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THE CATHOLIC HOUR

MOTHER OF MERCY

BY

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The third in a series of addresses under the general title of "Hail, Holy Queen," delivered in the Catholic Hour, broadcast by the National Broadcasting Company in cooperation with the National Council of Catholic Men on May 12, 1946, by the Rev. J. Hugh O'Donnell, C.S.C., President of the University of Notre Dame. After the series has been concluded on the radio, it will be made available in one pamphlet.

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MOTHER OF MERCY

The scene is Calvary on the first Good Friday. Our Saviour's passion is ever—the agony in the garden, the scourging, the crowning with thorns, the cruel journey to Golgotha's heights. He has been hanging there on the cross for three hours, undergoing the agony of death that we might live forever. His oblation of love to God the Father is about to be consummated. His life is slowly ebbing away. Gone now is the fickle multitude that only a few short days before took palm branches and went forth to meet him, crying, "Hosanna, blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel" (*John 12:13*). His disciples, fearful lest they should share His fate, have deserted Him, and gone into hiding. Of His apostles, all but John have fled. Even Peter—the rock—has denied Him thrice.

But mother love remains faithful to the end. Mary, who had held her Divine Son to her breast at Bethlehem, followed Him to Calvary. "There stood by the cross of Jesus, his mother" (*John 19:25*). The bloodstained lips of the Master part, and He speaks the memorable words: "Woman, behold thy son;" and then to the apostle, "Behold thy

mother." . . . "And from that hour, the disciple took her to his own" (*John 19:26, 27*).

Having given Himself for our redemption, Our Lord makes this last great gift to us, for John represented all mankind on Calvary. Thus, by explicit command of the God-Man, His mother was given to the human race as its mother—the Mother of Mercy, to serve as our refuge, our strength, and our mediatrix with Him. And Mary opened her arms to us and willingly accepted us as her children. Indeed, in the words of St. Bernardine of Siena; "At the same moment when Mary consented to become the Mother of God, she also consented to become the Mother of all children of salvation, and bore them already at that time in her Heart."

If, as the poet wrote, "Verily, there is a holiness in women we men know nothing of," it is because of a precious legacy which through Mary is glorified, sanctified, and beatified. Because of Mary's part in the Redemption of mankind, because of the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth, the attitude of the whole world toward womanhood and motherhood changed, and woman herself was raised to a

position that she had never occupied before. Under the aegis of Christianity, motherhood—God's agency for the reproduction of human life—was seen for the first time as one of mankind's greatest glories. To the pagan, woman was to be used for the gratification of the senses. He regarded her in much the way he did his other chattels. To the Christian, woman is a vessel of election, a repository of the soul made in the image and likeness of God.

To the Christian woman, the career of motherhood, next to the religious life, is the noblest and the greatest on earth. To be God's agent in bringing a child into the world; to be the instrument for making possible the continuation of the Christian heritage; to be the handmaid, as it were, for enabling others to enjoy the Beatific Vision with the blessed in heaven—such is woman's high destiny. What a vocation, O noble mother! And, by the grace of God, it is yours.

Blessed by special graces received in the sacrament of matrimony, motherhood goes forward as the great stabilizing and refining force of the human race. And the virtues of the true mother, whose ideal is ever the Blessed Mother, have contributed all throughout the centuries in

Christian lands to the culture of succeeding generations. The true mother always basks in the reflected glory of the Mother of God—*stabat juxta crucem*—and with her true mother's love brings comfort and solace to her erring children because of her mercy and tenderness of heart.

The true mother instills into her children a deep and lasting devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Such a one, for example, was the Mother of Padraic Pearse, the Irish patriot of a generation ago. The love for the Mother of God shared by this mother and son is beautifully expressed in a poem that Pearse wrote in Kilmainham Prison the night before he was executed. It was a little poem his mother had asked him to write in such fashion that it would seem to be said by her about him.

Dear Mary, thou who saw thy
first-born Son

Go forth to die amidst the scorn
of men,

Receive my first-born son into
thy arms

Who goeth forth to die for men;
And keep him by thee till I come
to him.

Dear Mary, I have shared thy
sorrows,

And soon shall share thy joys.

