

THE FAIREST
FLOWER OF PARADISE

CONSIDERATIONS ON
THE LITANY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN,
ENRICHED WITH EXAMPLES
DRAWN FROM THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

BY

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Preface

It was on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception that the idea first occurred to me of writing a popular work on the Litany of Loreto.

This Litany has been held in honor throughout the Church for many centuries: it is daily recited by millions of the faithful, and has even become an integral part in some of our public acts of worship. We have therefore thought that it would not be out of place to inquire into its doctrinal meaning, and to give to light the fruits of our studies for the edification of the Christian people.

For it seemed to us that while others on this great occasion were offering to Mary profound and erudite treatises, this tender Mother would nonetheless deign to accept a work, unworthy indeed of her, but yet a pledge of boundless love and gratitude.

Encouraged by this hope, we set ourself to the task, and were presently surprised to see how easy it is, by the application of simple principles, to trace in these invocations all the mysteries of the life of the Blessed Virgin: her excellences, her privileges, and her sorrows. In reciting the Litany, the faithful, perhaps unconsciously, go over the whole field of Marian theology.

As everyone knows, Mary occupies a unique position in the economy of the universe. Her divine Maternity has raised

her high above all creatures, even the very angels: she is the epitome of God's works and through the Incarnation of the Word, she is in some sort bound to the Most Holy Trinity by the ties of parentage. Now, the full tale of all these privileges and splendors is, in our opinion, summed up in the Litany of Loreto, that Litany which is, as it were, the Christian people's hymn in honor of Mary, their daily tribute of praise and love to this divine Mother.

Moreover, a pious custom has been universally introduced, of honoring Mary in a special manner during the month of May. In many places the praiseworthy custom obtains of a course of sermons about the Blessed Virgin, in which the prerogatives and the mysteries of her mortal life are dwelt upon. But although it is easy to speak about Mary, it is not equally easy to do so in a fitting manner. For this there is required a profound knowledge of Catholic doctrine, since in Mary are to be found the perfections of the entire universe: rather we should say that in Marian theology the whole deposit of Christian faith and morality in some way or another lies hid.

It behoves us, therefore, to give the most faithful and exact utterance, to all that concerns the Mother of God. If indeed the Church cares, as with a holy jealousy, about Mary's honor, if the name of this holy Virgin is in the mouth of all the faithful, if her sanctuaries are spread over all the earth, in a word, if Mary is that Woman seen in the Apocalyptic vision, "clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars,"¹—is it not fitting

¹ Apoc. 12:1

that we should strive our utmost to study and know her as she is? In studying Mary we study Jesus, we contemplate the Holy Trinity, we meditate on grace, the sacraments and our last end, because in all the works of God, Mary holds her assigned place: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His ways, before He made anything from the beginning.”²

Considering, therefore, that every point of Christian doctrine is after some fashion comprised in Mary, and that one of the most efficacious means to promote the Christian life, is to propose to the faithful the example of the divine Mother, we have thought it profitable to write a popular work, having for its foundation the series of invocations contained in the Litany of Loreto. In this work the whole Marian theology is briefly set forth, while at the same time the principal dogmas of our Faith and the moral duties of the Christian are brought to mind.

With this in view, we have deemed it advisable to follow the logical sequence in our treatment of what belongs to the Blessed Virgin, applying to each subject that invocation which appears most fitting. Since, however, several of these invocations are in fact but different expressions of one idea,³ we have been obliged, in order to avoid treating the same subject twice, to adapt to some of them, themes which at first sight may not appear to correspond with them very exactly, though in reality there is no notable discrepancy.

To the usual invocations we have added that which is proper to the Order of Servants of Mary, *Regina Servorum tuorum*—

² Prov. 8:22

³ For example “Holy Virgin of Virgins” and “Queen of Virgins”

“Queen of Thy Servants,” an invocation which has afforded us the opportunity of speaking about the royal dignity which here below invests every Christian who devoutly serves the glorious Mother of God.

And now, as to our design in writing this little book, we may say that it has been to collect in one, under the heading of the invocations of the Litany of Loreto, whatsoever belongs to the Most Holy Virgin, in its relation to the dogmas of faith and the precepts of Christian morality.

