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### "The Compassion of the Virgin-Mother and the Prophecy of Simeon"

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# The Compassion of the Virgin-Mother and the Prophecy of Simeon \*

## I. THE MIGHT OF DIVINE NEED

To catch a glimpse of the depth to which Our Lady shared in the redeeming Passion of her Son we must meditate upon the very simple words in which both Scripture and the Liturgy tell us of her incomparable role in the greatest of God's works.

But before we turn to these words let us recall the basic principle that *the tender mercies of the Lord are above all his works* (Ps., CXLIV, 9). Indeed He showed us the fulness of His power in taking upon Himself the wages of sin and suffering for us, even to the ignominious death of the Cross. That fulness is most strikingly brought home to us in that God freely chose His only begotten Son to be a Redeemer and unique Mediator so great, and the merits of his life and passion to be so overwhelming, that Christ could afford to have His Mother share both in the work and in the communication to us of the fruits of His Redemption. That is why the Church calls Our Lady "co-redeemer" and "co-mediatrix." This does not mean, of course, that, strictly speaking, we have two redeemers, two mediators, as if Christ too could be called co-Redeemer and co-Mediator. Even here the Blessed Virgin remains entirely within the dependence of her Son. For, if He makes her share in His redeeming Passion, it is not because, absolutely speaking, He needs the help of another — as when the strength of two is required to raise a certain weight. Even as King, Christ cannot be compared to the head of the State who strictly needs the help of intermediaries. When He does place Himself in the need of another, it is because He has freely decided, and made place, for such a need, so that whatever is performed by the one He chose to need is performed in virtue of His power — *God gave Him all the power, in heaven and on earth*. Yet, when Christ does choose to make place for such a need, He is the all-embracing author of a work both more divine and more human.

More divine, for no mere creature could possibly humble itself as did the one who, though *being in the form of God . . . emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross* (Ad Philipp., II, 6-8). In coming so very close to us in our own mode, being born of woman, and taking upon himself such great suffering for wrongs of which He is wholly innocent, He shows and exercises the power of God, for *mercy* is accounted as being *proper*

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to God,<sup>1</sup> and it is in *mercy* that His omnipotence is chiefly manifested.<sup>2</sup> Whenever God stoops and comes to us in our own mode, using what is otherwise proper to man, it is because of His mercy.

Again, His work is the more human when God chooses and condescends to need our nature, exploiting even the characteristic traits of man and of woman. And so, when we fail to recognize and to use the means which He thus places at our disposal, we ungratefully refuse precisely that in which His transcendent power and mercy are most deeply and touchingly extended to us. It is for this reason that he who rejects the Mother rejects the Son.<sup>3</sup>

## II. AND SIMEON SAID TO HIS MOTHER . . .

Many of the difficulties we find in seeing Mary as co-redeemer and mediatrix of all graces arise from our insufficient understanding of her womanhood in its most important implications. Perhaps the furies of a crude feminism have blinded us to what is most admirable in the nature and calling of woman. It is a *mother* whom God gave to us from the height of the cross; it was the royalty of a *queen* she accepted in her reply to the Angel Gabriel: *let it be unto me according to thy word* (LUKE, I, 38). To us she is a *mother* and *queen* of mercy.

And now let us turn to the passages of Scripture which most immediately concern her share in the Passion of her Son.

Thus we have the words addressed to her by Simeon, at the Presentation in the Temple: *And thy own soul a sword shall pierce, that out of many hearts, thoughts may be revealed* (LUKE, II, 35). St. Luke immediately goes on to tell us of the finding in the Temple, giving us a first intimation of the sorrow of the Mother. Note that it is Mary who shall speak. *And his mother said to Him: Son, why hast Thou done so to us? behold, Thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing* (LUKE, II, 48).<sup>4</sup> Consider now

1. Collect, *De Peccat.*

2. Collect, Xth Sunday after Pentec.

3. "Nam cui exploratum non sit nullum, praeterquam per Mariam, esse certius et expeditius iter ad universos cum Christo iungendos, perque illum perfectam filiorum adoptionem assequendam ut simus sancti et immaculati in conspectu Dei? . . . Quid enim? An non potuisset Deus restitutorem humani generis ac fidei conditorem alia, quam per Virginem, via impertiri nobis? Quia tamen aeterni providentiae Numinis visum est ut Deum-Hominem per Mariam haberemus, quae illum, Spiritu Sancto fecunda, suo gestavit utero; nobis nil plane superest, nisi quod de Mariae manibus Christum recipiamus." PRUS X, *Ad diem illum*.—"Divina consilia ad decet magna cum religione intueri. Filius Dei aeternus, quum, ad hominis redemptionem et decus, hominis naturam vellet suscipere, eaque re mysticum quoddam cum universo humano genere initurus esset connubium, non id ante perfecit quam liberrima consensio accessisset designatae Matris, quae ipsius generis humani personam quodammodo agebat, ad eam illustrem verissimamque Aquinatis sententiam: Per annuntiationem expectabatur consensus Virginis, loco totius humanae naturae. Ex quo non minus vere proprieque affirmare licet, nihil prorsus de permagno illo omnis gratiae thesauro, quem attulit Dominus, siquidem gratia et veritas per Iesum Christum facta est, nihil nobis, nisi per Mariam, Deo sic volente, impertiri: ut quo modo ad summum Patrem, nisi per Filium, nemo potest accedere, ita fere, nisi per Matrem, accedere possit ad Christum." LEO XIII, *Octobri mense*.

