

# the Perfect Woman



by † Leo A. Pursley, D.D.

To the late  
Archbishop John Francis Noll  
whose Devotion to Mary  
is memorialized in the  
National Shrine  
of the Immaculate Conception  
Washington, D.C.

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## The Perfect Woman

In 1973 there are millions of people who cannot remember that 1954 was celebrated as the Marian Year to mark the 100th anniversary of the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Yet, this event still has interest for Catholics in general and for Catholics of this country in particular. In 1846 Mary Immaculate was chosen as Patroness of the United States. Before the first apparition of Our Lady at Lourdes in 1858, seven bishops had dedicated their dioceses and cathedrals to her Immaculate Conception.

Announcing the Marian Year Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical letter with the significant title, *The Radiant Crown of Glory*. This, too, is of present interest. Devotion to Mary is a permanent part of our religious faith. It may suffer a partial and temporary eclipse for various reasons in some periods of history, but it is here to stay. Indeed, there are many who feel that the current crisis in the Church and in the world calls for renewal of this devotion, and there are signs that it is under way.

It would be a step in that direction to read, or read again, the letter of a great Pope mentioned above. In spite of its formal language it breathes such a pure spirit of filial love that all who read it may see that it is no perfunctory official document but a personal expression of warm and tender devotion from the inmost heart of the Holy Father.

Explaining the purpose of the Marian Year, he writes: "This centenary celebration should not only serve to revive Cath-

olic faith and earnest devotion to the Mother of God in the souls of all, but Christians should, also, in as far as possible, conform their lives to the image of the same Virgin. . . . If this devotion is not to consist of mere words, is not to be counterfeit coin of religion, or the weak and transitory affection of a moment, but is to be something sincere, true and efficacious, it is necessary that each one of us should, according to his condition of life, avail of it for the acquisition of virtue. The commemoration of the mystery of the Most Holy Virgin, conceived immaculate . . . should in the first place urge us to that innocence and integrity of life which flees from and abhors the slightest stain of sin."

All this is plainly a matter of intention and effort for each of us. Meanwhile, however, our immediate concern is to speak about Mary. In one of the Vatican galleries there is a painting by the modern German artist, Ludwig Seitz, which shows Saint Thomas Aquinas offering his written works to Holy Mother Church. She is represented as a gracious and queenly woman seated upon a throne. The saint kneels before her in the midst of his many books, filled with his profound learning and love of truth. This brief inscription tells us that she accepts them with praise and approval: "Bene scripsisti de me, Thoma." ("You have written well of me, Thomas.") I am reassured by the thought that Mary, Mother of grace and beauty, forever enthroned in the Heart of Christ and His Mystical Body, will look with like favor upon the least of her children who, like the little Juggler of Notre Dame, try to please her in their words and works.

But how much easier it is to speak to Mary than to speak to others about her! To speak to her, as a child to a mother, is to follow instinctively the course of thought and language dictated naturally and, we hope, supernaturally, by our consciousness of the intimate and loving relationship between us. To speak about her is to grope for words that tease us with their inadequacy, to reach for a fullness and richness of language that lie beyond our meager resources. I am reminded of a statement of the motion picture actress, Ruth Hussey. When she was asked by Father Patrick Peyton to play the part of Mary on a Family Theatre television program, she says that she was "stunned." Even after she had mastered her lines, in private rehearsal, she could not bring herself to utter that inspired and incomparable hymn of praise and thanksgiving, "My soul doth magnify the Lord." But the time came to say it; and she tells us that the words seemed to speak themselves "with a kind of singing wonder." Now she knew what the Magnificat meant. "It was the purpose of a whole life."

According to Dr. Samuel Johnson, "the ideas of Christian theology are too simple for eloquence and too sacred for fiction." I am not sure that he gave to these words the meaning they have for us; but I am sure that, if we look at Mary in the full light of divine revelation, we shall see in her something of that ineffable simplicity which is the attribute of God and needs no human eloquence to enhance its splendor. I am sure that, if we meditate upon the mysteries that surround her life, like the moon and twelve stars, lifting her high above the excellence of all men and

angels, we shall know that we are in the presence of a truth that is sacred, indeed, and could not be made more strange and wonderful by the most creative art.

This, then, is the initial and quite insuperable difficulty that faces anyone who desires to speak worthily of Mary. And this is just the right place to remind ourselves that Our Immaculate Lady is not an idea of theology, a mystery of religion, a simple and sacred truth. She is a person, a human person; and our love of her, however deeply touched with awe and reverence, must permit that primary fact to form our concept of her and inform our devotion to her.

In reading Caryl Houselander's precious little book, *The Reed of God*, I was impressed with the delicate emphasis she lays upon this point. Deploring her own misguided piety in early life, she says that "a very great many people still think of Our Lady as someone who would never do anything that we do. To many she is the Madonna of the Christmas card, immobile, seated forever in the immaculately clean stable of golden straw and shining snow. She is not real; nothing about her is real, not even the stable in which Love was born."

