

WHEN DID MARY FIRST KNOW OF HER DIVINE MATERNITY?

This *Review* recently carried a criticism of an article in which the Rev. E. F. Sutcliffe, S.J., tried to prove that Mary did not know that Jesus was truly God until some time after finding Him in the Temple.¹ Fr. Sutcliffe quoted two writers of the Church in favor of his opinion, and because of these two he says his opinion is not new and "does not lack high authority." Since the opinion proposed goes against the commonly accepted view, as Fr. Sutcliffe admits, it might be well to examine the testimony of the two Doctors upon whom he relies.

Venerable Bede, when commenting on the story of the finding of Jesus in the Temple, seems to say that Mary and Joseph did not know that Jesus was divine. But what has he to say about Mary's knowledge of the nature of her Child *before* this scene in the Temple?

For Venerable Bede both the titles "Son of the Most High" and "Son of God" used by the angel in the message of the Annunciation, undoubtedly express the divine Sonship of Mary's Child.² He inveighs against Nestorius for going against such a clear testimony and denying such an open truth, namely, that Jesus is God and that Mary is the Mother of God. Does Mary realize that, according to Bede? That seems so obvious to him that he does not have to express it; for Mary heard these clear titles and they were meant for her more than for Nestorius. Besides, according to Bede, she was not an illiterate girl. She had read the Scriptures and knew the prophecies. From the prophecy of *Isaias* 7:14, she knew that the Messiah would be born of a virgin, even though she did not know how.³ Because of her knowledge of the prophecies she was able later to compare them with what had actu-

¹ Cf. *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, CXII (1945), 441-44. The article criticized was in *The Month*, CLXXX (1945), 347-50.

² Cf. *In Lucam*, lib. 1 (MPL, XCII, 317 and 319 B). The same interpretation of these two titles is given in *Homiliae*, lib. 1, *homil. 1 in festo annunciationis B. M. V.* (MPL, XCIV, 11 D and 13 A).

³ Cf. *In Lucam*, lib. 1 (MPL, XCII, 318 C).

⁴ Cf. *ibid.* (335 D and 336 A).

ally happened concerning her Child.⁴ Surely, then, she also knew that the prophesied Messiah would be God. That was as clear in *Isaia*s as the prophecy about the virgin-mother.

The correctness of our inference is borne out by the clear words that Venerable Bede puts in the mouth of Mary as an amplification in her *Fiat*: "She says, 'May he be conceived in a virgin without the seed of man; may he be born of the Holy Spirit, (her) flesh remaining intact; may the Holy (thing) which will be born of the woman who will be a mother without the cooperation of a human father, be called the Son of God.'"⁵ So Bede has Mary say: "May he be called the Son of God." But according to him that title expresses divine Sonship. Consequently Mary knew before her consent to be mother that her Child would be God.

On the story of the Visitation the English Doctor comments: "[Elizabeth] calling her the mother of her Lord, because she understood that she [Mary] was bearing the Redeemer of the human race in her womb."⁶ If he uses the title "Redeemer," he does not thereby agree with some modern scholars that "Lord" is merely a Messianic title. A few lines later he amplifies Mary's *Magnificat* thus: ". . . my spirit rejoices in the eternal *divinity* of the same Jesus, that is, of Salvation, whose flesh is begotten by a temporal conception."⁷ So, according to Bede, Mary undoubtedly recognized the divinity of her Son while chanting the *Magnificat*.

Zachary too knew that Jesus is God; He called his own son "the prophet of the Most High." That according to Bede means "the prophet of Christ" who is the Most High. He uses this as an argument against the Arians.⁸ Now according to Bede, Mary was present for the *Benedictus* of Zachary.⁹

According to Venerable Bede the Magi knew of Christ's divinity: "And falling down they adored him. By no means would they have adored, if they had not believed him to be the Lord."¹⁰ Would Mary who was present be deprived of such intimate knowledge of her Child, which was granted to the Magi?