4. Let us note in passing that St. Joseph shares in this sorrow. It is a point not to be overlooked, realizing as we do that the foster-father of Christ is the living and sensible image of God the Father on earth. There is no *mission* of the Father. God the Son, and

the scene in which the prophecy of Simeon is fulfilled. *There stood by the cross of Jesus, His Mother . . . When Jesus therefore had seen His Mother and the disciple standing whom He loved, He said to His Mother: Woman, behold thy son. After that, He said to the disciple: Behold thy Mother* (JOHN, XIX, 25-27). And when Christ had yielded up His spirit and the soldiers came to take away the bodies of the crucified, and they saw that Jesus was already dead, *one of the soldiers with a spear opened His side* (*Ibid.*, 34).

The words in which the Holy Ghost in the Gospels, and the Church in her Liturgy, speak to us, state simply that in the Passion of Christ it is the *mother* who sorrows. Both Luke and John make this very plain: *And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His Mother* (LUKE, II, 34). *Now there stood by the cross of Jesus, His Mother* (JOHN, XIX, 25). And why does the Church in her Liturgy give such faithful and resounding echo to these precise words? The quotations from Scripture and the chants which compose the Office of both feast-days in honour of the Compassion of the Virgin (Friday after Passion Sunday, and September 17), are most emphatic on the sorrow of Mary as based very precisely on her maternal relationship to Christ. It may well be worth while to pause and weigh these words of the Gospel. For the sorrow of a mother is something unique indeed. But we had better turn for light to the truly wise and learned, who have excelled in pointing out the full meaning and implications of every-day words.

### III. SORROW OR PITY?

We have just referred to the expression "Compassion of the Virgin." The word *compassion* is taken from the Latin *cum* and *pati*, which means to *suffer with* someone. Quite appropriately, discussions on the co-redemption and mediation of Mary are usually preceded by a consideration of her compassion. Now it is sometimes pointed out that Mary's compassion consisted in pity for her Son. And of course, pity being sorrow because of the suffering of another, and Christ being one person and Mary another, this construction has its justification. However, does it go far enough? Surely the Apostles too had pity on their Master. They all pitied our Saviour; the one more, the other less deeply.

God the Holy Ghost, were sent to us, but not the Father. Yet He was represented for us in the person of the foster-father of His Son. Few authors have stressed this point — Monsieur Olier, founder of the Saint Sulpice, being one exception. Yet it is no doubt the greatest attribute of St. Joseph. Truly wedded to Mary, fostering Christ through his labor, his cares, even in sorrow, Joseph is chosen to be the representative on earth of the Eternal Father of this Son. Now it is remarkable that it should be the mother, not the father, who tells Jesus that they have sought him sorrowing. The father says not a word. As was once pointed out to me, he remains discreetly in the background: an idea well grasped by the primitive painters, who allow us but a glimpse of him through a window in the shaded background of their pictures. The dignity of St. Joseph is plainly stated in the Encyclical *Quamquam pluries* of Leo XIII: "Certe matris Dei tam in excelso dignitas est, ut nihil fieri maius queat. Sed tamen quia intercessit Iosepho cum Virgine beatissima maritale vinculum, ad illam præstantissimam dignitatem, qua naturis creatis omnibus longissime Deipara antecellit, non est dubium quin accesserit ipse, ut nemo magis."

But was the difference only one of degree? And, to be more explicit, is the suffering of a mother because of the evil that happens to her son, sufficiently conveyed by the word "pity"?

Let us consult in this matter the greatest theologian of the Church, whose thought, even as regards its very wording, has been set as an example for us. The manner how St. Thomas sees the problem is this: What is sorrow and what is pity? And again: Is compassion the same as pity? Strictly speaking, the object of pain or suffering is an evil which is inflicted upon our own person, and of which only the self can have experience. When the suffering arises from the apprehension of an exterior sense, we usually call it pain; when it is caused by the interior apprehension of the intellect or of the imagination, it is called sorrow. Hence the proper object of a pain or sorrow is none other than the evil that happens to oneself. The range of sorrow is of course far greater than that of pain understood in this narrow sense, yet acute and inescapable sorrow is sometimes called pain. For sound reasons the same name is often used to mean now one kind of thing in its distinction from all other things, and then again something which different things have in common. Thus we say that man and brute are animals; yet we sometimes use the same word "animal" to signify the irrational animal: for instance, we say "this is an animal, not a man." The same holds for the word "pain." At one time it is used to mean both pain and sorrow with reference to what they have in common; at another time it means pain as distinguished from sorrow; and again it may convey a particular kind of sorrow. But in all these instances we refer primarily to an evil which afflicts our own self: *dolor est tristitia de malo proprio*.<sup>1</sup>

Hence the notion of sorrow does not as yet convey the idea of mercy or pity. Mercy, St. Augustine says, is heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling us to succour him if we can. The unhappiness of another person, the evil that afflicts him, may cause sorrow in our own heart inasmuch as we consider the evil inflicted upon him as affecting our own self as well. Mercy or pity is sorrow for a distress which, though not actually our own, is nevertheless *considered as our own: tristitia de alieno malo, inquantum tamen aestimatur ut proprium*.<sup>2</sup> Like justice, then, pity relates to another. To say that a man is just toward himself is to speak figuratively; accordingly, a man does not, properly speaking, pity himself, but suffers on account of himself.

