

"A Mystical Rose by Any Other Name . . . "

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR LADY'S GLORIOUS TITLES

by Mark Alessio

"How rightly, too, has every nation and every liturgy, without exception acclaimed Her great renown, which has grown greater with the voice of each succeeding century." [Pope Leo XIII]

There is no place for minimalism in the worship of the Living God. The very act of actually believing in God, of responding to the desire that He initiates in the soul, is to acknowledge a reality beyond the obvious. It means opening the door to things of such splendour, terror and magnitude, that the most fantastic science-fiction novel reads like a stock market report beside it. Once the truth that a supernatural reality operates behind the mundane is accepted, all expectations must be shelved in favor of an exhilarating, and frightening, disposition to be surprised at any turn.

Many people don't want this adventure, and have minimalised "spirituality" accordingly. A quiet afternoon of Zen meditation, ostensibly concerned with "detachment" or "becoming free from grasping," ultimately reduces reality to the confines of the human mind. The New Agers, on the other hand, embrace novelties ---- crystals, paraphernalia, modes of dress, music, ritual ---- but it is still the practitioners who ultimately dictate Truth and practice. Their "spirit guides" never seem to contradict them, whether the topic is abortion, homosexuality or sex. As intoxicating as their system maybe for them, it is definitely NO adventure. In an adventure, you don't know what's coming next. In "religions" initiated by men or demons, things will always tend in the direction that pleases their followers.

The basic problem of all man-made [i.e., non-Catholic] "religions" is that they are not "revealed" religions. They are crafted, sometimes carefully, the way someone will design a building or a park. But, without a hook-up to Revelation, to eternal truths that can be known by human beings, they're no more than withered branches. They may boast of cathedrals or gatherings attended by hundreds of thousands of worshipers, but there is no Divine connection involved to differentiate them from any government social agency or the Boy Scouts.

The True Faith, founded by God Himself, would of necessity be a rich one, opulent in its particulars. Mirroring the God Who is unfathomable, its doctrines and practices would need to be abundant and varied, otherwise we would find ourselves pondering a God Whose glories and Divinity would fit inside a shoe box. If the Living God chose to reveal Himself through His creation, we can only expect that this Self-Revelation would be multi-faceted. If a composer can restate a musical theme different times and with different subtle variations in a given piece of music, we can't be surprised when God does it in a given world: ours. In the symphony of praise rendered to Our Lady over the centuries, Her glories and privileges have been restated often, and most plainly in Her many titles.

A "title" is more than a description. It implies that the one holding it possesses an actual right or claim to it. It distinguishes one person from another through the recognition of rank, office or honour. It is as common for us to use titles in our daily lives, such as in the writing of correspondence, as it is to use our own names.

So, where does this innate human propensity for "titles" originate? We get it from the very One Who inspired one of His prophets to call Him "Counsellor" and "Prince of Peace," and Whose followers would come to know Him as the "Good Shepherd," the "Lamb of God" and the "Alpha and Omega." He is the One Who deigned, though He was and is God Himself, to call a humble human man, "Father." Make no mistake. Our Lord did not use words frivolously or meaninglessly. If Jesus Christ called St. Joseph, His legal father, by the venerable title "Father," then He made good on it by giving St. Joseph all the respect and heartfelt love due a father. And, being eternal and unchangeable, He still and always will adopt this attitude towards St. Joseph. Though He may not be a "respector of persons," God is very much a respector of those titles [and the people bearing them] which help to order His creation.

No Divine "Democracy"

The enemies of the Roman Catholic Church have always borne in their hearts a twin hatred: hatred of "altar and throne." Wishing to rule themselves, to free themselves from the Kingship of Christ even as some of them refer to

