

MARY, MOTHERHOOD, AND THE HOME

by Fulton J. Sheen

THE PERFECTION of all motherhood is Mary, the Mother of Jesus, because she is the only mother in all the world who was “made to order” by her Divine Son. No creature can create his own mother. He can paint a picture of his own mother, for, in the field of art, the artist pre-exists his product; he is a symbol of God the Creator pre-existing His creatures. All art is an imitation of the Divine Artist Who, from all eternity, possessed in His Divine mind the archetypal ideas according to which He made the world in time. The most famous painting of a mother is probably that by Whistler. Once, when complimented on its beauty, he answered: “You know how it is; one tries to make one’s mother as nice as possible.”

Our Divine Lord pre-existed His own Mother existentially, as Whistler pre-existed his mother artistically. Every bird, every flower, every tree has been made according to an idea existing in the mind of God from all eternity. When He came into the world at Bethlehem, He was unlike anyone ever born; creation was no stranger to Him. He was like a bird that might have made the nest in which he was hatched. He came into the universe as a master into His own house or as an artist into his own studio. The universe was His and the fullness thereof.

In a particular way He created His own Mother. He thought of her before she was born, as the poet thinks of his poem before it is written. He conceived her in His eternal mind before she was conceived in the womb of her mother, St. Ann. In an improper sense, when she was conceived eternally in the pure mind of God, that was her first “Immaculate Conception.” In the Mass of that feast, the Church puts into her mouth the words from the Book of Proverbs, saying that from all eternity God had thought of her, even before the mountains were raised and the valleys were leveled.

The Lord made me his when first he went about his work, at the birth of time, before his creation began. Long, long ago, before earth was fashioned, I held my course. Already I lay in the womb, when the depths were not yet in being, when no springs of water had yet broken; when I was born, the mountains had not yet sunk on their firm foundations, and there were no hills; not yet had he made the earth, or the rivers, or the solid framework of the world. I was there when he built the heavens, when he fenced in the waters with a vault inviolable, when he fixed the sky overhead, and leveled the fountain-springs of the deep. I was there when he enclosed the sea within its confines, forbidding the waters to transgress their assigned limits, when he poised the foundations of the world. I was at his side, a master workman, my delight increasing with each day, as I made play before him all the while; made play in this world of dust, with the sons of Adam for my play-fellows. Listen to me, then, you that are my sons, that follow, to your happiness, in the paths I shew you; listen to the teaching that will make you wise, instead of turning away from it. Blessed are they who listen to me, keep vigil, day by day, at my threshold, watching till I open my doors. The man who wins me, wins life, drinks deep of the Lord’s favor; who fails, fails at his own bitter cost; to be my enemy is to be in love with death [Prov. 8: 22-36].

But God not only “thought” about Mary. He actually created her soul and infused it into a body, co-created by her parents. It was through her portals as the Gate of Heaven that He would come into the world. If God labored six days in preparing a paradise for man, He would spend a longer time preparing a paradise for His Divine Son. As no weeds grew in Eden, so no sin would arise in Mary, the paradise of the Incarnation. Most unbecoming it would be for the sinless Lord to come into the world through a woman afflicted with sin. A barn door cannot fittingly serve as an entrance to a castle.

God in His mercy remits original sin after our birth in the Sacrament of Baptism; it is only natural that He should grant a special privilege to His Mother and remit her original sin before she was born. This is what is meant by the Immaculate Conception: namely that, by the special grace and privilege of Almighty God, and in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, the Blessed Virgin Mary was preserved from every stain of original sin at the first moment of her conception. She was, in the improper sense, “immaculately conceived” in the mind of God from all eternity. But in the proper sense of the word, she was immaculately conceived in the womb of her mother in time. Mary, therefore, is no afterthought in the mind of God. As Eden was the paradise of perfect delight for man, so Mary became the Eden of

innocence for the Son of Man. For the simple reason that the Son of God chose her from among all women to be His Mother, it follows that she above all women is the model Mother of the world.

