Hope, and Love

It is through the three divine gifts of faith, hope, and love that a man is enabled to live and to love with a life and love that are at once his own and yet fully God's. At baptism, the three Divine Persons take up their abode in the Christian. Grace sets up a situation of human-divine friendship. In receiving the Giver, the baptized person receives His gifts. The divine gifts or virtues enable the Christian to *be* with these Persons as They are with him. Divine faith, hope, and love lift the Christian's natural endowments of intellect and will to a supernatural plane on which he, in a fully human and personal way, lives in union with God. Part of the fruitfulness of every sacrament and every deed of the Christian life is to intensify the theological activity which brings a human being's faculties to this highest, most noble, and most joyous expression conceivable for man.

The three divine virtues are, indeed, powers in an eminent sense of the word. They are the Christian's basic endowment, his life equipment. A human act on purely human initiative and faculties could never put a man in contact with God. Dialog with God would be utterly impossible without faith, hope, and love. Moreover, in linking a man with God, these three bonds bind Christians closely with one another. As dialog with God intensifies, so must love of neighbor. The converse is also true, as the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* makes clear.¹⁶

Dynamism of Grace

When sanctifying grace and the divine gifts are seen in terms of strength and power, they begin to reveal their dynamism and aliveness. The Christian mentality which regards sanctifying grace as a mere static condition or, hardly better, as a liquid poured into the soul, is tame Christianity at best, if it is Christianity at all. For Christianity is life, abundant life. Genuine

Christianity is always the flowing stream, the growing and blossoming fig tree, the banquet of friends, the dialog of lovers, the gathering of grapes, the multiplication of loaves.

The full meaning of Christ's resurrection was not His mere coming back to life or waking up. It was His being raised by the Father to a *new level of life*, the abundant life of glory. Likewise, the full meaning of our baptism is not merely our being freed from sin and placed in a state of innocence. Baptism establishes us on a new plane of life, the risen and glorified life of Christ. This is abundant life, this is vibrant life. It is the life which we live here and now in this "day of Christ Jesus."

What, specifically, is the splendor and abundance with which the three divine virtues invest the Christian? How do they affect his life? In the virtue of divine faith, the faculty of reason is raised up to share in the divine fullness of truth quite beyond the truth of God discovered in reason and creation. But divine truths perceived by faith are never mere abstractions. They lay claim to a man's whole being and existence. According to St. Thomas, faith is "the intermingling of knowing and loving directed Godward."¹⁷ It is both light to the mind and movement to the will.

In the divine gift of hope, the faculty of the will, reaching out towards happiness, is directed toward the divine inheritance of the child of God, which is heavenly bliss. The baptized Christian already possesses this divine inheritance and bliss in an inchoate way. For the Spirit, the "first intallment" of heaven, dwells in Him. His hope is, in a sense, already answered. And yet, eye has not seen nor mind conceived what is yet to unfold. Happiness is yet to become all-embracing and without tears. It is to become permanent and manifest. It is to rest fully in God. So hope presses on toward the final day.

The gift of love makes the faculty of the will, which sums up the whole person, capable of loving God with God's own love. For the baptized person lives only *in Christ*; therefore he loves only *in Christ*. The Christian is likewise made capable of loving others with God's own love, and, what is sometimes overlooked,

being loved by them in this divine dimension. It is in this way that the love of Christ, through the Spirit, is spread abroad and then, "pressed down and running over," is returned to God by the same divine route. Little wonder, then, that the greatest of the three strengths is love. For God is Love.

Divine realities are always limitless. Added to the three limitless strengths of faith, hope, and love, and enhancing them beyond the telling, are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, also a baptismal endowment. The gift of wisdom, for example, adds to divine love in the Christian by giving him a savor for this love, by letting him taste and even "experience" it in this life. So with the other gifts of the Spirit which add to, intensify, and beautify the three basic endowments. Through His gifts, the Holy Spirit makes the three divine virtues into pleasurable operations of the whole man. Within the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is eternally Gift. In time He becomes the Given as He is poured forth into our hearts.¹⁸ Gift follows gift; this is the way God works. In this divine torrent, the baptized Christian's mind and flesh exult in the living God. This flood of grace becomes in the Christian more intimate to him than the properties of his own nature. This is the way grace builds on nature and perfects it in an admirable exchange.

Special Vocations within Baptism

The fundamental call of baptism to a new life in Christ demands of the Christian a response of living faith. The call is not merely to be heard and assented to once. It is a continuous call requiring a vigorous *yes* for a lifetime in a concrete life-situation. Through baptism a basic dynamic pattern is set up within the Christian which should bring him to maturity as a Christian person. But this is not all. Faith is always ecclesial. The whole Church is the setting of a Christian's life. It is within this ecclesial community, this visible society, that the Christian person matures and, in so doing, helps to bring the Church to its own maturity.

The baptismal vocation is not fulfilled in a vacuum. A Christian does not merely drift to God on the waters of baptism. The primary baptismal commitment is reiterated in lesser calls throughout the Christian's whole life: in a special vocation, in special services within that vocation, in daily and hourly commitments to God, to neighbor, to the Church, to country, and finally to the material world which, because of man's Christian maturity, progressively realizes its own share in the fruits of man's redemption.

Ecclesial Dimension of Special Calls

Before going on to consider special calls addressed to Christians within the fundamental call of baptism, we wish to note here the ecclesial dimension of every Christian vocation. The life of each individual member of the Church is anchored in the life of the whole Church from which he receives his life, realizes it fully, and transmits it, in some degree, to others. The baptized Christian has both individual and community commitments to God. The concepts of individual and community are intimately interwoven in the Church. Neither idea must absorb the other. Yet both exist, in a sense, for one another. But what is unique in the ecclesial community is that each of its members is like a condensation of the Church's whole life in a single living part, in order that it might reach the fullness and beauty for which God has destined it in the integral life of the Mystical Body.¹⁹ The individual Christian who fully puts on Christ not only possesses a unique beauty as an individual. At one and the same time he also possesses and contributes to an ecclesial beauty, the Church's own bridal beauty. He becomes a living tessera in the mosaic of the Church which shows forth Christ. In her liturgy for the dedication of a Church, the Church-Bride has long marveled over this beauty of the one in many and many in one, over the living stones which make up the New Jerusalem.

Unity in Variety

St. Paul spends much time attempting to clarify the diversity-unity principle in the Church. In Romans 12 he describes the unity of the Christian organism: the various gifts within this unity. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he devotes a whole chapter to the marvels of this union and shows that the Church, like the human body, has many organs but, for all that, only one animating principle.

Already in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, Ezekiel had projected a striking view of the diversity-unity principle to be operative in the new Israel. Caught up in ecstasy, Ezekiel watched an angel of God carefully measure the temple area, section the holy city of Jerusalem, and then divide the entire land of Palestine. (Cf. chs 40-48.) The angel indicated how every part of the city and the land would be adjacent to the temple, where the focal point of the people's life would be God's presence.

The diversity-unity principle in operation comes out splendidly in Ezekiel's vision of a rivulet flowing from the temple. As the angel continues his fascinating measuring process, Ezekiel himself experiences the ever-deepening levels: a stream first reaching his ankles, then his knees, next his waist, and finally a torrent so high that it prevents any further wading about. The man of the measuring rod then invites Ezekiel to the torrent's bank for instruction about additional marvels: the stream would gather momentum, the angel said, and sparkle with such freshness that even the brackish water of the Dead Sea would be turned into living water causing a marvelous growth of foliage along its banks. (Ez 47: 1-12.)

In symbolic language Ezekiel thus brings out the important truth that temple worship will not only knit the various people together as a family, but will provide this family with a single source of life.²⁰

Both Ezekiel and Paul have put into sharp focus the living reality of unity and variety in the Church. The idea of special vocations in the Church ought to be considered only in this context. In God's providence, the perfection of the whole Mystical Body rises out of the variety of special vocations within the Church. It would be entirely false to think that all Christians should be called to live their one baptismal vocation according to the same special vocational pattern. For, "if the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing?" (1 Cor 12:17.)

General Call to Virginity

St. Paul compares marriage and baptism and says of the baptized: "You now belong to another, to him who rose from the dead." According to St. Paul, the result of this new marriage is "fruit for God." (Rom 7:4-5.)

Many evidences in the Church's tradition show that baptism is regarded as a nuptial mystery. In her Epiphany liturgy, the Church links the ideas of baptism and the Church's marriage with Christ. In the Orient, Epiphany is the baptismal day of the faithful and also the wedding day of young men and women. Both mysteries are thus more visibly inserted into the Church's union, more evidently proclaimed for what they are. The Armenian rite summons those about to be baptized in these words: "O you who have been invited to the wedding feast of the heavenly bridegroom, come and receive your baptism at this glorious feast. Robe yourself with the wedding garment woven by the Holy Spirit."²¹

If baptism gives a person the life of Christ and some share in the entire functional life of the Church, one might say that, in a sense, each Christian is a virgin-bride, no matter what his special vocation is. For by rescuing him from sin and raising him in the Spirit Christ joins the Christian with Himself as one body. Through baptism each Christian is wed to Christ in the everlasting covenant He has made with His Church. In the one covenant, Christ marries each baptized Christian for better or for worse.

The Christian's love for Christ must always be virginal, therefore, in the sense of being integral and totally given to God. In expressing this love, however, the Christian may be called to do so indirectly rather than directly. We shall explain this later.

The Special Call to Virginit

If every Christian is, in a sense, a virgin-bride of Christ, there are still degrees of perfection and likeness in realizing this bridehood. The richer a Christian is in sanctifying grace and charity, the more perfect is he as spouse. The more perfectly and directly he partakes of the Church's bridehood and the more fully he witnesses to it, the more perfect, too, is he as spouse. The vocation of Christian virginit is a special call to share in and express the Church's bridal life in the fullest degree and most direct manner open to a human person. It is thus a state of perfection.

The virginal life, understood as a special call, is not, therefore, a precept imposed by baptism. Yet it is baptism which opens the way to this summit of virginal life.

In the realization of Christian virginit, even as a special call, one may also expect to see the multi-jewelled variety of the Bride of Christ. This variety comes about through nature and through grace. Rational creatures differ profoundly even in their growth in sanctity since all their graces and endowments are gifts and consequently become subjective possessions. It is the one Spirit who gives these gifts as He shapes the vessels of election, and it is in His unity with the Father and the Son that He keeps his chosen ones in unity.²²

Of such varieties we should like to mention here the one created by masculine and feminine expressions of the virginal life. Even though in this study our considerations appear to be directed to feminine virginit, no exclusiveness is intended, nor need ultimate applications be in any way restrictive. The dedicated love of St. John the Apostle was as uniquely precious to God as that of Agatha, Lucy, or Gertrude. The mystery of this

varicity in unity is one of the splendors in which we shall delight in the new heaven and earth. No man, here and now, can begin to conceive of it.

The Church sees in virginity the most perfect fulfillment of her own covenant-mystery: to be the beloved bride of Christ, to "cleave to God" in the most intimate way. The virginal life opens to a Christian the fullest opportunity of taking God and of being taken by Him, of becoming a handmaid of the Lord, of being led to a full share in the Church's bridal life. "The Church flourishes as the true bride and as a virgin," says Origen, "by the flower of her chaste and pure virgins."²³ If virgins are to be truly virgin-brides of Christ, they must be ever near to the one Church-Bride. That is why the virgin dedicating her life to God reads her profession in the presence of the bishop, to whom is committed the welfare of the Church. It is the bishop who officially gives the veil to the virgin-bride and espouses her to Christ. He does this as the chosen friend of the Bridegroom.²⁴

With religious profession, the virgin realizes a new level of bridal union with Christ. She becomes an ecclesial witness in her whole person. What is innermost in the Church of God (bridehood with Christ) becomes visible in the professed virgin whose very dress (habit) is a witness of her union with Christ. Since the Church's nuptial relationship is achieved only through Christ's own passover in which He delivered Himself up out of love for men, the professed virgin also becomes a permanent witness to the paschal mystery of Christ now burgeoning in the Church. The Church-Bride and the virgin-bride are fully committed to taking on, in their one life, the *fait accompli* of Christ's saving death and resurrection.

Marriage and Virginity

The union of Christ and His Church is the basic nuptial mystery. Virginity partakes of this mystery in a deep and direct way; marriage also partakes of the same mystery by being its

image or sign and progressing indirectly toward it through a sacramental union. It can never be stressed too much that both Christian marriage and virginity are expressions of Christ's union with the Church and the Church's union with Christ.

Marriage is a sacrament because it is a visible sign of and a means to the human-divine nuptial dialog of Christ with the Church. Consecrated virginity is not itself a sacrament or sign; it is that very reality—Christ's union with His Church embodied in the nuptial relationship of the virgin with Christ. Marriage opens onto the mystery of virginity because virginity contains the plenitude of the mystery which marriage signifies.²⁵

These two sublime vocations in the Church, while intrinsically unequal in value, depend upon one another for their single and ultimate meaning. The two vocations, far from being opposed, are in fact so interdependent that if one is misconstrued or undervalued, so is the other. Those in either vocation suffer when they forget the witness of the other.²⁶ A contemporary theologian says that

Christian marriage can be understood only in the light of the reality it signifies in the plan of salvation: the self-sacrificing love of Christ for His Church and of the Church for Christ, the final union of the Church with Christ, of redeemed mankind with God. But, equally, we come to know the reality through the sign studied in the light of revelation. A true appreciation of virginity and of celibacy undertaken for the sake of the kingdom of heaven must be based on an appreciation of Christian marriage. Virginity renounces the sign in order the more directly and speedily to attain the reality signified. Only by understanding the value of the sign, though, can virginity be rightly oriented toward this reality. Both marriage and consecrated virginity, then, lead us toward a fuller understanding of the Christian vocation as such.²⁷

At this point, then, a juxtaposition of the realities of marriage and virginity will help to show their relationship and their unique way of showing forth Christ's love-union with the Church.

Married partners become two in one flesh in a holy and beautiful union which, as we have said, partakes of the ecclesial union in an indirect way. Since marriage is a *sign* of a greater union, however, it is likewise a reality of this world. It is ephemeral, therefore, and passing away. It foreshadows a greater and more lasting union to which all Christians are called and to which it must eventually give way. "All flesh is grass and withers" (Is 40:7-8), the Church sings in the Christmas office, the feast which brings the message of new life to a flesh doomed to die.

In the temporal order human beings express the deepest of human loves through a carnal union. The physical union of marriage is a synthesis of the wellsprings of the whole personality, it is the marriage partners' vehicle for becoming transparent one to another. In the glorified life of the resurrection, however, the body will no longer partially hide one's personality. Then completely dominated by the spirit, the body will no longer need to be overcome in order to yield up the secret of personality. The glorified body will be a perfect mirror for the true person (the Christian) somewhat as the glorified Christ shows forth the splendor of His Father. Christ will be "all in all" to His creatures. His glory will be seen in us, and in Him we shall be transparent to one another in perfect love.

In the glorified life of the resurrection, therefore, there will be neither marriage nor the giving in marriage. There will be only the everlasting banquet of love. It is highly significant that whenever the marriage theme is used in the New Testament to refer to Christ and the Church the allusion is invariably made to the end of time when all things will forever have been made new.²⁸

The complete and final fulfillment of what marriage foreshadows, delineates, and in a way partly realizes, may be achieved only by sacrificial love. In the great text of Ephesians (ch. 5) where Paul swings the pendulum back and forth between human marriage and Christ's marriage with the Church, the apostle says that a husband's love for his wife should be the same as that

which Christ, the wedded-Lord, showed for the Church-Bride: utter self-giving. So, too, the wife's love for her husband should be that which the Church shows for Christ, its Head: loving surrender in faith and joy. To press on toward the greater union which their marriage signifies, the marriage partners must assume their special series of life crises: baptismal dyings and risings. The nuptials which are eternal are those of the Lamb who delivered Himself up for us. Christian marriage "demands great realism and a profound spirit of sacrifice. Great joys are, indeed, promised to Christian married couples in their life together . . . but they must also be ready for sacrifice and renunciation. . . ." ²⁹

The virginal vocation is a special gift from God, freely accepted by normal human beings who, although naturally capable of marriage, are invited to forego human marriage in favor of a greater marriage. Virginité pledges itself to the eternal nuptials, as it were, in the single decisive act of religious vows: oblation. It thus sets out on a union with Christ which is direct and enduring. Moreover, the virgin's life has a single purpose; this is the meaning of the phrase "she is undivided." The virgin is one with Christ in a union which is perfected and anticipated in this life even though it will fully shine forth only in heaven.

Marriage pledges itself to the eternal nuptials bit by bit as the marriage blessed by God is replaced, in sacrificial love, by the greater marriage which it signifies. Married life has a double purpose; it is divided between an earthly love which it celebrates and a heavenly love toward which it progresses, even though, in the end, the two are forever becoming one. This transfiguring and transforming process of human marriage is said to be "the source both of the greatest joys and the most acute sufferings to be found in life."³⁰ Marriage offers God the sweet and bitter fruits and flowers of its temporal union. Virginité gives its roots to God. To God the virgin looks, in faith, for the fruits and flowers He has promised.

In becoming two-in-one-flesh in a life of faith and sacrifice, Christian partners realize their union with Christ and thus with

God. In becoming one flesh and spirit with Christ in the deepest and most total way, the Christian virgin realizes her union with Christ and thus with God without the support of a human partner. She does not, for all that, go to God in isolation, but in the company of true friends of God, the family of the Church.

Marriage *sees* and enjoys the bliss of a temporal reality which, for all its beauty, is not yet the summit of love. Marriage is both seeing and believing. It sees in its own union a partial realization of Christ's union with His Church, and it believes in the transcendent flowering of this union. Marriage is a means to an end; it must ascend faithfully to still another rung of union. It cannot repose fully in the union which it sees. The virgin, on the other hand, does not live by seeing but rather by *believing*, with all the sacrifices such belief entails. She lives in faith at the summit of union with God, knowing that the full reality of this union will appear only when vision replaces faith. With the Church, whom she mirrors, the virgin progresses "from faith to faith," from the initial gift of self to transformation into Christ. This life-process extends from *pasch* to *parousia*, from baptismal death to resurrection. Virginité gives itself up, wholly and without delay, to believing. "Blessed are they," said the risen Christ, "who have not seen, and yet have believed." (Jn 20:29.) This kind of blessedness means that persons who believe on the basis of God's word are due for congratulations. They are fortunate, lucky, and singled out for some honor—so Msgr. Knox asserted in a sermon on Christ's post-resurrection appearance to the unbelieving Thomas.³¹

The fulfillment of both human marriage and virginité lies ultimately in their fruitfulness. Fruitfulness in human marriage is seen primarily, although not exclusively, in offspring. A truly fruitful marriage is one rich in Christian charity, expressed in a deep mutual love of the partners for one another and for their children. A dynamic Christian nuptial charity is planted as a seed in the marriage sacrament. A life of wedded love and fidelity and parenthood are its fruits. Virginal fruitfulness, on the other hand,

is no less real than the parentage of human marriage. It exists, however, not on a carnal level but wholly in the realm of the spirit. Because the One who begets is the Spirit of the risen Christ operative in the Church, the more closely an individual is linked with the Church's nature and purpose, the greater is his opportunity for fruitfulness. The earliest tradition of religious life in the Church strongly insisted that spiritual parentage is the essential outcome of virginity when it is genuinely consecrated to Christ.³² Christian virginity is, in fact, effectively fulfilled only insofar as it "brings forth fruit." The parable of the ten virgins shows the wisdom of virginal fruitfulness on the one hand and the utter foolishness of virginal sterility on the other. So vast and important is this subject of virginal fruitfulness that we shall later devote an entire chapter to it.

Determining Factors of Sanctity

To point out the objective superiority of virginity over marriage is not to come to the verge of saying that all those in this state of perfection will reach a higher degree of holiness than those in the married state. Though possessing a rich intrinsic value, the state of virginity is not a moral guarantee of perfection. The end of all Christian vocations is love; he who loves most, in the all-embracing meaning of the word and in the measure of his gifts, will be holiest.

Another factor to be considered here is the mystery of vocation itself, which is at heart as unexplainable as falling in love. All men, without exception, receive the same fundamental call to salvation. The state of life in which this fundamental call will unfold differs, however, according to the mysterious designs of God. Not all men are indiscriminately invited to things better in themselves. Not all men are called, in other words, to the state of perfection, even though all are called to the perfection of their state.

If an individual is called to a vowed life of Christian virginity,

it is here that the graces of holiness will be found. If an individual is called to the married life, he will find there the graces leading him to holiness. If a man or woman is called to live the lay life of celibacy, it is for this person to accept God's plan for him and discover its potential for serving Christ and witnessing to the Church. Both in issuing His call and giving its graces, God shows a careful respect for man's freedom. There is no vocation until it finds an ear to hear it. The seed of God must fall on good ground or it will wither up and die. So, even though God has told us that we have not chosen Him but that it is the other way around, yet God waits on us to accept His choice. Man is always free to accept or to reject the gifts of God. God's foreknowledge of His plan makes man's freedom both possible and actual. For God's plan for man is a plan of salvation. It was man's abuse of freedom which alienated him from God. It was Christ's perfect obedience unto death which recast this freedom. In baptism and in his vocational life, the Christian is given the opportunity and power to recast his freedom so that, in Christ, he may freely move back to the Father.³³ The combat of renouncing the old man (the slave) and putting on the new (the free-man) is fought out in the Christian every day of his mortal life under physical and spiritual pressures, and finally in death itself. The *mors et vita* transformation, triumphantly completed in Christ, remains to be completed in the Christian by his own affirmation of it. The three-day passover of Jesus is lifelong for the Christian. Vocation, then, is an opportunity to say *yes* to what God holds out as best for us. It is a total, faithful commitment, within a concrete life-situation, to the dying-rising Christ.

If man rejects his fundamental vocation, the primal call to faith, he rejects salvation. If man rejects the special vocation to which he is called, he rejects the possibility of fulfilling God's architectural plan for him, a plan which, because God is love, implies the ultimate in joy and fulfillment for the individual, and perfect praise of the Father, through Christ, in that individual. To reject God's special call is always, in the end, to "go away sad" as

the rich young man did, and to take on a way more arduous. To Christ's own call, "Come, follow Me," there were at least twelve generous replies of which it could be recorded, "and they followed." Even among the chosen group of followers, however, Peter and Judas stand out as paradigms of the two possible responses to Christ: acceptance or rejection. "Jesus knew from the beginning who they were *who did not believe*, and who it was who should betray Him." (Jn 6:65.) Peter persevered in his *yes* despite the dark hours caused by his temporary infidelity. The faithless Judas persisted in his rejection until his response was twisted so far awry that it would have been better, in Jesus' own words, that this man had never been born.

Among the special calls God issues, dedicated Christian virginity is, then, the most radical and decisive way to realize Christ's words that "He who loses his life for My sake will find it." (Mt 16:25-26.) It is the living out of this paradox. It is both a funeral and a wedding. It is both dying and rising. But, above all, it is already that final marriage with the Lamb, the full splendor of which causes heaven itself to be silent. (Apoc 8:1.)

NOTES

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20. Cf. Edward F. Siegman, C.P.P.S., *The Book of Ezekiel*, Commentary, Part 2 (New York: Paulist Press, 1961), pp. 21-23.
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22. Cf. A. Vonier, *The Spirit and the Bride* (London: Burns, 1935), p. 149.
23. Origen, *In Genesim Homilia*, PG 12, col. 181.
24. St. Thomas, *III Sent.*, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5.
25. Cf. Preface of Virginal Consecration Rite.
26. Pius XII, *Sponsa Christi* (Apostolic Constitution), November 21, 1950, *Life of the Spirit*, 6:66, December 1951-January 1952, p. 215.
27. Aime Georges Martimort, *The Signs of the New Covenant* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1963), p. 305.
28. Cf. Louis Bouyer, *The Seat of Wisdom* (New York: Pantheon, 1962), p. 81.
29. Max Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1959), p. 37.
30. Bouyer, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
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*The faith that first must be possessed,
Root deep within our inmost breast;
And joyous hope in second place,
Then charity, Thy greatest grace.*
(Hymn for Lauds, Ferial Fridays.)

6 THE VOWS: POSTURES OF FAITH, HOPE, LOVE

EVERY GOOD and perfect gift comes from God. God gives; man receives. Human receiving itself takes place only in the framework of an antecedent divine gift.

Beyond the profound initiatory gift of baptism, God proposes still further gifts to those whom He has made sons in the sonship of Jesus Christ. One of the greatest of these gifts is the call to martyrdom; another, that of consecrated virginity. This is so because love is a gift beyond all gifts, a charism without equal. Martyrdom and consecrated virginity have within them the maximum potential for love. Given the grace for such vocations, a Christian is truly blessed.

Essence of Martyrdom and Virginity

Early Christian writings on martyrdom consider it a "eucharistic celebration and somehow the final result of the Eucharist itself." The essence of the martyr's act is love, not death or suffering, as is clear from its primary referent being not Calvary but the Eucharist.¹

In his Corinthian canticle of love, St. Paul extolls love as essential to every other charism, including martyrdom. Were a man

to deliver himself up to be burned and not have love, it would profit him nothing. The decisive element in a man's perfection is not the intrinsic height of the vocational gift. The decisive element is always love.

Since a virgin dedicates her whole being to the Lord in total love, the perfection of the virginal vocation is thus often considered to be equal to that of martyrdom, varying as it does only in externals. Virginity fully and perseveringly lived is, with martyrdom, the supreme witness of a human being's love for God. Achieved in union with the risen Christ, both vocations are faithful reproductions of Christ's own passover, His "deliverance" out of love.

Considering the hazards of human waywardness and mediocrity, one of the advantages of the gift of martyrdom would appear to be its speed and opportunity for decisiveness. The endless brain-washings and psychological torments of present-day martyrdoms indicate that the once precarious and precious element of swiftness has been uncannily detected, and attempts are now made to "remove" this blessing from martyrdom.

The gift of virginity differs from customary martyrdom precisely in its duration. Under ordinary circumstances, the virginal vocation is realized slowly and without spectacle in the spaced-out, day-by-day process of life. "Life is so daily!" a harassed virgin saint cried out in her memoirs. And St. Jerome wrote of virginity: "*Strenuous labor*, but a great reward: to be what the martyrs are, to be what the apostles are, to be what Christ is."²

What, in the end, gives the martyr and the virgin the strength for either a quick or drawn-out act of self-oblation to God? The pregnant woman, Felicitas, when asked on the eve of her martyrdom how she would endure the beasts if she already suffered so acutely in her labor, replied: "Today it is I who suffer; tomorrow Another will suffer in me."³ Similarly, the martyr Stephen's cry, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56), testified

to an overwhelming influx of grace enabling him to achieve his exodus to God.