Him as "Lord," they desired the extinction of both the Papacy and Catholic Monarchy. To accomplish this, at least in the "theological" sphere, it was necessary to create a "flat" deity, a one-dimensional "god" to whom all creation was little more than a huge, bland "soup" ---- a mixture of beings with no strata, no hierarchy, no authority, no royalty and, ultimately, no virtue. Priests, Popes, Kings, Saints, Fathers and Doctors were to be disposed of as quickly as possible, as their very existence proved that God had indeed arranged affairs on His earth. Such a God gets in the way of human plans, demanding, as He does, submission to authority and reverence for certain of His creatures. The enemies of the True Faith preferred the "clockmaker" god of the Deists, who set the earth in motion and took off on a very extended vacation immediately afterwards, leaving human beings the job of ultimately creating "Truth." They were first careful, however, to do two things: slap a "Christian" veneer over this bland, powerless "god," and steal the Sacred Scriptures from the True Church, and alter them, should the need to justify themselves arise later . . . in much the same way that an under-aged drinker will carry with him a fake driver's license, should the need arise to justify his purchase of alcohol.

But, this flat, monotonously even reality of the anti-Catholics exists nowhere in reality, least of all in salvation history. Scripture records that God elects certain individuals to prominent places. We find God's words to Rebecca concerning the sons, Esau and Jacob, growing in Her womb: "The elder shall serve the younger ." [Gen. 25:23] In the Book of Leviticus, God commands Moses to "take Aaron with his sons . . . and gather together all the congregation to the door of the tabernacle," after which Moses "vested the high priest with the strait linen garment". [Lev. 8:2, 3, 7] When Samuel was instructed by the Lord to anoint a new King, he travelled to Bethlehem and examined the seven sons of Isaias. His answer to Isaias was, "The Lord hath not chosen anyone of these." When young David was presented, the Lord said, "Arise and anoint him, for this is he." [1 Kg. 16:10,12]

Likewise, we learn the New Testament that "there hath not risen among them that are born of woman a greater than John the Baptist." [St. Matthew 11:11] During the Last Supper, we find that one man has been selected to lead his fellow Apostles: "Simon, Simon . . . I have prayed for thee . . . and thou, being once converted, confirm thy brethren." [St. Luke 22:31-32] So, the distinctions of priesthood, royalty, ecclesial authority ---- not to mention the fact that human beings are precious but hardly "equal" in the eyes of God ---- are facts of life, even though our society, inheriting its notion of "equality" from the diabolical architects of the French Revolution, finds this truth a hard one to stomach. The Protestant "reformers" were happy to imagine a "god" with no interest in a "hands on" approach to His world. By their reasoning, God began His Church with a "false start" [i.e., Roman Catholicism] and allowed it to languish in serious error for a whopping fifteen hundred years, when all the while He just wanted a few outgoing critics to read His book and carry on as they felt. With no superiors, no Saints and no religious obligations, the playing field was as level as an Iowa cornfield, and the threat of "altar and throne," with their requirements of humility and obedience, vanished.

But on the contrary, God was careful in the ordering of His world. He was careful to choose David over his brothers, to choose Aaron as high priest, to prescribe rites and offerings for His people to observe, to leave His Apostles with order, not anarchy, after His Ascension . . . and to send courageous Catholic monarchs into the world to protect God's people and their holy Faith.

Mary, "Mother of God"

In an accurate and filial understanding of Christianity, the proper veneration of the Blessed Virgin ---- made manifest in the reverence shown to Her glorious titles ---- is one of the most elegant examples of the order superimposed by Our Saviour on His Creation. The recognition of these titles places us in a balanced, proper relationship with the Sacred, by allowing us to exercise humility while still being able to take a certain "pride" in the promise of "adoption" held out by Our Lord. The observance of Mary's titles offers us the opportunity to approach God with a paradoxical combination of holy fear and confident boldness. Small wonder, as our God seems to delight always in such paradoxes. The same Lord Who said "Learn from Me for I am meek and humble of heart" would later reveal to His captors, "Thinkest thou that I cannot ask My Father, and He will give Me presently more than twelve legions of Angels?"

So critical to a correct understanding of Christianity is the veneration of Our Lady through Her proper titles, that

the Council of Ephesus [431 A.D.] defined one of them, "Theotokos" [Mother of God], not for reasons of sentiment or piety, but as a bulwark against heresy and a safeguard for the Truth of the Incarnation. And this is fitting, for it is this title that supports and illuminates all the others, the hub from which the others are spokes radiating outwards. Even the heretic Martin Luther, in a rare moment of sanity and lucidity, could write: "Hence men and women have crowned all Her glory into a single word, calling Her the Mother of God . . . It needs to be pondered in the heart what it means to be the Mother of God."