When beginning the story of the finding of Jesus in the Temple, Bede tells us that the fact that Jesus is God had been approved

⁵ *Ibid.* (320 A).

⁶ *Ibid.* (321 C).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Cf. *ibid.* (326 D).

⁹ Cf. *ibid.* (323 C).

¹⁰ *In Matthaeum*, lib. 1 (*MPL*, XCII, 45).

by *manifest* indications of miracles already at His Nativity, even at His Conception; whereas now Jesus Himself began to make known the truth of His divine Majesty.¹¹ If anyone caught these manifest hints at His Nativity, Mary certainly did. If anyone caught them at His Conception, Mary, who alone was present, did.

As we read on in Bede's commentary, he explains Christ's question, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" He says that Christ denies that Joseph is His Father and "simply and openly insinuates for us as well as for them who His true Father is." Did they miss this patent insinuation completely? Hardly, for then the purpose that Christ's question had, according to Bede, namely, of getting Joseph to realize what he owes to Christ as *Eternal* Son, would have been lost entirely. So far, then, there seems no doubt that Mary knew Jesus to be divine. Now for the crucial paragraph:

What an example of piety and at the same time of humility in the Lord! His parents do not understand the word about His divinity which He spoke to them; nevertheless He, not ungrateful of their human concern about Him, when they command, descends and is subject to them . . . and His mother kept all these words in her heart. She stored all the words of the gospel in her heart, both what she understood and what she did not yet understand, as if ruminating upon them and examining them more diligently.¹²

If we take only the first two sentences by themselves, it does seem that Bede denies that Mary and Joseph knew anything of His divine nature even after the revelation Jesus had just made. However, since he admits in the third sentence that Mary understood some of the words that Jesus spoke, and since we saw that he held that she knew of Jesus' divinity already at the Incarnation, we must interpret the first two sentences differently. They can, and taken in the remote context do, mean that Mary had known of Jesus' divinity before this, but she did not grasp all that He was now saying *about* that divine relation of His.

Venerable Bede explained this story of the finding of Jesus also in a homily. There too he says Christ's question is a hint at His divine Majesty. Then he adds:

¹¹ Cf. *In Lucam*, lib. 1 (MPL, XCII, 348 D).

¹² *Ibid.* (350 B).

Whose [Jesus'] example of great piety we must admire much. He saw that His parents did not yet grasp the mystery of His divine Majesty, and still He exercises toward them the subjection of human humility, so that by this humility He might gradually lead them to the acknowledgement of His divinity. For when He said, "How is it that you sought me? . . . they did not understand the word that he spoke to them."¹³

This passage seems to favor Fr. Sutcliffe even more than the one in the Commentary. However, if we do not wish to have St. Bede contradict himself openly, it seems we must say that he means here too they did not realize fully what the mystery of the divine Majesty was. At any rate, since Mary knew at the Annunciation and Visitation that her Child is the Son of God, according to Bede, his testimony in favor of Fr. Sutcliffe is at least doubtful, if in any way tenable.

Of St. Bonaventure's testimony, Fr. Sutcliffe says it is not so explicit as Bede's; still his words "seem to leave no room for doubt as to his opinion" (p. 347). His whole argument rests on the fact that St. Bonaventure uses the word *corripiciens*, a "harsh" word, five times in discussing this passage.¹⁴ He would hardly have done so, thinks Fr. Sutcliffe, if he had thought that Mary was aware of Jesus' real dignity.