Virgins likewise receive a steady and stable divine support to help them achieve a day-by-day deliverance to God. The writer of the book of Wisdom says: "I know that I could not otherwise be continent except God gave it; and this also was a point of wisdom to know whose gift it was." (8:12.) No life supports its man as the virginal life does. In the Old Testament, the notion of special vocation included both the call plus the graces needed to fulfill it. The fact is not less true in the era of grace. In order to see the abundance of these strengths, we need only to enumerate them.

Baptismal Strengths

Being one with the mystery of the Church, the Christian virginal life receives its support from the same source as does the Church: the river of life which flowed from Christ's side on the cross. The virgin's strengths are, fundamentally, the divine virtues of faith, hope, and love which all Christians receive in the sacrament of baptism. Here is the secret of all Christian living. The vowed virgin, however, puts these virtues to use, so to speak, in an eminent and special way. "Where will be found a chaste virgin," asked Augustine, "except in faith, hope, charity, perfect and undefiled?"⁴

The dedication of oneself to God by a life of virginity offered to God within the Church's virginal life brings the divine resources of baptism to their highest flowering. The virginal life demands the fullest use of these supporting strengths or, one might say, "synergetic" strengths, the cooperation of divine and human power. The virgin directly delivers up her whole being, day by day, to this transformation. Faith, hope, and charity filter through her human faculties and person and result in the marvel of a "new creation," a Christian virgin formed in the alchemy of divine gift and human response. St. Augustine, looking toward the heavenly significance of this synergy of Chris-

tian transformation, said: "When Christ crowns our merits, He crowns His own."⁶

Again the truth comes through to us that divine gifts are not boxed-up or static treasures to be merely admired from afar. They are dynamic and creative. To celebrate the baptismal entrance of these powers into a person, Christ used verbs connoting activity: "We will *come* to him and make Our continual abode with him." (Jn 14:23, Knox tr.) God's coming to man is never over and done. His abiding with man means that He lives with man in a stable, but not a static, way. St. Paul describes the summit of baptismal activity as *life*: "It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me." (Gal 2:20.) Philosophers say that grace is more a *relatio* than *habitus*. Grace is, indeed, *relation*; in Christ we relate with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The virginal life is wholly and directly dedicated to this living relation.

Laying hold of the three divine strengths is for every baptized Christian a lifelong process. It is not simply a matter of closing one's eyes and wishing it were so. The martyr's last response to God may be as total and swift as the blow in which it is consummated. Yet, for the martyr and for all Christians, the last response reflects the first. The last *yes* a Christian says to God, the punctuation mark on his baptismal life, is most often the apex of a series of less final, but no less loving, daily *Amens*.

If the divine strengths are assimilated by the Christian and, in turn, transfigure him and his activity, it stands to reason that any special God-given vocation is simply an invitation to be more deeply drawn into this synergy. Special vocations allow the baptismal call to become unique and personal with nuances drawn from time, place, talents, human relationships, and all that goes into a human life-situation.

Religious Vows

The vocation of virginity, therefore, has a special link which joins it to the baptismal energies and allows them to flower in a unique way. This special link is the profession of religious vows.

Religious vows attach the virgin anew, in a deeper bridal way, to the baptismal gifts of God. For the virgin the vows are a spontaneous, human way of saying: To God's fidelity, and in its strength, I pledge my own. The vows are a small covenant within the larger covenant between Christ and His Church. Not trusting her own enthusiasm to endure without wavering, a pledging virgin lifts up her enthusiasm to the realm of her will. She makes her desire to say *yes* to God fixed and firm. She burns the boats of turning back. She voluntarily makes her part in the covenant irrevocable as God has made His. She latches up her liberty and binds herself to God. In the person of the presiding bishop, the Church accepts the virgin's radical commitment and fixes it in perpetuity. A covenant is forged; the primal union of baptismal marriage is deepened to its maximum meaning.

There are obvious similarities between a virgin's profession and the contract of marriage. There are also differences, chiefly perhaps that the virgin does not, like the bride in marriage, entrust her happiness into the keeping of a human partner who may, on his side, prove unworthy of the trust. To the Israel of old God said that even if it were possible for a mother to forget her infant, it would never happen that the Lord would forget His chosen Israel. (Cf. Is 49:15.) The New Covenant is not less rich than the Old. The virgin knows that, whatever happens, Christ will be faithful. Trusting in the divine promise, the virgin shall never be disappointed in her expectations. For she has put her hope in the divine word which has called her. Her own human weaknesses, as long as they do not become fixed zones of resistance to grace, serve only to plunge her back, over and over, into the strength of God where what is weak becomes strong. (Cf. 2 Cor. 12:10.)

Formula of Profession

The formula of religious profession contains a kind of covenant-structure not altogether unlike some of the earliest known forms of covenant. Essential features in ancient covenants—par-

ticularly those which became patterns for the Sinai alliance—were these: a pledge of loyalty to a king in view of past benefits; statement in personal form; profession of trust in the king and reliance on the gods; provision for yearly renewal of terms; evocation of the gods as witnesses; and finally, the threat of a curse upon those by whom it is broken. Moreover, solemn religious ceremony marked the event of covenant-making.⁶

Profession and Covenant

Now let us see on what basis religious profession might be considered a kind of covenant. The profession formula is ordinarily read aloud before a presiding prelate who represents the Church and who, in the Church, stands as mediator between God and His people. A typical formula begins: "In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen." These words are not merely a prayerful way of getting started. They place the religious vows within the covenant-partner's *Name*, denoting the virgin's reliance on the power of this Name to accomplish what is pledged. In the sense of involvement in a deep mystery, the virgin's life will now be "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3) in a Name above all names. The profession formula is stated in a personal form: "I, Sister. . . ." Both human and divine partners are now committed to one another by name. "In honor of Almighty God" . . . the bond has the divine honor as its ultimate goal. The promise of vows perpetually or on the basis of renewal indicates a similarity with the stating of terms in treaties of old. With the solemn promise of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the essence of the pledge is stated. Finally, the witnesses are named and the profession treaty closes in the divine Name where its hope for fulfillment is placed. The presiding prelate and other witnesses represent the Church as witness of the virgin's covenant. A sign is then affixed to the written document to authenticate it, in a sense, in one's own blood because a person's name stands for his life. A "sprinkling with blood" greater than this signature will yet

take place in the sacred meal of the New Covenant with which profession ceremonies are usually linked.

In the profession-day Eucharist, as in subsequent ones, the vowed virgin places her oblation in the one oblation of Christ and His Church. Her sacrifice mounts upward; the offerer rises with the sacrifice. How better to enter into Christ's saving death? She eats Christ's Body and drinks His Blood to consummate her offering. How better to enter into His glory? In covenanted love, then, the virgin's offering and Christ's are one.

Is the vowed promise which results from a divine choice and a human response similar to a treaty, then, but for all that, nothing more intimate? Is religious profession related to the covenant-idea in striking external ways only?

As God's love disclosed its secret depths more and more through covenants of old, the prophets uncovered the truth that the Sinai alliance was itself a marriage union between Yahweh and Israel. The New Covenant has surpassed the Sinai covenant and, as a divine-human marriage union, forever progresses toward the eternal marriage with the Lamb in heaven. Religious profession, a covenant between Christ and the virgin, is part of the one essential marriage covenant which Christ has established with His Church. Through religious profession the virgin, too, is truly wed to Christ. Though there is much to say of this union, we shall first concentrate on the three religious vows. In their finest meaning, the vows are permanent and dynamic postures of readiness for the three divine strengths of faith, hope, and charity which are advanced to every Christian at baptism. They are the ways in which the virgin turns to the Lord and waits for Him. A vowed virgin becomes a concrete expression of the dynamic baptismal mystery wherein a man takes on the death of Christ (poverty, chastity, obedience) and, as a counterpart of this dying, becomes alive to God (faith, hope, love) in the risen Christ. Religious profession ceremonies portray the dying aspect by the tolling of funeral bells which sound out the small death-like separations which make up the earnestly dedicated virginal life, separations

which will one day culminate in physical death. The tolling and the funeral pall signify the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying. The bridal attire, ring, and nuptial language of the ceremonial prayers signify the grain of wheat springing up anew in fruitful life. They are the visual aids which point to the marriage of the virgin with the risen Christ.

If covenant-activity were to be put in capsule statement, it might simply be God's own words: "Turn to Me and I will turn to you." (Cf. Za 1:3.) Religious vows are ways in which a virgin turns to the Lord. The advancement of divine strength to live them is the way God turns to the virgin. The life of religious vows is therefore an *admirable exchange*.

Although we have already briefly considered the three divine strengths as baptismal endowments, it is profitable for us at this point to return to a more detailed consideration of them in the operative context of a virgin's vows.

Obedience and Faith

In her baptismal rite the Church declares that faith is the beginning of the Christian life. "What do you ask of the Church of God?" the baptizing priest asks the catechumen. "Faith," the catechumen replies. Faith, not anything else, is the definition of a Christian.⁷

God makes an entry into the heart of man only through faith. Faith is, within the Christian, a choice which he makes of the Christian way of life. Faith is therefore basic to love. Once God has come to dwell with man, divine love embraces all of man's supernatural acts. Throughout his life, this loving-activity in man will urge him to "believe all things and to hope all things." (Cf. Cor 13:7.) In heaven, however, faith and hope will yield to vision and permanent possession. Only love will remain.

If love is at the end of the journey, faith is at the beginning. Abraham was asked to have faith in God's promise. Faith moved him to detach himself from his familiar setting and way of life,

from his kinsfolk and lands, and go to a land God would show him.

We have already seen the excellence of the Virgin Mary's faith. Before all else Mary was a virgin most *faith-ful*. Her virginity was an aspect of her faith; she delivered herself up to God, whose word she knew to be true. Blessed was Mary because she believed. In the totality of her belief she became the Mother of God. Not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man (cf. Jn 1:13), but by faith in the word of God did Mary conceive. Irenaeus sees Mary's entire achievement in the redemptive plan as flowing from faith: "What the virgin Eve bound by her incredulity, the Virgin Mary loosed by her faith."⁸

Faith, then, is the root of the Christian life, and baptism (*sacramentum fidei*) is its sacramental expression. All genuine faith, therefore, is the Church's faith. All that a Christian does in the strength of faith, hope, charity, he does as a member of the Church. The voice of the one Spirit speaking to His Bride in the Church finds an echo in the heart of each believer. St. Thomas defines faith as an assent of the mind "*moved by the will.*"⁹ By that assent of the *will*, man is wholly caught up, mind, heart and entire being, and drawn up to God through his own elevated powers.

Faith is not a state, therefore, but a *movement*, an integrating movement within the Christian and within the Church. It is always on the march toward fullness. (Cf. Col 2:12.) Even "fixed" in perpetually-vowed obedience, faith must repeatedly hear God's word and keep it in the manifold circumstances of each day. "Today if you shall hear His voice, harden not your hearts." (Ps 94:8.) Faith is a lifetime activity. Even in the highest reaches of faith and love, God keeps inviting man and waiting for his reply. "Ceaselessly the Bridegroom comes in His own person with new clarity," Ruysbroeck exclaims, "just as if He never were come before."¹⁰ The Christian moves, indeed, from "faith unto faith." (Rom 1:17.) Faith is supremely active in its extreme passivity. Whereas it is a surrendering death, it is also a flourish-

ing life. It is thus both radical obedience (dying) and the height of triumph (rising). This is the victory: our faith. Faith is therefore an effect in man's heart of the glory of the risen Christ. On the Damascus road, Saul was struck blind by this risen glory. After the scales had fallen from his eyes as Ananias baptized him, Paul began his life-movement of belief, running a race toward the One whose voice he would never forget.

Here we touch the heart of faith. The believer does not run aimlessly, nor does he spend his energies espousing abstract truths. He runs toward a Person. Saul-becoming-Paul asked: "Lord, what wilt *Thou* have me do?" (Acts 9:6.) He addressed a Person, even as he had been addressed as a person. Similarly, a test of Peter's fidelity called for the public avowal of his loving tie with Christ. What comes first in every movement of Christian faith is the Person to whom faith is given. "In any form of belief," says St. Thomas, "it is the person to whose words the assent is given who is of principal importance and, as it were, the end; while the individual truths through which one assents to that person are secondary."¹¹

The person to whom the Christian assents is the risen Christ, who is one with the historical Jesus. Faith is encounter with the risen Christ. For if Christ is not risen, then our faith is vain. (Cf. 1 Cor. 15:17-18.) As the movement of faith continues, it is not directed so much *toward* Christ as *with* Him: "I live, now not I..." (Gal 2:20.)

As a faithful bride, the Church believes whatever Christ, her Bridegroom, tells her. But, above all, she believes in Him. She has wed the Lord in faith. Through Him and in His Spirit she goes to the Father. Faith is *personal* in both its origin and its operation: personal, because it originates in a person-to-person encounter, the Christ-encounter of baptism; personal, because it operates through a person's highest human powers lifted up in grace; personal, because it plunges the Christian, through Christ, into the deepest Personal exchange, the threefold Love of God.

If faith is the root of the Christian life and if it is found in the

sacramental life of the believing Church, then faith must also be the root of special vocations within the context of that Church's life. Without question, faith is, therefore, the root of Christian virginal life, which is both baptismal and eminently ecclesial.

We need to emphasize at the outset that in the exercise of faith in the vow of obedience, the virgin is a living image of the believing Church, the Bride who is marked by a holiness proceeding from the integrity of her faith. To consider the virgin's exercise of faith as a private affair and not related to the faith of the whole Mystical Body is inconceivable. (Cf. 1 Cor 12:25 ff.)

Obedience is faith in action. The dimensions of this obedience are determined by a Christian's state in life. In the vow of obedience the virgin freely chooses to give up her own will in exchange for God's will interpreted to her through the Church and her religious superiors. The vow of obedience, though a once-and-for-all act, is reaffirmed in all the faithful acts of the virgin's life. Her whole life is centered on rendering her basic oblation more definite and final, in lessening any small *no* which is at cross-purpose with her large *yes*. Obedience becomes for the virgin a faithful chain of love keeping her where God is. Through obedience she says, "Thy will be done; may Your covenant of love be accomplished in me and in the Church."

In giving up her liberty, she authenticates her deepest self: the image of her which God has fashioned in His everlasting love. True freedom is the power to realize this unique image. True freedom is the strength to become what God intends one to be. For the virgin, this power and strength are found in faithful religious obedience. Through obedience the virgin gives herself to God and thus deliberately and consciously asks in return to receive her true self from His hands. "Receive me . . . and I shall live!" When in faith a virgin gives herself totally to God, she may seem to "decrease." But her authentic Christian life increases. She finds her life by losing it. Through obedience she lays hold more and more of the authentic person God has made her to be. She no longer wants to see herself otherwise than in

God, without whom she is unintelligible. Thus obedience becomes the deepest actualization of the virgin's freedom as her true Christian identity is liberated more and more.

St. Benedict says that the obedience given to superiors is given to God. Faith is a vision of that unseen God. Faith sees the invisible through the visible. A religious superior may happily express or reflect the countenance of Christ, who came to serve. Human nature being what it is, she may, on the other hand, fail to show forth the image of Christ. In either case the obeying virgin, guarded by the solicitous maternal care of the Church, goes forward perceiving in faith the One in whom she believes. "*Scio cui credidi.*" (2 Tim 1:12.)

Faithful obedience is filled with both the dying and the rising aspects of paschal life. Together they form the authentic reality of Christian faith, and neither must, in this life, totally eclipse the other. Religious obedience has sometimes suffered from an eclipse of its liberating (rising) aspects. Never was it meant to be a vow of unmitigated hardship or a despoliation of human faculties and natural gifts. Never was it meant to be a process of depersonalization and mere servitude. Should it seem to be so at times, the one who has pledged obedience will not lose by fulfilling the command. If her faith is strong, she will ultimately find that God pays every debt. Obedience exercised in faith is not a surrender of reason but rather an enlightenment and fulfillment of this faculty.

For, through faithful obedience, what is good in man becomes better. What deviates from God is made straight. What is unauthentic in the personality of the obedient person is replaced by what is genuine. By faithful obedience, human strengths are tapped, intensified, refined. Of capital importance, they are linked more intimately with divine activity in a synergy that promises and finally realizes, even in this life, the highest fulfillment a man may reach or hope for.

"Thy faith has saved thee!" It is not obedience by itself which pleases God. It is obedience in faith, faith which comes from

God and leads back to Him. To do the will of His Father was Christ's consuming desire. For His virgin-bride, doing the Father's will becomes her lifelong pledge through obedience in faith. Obedience is the "sacrifice and service of our faith." (Cf. Phil 2:17.) Through faithful obedience the grain of wheat dies in order to rise up in Easter freshness and bring forth fruit.

Poverty and Hope

As there is in the earth an appetite for the sun, so there is in man an appetite for being (*besoin d'être*).¹² It is both a passive condition of emptiness and a dynamic activity driving man toward a richer participation in Being itself. In the Christian order, it is a condition of having nothing and yet coming to possess all things. (Cf. 2 Cor 6:10.)

If the life of religious obedience is faith-in-action, the life of vowed poverty is hope-in-waiting, hope that is rooted in faith. If by obedient faith the will is moved to assent wholly to the risen Christ and to the God whose salvation He brings, it is in the soil of poverty and hope that a Christian receives this salvation. It is in the soil of poverty that the virgin cries out her need. It is in the soil of hope that God answers her with the wealth of Himself.

All lasting riches begin with poverty. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." (Mt 5:3.) The kingdom of heaven is laid hold of by those who show God the passport of their own emptiness. For when God looks on the poor, they become rich. "He has looked on my lowliness," said Mary, Queen of the *anarwim*, God's poor.

The Gospels are one long record of divine action transforming poverty into riches. One moment, "They have no wine"; the next, "You have saved the best wine until now." One moment, five loaves and a few fishes; the next, a crowd fed and satisfied, and disciples gathering up twelve baskets of fragments. One moment, the empty nets of fishermen after a fruitless night on the sea; the next, a launch into the deep and a catch straining the

net to breaking-point. God's wealth is always excessive; it always overflows the vessel into which it is poured. Even death, the deepest emptiness, is unable to withstand Jesus' quickening power and fullness. At Christ's word, "Rise up," the wealth of life came back to a widow's son, to the daughter of Jairus, to the brother of Christ's special friends at Bethany. "He who believes in Me, even if he die, shall live." (Jn 11:25-26.) In poverty, the grain of wheat dies; in hope, the grain rises and brings forth abundant fruit.

Hope is dynamic faith; it is laying hold of life. For the virgin it is not limited to possessing, already in this life, the promised hundredfold. Hope presses on to the final prize that lies beyond the hundredfold. This prize is a Person, a Person whom, to win, virgins risk all.

Religious poverty, then, is a life of hopeful risk. The virgin stakes all on what God has promised. She sells what she has and gives to the poor. She leaves all to follow Christ. (Cf. Mt 19:21.) As Abraham forsook his land for a land of promise, so does the virgin leave father, mother, relatives, familiar surroundings, possessions great or small, to go to the land where God calls her.

Having material things may lead to being had by them, becoming attached to them as ends rather than means. So the virgin gives up the ownership of things. She deeds them over to the common life, to the Christ whom she now finds in the new and larger family of her religious community. She wishes to serve the Lord with an undivided heart. She vows a life of poverty and looks hopefully to God for her sustenance. What she needs for daily use she seeks in hope. For the most part she is even relieved of the seeking. She lives in the common patrimony of her religious family where God's care for her is, indeed, far beyond the care He gives to His sparrows or to the lilies of the field.

Important as are material renunciations in the virgin's lifelong movement from having to being, they are yet only visible witnesses to a deeper emptying. Stating a fundamental truth of the Christian life, Christ told His disciples that without Him they

could do nothing. The virgin believes this truth and therefore becomes aware of her basic inward poverty, which, as a stable disposition, is called variously humility, abandonment to God, or spiritual childhood. "Without Me you can do nothing." (Jn 15:5.) Interpreting this truth through her vow of poverty, the virgin accepts human weakness on the one hand while hoping in God's power on the other. So mighty is God's love, so strong and so gentle, that even man's wickedness and mistakes have a place in it. The dying-rising pattern of Christ's *pasch* again emerges. When her weakness is transformed by the divine strength of hope, the virgin sings with Paul the risen victory song: "When I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor 12:10.) When, through her poverty, the virgin becomes divinely rich, she experiences within her own life the admirable exchange which Christ made with all humanity in the Incarnation. Viewing her new endowments, the virgin understands why a man who gives all the substance of his house for love regards it as nothing. (Cf. Ct 8:7.)

"Let him who glories glory in the Lord." (2 Cor 10:17.) Through the vow of poverty, lived in the context of hope, the virgin truly glories in the Lord. Her weaknesses and renunciations lead her again and again to the strength of the risen Lord. "Rise up," Christ says. If she answers in a living and faithful way, she is indeed lifted up from glory to glory. She becomes a very rich *anawim*.

Inner emptiness, apparent and real failure and frustration, a foreign sky, loneliness, a worldwide ache for the *pleroma* of Christ—these and other daily dyings make up authentic Christian virginal life. They are not its wholeness; they are but a portion of its dying-rising pattern. They are what Teilhard de Chardin calls "diminishments."¹³ They are ways in which John the Baptist said we must "decrease." They are the daily ways a virgin leaves all things to follow the risen Lord. And follow Him she must. For once the Easter voice has sounded in her ear, she, like Paul and Magdalene, cannot forget it. Fundamentally she can no longer really think of anything else. She cannot rest

until she rests in that Person whose voice she has heard. Through Him she enters into a threefold Wealth surpassing understanding. Through faith and obedience she has found the risen Christ. Through hope and poverty she clings to Him. Through virginal love she will never let Him go.

Chastity and Love

Although there may be a genuine faith without love, "little" though such faith be, there is no genuine love without faith. Active love springs from faith. (Cf. Gal 5:6.) "It is not without reason," says Hans Küng, "that faith and love are named to describe the whole of Christian existence together with hope which expresses the eschatological tension contained in man's gift of himself."¹⁴

Love brings us to the heart of Christian life, for God is love. (1 Jn 4:16.) This Johannine phrase means not merely that in His dealings with men God is loving. God is not only love in His operations; He is love in His inner life. Into this inner life of love, God's Three-Personed Love, the Christian enters with Christ in sacramental baptism.

Therefore, although faith, hope, and love are essentially one in the Christian life, the greatest of these is love because it is the climax of inter-Personal achievement. Through faith the way is opened to love. Through love the Christian enters the dynamic love which God is.

What is true of every Christian is true in a special way of the virgin. Through obedient faith the virgin sees the Person of Christ, who has called her to bridal union with Him. Through poverty she brings her emptiness to Him in the hope that He will adorn her as a bride with jewels and the garment of salvation. Through virginal love she is joined in marriage with the Lamb, a marriage which she celebrates now in the candlelight of faith but "soon" in the full splendor of the everlasting day. "And behold, I come *quickly!*" (Apoc 22:7.)

The essence of the vow of chastity lies in an undivided and direct love of Christ which embraces God and neighbor. All-encompassing virginal love involves the person as an integral whole, and for this reason even the flesh is caught up in its direction. "O God, . . . for you my flesh pines and my soul thirsts. . . ." (Ps 62:2.) This virginal song expresses the integrity of virginal love much as the phrase "they shall be two in one flesh" signifies the unifying character of marital love.

The fallacy of considering virginal integrity or, for that matter, marital unity as a mere physical achievement becomes evident at this point. In the parable of the wise and foolish virgins the ten virgins had all kept their bodily integrity intact. The five foolish virgins had, in fact, done only this. They sinned, therefore, not by excess but by defect. They turned in upon themselves and failed to love. The five who entered the marriage room, however, held the lighted lamps of love in their hands. Their natural forces of love had been integrated with supernatural love and had thus become fruitful in the Spirit. It was God's own love at work in them which made them truly wise and brought them face to face with the Bridegroom. Bodily integrity was for them a mark of the extent of their love. It was a silent symbol of their total love, total hope, total faith.

If all the facets of Christian baptismal life are linked with the dying-rising dynamism of Christ's own *pasch*, one may expect this paradox to become ever more evident as the Christian continues to "put on Christ." Aiming to be lifted to the fullness of this life through the Spirit of the risen Christ, the Christian virgin and martyr must both clearly and decisively "show forth" the death of the Lord and the triumph of His victory. The martyr does so by standing fully available to God, by donating his life as a witness to love in the midst of forces inimical to God. Into the Father's hands the martyr freely commends himself. He delivers himself up to death for the sake of Christ. Here is total response to an absolute call. The virgin likewise stands fully available to God, donating her life as a witness to love. Into the Father's

hands she commends herself through Christ, her Bridegroom. In Him she delivers herself up to a daily death in the face of whatever is hostile to the reign of Christ in her own life and in her environment. This daily death makes her whole life a Eucharist, an oblation in the one loving sacrifice of Christ. "The root, the flower, too, of virginity," said John Chrysostom, "is a crucified life."¹⁵ Love's price is sacrifice.

For the virgin, love is everything. It is the pearl of great price. Countless virgins have sold all in order to buy it. This *all* is not only the virgin's own will which she "sells" in obedience for the greater good of true freedom. This *all* is not only attachment to material possessions or to a false self. This *all* is the virgin's very person, her entire being, which she delivers up in a direct oblation to her Bridegroom. So total a deliverance is meaningful only in the greater context of the Church's bridal mystery where the Church as virgin-bride gives herself wholly to Christ, and Christ in turn gives Himself to His Church. The virgin realizes and manifests this "high mystery" even here and now in her own deliverance to Christ.

This mystery of virginal love caught up in a divine-human marriage bond will never be luminously clear to men. St. Ambrose said of it: "What created intelligence can grasp the nature of a virtue which is not contained within the laws of nature? Or who can find language adequate to express what exceeds the life of nature? It has come down from heaven."¹⁶

We have previously shown how, in their nature, the vocations of Christian virginity and marriage both partake of and express the "high mystery" of the Church's bridal alliance with Christ, one in sign and the other in reality. We are now ready to pass on to the more functional aspects of Christ's union with the Church and see how marriage and virginity uniquely express this living bond of love.