Now, as we have seen, the word "compassion" clearly implies another person. In compassion we are sad, we sorrow together with another person, because of his distress. From this it follows apparently that compassion is the same as pity. Yet the moral sciences would not get very far if they could not advance beyond such seemingly exhaustive generalities. Experience, and indeed the very wordings established by custom, are never to be neglected, least of all in this field. Let us, then, abide with St. Thomas a little longer.

1. ST. THOMAS, *Ia IIae*, q.35, a.8, c.

2. *Ibid.*

Referring to Aristotle, the Angelic Doctor points out two radically distinct kinds of compassion: the one is sorrow in the strict sense of the word, the other is the same as pity. In other words, sorrowful compassion and merciful compassion are not quite the same. But how is this possible? How could any compassion be sorrow, seeing that sorrow, properly speaking, has no other object than the evil inflicted upon our own self? The following words of St. Thomas contain the answer to this question: "Just as, properly speaking, a man does not pity himself, but suffers (*dolet*) in himself, as when we suffer cruel treatment in ourselves, so too, in the case of those who are so closely united to us as to be part of ourselves, such as our children or our parents, we do not pity their distress, but suffer as for our own sores . . ."<sup>1</sup> Sorrowful compassion is therefore something far more immediate and intimate than mercy. This is made plain in the passage of the Philosopher's *Rhetoric* to which St. Thomas refers in this context: "The people we pity are: those whom we know, if only they are not very closely related to us — in that case we feel about them as if we were in danger ourselves. For this reason Amasis did not weep, they say, at the sight of his son being led to death, but did weep when he saw his friend begging: the latter sight was pitiful, the former terrible, and the terrible is different from the pitiful; it tends to cast out pity, and often helps to produce the opposite of pity."<sup>2</sup> Note, then, that the object of sorrowful compassion, unlike the object of pity, is not merely an evil that befalls another and is "considered as" one's own; it is still, as was said of sorrow, an evil that is inflicted upon the self: *malum proprium*.

#### IV. "MATER DOLOROSA"

From this it follows plainly that the compassion of the Mother of Christ is something far more intimate and profound than that of mercy. In so far as He is her Son, who derives his human nature from her and in her image, He is, in that very nature, part, as it were, of herself. In other words, the Passion of Christ is not merely an evil which she "considered as" her own; it is, strictly speaking, at the same time the sorrowful passion of the Virgin: the evil inflicted upon Christ in His Passion is the proper object of Mary's sorrow. Her sorrow is, strictly, *dolor*. Hence, when a theologian says that the Son and the Mother suffered *per modum unius*, the expression is more than a pious formula.

The Liturgy's wording, in the Offices of Our Lady's sorrows, is therefore quite formal. Throughout, her compassion is called "sorrow" (*dolor*). And the reason is plain. The names which constantly recur are those of *Filius*, *Genitus*, *Mater*, *Genetrix*, *Parens*, *Parturiens*. Where her Son is concerned she is not *Mater misericors* but *Mater dolorosa*. It is the *Mother* who stands at the foot of the cross. And it is only because she is the Mother that the sword can pierce her *own* soul — the very sword that inflicted the Passion upon Christ.

1. *IIa IIae*, q.30, a.1, ad 2.

2. ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric*, II, chap.8. (ROBERTS transl.)

Just as her motherhood, the compassion of the Blessed Virgin is absolutely unique. That is why it is said: *To what shall I compare thee, unto what shall I liken thee, O daughter of Jerusalem? what shall I equal to thee, and with what shall I comfort thee, O Virgin daughter of Sion, for great as the sea is thy destruction* (JEREM., *Lament.*, II, 13).

#### V. TO WHOM CAN WE COMPARE THEE?

And now let us consider more closely the uniqueness of this compassion. God cannot suffer in His divinity: the Person of Christ suffers in His human nature. On the other hand, no created person other than Mary is close enough to this Son to experience His Passion as *sorrow* in the sense we have here defined. So wholly and intimately is she united to her Son in His Passion and so plain is this union, that the faithful understand it without her being mentioned in the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary.