No mother was ever favorably known to the world except through her children. No one ever heard of the mother of Judas, but all know Mary through Jesus. The painting of Whistler's mother bears on the back of its canvas the portrait of Whistler himself as a boy. Even in art, the child and mother are inseparable. As one cannot go to a statue of a mother holding a child and cut away the mother without destroying the child, so neither can one have Jesus without His Mother. Could you claim as a friend one who, every time he came into your home, refused to speak to your mother or treated her with cold indifference? Jesus cannot feel pleased with those who never give recognition to or show respect for His Mother. Coldness to His Mother is certainly not the best way to keep warm a friendship with Him. The unkindest cut of all would be to say that she who is the Mother of our Lord is unworthy of being our Mother.

To show her veneration is not to adore her. Only God may be adored. Mary is an abstraction of love from Love. All the myth-creations of the upward struggling of men and far-off yearnings for a mother of mothers in such crudities as Penelope, Isis, Astarte, and Diana were unconscious, prophetic witnesses to a fulfillment in Mary, whom Francis Thompson has called:

*Sweet stem of that Rose,
Christ, which from the earth
Sucks our poor prayers,
conveying them to Him.*

Love for Mary no more derogates from Christ's Divinity than the setting robs the jewel, or the hearth the flame, or the horizon the sun. She exists but to magnify the Lord, and that was the song of her life. Knowing her as the Tower of Ivory, He climbs up the stairs of her encircling virtues, to "kiss upon her lips a mystic rose." Acknowledging her as the Gate of Heaven, through her portals He comes to us. He who slams the gate in the face of the Queen bars the entrance of Heaven. If the world lost the Mother, it also lost the Son. It may well be that, as the world returns to love of Mary, it will also return to a belief in the Divinity of Christ. The reason that Mary should be honored above all mothers was given by her cousin: "How have I deserved to be thus visited by the mother of my Lord" [Luke 1: 43]? The Angel Gabriel also gave the answer when he saluted her as "full of grace." But her Son gave the best and perfect answer when He willed her to us from the Cross.

Mary is, first of all, the model of the family. In the Annunciation story, there appears the action of the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. God the Father sends the Angel to announce that He will send His Son to be conceived in her and that this will take place through the Holy Spirit. When Mary accepts, a new society begins; a human family among human families, which is at one and the same time an ideal and an earthly trinity. In all other families there is father, mother, and child. In this family there is Child, Mother, and Father. It is the Child Who makes the family; it is the Child Who created the parents. Next to Him comes the Mother, for she alone, through the Holy Spirit, conceived the Son in her virgin womb. Finally comes Joseph, the foster father chosen by God to be protector of the group and, for that reason, protector of the Church, which is the expansion of that original family. All through the preceding ages, from the crudest wigwam where spouse lighted fire for spouse to the castle of the prince and princess, wherein the two looked down on heirs of earthly kingdoms, mankind has been looking either forward or backward to that Divine Family, in which God veiled the glory of His Divinity and became flesh through the selfless love of Mary under the strong and reverent wardship of Joseph.

That home of Nazareth, wherein the earthly trinity lived its round of mutual love and obedience, was indeed different from any other home. It had to be; otherwise it could not have been the prototype. The pattern cannot be the cloth, nor the original the copy, nor the example the thing exemplified. The Child was God's Son. Eternally generated in the bosom of the heavenly Father, He had no earthly father, only a kindly carpenter who acted as a foster sire. Mary, the Mother, was different from all mothers, for she conceived that Son with a passionless passion of a soul, as the love of her Creator

supplied the passion of a soul in the place of the passion of a creature. Passion is love in bondage; it is the spirit in us straining at the leash of the flesh; it is like an eagle made for the flights over mountain tops, yet caged within a canary's range. For this one time in history, love, by being emptied of passion, is permitted to spread its wings and fall in love with Love. "For it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child." [Matt. 1: 20]

Because Nazareth was so different, it is since then so imitable. Because it is the light, we can see our way. Once that earthly trinity stood revealed, the family could never again be the result of a lease or a contract alone; it would be a union, a fellowship, as indissoluble as the Trinity of which it was the reflection. Nazareth tells us the kind of love that makes a home, namely, Divine Love on a pilgrimage into time from eternity.