This quote is useful, regardless of its source. The title "Mother of God " does need to be pondered. It is unique in the history of Creation and can never be copied. And, were those three words the only title or description ever given to the Blessed Virgin in the last two thousand years, they would still define Her as the most holy and unique of created beings, for, as God has so ordained it, we cannot have an Incarnate Saviour without His Mother. Their relationship, established since the beginning of time, is etched in stone. Given the hard, straightforward fact of this relationship, St. Maximilian Kolbe could write:

"She Herself is indeed only a creature, but next to God She is a being so lofty that in order to understand the meaning of the words "Mother of God" it is necessary to understand the nature the nature of God." ¹

St. Maximilian speaks of the nature of God here, and it's when we ponder the "nature" of the God-man that the "loftiness" of Mary becomes manifest. her relationship to Jesus Christ wasn't one of convenience for the God-man, or something useful but coincidental to His plan. He clothed His Divinity in Mary's very substance. He took Her very substance as His own. Because of this, the Blessed Virgin cooperated with the Holy Trinity in a manner both miraculous and intimate. So closely does Our Lord identify His Mother with His salvific work that St. Maximilian goes on to say:

"Mary Immaculate is the personification of God's mercy. Therefore, whoever goes against Her alienates this mercy from himself and draws to himself the justice of God. A little child leaving his mother's breast dies from starvation. Similarly, he who goes away from the Blessed Mother will die of spiritual hunger." ²

The Litany of Loreto

Some of Our Lady's most well-known titles are preserved in the Litany of Loreto, which was approved by Pope Sixtus V in 1587, but could have originated as early as the end of the 12th Century. This collection of Marian titles is interesting in a number of ways. It enshrines both Old and New Testament imagery to form an expansive verbal tapestry, offering a panoramic view of the Blessed Mother's place in salvation history . So, She is invoked there not only as "Holy Mother of God" and "Mother of the Church," but also as "Seat of Wisdom," "Ark of the Covenant," and "Tower of David." The divisions between the "Testaments" melt away in this Litany, and the plan of God for our Redemption seems to flow across the centuries uninterruptedly, with logic and thoroughness. The womb of the Mother of God, the first of all Tabernacles, is superimposed over its "type" [i.e., foreshadowing], the Ark of the Covenant, and all the proper connections come to light.

The structure of the Litany makes these connections evident. The invocations are layered in a deliberate way. We begin with Mary's maternal titles: "Mother of Christ, " "Mother Most Pure," "Mother of Good Counsel," etc. Since it is Our Lady's Divine Motherhood that forms the basis of ALL Her glories and privileges, it is both right and informative to invoke this Maternity at the start of the Litany. By doing so, the Incarnation is planted as the bedrock, the very reason for our veneration of the Lady who presented the God-Man to us, clothed in visible flesh.

From the maternal titles, the Litany moves on to the titles praising Our Lady's virginity: "Virgin Most Prudent," "Virgin Most Renowned," "Virgin Most Powerful," etc. Again, this is the logical progression. The fact of the Divine Motherhood points inescapably to a virginal Motherhood, to a purity that must accompany the conception and birth of He Whom the Angel Gabriel would describe as "the Son of the Most High." And, moreover, this virginal purity must be abiding, "perpetual," otherwise there is no consistency to God's actions. If Our Lady's purity were not an abiding one, then we would have God carefully planning the Virginal Conception and Birth of His Son from the beginning of time, only to have this honoured, Divinely-bestowed purity discarded at the first opportunity. If this were the case, why have a virginal conception in the first place? Some might answer, "To prove the Divinity of Jesus." If this were the only reason, then why would God have placed St. Joseph on the scene, as a shield for Mary's honour and actual

foster-father to His Son? When addressing the crowds who gathered to hear Him speak, Our Lord didn't tell them to consider His Virgin Birth, but to look at His works, if they wished to understand that He had come from God.