That this difference between sorrow and mercy is profound indeed can be shown by comparing it to the difference between love of self and love of neighbour. When we are told to *love our neighbour as ourselves*, this does not mean that we should love him as *much* as we love our spiritual self, or that we could love him more. This is quite impossible, for love consists in unity or union, and we are more one with ourselves than with our neighbour. The other person may be far better than we — and we must always be disposed to allow that he is —, yet because this union with him is less of a oneness than the unity with ourselves, we cannot love his spiritual good more than our own. This, as St. Thomas points out, can be illustrated by the fact that a man ought not to give way to any evil of sin, which would preclude him from happiness, in order that he may free his neighbour from sin. And just as our own good is closer to us than that of our neighbour, the object of sorrow affects us more immediately and intimately than the object which mercy tends to remove for the good of neighbour. Obviously, the more truly we love ourselves according to charity the greater will be its fruit in mercy toward our neighbour. Now, inasmuch as sorrow is caused by the distress which may happen to one who is, as it were, part of our self, it has more innerness than mercy.

Lest, in speaking of the priority of our spiritual good over and against that of our neighbour we should overlook what is most essential, we must not fail to point out that for the very reason we have given above, I must love God more than myself. For God is indeed far more one with us than we are with ourselves. He is our supreme good: He, the author of our very self. And there are two more instances of persons that we must love more than we love ourselves. The reason is again their exceptional closeness to us. It is in Christ's Passion that Redemption has been achieved. It is by virtue of His grace that in charity we are united to God as He is in Himself. Since Christ merited for us in His humanity — united to the divine Person —, even this humanity

we must love more than we love ourselves. Now, no one could possibly love Christ more, even in His humanity, than does his Virgin Mother: nor could anyone even remotely attain to loving Christ so much more than the self. And so, in her sorrow, she suffers far more than in any distress that could befall her person alone. In this she is again absolutely unique. Because of her unique share in the very Passion of her Son, because of her own sorrowful compassion, because every fruit of this Passion comes to us through her,<sup>1</sup> we must love her too far more than we love ourselves.

#### VI. THE COMPASSION OF THE VIRGIN

Though the ineffable depth of this sorrow is indicated by the fact that there could not be a Son more perfect, nor a mother more perfectly mother, we would nevertheless be missing one very essential aspect of this suffering *per modum unius* if we confined ourselves to that generality. We may best bring to light this aspect by recalling that "the pain [of the innocent sufferer] is more intensified by reason of his innocence, in so far as he deems the hurt inflicted to be the more undeserved. Hence it is that even others are more deserving of blame if they do not compassionate him; according to Isaias, LVII, 1: *The just perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart.*"<sup>2</sup> Christ is the innocent victim *par excellence*, and this makes His Passion the greater. Now, the pure of heart have a better understanding of innocence than they who themselves bear guilt. They can compassionate the one who suffers undeservedly in a manner more selfless and understanding. Hence, the Mother of God could not have been so intimately one with Her Son in His Passion, had she herself not enjoyed the privilege of *immaculate conception*. The Mother at the foot of the cross is at the same time *Alma Virgo virginum*. Only the Virgin, who could say of herself "I am the Immaculate Conception," can experience, with Her Son, the depth of the abyss which separates the sinful creature from its Maker. She alone of all mere creatures can understand the cry to the Father: *Why hast Thou forsaken me?* This cry rises from the heart of Christ who is innocent of the guilt He suffers for. She alone, because of her own innocence, could know and experience the very root of this cry to the Father. When Joseph and Mary found

1. "Nemo est, o sanctissima, qui Dei cognitione repleatur, nisi per te; nemo est qui salvetur, nisi per te, o Deipara; nemo qui donum ex misericordia consequatur, nisi per te. Neque is nimis certe videbitur qui affirmet, eius maxime ductu auxilioque factum ut sapientia et instituta evangelica per asperitates offensionesque immanes, progressionem tam celerem ad universitatem nationum pervaserint, novo ubique iustitiae et pacis ordine inducto. Quod quidem sancti Cyrilli Alexandrini (*Hom. contra Nestorium*) animum et orationem permovit, ita Virginem alloquentis: Per te Apostoli salutem Gentibus praedicarunt . . . , per te Crux pretiosa celebratur toto orbe et adoratur . . . , per te fugantur daemones, et homo ipse ad coelum revocatur; per te omnis creatura idolorum errore detenta, conversa est ad agnitionem veritatis; per te fideles homines ad sanctum baptismum pervenerunt, atque ecclesiae sunt ubivis gentium fundatae.— Quin etiam sceptrum orthodoxae fidei, prout idem collaudavit doctor, praestitit illa valuitque: quae fuit eius non intermissa cura ut fides catholica perstaret in populis atque integra et fecunda vigeret." Leo XIII, *Adiutricem populi*.

2. *IIIa*, q.46, a.6, ad 5.— Also, ARISTOTLE, *loc. cit.*

Jesus in the Temple, she too had asked her Son the question: *Why hast Thou treated us so?* But Jesus answered with a question of His own: *What reason have you to search for me? Could you not tell that I must needs be in the place which belongs to my Father?* (LUKE, II, 48-49). The cry of the Son to the Father, the query of the Mother to her Son, the interrogatory reply of the Son to the Mother — referring to the Father —, all remain unanswered.<sup>1</sup> But we do know that *He went down with them on their journey to Nazareth, and lived there in subjection to them, while His Mother kept in her heart the memory of all this;* (LUKE, II, 51) and that *He did commend His spirit into the hands of the Father* (XXIII, 46) and achieved the work of Redemption (JOHN, XIX, 30).