One has only to read history
for proof of the statement that

when the mothers of a nation are strong and courageous, the nation is strong and spirited. A fair gauge of a nation's strength—that is, of its moral strength, which in the final reckoning is the only kind that really matters—is the regard, or lack of regard, that its people have for the Christian concept of motherhood as ennobled by the Mother of God. Disregard for that concept has marked the first stage of moral decay.

And it is being disregarded today. There has been a surrender to the neo-paganism of the period. Woman has not been dethroned, but she has deliberately descended from the eminent place that is hers, literally by divine right, as well as by right of her inheritance from the Mother of God.

Would it be too severe an indictment to say that in our time too many women hold themselves too cheaply? Surely those women who would willingly revert to the lowly status that was theirs before the advent of Christianity are following a line of reasoning that is nothing if not perverse. Yet one of the saddest signs of the times is the apparent enthusiasm with which so many women are discarding the ideals that make "a good woman . . . a wondrous creature, cleaving to

the right and to the good under all change: lovely in youthful comeliness, lovely all her life-long in comeliness of heart."

As one of the great pulpit orators of this century has said: "All good men idealize women, and this is why all men worthy of the name are grieved when women are less ideal than they might be. It is because men want something to look up to, something to admire, to love and to serve with chivalry that they feel so poignantly the desecration of womanhood through thoughtlessness, boldness, coarseness, vulgarity, immodesty, or whatever cheapens and degrades woman."

Yet divorce and birth control—or planned parenthood, as it is fashionably known—are destroying the dignity of womanhood, and as a natural consequence are destroying the sanctity of the home. In many homes there seem to be more dogs and cats than children—and what a breed they are! There is a curious glorification of the multi-married whose current liaisons are faithfully recorded by the daily press. In many cities a ratio of three divorces to one marriage is not uncommon. There is such widespread shirking of parental duties that we are raising a generation of children who even now are reaping the bitter fruit of

their parents' neglect, according to the appalling record of constantly increasing juvenile delinquency. Priests preach religion, but it is for parents first to instill it, by word and example, in the hearts of their children—to teach them belief in God, dependence upon God, and obedience to His laws. A strong civilization begins at the cradle and fireside. It starts at the mother's knee with lessons in the simple virtues. A strong civilization can have no other foundation; one built on any other is foredoomed to decay.

Yet, thanks be to God, we still have the strong woman, the valiant woman, the courageous woman, faithful and true, carrying on in imitation of Mary in the fulfillment of her duties as a real mother. She is the mother who sees herself as God's agent, who sees her children as immortal souls, made by God and intended for God, that have been entrusted to her care.

Such mothers are the hope of the world, the hope of this nation, to whom I pay tribute for their fidelity and devotion to the highest ideals of motherhood. They have been tried in the crucible of love and not found wanting. With them as a force, our beloved country may succeed in casting off the curse of neo-

paganism and truly have a rebirth, a revival of family life in homes where the mother is literally the queen, guiding her children in the paths of righteousness and rejoicing in them as she watches them grow toward God. These mothers have their reward here, and they shall have a more glorious reward hereafter. "Who shall find a valiant woman? . . . Her children rose up, and called her blessed" (*Proverbs 31:10, 28*).

Has there ever been a time when maternal mercy was so needed in a sorrowful world? Has there ever been a time when "we poor banished children of Eve" so needed the mercy that flows from a mother's love, as it was glorified by Mary at the foot of the cross? The Mother of Mercy is also the Mother of Sorrows, compassionate and understanding, for a sword pierced her soul, "that out of many hearts, thoughts may be revealed" (*Luke 2:35*). She will intercede for her erring children, if we but have recourse to her. Through Mary, we may learn that earth has no sorrow which heaven cannot heal.

Sorrow has come to millions of sufferers caught in the backwash of a global war; sorrow to the women of Europe, mothers, thousands of whom are even now

plodding along weary roads, homeless, leading the children whom they bore they know not whither; sorrow to the children, ragged, hungry tots with pinched faces, whom privation has made far older than their years. May I appeal to all Americans to help these unfortunates by contributing to the campaign to feed Europe now? I ask you in the name of these starving innocents. I ask you in the name of Him who said "Suffer little children to come unto me," and "Amen I say to you, as long as you did it not to one of these least, neither did you do it to me" (*Matthew 25:45*). May the Mother of Mercy intercede for them!