St. Bonaventure is showing that Jesus was truly humble in submitting Himself to Mary who corrected Him (*corripienti*). That he, however, did not consider this a harsh correction, he himself indicates in this very section when he writes: "She speaks more confidentially and asks the cause of His leaving them, since she knows that she ought to be honored by Him." She is really not reproving; she merely asks for an explanation of His action. This is in place even though she knows He is God. Fr. Sutcliffe assumes that the reproof of Mary is harsh and concludes that she did not know that Jesus was God. Now St. Bonaventure himself does not consider the reproof harsh at all; on the contrary, as he states explicitly in a sermon on this passage of Luke, it was meant to be a sweet word: "Praemittit dulcedinem benigne allocutionis in ore . . ."¹⁵ Moreover, in this sermon he demonstrates Mary's

¹³ *Homiliae*, lib. 1, homil. 12, in dom. 1 post epiph. (MPL, XCIV, 65 D).

¹⁴ Cf. *In Lucam*, 2, 48 (*Opera omnia* [Quaracchi], VII, 68 a and b).

¹⁵ *Sermo in dom. infra octav. epiph.*, n. I (*Opera omnia*, IX, 171).

prudence from this question of hers. Twice he calls her "Virgo prudentissima" precisely because of her question of "reproof." So St. Bonaventure hardly considers the reproof harsh; and Mary can be fully aware that Jesus is God and still ask her question.

One might argue more conclusively, perhaps, in favor of Fr. Sutcliffe from St. Bonaventure's statement that Christ's question showed that He was Son of the Eternal Father and the added phrase that this word was occult to them.¹⁶ However, St. Bonaventure does not mean, as might seem, that Jesus hinted at His divinity quite plainly, but they missed the point completely. He has Mary aware of Christ's divine dignity long before this scene.

In the sermon referred to above, the Seraphic Doctor has Mary meet Jesus in the Temple with these words: "'According to the multitude of my sorrows' which I had on losing thy corporal presence, 'thy consolations made my soul rejoice' on seeing thy face *radiant with divine splendors.*"¹⁷ Note well that Mary is supposed to be saying this. Consequently, in this very scene before Christ revealed Himself, Mary knew that He was truly divine.

According to Bonaventure there is no doubt that the Magi knew of Christ's divine dignity.¹⁸ Now if the Magi knew, would St. Bonaventure deny Mary that knowledge? Even Herod's promise to adore the Child implied that he realized that the Messiah would be "the King of the heavens." He feigned the desire to adore the Child in imitation of Mary's adoration.¹⁹ So Mary had known and had adored.

The shepherds knew of Christ's true nature at the Nativity because of the Angel's message to them. They went to the crib, giving testimony to the true Lamb and praising the Saviour of the world, the Incarnate Word, who was the Son of God in flesh.²⁰ Now if the shepherds were told, why should Mary have remained ignorant? St. Bonaventure tells us explicitly that Mary rejoiced at the birth of Jesus and invited others to rejoice with her because she had given birth to Him who is God, and he puts this chant of the Church on Mary's lips: ". . . placui Altissimo et de meis

¹⁶ Cf. *In Lucam*, 2, 49 (*Opera omnia*, VII, 68 a and b).

¹⁷ *Sermo in dom. infra octav. epiph.*, n. I (*Opera omnia*, IX, 172 a).

¹⁸ Cf. *Sermo in epiphaniam*, n. III (*Opera omnia*, IX, 158 b and 161 a); n. VIII (166 b); n. IX (166 b); n. XII (167); n. XIII (168 a).

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, n. III (159 a); n. II (150 b).

²⁰ Cf. *Sermo in natiuitate Domini*, n. I (*Opera omnia*, IX, 102 b and 103 b).

visceribus genui Deum et hominem."²¹ Above we saw that St. Bonaventure holds that Herod feigned the desire to imitate Mary in her adoration of the Child. Mary must, then, have adored Him already at the Nativity.

