

# MARY'S PART IN OUR REDEMPTION

by

GEORGE D. SMITH, D.D., PH.D.

Hon. Canon of Westminster

*Vitam datam per Virginem  
Gentes redemptae plaudite*

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## Prologue: The Fall and the Promise

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The history of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden has become so familiar to us, that perhaps some of its details are blurred in our instinctive recognition of a story repeatedly told. Of course, we say, everybody knows the story of Adam and Eve! Something similar happens when we see a familiar face; we are content to recognise the general outline without paying particular attention to individual features. So true is this that, when some peculiarity is pointed out to us in a countenance which we had supposed that we knew as well as our own, we sometimes realise with a shock that we had never noticed it before. This is more often the case when we are invited to make a comparison between two people with whom we are intimately acquainted. Only then do we remark details of similarity where we had hitherto seen nothing beyond a vague and general resemblance. And so it may well be that a careful examination of the story of the Fall, though we have known it since childhood, will reveal features previously unnoticed or regarded as irrelevant; especially since it is our intention later to compare that story with another, equally familiar to us from our earliest years.

The words in which the inspired writer first makes mention of man are arresting in their far-reaching significance. They are put in the mouth of God Himself, and, understood in the light of subsequent revelation, they summarise the whole purpose of man's existence: "Let us make man to our image and likeness. And God," the narrator continues, "created man to his own im-

age; to the image of God he created him.”<sup>1</sup> The full meaning of this statement becomes clear only when we take into account what God has since told us about His designs in man’s regard; it is only when we know what Christ came to restore that we appreciate what it was that Adam lost, what was that likeness to God imprinted upon man in the moment of his creation. “We shall be like to him,” says St. John,<sup>2</sup> describing the glories of our adoptive sonship, “for we shall see him as he is.” It is true, of course, that when God breathed into man the breath of life so that he became a living soul, He had already made him like to Himself, because man was thus by nature a free and intelligent creature, king of the visible creation, and to that extent an embodiment of the divine intelligence and power.

But Catholic Tradition has seen more here than the remote likeness to God which man’s spiritual nature entails. The Fathers have seen in this divine breathing the operation of the Holy Spirit by which He first bestows upon man those great and precious gifts that make him a partaker of the divine nature.<sup>3</sup> In creating man God gave him more than his natural due. He endowed him with sanctifying grace, in virtue of which he became a son of God, heir to eternal life, destined to enjoy that bliss which belongs naturally to God alone, the beatitude which comes of the direct and immediate contemplation of Himself who is infinite Truth, and the possession of Him who is infinite Goodness. He raised man to the supernatural order.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 1:26-27

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:2

<sup>3</sup> 2 Peter 1:4

To be raised to the supernatural order means to be made the friend of God; it means to be admitted to an intimacy of reciprocal love with the Creator which no creature can attain save through that loving condescension of God which is grace. By this gift man's nature was transformed; he was endowed with a higher life which, without suppressing his natural activity, suffused his powers and deified them, so that he was able to treat with God on terms of friendship. His actions thus became the actions of a son of God, his homage a loving and filial obedience, and charity, or the supernatural love of God, became the guiding motive of his life. In this familiar intercourse between the creature and his Maker the duty of creaturely submission remained; but it had now become a willing service which God would reward with His beatific presence, making man share in the bliss of His own knowledge and love.

“And the Lord God had planted a paradise of pleasure from the beginning, wherein he placed man whom he had formed ... to dress it and to keep it.”<sup>1</sup> What the writer tells us in this simple and picturesque language, subsequent revelation enables us again to elaborate. The nobler faculties of man, his intellect and his will, had been enriched with those supernatural gifts which would enable him to achieve a destiny infinitely surpassing his natural powers. But even with this God was not content. He willed still further to perfect this creature, upon whom it seemed that He sought to exhaust His power of giving. All in man must be complete harmony, all must conspire to make his life an easy and a happy one. Lest the demands of his lower self should distract his will from the quest of spiritual things

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 2:8-15

God gave him perfect control over all his desires. In Adam there was no conflict between the flesh and the spirit; by the preternatural gift of integrity he was preserved immune from that inner struggle with which we are all so familiar, and which St. Paul has described in a well-known passage of his epistle to the Romans.<sup>1</sup> “God,” says Ecclesiastes,<sup>2</sup> “made man right.” His whole nature was perfectly balanced, his sentient faculties in complete subservience to his mind and will, and these in turn subject by grace to God.

As to the intellectual endowments of the father of our race, it would be unwise to attempt to assess them, or to conjecture what knowledge he possessed. Of this we may be certain: the preternatural harmony existing between the material and the spiritual elements in his nature must have enabled him to acquire knowledge with the greatest ease, and God must, in addition, have revealed to him all that he needed to know concerning his supernatural destiny and the divine plans for the human race of which he was to be the one fount and origin.