Without entering into subtle points of theology which, useful enough in their own proper time and place, would be little appreciated by ordinary Christians, we have endeavored to weave a garland of all that is most beautiful and at the same time of the greatest practical utility in Mary’s life. This Woman without peer is by far the fairest flower of heaven, a flower of so sweet perfume, that only to breathe its fragrance suffices to fill the soul with purest delight. The spiritual enjoyment derived from a more intimate knowledge of Mary, is ample recompense for the labor of study.

With a view to making the present little work serviceable to many, we have appended two tables: the first containing the traditional order of the invocations of the Litany of Loreto with the titles of the different subjects we have allotted to each; the second presenting the same subjects arranged in logical sequence. This latter table may be used by those who, whether for their own private study, or with a view to giving public instructions, prefer to have a complete and well-ordered course on all those matters which regard the Most Holy Virgin.

Those who wish to make use of this book for the purpose of finding therein subjects for conferences or sermons during the month of May, can make choice of those invocations which seem best calculated to meet the needs of their audience. For the rest, the subjects are independent one of the other, and taken separately will perhaps be found of value for occasional sermons.

We lay down this little book at the feet of the Immaculate Virgin, with the ardent longing that she may become more and more known and loved. There is no surer or shorter way to Jesus than the knowledge and love of Mary. Whosoever would find Jesus must seek Him at Mary's hands, for it is written of the Magi that they found Him nowhere else except in His Mother's arms. *Invenerunt puerum cum Maria Matre ejus.*⁴

⁴ Matt. 2:11

Chapter 1

HOLY MARY

Predestination and Name of Mary

*Thy name and thy remembrance are the desire of my soul:
my soul hath desired thee in the night.*

Isa. 26:8-9

God, having decreed that He would become Man for the salvation of the human race, at the same time decided that He would be born of a woman, so that He might not only be like unto us by nature, but, furthermore, be one of our race.

For the fulfillment of his designs, the Most High had chosen from all eternity a creature whom He freely predestinated to the sublime dignity of Mother of the Word, and likewise to be the recipient of all those prerogatives of nature and grace which so high an office requires. For this cause God willed to raise this privileged creature, not only above all men, but also above all the choirs of angels. We need not wonder, then, if so noble a woman was, from the very beginning, by reason of the great mystery to be accomplished in her, the object of the divine complacency: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His ways, before He made anything from the beginning.”¹

Admire and adore, O my soul, with all possible humility, the justice and mercy of God’s ways. Render thanks to this great

¹ Prov. 8:22

Lord, for having deigned to predestine a simple creature, of like nature with thyself, to so high a dignity. At the same time ask of Him grace to be contented and quiet in the place He has assigned thee upon this earth, and remember that the conditions of human life are all by His disposal; so that to wish to alter them is to desire the overthrow of the social order, which after all is God's own work.



It was reasonable to expect that the name of a woman privileged as Mary was, should comprehend in its meaning the office to which she was called, and the lofty privileges resulting from this office.

This blessed Name had been pronounced by God in the very act of predestining this wonderful creature. Further, we may believe that He Himself suggested it, by an interior inspiration, to the parents of this favored Child, when the time of her birth had come. This name is the Name of Mary. It may mean three things: sovereignty, bitterness, and resistance; three ideas which represent the principal prerogatives of our glorious Queen.

In the first place, Mary, by becoming Mother of the Incarnate Word, became also sovereign and mistress of the universe. Furthermore, since she was destined by God to cooperate with Jesus Christ in the ransom of the human race, she had to suffer the greatest torments which a pure creature ever endured. Lastly, by virtue of her Immaculate Conception, she was the first person to shake off the unhallowed yoke of

the evil one, and thus in her own person to offer to God the first fruits of the Redemption. The Name of Mary, therefore, is at one time synonymous with her unrivaled greatness, her fathomless sorrows, and her splendid victories.

Blessed and holy Name! Thou art to my soul a source of boundless joy: sweeter than honey to the taste: more pleasing to the ear than the most exquisite melody.



The most holy Name of Mary, joined to that of Jesus, possesses a hidden power which puts to flight the demon, and fills the soul of him who utters it in loving faith, with consolation and hope. It is a certain fact that God has attached a beneficent power of sanctification and life to the devout uttering of these two Names by the faithful, and this precisely because Jesus and Mary are the dearest objects of His love.