There is but one life, because there is but one Source of life. The life in flower and plant and the life in man and woman is but the slowly smoldering spark caught up in a clay-kindled flame from the eternal fires of God. Man could not call God "Father" unless He had a Son; and we could not be sons of the Father unless from all eternity the Heavenly Father had made us "to be molded into the image of His Son" [Rom. 8: 29]. Because images become blurred, the Father sent His Son to this earth to teach us the manner of beings He had eternally meant us to be. Human generation had thus become ennobled, because it is the reflection of that eternal generation in which life flows from Life and then goes marching, in created forms, through all the kingdoms of earth, with such force and vitality that death alone can conquer it. Here is the pattern of all fatherhood, all generations, and all life-giving processes, for in it love overflows into Love! This is the beginning of the earthly family: the original of Nazareth.

Because Divine Love as a Messiah came to earth, it became natural that husband and wife should not only give themselves to one another in mutual sacrifice but also should recover themselves in the love of their children, who tie them together as father and mother as the Holy Spirit is the bond of unity between Father and Son. If human love fails, it is because it is short-circuited, not directed to a mutual incarnation of love but rather turned back upon itself, where it dies of its own too-much. Without the child as the bond of mutuality, or at least the desire for the child, passion can end in mutual slaughter. But with the child, love discovers itself to be immortal. By giving its flesh and blood as a kind of earthly eucharist, it lives on what it feeds.

Marriage must end in the family, at least in intention if not in act; for only through the family does life escape exhaustion and weariness by discovering its duality to be trinity, by seeing its love continually reborn and renown, by having its mutual self-giving transformed into receiving. Love thus defeats death, as it defeats exhaustion. It achieves a kind of immortality as self-renewal becomes self-preservation. God is eternal society; Three Persons in one Divine Nature. The family is human society; mutual self-giving, which ends in self-perfection.

Deep mystery is hidden in the fact that Mary "conceived by the Holy Spirit." It meant that the love that begot her child was not human love. A child is the fruit of love. But, in this one instance, the love that begot was the love of God, which is the Third Person of the Trinity. Under the sun one needs no candle. When conception takes place through Spirit love, there is no need of human love. The virgin birth did not imply that Mary conceived without love; it only meant that she conceived without passion. Birth is impossible without love. Human husband love is unnecessary if God sends His Spirit of Love. Where there is no love, there is no family.

To Mary alone was given the gift of bearing a child directly through God. But, in a lesser way, every child is born of God. The parents cannot create the soul of the child; that must come from God. Flesh cannot beget spirit. At the very beginning of the human race, Eve, in the ecstasy of the first-born in the world, cried out: "I have been enriched by the Lord with a man-child" [Gen. 4: 1]. "By the Lord," but using the intermediary of man, Mary, the new Eve, in the ecstasy of her first-born could cry: "I have been enriched by the Lord with a man-child," without the intermediary of man; because she was begetting the new Adam, the new head of the human race. As in the Trinity there are Three Persons in one Divine Nature, as in Adam there are millions of human persons in one fallen human nature, so in Christ there are millions of human persons in one regenerated human nature. "In Adam," man with his heritage of sin can become "in Christ," with a heritage of grace.

The Trinity as the ideal family is the model not only for the human family, but also the model for the family of nations

and the human race. The Giver, the Receiver, the Gift were first reflected in Adam, Eve, and their offspring, and later at Bethlehem in Child, Mother, and Father. “Beloved, let us love one another; love springs from God; no one can love without being born of God, and knowing God” [1 John 4: 7]. Mary also reveals the beautiful relationship that ought to exist between mother and children.

There really is such a thing in the world as two hearts with but a single thought. Hearts are like vines; they intertwine and grow together. One can give his heart away, but since there is no life without a heart, one must receive another in return, or die. Deep love does not so much exist between two hearts as between one heart in two bodies. A community of interests, thoughts, desires develop as if from two mountain currents a single river flowed.

What makes parting and death so tragic to lovers is that it is not two hearts that are separating but one heart that is being broken in two. A broken heart is not the fracture of a single heart, but the rupture of two hearts once united in the rapture of a single love. In fear, one’s heart can be in one’s mouth; but in love, one’s heart is in the beloved. And since each of us has only one heart, it can be given away only once.

