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THE CATHOLIC HOUR

# WHY THE MADONNA?

BY

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The fourth 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 19, 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.

National Council of Catholic Men  
Washington, D. C.

## WHY THE MADONNA?

Raphael, the great Italian painter, has been dead these four hundred years and more, but even now he towers above his contemporaries by virtue of a unique achievement. Like other gifted artists of his time—Titian, Tintoretto, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michaelangelo—he left the world a legacy that it will always treasure. What set Raphael apart from his fellows, however, was that he, better than any of them, portrayed on canvas the loveliness and delicacy—the spiritual beauty—of the Blessed Virgin. It is not for me to say that Mary guided his brush. But it is true that even the boy Raphael had an exceptional devotion to the Mother of God. She was his ideal, and he determined to use the great talent that God had given him to honor her with paint upon canvas.

Such is the effect of the Madonna of the Chair that even those who know little and care less for line and color, and perspective and composition, cannot help seeing in the masterpiece an ethereal sweetness that arises out of the mother's love for a child. Sweetness—a sweetness of soul—is a virtue of life beautifully exemplified in Mary, Our Mother.

In Mary we see the sweetness of surrender of the human will to the divine. From the moment during the Annunciation when she said: "Behold the handmaid of the lord; be it done to me according to thy word" (*Luke* 1:38), Mary was in the hands of God more completely than any of His creatures has ever been. To be sure, we are all completely in God's hands, but Mary was chosen for a special mission in the redemption of mankind, a mission foretold in the Garden of Eden when the Lord God said to the serpent: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel" (*Genesis* 3:15). With sublime confidence, such as we should appropriately envy as well as emulate, Mary submitted to the divine will. Now let life bring her what it would; she had lost herself in Him. So, when "her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered . . . she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (*Luke* 2:6, 7).

No room in the inn! Yet Mary

was not disturbed, because within her beat the pulse of divine love. Her heart was filled with sweetness and joy, for the hour had come when the ancient prophecies of her people were about to be fulfilled. "And thou, Bethlehem . . . art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be the ruler of Israel: and his going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity" (Micheas 5:2).

The Christ Child—the true God, made man—could have been born in regal splendor, surrounded by every luxury, had He so willed it. After all, the three kings who came to adore Him acted upon a rather human and reasonable assumption when they went to Herod's palace, asking, "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" (*Matthew 2:2*) But the ways of God are not the ways of man, and the Savior chose to be born in an abandoned stable that was little more than a cave; to begin His life on earth even as the humblest of the sons of men, with only His foster father, St. Joseph, and the shepherds to do Him homage.

Picture Mary during the hidden life at Nazareth, radiant with sweetness and tenderness, the epitome of mother love, as she cared for the Child Jesus.

She bathed Him, caressed Him, and held Him in her arms as He slept. With what pride she watched him advance in wisdom, and age, and grace. Meanwhile, as He grew older, and worked with St. Joseph, she made and kept a home for them both. And on one occasion at least, mother-like, she was concerned for her Son—when she and St. Joseph went seeking Him in Jerusalem. In her consecration to her daily tasks, she is a perfect example of leaving God for God, and a perfect example for the true Christian mother who, after Mary, manifests the sweetness that blossoms from a mother's love for her children. Always in the background, modest, completely unselfish, she was nevertheless the queen of her home.

Mother-like, perhaps, she could not bear the thought of our Lord's leavetaking in Nazareth, so we find her present at His first public appearance — the marriage feast of Cana. The Evangelist sweetly adds, after describing the scene, "and the mother of Jesus was there" (*John 2:1*). To me this is quite significant. She saw him inaugurate His career with a great miracle, and she was with Him on Calvary at the close of His career, whence was to follow the greatest of miracles.

In the meanwhile, she was alone, praying to God for her Son's success, as all true mothers do. Word reached her of other miracles, and she was happy. She also heard of the wicked charges made against Him, and she was sad. But she knew her Son, and knew the charges to be false. Again she renewed her prayers that the truth might prevail. But when the inevitable occurred, she followed Him to Calvary and stood at the foot of His cross—the true mother, faithful to the end. Then, after the crucifixion and resurrection, she lived quietly with John patiently awaiting the day when her God and her Son would provide for her assumption into heaven where she would reign gloriously for all eternity.

As we reflect upon a life so selfless, so completely motivated by love of God, our worldly ambitions and strivings seem petty and shallow indeed. "From Mary we learn not to crucify love, but to cultivate it, and to let it crucify us with her Divine Son. In Mary, the mother of God and the mother of us all, the love of men is one with the love of God."\*

Now, let us return to Nazareth where Mary first received the

Archangel Gabriel, and note the Archangel's salutation. He said, "Hail, full of grace." He did not compliment her on her rare personal beauty, although he might well have done so, for we are told that she was indeed beautiful, and that she had a smile of infinite sweetness. He referred instead to the spotless purity of her soul, to the inner beauty that comes from the possession of every virtue. This is the Virgin whom Solomon saw in a vision when he cried out: "Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in battle array?" (*Canticles* 6:9). Mary was a living example of womanly charm. Her body was a temple of the living God, mantled in Christ's love.