All this is brought to the fore by the wording *Compassio Virginis*. The Compassion is attributed to the Virgin, because the name Virgin conveys the incomparable purity of the Mother. This consideration shows the relevance of the Immaculate Conception of Mary to her participation in the Passion of Christ.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore admirable that the spiritual writings of our time should mention the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sorrowful Heart of Mary in one breath, as it were.

#### VII. AND THY OWN SOUL

Let us now return to the prophecy of St. Simeon. *Et tuam ipsius animam pertransibit gladius: and thy very own soul a sword shall pierce.* It is because of her motherhood that the sword of the Passion does pierce her *own* soul. The Passion of Christ is at the same time her own Passion; the suffering is inflicted by the same sword. Now the Second Nocturn (taken from a sermon of St. Bernard) of the Feast of the Compassion shows most pointedly the fulfilment of this unity which we have so far stressed. "Yea, truly, O Blessed Mother, the sword pierced thy soul, for only by passing through thy soul could it penetrate the body of thy Son. And when this Jesus of thine had given up the ghost, and the cruel spear which opened His side could not touch His soul any more, it pierced through thine. His soul was certainly no longer there, but thine could not be torn thence. The sword of sorrow did indeed pierce through thy soul, so that we may truly call thee more than martyr in whom love which made thee suffer with thy Son far exceeded any bodily pain." When the soldier opened the side of Jesus with a spear, Our Saviour had already yielded up His spirit, and so He could no longer

1. The French theologian, Father Thomas-Marie Dehau, has pointed out the contrast and unity of these questions, in his admirable *Ève et Marie*, pp.357-362. (Presses Universitaires, Université Laval, Québec.)

2. "Ipsa fuit, quae vel propriae, vel hereditariae labis expers, arctissime semper cum Filio suo coniuncta, eundem in Golgotha, una cum maternorum iurium maternique amoris sui holocausto, nova veluti Eva, pro omnibus Adae filiis, miserando eius lapsu foedatis, Aeterno Patri obtulit; ita quidem, ut quae corpore erat nostri Capitis mater, spiritu facta esset, ob novum etiam doloris gloriaeque titulum, eius membrorum omnium mater. Ipsa fuit, quae validissimis suis precibus impetravit, ut Divini Redemptoris Spiritus, iam in Cruce datus, recens ortae Ecclesiae prodigialibus muneribus Pentecostes die conferretur." — PIUS XII, Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*.

suffer either in body or in soul. This spear did not pierce Christ the Man, only the body from which the soul was now departed. But this spear did pierce the soul of the Mother who was witness; of the Virgin who could still suffer, and whose soul took the place, as it were, of the soul of her Son. And so the spear did pierce both body and soul — the body of the Son and the soul of the Mother.

Now it is very important to realize that after the death of any other person, the body is no longer, properly speaking, a human body, but is so in appearance only; it is a mere corpse, it is separated from the person. In fact, although the human soul is immortal and can subsist apart from the body, yet the human person, which consists of both body and soul, ceases to be a person at death. But in the case of Christ, the person is a divine one, and although at His death the union of body and soul was dissolved — in which state Christ ceased to be a man — nevertheless the body as well as the soul remained united to the Person. That is why, even in death, the inanimate body remained really and truly the body of Christ.<sup>1</sup> It follows, then, that the soldier pierced, before her very eyes, the body of her Son, and not merely an unrelated corpse. The divine Person was still present in virtue of the sacred body — physically present to Mary at the foot of the cross. And thus was completed in the Virgin Mary that Redeeming Passion in which the Son had merited for her a share so intimate and quite ineffable.

#### VIII. "MAGNIFICAT" AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

Religious artists sometimes mislead us in their representation of Mary at the foot of the cross. Even so great a painter as Quentin Matsijs, in his *Deposition from the Cross*, shows Our Lady swooning. Outstanding theologians, such as Cajetan, have vigorously disapproved of such an interpretation. Their reason is convincing. It is entirely wrong to emphasize her suffering in a fashion apt to obscure her wondering and admiring knowledge, her deep awareness of what was going on in the Passion of her Son — a passion which was at the same time her own. Not only do we diminish Mary's participation in the Passion if we represent her in a state of physical and mental collapse; we forget that she retained her fulness of wisdom, her wondrous realization of the dimensions and proportions of this event; that she remained witness until the very resurrection of her Son.