No two hearts in the world ever grew together like the hearts of a Mother and a Son: Jesus and Mary. “Where your treasure-house is, there your heart is, too” [Matt. 6: 21]. His treasure was His Mother, her Treasure was her Son. These two hearts, the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, kept their treasures in one another and in the sovereign will of the Father. In a certain sense, there were not two hearts but one, so deep was the love for each, so at one were their wills, so united were their minds.

These two hearts, the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, threw defiance to the world’s warning not to wear your heart upon your sleeve, for they wooed the world openly. Shakespeare wrote: “I will not wear my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at.” But the Savior, wearing His heart upon His sleeve, said: “Come to me, all you that labor and are burdened; I will give you rest” [Matt. 11: 28]. The love of Jesus and Mary for mankind was so open, they left their hearts exposed to every errant dart from the bow of sinful man. Standing at the portals of every heart in the world, each could say: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” They would break down no doors; the latches are on the inside; only we can open them. Because they have wooed, they can be wounded.

The Sacred Heart gave an example to children by allowing His Incarnate Life to be formed by the Immaculate Heart of His Mother. No other human being in the world contributed to His Sacred Heart. She was the anvil on which the Holy Spirit, amidst the flames of love, hammered out the human nature with which the eternal Word of God was one. From her own body and blood, as a human eucharist, He was nourished for life in the world. As the vineyard of His wine, as the wheat field of His bread, she supplied the materials for that Divine Eucharist, which, if a man eat, he will live forever. As friends and relatives crowded about to seek resemblances, they found them double. He resembled His Heavenly Father, for He was indeed “the splendor of His glory; the image of His substance. “ But He resembled His Mother, too, for, reversing Eden, man now comes from a woman, and not woman from a man. “He was bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh.”

So submissive was He to her care that the door that slammed in her face in Bethlehem also slammed on Him. If there was no room for her in the inn, then there was no room for Him. As she was the ciborium before He was born, so she was His monstrance after Bethlehem. To her fell the happy lot of exposing, in the chapel of a stable, the “Blessed Sacrament,” the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ. She enthroned Him for adoration before Wise Men and shepherds, before the very simple and the very learned. Through her hands He received His first gifts, which as all mothers do, she would keep until He “grew up.” None of them were toys. One of these gifts was gold, because He was King; another was frankincense, because He was Teacher; but the third gift was bitter myrrh for His burial, because He was Priest and Redeemer. Myrrh, signifying death, was accepted by her as a sign that, even at the crib, she would help fashion Him for the Cross and the redemption, for that was why He came.

Through her arms He goes out into other arms. Men do not receive Jesus except through Mary. Simeon “also took Him in His arms.” But in no other arms is He really safe, not even in the arms of a saintly old man. For Simeon, too, brought myrrh, when he said to Mary: “Behold, this child is destined to bring about the fall of many and the rise of many in Israel;

to be a sign which men will refuse to recognize; and so the thoughts of many hearts shall be made manifest; as for thy own soul, it shall have a sword to pierce it" [Luke 2: 34, 35].

"A sign which men will refuse to recognize," means the cross: one bar in contradiction with another bar, man's will in opposition to God's will. Nowhere in all the world is He safe from contradiction except with His Mother; for, being conceived without sin, she was immune from the original contradiction of sin. But with others this was not true. When a wise man first saw Him, he gave myrrh for His death. When another old, wise man first touched Him, he spoke of a cross. "As for thy own soul, it shall have a sword to pierce it." Her own Immaculate Heart and His Sacred Heart would be as one in love through life, that the spear to be driven through His Heart would also pierce her Heart. As the innkeeper's words to Mary pierced His heart, too, so the sword of Calvary would also pierce her heart, as if the heart cord of Mother and Son had never been broken at birth. For nine months she bore Him in her womb, but for thirty-three years she bore Him in her heart. One stone sometimes can kill two birds, and one sword sometimes can pierce two hearts. As He received His human life from her, so He would not give it up without her. He does not wait until maturity before announcing that the reason for His coming is to take up the sign of contradiction. He makes the offering when He is only forty days old, but He does it through His Mother.

