

**SAINT MARY THE
VIRGIN. TRANSLATED
BY HAROLD GIDNEY**

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RENÉ-MARIE DE LA BROISE

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the Virgin*

By René-Marie de la Broise



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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

IT is not possible to write the life of the Blessed Virgin in the same way that one would write the lives of saints of later times. For these, there are usually available some contemporary memoirs possessing a certain authority, and the carefully collected records which form the evidences for their canonisation. From these sources, few in number and perfectly reliable, their biographies may be readily compiled; and in the case of a popular work it is a sufficient guarantee of trustworthiness if these sources are briefly indicated at the outset.

But in the case of the mother of Jesus, the documents which must be taken into account are both more numerous and more difficult to use properly. For the facts themselves, it is necessary, if one wishes to add anything to the gospel narrative, to gather from early christian literature, evidences of diverse value and not seldom of doubtful value, from which may be adduced, occasionally facts, but more frequently merely conjectures and probabilities. On the other hand, concerning the saintliness of the Virgin Mary and her part in the mystery of our salvation, the exegesis of the Old and New Testaments, theological teaching, and even asceticism,

afford instruction of the highest value, and often furnish facts which are sufficiently guaranteed. To demonstrate how these various documents should be made use of, and to show in what way they have been used, it will be desirable to touch upon some questions of method in this introduction, and also to append numerous notes and references to the text.

I have already attempted an essay on the lines of this introduction,¹ and some day I may perhaps entirely re-write this work in a more critical and exhaustive manner. In the meantime, the limitations imposed by the scope of the series in which this volume appears, though demanding some sacrifices on the part of the author, possess great advantages for a wide circle of readers, in presenting a volume which is short and easy to read. If these advantages help to make the most lovable character of the Virgin Mary better known to a larger number, they will more than compensate for the disadvantages.

There are, as it were, three aspects of the subject, and these three ought to be treated simultaneously and interdependently, because, taken together, they present the true aspect of the character and personality of the Blessed Virgin.

Firstly, there is the historical account of the events of her life. For this, the Gospels, and they alone, afford information supported by the historical authority of contemporary narrative and by the still

¹ *Comment écrire la vie de la Sainte Vierge*, in the *Études* of May 5 and 20, 1898.

higher authority of divinely inspired writings. Besides these, there are the other books of Holy Scripture; and for the events and facts which these do not mention, we have the accounts handed down by the Fathers and early church historians, and the local traditions preserved in the countries in which Mary lived. It is also necessary to take into account the apocryphal gospels, and all that singular literature comprised under the name of Apocrypha, which is so much studied at the present day. Further, one may consult with discrimination the personal revelations of certain saints or of persons who have died in the odour of sanctity. But these various sources will supply us with much less information than it seemed possible to hope for. And, for reasons which would require long and complex analysis, the evidences which are derived from them are not important if taken one by one; even by grouping them we do not always find, but often far otherwise, a tradition uniformly and consistently followed; and upon several questions they present only uncertainty and irreconcilable contradictions. However, to bring out that which may be taken as absolutely certain, that is to say the gospel narrative; to accept some points which the testimony of numerous and weighty authorities renders almost certainties; to choose among divergent opinions and traditions those which seem to be best founded; to take, in certain cases, in default of trustworthy documents, a careful estimate of probabilities, such as what has been thought by those who, according to Catholic tradition, have been best acquainted with Our Lady and have

best spoken of her ; to give to each statement, without either strengthening or weakening it, its correct degree of certainty or probability ; to avoid the contradictions too frequent among those who accept from every source incompatible data, and, on the contrary, to endeavour to co-ordinate properly the soundest opinions in a consistent biographical method ; to renounce, since it is necessary to do so, the satisfying of pious curiosity upon every point, and from fear of affirming that of which one is ignorant, to leave open freely those questions upon which our information is imperfect ; and finally, to reserve the right to change one's opinion concerning those points on which more light may yet be thrown—herein, indeed, is comprised that which it is possible to do.

Secondly, it is necessary to give some idea of the mind of Mary and of her inner life. This, perforce, involves a certain amount of conjecture and even the risk of what may be thought temerity. Why wish to divine the thoughts and feelings of a heart which, by reason of its natural qualities and much more by reason of the marvellous operations of grace, so far surpassed ours ? Yet, he who does not attempt this, neglects an aspect of the subject which is of much greater importance than questions of chronology or of purely material facts. We humbly recognize that we shall never know all the secrets of that wonderful soul, and that we are ignorant even of the most beautiful aspect of it. But, if the whole truth is beyond our reach, it is nevertheless possible to say, and we may have confidence in so doing,

some things upon this subject which are both beautiful and true. They are to be found in the teachings of theologians, whose persevering reflection has illuminated more than one problem in this higher psychology; in the meditations of the saints, whose minds resemble in some slight degree the mind of Mary, and who were able to realise an approximate idea of her thoughts and affections; and also in the opinion of the Church which, living by the spirit of Jesus, cannot mistake the spirit which animated His mother.

Thirdly, the part assigned to Mary in the divine scheme of the Incarnation and the Redemption must be set forth. And of the three aspects of the subject this one is the best known. For Mary's part in this scheme is revealed to us by God; it pertains to the faith and to the infallible teaching of the Church. In short, Mary is the mother of God, and, if one may so say, as mother of God she can, by the dispensation of Providence and by her free co-operation, be associated in all the mysteries of the incarnate Word. This point, illuminated by the divine light itself, illuminates in its turn all the catholic doctrine concerning Mary. If one should be tempted to find exaggeration in all the great things which the Fathers of the Church and the saints have said of Mary, it must be called to mind that her motherhood is the source and measure of all her privileges and supremacy. Assuredly she is a pure creature, but she remains infinitely inferior to God. And yet, since it has pleased God to become man and to be born of a woman, she who was

chosen to co-operate as the human mother in the great scheme of the Incarnation, finds herself elevated to a rank absolutely apart. Her saintliness surpasses that of all the angels and of all men, because it is the saintliness of the mother of God; and her titles and her privileges, which will be set forth in the course of this work, are incomparable titles and privileges because they pertain to her divine motherhood. As mother of the God incarnate and Redeemer, she is also mother of men, co-redeemer and mediatrix of the world, queen of angels and of the whole universe; the queen and mother who, in the transcendent greatness of her person, in a manner comprises and symbolises all humanity and even the whole of creation, and especially that faithful portion of creation which forms the great Church of the saints and angels.

Among these aspects of the character of the Blessed Virgin which christian thought brings out little by little in an increasingly explicit manner, there is one, especially glorious for her and comforting to us, which I should like to see brought more and more into prominence: that of her association with Jesus in the work of redemption, and consequently as mediatrix with Him, though in an inferior degree, in all the blessings which we receive from heaven. If, in its humble way, this book succeeds in contributing to bring home this doctrine to the souls of men, it will be less unworthy to be dedicated to Our Lady, when, as at this time, we are celebrating the jubilee of the affirmation of the