As a hinge for our ponderings here, we shall focus on three essential characteristics of marriage, whether the "high mystery" of the Church's union or lesser unions which mirror it. These

are best stated in compound patterns: (1) permanence and integrity; (2) self-donation and communion; (3) fruitfulness and fulfillment.

The *permanence and integrity* of the Church's enduring union with Christ are based upon the divine promise made to the Church: "Behold, I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world." (Mt 28:20.) Fidelity is thus an essential attribute of God's love. God does not give His love and then withdraw it. His love cannot be alienated. Linked with the character of permanence is the integrity of the Church's union with Christ: the wholeness of her faith which is anchored in Christ, whom God raised from the dead in the Spirit's power.

The marriage of a virgin to Christ through religious vows partakes of this ecclesial permanence and integrity. The virgin shows forth this permanence by the perpetuity of her vows. She shows forth this integrity by the totality of her faithful dedication, which embraces her entire person in an undivided way. Since Christ has pledged His fidelity to her through the Bride-Church, the virgin prays that, though she be separated from all else, she may never be separated from the Lord. (*A te nunquam separari permittas.*)

The "unto death" of the marriage contract and the marital fidelity of the partners are the obvious parallels in the sacrament of matrimony. The sacrament elevates the union to a plane of indissolubility where its endurance, often threatened by human emotional changes, is supported by Christ's own love. Since marriage partakes of and proclaims Christ's permanent union with His Church, husbands and wives who separate or who live in mutual coldness make a lie of the symbol which they are. Indissolubility of the marriage bond is rooted in Christ's faithful alliance with His Church-Bride.

Both marriage and virginity, then, are vocations of lifelong commitment to Christ. Because of their permanence and integrity, both vocations proclaim the faithfulness of God's promise. Yet it is only in His antecedent faithfulness to them that virgins or

married partners receive the strength to be faithful to God. This "antecedent faithfulness" comes to them in the grace of baptism, in their special vocational call, and finally, in the "covenants" of religious profession or marriage vows.

Self-donation and communion are realized in the Church's bridal life in her sacraments and eucharistic sacrifice. In the Eucharist, Christ as Bridegroom delivers Himself up to His Father for His Bride. The Church-Bride, in return, gives herself to Christ and thus enters the current of His offering to the Father.

By the oblation of her vows, the virgin re-enacts the Church's donation to Christ and thus makes answer to the Self-giving of the Bridegroom. As the Eucharist is for Christ a renewal of the one deliverance of the Upper Room and Calvary, so it is for the virgin always a renewal of her vows. Total commitment to Christ implies her daily readiness to change gradually within herself whatever is an obstacle to loving union with Christ, whatever prevents her oblation from becoming one with that of her Bridegroom, whatever hinders her from serving Christ in others and thus witnessing to Him in the world.

The virgin-bride and Christ, the Bridegroom, celebrate the summit of their union in the eucharistic banquet of love, the mystery of faith, the pledge of hope. Christ says to the virgin, "Take, eat, this is My body given up for you." (1 Cor 11:24, Knox tr.) Every Eucharist may become, for the virgin, a new awareness of Christ's love, the secret expansion of dialog with Him, and an ever-deepening commitment to the Church's mission on earth.

A sacramental marriage union, on the other hand, reaches the summit of self-donation and communion in the marriage act which is the synthesis of all other marital donations and dialog. "Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh. . . ." Adam's words have been called "the first song of bridal love."¹⁷ The human marriage union, which is a sign of something greater, becomes truly profound when the marriage partners take part together in the

eucharistic meeting with Christ. For this is the meeting in which their own encounter is fulfilled.

Let us pause for a moment to compare the two communions—that of human marriage and that of Christ's union with a vowed virgin. The height of person-to-person communion which is achieved by marriage partners in the marriage act is achieved by the virgin not in a qualitative but rather in a transcendent realization of sex. Through her vow of chastity the virgin has surrendered to the Lord the secret of her person and signified the totality of her love. Having been received by the Church in the name of Christ, this vow has placed the secret of her person forever in the keeping of Christ. This surrender is further perfected and celebrated in the sacrament of the Eucharist, where Christ gives Himself to the virgin in the measure of her surrender to Him. Through this lifelong surrender of her whole person, the center of the virgin's life is shifted to the transcendent plane of risen life, of heavenly life, since man's fleshly body is at the root of the earthly state. Radically renouncing the fulfillment of her person in the sacred encounter of human marriage, the virgin finds her fulfillment in a union with the Lord on high. The physical fact of sex and its psychological impact on her person do not, however, cease. The vocation of virginity is worked out in a woman of flesh and blood. The energies of love which, for the marriage partners, converge in the sexual act are, for the virgin, channeled (sublimated, if you will) into a transcendent, though not less real, union with the Lord. The secret of her person is elevated to its final plane of eschatological existence.¹⁸ Here it remains "hidden with Christ in God." (Cf. Col 3:3.) As Ecclesiastes says of wisdom, so we might say of the virgin, "Deep, deep is her secret, who shall read it?" (Eccles 7:25.)

Lastly, now, we come to the aspect of *fruitfulness and fulfillment* in any nuptial alliance. In her union with Christ, the Church-Bride begets and gives birth through the power of the Spirit. In so doing, she advances toward her *pleroma*, her fulfillment in Christ. The liturgy of the Church frequently speaks of

the regenerative powers of the Spirit which the Church possesses and which come to birth in the mothering sea of baptism and in the Church's entire sacramental activity.

The human marital union is fruitfully fulfilled both in the mutual love of the marriage partners and in their parenthood. It reaches its greatest fruitfulness and *pleroma*, so to speak, when it becomes concretely and visibly what it proclaims in its depths: a union of love in the love of Christ. When the marriage partners and their children have, through the exercise of Christian love, become holy in the holiness of Christ, the sacramental union of marriage will have achieved its true fulfillment.

The fruitfulness of the vowed virgin flows from the Holy Spirit, creative principle in the one bridal Church. The virgin does not bring forth fruit in the physical manner of marriage. She brings forth the fruits of the Spirit, the works of love. This type of fruitfulness will be detailed later, as we hope to emphasize the truth that genuine Christian virginity is by no means sterile.

Permanent, integral, communicative, total, selfless, fruitful and fulfilling—these are some of the characteristics of Christ's union with His Church. They are the "witnessing" features, too, of the realities of Christian marriage and of Christian virginity, both of which mirror the ecclesial union in unique ways.

Conclusion

Whatever the degree of its intimacy or the nuances brought to it by special vocations, union with God is always an expression of the theological activity of faith, hope, and love—powers received by the Christian at baptism. Every subsequent sacrament and sacrifice which the Christian celebrates in the Church, all human and divine encounters, all praise and worship, the daily life of labor, service, scholarship, suffering, the life of the evangelical counsels—all these realities intensify the basic orientation of baptism and allow its powers to become operative. The vocation to virginity is also accomplished fundamentally through the

baptismal power that is at work in the virgin. (Cf. Eph 3:20-21.)

It is for this reason that religious profession may be considered a second baptism. It both reaffirms the virgin's basic baptismal commitment and brings it to flower in chaste and ardent nuptial love. The religious vows, postures of faith, hope, and charity, hold the virgin close to the heart of Christ "as locket or bracelet clings." They are, in the end, a declaration of love given and love received. The torch that lights this admirable exchange is, indeed, a blaze of fire, a blaze of the everlasting love which Jeremiah spoke of. Not death itself is so strong as this love, not the grave itself cruel as love unrequited. (Cf. Ct 8:6.)

NOTES

1. Elmer O'Brien, S.J. "Ascetical and Mystical Theology," *Theological Studies*, 19, p. 59.
2. St. Jerome, *Epis. ad Eustochium, Paulae Filium*, PL 22, col. 423.
3. *Passio Sanctarum Martyrum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, PL 3, col. 47.
4. F. Moriones, O.R.S.A., *Enchiridion Theologicum S. Augustini* (Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Matriti, 1961), n. 1348.
5. *Ibid.*, n. 1891-1896.
6. R. A. F. MacKenzie, *Faith and History in the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 40-41.
7. Ronald Knox, *University and Anglican Sermons* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), p. 444.
8. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, PG 7.
9. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 2, a. 9.
10. J. van Ruysbroeck, *The Spiritual Espousals*, trans. Eric Colledge (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1952), p. 181.
11. St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, II-II, q. 11, a. 1.
12. Vincent P. Miceli, "Marcel: The Ascent to Being," *Thought*, 38:150, Autumn 1963, p. 403.
13. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 55.
14. Hans Küng, "Justification and Sanctification According to the New Testament," *Christianity Divided*, ed. Daniel Callahan (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 324.
15. St. John Chrysostom, *De Virginitate*, PG 48, col. 592.
16. St. Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, PL 16, col. 198.

17. John M. Oesterreicher, *The Israel of God* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 23.

18. Cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1938), pp. 184-186. We are aware of the ambiguous meaning of the word *sublimation*. We use it in the sense of a real transposition, not a mere camouflage.

*The joy of a virgin of Christ
is of Christ,
in Christ,
with Christ,
through Christ,
for Christ.*

—ST. AUGUSTINE, *De Sancta Virginitate*
(PL 40, col. 411).

7 THE LORD IS HER PORTION

WHEN CHRIST said “Many things yet I have to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (Jn 16: 12–13), to what did He refer? To the harsh sufferings He was about to undergo? To the full splendor of the Christian message whose glory had stunned Peter, James, and John on Mount Tabor? Or did His words embrace the whole chiaroscuro of the Christian life, the blend of dyings and risings bearable only in Christ?

Were one to advert with lively faith to the reality of the words, “I espouse you to Jesus Christ,” as they are addressed to the vowed virgin in the Church’s ceremony of religious profession, one might conclude that here, indeed, is one of those “unbearable” realities of which Christ spoke.

Fearsome Mystery

A creature’s nuptial union with Christ, the Son of God: confronted with this truth one might wish to hide away from its splendor. It is too much to bear. Overcome with the contrast be-

tween the largesse of the Lord and his own powerlessness, Simon Peter cried out after the miraculous catch of fish: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." (Lk 5:8-9.) The Old Testament *anawim*, sensing their inner emptiness, prayed: "If You, O Lord, mark iniquities, Lord, who can stand?" (Ps 129:3.) Even once-removed, so to speak, from direct contact with the Lord, Elizabeth found herself overwhelmed by Mary's visit to her. "And how have I deserved," she asked in joyful bewilderment, "that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1:43-44.) The centurion begged the Lord only to send His word to heal the sick servant, for the honor of a personal visit so exceeded the officer's own worthiness. (Mt 8:8.)

Page after page of Scripture reveals the consternation of man in the face of God's goodness, at once fearsome and fascinating. Still affected by the remnants of original sin, the human creature instinctively tries to hide his nothingness under the fig leaves of protestation, remonstrance, or flight. But whither shall he flee? (Cf. Ps 138.) Fortunately for the human creature, neither can he flee from God's goodness, nor will God flee from him. This double truth becomes a torment to the sinner and a joy to the saint. Always fluctuating between these two conditions in this life, man finds himself abashed by the divine gifts which come from God's exceeding great love. But abashedness turns to gratitude. Man hides, and his shelter is under the shadow of God's wings. Here he receives the strength to bear divine goodness.

Fascinating Mystery

God has given His gifts to man not to stupefy him but rather to rejoice his heart and make him readier for his true homeland. God tempers His brightness according to man's capacities to receive. At the same time, God strengthens and shapes these capacities in order to make man ever stronger to bear divine goodness. Bearing the splendor of this goodness can never be a mere human achievement. God must first give man the power to re-

ceive Him and His gifts. This power begins in baptism with the gift of divine life along with an ever-expanding retinue of strengths: divine faith, hope and love; the gifts of the Spirit; actual graces; sacramental gifts; charisms.

Protected under the shelter of God's wings and equipped with the baptismal helmet of salvation, the Christian virgin advances to ponder Christ's marriage union with His Church, the one Bride, and, in this alliance, to discover something of the meaning of her own espousals with Jesus Christ, the one Bridegroom. The Church is for her the Light in which she sees light.

In applying the term *bride of Christ* to her virgins, the Church has, from earliest times, shown a certain ease and confidence. As early as the third century, Tertullian used the phrase *married to Christ* to describe the virginal state.¹ A century later Agnes, confronting her pagan judges, revealed the marriage with Christ to which she was committed. St. Athanasius, speaking of Christian virgins, said, "The Church customarily calls them 'brides of Christ.'"² The ancient rite of virginal consecration, now being revived and revised in this century, is wholly woven around the bridal concept. Contemporary usage of and esteem for such terminology is reflected in Pius XII's statement about the virgin: "Christ will be her Husband."³

Gratuity of Virginal Covenant

A vowed virgin, in covenant with Christ, knows that she cannot give her divine partner anything that she has not received from Him. From the profound initial blessing of her baptism, gift after gift has come to her. Above all, she has been called to be a virgin-bride. God's call is always operative. In it the virgin finds the grace to respond and to pledge herself through vows to its fulfillment. Faced with God's choice of him, David exclaimed: "What worth has my kindred in God's sight, that he should make an everlasting covenant with me, sealed and ratified, all of it?" (2 Kgs 23:5, Knox tr.) The Christian virgin might gratefully

protest in a similar way. But she knows that God does not choose on the basis of merit or kindred. The title-deed to His special gifts is most often something which the world holds as foolish. God delights to be with the ordinary run of mankind, with people who are as plain as bread or, to use Caryll Houselander's happy phrase, "simple as flax."

Christ's Dowry to His Bride

Once the virginal marriage-contract between Christ and the virgin has been forged and then placed by the Church-Bride in the deepest current of her own life, Christ begins to reveal to His virgin-bride something of the height and breadth and depth of His love. There is not, nor ever will be, a husband like this Husband.

As His dowry to His ecclesial Bride, Christ sent His Spirit, Gift of gifts. To each Christian the Spirit is personally given in the sacraments of initiation. So vibrant at times is His activity within the Church and within the Christian, that one might say the Church lives in repeated Pentecosts. All the marvels of Christ's marriage union with a dedicated virgin flow from this fundamental gift of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, whatever be the *magnalia Dei* in the Church in specific times and places, they bud forth and flower from the Spirit of the risen Christ. "Send forth Thy Spirit, and we shall be created." We, the new creation (cf. 2 Cor 5:17), are forever being realized. Since whatever is received by man is received according to the mode of the receiver,⁴ the progressive elevation and enrichment of man's faculties through grace shapes, in a sense, further gifts of God. On the Christian who has become a virgin-bride, a "new creature," Christ bestows His gifts in a nuptial dimension. To the virgin He gives His gifts as Bridegroom; she receives them as bride. The covenanted life of a professed virgin and Christ is accomplished in the framework of marital exchange. The *Jesu Corona Virginum*,

wedding hymn of the virgin, sings out the fact of Christ's beneficence to His bride: "Thy Love provides bridal gifts."⁶

In Christian marriage, a bridegroom gives to his bride his name, his self-giving love, his care and protection, his kindred, his possessions. In the "high mystery" which human marriage signifies and which the virginal life embodies, the gifts are similar but on a divine plane. The Bridegroom-Giver is God. His gifts, therefore, are limitless and perfect.

Gift of Name

To His virgin-bride, Christ gives a new name. Of the victorious Church, the angel of the Apocalypse said: "To him who overcomes, I will give the hidden manna . . . and a new name." (Cf. Apoc 2:17.) The new name of the virgin-bride signifies an interior renewal based on her new and deeper link with Christ. Her name is derived from Christ's own name, just as a bride takes on the name of her husband in a human marriage. To receive a new name at religious profession or investiture betokens this involvement and denotes, in a sense, the reverse side of the Bridegroom's name. Already having the high name of Christian by reason of her baptism, the virgin now receives a new name to attest to a deeper immersion into the Christian life and a new deliverance to Christ in the virginal vocation. Pledging herself to a more intense dying to self and rising to Christ, the virgin receives a new name to celebrate this *metanoia* and to echo the more intimate disclosure of Christ's personality which she, as a bride, will receive.

As human marriage partners live under one name, so the virgin receives a new name to celebrate her oneness with Christ. "It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me." (Gal 2:20.) Her whole life will be given over to intensifying Christ's life in her, to putting on the fullness which His Name denotes. Every act of the vowed virgin will be a communion in the mystery of Christ's Name.

In biblical mentality a name is not a mere appellation. To reveal one's name to another is, in a sense, to give that person entrance into one's personality. Adam's knowledge of names in the animal kingdom made him lord of these creatures. The name of Yahweh, once revealed to Moses and the Israelites, became a permanent promise of protection and love. When the Israelites called on the Name of the Lord in a manner according to His Will, He heard them without fail. "To know the name" of Yahweh meant that the Israelites would, in turn, give the Lord their full trust. To depend on other gods would indicate an intolerable division of heart, a profanation of Yahweh's name.

For the Israelites, remembering the Name of the Lord meant not merely recalling it to consciousness or regarding it as a talisman for achieving shortsighted ends. Remembering His Name meant a personal confrontation with Yahweh in worship and in the renewal of covenant-obedience.⁶

In the face of the repeated infidelity of the Israelites, God showed mercy only for "His Name's sake." (Cf. Is 48:9-10.) His Name contained a permanent promise of love. Toward ingratitude and infidelity, this love became active as mercy and compassion.

The Old Testament *anawim* formed the bridge to the New Israel only because they continued to trust in Yahweh's Name when all others had forgotten Him. (Cf. Zeph 3:8-13.) The Psalmist had recorded God's pledge to the faithful individual thus: "I will protect him because he has known My Name." (Ps 90:14.) Truly knowing the hidden content of the Savior's Name because of the Angel's instruction to her, Mary sang out to Elizabeth: "He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name." (Lk 1:49.) Mary knew the Name of the Lord; in her heart she pondered its holy meaning.⁷

The New Testament reflects an urgency to seek the hidden contents of the Name of Jesus. "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?" (Mk 4:40.) It is a fascinating adventure to read through the Gospels noting the recurrent litany

of the Lord's Name: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God"; "This is My Beloved Son"; "Son of David, have mercy on me"; "Rabboni." Trust in the Name of the Lord is the strength of martyrs. "Thou holdest fast my name" (Apoc 2:13); thus is the faithful witness of the martyr characterized.

The blessed in heaven will be known by a new name (cf. Apoc 2:17), a name which God keeps in readiness for those whose life unfolds faithfully according to the name of Christian. The Christian has been baptized "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The Greek text, "Into the Name . . .," reveals the depths of the baptismal reality even more forcefully.⁸

To continue to call on Christ's Name in faith throughout her life, to remember it, to depend on it, is for the virgin always to be in dialog with the person of Christ. With Christ's Name comes His living, actual presence, a presence which grows neither weary nor listless (cf. Is 40:28), which neither slumbers nor sleeps. (Cf. Ps 120.) Calling on the divine Name becomes for the virgin, an *anamnesis*, a faithful, effectual contact with the Easter Christ of her first and second baptism, now wholly Bridegroom to her. "Our help is in the Name of the Lord." "Blessed be the Name of the Lord." For the virgin-bride, these are the love songs of her life. She prays in the Name of the Lord, offers sacrifice in His Name, goes to the Father in His Name. This is the rhythm of her remembering heart.

Further sacramental encounters deepen this nuptial dialog. In the eucharistic meeting, Christ calls His bride by name; she in turn comes to know His risen fullness in the breaking of the Bread. At the same communion she prays as Christ did before the great Thursday Supper: "Keep, *in Thy Name*, those You have given Me." (Jn 17:11.) For in the Eucharist she meets, through Christ, the community (*koinonia*) of her brothers and sisters in the Christian family.⁹ The Eucharist is always the celebration of the full mystery of love which embraces all the people of God.

But we have not yet expressed the heights of presence which the divine Name brings. For if in the Name of Jesus we find personal presence, we also find a living and personal relation. At the root of all revelation about Christ's person lies the mystery of God's own Tri-Personal Life. Through the Name of Christ and the presence this Name brings, the virgin-bride receives an ever-deepening share in the Trinitarian Life, the mutual pulsation and communication of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To be joined with Christ in living, covenanted love and to share His Name is always to be entering with Him into the summit of life and love. When an ineffable gift of grace places this threefold relationship within the quasi-experiential grasp of the virgin, she is blessed indeed. To the virgin-bride the Name of Christ is truly, then, a Name above all names. For on its wings she rises to the sacred mountain of *agens et quietus*. Here she partakes of as much union with the God of Love as she could ever possibly seek. For this ascension and partaking, human language has no name. The seventh seal is broken and words stand still.

Once given the fullness of Christ's Name, the virgin-bride has received *all*. She loves to linger over this *all*. She loves to open up the Bridegroom's gifts and, in the joy of each discovery, kneel down and praise the Name of the One who gives.

Gift of Love

With His Name, Christ gives His love, a love which surpasses understanding and is beyond all devising. If His name is above all names, so is His love. Like every true lover, God is not content with protestations of love. He longs to give Himself up for His bride. His love is a sacrificial love. The supreme moment of loving encounter for the Church and for the professed virgin is, therefore, the moment of the eucharistic sacrifice and sacrament. Here the virgin's own deliverance is joined with Christ's in order to ascend to the Father in the fragrance of worship and thanksgiving. Here Christ's Body, given ultimately for the life of the world

(*pro saeculi vita*),¹⁰ is given wholly to His bride. Christ says of His Body: "Take it, for it is yours. This is My Body which is given for you." The virgin has a real right, then, over Christ's Body. But also, her body¹¹ is no longer hers but His. The perfect culmination of the chaste and divine marriage of Christ and His bride is the Eucharist.¹²

In relating thus to Christ in the Eucharist, the virgin-bride relates to the whole Christ. Christ has so thoroughly united Himself with all men that in meeting Christ the virgin meets all men, and in meeting all men the virgin meets Christ. Only with and through others can Christ be fully known. The ability to relate to others touches the core of human personality. For to be a person means to be an open being, one related in personal communication with others. "I was hungry and you gave Me to eat." "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" The virgin longs to meet Christ, therefore, not only in the Eucharist, but again and again in the daily bread of ordinary encounters with friend or even foe. She meets Him in the beggar, the rich, the prisoner, the sick. She meets Him in her nearest neighbor, the one who needs her most, and in the one she most needs. But the root of all these encounters is the eucharistic encounter with Christ. The virgin meets Christ in the Eucharist the better to meet Him in all men and all men in Him. Though distinct, the two encounters cannot be separated. The authenticity of one depends upon the other. Caryll Houselander gives us a picture of an unreal worshipper who found Christ in the crucifix but not in fellowmen:

My candles have burnt out at the carved, archaic feet,/While I
passed the poor man by with the broken boots in the street./I have
said to the worn face of the polished darkworn wood,/"Lord, Lord!"
I was mute to Love's substance in flesh and blood.¹³

Pope Paul VI said that the secret of the apostolate is learning how to love. He called his office of ruling the flock of the Lord "a labor of love."¹⁴ The apostolate is always an apostolate of love.

It is every Christian's business in some way or another. For, in its essence, the apostolate means love shared, love manifested. It means, in the words of Cardinal Suenens, "letting Another love others through us."¹⁵ Virginity is neither a severance of human love nor indifference to it. It is a transformation of human love. It is, in the end, letting Christ love through us.

The eucharistic encounter makes the virgin's heart larger and her feelings finer, so that she is better able to fulfill her apostolic task of love and service. In the Eucharist she makes supreme contact with Christ in His Church, where all His members are joined in oneness. From sunrise to sunset, without ceasing, there goes on in the one Church-Bride that pulsating double life: the life of Christ in the sacrament and the life of the Church's members through the sacrament.¹⁶ Christ communicates His sacramental life to His one bridal Church in order that Christians may be one "as We are one."

Christ and His members make one single Body. The Bridegroom and the ecclesial Bride are "one flesh." Yet there is no confusion of Head with members. Christians are not the physical nor the eucharistic Body of Christ; the Bride is not the Bridegroom. All the distinctions are there, but they do not add up to discontinuity. The Church is not just a body, but the Body of Christ. Origen begs us "not to separate the Church from the Lord."¹⁷ But even though the Church and the Lord make a single Body it remains for the Church lovingly to manifest this union in time. To live ecclesially is, therefore, to live fraternally and also ecumenically.

In Christ, the virgin is a sister to all. In Christ, everyone is to her a sister or brother. This is not always a comfortable Christian truth. But Christ laid down His life for His friends and enemies; His followers must do the same in various degrees. To live thus is an *exodus* from selfishness to selflessness. For this type of pass-over, all Christians need the power of the risen Christ. In the Eucharist, Christ brings the Church and the virgin-bride the strength of His own victorious love. He asks that this victory be

carried to the world. So long as there is racial hatred, class discrimination, coldness and non-caring of any sort, the victory has not yet been fully poured abroad.

Gift of Life

With the Bridegroom's love comes His life. Already surging through the Christian from the time of his baptism, Christ's life is energized anew and nourished in the eucharistic communion. As Christ's own sacrifice opened the wellsprings of the Spirit's fruitfulness and delivered this fecundity to the Church, so the mutual deliverance of the Bridegroom and the Church-Bride in the Eucharist results in fruit for God. "The Eucharist makes Christians, and Christians make the Eucharist."¹⁸ The Eucharist is both seed and fruit in the Spirit. It is, in the words of Pope Leo XIII, "the flower and the fruitage" which is daily multiplied and spread abroad in the Church.¹⁹

The admirable divine-human exchange between Christ and the virgin occurs at the eucharistic center of the Church-person. "He who cleaves to the Lord is one spirit with Him." (1 Cor 6:17.) The virgin is united to Christ in one Spirit, it is true, but also in the mystery of the one eucharistic flesh which builds and binds Christ and the Church-Bride together. In the eucharistic meal, the virgin-bride and the one ecclesial Bride take part in the "flesh-Spirit mystery of the God-man" shown forth in the Eucharist-Cross-and-Resurrection.²⁰

Gift of Light

To the virgin-bride, Christ gives His name, His love, His life. He also gives His light. Christ's revelatory word is the lamp of the virgin's life. Under the compulsion of a life of mutual love, the secrets of the scriptural word are yielded up more and more to the ecclesial Bride and to the virgin-bride. The nourishment of both divine-human unions is the eucharistic bread of life and the scriptural bread of light.²¹ Pope John XXIII has said that "the

Bible and the Chalice" are at the heart of Christian life.²² Especially in the liturgy, which Jean Valet has called *la Bible expérimentée*, does the virgin-bride taste and see that the Lord is sweet. Here, truly, Christ gives her a heart to know Him, His very own heart which discloses to her the inner secrets of the Gospel and the splendor of His News. "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God." (Mt 5:8.) In the Eucharist Christ gives the virgin His pure heart, an understanding heart which burns within her when the scriptural book is opened by Christ Himself in the Church and is expounded by His Spirit to all the Emmaus travelers of today. For the virgin, as for those forlorn disciples, the Gospel is never just pleasing information. It is a call to encounter and personal transformation. It is an inner branding and an engagement of the heart.