As He was formed by her body and given to mankind by her arms, so He was formed by her mind. The world received only three years of His life, but Mary had thirty years of His obedience. Down to Nazareth He went to be subject to her. He, the Divine Word, for three long decades responded to a human word. Nazareth was the first university in the history of Christianity, and in it all humanity, in the person of Christ, was trained in obedience under the tutelage of a woman. It was no wonder that, when He was graduated, men marveled at His learning: "No man ever spoke as this man." Nazareth was the school for Golgotha.

Her Divine Son could not submit His Divine will to a human mortal, but He could submit His human will, which He received by becoming man. Just as in the unity of His Divine Person He is immortal in virtue of His Divine nature but mortal through His human nature, so He is beyond submission as God and yet freely within submission, except in those things that bear directly on the mission of His heavenly Father: "Know you not that I must be about My father's business." As He depended on her answer to the Angel, before turning back eternity and becoming flesh, as He depended on her for His birth, as He depended on her to present Him at the Temple for the prediction of the Cross, so He depended on her for the announcement of His public life at the marriage feast of Cana. "The Mother of Jesus was there. And Jesus also was invited." She is mentioned before He is in the Gospel story of Cana. She enters; He follows. He is at a marriage feast because she is there. Because she asks for it, He works His first miracle. Perhaps it would be truer to say that she did not ask for it but insinuated it. Her words were merely the affirmation of fact: "They have no wine." But though she expressed a wish to her Divine Son, she nevertheless uttered a command to men: "Do whatever He tells you." Her Son fulfilled her wish; men obeyed her command. Mary was not a spectator at Cana's miracle. She was His inspiration. The Mother is as conscious of her power over her Son as He is conscious of His power over creatures. She suggests; He grants.

All through His life, we find a loving dependence of the Sacred Heart on her Immaculate Heart. The blood that flowed in His veins, came from her; His Body that was later delivered for sin was first delivered by her. The Divine fires, which kindled the earth, were housed in her heart. The waters of everlasting life, which are dipped to those that thirst, came through her as a fountain.

This love that the Sacred Heart had for His Mother was reciprocated by the love of Mother for Son. The life of Jesus speaks to us and says: "I gave Myself to My Mother. My body was fashioned by her; My will was subject to her; My miracles were begun through her; My crucifixion was announced through her; My redemption was perfected with her at the foot of the Cross. Unlike other men, I did not leave her to start a family, for as I told My Mother, there are other bonds than those of the flesh. 'If anyone does the will of my Father Who is in Heaven, he is my brother, and sister, and mother' [Matt. 12: 50]. My family, the family of all who live by My Spirit, started with her. I was the first-born of the flesh; John was the second-born of the spirit at the foot of the Cross. No one, therefore, can be an adopted son of My Heavenly Father

without being, at the same time, My brother; but no one can be My brother who does not depend on our Mother. To each of you on the Cross I said: 'This is thy mother.' A Christian means another Christ. You must therefore be formed as I was. I ask that she be your mother, not that you rest in her, for a creature can never be the end of a creature. Her mission is to transform you into Me, so that you put on My mind, think My thoughts, desire My will, and live by My life. But how shall you put on Me except through her who is clothed with Me as the sun? Easier it would be to separate light from the sun and heat from the fire, than to separate growth in Me from devotion to her. I came to you through her; through her, you come to Me. 'What God, then, has joined, let not man put asunder.'"

When any other mother loves her child, she loves a creature. In the case of Mary, she loved her Creator, too, for it was not a nature she loved but a Person, and the Person is the Son of God. In the Transfiguration, the heavenly Father said: "This my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" [Matt. 3: 17]. The Father here spoke of Jesus Christ, true God, true man, appearing in glory before His Apostles, with His face shining as the sun and His garments white as snow. When the eternal Father willed to associate the Virgin Mary in some way to His eternal generation of the Son by sending Him into her body as a temple, there must have arisen in Mary's heart some spark of that infinite love that the Father has for His Son. Thus, the love of Mary for Jesus comes from the same Source as Her Son in God, the prototype of the love of a mother for children as gifts of God and of children for mothers as prolongers of the Incarnation. Some idea of this love is suggested in the simple lines of the Gospel, when her Son went down to Nazareth: "While his mother kept in her heart the memory of all this" [Luke 2: 51]. And the words were the words of the Word. In this reciprocal love of the Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Heart, there is suggested the conclusion that if the Sacred Heart willed to have His body, His mind, His will, and His mission formed by the Immaculate Heart of His Mother, then shall not earthly mothers form Christ-life in their children through the inspiration of that same Immaculate Mother? In a broader way, all grown children, adults in the Mystical Body, have their love for Christ formed by His Mother.