Nor would death come to put an end to this happy existence. Though his body would of its nature tend to dissolution, that natural tendency to corruption would be checked by the gratuitous gift of immortality; and he would be likewise immune from those pains and ills which make our life, in the words of St. Gregory, “one long prolixity of death.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 7:14-25

<sup>2</sup> Eccles. 7:30

<sup>3</sup> *Hom. in Evang.*, lib. II, hom. 37 (P.L. 76, 1275)

But the duty imposed by his condition as a creature had still to be observed. Adam must be obedient to God's will. "And God commanded him, saying: Of every tree of paradise thou shalt eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat. For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death."<sup>1</sup> All visible creatures had been made subject to man; he was to "rule over the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air and all living creatures that move upon the earth";<sup>2</sup> he must not on that account suppose that he was completely independent, his own lord and master. He had been endowed with the most noble gifts of mind and body, raised up by grace to be God's friend. But all this was God's free gift, and Adam must make recognition of His overlordship by yielding Him willing service. He must obey. All things visible were subject to him. But he, in turn, must be subject to God.

Such, then, is Adam, the head and fount of the human race. From him every other human being is to proceed: "God, who made the world and all things therein ... hath made *of one* all mankind to dwell upon the whole face of the earth."<sup>3</sup> In creating the first man, God created all men, for all were contained virtually in Him. "All men," says St. Thomas,<sup>4</sup> "may be considered as one man inasmuch as they have in common the nature which they receive from their first parent; ... and thus the many men descended from Adam are like many members of one body." By one man human nature entered into the world, by one man

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 2:16-17

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 1:28

<sup>3</sup> Acts 17:24-26

<sup>4</sup> I-II, 81, 1

human nature enriched with grace was to be transmitted to all.<sup>1</sup> His descendants would receive as their birthright the same supernatural gifts as had been bestowed upon Adam; all would be men, yet also sons of God, receiving together with their humanity the grace that made them partakers of the divinity.

The human race, therefore, was to increase and multiply and fill the earth.<sup>2</sup> But for this it was necessary that Adam should have a partner in his task. "The Lord God said: It is not good for man to be alone; let us make him a help like unto himself."<sup>3</sup> His partner must be like himself; no other creature on earth that God had made was fit to be mated with Adam for the work of propagating the human race. Adam "called all the beasts by their names and all the fowls of the air and all the cattle of the field; but for Adam there was not found a helper like himself."<sup>4</sup> God alone could supply a suitable partner; one who should be of the same nature as Adam, one who, equally endowed with him, might be a fit companion for the first man, and his associate in the task of filling the earth with sons of God.

And now let us notice how God creates the first woman. Adam's body had been fashioned out of the slime of the earth.<sup>5</sup> Not so the body of the first woman. The body of Eve is formed from the body of Adam, so that she may be "bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh."<sup>6</sup> Of all mankind, male and female, Adam is

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rom. 5:12 *seq.*

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 1:28

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 2:18

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 2:20

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 2:7

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 2:23



the source; not a single human being but had its origin in him, the head of the race. "The head of the woman," says St. Paul.<sup>1</sup> "is the man ... the woman is of the man." The first man had been created in God's image and likeness; and so also was the first woman. Into her body, too, God breathed the breath of life so that she became a living soul; and since she was to be a help in all things like to Adam she also was endowed with the grace of God. But all this was in order that she might be a fit associate for Adam. "The man," says St. Paul again,<sup>2</sup> "was not created for the woman but the woman for the man;" and therefore "man is the image and glory of God," whereas "the woman is the glory of the man."<sup>3</sup> Like Adam, Eve comes forth from the hand of God, lovely in form, noble in soul, adorned with heavenly gifts, to be his helper in the human family, where the man is the natural head and the woman his God-given consort. Of all men Adam is the head, and Eve is to be the mother of all the living.

And now enters the third actor in this drama: Satan, the serpent, the deceiver. He, in common with the rest of the angels, had been raised to the same august destiny as that of mankind. To him, too, had been offered those gifts which would make him a partaker of the divine nature. But he had refused to pay homage to God. One of the most highly endowed among the pure spirits, he had scorned to receive by grace that which he deemed to be his already by right of nature. What could God give him that he did not already possess? Was he not lord of myriads of angels, subject to his dominion and obedient to his command?

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 11:3,8

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 11:9

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 11:7

In what else could he be like to God? This was the first sin ever committed against God, the sin of pride: "I will not serve." And Lucifer and his angels were cast down from their high thrones and for ever shut out from the kingdom of grace.

