

## PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

## Authentic Marian Devotion

October focuses our attention in a special way on our Blessed Mother. I dedicate this column to her in personal gratitude for her motherly care for me. The title suggests that there are and have been in the history of the Church aberrations in devotion to Mary. I have much assurance that this is true.



More than two years ago (March 22, 1974) Pope Paul expressed his concern about a balanced devotion to Mary in an "Apostolic Exhortation" addressed to all the Catholic bishops of the world. In the introduction of the letter, he clearly speaks of his intention to write a document directed to the "right ordering and development of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary." The body of the letter makes it equally clear that he is prompted to write from a deep pastoral concern about excesses in Marian devotion that called for a corrective voice. He expresses an awareness, too, that the cult of Mary needs continual updating to keep her a woman for all ages. Among the extremes he cites those who scorn all devotions of piety and never do anything to replace them; and, at the opposite extremity, those whose devotion is filled with sentimentality and vain credulity and superstition. Devotion to Mary, he warned, has to be in the spirit of the Gospel which is personally demanding and calls us to perseverance and practical action.

Some six years ago, Father Eamon Carroll, a faculty member of Catholic University and a prominent Marian scholar, was asked to comment on the quality of American devotion to Mary. After a 6 month tour around the country and 160 lectures on Mariology, he expressed the same pastoral concern that Pope Paul had voiced: "I would regard the chief drawback of the American attitude toward our Lady as an overdependence on apparitions and private revelations. This has prevented for many the growth of a deeper Scriptural devotion to our Lady. People nourished on an approach to our Lady that has secret messages, hidden letters, apocalyptic threats, seem inclined to find the Biblical portrait of Mary somewhat less interesting or nourishing."

A recent book, SAINTS for CONFUSED TIMES, by John Carvey (The Thomas More Press - 1976) has an interesting chapter on Mary. The author contends that there has developed a great gulf between the Mary we encounter in Scripture, and the one presented to us by a later Church tradition. She became so exalted and remote from us, that it became practically hopeless to imitate her. And, after all, that's what saints are for. Phyllis McGinley calls our pursuit of holiness, "Saint-watching." While the Reformation brought an end to devotion to Mary among many Christian denominations, the original intention of its chief leaders was to purify a devotion which had become overlaid with superstition. Martin Luther, for example, wrote: "The great things are nothing less than that she became the Mother of God, in which work so many and such great good things are bestowed on her as pass man's understanding. For on this there follows all honor, all blessedness, and her unique place in the whole of mankind. It needs to be pondered in the heart what it means to be the Mother of God." In protesting abuses of devotion to Mary, Calvin wrote: "We truly do not want to take in the least from the honor which is her due, but nothing is withheld from her by not making her into a goddess. On the contrary, people do Mary a great disservice when they disfigure her with false praise and rob God of what belongs to Him." Calvin recommended the imitation of Mary: "We must not just praise her in words, we must follow her example. The greatest praise we can offer is when we recognize her as our teacher and we her pupils. Realizing that God in grace has looked on her, we wish to see in her, as in a mirror, the mercy of God."

One wonders then, how the sects that claim these reformers as their founders later rejected all Marian devotion. The history is complicated and it would require a lengthy treatise to analyze it. Heated accusations served to promote new efforts on one side to strip away as many remnants of the old faith as possible, and on the Catholic side the distortions were maintained more firmly than ever because of the attack.

Now that calmer heads prevail and respect for one another is deepened, Christian scholars are thoughtfully searching the Scriptures and are finding the great woman of faith presented there — a model for our imitation — and a sign and hope of our salvation.

The sentimentalists in Marian devotion forget the reality of the pain of her pilgrimage. She has rightfully been compared to Abraham whom the liturgy calls "our father in faith." Both faced a God they had known as a God of mercy and justice Who keeps faith with His promises. But the same God makes terrifying demands when we say, "Thy will be done." God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son. Mary is asked to bear a child without a husband. To have a child that comes from God apart from human generation had to be interpreted by her contemporaries as an absurdity. She must have endured ridicule from the so-called "respectable people" of her day.