No, the virginity of Mary was more than a mere required condition for the birth of Her Son. It was substantial; it was part of who and what She was and is. So, the Litany of Loreto offers high praise to this virginity on the heels of its praise to the Divine Maternity, which was its foundation. Then, after these praises of Mary's motherhood and virginity, the Litany praises the roles bestowed on Mary as a result of this Virginal Maternity. Again, it's a clearly stated doctrinal progression. After we recognize and praise Mary's motherhood and virginity, we proclaim just what this twin office entitles Her to do on our behalf. Here, the Litany invokes Her under titles such as "Seat of Wisdom," "Gate of Heaven," "Refuge of Sinners," while not ignoring some allusions to Her mystery and beauty [again, the results of Her Virginal Motherhood]: "Cause of our Joy," "Mystical Rose," "Morning Star," etc.

How can mankind be stingy in praise of God's Mother when He has honoured her more highly than we can ever dream of? And yet, we try. The development of the Litany of Loreto is a concrete example of just how strongly the desire to love and praise Mary is set into our hearts by the Holy Ghost. Over the years, new titles have been added to this Litany, as history proves again and again the love of this Great Lady for Her children. One notable example is the title, "Queen of the Most holy Rosary," which was added to the Litany by Pope Leo XIII and can trace its origin back to the "Feast of the Holy Rosary," instituted to commemorate the famous victory over the Turkish fleet at Lepanto on October 7, 1571. ³

The words of Pope Leo, recorded in His Apostolic Letter, *Salutaris ille* [December 24, 1883], are an eloquent testimony to the need of Christians to recognize Our Lord's bounty and honour it accordingly:

" . . . the Rosary was instituted chiefly to implore the protection of the Mother of God against the enemies of the Catholic Church, and, as everyone knows, it has often been most effectual in delivering the Church from calamities.

"To the honour, therefore, of Mary, the august Mother of God, for a perpetual remembrance of the prayer for Her protection offered among all nations to Her most pure heart throughout the month of October; as an enduring testimony of the unbounded trust which We put in Our loving Mother, and in order that We may day by day, more and more obtain Her favourable aid, We will and decree that in the Litany of Loreto, after the invocation, 'Queen conceived without Original Sin,' shall be added the suffrage, 'Queen of the Most Holy Rosary, pray for us!'" ⁴

We can really see in this Letter how concrete is the reason for honouring Our Lady and recognizing Her glorious titles. Contrary to the anti-Catholic view, we don't honour the Mother of God because our psyches harbor a vestigial desire to worship the pagan goddesses and earth-mothers of the dim past, or because it's a "colourful" thing to do, a sort of "verbal incense." The Pope's strong, clear words remind us that this veneration is grounded in cold, hard experience. It may be extravagant at times, or poetic, but that's because it has to be. No other approach would suit the subject. We tailor our praise around the reality of what we are praising. In doing so, we don't create random titles for Our Lady. Instead, using our God-given intellects, we recognize the truths which are reflected in them, and seek to express these truths. It's what both scientists and poets have been doing for countless centuries and it's as practical as any human endeavour can be.

The Akathist Hymn

Centuries before Pope Sixtus V approved the Litany of Loreto, the Byzantine Church brought forth a hymn of praise to Our Lady, the "Akathist" Hymn. Although this poetic masterpiece has been dated as far back as the mid-5th to early 6th Centuries, it bears a dedication commemorating the rescue of the city of Constantinople, when a besieging fleet of Persian ships was scattered by a powerful wind and wrecked ashore near the church of the Theotokos at Blakhernae in 626. The name "Akathist," which refers to a hymn sung "while standing," attests to the solemn and public nature of this prayer. It was also prayed as a means of invoking the Virgin's aid during military campaigns. ⁵

The "Akathist" Hymn is a work of heartfelt and intense praise to the Mother of God. It incorporates short narrative sections drawn from the Gospels and legend with sections wherein Mary is praised through a multitude of titles and imagery. It is both artistically opulent and doctrinally rich, a fruit truly representative of the early Byzantine Church. Part One of the "Akathist" Hymn relates, in poetic form, the Annunciation and Visitation. There we find the Angel Gabriel joyfully addressing Mary:

Hail, Revocation of Adam's fall!
Hail, Redemption of the weeping Eve!
Hail, for you are the throne of the King!
Hail, for you bear Him Who bears all things!
Hail, Star heralding the Sun!