I should like to explore somewhat the reasons for this sorry state of mind and make some likely applications to the special needs of our time. Let me begin by borrowing two lines from one of the less Christian poets who did, nevertheless, pay his tribute to "our tainted nature's solitary boast." It was not of Mary that Wordsworth wrote the following verse, but it could not justly describe anyone else.

“A perfect woman, nobly planned,  
To warn, to comfort, and com-  
mand.”

May I ask you now to keep these three last words in mind?

Mary is, first of all, a perfect woman. We are dazzled and frightened by perfection, even the idea of perfection, so remote and unattainable. But I did not say that Mary is perfection. I said that she is the perfect woman, the most revealing mirror of that perfection which exists in God alone. As Father Hopkins writes in his hauntingly beautiful poem on *The Blessed Virgin Compared To The Air We Breathe*:

“Mary Immaculate,  
Merely a woman, yet  
Whose presence, power is  
Great as no goddess’s  
Was ever deemed or dreamed, who  
This one work has to do—  
Let all God’s glory through.”

It is not, however, this consideration alone that makes it difficult for many people to love Our Lady as she ought to be loved. I think we shall account for it more fully if we examine the role of Mary as the perfect woman nobly planned to warn, to warn the world against its worldliness, to show forth in herself those qualities of soul and body which confound the wisdom of the world and challenge its loyalty to its own idols. For there is nothing so little appreciated today as purity, nothing so little understood as virginity. And if we think, good easy souls, that our own people, secure behind the fortress of their faith, remain untouched and uncontaminated by the blight of this spiritual

blindness, we shall delude ourselves with false hope and foster in them the very sickness we must seek to cure.

So it is, that even among the faithful, there is current the mistaken notion that purity and virginity are negative virtues at best, fugitive and cloistered, always to be associated with sterility and impotence. How few would understand these lines of Patmore, who was, by the way, a much-married man:

“Love, light for me thy ruddiest,  
blazing torch,  
That I, albeit a beggar by the Porch  
Of the glad Palace of Virginity,  
May gaze within and sing the  
pomp I see;  
For, crown’d with roses all,  
‘Tis there, O Love, they keep  
thy Festival.”

If I may quote again from *The Reed of God*: “Unfortunately, there are not only wise virgins in this world but . . . foolish virgins: and the foolish virgins make more noise . . . than the wise, giving a false impression of virginity by their loveless and joyless attitude to life. They cause us to turn with a sigh of relief to the page in the Missal which announces the feast of a holy woman who was neither a virgin nor a martyr. These foolish virgins, like their prototypes, have no oil in their lamps. And no one can give them this oil, for it is the potency of life, the will and capacity to love. We no longer think of virginity as the first fruit laid upon the fire of sacrifice, but rather as a windfall of green apples . . . hard and sour because the sun has never penetrated them and warmed them at the core. Virginity is really the whole offering of soul and body to be con-



sumed in the fire of love and changed into the flame of its glory. The virginity of Our Lady is the wholeness of love through which our own humanity has become the bride of the Spirit of Life.”

How magnificently positive and productive is this true concept of consecrated virginity! Surely it is our duty to help awaken the world to see the brightness of this Morning Star that shines above it, to feel the attraction of this lodestone of unalloyed love that lies accessible beneath the vileness of our fallen nature. Surely it is our duty to inspire in others, in our children, in our youth, in our mature men and women, single or married, a devotion to this ideal of purity which alone can purify them and thus redeem and restore. But we can do this only if we ourselves heed with prompt and vigorous response the voice of the woman who warns the world of its errors, its follies and its sins, of its crying need for prayer and penance, of its certain impending doom unless it strives to recover that innocence and integrity of life which the Holy Father envisioned as the true and lasting fruit of the Marian Year.

Mary is also the woman who comforts. If the unthinking multitudes that move so restlessly and, for the most part, so aimlessly, through this shadow-land we call the world, cannot be won back to God by the lovely vision of Mary the Virgin; and if the less enlightened and the lukewarm among her own children stand aloof from the fire of love that burns in her virginal heart, surely neither one nor the other can long resist the appeal of her Motherhood, that divine and universal Motherhood by virtue of which Mary is supremely the woman who comforts. It is

our lot to live in an age uprooted from its basic and best traditions of Christian culture, an age torn by the agonies of dissension and conflict, fighting with itself like a guilty man who will not listen to his conscience or cannot hear it for all the confusion around him; an age rendered homeless and empty-hearted by forsaking the God who alone can fill the heart and make a home in the human soul. That is why this age of ours, more than any other, is an orphan, an orphan of the storm. There is nothing that an orphan needs so much as a mother; and there is no mother like Mary, "Mater amabilis," most loving and most worthy of love.

When the peasant girl of Galilee heard the greeting and the message of the archangel, she said Yes — for herself and for all humanity. In that moment of whispered consent, Mary offered her soul and body as a chalice in which God would mingle the purest water of humanity with the rich wine of divinity. So "the Word was made flesh" and all the exiled children of Eve were given a mother.

Certainly it is here, in the consoling and all-embracing implications of her motherhood, that Mary claims our love as no other saint ever can. It is here that we find in her what we can find in no one else, the kind of help that differs from all others, the understanding, the love, the comfort that only a mother can give and only a child can receive. Each saint has his special time and place, his special gift, his special sort of accomplishment. Accordingly he is classified and venerated. But Mary has all. She is our mother. She is all things to all of her children.