Gift of Inheritance

Christ gives His ecclesial Bride all that He is. As Lord of heaven and earth, He also gives her a bridal share in all that He has. The Church-Bride's husband is a King. And of His kingdom there shall be no end.

His kingdom is all nations or, better, the whole world and all that dwells therein. To His Bride He gives a share in the transformation of this vast kingdom into the kingdom of Christ and the reign of His love. The Son of God became man "to consecrate the world."²³ Both the Church and the virgin-bride share in this immense task until Christ becomes all in all. The vowed virgin is a "firstfruit" witness of this consecration. For even now she lives the life of the resurrection. Her whole being has been delivered to the transfiguring power of the Spirit. The *parousia* will reveal this transfiguration which, in time, remains hidden. Christ is already the virgin's All-in-all, as He will some day be the Omega of all creation. The virgin's task is to hasten the blessed day of this *pleroma*. In patience and hope, she takes up this kingly cause. Her life is wholly directed to the *end-time*. On each passing day she tries to leave the imprint of Christ's presence

through her being, her work, her word. To each day she tries to bring the transfiguring power of the Holy Spirit and some of the glad brightness of the Easter morning.

Gift of the Cross

If Christ gives His bride a share in the paschal consecration of all things, He also gives her the instrument of His pasch: the cross. The rhythm of Christ's passover was that of dying and rising. It is the same creative rhythm which is reproduced in the virgin's life. The cross is the virgin-bride's share in Christ's own death and resurrection. But the virginal life finds its full meaning only in an ecclesial dimension. So the virgin may well expect to enter deeply into the fellowship of Christ's suffering in order to share more closely in the Church's arduous task of consecrating the world to Christ. She may thus be called to a large, ecclesial share in the sufferings of Christ, to a sacrifice of reconciliation for "the whole Christ." Whatever the extent of the virgin's cross, however, it is not to be borne in a dark background of mourning beyond the reach of hope. Although she may seem to be forsaken in hours of dread and anguish, there can be for her no final eclipse of light. In Christ, her cross has already triumphed. The green grass of Easter sprouts at its base, and the warm sun of triumph bathes it in splendor—seen or unseen. Through fellowship in Christ's sufferings, the virgin is called to share in His glory, a glory to be radiantly revealed at long last in the one Church-Bride and in the virgin-bride now asked to bear Christ's wounds "a little while."

Conclusion

Essentially the gifts of Christ, the Bridegroom, to His ecclesial Bride and to His vowed virgin-bride are those which every bridegroom gives his bride: name, person, and possessions. To

unpack the full content of these bridal gifts is a task and a bliss immense enough to occupy the virgin-bride for all ages and in the world to come.

Gifts beyond the telling: this is what it means to be a bride of Christ; to have the Lord of heaven for a Husband.

NOTES

1. Tertullian, *De Oratone*, PL 1, 1189 d.
2. St. Athanasius, *Apologia ad Constantium Imp.*, PG 25, col. 659.
3. Pius XII, *Sponsa Christi* (Apostolic Constitution), November 21, 1950, *Life of the Spirit*, 6:66, December 1951-January 1952, p. 215.
4. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 84, a. 2.
5. Monastic Breviary: Vesper Hymn for Feasts of Virgins.
6. Cf. Thomas Merton, "The Name of the Lord," *Worship*, 38:3, February 1964, pp. 142-151.
7. Cf. Benjamin F. Meyer, S.J., "But Mary Kept All These Things. . . ." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 26:1, January 1964, pp. 45-46.
8. Johannes Hofinger, S.J., *The Art of Teaching Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1957), p. 126.
9. Cf. Bede Griffiths, O.S.B., "Liturgical Formation in the Spiritual Life," *Life of the Spirit*, 6:69, March 1952, pp. 361-368.
10. Communion for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
11. *Body* is here used in its biblical meaning as signifying the whole person.
12. J. Bossuet, *Meditations sur L'Evang.: La Cène*, p. 24.
13. Maisie Ward, *Caryll Houselander: That Divine Eccentric* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), p. 201.
14. Cf. Paul VI (as Cardinal Montini), "The Mission of the Church" in *The Church* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1964), pp. 21-48.
15. Léon Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *The Nun in the World* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1963), p. 64.
16. A. Vonier, *The Spirit and the Bride* (London: Burns, 1935), p. 234.
17. Origen, *Comment. in Matthaem*, PG 13, col. 1230.
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19. Leo XIII, *Mirae Caritatis* (Encyclical Letter), (New York: Benziger, 1903), p. 525.
20. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Sponsa Verbi* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1961), p. 197.

21. Cf. Celestin Charlier, *The Christian Approach to the Bible* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1958), p. 247.
22. John XXIII, *Un vivo desiderio* (address to seminarians in Rome, January 28, 1960), *The Pope Speaks*, 6:4, p. 367.
23. Roman Martyrology for Feast of Christmas.

*Through them Mother Church rejoices
in her glorious fruitfulness, and
in them it flowers in abundance. . . .*

—CYPRIAN, *De Habitu Virginitatis*
(PL 40, col. 443).

8 SPIRITUAL FRUITFULNESS

ABRAHAM'S WIFE, Sara, brought forth Isaac from a barren womb. The virgin Mary of Nazareth believed that without the intervention of man God could bring forth fruit from her virginal womb. And how great was the fruit of that womb! Of the virgin Church, St. Paul, quoting Isaiah, exclaimed: "Rejoice . . . for many are the children of the desolate, more than of her that has a husband." (Gal 4: 27.)

Root of Church's Fruitfulness

The Church's power to bring forth spiritual fruit is rooted in an eternal source: the fruitful life of God. Within the Trinity this fruitfulness is the Holy Spirit, the love of the Father and the Son, a love manifested to man (1) by the creation of the world of man and the universe of beings; (2) by the Incarnation and the re-creation of the world wounded by Adam's sin. It is this second fruitfulness that concerns us here. This re-creative fruitfulness is further divisible into three moments of begetting, all attributable to the Holy Spirit: (1) the Incarnation of Christ in the womb of Mary; (2) the Death-Resurrection-Pentecost moment in which

the womanly Church was begotten by Christ, the Head, and the Spirit of the risen Christ was breathed into her; and (3) the begetting community of the Spirit at work in this Church, the Mystical Body of Christ.¹

This final moment of re-creative fruitfulness which issues from the side of Christ is now operative in the Church's center. When, on the cross, the pierced side of Christ gave forth blood and water, the Church was born. From that hour she contained within herself life-giving waters to heal and quicken the whole world. The body of the Son of Man became, on the cross, the new temple foretold by Ezekiel (cf. 47:1 ff.), a second paradise, a fertile earth containing within itself the fount from which the Church would continue to draw her cosmic waters of life. In his homily for Palm Sunday, St. Ambrose pictures the mountain of fruitfulness which is a complex of the Mount of Olives, Calvary, and the New Jerusalem. Here the heavenly Farmer stands "so that each one of those planted in God's house can say of himself: 'I am like a fruitful olive tree in the house of the Lord.'"²

Whatever life-giving powers the Church possesses will thus forever be the priestly, prophetic, and redemptive powers of Christ Himself which He gave to her from His riven side. It is the Spirit of the risen Christ who keeps these powers operative in the Church. The paradise of the new earth which the Holy Spirit now continues to create in the Church grows out of the paradise of Christ's sacrificial body, the new temple of glory.

The cry of Jesus at the feast of Tabernacles, "If anyone thirst, let him come to Me and drink" (Jn 7:37-38), has its background in the Jewish feast of the "joy of water-drawing," when Yahweh was induced to pour out the life-giving autumn rains upon the land. At a point in the festive ceremony, it was believed that the waters of the subterranean lake rose up beneath the navel stone of the temple and issued forth to irrigate all the earth.³

As rain cleanses, invigorates, and stimulates the growth of creatures, so the divine waters issuing from Christ's side cleanse and enliven man, causing him to grow and bear fruits in the

Spirit. To help us understand the reality of fruitfulness in the Church and its abundant realization in the Christian virginal life, we shall devote some thought to the Old Testament concept of the *kabod* in order to see how this concept is concretized both in the Marian-event and in the one Church-Bride of the New Testament.

Kabod, Center of Old Testament Fruitfulness

The dwelling of God with men was the one great dream of the Old Testament. Made visible in a cloud covering the tent which Moses was commanded to build, this glory-cloud *Presence*, also called *shekinah* or *kabod*, later hovered over the ark of the covenant. Still later, the cloud filled the Jewish temple, bringing the mysterious divine Presence to dwell with the Israelites. Here was the heart of their life.

From this *kabod* (dwelling), holiness radiated outward, first to the court of the priests, then to the circle of lay tribes, then to the still broader circles which reached the bounds of creation. Simultaneously, the worship of all creation ceaselessly converged to the *kabod* by way of this same incoming route, with final mediation dependent upon Israel's priests.⁴

The Spirit, Center of New Testament Fruitfulness

The New Testament Church, Christ's Mystical Body, continues to center upon the "holy of holies," from which Christ, our high priest (Heb 9:11-12), sends forth the creative life of His Spirit and to which the final fruits of His creativity are returned by man and offered with Christ to the Father. As Head of the Church, Christ offers to the Father not only Himself but, in Himself, His members as well.⁵ The Church thus images in her own structure a pattern of radiation and convergence similar to the dynamism of the Old Testament *kabod*. There is at the

Church's center the *kabod*, the creative Spirit, who with Christ forms one principle of operation in the Church.

The radiation from the *kabod* is the outgoing work of the Holy Spirit; it is *agape* on the march to man. The convergence is the returning work of the Holy Spirit, the fruits which He has wrought in man with man's consent and collaboration. Man's cooperation is thus not a self-originated activity but a response to *agape*, an openness to the Spirit.

Radiation and convergence are, therefore, two aspects of the Church's life: the dispensing of holiness and its assimilation. In the concrete, the Church is simultaneously both means of holiness and blossoming forth of holiness. The Church is both seed and flower. In baptism she pours out the seed of the dying-rising Christ; in her life she brings this seed to flower. Her life is therefore at once travail and birth, an agony of hope and a joy of achievement. She experiences her inner nature of holiness by fulfilling it. Her life reflects the words of Psalm 74: "For the Lord will give goodness, and our earth shall yield her fruit." This is the picture of the twofold activity of the Church's life: the Lord giving, the earth receiving and bearing fruit. This is likewise the picture of the Church's fruitful spiritual motherhood.⁶

The Church's motherhood is called *spiritual* because the Church is a spiritual community in the world, a community operating through the power of the Spirit. The word *spiritual* is not necessarily opposed to visible. The Church brings forth both visible and invisible fruits, all of them spiritual in the sense of being created by the Holy Spirit. Spiritual, in the biblical sense, is the sanctified condition of the whole man and his world of human activities.⁷

Pius XII says that it was possible for Christ personally and immediately to impart the graces of redemption to men. But He wished to do so only through a visible Church that would be formed by the union of men, and thus through that Church every man would perform a work of collaboration with Him in dispensing the graces of redemption. "Dying on the Cross," says

Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis*, "He left to His Church the immense treasury of the Redemption; toward this she contributed nothing. But when those graces come to be distributed, not only does He share this task of sanctification with His Church, but He wants it in a way to be due to her action. Deep mystery this. . . ."⁸

In dispensing and nurturing the graces of redemption, the Church becomes a fruitful mother. She dispenses the means of holiness by her sacramental maternity. She blossoms forth in holiness by an additional and related maternity, a "spiritual mothering of holiness" which is also a very important aspect of her motherhood, closely related to and dependent upon her sacramental maternity. Or, if "mothering of holiness" seems too broad a term here, one might say a spiritual mothering of the life of faith, of hope, of love. "Perhaps this mothering is too little studied," says Yves Congar, "theoretically undervalued in the Church, even though it is extremely real, a factor of everyday life."⁹

Natural motherhood, as we know, is not confined to the mere physical process of giving birth to a child. When asked to settle a dispute between two harlots wrangling over the motherhood of a child, the wise Solomon decided in favor of the one whose "heart went out to the child" at the suggestion that he should be divided between them for the sake of peace. (Cf. 3 Kgs 3: 16 f.)

A mother whose heart is unmoved toward her child and who is thus unconcerned about his personal development is hardly a mother at all, even though she may have brought forth the child physically. Psychological studies are uncovering more and more the extent of a mother's influence on the personality of her child from the period of prenatal growth on through birth and early childhood. The relationship of mother and child is far beyond a mere physical one even in these early stages. It is not difficult to see that subsequent mothering is equally extensive and important. A debate is hardly called for. In genuine motherhood begetting and rearing are two aspects of one reality.

The Church's motherhood, then, is also twofold. The Church not only gives birth to her children in baptism but tends the life she gives. For, like every other "word" of God, the "word" of each person's life in Christ must not return to God fruitless. (Cf. Is 55:11.)

Returning now to our original concentric structure, we may easily identify the functions proper to each of the three outgoing, radiating circles. There is, first, the Church's *sacramental motherhood*, which is entrusted to the priesthood. Through baptism and confirmation all the faithful share in the universal or baptismal priesthood and exercise it in sacramental worship. The ordained priesthood is derived from, and is a sacrament of, the whole body of the faithful, so that the priest represents both Christ and the community. The ordained priest is deputed to confer sacramental grace and to perform additional functions in the Church both in worship and in preaching the word of God. In the Church's parentage, clerics represent Christ as manly and giving.

Secondly, there is the Church's *spiritual motherhood* or, what is called by some, her juridical maternity. In a sense, the whole Church is called to share in this maternity by the holiness of its members and by their teaching activities, which extend and assist the teaching office of the ministerial priesthood. Even though not exclusively so, the Church's parentage is here shown as womanly and receiving. In the Church's spiritual motherhood, the sanctification of the baptized pours itself out upon all nations in some way, spilling the effects of its own redemption upon the whole temporal order.

The third circle is a kind of sum total of the Church's maternal activity, which, in a mysterious but real way, embraces the whole universe. We shall have more to say later about this cosmic dimension of the Church's motherhood. It is to be noted that none of the three functional areas excludes the others. All interpenetrate in various degrees.

Unity and Variety in "Mothering"

The Church is one in her nature and diverse in her functions. Her unity penetrates her diversity; her diversity leads back to unity. Whereas her life-giving processes are entrusted to various groups within the Church, they are in their effects shared by all.

St. Augustine distinguishes the "society of the sacraments and the society of the saints," the former being ordained to the latter.¹⁰ Those who confer the graces of the Church's sacramental life stand as the active element in the Church representing Christ the Head; those who further "confirm what is wrought" in the sacraments are the receptive element in the Church representing the members joined to the Head. As in a human body, so in the Mystical Body, "the eye cannot say to the hand: 'I do not need thy help'; nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" (1 Cor 12:21.) What one member does profits or harms the whole, and in the end it is the whole body which is involved when the hand, foot, or eyes perform their function.

St. Paul uses the analogy of the human body to show that unity issues in variety and variety leads back to unity in the Body of Christ. "If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? . . . Now if they [the members] were all one member, where would the body be?" (1 Cor 12:17.) Far from limiting or inhibiting activity, order and differentiation of function ensure effectiveness both in the human body and in the Mystical Body.

When one element in the Church usurps the activities of another even in an indirect way, or when one element abdicates its own responsibilities, then the Church's intrinsic life and vigor are prevented from renewing the face of the earth as splendidly and as deeply as they might. Throughout history, therefore, and to this very day, the Church periodically sits in council either to restore the splendor and integrity of her doctrine or to renew the vigor of her life functions by both clarifying and integrating them.

Prototypic Fruitfulness of Mary

Having seen that the Church derives her fruit-bearing power from the riven side of Christ and that she further achieves fruitfulness in herself through the Holy Spirit (the *kabod* now dynamically dwelling with men in the Church), let us now turn to the Mary-event to see how the mystery of fruitfulness is concretized in her. For Mary's fruitfulness is the prototypic fecundity¹¹ of the virgin Church. And the fruitfulness of dedicated virgins, the reality toward which our thinking is progressing, finds its meaning only in the fruitfulness of the Church, at once virgin, bride, and mother.

Mary became the ark of the New Covenant when, in the power of the overshadowing Spirit (the *kabod*), the Word was made flesh in her womb. Considering the human body of Christ as the new temple, St. John says: "The Word was made flesh and pitched His tent among us." Here is the *shekinah* Presence that rested on Moses' tent, the *glory-cloud* that filled the Jewish temple and proclaimed God's dwelling with men.

To the message of the angel that she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary responded with a faithful *yes*. Christ was then conceived in her womb through the Spirit's overshadowing. The Holy Spirit was the active principle of conception. Although Mary's part in Christ's conception was wholly passive, her *response* to this conception, along with the redemptive plan outlined by the angel, was both active and passive. The active element in her response was her faith; the passive element, her virginity, itself the fruit of faith wholly surrendered to Another.

Mary's motherhood of the God-man Christ in the flesh was the foundation of her spiritual motherhood of the whole Christ. Both the motherhood of Christ and her motherhood of men were to be achieved by the power of the Holy Spirit. On Calvary Mary renewed her faith in the whole redemptive plan by her consent

to the life-giving death of her Son, who offered His body as the new temple, the eternal source of life-giving waters. As she took part in His death by co-suffering, so she became an active sharer in bringing forth His life in the whole Christ, the Church: "Woman, behold thy son." (Jn 19:27.) Just as the Spirit conceived Christ in Mary's womb, so this same Spirit would continue to beget Christ in the souls of men, bringing Him to birth in the regenerative waters of the Church's baptism. Mary's mothering of Christ in the flesh would now extend to the Church's work of mothering Him in men.

Mary's total motherhood marked the dawn of the Spirit's work in this world to renew the earth. The spiritual fecundity of the virgin Church and of vowed virgin-daughters of the Church wells up from this one Source. As Mary's motherhood of all men was confirmed on Calvary when the Church was born in the Spirit as water and blood flowed from the side of Jesus, so the Church stands permanently at this side to receive her sacramental life and its fruit-bearing power in the new creation.

It is thus an eternally enduring fact that now, today, all of Christian life, all of ecclesial life, is under the continual dynamic urge of the Spirit of Christ. "The love of Christ impels us." (2 Cor 5:14.) The effusions of the Holy Spirit upon the Church began in the Easter mystery. In the Ascension, the risen Christ was invested as universal Lord and King, receiving the full radiance of His glory; Pentecost is the eternally continuing application of that which was consummated in Christ.¹² The Spirit draws out of Christ's work of redemption achieved once and for all. "He will receive of what is Mine" (Jn 16:14), Christ said of the Spirit.

The Spirit now manifests His fecundity in the Church, therefore, as an unfolding of the Mary-event at Nazareth and on Calvary. This is the Marian fruitfulness of the Church. The redemptive work is wholly Christ's, but it is eminently shared and transmitted by Mary in the fruitfulness of the one Church-Bride.

Called to a special share in this Marian and ecclesial fruit-

bearing is the vowed virgin-bride of Christ. We shall attempt here to detail, insofar as possible, the abundance of her fruitfulness within the Church.

Virginal Fruitfulness

The vowed virgin's fruitfulness is also *spiritual* in the biblical sense: it is the result of the Spirit's transforming power at work in her through sacramental baptism. It is also *spiritual* in the sense of sometimes being the fruit of a spiritual gift (1 Cor 12:4-12) which manifests the work of the Spirit in a special way. The virgin has been called to fulfill a special role in the Church. As she pronounces the vowed *fiat* of her answer, her marriage with Christ takes place in the overshadowing of the Spirit residing in the Church. Her offspring, therefore, is the fruit of this Spirit. Having renounced the joys of marriage, she has yielded up the joy of physical fruitfulness. Her fruits are, therefore, not human creatures but rather the "new creation" of Christ which the Spirit brings forth in the world through her.

It is the *faith* of the virgin-Church which allows the Spirit to conceive in her; it is likewise the virginal faith of the Church's dedicated daughters which brings them an abundant share in both the activity and the joy of the Church's spiritual motherhood. The vowed virgin knows no other fecundity than that of the Spirit at work in the one Church-Bride, of which she is a living embodiment.¹³ The virgin's fruitfulness does not issue from efforts toward heroism or self-mastery. Her fruitfulness comes when He who is mighty looks on her lowliness (expressed in faith and hope), and when He overshadows her with His creative power.

The excellence of the virginal life is precisely this: in a totally undivided way (cf. 1 Cor 7:33-34) the virgin devotes herself to the twofold fruitfulness of the Church: the worship of God (her share in sacramental maternity) and the works of God (her share in spiritual maternity). Her whole aim is to integrate her own special vocation with the vocation of the Church and to be

ever more consistently, both inwardly and outwardly, a proclamation of the nature and function of the one ecclesial Bride. To this end she leaves the superficial current of the world and enters an environment apart from the world in a visible sense, but joined most deeply to the world's final end and meaning. The virgin's whole life aims to consecrate this world, to sanctify it in the Spirit. Her goal is therefore one with Christ and one with His Bride: *consecrare mundum*.¹⁴ The community in which vowed virgins live, given over to this goal both corporately and individually, becomes a kind of earthly anticipation of its realization. It is a city of God, the Church in miniature. Saint Benedict called his monastic community the *vita caelestis* because, at its depths, it is lived for the *end-time*. Virgins are, therefore, eschatological persons, true citizens of heaven who already show forth, and sometimes even experience, this citizenship in substance and in accidental ways.

The religious community is a living expression of the ecclesial community of saints where all the Church's goods, her graces and her functions are, in the end, held "in common." (Acts 4:33.) The communion of saints is one Body quickened by the same supernatural life, fostered by the same sacraments. It is one faith, one hope, one love in vital interchange among members. "One would hesitate to express so astonishing a truth," says Jean Leclercq, "were it not a part of the Church's creed: 'I believe in the communion of the saints.'"¹⁵ We do believe *in* the communion of saints, within the living current of supernatural exchange where benefits and sorrows mysteriously affect one another. In this Body, the Church, "no good act can be done by a member which does not help the whole Body."¹⁶ According to St. Augustine, it is the Church as a union of love and a communion of saints which exercises spiritual motherhood.

Because of the communion of saints, each grace in the Church is a social grace. Each grace grows not only in an individual; it grows within the Church and enriches both the Church and the individual. The Church thus witnesses the reciprocal love of the

three Divine Persons where each says of the other what Christ said to the Father: "All things that are Mine are Thine, and Thine are Mine; and I am glorified in them." (Jn 17:10-11.)

So, in a religious community, the virgin shares in the Church's fruitfulness not only as an individual but socially, that is, within her religious family. This is what it means for virgins to dwell together in unity. How good, indeed, and how pleasant it is!

The Role of Witness

The meaning of Christian witness is to be found only in the order of the Incarnation. Christ received all from the Father. The Spirit receives from Christ, the Church from the Spirit. Christians are called to draw out from the Spirit in the Church and carry this best wine to the world. The inebriating energy of the Spirit is given to all for the sake of all. The better each individual Christian fulfills his task of witnessing, the more easily the Church fulfills hers. It is not what the individual stands for but what the Church stands for. The individual is called upon to express Christ meaningfully to the contemporary world in both a personal and corporate way. From baptism on, the Christian is involved in the Church and cannot remain indifferent to her nature or her task. Therefore those who see the individual witness ought to see the Church not merely as an institution but as the loving face of Christ in the world. The apostles always gloried in the fact that they were witnesses to the risen Christ. So does the virgin. (Lk 20:35-36.) The Christian is invested with his role of witness by baptism, but especially by confirmation, the sacrament of witness. The essential point of confirmation is the *strengthening of faith*—faith in the risen Christ. Strengthened in his faith, the Christian is strengthened in his self-giving and witnessing—it is all one.¹⁷

Specifically, what are the activities which make up the Church's virgin-motherhood and thus the motherhood of the Christian virgin? In order to relate the virgin's role of witness to the

Church's maternal functions we shall reiterate the latter as we detail the virgin's role.

The Church's *sacramental motherhood*, Christ's birth in grace in the souls of men, is shared by all Christians in its effects, although for its conferring it is almost wholly dependent upon the ministerial priesthood. Whatever good disposition (itself the fruit of both grace and effort) an individual brings to the sacraments, however, is already a share in the Church's sacramental motherhood. The fruitful unfolding of sacramental grace in an individual's life beyond the moment of sacramental encounter is still another, and even deeper, share in the Church's *sacramental motherhood*. Moreover, in the sacramental "return" which Christians make to God through worship (Holy Mass, sacraments, liturgical prayer), all the faithful take an active part because of the universal priesthood of their baptism. The scope of this latter aspect of sacramental motherhood is immense, especially for virgins who are officially deputed to the Divine Office, the Church's official public prayer.

What we have referred to as the Church's *spiritual motherhood* includes the wide field of preaching, teaching, and every good work through which the Church makes the face of Christ known and loved in the world. Ordered by the Church's episcopacy, these works are channeled to religious orders, to lay groups within the Church, and to individuals.

Though entrusted to the ministerial priesthood as an office, the work of the Church's teaching is shared by all who in some way bring the word of God to others. The area of teaching is one of wide "mothering" in the Church. In his very person, a Christian is always called to be a *kerygma*. Moreover, the role of every Christian engaged professionally as a teacher is truly a charism of the Church as the teacher unfolds the riches of Christian humanism, the totality of truth, and thus helps to elevate the world to its final fulfillment in Christ.

In effect, *spiritual motherhood* includes every form of witnessing which the Church exercises both directly and indirectly. But

before we detail the life of *witness* which is the visible part of the Church's fecundity and that of the vowed virgin, we wish to establish clearly the meaning of the word itself. To the apostles, Christ had promised: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be witnesses for Me in Jerusalem." (Acts 1:8.) Thus, all witnessing in the Church proceeds from the power of the Holy Spirit, and it makes known the presence of Christ.

At the height of witnessing to Christ in martyrdom, Stephen saw the heavens opening and the Son of God making His presence known to him. The role of the witness is first to discover and realize the presence of God in his own life. Having done so, he is ready to transmit this presence to others and, in this process, to open himself to deeper levels of presence. The *modus operandi* of the witness is primarily one of *being*. St. Benedict says that before the throne of God a monk is not heard on account of his much speaking but on account of his humility and simplicity of heart. The same holds true in the rapport a witness hopes to establish with others. What he says or does will be effective only if it flows from his own faithful commitment to Christ.