There is a touching exuberance to the demeanour of Gabriel shown when Our Lady questions him about the means by which the Savior will be conceived. As though he can't bear to leave off his praises, the Angel immediately continues:

Hail, for you are the beginning of Christ's wonders!
Hail, Heavenly Ladder by which God has down!
Hail, Bridge by which those of earth are borne to Heaven!

The author of the "Akathist" points throughout his prayer to the attitude we should observe in venerating the Mother of God. Such honour, ultimately offered to the Holy Trinity, must of necessity be generous and unreserved. We'll see that such is the attitude of all the speakers who address Mary in the "Akathist."

Part One of the Hymn relates how St. John the Baptist, leaping with joy at the Visitation, offers praises to the Virgin from his mother's womb:

Hail, for You bear the loving Bearer of Life!
Hail, Meadow land yielding a rich harvest of mercies!
Hail, acceptable incense ---- cloud of Intercession!
Hail, O mortals' Covenant with God!

In the lofty praises sung by Gabriel and St. John, a clear sense of Our lady's role of Mediatrix, flowing naturally from Her title, "Mother of God," is evident. Part Two of the "Akathist" begins with praises offered by the Shepherds to Mary at the Birth of the Saviour:

Hail, Sheepfold for rational sheep!
Hail, Opener of celestial portals!
Hail, O solid Foundation of Faith!
Hail, O shining Pattern of Grace!

Later on, the Magi also enter the picture with their own spirited encomiums:

Hail, Daybreak of the mystical Day!
Hail, O You who have cast out the inhuman tyrant of old!
Hail, O You who deliver from the fire of passions!
Hail, Gladness of all generations!

In Part Three of the "Akathist," the people redeemed by Jesus Christ, the Son of both God and Mary, are given their opportunity to praise their Holy Mother:

Hail, O Tree of richly splendid fruit which sustains believers!
Hail, O You who are the birth-giver of the captives' Redeemer!
Hail, Mediatrix before the righteous Judge!
Hail, Mercy for all those who have sinned!
Hail, most excellent Tabernacle of Him Who is adored by the Seraphim!
Hail, O You through whom Paradise is opened!

It is fitting that a redeemed people should focus their words of praise on the opening of Paradise and the mercy available through the merits and beneficence of the Incarnate Word. And, like Gabriel and the Baptist before them,

they naturally and unfailingly turn their thoughts towards the Mother whose sacred womb spanned the distance between Heaven and earth, thus clearing and opening a passageway that had been blocked by the fall of our first parents.

Praise to Mary by the redeemed people of God continues in the Fourth and last section of the Hymn, in a series of titles that proclaim Her labors as Mediatrix, Dispensatrix of Grace, Defender of the Church and sure Guide of Christians:

Hail, Cause of flight to the Corrupter of souls!

Hail, Distributor of God's benevolence!

Hail, unshakable Tower of the Church!

Hail, O you through whom our victories are won!

We noted earlier that the "theological" reasons prompting us to venerate and honor the Blessed Virgin rest on Her twofold offices of Mother and Virgin, offices mirrored in the Catholic Church herself which "generates" spiritual offspring through the cleansing of Baptism and nourishment of the Sacraments. This twin office of the Virgin is highlighted powerfully in the "Akathist." Each section of praise, each grouping of imagery and titles in honor of Mary --- whether attributed to the Angel Gabriel, the Shepherds, the Magi, St. John the Baptist, or the People of God --- closes with the same line: "Hail, O Bride and spotless Maiden!" It is a refrain that is sounded throughout the Hymn, grounding this breathtaking collection of celestial praises upon the earthy, all-too-human reality of Nazareth and Bethlehem.