Sorrow has come to the war mothers of the United States: to those valiant women who are an inspiration to all who know them and see them, carrying their cross of separation bravely as they reflect on the loss of their dear ones who have made the supreme sacrifice and now sleep in glory everlasting in some foreign land. Sorrow has come to those mothers who have seen their own flesh and blood come back maimed and ill from the battlefields. And it has come to those brave wives who, through tears, have embraced with arms of tender mercy their husbands, whom war has broken in body,

while murmuring inwardly, "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health, till death do us part."

Noble women, valiant women all, women whose lot it has been to wait and hope and pray, we salute you as the real heroines of the war. Brave women, strong women, who gave those nearest and dearest to you, remember that in the person of the Mother of God, the Mother of Mercy, who gave her only Son for our redemption, you have a friend, a guide and a help, and a mediatrix in the long years ahead. She will never fail you, if you but have recourse to her.

The Mother of Mercy is also the Refuge of Sinners, and her refuge is much needed at present when the world is trying to devalue sin. It just can't be done. And don't let the modern psychoanalyst, who doesn't believe in God, try to tell you otherwise. He will attempt to explore your inner life with a view to glossing over a troubled conscience. He will tell you about Freud's "libido," urges, and the necessity of self-expression. He will take you on an excursion of polysyllabic phrases that would puzzle the modern Webster. He's trying to give you an escape, but there is no escape from inner restlessness and discontent because sin

is the root cause. You can't run away from it, even though it does cost you a handsome sum to try.

So, to sinners who have strayed from the paths of righteousness, I say that although your sins may be many and heinous, although you may have sunk so low that you sometimes feel beyond redemption, you need not, you must not, despair. Remember always that a merciful God, through His merciful Mother, stands ready to lead you through the cleansing waters of penance and absolution if, like countless other Magdalenes and Pauls, you but seek out a priest of the Most High, who is willing and anxious, like the Master Himself, to restore you to spiritual health. Remember the words of Christ, "I am not come to call the just, but sinners" (*Matthew 9:13*).

In spirit, we return to the heights of Calvary. All things are now accomplished. The long agony is over, and Mary has stood at the foot of the cross to the end. Mercy has been en-

shrined with divinity in a holocaust of love. Christ did not permit the chalice to pass from Him, but died that we might live, not here, but hereafter. "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lying down his life for his friends" (*John 15:13*). And this love perdures to the end of time. That we might be enriched by this love, sanctified by this love, ennobled by this love, Christ gave us a Mother of Mercy, His own Mother, for our solace, our comfort, and our help, if we but have recourse to her.

Truly could St. Bernard say: "Mary is Mother of the merciful, she is created to be merciful, she is made of what is most merciful. The duration of her mercy is unto the end of the sinner's life. The broadness of her mercy is unto the limits of the earth. The height of her mercy is unto heaven. The depth of her mercy is unto the lowest abyss of sin or sorrow. She is always merciful. She is only merciful. She is our Mother of Mercy."

THE CATHOLIC HOUR

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The nationwide Catholic Hour was inaugurated on March 2, 1930, by the National Council of Catholic Men in cooperation with the National Broadcasting Company and its associated stations. Radio facilities are provided by NBC and the stations associated with it; the program is arranged and produced by NCCM.

The Catholic Hour was begun on a network of 22 stations, and now carries its message of Catholic truth on each Sunday of the year through a number of stations varying from 90 to 110, situated in 40 states, the District of Columbia, and Hawaii. Consisting usually of an address, mainly expository, by one or another of America's leading Catholic preachers—though sometimes of talks by laymen, sometimes of dramatizations—and of sacred music provided by a volunteer choir, the Catholic Hour has distinguished itself as one of the most popular and extensive religious broadcasts in the world. An average of 100,000 audience letters a year, about twenty per cent of which come from listeners of other faiths, gives some indication of its popularity and influence.

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