As Mary and Jesus are the model-love of mother and children and of Christians and Christ, so she is the inspiration of a home. The principal difference between a house and a home is a child. In a house individuals dwell; in a home the family lives. There are more persons in a boardinghouse or hotel than in a home, but since there is no deep unifying bond of love, the group never makes the family. The two principal virtues of a home are consecration on the part of parents and obedience on the part of the children. The first of these lessons is revealed in the Presentation; the second in the life at Nazareth.

St. Luke begins the story of the Presentation in these words: "And when the time had come for purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem, to present him before the Lord there. It is written in God's law, that whatever male offspring opens the womb is to be reckoned sacred to the Lord; and so they must offer in sacrifice for him, as God's law commanded, a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons" [Luke 2: 22-24].

All the women of Israel who had brought forth a child were obliged, at the end of forty days, to present it to the Temple, and, if it were a first-born, to ransom it. The ransom imposed was in memory of God's ransoming the first-born of the Jews while they were in captivity in Egypt. Jesus was the first-born, not only of Mary [and the only born] but was also the first-born of creatures: "His is that first birth which precedes every act of creation" [Col. 1: 15]. In the name of all humanity, Mary offers her Son as a ransom for the world's redemption. Her act of dedicating her Son was a continuation of the Fiat she pronounced at the Annunciation. Mary was not a priest, but she was the Mother of the High Priest and as such offered in her heart her Child for the salvation of the world. She was not an altar, but the Mother of the Living Temple of God, which, if men destroyed, He would rebuild in three days. As a kind of paten, she holds in her hands Him Who is "the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world."

When Mary Magdalen poured out the precious perfume on the feet of her Savior, the Lord said she was doing it in preparation for the day of His burial. When our Lady presented her Child in the Temple, she was offering Him, too, for the day of His burial for the redemption of the world. Not to other mothers comes the high summons to offer their sons in reparation for the world; but to every mother does come the summons to consecrate her child to the service of God. I know a mother who, when her first-born was Baptized, immediately placed him on the altar of the Blessed Mother and

there consecrated him to God. He is now in the service of God.

The right to educate the children does not belong primarily to the State but to the parents. The State may instruct, but only the parents can consecrate. Since they hold the right from God, they will be held responsible for the proper exercise of the right. Like Mary, they must consecrate their children to the love and service of God. Unlike Mary, they are not called to consecrate unto a crucifixion, for there will never be another Redeemer. Mary here is imitable in the consecration, not in the one who is offered. The consecration of Mary's Child was in a temple; the consecration of every mother's child must also be in the house of God. Without religious education, there is no consecration, and without consecration a child is like an errant arrow, knowing neither the power that gave him motion nor the goal toward which he tends. But the child trained in sacrifice because Jesus Christ died for his sins, trained in truth because of a belief in Him Who is Truth, trained in purity because his body is the temple of God, becomes the redeemer of the parents, as their love pays back the spark of heaven with the flames of faith.

As parents would not think of stealing a neighbor's child, so neither would they ever dream of cheating God of His heritage. They are the trustees of that carnal wealth, not its creator. They have been sent out "two by two" not to picnic on the way but to reinforce the ranks of earth. Mary has taught the mother the first step in the founding of a home by offering it to God, then taking the child back in her arms full of God's purpose.