God chose to take what the world ridicules and despises, the world of respectable people and the institutions which support their self-righteousness, and make it the vehicle of His Son's entry into the world. This is an uncomfortable picture of Mary. We are tempted to drag her into the world we prefer — the world of respectability in which we worship a predictable God Who could never make His children uncomfortable.

Kierkegaard once remarked: "I think it will not be found difficult to explain why she became the Mother of God. It is because she could say, and mean it, 'Be it done according to your will.' It was because she was able to say this that the Word became flesh in her." Despite the dread, the risk, the strangeness of the God she faced directly for the first time, she was able to accept the will of God completely and God was free to act. Redemption needed her cooperation.

It is a model of what faith means, that Mary can matter to us now. For the Word to become flesh in each of us, we have to be prepared to meet a God as strange as the one Mary met. It is only through prayer and attentive listening that we open ourselves and become able to say wholeheartedly, "Be it done as You will."

The response that made her great is the response that we must make to the Lord Who has called us to be members of a Community of Saints. Surely, the inspiration of the real Mary is needed to assist us in our common vocation. May she help us to say "Yes" to the Lord each day as we face the inevitable pain of our human pilgrimage.

## Evangelization and Human Advancement

Following is the text of the Holy Father's address during the general audience on Wednesday, 22 Sept.

You may have heard mention of a forthcoming meeting, on a national level in Italy, but of general interest for the Church, on the much debated subject: "Evangelization and human advancement". What is this meeting about? It is a question of the confrontation of two fundamental ideas: the activity of the Church on the one hand; the improvement of the conditions in contemporary society on the other hand. It is the confrontation presented by the Council, in its broad Pastoral Constitution known now by

the words with which it opens, *Gaudium et Spes*, between the proclamation of the Gospel message and the modern world. It is a confrontation that it is so radical (it reveals at once, right from the start, a dualism that is accentuated today: Church and world), so extensive, so serious and pressing as to im-

mediately reveal very many problems. These problems involve the whole life of the Church, with which alone we are concerned now, even if she is not considered directly in herself, but in the way in which she addresses mankind, in the midst of which and for which she, the sign and instrument of salvation, is living.

We know the four marks that characterize the Church and give a glimpse of her essential properties: unity, holiness, catholicity, apostolicity. This last mark, apostolicity, is examined in this context in a particular way. It, also, is considered more than in its structure, in its operational and dynamic function, that of proclaiming and spreading the Gospel, brought down from heaven, and introduced into human history, by Jesus Christ. This is the function which we call "evangelization", or, we can say in a general sense, the diffusion of the faith.

How is the faith, understood as the Catholic religion, communicated to mankind? Since we are so imbued with "anthropocentrism", that is, the tendency to give man the first place, and for many people the only place, in the scale of our interests, we at once ask ourselves: what is the use of faith? Of religion? Is it beneficial to man, and to what extent? Man has still immense

needs, immense rights: is faith, religion useful to him, or not? Does "human advancement", as is said today, draw advantage from evangelization? What advantage? And how?

This utilitarianism which practically dominates contemporary philosophy and politics, is legitimate, in fact necessary. Man is at the center of our thoughts; but considered how? In the needs of temporal life only, or in the overall and superior view of his deep and specific aspirations? What is man's true salvation? His true happiness? His predominant destiny? The science of man, the true science of our life, cooperates in this way with the message of the Gospel, and questions it: what do you give me? Economy, the science of prosperity which is the leading character, so to speak, in the human household, in the kitchen especially, asks: give me bread; I am hungry!

There is such force of persuasion in this elementary and universal question! Christ realized this Himself when he twice multiplied bread for the hungry crowd.

But let us be careful: for our Lord, who opens wide the kingdom of heaven above the temporal horizon, man's needs are not only economic, or earthly.