In our day countless numbers of women still take Mary as their model, and pattern their lives after hers. They have true womanly charm and sweetness—from the wife and mother, queen in her home, rearing God-fearing children, to the devoted nuns hidden away from the world that they may be hid in Christ. But in our day, too, there is a kind of lunatic fringe that has reverted to a completely pagan concept of woman and her physical charms, a concept that does not take into account her holy voca-

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\* (*Our Lady's Month*, Burke, p. 10, Paulist Press)

tion, but only her power as a seductress. And yet, how fleeting is physical beauty! "The body, when you come to think of it, matters little. All the beauty in the world cannot endure more than its appointed span . . . What has become of the beauty . . . of Bathsheba, for whom David of the Psalms fell from grace? And Balkis, Queen of Sheba, with her apes, ivory, and peacocks? Dust and ashes, dust and ashes! . . . Beauty increases and wanes like the moon. A little shadow around the eyes, a little crinkle in the neck, the backs of the hands stiffening like parchment. Dust and ashes, dust and ashes."\*

In the Garden of Eden, Eve seduced Adam into eating the forbidden fruit. Led on by the serpent who tempted her, she in turn pursued Adam until he too yielded to temptation. Such was a woman's power of seduction and this power has often been compelling through all the ages. Yet another Eve, Mary, the spiritual mother of mankind, was to crush the tempter's head. Eve was the seducer. Mary is the inducer—to Christ. She leads women to an appreciation of their vocation, to the sanctification of

their bodies as temples of the Holy Ghost.

Contrast this appreciation and sanctification with the current vogue for the "pin-up girl," the painting or photograph that through lack of clothing, the immodest posture, and the enticing look portrays an animal charm that seems to crave a partner to satisfy lust. The vogue was strong during the war; it shows no sign of abating now. Too many newspapers and magazines are competing with one another in publishing pictures as risqué as possible, to the seduction of men both young and old, first in their thoughts and desires, and then in such acts as had better be left untold.

The importance of the press is one of those things which it is impossible to exaggerate. The press sways public opinion with the same ease that the wind swirls away a dead leaf. The multiplication of newsprint is a veritable multiplication of loaves, but unhappily poisons as well as loaves are multiplied. Newspapers and magazines carry life or death to the souls of innumerable people; and too many seem no longer to realize that spiritual death has discovered a way of entering our homes without ceremony. It slips in quietly under the guise of newsprint.

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\* (Messer Marco Polo, p. 62, Donn Byrne, Century Co., 1922)

One can have no respect for publications that pander to man's lower nature; nor can one have much respect for the young women who apparently are so eager to exhibit their physical attractions to be gloated over. They have lost something fine that they can never regain. They are daughters of Eve without being daughters of Mary.

Freud's libido has encompassed the world. Men and women deliberately run counter to the Ten Commandments, taking a particular delight in breaking the sixth and ninth, and then wonder why God has turned His face from us. And how, I might ask, can we, in common decency, ask the intercession of the Mother of God, when so much of what is going on in the world is an insult to the Virgin Most Pure?

A characteristic of the modern pagan is that he—or she—sees the world in terms of pleasure, with an inordinate emphasis on the pleasures of the flesh. The lower nature of man must be gratified, despite the testimony of history that retribution follows. It may not be swift, but it is always sure.

How may the pagan practices of our times be counteracted? How may we offset the strong, lustful force that has swept

over the world, and over this nation, degrading the nobility of woman—and degrading it, let us sadly admit, with her tacit consent? We must turn again to Mary, the Mother of God and the mother of all of us. Let us enshrine the image of her in our homes, as well as in our hearts. A spiritual writer has beautifully said that, except for the Crucifix, there is no mirror into which a Christian can look with greater profit than the image of the Virgin Mother of God. If we frequently look at this holy image, we will discover that it produces a sanctifying and salutary effect upon our whole life. It influences our thoughts, desires, words, and deeds. It protects the imagination from filth. It matters not whether the picture of Mary represents her as a maiden at prayer, or as the Mother of the Divine Infant in the stable, or as the Sorrowful Mother beneath the Cross, or as Queen of Angels and Saints in heaven. In each we see in her the revelation of God's beauty, the image of His own goodness, and the goodness of the true mother.

Mary is our country's Queen. And this is the centennial of our dedication to her by the Sixth Provincial Council of Baltimore. Could there be a more appropriate way of observing the an-

niversary than by a concerted effort to make the nation conscious of the strength and glory of woman? Than by trying to revive a true appreciation of what she means to the family, to society, and hence to national life itself? Than by remembering that Mary is actually as close to us as our own mothers ever were, and by acting as if we were ever in her presence?

We have been wandering children, erring children, but the arms of Mary are always open to receive us, and she is always ready to intercede for us with her Divine Son, if we but have recourse to her. We need to return to God through love of the Mother of God, the queen of the heavenly realm, who is also queen of this earthly realm, the United States. When the picture of our queen is in our homes and in our schools, when it is carried among our personal belongings as a treasured possession, we shall be on the road back to God, and the forces of evil will be routed. And when we look at her

image, let us call upon her holy name, let us beg her to help us, for as it was revealed to St. Bridget: "As the rebel angels flee from those who invoke the name of Mary, so the guardian angels draw nearer to those souls and protect them more carefully who pronounce her holy name with love and reverence."

So in an age that glorifies pictures, let us pull down the "pin-up" and put up the Madonna. The "pin-up" and all that it implies is of the earth, earthy. The Madonna and all that it connotes is of the spirit, spiritual. It is the only true portrayal of the dignity and charm of womanhood under the aegis of Mary, the Mother of God. If woman is uplifted, and also uplifts herself, we will have struck the first blow at a sensate culture that has engulfed the nation and the world. For in the sweetness of Mary, the Mother of God, woman will recapture the charm, the dignity, the beauty and the strength which has earned for her the title of "The Great Inspirer."

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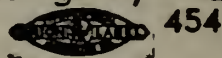
# THE CATHOLIC HOUR

1930—Seventeenth Year—1946

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.

Our Sunday Visitor Press  
Huntington, Indiana



454

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