The sweetest strength of the apostolate, therefore, is the presence of Christ within the witness. The life of witness is a life of sharing this presence, of truly communicating Christ. The apostolate is a continual process of discovery: finding Christ in one's own life and thus inviting others to find Christ in theirs and to spread Him abroad. The witness helps both to bring Christ's presence to the world and to find it there. He is forever going out to meet this presence. Witnessing is achieved primarily through personal contact in a type of encounter that is not movement toward another but rather *with* another. The point of contact is the common human setting of a fellowman's life. Here is the point where dialog begins, dialog that both humanizes and sanctifies.

The true witness must have a deep concern for the concrete and human needs of his time. What is genuinely good, true, and

beautiful on a natural level ministers to supernatural growth. A great Christian humanist of our century, Gerald Vann, said, for example, that poetry does not save the soul, but it may, and often does, make the soul more worth saving. The more fully and completely human the Christian is, the more complete his praise of God can be.¹⁸

The witness, therefore, must be attuned to the values of the world in which he lives, the genuine world which is often obscured by sham, ugliness, stupidity, and sin. In the Spirit of the risen Christ, the true witness passes through the closed doors of artificiality, human error, weakness, and indifference in order to speak to the heart of his fellowman.

Our beloved John XXIII found an immediate point of contact with prisoners, with the sick, and with the Jews whom he greeted by saying, "I am Joseph, your brother." He did not find it impossible to discover grounds for contact even with a communist couple to whose children he sent the blessing "of an old man." As Archbishop of Milan, our present Holy Father went to the steel mill, the factory, the shop, the store, and even into the mines and fields, to find the worker and make contact with his problems. Montini spoke to his people not in throne rooms or in ecclesiastical settings of baroque splendor but in the grime and noise and sweat of factories and other places of human endeavor.¹⁹

Another gifted witness of our time, the late Father Gustave Weigel, always looked for common ground upon which to meet separated Christian brothers. This great ecumenist maintained that although unity is the hope of ecumenism, its purpose is "dialog and fellowship."²⁰

Very often the dialog of the witness with others is a wordless one. True compassion for the sick is usually beyond words. It is simply *compartir*, to identify lovingly with those who suffer, to meet them in their hour. It is the quiet gesture of Veronica who "with her gentle cloth, still passes on the way"²¹ in our own day. Beyond words, the hands also speak a language of their own. Through them a you and an I are often brought together in en-

counter. In family and school life, the leading of a child by the hand is a common occurrence. It has deeper significance, however, than that of merely conducting the child along some path. It is a gesture of "being with" the child on some level of identification. The Gospels record this gesture of the Lord and show what part it played in establishing the contact of faith as a prelude to miracles. St. Mark pictures Jesus taking the mother of Simon's wife "by the hand" (Mk 1:31) as He restored her to health. The Gospels show Jesus at the noisy wake for Jairus' daughter on which occasion Matthew says that Jesus "took the little girl by the hand and she rose up." (Mt 9:26.) Numerous other references to this human and powerful gesture of Jesus help to link it in our minds with the mighty *dextera Domini* which one day raised Jesus Himself from the dead. In all human encounters the witness tries to cultivate a sensitivity to others' joy, weariness, anguish of heart. Words are not always necessary in order to establish a contact with others in these moments, although at times they are the best instrument of dialog.

The attitude most foreign to a genuine Christian witness is that of a condescending do-gooder. Fellowmen are not to be treated as targets for the virtuous action of the witness. The world and other people are not to be regarded as objects upon which the witness exercises virtue. The true witness is not even possessed with an idea of "giving good example," which often has a Victorian and slightly pharisaical ring about it. The biblical notion of edifying is that of building up the Church by drawing others to deeper faith, hope, and love. The drawing power is "not I, but Christ." Suenens's definition of the apostolate as "letting Another make Himself known through me"²² places the movement of Christian witnessing in its only genuine perspective. Witnessing is always a gift from God for the service of love. It is not a technique of aggression.

Another important aspect of the witness' role is its universality. For those called to special vocations within the Church, there is always a tendency to equate divine call with divine approval and

to settle down complacently into one's "favored" status. It is possible even for God's elect to enclose themselves in their "perfection" as the Pharisees did, to consider their state as a priority on holiness, and to be guilty of what a contemporary poet, Daniel Berrigan, has called "abstaining from mankind." When God extended His mercy to the Ninivites and thus cancelled the effects of Jonah's eloquent prediction of this people's doom, the prophet sulked over the fact that God's gifts were being lavished on the bulk of mankind rather than on an elite group. The true Christian witness has the universal heart of Christ. He carries the whole world in this heart. "I will give them a heart to know Me," God prophesied through Jeremiah. This "Me" is the "Me" Saul was introduced to. It is the *Me* of the whole Christ, the *me* of every man called to receive salvation from God through Christ. A Latin inscription on John XXIII's catafalque recalls the love this great Pope lavished on the whole Christ: "True image of goodness, he loved each and every man as a son, with incredible tenderness; in life as in his agony and after death, he was loved in return in a marvelous way."²³

Universality in the witness also implies an openness to the whole of God's creation and to human achievements in this creation. Everything pertaining to the genuine unfolding and perfecting of human nature is meaningful to the witness. This is not mere liberal humanism or the religion of progress. It is Christian humanism which esteems human progress not as an end in itself but as a means to the all-in-all of Christ which will be manifested at the *end-time* event of the *parousia*. The *Benedicite* of God's creation and that of man's creation sing together in the Church's witness. Encounter with creation is an extension of divine and human encounters. Charity spreads itself abroad and longs to "sing with all the earth."²⁴

If the outlook of the witness is universal in its goal, it is also universal in its origin. This origin is the Church. Special vocations and charisms within the Church are given for the good of the whole Church and always issue, if they are authentic, from the

one Spirit who spreads forth the fragrance of Christ through the witnessing members of the Church. The Christian bears witness to Christ not as an individual alone but as a sharer in the Church's witness. He is what he is because of the Church. In fact, he is the Church showing forth the love, service, and Easter joy of the Bridegroom. The witness does not verbally proclaim the faith of this Church so much as he stands as its permanent kindly evidence. Men do not look at a true witness and say "How strong is his faith," but rather, "how great is his love." His own personal qualities are part of the manner in which the loving face of Christ is manifested. In this sense, the witness is a living *kerygma*. St. Gregory of Nyssa says that "just as the eye which cannot bear to look directly into the sun sees it reflected in the mirror of water, so also, when [they] look at the face of the Church, the eyes of the soul contemplate the Sun of Righteousness as if in a flawless mirror."²⁵

The Virgin as Witness: In Her Being

All that we have already said in describing the true Christian witness applies also to the vowed virgin whose life is wholly given to witnessing Christ. St. Cyprian calls the virgin "the most illustrious portion of the Church,"²⁶ a phrase equally well translated as "the most witnessing portion" of the Church. For the virgin is called to show forth, *in her whole being*, the loving nuptial union of Christ with His one Bride, the Church. She is called to witness that God's grace has taken total hold of her life in nuptial union. By the holiness of her life and the totality of her faithful dedication, she helps to affirm the intrinsic holiness of the bridal Church and the unity, integrity, and permanence of this Church. She is a permanent sign of the Church's total response to the absolute call of Christ. She is called both to embody and to bear witness to the Church's spiritual maternity of holiness. Already in her very being, the virgin is thus responsible for a

tremendous "mothering" in the Church. Through and through she is one with the Church-Bride.

The Virgin as Witness: In Her Community

We have already shown the deep meaning of the religious community as a miniature communion of saints. In her own community life, the virgin is called to be a witness to the Christian brotherhood of the whole Christ. The religious community is the Church in miniature. It is a living parable of the kingdom of God.²⁷ Through one mind and one heart (cf. Acts 2:46), a religious community realizes the fraternal union of the Gospels. Congar says that we cannot meditate too much on this truth. Religious communities must never become faceless collectivities or merely impressively organized institutions. They must be dynamic group witnesses to the New Covenant, where there is only one commandment: love. While necessary, organization and administration in religious communities is secondary. What is primary is person-to-person encounter in Christ, mutual love and respect, and a firm dedication to a specific witnessing role in the Church. The idea of a community of Christians gathered together in *agape* is profound and precious. Any visible community whose inner dynamism is Christian love—married partners, the family, the religious community—both reflects and partakes of the divine society of the Most Holy Trinity. The activity of Christian groups joined in love translates Trinitarian love in visible form.

Communion in charity is essential for the happiness of man. God is not loved in solitary commerce but only in Christ Jesus, in the whole Christ. For a Christian to be his real self, he must necessarily be-in-communion, he must share in a community. In encounter, the Christian does not only find another; he also finds his authentic Christian self. The more the true self (personality in Christ) burgeons and opens up, the more capable it becomes of communion with others. Charity "is not self-seeking." (1 Cor 13:6.) From Adam's sin to the second Adam's sacrifice of redemp-

tion, the solidarity of the human race is evident. In the era of Christ, the second Adam, the beginning and the end of all communion is to form a single body with Christ and thus enter into the threefold Society of God.²⁸

Holy Thursday, the day of the Great Supper, began in a community setting and in the sweetness of friendly companionship. It ended with an unveiling of friendship's deepest meaning, and a traitorous act which would both test and help to perpetuate the one love which dies for its friends. In her liturgy for Holy Thursday the Church therefore says of Christ: "The day before He suffered for our salvation and the salvation of all men, that is, *today*, He took bread into His holy and worshipful hands. . . ."²⁹ It is the immediacy of this *today* which bestows on Christians what St. Paul calls *koinonia*, communion, fellowship, sharing. The Church's first sharing was, and continues to be, a sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ given for all men. (Cf. 1 Cor 10:16.) All other communion flows from this eucharistic sharing and, in Christ, draws all men into the Trinitarian Society, the mystery Christ revealed to His apostle-friends at the great Supper.

St. Paul points out the profound change which Christianity brings to interpersonal relationships. (Cf. Gal 3:28; Col 3:11.) In the Christian community each person is charged with the care (*carus*-love) of his brother who is Christ. Those in authority are charged with this care, love, and service, a second time and in a higher manner. They become the servant of servants.³⁰ The superior in any Christian society truly has authority, therefore, but only within a fraternal community of service. He is in the midst of his believing brethren as one of them. He represents Christ in a positive and fruitful sense, not merely in a restrictive way. He represents divine love inspiring and encouraging initiative, as God does by His grace, and helping the members of his community to rise to new levels of excellence as they build up the kingdom of God in the world.³¹

In a genuine community, the superior and each family member become responsible for their brothers as Moses was for his or as

the faithful Israel remnant were for theirs. Community is gift-sharing; it is the giving of what we are, what we have, and what we do. Love, service, and compassion are its visible features. No true Christian can escape community living on some level. It is possible, however, to lack the psychological and spiritual attitudes which make community life fruitful. It is possible to run away from the enriching contacts of person-to-person encounter with others.

The religious community is that particular organ of the Church in which individuals are espoused to Christ in the Church. It is a miniature ecclesial family within the deeper family organism of the Church. It is Christ's love-union for His Bride made visible in a communal way. Thus, what a virgin is called to reflect in her own person she is also called to witness by her love for others within her religious community.

The members of certain religious communities take a vow of stability which binds them to a particular community not merely in a static sense but as a special mirror of the Church where vital interpersonal relationships unfold in Christian love. Through a better understanding and living of this vow such persons might greatly assist the Church's present effort to sharpen community-awareness, an attitude so basic to liturgical renewal.

Community life will always have about it aspects of both light and darkness, clarity and obscurity. It is part of Christ's passover. This is so because the community is yet *in via*, in a state of becoming perfect in the risen life of Christ. A true community shows a shared unity in essentials and not a suffocating uniformity in accidentals. All members of the community have the same baptismal origin, the same faith, the same Spirit, the same love, the same hope, the same vocation, the same goal. A certain dialectical tension in accidentals is good if heart and mind are one in essentials. And although there will be suffering and hardship in personal relationships, life in a religious community ought to be more of a feast than a crucible. It ought to be a source of mutual enrichment, a good and pleasant place, always deeply glad even

though its days are both glad and grey. In order to be a community witness, the vowed virgin lives close to the heart of her community in the sense of closeness of friends. She opens her arms to her community and thus draws this community close to her own heart. This same *closeness* pertains to the community's actions and attitudes toward each of its members. In the end it is the single heart of Christ drawing all to each and each to all.

Community life is a sacred thing. It is the large way in which the virgin comes to know God's great love for men. It is the large way in which she spreads this love abroad.

Witness in Her Prayer

As a virgin bears witness to Christ both in her person and in her community, so she bears witness to the praying Church both individually and socially. If her love is primarily shown forth in community, so is her prayer. The gathering of the faithful is the Church's primary milieu of prayer. It is in community prayer, therefore, that the virgin prays most deeply with the one Bride. It is in the act of praying with the voice of the one Bride that Christ joins His voice to hers. The blind Abbé Pouget begged that all Christians take part, as much as they could, "in this chorus which cries to God through the mouth of Christ Who is always interceding for us."³² St. Paul's inspired words speak of the Spirit groaning within us; St. Augustine called communal prayer "Christ's voice in ours and ours in His."³³ For in His redemptive life, Christ became forever the "mouth of our nature"³⁴ whereby we cry out our need to God.

The virgin prays with the voice of her Bridegroom. She shows forth the "new song" and even becomes, in a sense, a living canticle. Some virgins are almost wholly given to this service in the contemplative life, the secret spiritual maternity in the Church. Although not all virgins are called to the contemplative vocation, all are called to some degree of contemplative and ecclesial prayer. Only through the Church's prayer does a virgin

effectively enter into the more visible area of witnessing. In the worship of God, the virgin enters first into the sacrificial heart of Christ. As a lover she also witnesses here to Christ, in a sense, by showing to Him the needs of His Bride. Here she brings the whole world and joins it with Christ in order to let it rise up, with Him and in His Spirit, as a sacrifice of praise to the Father.

The growth of the Church depends not merely upon the number of her members but rather upon the intensity of Christian love in her members. Thoughtful writers assessing the reasons why the Church has failed to come through to the world reduce them to one: a failure of love. "We are terribly ordinary people, speaking of extraordinary things," says one writer. "Can we blame others if they do not listen?"³⁵ As the reign of Christian love is established within the virgin, it compels her to spread it abroad through the secret life-giving channels of the Church. In the Eucharist, the virgin's prayer is also directed to the life of the world (*pro saeculi vita*). The extent of her prayer, since it is one with Christ's prayer to the Father, will always be "to the uttermost coasts." In this life she may never know the men, women, or children in need who have received the alms of Christ through her. In his vital way of remembering, St. Augustine reflected on the graces of his life which had been won by the prayers and tears of his mother. He declared that man truly happy who, through another's tears, love, and prayers, has been born and nourished unto Christian life.³⁶

If she stands as witness to Christ through her prayer and worship, the virgin also testifies to Christ's love by her life of penance and suffering in whatever shape or size. Sisters living out their days in infirmaries are often saddened by their inability to "pray" even though they are, in reality, a living prayer and holocaust. They are the "readiness lamps" of a religious community, true ladies-in-waiting who are precious in the sight of God and of a community. Having lifted themselves up to God in grace, they now watch and wait to be lifted up in the final resurrection. They bear in their bodies the weight of the world and of the Church-

Bride. In them the weight of the whole Christ rises up to the Father.

For the "prayer-less" infirm or for those whose prayer has suddenly and seemingly turned hollow, Edith Stein has a message: "Perhaps providence is using our agony to deliver another who is truly cut off from God. Therefore we will say: 'Thy will be done,' even, and particularly so, in the darkest night."³⁷ Her message was undoubtedly born in the *beata nox* of her own rich life of redemptive suffering, the same life-and-death process expressed by St. Paul in the swift parallelism: "So death makes itself felt in us, and life in you." (2 Cor 4:13, Knox tr.)

Witness in Her Works

Committed to Christ, the virgin is committed to His life of service. This is the Church's area of worldwide consecration and includes all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy and the missionary life. For the virgin, as for the Church, there are no other tasks but Christ.

The Church's life of service flows from *agape*. It is never condescending activity but rather a sharing of goods. In the synoptic Gospels, *agape* is seen essentially as a deep-rooted conscious love, seeking always to prove itself. It is God's free gift received by man and returned to Him with deep gratitude.

What is the characteristic of this love in relation to others? "Toward neighbor it is spontaneous, disinterested and gentle. It forces men to decision and moves them to act to translate their love into kindnesses or into services. *Agape* implies being unconditionally available; it may demand the sacrifice of all that is humanly dear."³⁸

Agape-on-the-march in the Church's life means the good Samaritan binding up the wounds of strangers, lifting them up, and bringing them to a place of refreshment and enrichment. It is the function of the hierarchy to structure and organize this service in the Church. (Cf. Eph 4:12.) The religious community itself,

existing in the Church under the Church's approval, further specifies these works to an individual by religious obedience which does not eliminate personal initiative but rather helps to stimulate it toward the most constructive kind of action.

Pius XII has said that the vocation to virginity does not estrange persons from this world but rather awakens and deepens the energies needed for wider and higher offices beyond the limit of individual families. "Today," he said, "there are many teaching and nursing sisters who, in the best sense of the word, are nearer to life than the average person in the world."³⁹ The apostolate of service is not optional for the baptized. It is, in some degree, an essential part of every Christian life. If the virgin shares more deeply in the Church's nature and life, she likewise shares more profoundly in the Church's fruit-bearing function: the life of witness, the apostolate.

A wholly faithful virginal life is in itself "fruit for God." But in God's kingdom the laws of growth compel the fruit-bearing vine to bring forth more fruit. The grace of religious vocation opens to the virgin the opportunity of bringing forth more fruit. Through her person and her community her fecundity flows outward; she helps to spread the risen Spirit abroad in the temporal order and in the universe itself.

God Himself, by virtue of His grace, prepares a man to believe. The Christian and the virgin are called to help in this preparation.⁴⁰ St. Thomas points out two moments of grace, that which creates faith anew and that which confirms and perfects it. Man collaborates in the results of both of these activities.⁴¹ If godparents "stand up" for babies and declare their desire for baptism, so all Christian witnesses must, in a sense, "stand up" for all men and desire baptism for them. For the growing word of God (faith) in the life of a Christian, the virgin provides, both before and after a person's baptism, an atmosphere conducive to greater growth. Especially by her teaching she helps others to conceive faith, or else tends and nourishes it in them. In a word, she "mothers" the Christian life wherever she finds it: in the human

setting of classroom, market-place, hospital ward, home, kitchen, office. Here she helps to confirm what the Spirit has wrought. This is no small achievement in the Church's life. It is a part of virginal fruitfulness, a part of virginal witnessing.

Just as life has a rhythm of energy and repose and seasons of summer and winter, so there is a rhythm in the apostolate. There is a time to gather resources for labor as well as a time to use them; a time to prepare for the role of witness as well as a time to exercise it. Apostolic work is love made visible. But love, too, must be kept within the bounds of limited energy and observe the laws of human living. Christ took on a human body and thus put His action within certain human limits. He did not play the hero or superman.

Conclusion

The dedicated virgin is called to realize within herself the Church's vocation to be at once virgin, bride, and mother. She is called to witness to the one Church-Bride in a way that is both clear and appealing. The witnessing virgin carries the oil of love in her lamp. In faith she has been wed to Christ. In faith, hope, and love she becomes fruitful in good works. As a virgin she believes in a fruitfulness beyond what can be seen; as a virgin-bride she receives the Spirit of this fruitfulness; as a virgin-mother she brings forth the fruits of holiness, prayer, and good works—all issuing from love.

At one with the mystery of the virgin-mother Church, the vowed virgin fulfills, on a hidden and higher level, the human motherhood whose visible reality she has foregone. She is thus not deprived of the vocation to motherhood inscribed in the fibre of her very being. The Church's womb-fruit is Christ—the Christ who is begotten in the Church's countless children. With the virgin-Church, the vowed virgin helps to give birth to these same children in the Spirit, children beyond count. Thus, the very

woman who gave up that which is dearest to a woman's heart—marriage and motherhood—has secured by this renunciation an all-surpassing marriage and motherhood.

The full extent of her fruitfulness is hidden; even to the liveliest eye of faith it is but dimly perceived. When at last the virgin-bride will rise up, with Christ, and go to the Heavenly Father, she may find her best song to be the one sung by the Israel virgin returning home from exile: "Who has begotten me these? . . . Barren days of exile, when I could not give birth; who has reared me these, when I was left solitary?" (Is 49:21, Knox tr.) The works of the Spirit are always, in the end, surprising beyond belief. Bewildered by their admirable powers and achievements on the first Pentecost-event, the apostles did not know themselves any more. To the virgin who fulfills her vowed life in the power of this same Pentecostal Spirit, the final manifestation of His fruitfulness in her will flood her with glad and grateful surprise. For the present, the virgin lives by faith in the promises of God. Those who believe and hope and love will not be disappointed.

Perhaps there is no indictment so frequently and vehemently voiced against the Christian virginal state as the accusation of sterility. Judged solely on natural standards, the virginal life appears as a life of barrenness. To this type of judgment, no number of convincing statements based on supernatural faith will be acceptable. To anyone who lives only for the city of man, the life of a dedicated virgin will seem to be sheer waste; the virgin herself will be regarded as the offscouring of mankind, one who has deviated from the natural destiny of woman and one who will, for this reason, never be "fulfilled" as a person.

To those of no faith or of "little faith," to those who reason according to natural norms alone, the supernatural fruitfulness of the virginal life will never be appreciated. When St. Augustine soared upward to the heights of divine love and then attempted to translate his experience into words, he realized that these words would go unheard by anyone who had not shared a similar ex-

perience. "Give me one who loves," he said, "and he will know what I mean."⁴²

But even to many who are called to live the life of Christian virginity, the realities of spiritual fecundity and of womanly fulfillment are sometimes accepted only notionally, and not with the vibrant faith and joy they deserve. As a result, the reality of Christian virginity in the Church does not always achieve its fullness. The Church suffers a loss, the virgin suffers a loss, and all mankind is poorer for the loss. Men are known by their fruits. But fruitfulness may be minimal or maximal. There is need, in the virginal life, to cultivate the "good ground" upon which the seed of the Spirit may be more faithfully received in order to flourish in a greater fold of productivity. (Cf. Mt 13:8-9.) The world can scarcely be expected to believe in the Bridegroom if, through the lives of Christian virgins, the Bride seems to be barren.

But if the Church's children are at times lacking in the perfection of fruitfulness, the Holy Spirit is never lacking to the Church. There is a need to call on this Spirit for new Pentecosts in the Church's virginal life, or better, to ask this Spirit—whose gifts are always pressed down and running over—to let the Church's virgins breathe anew the fresh Pentecostal air already blowing mightily into the Church's open window. With a renewal of the fullness of the virginal mystery in the Church, especially its aspect of abundant fruitfulness, the whole earth might, indeed, once more "give promise of spring." (Ps 83:7-8.) For the full virginal mystery is the fresh and fragrant reality of Easter, the risen life of Christ come to awaken, renew, and replenish, to rejoice hearts and draw them to the everlasting Easter feast.

In our small effort toward this renewal, we have yet to disclose a summit in the virgin's ecclesial Bride-likeness and to discover here the uplifting power which brings the virgin to eminent fulfillment as a person. Too long this message has been minimized or hidden away from those who need to know it.

NOTES

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3. Joseph Bourke, O.P., "From Tabernacle to Temple," *Life of the Spirit*, 16:184, November 1961, pp. 182-186; 190-196.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
5. Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (New York: Paulist Press), p. 47.
6. Cf. Yves Congar, O.P., "The Theology of Religious Women," *Review for Religious*, January 1960, p. 18.
7. Peter de Rosa, "The Sense of Community and Liturgical Prayer," *Worship*, 38:5, April 1964, p. 253.
8. Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, p. 26.
9. Congar, *art. cit.*, p. 18.
10. St. Augustine, *Sermo 362: De Resurrectione Mortuorum*, PL 39, col. 1615.
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23. News and Notes from *The Pope Speaks*, 9:1, 1963, p. 1.
24. St. Augustine, *Sermo 27*, No. 1, PL 38, col. 178.
25. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Cantica Canticorum, Homilia VIII*, PG 44, col. 950.
26. Cyprian, *De Habitu Virginum*, III, PL 4, col. 443.
27. Congar, *art. cit.*, p. 34.
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32. Jean Guilton, *Abbé Pouget* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1958), p. 141.
33. St. Augustine, *On the Psalms*, Vol. II, Ancient Christian Writers Series (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1961), pp. 13-14.
34. Theodoret, *Interpretatio Epist. I ad Cor.*, PG 82, col. 359.
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*Come and see the deeds of God;
how striking are His plans for men.*

(Ps 65:5.)

9 NOW NOT I

A PIONEER BISHOP of a Midwestern diocese once told his co-laboring missionary Sisters that they lived in an "ocean of grace." So similar to phrases St. Ambrose uses to describe Scripture,¹ the words particularly delighted one of the young missionaries, who treasured them up in her heart for more than a half century afterwards. Now, bumping ninety years of age, this retired missionary still recalls the phrase, "ocean of grace," reviews it for the benefit of others, exults in it. Above all, she has found it to be truer every day of her life.

To virgins who begin to ponder the splendor and fruitfulness of marriage with Christ, the Lord's promise of a hundredfold in this life seems like a classic understatement. In His ways with men, God adds gift to gift. There is never an end to His gifts because at the heart of them all He stands as Infinite Giver. His blessings will always be too many to recount.

Swimming in an ocean of grace, the virgin vowed to God and made fruitful in the Spirit is truly wanting nothing. But to those who are rich God gives yet more. He follows as His policy: "For to everyone who has shall be given, and he shall have abundance." (Mt 25:29. Cf. also Mt 13:12; Mk 4:25; Lk 8:18; 19:27.) When

the Lord blesses, He blesses "with all His might." (Responsory at Matins for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost.)

Up to this point in our study we have not yet referred explicitly to a surpassing gift which the Church holds in reserve for certain of her virgins vowed to God in religious profession. We have designedly held back the mention of this gift as the Church herself seems to do when she reserves its bestowal only as a special privilege to religious communities and only when certain qualifications and dispositions are present in the one asking to receive the gift. We are speaking of the privilege of virginal consecration.