Correlative to consecration of the part of the parents is obedience on the part of the children. After finding the Divine Child in the Temple, St. Luke tells us: "But 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. And so Jesus advanced in wisdom with the years, and in favor both with God and with men" [Luke 2: 51, 52]. A triple humiliation is here revealed. "He went down" was a miniature of the Incarnation, when God came down from Heaven and became man. Physically, Nazareth was below Jerusalem in the topography of the country. Spiritually it was lower too, for the Creator now goes down to His creatures. "To Nazareth." "Can anything that is good come from Nazareth" [John 1: 46]? was asked by one of the Apostles on hearing that the Messiah came from that tiny little village. He was born in "the least of the cities of Israel;" now he would live in a scorned town, but the ignominy of His death and His apparent defeat He would proclaim in the great city of Jerusalem. "And He was subject to them." Here the sculptor obeys his chisel, the painter is subject to his brush, the winds obey the dictates of the leaves. Two decades later men will see Him washing the feet of His disciples. "So it is that the Son of Man did not come to have service done him; he came to serve others, and to give his life as a ransom for the lives of many" [Mark 10: 45].

What makes the obedience of this Child all the more impressive is that He is the Son of God. He Who is the General of humanity becomes a soldier in the ranks; the King steps from His throne and plays the role of peasant. If He Who is the Son of God makes Himself subject to His Mother and foster father in reparation for the sins of pride, then how shall children escape the sweet necessity of obedience to those who are their lawfully constituted superiors? The Fourth Commandment, "Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother," has been broken by every generation since the dawn of man. At Nazareth children would be taught obedience by Him who really is the Commandment. In this particular instance, where the Child is Divine, one might think that at least He would have reserved for Himself the right of "self-expression." Mary and Joseph, it seems, could have with great propriety opened the first "progressive school" in the history of Christianity, in which the child could do whatever he pleased; for here the Child could never have displeased. "And he who sent me is with me; he has not left me all alone, since what I do is always what pleases him" [John 8: 29].

But there is no evidence that He gave to Mary and Joseph just the nominal right to command. "And lived there in subjection to them." God subject to man! God, before Whom the Angels, principalities, and powers tremble, is subject to Mary and to Joseph for Mary's sake. Two great miracles of humility and exaltation: God obeying a woman; and a woman commanding God. The very fact that He makes Himself subject endows her with power. And this obedience lasted for thirty years. Three hours He spent in redemption; three years in teaching; thirty years in obedience. By this long span of voluntary obedience, He revealed that the Fourth Commandment is the bedrock of family life. In a larger way, how else could the primal sin of disobedience against God be undone except by the obedience in the flesh of the very God Who

was defied? The first revolt in God's universe of peace was the thunderbolt of Lucifer: "I will not obey!"

Eden caught up the echo, and down the ages its inflection traveled, worming its way into the nook and crevices of every family where there gathered a father, mother, and child.

By making Himself subject to Mary and Joseph, the Divine Child proclaims authority in home and in public life to be a power granted by God Himself. From this disclosure follows the duty of obedience for the sake of God and one's conscience. As, later on, He would tell Pilate that the civil authorities exercise no power except that given them from above, so now by His obedience He bears witness to the solemn truth that parents exercise their authority in the name of God. The parents have the most sacred claim on their children, because their first responsibility is toward God. "Every soul must be submissive to its lawful superiors; authority comes from God only, and all authorities that hold sway are of his ordinance." [Rom. 13: 1]

If the parents surrender their legitimate authority and primary responsibility to the children, the State takes up the slack. When obedience in conscience in the home vanishes, it will be supplanted by obedience by the force of the State. The divine glory of the ego, which characterized the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is so much social nonsense. The Divine glory of the State, which is now taking the ego's place, is a social nuisance. Believers in ego-consciousness and collective-consciousness may regard humility and obedience as a vice, but it is the stuff of which homes are made. When, in the one family of the world where one might legitimately excuse "child-worship," for here the child is God, one finds on the contrary child-obedience, then let no one deny that obedience is the cornerstone of the home. Obedience in the home is the foundation of obedience in the commonwealth, for in each instance, conscience submits to a trustee of God's authority. If it be true that the world has lost its respect for authority, it is only because it lost it first in the home. It is a peculiar paradox that as the home loses its authority, the authority of the State becomes tyrannical. Some moderns would swell their egos to infinity, but at Nazareth infinity stoops down to earth to shrink into the obedience of a child. There is a bond established. Democracy put "man" on a pedestal; feminism put "woman" on a pedestal; but neither democracy nor feminism could live a generation unless a "Child" was first put on a pedestal, and such is the significance of Nazareth!