We may call to mind, here, that the most intense suffering, far from being diminished by the joy which may remain in the higher part of the soul can, on the contrary, be deepened by it. This was true of Christ who, even in the fulness of His Passion, enjoyed the beatific vision, not only in His divinity but even in His human soul.<sup>2</sup> The contrarieties between the blessedness and the suffering of the same person only intensified that suffering. Likewise, we must not overlook the joy which

1. ST. THOMAS, *IIIa*, q.50, aa.2, 3, 4.

2. *Ibid.*, q.46, aa.7, 8.

transported Mary even in her deepest sorrow,<sup>1</sup> because of her limitless Faith in the merciful power of God — *He who is mighty, He whose name is holy, has wrought for me His wonders* (LUKE, I, 49) —; because of her Hope — *keeping his merciful design in remembrance, according to the promise which He made to our forefathers, Abraham and his posterity for evermore* (I, 55) —; because of her Charity towards God and her triumphant pity towards us. We should never consider the possibility of the slightest beclouding of her mind, lest we diminish at the same time the sorrow in her heart.

#### IX. THE TWO-EDGED SWORD

Some of the truths she did contemplate and feel in this Passion can be shown from the very words of the prophecy of Simeon. It is St. Ambrose who first enlightens us about their meaning. This doctor of the Church, in his Commentary on St. Luke, says — the passage is quoted by St. Thomas — that the sword signifies “Mary’s prudence which took note of the heavenly mystery. For the word of God is living and effectual, and more piercing than any two-edged sword.”<sup>2</sup> The term “prudence” must not be understood in the narrower sense, but rather of the wisdom of Mary: of her speculative as well as of her practical wisdom. Note that the last words of St. Ambrose are a quotation from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews: *God’s word is something alive, full of power: it can penetrate deeper than any two-edged sword, reaching the very division between soul and spirit, between joints and marrow, quick to distinguish every thought and design in our hearts* (IV, 12-13). St. Thomas, in his Commentary on this Epistle, tells us that the *word of God* (or, as it is also understood: *the word of God to us*) is none other than the *Word*, the Son of the Father, Christ. Christ, then, in this interpretation, is the sword mentioned in the prophecy of Simeon. This understanding may at first seem strange, for in what sense could Christ Himself be the sword of His own Passion? Yet, on closer consideration we realize — whether or no it is the precise meaning intended in this text of the prophecy and in the words of St. Paul — that there is a very profound sense in which Christ Himself is indeed the author, the planner and executor, of His Passion. He is such a sword as described by St. Paul, not only by reason of His divinity, but also by reason of His human soul.

We should consider first that He is the Word of God — the Uncreated Wisdom. Now, the order of Redemption is the fulness of the work of divine Wisdom which conceives all things, and it is *through the*

1. “Hinc Matris et Filii numquam dissociata consuetudo vitae et laborum, ut aequè in utrumque caderent Prophetæ verba: Defecit in dolore vita mea, et anni mei in gemitibus (Ps., xxx, 11). Quum vero extremum Filii advenit tempus, stabat iuxta Crucem Iesu Mater eius, non in immani tantum occupata spectaculo, sed plane gaudens quod Unigenitus suus pro salute generis humani offerretur, et tantum etiam compassa est, ut, si fieri potuisset, omnia tormenta quæ Filius pertulit, ipsa multo libentius sustineret.” PRUS X, *Ad diem illum*. — Cf. ST. ALBERT THE GREAT, *Quæstiones super Evangelium* “*Missus est*,” qq. 149-150.

2. IIIa, q. 27, a. 4, ad 2.

*Word that all things have been made* (JOHN, I, 3) — through this very Son who was born of the Virgin Mary, who humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. All this is contained within the conception of the Word. All this was fore-ordained from all eternity. It is the will of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. But it is the Son, the conception and image of the Father, who was sent to be born of the Virgin Mary and to bring about the new order by His death. Mary knows she is fore-ordained to suffer in this plan as she does, and how could she fail to realize that this sword who is her Son is a sword of conquest?

But even if we consider Christ in His human nature, He is still the sword of His own Passion, and therefore of the sorrowful compassion of His Mother, seeing that He was indirectly the cause of His own death. For this interpretation we have again the authority of the Angelic Doctor, who very plainly asked the question whether Christ was slain by Himself.

A thing may cause an effect in two ways: in the first instance by acting directly so as to produce the effect; and in this manner Christ's persecutors slew Him because they inflicted on Him what was a sufficient cause of death, and with the intention of slaying Him, and the effect followed, since death resulted from that cause. In another way someone causes an effect indirectly — that is, by not preventing it when he can do so; just as one person is said to drench another by not closing the window through which the shower is entering: and in this way Christ was the cause of His own Passion and death. For He could have prevented His Passion and death. Firstly, by holding His enemies in check, so that they would not have been eager to slay Him, or would have been powerless to do so. Secondly, because His spirit had the power of preserving His fleshly nature from the infliction of any injury; and Christ's soul had this power, because it was united in unity of person with the Divine Word, as Augustine says (*De Trin.* iv.). Therefore, since Christ's soul did not repel the injury inflicted on His body, but willed His corporeal nature to succumb to such injury, He is said to have laid down His life, or to have died voluntarily.<sup>1</sup>

Because, even in His human soul, He had every power to stay the arm of His executioners and yet voluntarily subjected Himself to their power — a power they receive from that same Word of the Father —, He was in this sense the author and sword of His own Passion. Note that He is the more deserving of the name "Sword" in that "the magnitude of the pain of Christ's suffering can be reckoned by this, that the pain and sorrow were accepted voluntarily, to the end of men's deliverance from sin; and consequently He embraced the amount of pain proportionate to the magnitude of the fruit which resulted therefrom."<sup>2</sup>

The Queen of Martyrs,<sup>3</sup> at the foot of the cross, knows all this most acutely and most wondrously, and the realization of it pierces her soul. The two-edged sword, the Word divine and human, attains both the Son and the Mother. But who knew better than she the power of her Son's

1. *IIIa*, q.47, a.1, c.