Conclusion

The Litany of Loreto and the "Akathist" Hymn are only two of the many examples throughout history where a recognition of Our Lady's glories combines equal portions of poetry and prayer to produce descriptions of Her that are practical and beautiful, both doctrinally sound and pleasing to the ear and heart. Some of these titles have become miniature prayers unto themselves: "Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us," or "Mary, Refuge of Sinners, pray for us." Others, like "Ark of the Covenant," remind us always of the intimate relationship that existed and ever will exist between Jesus and Mary, who carried Him in Her womb for nine months.

The invocations and titles of the Litany and the "Akathist," and all those addressed to Our Lady throughout the centuries, point directly to Her privileges, the privileges bestowed upon Her by a God Who is not mean-spirited or frugal in His gifts. If they sometimes sound extravagant, it only means that they have succeeded in coming that much closer to the Divine honour Our Lord paid to Mary by choosing Her to be His Mother.

The Blessed Virgin's first and greatest title, "Mother of God," is bequeathed to us in the Gospel of St. Luke, where St. Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Ghost, calls Mary "the Mother of my Lord." And, whenever we offer fitting praise to this Mother through Her glorious titles, we imitate the Blessed Trinity in a very concrete way. For, as is recorded in the Gospels, each Divine Person of the Trinity bestows a particular title of honour on the Blessed Virgin. God the Father, through His messenger Gabriel, gives Her the title "Full of Grace." God the Son, addressing St. John from the Cross, publicly recognizes Her title of "Mother" of all mankind ["Behold your mother"]. And, again, God the Holy Ghost, through St. Elizabeth, enshrines forever Her title of "Theotokos" [Mother of God]. Taken together, these Divine appellations teach us without any possibility of doubt that the Virgin Mary is the Immaculate Mother of God and Men, and a Treasury of Grace.

If such is the honour paid directly to Our Blessed Mother by the Eternal God, how can we even dare to suggest that our own poor human praises can ever be either sufficient or over-abundant? On the contrary, we would have a long way to go to reach either condition.

A few more lines from the "Akathist" make a perfect summary on the subject. There is a brief collect --- a depiction of the Annunciation scene --- appended to the Hymn as a closing prayer. We can profit by dwelling upon the attitude of the Angel Gabriel towards Mary in these few lines:

Gabriel beheld in amazement,

"O Mother of God,

*Your holiness and
Your purity's splendor;
And he cried out to you:
"How shall I praise you?
How shall I address you?
I am hesitant; I marvel!
But, as I was commanded,
I shall greet You:
Hail, full of grace!"*

In this striking prayer Gabriel is almost troubled before the Virgin, but his consternation is born of sheer joy and gratitude to God . . . and how to express such thanks in words. What of the anti-Catholics who are likewise troubled before Mary, but with a consternation born of resentment and contempt? Which of the two imitates the Holy Trinity revealed in Sacred Scripture?

The answer is simple. If we take our cue on the manner to be adopted in approaching Our Blessed Mother from the Holy Trinity, we will find that all Her titles, honours and glories flow swiftly and easily from Her supreme title, "Mother of God." And, if all our praise of the Virgin is ultimately rendered to the glory of the Triune God, then this praise will try to mirror the bounty of that very God. It will be accordingly, generous, ornate, varied, heartfelt and presented with both insight and abandon. It will also, in the process, bring much happiness to the one offering it . . . as well it should.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Quoted from *Mary Immaculate in the Writings of St. Maximilian Kolbe, OFM, Conv.* [1987, Augustine Publishing Company].

2. Ibid.

3. *Meditations and Instructions on the Blessed Virgin For the Use of the Clergy and the Faithful*, by A. Vermeersch, SJ. [Newman Press, 1954 . . . originally published in 1909].

4. Quoted from *Papal Teachings: Our Lady*, selected & arranged by the Benedictine Monks of Solesmes. [St. Paul Editions, 1961].

5. *The Office of the Akathist* by Edward F. James, MA [Montfort publications, 1959]. All quotes from the "Akathist" Hymn are taken from this edition.