We may complain at times that God

has told us so little about her, about her appearance, her personality, her words and deeds. In so complaining we miss the point. God has told us what we need to know. He has included in Mary's vocation and in her life's work the one essential thing that lies hidden and must be revealed in every vocation and in every life's work: to bear Christ in our hearts and carry His light to the world. This Mary did while remaining lowly and obscure, a lay woman among the people of her village, doing the ordinary daily tasks of her home, just being what God wanted her to be. That is why the greatest of saints is the only one whom we can all truly imitate, even though she stands above us as heaven is above the earth.

In the late Father Leen's study of the vexed question, "What is Education?" there is what seems to me a penetrating remark. He says: "Men may study to be learned; women should study in order to be wise." Are we right in looking to women, and particularly to mothers, for that wisdom of the heart so urgently needed by our world? This much is certain: Woman is not, by nature or grace, the mere echo of man. She is truly free only when she is free to be herself, to develop in herself those qualities that make her more womanly. She is not emancipated when she is granted the dubious privilege of being less womanly. Whether she is destined for marriage or not, she is always a mother at heart; she is always a fountain of life, not only in a physical sense but in a moral and spiritual sense. That is why she cannot renounce her motherhood, even in this larger comprehension, without denying to God and man her unique contribu-

tion to the glory of the One and the good of the other. And that is why we pray that Mary, the woman who comforts, the Mother who gives strength to troubled minds and weak wills and timid hearts and tired hands, Mary, the Seat of Wisdom, may intercede for all women that they may know their own worth, their place in God's plan, the glory of their vocation; that they may take the wounded world into their arms, even as Mary clasped the lifeless Body of her Son; that they may hasten with the holy women to the empty tomb and lead us out of darkness and death into the newborn life of the risen Christ.

Not only is Mary the woman who warns and the woman who comforts; she is also the woman who commands. It is the right of a queen to rule over her subjects, and Mary holds that right by divine authority, by universal acclaim. She has it because God chose her to be the Mother of His Son Who is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. She has it because she earned it by standing beside Him as He did battle unto death to save His people. Happily there is no need within the household of the faith to vindicate Mary's claim to the title, Mother of Divine Grace, to insist upon her living and effective union with Jesus Christ in His sacrifice of atonement, to point out her share in the shedding of His blood and the dispensation of His graces, to explain why we bow before her as Queen of Apostles and Martyrs, Queen of Angels and Saints, Queen of all hearts.

But are we content to hug this secret to ourselves and care nothing that millions of others do not know it? In contem-

porary American life there is many a curious inconsistency. One of them is the fact that, while we have no use for real queens, we have set up a thousand and one make-believe queens to receive our flattering homage. The modern cult of physical health and beauty, with its vast commercial possibilities, seems to have been exploited to the very last limit of vulgarity. Has it helped us to appreciate the grace and dignity that proclaim the true quality of the queen?

The fact is, on the contrary, that minds and imaginations and emotions, nourished almost from infancy on this unsubstantial fare must take a long, long step before they can understand why "all the beauty of the king's daughter is within," why the sweet and gentle Maid of Nazareth is "terrible as an army set in battle array," why she is the terror of the legions of hell whose proud leader she crushed beneath her foot, why she holds the destiny of nations in her hand, why, in a word, she is the Queen of the Universe.

Perhaps this is the one aspect of Mary that appears least compelling, as evidence of her greatness, to many people in our day. But it conveys a weighty truth and a mighty lesson of the utmost importance to the modern world. I shall not undertake to explain to you why this is so. You know the prevailing state of affairs today on every level of life. Consider it well. Look long and closely at the picture before you. Follow the chain of events from cause to consequence and back again. You will see, because you have the key, that there is only one way out — the way that Mary walked in queenly majesty from Nazareth to Bethlehem to Calvary

and thence across the world, the way of submission to divine law and order, the way of conformity to the will of God, the way of union between the Spirit of Christ and the heart of man, so that Love may be born and bring us peace.

It is for us who say, "Hail, Holy Queen!" to rally to her standard in her struggle to win the world to her Divine Son. If it is true, in a mystical sense, that Christ will hang from the cross while a single soul remains to be saved, so it is true that Mary will stand beneath the cross in the travail of her motherhood until all her children are counted in the courts of heaven. When she calls upon us to help, it is the Queen who commands, and we must obey.

Much that I wish to say in this final tribute to Mary, Our Queen, is strongly expressed by Hilaire Belloc in his *Ballad To Our Lady of Czestochowa*. It might well be taken as a summary of all that Mary should mean to us and to our world.

"Help of the half-defeated, House of  
Gold,  
Shrine of the Sword, and Tower  
of Ivory;  
Splendour apart, supreme and  
aureoled,  
The Battler's vision and the  
World's reply.  
You shall restore me, O my last  
Ally,  
To vengeance and the glories of  
the bold.  
This is the faith that I have held  
and hold,  
And this is that in which I  
mean to die."