2. *IIIa*, q.46, a.6, c.

3. "Ipsa denique immensos dolores suos forti fidentique animo tolerando, magis quam Christifideles omnes, vera Regina martyrum, 'adimplevit ea quae desunt passionum Christi... pro Corpore eius, quod est Ecclesia (*Ad Col.*, I, 24).'" PIUS XII, *Mystici Corporis*.

weakness, and that in His deepest humiliation He was to vanquish? The *Magnificat* was in her heart, even at the foot of the cross. *Nigra sum, sed formosa.*

#### X. THE DIVISION BETWEEN SOUL AND SPIRIT

So far we have interpreted the meaning of the prophecy: *And thy own soul a sword shall pierce*, according to St. Bernard and St. Ambrose. There is one more interpretation, which St. Thomas calls to our attention. But before we read St. Basil's opinion, let us note that we do not have to choose one of these interpretations to the exclusion of the other. In fact, they all converge; and to neglect one of them would mean to lose sight of one important aspect of the same object. It is in this manner that St. Thomas and his disciples have taken these various understandings.

In fact, the meaning of the word *sword* we have just exposed leads quite naturally to the opinion of St. Basil. Here is how St. Thomas conveys it to us: "Others again take the sword to signify doubt. But this is to be understood of the doubt, not of unbelief, but of wonder and discussion. Thus Basil says (*Ep. ad Optim.*) that *the Blessed Virgin while standing by the cross, and observing every detail, after the message of Gabriel, and the ineffable knowledge of the Divine Conception, after that wondrous manifestation of miracles, was troubled in mind*: that is to say, on the one side seeing Him suffer such humiliation, and on the other considering His marvellous works."<sup>1</sup> Now this so-called doubt is most aptly expressed in the words of St. Paul: *God's word is something alive, full of power: it can penetrate deeper than any two-edged sword, reaching the very division between soul and spirit.* What, in the case of Mary at the foot of the cross, may be understood by this division of soul and spirit? It is the division we have already referred to: the division between the joy in the higher part, and the sorrow in the lower part, of Mary's soul. The joy did not allay the suffering, nor the suffering diminish the joy. They were, at that moment of extreme opposition, wholly divided, yet at the same time inseparable. Here, in the heart of Mary, *deep calls upon deep* (*Ps.*, xli, 8). She was transported by the divine Wisdom displayed in the Passion — that Wisdom of God which is foolishness to man; but that Wisdom would not have been realized without the suffering of her Son and the sorrow of His Mother.

#### XI. "UT REVELENTUR EX MULTIS CORDIBUS COGITATIONES"

Finally, we must not overlook that Mary not only willed the Passion of her Son, offering Him to the Father,<sup>2</sup> but gave humble consent to her

1. *IIIa*, q. 27, a. 4, ad 2.

2. "Ita cum Filio patiente et moriente passa est et paene commortua, sic materna in Filium iura pro hominum salute abdicavit placandaeque iustitiae, quantum ad se pertinebat, Filium immolavit, ut dici merito queat Ipsam cum Christo humanum genus redemisse."

BENEDICT XV, *Inter Sodalicia.*

own share in His sorrow. St. Basil aptly refers to the Annunciation, in which the Blessed Virgin chose to be the Mother of Jesus, i. e. of the Saviour — *that name which is greater than any other name* (*Ad Philipp.*, II, 9). Because of this voluntary acceptance, she may be called, with her Son, the *two-edged sword* of the Passion and of our redemption. *Hard and heavy and strong that sword is which the Lord carries; shall he not wreak his vengeance, in due time, upon the monstrous serpent that bars the gate?* (ISAIAH, XXVII, 1).

By reason of this compassion she too is a *sign which men will refuse to acknowledge*; (LUKE, II, 34)<sup>1</sup> but *she shall crush the head of the Serpent* — i. e. the faithless mind and will of him whose thoughts and designs are turned away from the One, toward the darkness and confusion of the many, and who was a *homicide from the beginning* (JOHN, VIII, 44) —, *while he does lie in wait at her heel* (*Gen.*, III, 15). The "heel" may be understood to mean that lower part of her immaculate soul ("anima" as opposed to "spiritus")<sup>2</sup> in which the Mother sorrowed. It is significant that Christian artists represent the Virgin crushing the head of the Serpent with her foot — an understanding which has the authority of Pius IX<sup>3</sup>.