Hidden Treasure

Among many well-disposed and even learned religious men and women, a doubt often arises over the meaning and value of virginal consecration. Apparently so similar to religious profession, is virginal consecration merely its duplication within a lengthier and more externally elaborate ceremony? For if a virgin dedicates herself to God through vows, and the Church indicates an acceptance of this dedication when the prelate, in the name of the Church, receives the virgin's public profession, may anything still be added at a later time to such a total dedication? Thus the confusion which arises over the meaning and value of virginal consecration as opposed to religious profession keeps its true nature hidden from the eyes of many.

In listing several reasons why Christ was to be born of an espoused virgin, St. Thomas, along with earlier doctors of the Church, mentions a rather mysterious one: namely, that the fact of Christ's birth would be hidden from the devil. Unable to square Mary's virginity with her marriage to Joseph, the devil would be put off to look elsewhere for the birth of the Messiah.² Is God similarly allowing human confusion in our age to hide another mystery from the one who, like a roaring lion, goes about in every age seeking whom he may devour?

With its inner meaning caught in the web of obscurity, the rite of virginal consecration has become a rarity in the Church's present-day life. As we have indicated, the crux of confusion seems to be that religious profession is itself regarded as a "consecration," which renders further consecration redundant. Yet, the *Roman Pontifical*, which contains the texts of the consecration rite, presupposes the vows on the part of the virgin asking to be consecrated, proving that the consecration is both distinct and different from the vow of virginity or from religious profession.³ Unlike religious profession but like other great blessings (of an abbot, an abbess, or the bridal blessing of marriage), virginal consecration can never be repeated in a person's lifetime. This fact indicates that the consecrated person receives a permanently inherent quality.

There are two kinds of virginal consecration, to use the term in its widest sense: a virgin's consecration of herself to God in religious profession (*virgo Deo consecrata*) and a consecration that comes from God (*virgo a Deo consecrata*).⁴ It is important to note that in religious profession the virgin vowing herself to God is the central agent. Here a virgin, upheld by grace, freely "consecrates" herself to God in answer to His call. The Church receives the virgin's vowed promise and surrounds her with abundant ceremonial blessings.

In the rite of virginal consecration, however, God consecrates the virgin. Through the Church, God exercises the dominant initiative, and the vowed virgin, after expressing her willingness to be consecrated (*volo, promitto*), stands as receiver of the Church's great consecration. In the rite of virginal consecration (a constitutive sacramental), the Church formally and publicly constitutes or establishes the professed religious as a virgin-bride of Christ. The Church seals in the virgin's person God's promise and the virgin's own. At the center of this *ordinatio caritatis* is God, in whom and by whom the consecration is effected.⁵

A theologian who has long studied the rite says:

What God does is greater than what man does. And this sacramental, which Holy Mother the Church has so marvellously fashioned after the sacrament of Orders, by the power and merits of the same Holy Church, creates a *state* and distinct *position* in the Mystical Body and produces in the soul effects commensurate with its solemnity and beauty. . . . It makes virgins to be *sacred* with a godliness that lasts for a lifetime and carries them into the eternal nuptials.⁶

The total deliverance of one's whole being to God, which has been wrought in religious profession, is in virginal consecration not made more certain or complete, for it was that already. Rather, the vowed virgin is now through consecration given the status of a sacred person in the sacramental meaning of the term. Consecration elevates her to a new position in the Church and, in so doing, brings her to an even greater share in all that the Church is and does. In turn, the sacredness of her person equips the consecrated virgin to become a more complete witness to the intrinsic holiness of the Church.

An individual, then, may vow his life wholly to God. Only the Church, acting in God's name, may sacramentally mark the innermost fibre of such a person as belonging wholly to God.

Consecration: A Sacramental

In order to detail the meaning of the consecrated virgin as a *sacred person*, we must briefly review the meaning of a sacramental, that consecrated order that results from the sacraments.

Through the sacramentals the Church brings all created things into the orbit of God's blessing; in reality she touches persons and material things with the grace of the redemption, making them special instruments and channels of the grace of God. Many of the greater sacramentals are drawn directly into the action of the Mass in their dedicatory rites. Their blessings even bear a likeness to the great prayer of the Mass itself and are expressed in eucharistic language.⁷ The consecration of a church gives to a

temple of God a permanent quality of sacredness. The church may now never be diverted to ends other than God's worship. So similar to the consecration of a church, the virginal consecration likewise gives to the vowed virgin a permanent and inherent quality of sacredness setting her apart for God's worship and His work.

A closer look at the rite of virginal consecration will reveal in what way the sacramental achieves its end and into what orbit of blessing it draws the consecrated person.

Rite of Consecration

If the role of the Spirit in the Church is to transform the members of the Church ever more into living images of Christ, the consecration reality not only furthers such an inner transformation but also celebrates it in a ceremony of singular and sublime beauty. The rites of the early Church, it has been said, were not demonstrations so much as celebrations based on a deep understanding of the inner meaning of what was being celebrated. The rite of consecration is high proof of this fact and a marvelous picture of the Church in the act of celebrating.

What is the Church consecrating? What is she celebrating? In the rite of consecration, the Church is establishing as sacred not only a person but a virgin-person married to Christ in religious profession. Seeing this mystery as her very own bridal life, the Church celebrates its confirmation in a rite deliberately modelled upon the marriage liturgy. Every detail of the rite accents the literal interpretation of the virgin's marriage to Christ. The unifying idea in the richly integrated consecration rite is that of the virgin's bridehood. It is this totality of bridal surrender as it exists in the person of the virgin-bride that is consecrated and, in a real sense, confirmed publicly in the sacramental rite.

Enshrined as it is in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, virginal consecration becomes a wedding feast with the Church's special prayer over the virgin-bride (Preface of Consecration) and the

marriage Banquet in which the bride takes, eats, and is wholly satisfied. Throughout the whole rite there is revealed an ingenious interweaving of Christ's sacrifice and the virgin's oblation. It is precisely in this eucharistic mystery that the virgin's oblation and Christ's once more become one: "My beloved belongs to me and I to Him."

Since the chief consecratory moment of the rite is to be found in the Preface, a glance at the content of this Christian masterpiece will be rewarding. The consecratory Preface presents virginity in a sublime context: God, creation, original sin, redemption, consummation. This wide setting indicates the paramount role which consecrated virginity plays in the whole redemptive plan as it is achieved within the Church.⁸

The Preface, sung by the presiding prelate, invokes the Spirit of Christ upon the virgin, constituting her formally a bride of Christ. As it is the mission of the Holy Spirit to make the Church a fit Bride, so it will be in the mysterious relationship of the Spirit and the virgin-bride that the latter will take on the features of her Bridegroom. The Spirit will give the virgin the heart of a bride, the mind of a bride, the body of a bride, in order to make her one with the Church-Bride and thus with the Lord.

"Who but Thee," the Preface asks, "could nourish the desire of virginity in their hearts and furnish them with needful strength?" The extent of this hope is later detailed: "Be Thou their honor, Thou their joy, Thou their desire; in sorrow their comfort, in doubt their counsel, in attack their defense; in trial their patience, in poverty their riches, in fasting their food, in sickness their medicine." What might, indeed, become an endless enumeration finally converges into one all-embracing hope: "May they possess all things in Thee whom they seek to love above all things." A look into the heavenly future follows, and the Preface closes "Through Jesus Christ. . . ."⁹

The Preface of virginal consecration strikingly resembles a passage in St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Around a similar motif of God manifesting His power in the climate of

human weakness, Paul weaves a litany of hope: "In all things we suffer tribulation, but we are not distressed; we are sore pressed, but we are not destitute. . . ." Onward he advances, his parallels finally climaxing: "For we the living are constantly being handed over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our mortal flesh." (2 Cor 4:7-11.) Transformation into Christ ever more and more, this is the goal for a consecrated virgin as it was Paul's consuming desire for himself and for his "churches."

From the Preface onward, the ritual prayers of consecration refer to the chosen one, the virgin-bride, "sealed" for one Love. The presentation of the ring and crown externalize what the Preface has formally established. The veil indicates espousals.

The virgin's formal deputation to divine worship, which takes place near the close of the ceremony, is not a new commitment. Divine worship is a privileged task given to all Christians in baptism and confirmation. The consecrated virgin, however, is committed to sacred worship in an intensified ecclesial dimension. As a consecrated bride of Christ, she both shares more profoundly and expresses the nature and function of the one Bride. Her fuller commitment to worship in accord with her sacred status is ceremonially signified by the bestowal of the breviary. An updating of this precious rite might here include a special reference to and blessing upon the manifold apostolic tasks which have become a part of the Church's present-day function of witness, and hence, also, a part of the virgin-bride's task.

With the forging of a deeper commitment to the Spirit's work in her and in the Church, the virgin also receives in the rite of consecration a promise of greater divine protection. The Old Testament "jealous God" makes Himself manifest in the avenging flames of the *anathema* with which the Church surrounds the virgin. If an *anathema* seems too severe to present-day ears, one need only recall the permanent threat which the world, the flesh, and the devil offer to God's action in any age. The threat may appear in more subtle disguises, perhaps, but it will never be

absent. The gifts of God come to man to make him joyful, but they are deeply serious realities and are not to be treated as trifles. An *anathema* in the rite of consecration is the gesture of a Love which is ever strong, steadfast, forgiving and gentle but which cannot tolerate a temple turned over to various forms of profane bargaining.

Effects of Consecration

The Church's sacramental gestures are the acts of Christ. They effect what they signify. Virginal consecration has placed a new seal of sacredness upon the virgin-bride in her nuptial relationship with Christ. By being celebrated in the Church's rite, this union is also celebrated and ratified in heaven. Above all, the sacramental has drawn the virgin more deeply into the Church's own bridehood and into the Holy Spirit's dynamism which surges through the Church. The consecrated virgin-bride now embodies, in the most profound way, the living relationship of the one ecclesial Bride with Christ. She is a concrete proof through and through of this relationship. She is a witnessing mark of the Church's bridal meaning and her total consecration to God.

The character (God-likeness) received by all Christians in baptism is, in the virgin, enlarged and given fuller scope. The Christ whose image the virgin mirrors is truly Christ, the Son of the Father, Christ the Victor, Christ the King. But above all, He is Christ the Bridegroom. It is now not she who lives but Christ the Bridegroom who lives in the virgin-bride. Virginal consecration thus brings an unsurpassed nuptial blessing to the virgin-bride, a blessing that, if approached with faith, is seen to be pressed down and running over.

Bridehood is both gift and task. The virgin-bride's task is the Church's task: to bring forth fruit for God. Consecration does not create this task; it merely announces it to the virgin in terms of her new consecrated status. Not unlike the coronation of a queen, the consecration widens the realm of the virgin's spiritual

activity as the Spirit's work in her is intensified. It also brings to her a deeper share in the fecundity of the Holy Spirit. The consecrated virgin is made more prolific in supernatural fruitfulness. "*Habebit fructum,*" the Church sings in her office for virgins. The consecrated virgin may hopefully take up the same refrain.

Through the Church's consecratory act, a virgin may wonderfully experience the universal mystery of the Church. She may, in the grace of this sacramental, come to know what it means to have an ecclesial heart.¹⁰ This is the way St. Catherine of Siena knew the Church. It is the higher wisdom spoken of by St. Thomas on the threshold of the *Summa* where he speaks of a wisdom which "suffers divine things."¹¹ The virgin is not merely confronted with the Church, she is involved in it. She "suffers" within herself the joys and sorrows, the pain and the triumph, of the Church. She "lives" the mystery of the Church.

The same Spirit who works in the Church continues to work deeply in the consecrated virgin-bride, confirming what He has wrought. In turn, the virgin depends on His strength or His *persuasion*, a single happy word which best describes His manner of working from within. The apostle Peter could never forget the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Peter's epistolary descriptions of that Spirit, written so many years after the Pentecost event, vibrate with almost breathless excitement. For Peter, the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost was an exhilarating experience and an unforgettable assurance that the Spirit's activity is forever the bursting forth of spring in the Church. For the virgin-bride, too, the coming of the Holy Spirit in His new abundance of virginal consecration is a unique event, always as fresh, creative, and fragrant as spring and, if faith is large, always unforgettable. In the grace of this consecration she comes to know better the Spirit of truth, who teaches her from within and from without; the Spirit of longing, who fulfills the deepest longing of her heart while He creates deeper desires; the Spirit of Love, in whom she becomes one with her Bridegroom, in whom her heart and flesh exult in the living God.

Even in His highest gifts, however, God respects man's freedom. Having fully seen the essential value of man's free *yes* to God's initiative, St. Augustine said that although God makes us without us, He does not save us without us.¹² Sacramental activity is Christ's saving activity joined to our free response. Virginal consecration is wholly sacramental and thus wholly saving. As such it depends on man's faithful *yes*, man's free response. Even in the surpassing gift of virginal consecration, God stands at the door and knocks. The God who chooses would continue to be chosen; He who gives Himself would have us give ourselves; He who transforms asks that we let Him change us. "Open to Me, My sister!" The call of the Canticle continues to be heard in the life of the consecrated virgin. It is a call which continues long after the ritual moment of consecration is over. Mary's trusting and total *yes* is for the virgin-bride the best response, a response made up of a passivity and liberty equally radical.

The gift of virginal consecration, then, does not dispense with further moral effort on the virgin's part. If anything, the sacramental gives the virgin an even keener awareness of human weakness and the need for utter reliance on God. Strength is made perfect in human weakness only if this weakness prompts a person to lay hold of divine riches. Recognition of weakness precedes the seeking of divine help. It was Mary who first announced to Christ: "They have no wine." It was Christ who then, in a sense, advanced His "hour" so that the guests might be gladdened in divine abundance. (Cf. Jn 2:1-12.)

If the consecrated virgin is not dispensed from moral effort, neither is she now exempt from the fire and water of suffering. A faithful reception of consecration will, however, bring to her a deeper insight into suffering and the grace to see it as a purifying pasch leading to the refreshment of risen life in Christ even here and now. For the faithful virgin, the *beata nox* of suffering always leads on to the paschal *lumen Christi*, even when the latter seems not to be shining.

As the one bridal Church ever lives "not I, but Christ . . ." (Gal

2:20), so shall the consecrated virgin live. The deep unity of Christ and the virgin does not abolish their duality, however, despite the excessive words of one of the Catherine-saints who cried out: "My me is God!" True knowing remains the meeting together of two liberties. As a bride and husband are two in one flesh, so the virgin-bride and Christ are two, literally, in one Spirit.

The glorious things which ultimately unfold from this human-divine union will, for the most part, never be visible to the eyes of men. Even for the eyes of faith, they will be too much to bear. On the white pebble of the Apocalypse (2:17) they will, however, be inscribed. For those who love, this is enough.

Personal Fulfillment as a Virgin

After ascending the highest reaches of love open to man in this life, we must now come down to answer a charge often levelled in our day against the virginal life. Since the answer is all one piece with our foregoing considerations of virginal consecration, we feel that now is the opportune moment to face the charge.

We have elsewhere attempted to show that Christian virginity bears within it a potential for fruitfulness to a degree not even suspected by those who view it from the outside. Still nagging in the recesses of the minds of many persons, however, even persons who *do* admit of the virgin's supernatural fruitfulness, is the suspicion that the virgin will never be completely fulfilled as a human person, as a woman. Fulfillment, in this type of thinking, is based upon the idea that a person is fulfilled only through relatedness to another. "It is not good for man [or woman] to be alone. . . ." (Cf. Gen 2:18.) God Himself has said it. Only in dialog with another does one begin to know (to fulfill) himself, to authenticate his true personality. And, normally, the height of relatedness is considered to be the marital relationship, which signifies not merely a physical relationship, but a dialogic ex-

change as total as human beings are given to experience in their present, somewhat opaque, human condition. Anyone, the argument continues, who foregoes this relationship may, indeed, be somewhat successful in life, may even achieve "sanctity." But he or she will never be fulfilled as a person. Thus this type of objection concludes in a decisively negative and unqualified way.

Returning to the framework and sequence of the foregoing objection in the hope of separating truth from fiction, we shall now juxtapose the evidences affirming eminent personal fulfillment in the virginal life.

We are assuming, from the outset, that the virgin in our argument is a person who has received a genuine call to religious life and has responded with a good will to the graces of this call by vowing her life to God according to the norms set by the Church. We maintain that to such a Christian virgin, fulfillment as a person is wholly possible. In accord with our objectors, we also consider personal fulfillment to be based upon the ideas of relatedness to another or to the "other"—meaning one and/or many. For to live is to love; and to love implies someone beyond the self. It is not good for man, for woman, to be alone; we, too, concede this. Only in relating lovingly with others does one authenticate one's personality. Psychologists say that the mature person is basically altruistic. Why is this so? Because love goes out of itself; goodness diffuses itself.¹⁸

Along with our objectors, we also concede that on a natural plane the marital dialog contains the potential for the height of human relatedness. It is not, however, the only way of expressing relatedness on a natural plane, nor may it, even in Christian marriage, remain on a purely natural level. That sexual activity does not belong essentially to the perfection of the personality even in marriage is demonstrated in marriages where, for some reason or other, such relationships must be foregone for long periods of time or even permanently. The marriage union does not exhaust itself in the purely physical sphere. True marital relatedness is the activity of the whole person, not merely the act

of one distinct faculty. It is the whole person who relates to another in love through the vehicle of one, or several, faculties.

Because of the opaqueness of the body, marriage partners will, in the present life, never wholly reveal the secret of their personality to one another even in the deepest of their unions. Their whole married life, if faith is lively, will be spent in perfecting their union by bringing it to partake in and to express ever better and better the one essential love-union of Christ and His Church-Bride. As a sacrament of the Church, every aspect of the marriage union is taken up into a sphere of life beyond itself. While they are coming to know one another through surrendering love, the sacrament makes it possible for marriage partners to come to know better the love of Christ disclosing itself to man, His beloved Bride. Relatedness in marriage is a means to an even greater end. This ultimate goal is found on the high plane of the life of glory, the life of the new heaven and the new earth where men neither marry nor are given in marriage, where God's love is wholly transparent in person-to-person relationships. The life of glory is a life of everlasting marriage with God through Christ and in His Spirit, a life of the most sublime unity where men meet others in the wholly Other. Moreover, marriage is a day-by-day process of relatedness, and although this relationship is normally celebrated and nourished through the marriage act, it is not confined to it. The unitive love of marriage is not an all-at-once acquisition precisely because it comprises relatedness on many levels. Beyond the symbolic act of marital union, the entire married life is to be made up of mutual love and surrender which flow from and lead back to the moment which one might term "the sacramental communion" of marriage. The bridegroom lives for the bride in all he is and does; the bride lives for her husband, who is, as Genesis says, "her longing." To the unceasing person-to-person gift which husband and wife make to one another God joins the creativity of His own love in the blessing of new life with the consequent opportunity of a new relationship of love between the child and its parents.

Now let us again pass over to the virginal life. Most perfectly, the virginal life implies a loving relationship with Christ and the willing deliverance of the virgin's whole being to Christ. The mode of this deliverance is the public vow voluntarily given by the virgin, on the one hand, along with the consummating and official acceptance of this vow by the Church on the other. The day-by-day deliverance comprises the whole vowed life of the virgin in which her marriage with Christ is expressed and perfected. This life is both humiliation and exaltation. It is dying in Christ and it is rising in Him. The eucharistic sacrifice and the whole circle of sacraments are the communing heights of this union. The offspring of good works and sacramental growth in the Church issue from the creative, person-to-person relationship of Christ with the virgin-bride. The virgin-bride lives, by faith, for her heavenly Husband. The union celebrated is already that of the everlasting marriage with the Lamb. Bridal life with Christ is an end in itself since it is the ultimate goal of all Christian living. Unlike the bride in a human union, the virgin-bride may not only love her Husband who is Christ and surrender wholly to Him; she may even adore Him, for He is truly Christ, the Son of God. The bride in a human marriage may love ardently and deeply. But since her husband is a creature, he may not be adored by his bride, even though history records many *belles lettres d'amour* which have indulged in effusions of verbal idolatry.

We ask at this point, then, if it is possible that the personality of a woman wed to a human husband will be fulfilled whereas the personality of a woman wed to Christ, a divine-human Husband, will be unfulfilled? We admit that in either vocation, fulfillment is realized in various degrees of perfection according to subjective factors. Objectively, however, one must concede that fulfillment as a person is not only equally possible for the bride in a human marriage and the virgin wed to Christ by vow but that it may be achieved by the latter in an even more total and surpassing way. For the Christian virgin, whose relatedness is not merely with a human *other* but with the Wholly Other, the customary modalities

of marital relatedness are transcended. The virgin delivers the secret of her person to her Bridegroom in a supernatural manner and on a supernatural plane. The essential surrender, however, is present, and the act of loving exchange is, moreover, what it will be forever in the celestial wedding feast.

Through her life in religious vows, the entire person of the virgin is completely and absolutely directed toward Christ. Through the vow of chastity, the supremacy of the spirit (the transfiguring Holy Spirit) over the natural sexual impulse reaches its peak. By her total consecration, the virgin's center of gravity is shifted to the plane of risen life. On this plane she accomplishes, through the Spirit, what would otherwise be impossible. The sacrament of union for her, the peak of her married life with Christ, is the Eucharist, pledge and foretaste of everlasting life. In the eucharistic encounter her flesh exults in the living God, flesh which even now lives on the plane of resurrection.

And, beyond all this, her Christian womanliness unfolds within the womanly structure of the Church-Bride. The virgin-bride, in her own person, becomes one with the Church-Bride who rejoices, who prays, who loves, who suffers, who serves, who conceives in the Spirit, who brings forth fruit unto God, who thanks, who hopes, who offers, who waits. What fulfillment, we ask, may compare with this fulfillment?

Person and Relation

Although we have said that mature relatedness to other persons stands at the core of personality fulfillment, we have not yet explained why this is true. At the root of all revelation about person lies the unsearchable mystery of God's own Personal Life. *Being* at its very source is personal: that rich inter-Personal living of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Man himself is invited to share in this inter-Personal life through sacramental encounter with Christ. Moreover, because of the social structure of the Mystical Body, Christ is personally encountered in every human relation-

ship. Christianity is a social mystery. The Mystical Body, the Church, is the society of union in this life for all those who share the name of "person."¹⁴

For the Christian, then, life becomes an intricate pattern of personal relationships which are destined to both participate in and reflect the mystery of God's own threefold relationship, His inner Life. The marriage union, the union of Christ with a vowed virgin, the Christian family, the religious community, the union of brother and sister, the union of friends—all these and other personal relationships originate and converge in the one essential flow of threefold Love. Faced with love in its divine fullness, the Christian cannot avoid its implications in his life. One of the basic characteristics of the truly mature person is that he faces openly his nature as a lover, his need to receive love and to give it. Christ's death shows the risk a man runs in loving others, the risk of rejection and suffering and deep personal hurt. Christ's resurrection shows the ultimate triumph of love.¹⁵

Only the authentic person can relate to others in love. What do we mean by the authentic person? We mean a person who is truly himself, a person of integrity, a person who is ever realizing in himself the image for which God made him. The process of realizing the authentic self (God's image of us) is a process of psychological and spiritual growth, a process of maturity. It implies a gradual integration of sense, emotions, intellect and will operating in unity under the direction of the will moved by grace to choose what is good. Beginning with original sin, any kind or degree of sin disturbs this inner order to a greater or lesser extent, turning a man against God and also against his own true self, making a man, in fact, his own enemy. The prodigal son was said to have gone off into a "far country." (Lk 15:13.) Commenting on this passage, St. Ambrose asks: "What country is farther than the land of alienation a man enters by sin?"¹⁶ A person who severs himself from God and encloses himself within the false self is unable to be truly open to others, despite appearances to the contrary.

Relatedness to others, and ultimately to God, is therefore dependent upon the synchronized operation of dying to the false self and rising to the new. The human person truly becomes himself only to the extent that he goes beyond himself in a relationship and movement towards the world, towards others, and towards God. Christian life is this very process on its highest level: "You must be clothed *in the new self*, that is being re-fitted all the time for closer knowledge, so that the image of the God who created it is its pattern." (Col 3:10, Knox tr.) St. Paul's use of the image of clothing is not without significance. For after Adam and Eve sinned, they perceived themselves to be "naked." They felt a loss and a consequent need for clothing to "complete" their persons, to make up for the integrity they no longer possessed.

Living in the "ocean of grace" which is her daily fare, relating to Christ the Bridegroom by encountering Him lovingly in the sacraments, in other persons, and in His creation, the consecrated virgin willingly opens herself to the reality of Being and thus attains personal fulfillment in an extensive and intensive manner. Since love diffuses itself, the virgin finds her loving relationship with Christ a fruit-bearing one, yielding spiritual increase to God. (Cf. Rom 7:5.) The reality of fruitfulness, discussed earlier in this book, is a significant aspect of her fulfillment. In relating to her divine Husband, Christ, and in Him, with others, she is enriched beyond her own capacity for hope; she is made wise beyond what enters her mind; she loves and is loved beyond the telling. To use Hopkins' happy word, Christ truly "easters" in her. She dies to the false self and rises to the true self in Christ in a hundredfold way she could never have dreamed of. Her fulfillment in Christ manifests the highest degree of baptismal unfolding. For the virgin-encounter with Christ has become not a movement toward Him but, in its highest unitive sense, a movement with Him and in Him as Bridegroom. "I live, now not I but Christ liveth in me." (Gal 2:20.) This does not mean that the human "I" is blotted out. It means that precisely because Christ lives in the

virgin, she is finally able to be herself, the *self* which God had in mind when He created her and awoke in her the powers of knowing and loving and choosing.¹⁷ Christ's invasion of her personality removes nothing of her authentic personality, but only her imperfections. To be closed in upon self is the most inhibiting kind of imperfection.

Until she opens herself to God and to others in love and friendship, the virgin cannot fully realize what it means to be a person in the deepest sense of the word. If the virgin hungers to be a part of the stream of life, to be truly completed and fulfilled, she is invited to do so on all these compenetrating levels: interpersonal, communal, ecclesial, cosmic, christological and, finally, trinitarian.

Obstacles to Fulfillment

Why is true personal fulfillment not always realized in the religious life? Obviously because of the failure to relate genuinely to Christ as He comes through the sacraments and through human encounters. But the root of this failure might be traced to two chief reasons: (1) a disregard for human values; (2) a weak faith. We shall briefly discuss each of these causes in turn.