We may well understand his envy, therefore, when he saw man, a being of a much lower order of creation, now raised far above him by his elevation to the supernatural order, and made truly in that image and likeness of God which he himself had rejected.<sup>1</sup> Man ought by nature to be subject to his dominion. Yet here was this puny being, a creature of flesh and blood, not only exempt from his jurisdiction but reigning over the whole of the visible creation, and—what was much worse—over him and his angelic satellites! This was more than Satan's pride could endure. All those powers of intelligence and cunning, all the subtlety of which his angelic nature was capable, would now be employed to drag man down, to degrade him to the level of his mere humanity, so that Satan might obtain over him that power and dominion to which his angelic nature gave him the right.

He does not approach Adam directly. The woman will be easier prey, and through Adam's affection for his wife Satan will find a way to tempt the head of mankind. If only he can persuade man to disobey, to rebel against God as he himself had rebelled, his purpose will be achieved. Why not suggest the same consideration which had led to his own ruin? Why not urge that by their own efforts they could become like God if they wished, that it was only because God feared the rivalry of man that He strove

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wis. 2:24: "By the envy of the devil death came into the world."

to keep them in subjection? Let them cast off the shackles of God's dominion and be like gods themselves, lords of all things and subject to none!

"Why?" asks Satan, subtly suggestive, "why hath God commanded that you should not eat of every tree of paradise?" Why this restriction upon your liberty? Eve is not loth to answer the tempter, though she had been wiser not to parley with one who thus questioned God's commands. The reason, she tells him, why they must not eat of the tree in the midst of paradise is that God has forbidden it under pain of death. Satan scoffs at the idea: "No, you shall not die. For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."<sup>1</sup>

The ruse is successful; the seed thus planted takes root in the woman's mind; pride is born in her soul, and in her heart Eve had already disobeyed before her hand was stretched forth to take the fruit, which was now so pleasing to her eyes. "And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat, and fair to the eyes and delightful to behold; and she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat."<sup>2</sup>

The serpent disappears, his purpose accomplished. He knows full well what the sequel will be. Eve has sinned; the mantle of grace has fallen from her soul; gone now are all the gifts which perfected her nature and kept all her powers subject in the service of God. She is already the child of Satan, and in his service all her arts will now be used. Made to be the help-meet

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 3:1-5

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 3:6

of Adam, she now becomes his tempter—and Adam, deceived by the glamour of an impossible independence, casts off the yoke of God, forsakes His friendship and breaks His command. “And she gave to her husband, who did eat.”<sup>1</sup>

The disastrous effects of that act of disobedience we know only too well. Adam and Eve were no longer the children of God, they had turned against Him; they had lost sanctifying grace, they had effaced from their souls that supernatural likeness to God in which they had been made. Already they felt the stirrings of unbridled passion; having risen up against God, they became aware that a rebellion had begun within themselves, that even their own desires were not subject to their wills. “Their eyes were opened and they perceived themselves to be naked.”<sup>2</sup> Pain and sorrow would now be their portion, and death the end of their days.<sup>3</sup>

But the sin of Adam was immeasurably more tragic in its effects than the sin of Eve, because his disobedience was fateful, not only for himself, but also for us. Adam was the head of the race. The human nature which he possessed, ennobled with all the gifts which God’s bounty had bestowed upon it, was our human nature; he held it in trust for us. And now by his sin he had deprived humanity of all those supernatural endowments which he should have transmitted to posterity. The sons of Adam would still be men, but they would be no longer the sons of God; they would inherit from their progenitor a nature lacking

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 3:6

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 3:7

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 3:16 *seq.*

that supernatural likeness to God which the Creator intended all men to possess; they would be born in a state of sin. "By one man sin entered into this world and by sin death; and so death passed upon all men, in whom all have sinned."<sup>1</sup> Adam was to have filled the earth with a blessed progeny; now he will people it with sinners, with men created for a divine destiny but bereft of all power to attain it; from their very conception set in a state of enmity with God, shut out from that loving intercourse with Him to which grace alone could raise them; subject to pain and grief, tormented by the sting of concupiscence, doomed finally to suffer that death which is the wages of sin.

All this is the effect of Adam's disobedience. Was he conscious of the dread significance of his act? It is difficult to believe that he was not. He was the head of the race; and if we apply to him the principle generally accepted by theologians, that when God chooses a creature for a particular office He gives to him the knowledge and the qualifications which will enable him to discharge his appointed function in a human and responsible manner, then, it seems, we must admit that Adam was fully responsible for the universal havoc which he wrought by his rebellion. That he repented is beyond dispute; and that God forgave him we cannot doubt. But it was not in ignorance that he brought sin into the world; he bears full blame for the original sin which we all inherit at our birth.

And what of the sin of Eve? Does she bear no part in the blame for the sin of our race? She does, but not directly. Immediately and directly, her sin harmed none but herself, because not she,

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 5:12

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