One with her Son she is the *two-edged sword . . . quick to distinguish every thought and design in our hearts*, for she fathoms in a manner so universal our inmost life that without her mediation the thoughts and designs in our hearts cannot be unraveled.<sup>4</sup> As Simeon prophesied :

1. That this part of the prophecy applies to both Christ and Mary is plain from the words of Gregory of Nyssa (Ca 330-400) on the present passage, reported by St. THOMAS in the *Catena Aurea*: "Haec siquidem de filio dicuntur; spectant tamen ad ejus genetricem, dum singula sibi assumit simul periclitata et glorificata: nec tantum prospera, sed illi denuntiat etiam dolorosa; nam sequitur: *Et tuam ipsius animam pertransibit gladius*. In what sense she is a "signum, cui contradicetur", can be illustrated by the following words of Prus X: "Nimium scilicet haec comprobantur ex dolenda eorum ratione, qui, aut daemoneis aestu aut falsis opinionibus, adiutricem Virginem praeterire se posse autumant! Miseri atque infelices, praetextunt se Mariam negligere honorem, ut Christo habeant: ignorant tamen non inveniri puerum nisi cum Maria matre eius."

2. Cf. St. THOMAS, *In ad Hebr.*, cap.4, lect.2. Also CORNELIUS A LAPIDE, *In Pentat.*, III, 15.

3. "Quocirca sicut Christus Dei hominumque mediator, humana assumpta natura delens quod adversus nos erat chirographum decreti, illud cruci triumphator affixit, sic sanctissima Virgo arctissimo et indissolubili vinculo cum eo coniuncta una cum Illo et per illum sempiternas contra venenosum serpentem inimicitias exercens, ac de ipso plenissime triumphans illius caput immaculato pede contrivit." Prus IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*.

4. "Ad haec vero vix dici potest quantum amplitudinis virtutisque tunc accesserit, quum ad fastigium coelestis gloriae quod dignitatem eius claritatemque meritum decebat, est apud Filium assumpta? Nam inde, divino consilio, sic illa coepit advigilare Ecclesiae, sic nobis adesse et fovere mater, ut quae sacramenti humanae redemptionis patranda ministra fuerat, eadem gratiae ex illo in omne tempus derivandae esset pariter ministra, permissa ei poene immensa potestate. Hinc, recte admodum ad Mariam, velut nativo quodam impulsu adductae, animae christianae feruntur; cum ipsa fidenter consilia, et opera, angores et gaudia communicant; curaeque ac bonitati eius se suaque omnia filiorum more commendant. Hinc rectissime delata ei in omni gente omnique ritu ampla praeconia, suffragia crescentia saeculorum; inter multa, ipsam dominam nostram, mediatricem nostram ipsam reparatricem totius orbis, ipsam donorum Dei esse conciliatricem." LEO XIII, *Adiutricem populi*. — "Ipsa est caelestis veluti rivus, per quem gratiarum omnium atque donorum fluentia in miserorum mortalium sinum deducuntur." BENEDICT XIV, *Gloriosae Dominae*. — "Nemo est, o sanctissima, qui Dei cognitione repleatur nisi per te . . ." LEO XIII, see above, p.320, n.1.

*thy own soul a sword shall pierce, and the thoughts of many hearts shall be made manifest.* The compassion of the Virgin was such that she was made treasurer<sup>1</sup> and dispenser of all God's mercies towards us.<sup>2</sup>

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In view of the distinction we have drawn between sorrow and pity, is not in some sense the Mother of Sorrows at the foot of the cross also Mother of mercy? Most assuredly she is. The very aim of the Passion is none other than the exercise of mercy towards us. Mary did will this Passion of her Son, for our sake — out of pity for our miseries.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely with regard to us that the Mother of the one who is Mercy is both Mother and Queen of mercy.

CHARLES DE KONINCK.

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1. "Ab ipsa enim tamquam uberrimo ductu, coelestium gratiarum haustus derivantur: eius in manibus sunt thesauri miserationum Domini. Vult illam Deus bonorum omnium esse principium." LEO XIII, *Diurni temporis*.—"Hac spe erecti Deum Ipsum, per Eam in qua totius boni posuit plenitudinem, summis animi Nostri votis enixe obsecramus, ut maxima quaeque Vobis, Venerabiles Fratres, coelestium bonorum munera largiatur." LEO XIII, *Supremi Apostolatus*.

2. "[Deipara] sola tota facta domicilium universarum gratiarum, et quae, solo Deo excepto, exstitit cunctis superior, et ipsis Cherubim et Seraphim, et omni exercitu angelorum natura pulchrior, formosior et sanctior, cui praedicandae caelestes et terrenae linguae minime sufficiunt." — PIUS IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*.—"Maria est princeps largiendarum gratiarum ministra, thesauros promeritorum eius [i.e. Filii] materno veluti iure administrat." PIUS X, *Ad diem illum*.

3. "... Stabat iuxta crucem Iesu Maria Mater eius, quae tacta in nos caritate immensa ut susciperet filios, Filium ipsa ultro obtulit iustitiae divinae, cum eo commoriens corde doloris gladio transfixa." LEO XIII, *Iucunda semper*.