Grace builds on nature and perfects it. Certain trends of religious formation not only condition virgins to mistrust the natural components of experience but, always and ever, to wage war against them. Sometimes the words human and natural are even accepted as synonyms for something permanently imperfect if not sinful. Yet holiness is wholeness. The entire complex of man's personality is meant to share in the redeeming and integrating power of grace. Becoming a saint should never make a man less human. Dying to self is a process of transformation, not annihilation.

In listing some of the difficulties in a life of Christian virginity, Max Thurian says that "a man runs the risk of becoming an old bachelor and a woman an old maid, with all the disagreeable and

repugnant results which that brings about." He observes the possibility of ascetic austerity becoming overdrawn at times and, sought as an end in itself, becoming an obstruction to the radiant love of Christ and to His virile gentleness. "Wishing to be fore-armed and 'armourplated' against the attacks of the devil, of desire, affectivity or sentimentality," Thurian goes on, "a man may create an impenetrable psychological shield for himself. Thus he becomes mysterious, inscrutable and inhuman." Austerity ought to be kept flexible by joy and marked by Christian love in order not to turn out stoics who, along with their vices, have also lost their personal warmth and sensitivity to human happiness.¹⁸

A man who views his own natural endowments in themselves with suspicion will also tend to look upon material things and the world of human values with a manichaeistic eye. The poorly translated prayer "to despise the things of this world" only confirms this attitude of "holy" disdain. It has been suggested that we occasionally translate the phrase *terrena despiciere* by the words *God so loved the world*. The word *despiciere* really means to look down upon something from a high vantage point, to view things from above or, in other words, to see them with love as God sees them.¹⁹ Whatever is valuable in human life is welcome in the divine process of transformation and ought to shine forth most clearly in the person wholly given to God. Genuine human realities are never to be despised, even though many of them must be foregone by those who are called to "leave all things and follow." If one makes a gift of something precious to a friend, it does not follow that one should despise the gift.

Another related distortion is the strange effort to look for a God who is far away rather than a God who is actually very near, dwelling among us, in fact. Here we should like to relate the story of a little girl who, rigidly schooled in church behavior, worked very hard during Benediction to see God, who, her mother told her, was "up there" in the gold case. The child slanted her head and peeked and peered through the self-con-

structed latticework of her fingers. Squinting in just the right degree, she finally came to see bright rays and colors issuing from the gold case. At the end of her immense effort she concluded that what she saw must surely be God in heaven as the altarboy's censer added generous clouds of smoke to her little homemade rapture.

Many adults, too, rack their heads or strain and writhe to conjure up a vision of the God "afar" when He is to be found within them, within others, and within the parable of His creation. The point we are making is not an argument against Benediction, even for little girls. It is rather a hope that we value more highly the world which we see, and that we find God speaking to us here as well as in the higher world of sacramental realities where faith becomes our only eye.

The Church of the present age seems called to a new realization and expression of paschal Christianity. The fully-believing paschal Christian ought to be, in St. Augustine's words, an *Alleluia* from head to foot,²⁰ a man of sobriety and gaiety; a man of suffering and joy; a man of vision and of common sense, but all one piece in the inner gladness of the Resurrection. If the virgin is to be an authentic witness of Christ, she must bring the paschal victory to the whole texture of human reality. She, too, must be an *Alleluia* from head to foot. This is the way she "keeps" the Easter feast. (Cf. 1 Cor:8.) If her dyings do not make her more alive to God, she is still living in the Old Testament. She is not very good news to the world. She has not really risen with Christ. St. Paul says that if Christ is not risen, our hope is vain. Likewise, if Christians never rise to the full message of the Gospel, their life is truly empty and forlorn. There is only one principle of life in the Church: it is the Spirit of the risen Christ. Not to have put on this risen Spirit still leaves us in a dark zero hour, sad creatures indeed.

A paschal and ecclesial-minded writer of our time says that "the Church is in the world to meet it on every corner, to save it on every street."²¹ Through the Church, God continues to send

forth His Spirit to build a new creation in the world which Christ knew and loved. God channels His grace to men through the Church and the sacraments, through human encounters, through the pouring of wine or sharing of bread, through visits with the sick, through laughter and love, through pain and grief. Pouget has said that however much of a mystic one might be, it is good to know that we are not strangers to this world, that we still need to breathe lungfuls of air and to feel earth beneath our feet.²² Christ came not to destroy but to fulfill. (Mt 5:17.) It is time to end the man-made schism between the natural and supernatural. Nature and grace are partners. Sin is an enemy to both.

Making room for the whole of reality in our life: such is the task which plays an important part in personal fulfillment. Man is called to relate to God, to the universe, and to other men, and to discover, in Christ, the unity underlying all these relationships. Even though the universe is not a person, yet it is a manifestation of *being* which the Christian is asked to confront personally in order to discover the voice and the face of its Creator and, in addition, to give back to the universe the voice and face of Christ with which to express its praise of the Father.

A second obstacle to personal fulfillment in religious life is best described by Our Lord's words to the disciples as they panicked during a storm at sea: "O you of little faith!" (Mt 8:26.) On another occasion, Jesus said to the apostles: "There are some of you who do not believe." (Jn 6:64.) Over and over again, to the crowds and to smaller groups of His friends, Jesus underlined the necessity of faith. Edith Stein says that behind convent walls even the average nun does not realize the ideal of personal fulfillment which the virginal vocation offers. The reason lies, in the first place, in not having faithfully taken in the full meaning of the vows and, secondly, in a waning enthusiasm for the total commitment these vows entail. Virgins who live in this "little faith" will, according to Edith Stein, usually be "a torment to themselves and a burden to their community."²³

The loudest "faith" in our times seems to be faith in a self-

created image, faith in what is sometimes falsely considered "progress," faith in material quantity and in status, faith in statistics. But this is not faith at all. It is, in fact, the very opposite of faith.

And yet, faith is not merely a vague or even determined hope that all will turn out well in the end despite what takes place in the interim. The faith which a virgin is called to exercise, the faith upon which she is to base her whole life, is faith in the divine promise, in the word of God: "Sustain me as You have promised, that I may live; disappoint me not in my hope." (Ps 118:116.) Both what she believes and the strength to believe it are divine gifts. Through her vows, the virgin exercises this faith day after day. And she is not disappointed as she faithfully "sees" the hundredfold surrounding her on every side.

Without a large faith, the virgin, too, would surely perish. If she fails to believe in the God she cannot see but who is, for all that, at her very side, she will begin to build more obvious gods as the virgin Israel did, gods which can be counted and seen. We who thus deviate from our faithful commitment to the one true God and His divine promise will expend precious energies originally meant for His kingdom and end up foolish all the same. Moreover, the world will be less faithful because of our lapses, large or small. This is what St. Paul means by "beginning in the Spirit and ending in the flesh." (Cf. Gal 3:3.)

The words which Yahweh said to Israel, "Turn to Me, and I will turn to you" (Za 1:3), are valid for every era. The secret of personal fulfillment is, in the Christian era of grace, even more closely at our side. For God has taken up His dwelling within the Christian, in a human tent, in a human ark. To have faith in this abiding presence of God, to hear His voice each day, to fulfill His bidding—this is the high road of belief. Matthew relates that, in a certain country, Christ could work few miracles for the people "because of their unbelief." (Mt 13:58.) It is Matthew, too, who records the plaintive words of Christ: "How often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathers her young under

her wings, but thou wouldst not!" (Mt 23:37.) There is no door so tightly closed to God's blessings as that of unbelief.

"Sustain me, O Lord, as You have promised, that I may live. . . ." (Ps 118:116.) This is the virgin's life-song of faith. Over and over she asks to be strengthened with the divine word. (Cf. Ps 118:25.) She keeps putting her faith in this word.

Conclusion

Fulfillment, then, is anchored in relatedness to others and, ultimately, to the wholly Other. Its achievement is dependent upon a lively faith in God, in the richness of His creation, in His promise, and in the whole texture of human and divine reality.

The virgin-bride of Christ does not really seek fulfillment of her person as an end in itself. She seeks Christ. The great saint and psychologist, Benedict of Nursia, made the seeking of God the touchstone for judging a man's earnestness in becoming a monk. Self-fulfillment comes as a surprise and a reward for seeking God. Were a person to seek self-actualization as an end he would surely miss it. For to actualize the self one must transcend the self in commitment to others. The saints have been notoriously carefree about the development of their personalities. They are known, however, to have had a deep and loving concern for others.

Personal fulfillment is a precious by-product of loving Christ as person-to-Person in sacramental encounter, human encounter, and encounter with the world. The virgin who emerges from this dynamism of love is a person filled with Christ, doing what Christ Himself does at the heart of the Tri-Personal Life: giving Himself to the Father in the Spirit of Love.

When the soul is thus transformed into a sort of pure living relation to God, it has reached its perfection; it has become truly a person, because it has become—in its measure—a perfect image of the subsistent relations which the Divine Persons are; at each moment

filled with the gift of God himself and pouring itself out in a total offering—"acting exactly according to the manner in which it has received, and returning to the Giver His own gifts with all the excellencies proper to the gift itself." The human person is now made perfect by its communion in the Divine Persons—"by means of faith."²⁴

A prayer in the rite of Consecration says:

Grant, we beseech Thee, O Lord, to these Thy handmaids, whom Thou hast deigned to adorn with the honor of virginity, the complete fulfillment of the work which they have begun; and in order that they may offer Thee a perfect oblation, may their undertaking merit to be brought to full completion.

The work which virgins have begun is the work of total deliverance to God. The Church asks the Lord, the virgin's Bridegroom, to bring this work to fulfillment. He does so by filling the virgin with Himself. There is no fulfillment like this fulfillment. The Church-Bride and the virgin-bride are not disappointed in their expectations.

NOTES

1. St. Ambrose said, "Bibe Christum, quia vitis est, . . . quia fons vitae est, . . . quia flumen est. . . ." In *Psalmum I Enarratio*, PL 14, col. 940. St. Bernard of Clairvaux often spoke of the *excessus* or overflowing love of God; St. Thomas Aquinas, of the *redundantia* of grace.

2. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 29, a. 1.

3. Paschal Botz, O.S.B., "Sponsa Regis Aeterni," *The Benedictine Review*, 9:1, January 1954, p. 8.

4. Martin B. Hellriegel, "The Ritual for the Consecration of Virgins," *Liturgical Week Proceedings*, 1958, p. 177

5. Mother Kathryn Sullivan, R.S.C.J., "Love is the Meaning of the Consecration of Virgins," *Liturgical Week Proceedings*, 1958, p. 110.

6. Botz, *art. cit.*, p. 11.

7. William J. O'Shea, *The Worship of the Church* (Westminster: Newman, 1957), pp. 531-532.

8. Roland Behrendt, O.S.B., "Church and Virgin, Spouses of Christ," *Sponsa Regis*, 29:2, October 1957, pp. 30-31.
9. A translation of the Preface by Jerome Hay, C.S.S.R., as found in *Life of the Spirit*, 7:76, October 1952, pp. 150-152.
10. Cf. Pius XII's address to the cloistered nuns of the whole world, July 19 and 26, August 3, 1958, in which he speaks of "the apostolate of the Church." Likewise *Ecclesiam Suam* in which Pope Paul VI says that the mystery of the Church is "something to be lived."
11. St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, I, q. 1, a. 6.
12. F. Moriones, *Enchiridion Theologicum S. Augustini* (Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Matriti, 1951), n. 1804.
13. Cf. St. Thomas, *op. cit.*, I, q. 106, a. 4.
14. Bernard Cooke, S.J., "The Theology of Person," *Spiritual Life*, 7:1, March 1961, pp. 18-19.
15. Bernard Cooke, S.J., "Personal Development through Sacramental Life," *The Catholic World*, 194:1161, December 1961, p. 160.
16. St. Ambrose, *Expositio Evang. Sec. Luc. Lib. VII*, PL 15, col. 1757.
17. Romano Guardini, *Freedom, Grace, and Destiny* (New York: Pantheon, 1960), p. 73.
18. Max Thurian, *Marriage and Celibacy* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1959), p. 116.
19. Cf. Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), p. xvi.
20. Moriones, *op. cit.*, n. 1845.
21. Barnabas M. Ahern, C.P., *New Horizons* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1963) p. 218.
22. Jean Guitton, *Abbé Pouget* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1958), p. 128.
23. Edith Stein, *Writings* (Westminster: Newman, 1956), p. 171.
24. Jean Mouroux, *I Believe* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1959), p. 89.

*See how yonder earth gives promise
of spring at their coming, new-clad
by the bounty of returning rain.*

(Ps 83:7-8.)

10 NOW IN PART

"TO UNDERSTAND the paschal mystery is to understand Christianity; to be ignorant of the paschal mystery is to be ignorant of Christianity."¹ These words of Pope Paul VI, spoken by him as Cardinal Montini, are Pauline in a double sense. They are another way of saying that "if Christ has not risen, then our faith is vain, . . . we are still in our sins." (1 Cor 15:17-18.) The apostle Paul was eager to have Christians comprehend the great mystery of salvation. (Cf. Eph 3:17-18.) Pope Paul VI desires the same. Not to comprehend, in some degree, the essential mystery of Christianity is, indeed, to reject its full meaning for and impact upon our lives. What is little known will be little loved or lived. If efforts to penetrate this central truth of Christianity are not made, Christians may well be guilty of what is called "the hidden heresy of indifference."² Each man must make the truth of the Gospel his own by living contact with it. If he is content to view it only in a fixed and frozen formula, if he is not willing to trouble himself about its meaning, he will be a drag on the Church and on the integrity of her faith.

The paschal mystery in its totality is the glorified humanity of Jesus Christ which is spread abroad in human history through the

Spirit of the risen Christ at work in the Church. The Church is the witness of Christ's paschal mystery because she has in herself all the qualities of Christ's resurrection. She lives and operates in the Spirit of the risen Christ. It is this Spirit who, in the Church, makes the glory of the Resurrection a reality here on earth—a reality in persons and a cosmic reality as well. The Spirit is essentially a glorifier, that is to say, one who makes Christ's glory a reality here on earth.³ He it is who, in St. Paul's words, "loads us with everlasting glory." (2 Cor 4:16-18, Knox tr.)

Although much of the Church's risen life (sanctity) is manifest in the form of love, service, joy, peace, and patience, immensely more of it remains unseen. The full revelation of the Church's present risen state will take place only in the *parousia*. To his dearly-loved disciples, St. John remarked that even though we are now, in fact, the sons of God, "it has not yet appeared what we shall be." (1 Jn 3:2.) The disciples of Christ knew that Christ had risen from the dead; they conversed with Him after His victory over death. But even though the fact of His resurrection was evident to them, their natural eye could not perceive the glory that was in Him.⁴

What is true for the risen Christ is true for His Bride, the Church. The Church's "glory" is also within and only partially visible in its fruits. "Persecution, temporal misfortunes, the sins of the Church's individual members, are the sackcloth in which the wife of the Lamb sits and mourns as if she were not the Queen she really is."⁵

So, even though the Spirit is as much with the Church and with its members as He will forever be in the new earth and heaven, modally there is a difference between this eon and the life of glory. The Church, in time, remains a *sign* to the world of what is yet to come, even though the sign itself partakes of the fulfillment.

With the paschal mystery, which comprises Christ's resurrection, the sending of His Spirit, and His ascension into glory, the *eschaton*, the final and decisive act of God, has entered the history

of mankind. The Holy Spirit has been given to the Church and to each baptized Christian as the earnest, the first installment (cf. Rom 8:25 and 2 Cor 1:22, 5:5), of heavenly life. The word St. Paul uses is *arrabon*, a Semitic word meaning an initial part-payment to close a bargain, one given as a guarantee of the full payment to come. It is more than just a promise, it is the beginning of the fulfillment of that promise.⁶

All baptized Christians who possess the permanent gift of risen life, the Indwelling Spirit, already possess the heavenly life here below in an inchoate way. Eternity has been set in their hearts. (Cf. Eccles 3:11.) St. John says, "I say to you, he who believes in Me has life everlasting." (Jn 6:47.) Moreover, Christians who allow this risen life to flourish within them through greater faith and sacramental quickenings, Christians who feed on the heavenly bread of the Eucharist, come to realize more and more in themselves the fullness of the life of glory. All Christians are thus, in various degrees, witnesses to the life of glory. To say that the Christian layman is an incarnational witness and the virgin an eschatological witness is accurate only if it describes an attitude of emphasis. Incarnation and final resurrection-glory are two sides of the Christian reality. To eclipse one aspect would mean to lose the reality. The history of spirituality records such total or partial eclipses and their consequences.

Being, by profession, a living witness to the Church's bridal mystery, which is the heavenly mystery toward which all Christian life converges, the vowed virgin is called to the role of eschatological witness in an eminent but not exclusive way. The manner in which she shows forth the final flowering of the paschal mystery will be noted here specifically.

A Token of the Last Days

By her life, the virgin is a token of the "last days" seen not as a foreboding catastrophe but as the completion of earthly life and immanent in this present life. The virgin exemplifies in this

world the life of the world to come. She is not merely a faint image of a distant reality; she is already an initial, though partial, manifestation of this reality.⁷

Her poverty affirms that God is her riches; her chastity that Christ is her Bridegroom and that there will be, in heaven, no nuptials save with Him. Her obedience affirms that true liberty means surrender to God's all-beautiful design for man. Her whole life points to the life of glory.⁸

She thus proclaims that the present world is coming to an end in favor of a new heaven and earth. She does not panic over this fact but awaits the end in hope and longing. In her the everlasting joy, youth, and freshness of the final day already shine and create in the world a restlessness, an eagerness to press on to the things which do not pass away.

The virgin, along with all who live and long for the era of immortality and youth, really grows younger as she ages. Some Christians, such as Pope John, even manifest this youthfulness of age which comes from serenely pressing onward to immortality.

Witness to the Spirit's Fruits

The virgin's life is eminently eschatological because it is forever witnessing the action of the Holy Spirit, the messianic paschal Gift *par excellence* to the Church. For the virgin's fruitfulness is due, not to any human means, but to the creative Spirit. In the world to come, the fecundity of the Spirit is the only fecundity. The virgin spends her life already bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit in this world. She is, in turn, ever lifting up her eyes to the eternal hills and drawing all things of this world into the new and everlasting creation of the Spirit. She herself is called to be a shaft of light to others, letting them see, through her, into this splendid Easter land. One with Christ in body and spirit, sharing in the glory of Christ's resurrection, the virgin has her home no longer on earth but in heaven. (Cf. Phil 3:20.) It is from heaven

that the virgin receives her fruit; it is in the heavenly granary that her fruit is stored up.

Witness to Lasting Values

The virgin is a witness to the primacy of the spiritual over the material. For material things, good and beautiful though they may be, will pass away. The new heaven and earth will be fashioned from the old, and it is not given to man to know how this transformation will take place. What will never be consumed by the ravages of time or the transforming process of the last days will be *good works*, the inner meaning of all human activity: "Their works follow them." (Apoc 14: 13.) Material things which have served as vehicles for the Spirit's power in this life will likewise live on in their "fruits."

The virgin, for this reason, does not by any means hold material things in contempt. She reads the parable of God's love in them. She sees them as silent conveyors of sacramental life. The blind Abbé Pouget delighted in the fact that the earth of men contained the germ of heaven. By "earth" he meant the heavy word including everything which is "common, solid, concrete, troublesome, observable, and praiseworthy . . . this earth of men."⁹ The virgin sees man's earthly handiwork as a visible expression of order and beauty within the person of the human maker. The material world plays its role of pointing to the world of the Spirit, and, conversely, the Spirit of the risen Christ invades the material universe and brings it to its higher fulfillment. By her very presence the virgin keeps bringing to the world which is falling away the glad news of the everlasting city of God now a-building in the Spirit's mighty power. She is among the first-fruits of this Spirit's work insofar as His strength is operative and manifest in her life, insofar as He, the Breath of the Father and Son, has each day become her breath, the vital energy and direction of her life.

Although the virgin shows the primacy of the spiritual over the

material and carnal, at the same time she shows the world the value of the whole person in his psychosomatic unity. Whereas physical integrity is only the first level of virginal undividedness, even the flesh provides its own proper emblem to mark this first level and to remain as a mark for the larger meaning of virginity. In virginity, then, as well as in marriage, the body is called to its own manner of attesting to the high mystery of Christ's love-union with His Church. Both the virgin and the married partners reflect the precious value of the whole person. They show that life is not merely a matter of "saving one's soul." Christ came to save persons, not souls or bodies in isolation. The genuine Christian virgin does not subscribe to a dualistic anthropology which regards salvation of soul apart from the body or even in spite of the body.

Witness to Everlasting Marriage

Through her bridal union with Christ within the Church, the virgin is already wholly involved in the one essential marriage, the marriage of the Lamb with the New Jerusalem. In her life as virgin-bride she has accepted the gift of an immediate union with Christ begun in baptism and reaching its fullness in religious profession and virginal consecration. In her very person she thus witnesses to the final and everlasting marriage banquet which is the ultimate end of each Christian life. The majority of baptized Christians achieve this ultimate end indirectly through sacramental marriage, itself a sign of and a living share in Christ's marriage with His Church. As sacramental marriage helps to interpret and make visible to the virgin the sublimity of the ecclesial marriage, so the virgin's marriage with Christ shows the married couple the ultimate bliss toward which their temporal union moves. Already celebrating the one essential heavenly union, the virgin is a living message to the married partners that although their union will be severed in death, it is not doomed to

death. Death will disclose to them the reality of divine love which lies at the heart of their earthly union, a reality which their earthly union spends itself in expressing and attaining. Death will open to them the bliss of a union which encompasses, transfigures, and transcends all earthly joy. In heaven they will celebrate the fulfillment of the union which their earthly marriage signifies.

Witness to Immortality

In the present life, procreation of the married makes up for the ravages of death. In the new life, the function of earthly marriage is no longer needful, as men will no longer die. By transcending the visible fecundity of the flesh, the virgin already here and now bears witness to the new era of immortality. She already celebrates the life in which there is neither human marriage nor the giving in marriage. She becomes like the angels, not in having a wholly spiritual nature as they do, but in anticipating the status of immortality.

Witness to Resurrection of the Body

Wed to the risen Christ, the virgin already lives in Him as "firstfruits" of the Church's harvest. She already celebrates, in faith but in substantial fullness, the unique and eternal marriage of the resurrection of the body. The life of virginity is an anticipation of what will be every man's joy in the kingdom of heaven. Although each Christian is already, in this present existence, "risen with Christ" (cf. Col and Eph), the virginal vocation is a more radical and profound assimilation of this risen life. The virgin's flesh, through the vow of chastity, is already taken up to the transcendent plane of risen life. The fecundity of her flesh yields in favor of the fecundity of the Spirit. Her whole person is integrated in this spiritual fecundity.

Living to be Born

Having become more and more alive to God, the virgin is each day readier for her final birth. Each day the buds of glory open more fully within her in the warmth of the Spirit's indwelling presence. When the tension between the partial and full realization of heavenly life becomes too strong within her, she discovers that this tension itself is part of the process of being born anew. The Christian both possesses and pursues the heavenly life. He stretches forth toward what he already has. Certain writers have called this mysterious duality "eschatological tension."

So overcome by the risen Christ whom he had encountered on the Damascus road, St. Paul seemed certain, as his earlier epistles show, that the *parousia* was imminent almost any day. Only later, when the great things he would be asked to suffer for the sake of the Lord began to tumble out into his life, did he realize the necessity and value of a time-between, a time to intensify his yearning and to light its torches in the Gentile world so that the whole world would become synonymous with those who "long for His coming." With beautiful impatience, St. John of the Cross longed for his full birth unto God. The great St. Teresa cried out at one time, not from exasperation but from the greatness of her longing: "Lord, it is high time to see Thee!" And Monica, after the vision at Ostia, asked simply, "Then what are we doing here?" In other words, how could she, Monica, remain on earth when heaven had stolen her heart?

The Virgin Mary, who excelled in every Christian virtue, was also a perfect Lady-in-Waiting. Waiting, it has been said, is a form of suffering God asks of His special friends. Mary waited for a divine clarification of her pregnancy to Joseph; she waited for Christ's birth; she waited in Egypt for Herod's wrath to cool down; she waited for Christ's "hour" of miracles and preaching; she waited on Calvary for His consummating deliverance to His Father; with the other Marys, she waited for His resurrection

from the tomb; with the apostles, she waited and prayed for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Mary was always actively patient in her waiting.

Yearning and waiting give to the virgin's love a singular nourishment, allowing her to possess more and more the essence of her quest. She yearns and waits both for God and for the resurrection of the body, the latter being the final liberation which will allow the Spirit to manifest totally Christ's paschal victory in her and, finally, in the Church.

Wherever love is ardent and genuine and deep, even apparent and temporary separation between lovers are cruel deaths. For the virgin-lovers of Christ, too, time will always lag. Left on earth, the virgin feels exiled from her Bridegroom. The Spirit and the Bride say: *Come*. To both assuage and deepen this cry, however, and to make it a mighty voice, the virgin realistically takes up the tasks of the Bridegroom in this world. Seeing, with the eyes of faith, the glory that is on its way and even now transfiguring the very world in which we live, the virgin does not merely stand holding her breath for the last day. The hope of the final *parousia* does not turn her away from the present world but justifies and transfigures all that she does in it.

Hastening the Pleroma

At Christ's ascension into heaven the disciples stood looking up to heaven. Eventually they had to carry to the ends of the earth the full meaning of what they saw. Did they ever really relinquish their vision? Not at all. They treasured it up in their hearts. They gave up only the geographical locale of the vision in order to take it to the ends of the earth. The full meaning of the vision drove them on. The disciples who left the immediate setting of Christ's ascension carried the Kyrios, the King of glory, in their whole being. After the Pentecostal Spirit had empowered them to do so, they told the vision to every man.

The virgin and the apostle engage in temporal tasks not merely

to pass the time between the present and the *parousia*, not merely as occupational therapy for exiles. Rather they take up the tasks of the unfinished universe which God has given to them in the hope of restoring it to Christ. If Christ has gone to prepare a place for all men, all men in turn must prepare the world for the moment when the King of glory returns to hand over the finished kingdom to His Father. (1 Cor 15:24.) Such a vision gives a completeness to Christian existence. To work in the world with this complete vision in one's heart is to work with certainty and with hope, with efficiency and with gladness. It is to spend the "time-between" annexing the world to Christ, imprinting the Easter mystery upon the universe, and putting all in readiness for the final passover into the new heaven and new earth.