It is, then, the duty of every good Christian frequently to pronounce these two holy Names with faith, hope and reverence. We should call upon them in our needs, and do all in our power to prevent their unworthy usage by the lips of the profane. Alas! why is it that Names so great, so holy and at the same time so dear to our hearts, are oftentimes made the butt of scorn and raillery!

O my God, may Thy great and awful Name be ever hallowed in those of Jesus, my Saviour, and Mary, His Blessed Mother! In them, we find our life and our salvation!

Example: The Seven Holy Founders

In the thirteenth century, when the persecution carried on by Frederick II was raging against the Church, there lived in Florence seven illustrious men who, united by the bonds of Christian charity, strove to make their lives conform as far as possible to the dictates of evangelical perfection. On the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, 1233, when they were absorbed in prayer in the Laudesi chapel, Mary herself deigned to appear among them, inviting them to abandon all things and dedicate themselves to the service of her Son and herself. Promptly and joyfully they followed the summons of the Queen of Heaven and, abandoning wealth and relatives, withdrew to a solitary place to lead a life of austerity and union with God.

In order the better to flee the tumult of the world, after a short time they left Florence and betook themselves to Monte Senario, about nine miles northward of this city. There, for some years they continued their hidden life of penance, enjoying the ineffable sweetness promised to those who faithfully serve our divine Lord and His Holy Mother. On the evening of Good Friday, 1240, while meditating on the sorrowful mysteries which the Church commemorates on that day, the Queen of Heaven appeared to them again, bidding them found a Religious Order, the Order of her Servants, whose aim should be to spread devotion to her sorrows throughout the world. The object of this devotion was to recall the part which Mary had as the associate of Jesus in His work of redeeming mankind from the bondage of sin.

When the foundation of the Order had thus been laid by Mary herself, the Seven Holy Founders abandoned their beloved solitude of Monte Senario and undertook long journeys throughout Italy, France, Germany and Poland, everywhere preaching the sorrows and glories of Mary, converting sinners and pacifying cities. Heavenly signs accompanied the death of each of these Saints. And as one love united them while they lived, so after their death one tomb received them all. In the course of centuries they were invoked together by the people, under the title of the Seven Holy Founders of the Order of the Servants of Mary, called also the Order of Servites. These holy men were all raised together to the honors of the altar by Pope Leo XIII, of holy memory, in the year 1888.

PRAYER

O Mary, my tender Mother, imprint thy Name, with that of Jesus, upon the inmost recesses of my heart. Obtain for me of God, in my last hour, to utter thy blessed Name and that of thy Son, with lively faith and ardent love, in order that by the virtue of these holy Names, the enemies of my salvation may be put to flight, and I may resign my soul into the hands of my Heavenly Father. Amen.

Chapter 2

HOLY MOTHER OF GOD

Incomparable Dignity
of the Mother of God

She adored Him whom she brought forth

Office of the Purification

The human mind can never fully comprehend all that is contained in the title “Mother of God.” It is the title by which the faithful love to address Mary, and the Church has sanctioned it by her infallible authority. All the beauties of nature, all the riches of grace, all the splendors of glory pale before the majestic grandeur of such a title as this. For, by the very fact of having conceived the Word Made Flesh, Mary has been united to God by the same ties which unite a mother to her true son.

Just as, therefore, the dignity of the human nature in Jesus Christ is immeasurably raised above all things created, by reason of the hypostatic union with the Divine Word, so also the dignity of Mary belongs to a superior order, on account of her position as Mother of God. This title is precisely the source and the measure of all those gifts of nature, grace and glory, wherewith the Lord was pleased to enrich her. “The Holy Mother of God has been elevated above the choirs of angels in the heavenly kingdom.”¹

¹ Versicle of the Magnificat on the Feast of the Assumption

Admire, O my soul, so great a miracle of the power of the Most High; and since He has deigned to call thee to the service of so great a Queen, render Him thanks and promise to thy Sovereign an eternal fidelity.



The title of Mother of God, with which the Catholic Church honors Mary, is not only the source of incomparable greatness in her, it is also a potent means to ground us firmly in the possession of true faith, and to bring us to a more perfect knowledge of the divine attributes.