In his commentary on the Visitation the Seraphic Doctor remarks that it is very praiseworthy and admirable that Mary, who is the Mother of God, should visit the servant of God, Elizabeth.²² Now if Mary's action is so praiseworthy and admirable, she must have been conscious of her dignity as Mother of God; else where the great humility? St. Bonaventure does not state explicitly that Elizabeth and Mary were aware of Mary's true dignity, but he seems to take that for granted, as something evident in the exclamation of Elizabeth, "Mater Domini mei." In a sermon on John the Baptist, he makes it clear that the Precursor recognized that the "Lord Saviour" had come, and that his knowledge was transmitted to the mother who expressed it prophetically in the words: "And how have I deserved that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Now in this passage St. Bonaventure speaks also of the Virgin's carrying the "Divine Word" in her womb.²³ Besides, "Lord" is for Bonaventure a divine title that merits adoration for Jesus.²⁴ If Elizabeth and her son knew that Jesus is divine, would the Sainly Doctor exclude Mary from such a privilege?

Both in his commentary²⁵ and in a sermon²⁶ on the Annunciation, the Seraphic Doctor holds that the titles "Son of the Most High" and "Son of God" are strictly divine titles. And even though he does not say explicitly that Mary was aware of the real dignity that these titles proclaimed, he takes that for granted. That is why, when speaking of Mary's consent to the Incarnation, he says: "The angelic annunciation had to precede the Incarnation . . . so that by the announcing [the angel's message], would arouse her to faith, and through faith to consent, and through consent to con-

²¹ *Ibid.*, n. III (111).

²² Cf. *In Lucam*, 1, 43 (*Opera omnia*, VII, 29 b).

²³ Cf. *Sermo de nativitate Joannis Baptistae*, n. II (*Opera omnia*, IX, 544 a).

²⁴ Cf. *Sermo in epiphaniam*, n. III (*Opera omnia*, IX, 158 b).

²⁵ Cf. *In Lucam*, 1, 32 (*Opera omnia*, VII, 24 a).

²⁶ Cf. *Sermo de annunciatione*, n. II (*Opera omnia*, IX, 664 a).

ceive the Son of God through the Holy Spirit."²⁷ The obvious meaning of this is that Mary consented to be the mother of the *Son of God*. Again, he says, "Nevertheless there is reason on the part of the Virgin who conceived, who as soon as she consented, was filled with the Holy Spirit, and became the *Mother of God*, according to what the angel had announced."²⁸ If the angel announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of God, and if Mary gave her consent, she must have understood those titles which told her precisely to what she was giving her consent.

The Seraphic Doctor compares the Blessed Mother at the Annunciation to a bridal chamber in which the Word wedded human nature.²⁹ By this he does not insinuate that she was unaware of what was going on. Rather she was an intelligent bridal chamber, fully aware of the great ceremony that was taking place. Bonaventure calls the Angel Gabriel the bridesman at this wedding, in which through the love of the Virgin and of God was born the Son of God.³⁰ All this supposes that God was using Mary as an intelligent instrument who gave her consent with full knowledge of the effects.

To sum up, it seems that, though St. Bede leaves some confusion as to his precise meaning regarding the Blessed Mother's and St. Joseph's lack of understanding of Christ's words, still he made it clear enough prior to that that Mary knew her Child is not a mere man, but also God. Consequently, Venerable Bede can hardly be used as an authority for the opinion that she knew nothing of the divine nature of her Son until later in His life.

As for St. Bonaventure, there seems to be no doubt whatever that Mary knew of her great privilege of being mother of the Son of God long before the scene in the Temple. Certainly, the conclusion from the "harsh reproof" is entirely unwarranted. Even the Fathers and the theologians must be interpreted in the light of immediate and remote context.

DOMINIC J. UNGER, O.F.M. CAP.

*Capuchin College,
Washington, D. C.*

²⁷ *In III sent.*, dist. 2, dubium 4 (*Opera omnia*, III, 57 b).

²⁸ *In III sent.*, dist. 3, pars 2, art. 3, quaest. 2 (*Opera omnia*, III, 93 b).

²⁹ Cf. *Sermo de annunciatione*, n. IV (*Opera omnia*, IX, 672 a and b).

³⁰ Cf. *De donis spiritus sancti*, collatio VI (*Opera omnia*, V, 484, 485).