The Incarnation marked the focal point of cosmic history. At that moment, when the fullness of time had come, Christ entered this world according to promise. He turned the hour glass over and the sands of time began to pour into the *end-time*.¹⁰ With the paschal mystery, man has become vitally involved in this *end-time*. The paschal mystery now flowers in man and in his world during the pause between the two comings: *incarnation* and *parousia*. This period of flowering is paschal-fulfillment in process. It is the *pleroma* being realized. When a baptized Christian takes on the paschal mystery more deeply in himself, when he spreads it abroad in the world, he helps, from man's viewpoint, to hasten the *pleroma*. He helps to set the stage for the final scene of this world as it becomes the overture of the new. He helps to bring the *parousia* to birth. Even though the exact hour of the *parousia* belongs to God's hidden design, yet the Christian has been called to take part in determining it.

The Virgin's Cosmic Role

At the Incarnation the angels brought the glad news of redemption to the earth. In the final paschal flowering, the *parousia*, the earth itself will carry the news of its completed redemption

back to heaven. It is the virgin's consuming desire to sing the completed song of the redemption, the *Alleluia*, with all the earth and to find the whole earth singing it with her. She tries to see God's work on God's scale. She has a sense of the cosmos.

The riches of redemption have been given to the Church; through the members of the Church they are to flow out upon the whole universe. "Let the earth shout for joy." (Ps 96: 1.) The full manifestation of glory at the *parousia* hour will include the world and all that dwells in it, all that has turned toward Christ. When man fully and finally rises with Christ even in his body, when for the virgin the totality of her rising is made manifest, man's joyous portion will become the lot of the entire universe. Paul gives us a picture, therefore, of the whole universe eagerly awaiting the final day. (Rom 8: 19-20.) Father David Stanley tries to capture this cosmic eagerness by translating the Pauline passage thus: "Creation, with utmost eagerness, awaits on tip-toe the revelation of the sons of God."¹¹ Creation is not awaiting redemption, for in the paschal-event it has already been redeemed in a way proper to its own condition. It is awaiting the fullness of redemption within itself, a liberation from its present imperfectly realized state of redemption to a state of splendor where God's glory will be manifested. Its present state is not one of agony, therefore, but rather of birth.¹² Finding it apt for expressing this state, St. Paul does not shrink from the deeply human and richly expressive metaphor of human birth: "For we know that all creation groans and travails in pain until now." (Rom 8: 22.)

With the dynamism of the Holy Spirit at its ecclesial center, the world seems hardly vast enough to hold what is yet to come. And it is not. The new creation (cf. 2 Cor 5: 17) of which the baptized Christian is already a part is being born, in a sense, each day as the abundant life of Christ is progressively realized in redeemed man and in redeemed matter. St. Thomas speaks of the material universe being, after the last judgment, finally "adapted to the state of man." He continues: ". . . and since men will not

only be freed from corruption, but clothed in glory, the material universe must also acquire in its way *quamdã claritatis gloriam*."¹³

All the virgin's efforts are thus directed toward consecrating the whole world to Christ. Her work and her person have cosmic significance. Whatever tasks she assumes in her life of obedience within the Church she regards as a splendid way to perfect the universe, to consecrate the world, to place it wholly at the service of love. All her activity becomes alight with the glory of that coming final day. She thus brings to earthly existence its deepest meaning and helps this meaning to become a reality.

The *pleroma* which Christians hope for, however, does not necessarily mean that the world will have reached a state in which it will flourish to the utmost of its natural powers. It is in redeemed man that the cosmos is summed up. It is in redeemed man that the universe is drawn to Christ by the eschatological "pull." The temporal success of this world is genuine only if it promotes the higher realization of man's own redemption. The two orders, natural and supernatural, are meant to complement one another. Many times their complementarity is neither seen nor understood by man and hence not realized in actuality.

The fulfillment of Christ's *pleroma*, therefore, may or may not concur with what seems to be an apogee of human progress.¹⁴ Being subject to man, the universe in itself is not the determining factor for redemptive fulfillment. It is man who is called to perceive the sacred and transcendent message written in the universe and to bring this meaning to fulfillment. It is man who determines to what extent his earth shall sing the new song, to what extent the universe will be placed at the service of love. Any effort to prepare for a redemption of the universe through human labor alone without regard for the redemption of man is a total delusion.¹⁵

Even though the material things of the world will perish, it is not given us to know in what transfigured manner they and their spiritual fruits will live on in the new earth. What we do know

with the certainty of faith is that there will be in the end a final and unimaginable renovation, a bursting forth of splendor and joy, justice and peace, which man cannot even begin to imagine. So great is the love of God for what He has made; so great is His love for man, the earth, and all the fullness thereof.

The virgin is called to move through this world of wonder and, in her own person, to realize the Easter mystery and then help the world to realize the same. If she cannot travel to the ends of the world to help this mystery unfold, she can carry the universe in her heart, a heart which her vocation has made one with the immense heart of Christ.

Eucharist: Pledge of Glory

Grace and glory are one. They are one and the same sharing which, through time, leads on to the unending Easter day. The dynamism of grace is centered in the fullness of the Trinitarian relationship. In heaven this fullness is known by vision. On this earth it is known by faith. The just man lives by faith. The states of grace and glory are ontologically the same; one is the commencement in time of the other.¹⁶

In order not to find the life of glory too high for his hopes, the Christian is given a pledge of this glory in the Eucharist. For the virgin, the Eucharist, which proclaims the single mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, is not only a pledge of glory. It is a repeated appeal to her to celebrate, in time, the heavenly marriage banquet at which she will forever sup with Christ and Christ with her. (Cf. Apoc 3:20.)

Each day the virgin takes part, in faith, in the Church's feast of love, the paternal banquet of Christ and His redeemed people, the feast of the pasch. The Church and the virgin unceasingly celebrate their one essential marriage with Christ in the banquet meal of the Eucharist. The joy of this banquet is an *esprit de corps* and *convivium* in the deepest meaning of these terms. The Spirit (*esprit*) is the Spirit of the risen Christ; the Body (*corps*) is the Mystical Body of Christ. The shared life (*convivium*) is the

risen life of Christ which surges through the feasting Christians endearing them to one another but also linking them more closely to those happy friends of God, the saints, whose feasting and gladness is now permanent and everlasting.

At the eucharistic table, then, the Church gathers all her children, all those who are young at heart, in the pledge and realization of glory. She labors with and cultivates her earthly "seed in Sion" at the same time that she is exceedingly glad over her full-blown kindred in the New Jerusalem. (Cf. Is 31:9.) The eucharistic meal is always Christ's *parousia*, like to His final coming in all its essential aspects save one, and this on our part: evidence to the eyes of the body. Christ comes, so to speak, *incognito* in the eucharistic *parousia*. But the dynamism of this Eucharist carries forth His ecclesial Bride and His virgin-bride to the final coming. For the Eucharist increases the hunger which it satisfies. It compels the One Bride and the virgin-bride to press forward to the final feast. The Spirit and the Bride continue to cry out: *Come!* In the Eucharist, Christ answers the cry and adapts His coming to this "time-between."¹⁷

Conclusion

Next to Christ and to Mary, the virgin-bride is called to lead the procession of Christians who are ascending on high with Christ, the Bridegroom. In the vanguard, if she truly listens, she already hears festive music from the banquet hall. For in this world, Christ's comings are multiple in their manifestations. At the climax of them all is the *parousia*.

The *parousia* hour is the everlasting day, the never ending marriage celebration toward which the virgin directs her life and all her energies. In the Church's Pentecostal flame, she keeps her lamp lit for the Bridegroom who announces this great hour. Each day she has heard His footsteps in His many comings. With the Shulamite maiden, she has already faithfully seen her Bridegroom through the trellis. She has heard Him rapping at the door: "Open to Me, My sister." Now, once more, she eagerly awaits Him not

only for herself but for all those "who love His coming." (2 Tim 3:8.)

The Christian virgin is the finest example of "pressing forward" in eager expectation of the *parousia*. She is hope made visible; hope on its tiptoes straining to see fully and forever what she now possesses in an inchoate way. Already following the Lamb in His burgeoning kingdom here, she is consumed by the hope that the *pleroma* will be hastened, that the Bridegroom will not tarry, and that the whole world will fill the ranks of those who go out to meet Him. Come, Lord Jesus!

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*So, at each stage refreshed, they
will reach Sion, and have sight
there of the God who is above all
gods.*
(Ps 83:8.)

11 THEN, FACE TO FACE

IN HIS TREATISE on the Holy Spirit, St. Basil reaches moments when he seems fagged out with the overwhelming goodness of God which the Spirit spreads abroad in the Church and in the world. In one of these moments he exclaims: "If such is the earnest, what the perfection? If such the first fruits, what the complete fulfillment?"¹

Our previous chapter has sketched the "partial" heaven which a Christian possesses even in this life. With the eye of lively faith, we have seen the "first installment" (cf. 2 Cor 5:5) of heaven to be exceedingly great. We are now faced with the task of at least affirming, *in faith*, what still lies beyond this partial view of heaven, since no man living has ever fully seen the arcane things of God, nor could he describe them if he had.

When asked to speak of God's great things, Ezekiel's tongue seemed to become paralyzed. The prophet was forced to pantomime God's message. The apostle John fainted over the brightness exposed to his view by the angel of the Apocalypse. At the opening of the seventh seal, heaven itself stood silent for "half an hour." (Apoc 8:1.) On the road to Damascus, Saul was so overcome by the voice and glory of the risen Lord that he remained

blind and stunned for three whole days. Nor did he fare much better when, later in his apostolic life, he was swept up to the seventh heaven and there heard secret melodies and messages. The twelfth chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians promises to be, at long last, a first-hand report from paradise. Paul says everything right up to the height of his ecstasy. But when the reader quickens his pace in order to seize the secret, Paul suddenly and simply breaks off, saying that he has heard "secret words that man may not repeat." (2 Cor 12:5.) He finds it more appropriate in his present condition to relate his weaknesses which give full scope to the strength of Christ, Paul's only title-deed to glory.

Paschal Paradox

At this point, then, we also return to our human condition. We return to the dying-rising paradox with which we opened our study. Christianity is death and it is life. Christian virginity is the special vocational expression of the fullness of this paschal pattern. It is a living and total embodiment of Paul's words, understood *in Christ Jesus*: ". . . as dying and behold, we live." (2 Cor 6:9.) The religious profession ceremony, we noted, portrays the death aspect of virginity by certain similarities to a funeral service; the life aspect by likenesses to a wedding.

To the very end of the virgin's earthly life the paradox continues as it does for all the baptized. Committed wholly to Christ, the virgin-bride shares in the fullness of her Bridegroom's life, whether in His death or in His risen life.

The Reality of Death

Before attempting to envision the glories of the Easter land, let us first look at the reality of death. What is its meaning for the Christian? What is its meaning for the virgin-bride of Christ?

On the natural level, death is absurd, senseless, and unintel-

ligible. For it denies a man all the natural promise which he might have realized in his earthly life and shatters any further hope of human achievement. The book of Wisdom says: "For God made not death: neither has he pleasure in the destruction of the living." (1:13, 2:24; also Ez 18:23.) Numerous scriptural passages affirm that death, brought about by the devil's envy (Wis 2:24), is man's invention. It is the killing effect of sin. Once man has cut himself off from the living God, he has doomed himself to die.

In His great love for man, however, God sent His Son to repair the fatal wound man dealt himself. Because He loved life, abundant life, and because He loved man, Christ faced death. By dying, Christ dealt death its own death-blow. "Death, I will be your death," the morning Office of Holy Saturday declares. If the evil-minded rulers of the world had known the tremendous outcome of Christ's own death, says St. Paul, they would never have allowed the Son of Man to be crucified. (Cf. 1 Cor 2:8.) That crucifixion could lead to any kind of triumph was a conclusion far beyond the grasp of either the devil or those who assist him in the world.

Man's sin, which caused his death, was a perversion of his liberty. To restore right order and give death a new meaning, Christ had to reverse man's act in its precise point of deviation. For the will which had said *no* to God, Christ gave a will wholly delivered up to His Father in the radical surrender of love. In Christ's death, it was this perfect and loving surrender which redeemed man. In order to heal the fatal wound man had dealt himself by an abuse of his freedom, Christ did not remove man's freedom but, instead, He redeemed man's power of freedom. He "delivered Himself up" wholly and lovingly to the Father. His pain and suffering were the outward expression of the totality of His deliverance.

"Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit!" (Lk 23:46.) The Father answered this act of total deliverance by raising Jesus from the dead to the new and glorified life of heaven. Death became, for Christ, the passage to resurrection and ultimate glory

at the right hand of the Father.² Christ has been beautifully termed "the first great emigrant of the New Covenant."³

For Christians who live Christ's life and thus follow after Him, death now has this new and single meaning of transition, of pass-over. At his final death, the Christian rises up out of the baptismal waters once and for all. Physical death brings baptism to its fulfillment. It becomes a means of being *with Christ* in a fuller sense than is possible in this life. This intensified identification does not, however, take place automatically. The individual Christian must still accept his hour in obedient love and utter dependence on God's mercy and, thus, once more and finally, take on the very death of Christ.

As his natural powers reach their lowest ebb in death, the Christian is called on to deliver himself totally to Another. He is called to his highest act of believing; he is called to answer *yes* with his whole being to the final invitation of God: *Come to the Father!* It is now not what the Christian does which will bring him to the Father; it is only what Christ does in him. In life and in death the Christian has one mediator. At his final hour the Christian is again and finally asked to deliver himself into the hands of the one Victor. To lay down his life in sacrifice as Christ laid down His life for His friends is a power given to the Christian only from the Spirit of the risen Christ who cries out within him: *Abba, Father.*⁴

How can the Christian lay hold of divine strength and thus bring to his final hour a fully obedient surrender? One might say that in this answer lies the value and valor of Christian paschal living. For the obedient love which a Christian must possess at the moment of his death is not confined to that moment. It is a fundamental attitude which he has been called to cultivate and express each day of his life in his person and in his deeds. The final death-surrender is a culmination of hourly, daily, yearly deaths. The quality of a Christian's final deliverance to Christ is shaped by the quality of his previous deliverances to the Spirit's transforming power within him. The value of each mortification of his

life has been precisely its opportunity for deliverance to the Spirit's transforming power and a consequent share, that moment, in the power of Christ's passover.

The Virgin's Daily Death

In a "professional" way, the virgin has stabilized this attitude of loving deliverance through her life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Her life has been a daily surrender to the Spirit's transforming work within her in the paschal pattern of dying to sin and living to God. "I die daily," says St. Paul; "I affirm it, by the very pride that I take in you, brethren, in Christ Jesus our Lord." (1 Cor 15:31.) By her life and deeds, the virgin, too, has been interpreting her own final death. Now, at this hour, her whole dedicated life is gathered up as a sheaf for the harvest.

Who is so weak as the one whose life is ebbing away? And yet, who is so strong as the one who is completely delivered to the victory of Christ? Having exercised faith, hope, and love in her vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity, the virgin has become readier for the highest act of believing, hoping, and loving. At this moment, the same divine virtues are her strength. Through them she again lays hold of the victory of Christ.

The virgin who has delivered herself up to God in vows thus finds in death the supreme moment of her lifelong and total deliverance. For death is an event which strikes man in his totality.⁵ In death her lifelong *fiat* is made definite and final.

For the virgin, therefore, more than for any other Christian, that which is called death is the end of all dyings. It is a moment of liberation, an entry into life. For her, as for Ignatius of Antioch, it is glorious "to be a setting sun—away from the world, on to God."⁶ For the virgin, death is a friend. "God will wipe away every tear. . . . And death shall be no more: neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more. For the former things have passed away." (Apoc 21:4.)

Death's Total Meaning

When St. Benedict advises his monks to keep death daily before their eyes, he is not being sadistic. With his comprehensive vision, he is most surely recommending a comprehensive view of death as a dying-rising totality involving the whole Christian person. Death is more than a mere biological phenomenon. For the Christian, death can never be considered merely as a natural process.

St. Paul's presentation of death as a daily recurrence within the Christian of Christ's dying-rising mystery (Col 3:1-17) makes it almost impossible for a Christian *not* to keep death daily before his eyes. Death is a continual aspect of the Christian passage from death to life; it is part of the daily process of Christian transformation.

Why, then, does St. Benedict recommend the obvious and inevitable as a subject of daily pondering? Perhaps in order that the monk will become habituated to paschal living, of which daily dying is a part. St. Benedict insists, for example, on the monastic observance of the Lenten fast only in the framework of glad expectation of Easter. He here reveals his theological wisdom in seeing the Christian dying-rising process as a single reality within the unity of Christ's own passion and resurrection. St. Benedict would not want his monks to view merely the physical agonies of death and thus eclipse the liberating or "eastering" process which is its reverse side. Nor would he, on the other hand, want his monks to consider the death-event as all-beautiful and bright, and thus lose sight of the self-emptying and radical surrender which makes it Christ's death in the Christian. Death is emptiness and fulfillment; death is sadness leading to gladness. What ultimately triumphs in Christian death, let us note, is fulfillment and gladness.

Keeping death daily before his eyes, therefore, offers the Christian—and the monk—an opportunity to savor both aspects of the one reality in a distinct way at times and in an integrated way at

others. St. Benedict's intention was undoubtedly to lead his monks to meditate on whatever would make their own death more precious in the sight of God. Without a shade of doubt, what St. Benedict would never tolerate would be an attitude similar to that of the modern pagan who, denying the fact of rising, also attempts to disguise the reality of dying. Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* remains the classic satire on the cultivated manner in which modern man flees from the reality of death.

St. Paul has a phrase describing the carefulness a Christian must bring to the reality of dying. "We have to be *closely fitted*," he says, "into the pattern of his [Christ's] resurrection, as we have been into the pattern of his death." (Rom 6:5. Knox tr.) This process of being *closely fitted* is performed for the Christian in the Church's sacramental life. The virgin, too, lives her virginal mystery—dying and rising with Christ—at the heart of the Church, at the heart of the one Bride whose whole life is directed toward becoming more *closely fitted* to the living image of her Bridegroom. That the passover pattern of her Bridegroom's life will become perfectly reproduced within her own is the single desire of the one Bride and all her virgin daughters. The bridal-Church nurtures this hope in all her baptized children. She is serenely optimistic and calls the day of a Christian's death his birthday. Precious, indeed, is the death of a Christian if, having become *closely fitted* to Christ, having suffered all the things implied in this fitting, he is now ready to enter with Christ into glory. (Cf. Lk 24:26.)

Anointing unto Glory

If the sacrament of baptism is the little wedding which begins the life of every Christian and which the virgin-bride professes to embody fully in her life, so the sacrament of the anointing is a joyful preparation for the heavenly marriage of Christ and His Church, of Christ and the Christian, of Christ and His virgin-bride.

Although all sacraments bring the Christian to some degree of sharing in the death of Christ, three sacraments do so most perceptibly. Baptism is obviously the first sacramental step in putting on the death and resurrection of Christ. In the Eucharist, the Christian celebrates "the death of the Lord" until He comes. In the eucharistic sacrament and sacrifice, Christ makes His saving death effectively present in the space-moment of a man's life. Finally, the last anointing invests the Christian, in the final moment of his earthly life, with Christ's own saving death, with the grace to die and the grace to be born to everlasting life.⁷

At the moment of his death, the Christian—whether virgin, groom, child, mother—either wears the wedding garment of his baptism or has cast it off. He is either wise or foolish. The sacrament of anointing is the Church-Bride's last effort to adorn her child for the wedding feast, to place the burning lamp of love in his hand and make him truly wise.

The Church's liturgy describes the whole company of heaven coming to meet the Christian in death as if he, individually, were the Bridegroom. In the Bridegroom, heaven sees the Church-Bride. In the Church-Bride, heaven sees all baptized Christians, brides clothed in the wedding garment. At the death of each Christian, therefore, heaven meets both the Bridegroom and the Bride coming up from the desert of Bosra in the rose-colored garments of redemption.

If heaven comes forth to meet the dying Christian, always a bride in some degree, the community of Christ on earth gathers to send the Christian on his final passover. In her rite of anointing, the Church-Bride restores or beautifies the Christian's baptismal garment in the sacred bath of penance. The anointing with oil brings cure to his body and/or forgiveness of his sins to prepare him for immediate glory. Moreover, the Christian receives the power somehow to "take in" the warmth and light and joy of heaven. He becomes truly able to see God and yet live. Even the deeds of his earthly life receive, in the last anointing, the liberating power to shine forth in the splendor of their Christian meaning. Finally, the Eucharist, now Food for the Way, gives the

Christian a Companion for his journey so that his heart may burn within him and not be sad.

The papal blessing and prayers for the dying show the Church to be, indeed, a provident Mother. She is realistic, however, and places all her hopes on the divine side. In her last prayers she does not speak of the dying one as having been an extraordinary person. "He has sinned," she admits. But she goes on to recommend him on the minimal grounds that "he has not denied the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," a recommendation which may happily suit "almost all the beings of this distracted and failing species."⁸ Sent off with the greatest strength the Church possesses, Christ Himself, the Christian enters into the joy of the Lord.

To See His Face

But what is this "joy of the Lord"? Has not the Christian, even in this life, possessed in substance the heavenly life? Has not the Christian virgin, especially, been wholly taken into union with the Lord already in this life? What is there that she could yet receive that she has not already received? There is still something more, however. If this were not so, heaven would be here and now.

On the brink of heaven, on its doorstep, the virgin shares, most acutely, the pangs of a certain little girl who longed to see a face. The little girl's story is this: afraid to stay in her bed when the dark hour of night brought forth fantastic shapes of animals and ogres on the wall, the little child was shedding tears instead of falling peacefully asleep as children should. In an attempt to allay the child's fears, the mother recalled what she considered a strong and most comforting Christian truth and tenderly offered it to her child for solace. "There's no need to be afraid, dear," the mother said. "God is here." Unconvinced, the weeping child replied with the crux of her grief: "But I want somebody with a *face*."

How blessed will be that day of days when the eye shall see, beyond the veil of faith, what the saints in their glory now see: the face of God. This is the joy into which all Christians pass through death, a joy which will neither diminish nor end. In the

hymn *Adoro Te*, St. Thomas expresses, in theological language, this same yearning of the little girl and of all Christians who want Someone with a face:

Jesu whom I look at shrouded here below,
 I beseech thee send me what I thirst for so,
 Some day to gaze on thee face to face in light
 And be blest forever with thy glory's sight.⁹

Of all our friends, the senses, the natural eye seems particularly unassuaged in the realm of supernatural realities. The eye is continually being asked to take the high road and go from the visible to the invisible. Natural vision is asked to feed faith. How blessed, then, will be the day of seeing. In the *Paradiso*, Dante gives much attention to this blessed and unique seeing: the rapture of the divine vision.

Moreover, the "joy of the Lord" will be experienced finally by the Christian in his risen body. Having died daily with Christ throughout his life, the Christian has also risen daily to the heavenly life. Through the Spirit's work in him, the Christian has developed a deep yearning for his full resurrection in which his body, too, shall share.

Resurrection of the Body

The body which a Christian yields up in death will, on the great day of the Kingly coming, rise up forever. In his flesh, he shall see God, know Him, and know what is the height, breadth, length, and depth of His love. No matter how profoundly death may liberate a man to live more fully with the Lord, the rich consummation of joy is reserved for the *parousia*, the final resurrection day. The Christian shall on that everlasting day re-establish human relations with all the saints, the good fragrance of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 2:15), whom he knew and lived with on this earth. He shall meet in the depths of encounter those whom he

longed to know: St. Paul, the three Marys, the several St. Johns. He shall know all these in Christ as he is known in Christ.

Behold, I Am Near

There is no newer or more complete word about heaven than the Word of God. For God has only one Word, Jesus Christ. In Christ He has said all. What Scripture records is simply "the revelation of Jesus Christ." Heaven is as near to the Christian as Jesus Christ is near. And Jesus Christ is as near as the Church is near, the one Church-Bride whose life is Christ's own. Within the New Covenant of this Church, Christ keeps a special covenant with His vowed virgin-bride.

Heaven, for the virgin-bride, will be to see the face of God. It will be to rise at last to the Easter life. But this is not all. Having lived her life at the heart and life-stream of the one ecclesial Bride, having been faithful to the holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, the virgin-bride will find her bliss enlarged and expanded to ecclesial dimensions. Her life has been a long witness to the solidarity of redeemed mankind. Now the whole Christ will rejoice in her, and she in the whole Christ. This is what it means for her to enter into the joy of the Lord, the threefold plenitude of Love. Such is the testimony given to us by St. John, who records the song of the mighty multitude of heaven:

Alleluia, the Lord our God, the Almighty, has claimed his kingdom; let us rejoice and triumph and give him the praise; the time has come for the wedding-feast of the Lamb. His bride has clothed herself in readiness for it; hers it is to wear linen of shining white; *the merits of the saints are her linen.* (Apoc 19:7-9, Knox tr.)

The continuity between the *spotted* bride of Yahweh in the Old Testament and the *spotless* Bride of Christ in the New Testament is not only once more implied in this and other Apocalyptic texts. The meaning of salvation history in its nuptial dimension is, in

fact, clearly recapitulated like the third and summary section of an immense sonata-allegro form.

Thy Face Do We Seek!

For the virgin-bride who lives in the present life with the impact of St. John's vision in her heart and its substance unfolding in her being, there is only one thing left to ask for. All else has been given to her in advance from the hands of the one ecclesial Bride. With the Church, she voices her one remaining desire: "Show us Your face, O Lord." It is always Advent for the virgin-bride, and yet always Christmas, too, and always Easter.

In her present condition of "halfway house," she shares, sometimes acutely, the little girl's pangs to see a face. She sees the rays of the high-noon hour all around her. For, no matter how remote in time Christ's final coming is, it is always very near at hand. Compared with the length of days into which it will lead, it is now already at the gates. In the twinkling of an eye the trumpet will sound. Christ's final coming is always essentially *soon* for the virgin-bride and for the Church-Bride.

While she awaits the Bridegroom's coming, the virgin-bride speaks to Him, strangely present in His absence. She grows strong on the Living Bread which both comes down from heaven and leads back to it. With the New Jerusalem, she is clothed in readiness, "as a bride adorned for her husband." (Apoc 21:2-3.)

At long last a cry is heard: "Behold, the bridegroom is coming! go forth to meet Him." (Mt 25:6-7.) Within the one Church-Bride, the virgin answers: "Come! Thy face, O Lord, Thy face do we seek." (Cf. Ps 26.) With the risen Christ and in His Spirit, she advances to the Father.

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