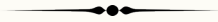
In fact, the first step toward a recognition of Jesus Christ as Saviour of the world, is belief in the Divine Maternity; on the other hand, whosoever refuses to acknowledge Mary as true Mother of God, has by the very fact made shipwreck of the faith.

Further, Divine Wisdom shines forth the more clearly by the fact that God deigned to choose Mary for Mother of His Son. Of all God's works, the Incarnation is worthiest of the right hand of the Most High; but how can I sufficiently admire the counsels of Thy wisdom, O my God, since Thou hast willed to oppose to the work of destruction and death, begun in the sin of Eve and completed in that of Adam, a work of reparation, begun in the obedience of Mary, and consummated in the sacrifice of Jesus?

What glory accrues to the goodness of God from the Divine Maternity! For, in predestinating Mary to be the Mother of the Word, God decreed to give her to us as our Mother also.

He willed that she should accomplish in union with her Son the work of our redemption, and that by regenerating us to the life of grace, she should become our Mother in the spiritual order.

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are His judgments, and how unsearchable His ways!”²



The Divine Maternity is indeed the starting-point of the work of our salvation. It is therefore the duty of every Christian fearlessly to proclaim this truth. In believing Mary to be the Mother of God, we believe also that the Word was made Flesh. But in order that this faith be not barren, it must be accompanied by a sincere worship both internal and external; a worship consisting in acts of homage, of veneration and of love for this peerless creature bound to us by so many titles.

The faithful soul cannot, then, do better than follow the example given us by the Church, which never tires of proclaiming this truth to the universe at large, whether by the erection of temples in Mary's honor, by the establishment of sodalities consecrated to her, by the approval of religious Orders devoted to her service, or by the institution of practices of piety in her honor.

² Rom. 11:33

Yes, Mary is indeed worthy to be saluted with the words addressed of old by Ozias, the Jewish leader, to Judith: "Blessed art thou, O daughter, by the Lord the Most High God, above all women upon the earth."³

Example: St. Cyril of Alexandria

The devotion to Our Blessed Lady is so intimately bound up with the whole deposit of Divine Revelation, that it is not possible to deny the prerogatives of this glorious Virgin, without offending against some truth of the Catholic Faith.

St. Cyril the great Bishop of Alexandria was the glorious champion of the Divine Maternity and as a consequence, of the sacred deposit of Christian Revelation. His exalted virtues are proclaimed not only by private testimony, but by the solemn Acts of the two General Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. Anxious to promote devotion to Our Blessed Lady and moved by zeal for the salvation of souls, St. Cyril had nothing more at heart than to preserve his flock from the lamentable heresies concerning the Divine Maternity of Our Blessed Lady, which at that time pervaded some of the eastern churches.

Cyril, being not less versed in sacred learning than exercised in every virtue, was sent by Pope St. Celestine to preside over the Council of Ephesus. In this great assembly the heresy of Nestorius was condemned and the dogma of the Divine Maternity of Our Lady was proclaimed. On this

³ Judith 13:23

occasion St. Cyril poured forth his heart in a fervent prayer in honor of the Mother of God in the presence of all the bishops gathered for the occasion. This prayer is one of the most beautiful hymns of praise that has ever been composed in honor of the glorious Queen of Heaven.

But it was not long before the holy Bishop had to suffer for this deed, which drew down on him the implacable hatred of the heretics, from whom he had much to suffer. They ended by driving him out of his diocese. However, this did not prevent him from continuing to defend the august dogma of the Divine Maternity of Mary by word and writing. He was only too happy to suffer for this truth: but Our Lady was not slow to recompense her faithful servant with an abundance of heavenly graces. At last, through her intercession, he was allowed to return to his See, where he was received with great joy by his people. He died a saintly death on the 28th of January, 444, his soul passing from earth to heaven to praise for all eternity the glorious Mother of God whom he had so honored during his lifetime.

PRAYER

O Mary, I believe with all my soul that thou art the true Mother of God, through whom the work of our salvation has been accomplished. Grant, I pray thee, that with this faith deeply rooted in my heart, and with the good works springing therefrom, I may surrender my soul to my Lord: do thou thyself present it before the throne of thy Divine Son, for “my life is in Thy hand.”⁴

⁴ Gen. 47:25

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