

WHY CATHOLICS PRAY TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN *

An incident of Catholic life.

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THIS is not in the least a tale, but merely the relation of an incident which really took place, and it has no particular interest save that it serves as an actual setting to a few words upon a well known point of Catholic doctrine. Away in the Abruzzi, some sixty miles from Rome, there is a village, or townlet — one of the many that one sees everywhere in Italy. It is perched, of course, on the side of a precipitous hill, and the houses stand tier over tier, until they find their fitting crown in the parish church, with its tall campanile. Some speculator greatly daring, built at the lower end a large modern hotel. In his prospectus he said many persuasive things, and amongst them one which was quite true, namely, that from its windows there could be obtained a superb view of the white peaks of the Gran Sasso d' Italia.

Some twenty years ago there came to this hotel a party of American tourists — the father and mother, some daughters with a governess, and some boys with a tutor. In the evening, after dinner, they sat in the loggia or verandah. When they had tired of admiring the Gran Sasso, they leaned over the parapet and saw about a hundred feet down below, where the road winds round the hill, a little wayside shrine of Our Lady — just an altar and statue roofed over — and a peasant woman kneeling very lowly before it. They passed from hand to hand an opera-glass and expressed their minds very fully and plainly upon the “deplorable ignorance and superstition in priest-ridden Italy.” The mother, an estimable and good-hearted woman, who in her sincerity took her own religion very seriously, denounced what she saw as “rank idolatry,” and added — what was quite true — that it was not the religion she had been taught in New England.

Even the tutor, who was, or ought to have been, a Catholic, but who knew more about Greek plays than he did about his catechism, timidly chimed in, and spoke of the abuses owing to the ignorance of the masses, of “excessive devotions to the saints,” and the absence of any strict obligation in private devotions to pray to any one but God alone. Altogether, the jury in the loggia found their verdict without leaving the box.

Nina Fabretti was the wife of a poor shoemaker. Her husband, Pasquale, was genial and picturesque, but not over industrious, and it was only by taking in work from outside, and labouring hard and late, that Nina could make ends meet and feed and clothe her family. Her chief rest and relaxation was to go out for half an hour in the cool of the evening, after the Ave bell, and kneel at the little shrine and pour out her sorrows and solitudes to God and to Our Lady. She first of all said her Rosary. In the Joyful mysteries, the thought of the love-lit domestic life of our Lord in His poverty-pinched home at Nazareth rang true to her life, and brought her courage and solace in her own domestic trials and anxieties. The good Jesus must have had people like Nina in His mind when He chose to live thirty years under the roof of a poor carpenter! In thinking over the mysteries of Our Lord's death and Passion, her own fears and troubles seemed to grow less and less, and to fall into their due proportion. And when, in the Glorious mysteries, she recalled her Lord's risen beauty and majesty, she felt ready to endure anything if only at the end He would hold out His crucified hands to welcome her home to heaven, and would place on her brow the crown of endless peace and joy as He did to His own blessed Mother.

Then, after the Rosary, she just talked to Our Lady, as one mother would talk to another, and told her all the troubles and trials of the little household up the street, knowing that the Mother of her God would understand, and would not fail to give generously the help of her intercession and sympathy. She prayed for her Pasquale, and asked Our Lady to make him just a little more like the industrious St. Joseph. Then especially she asked her to plead with Jesus for her two boys, Giovanni and Francesco, both soldiers, away out at the front in distant Africa (the disastrous war with Abyssinia was just then at its worst). She could hardly spell out their letters, but she carried them over her heart and loved to look at the paper that their hands had touched. She appealed most of all for the next — her favourite boy, Luigi, who lay sick at home in the

last stages of consumption. She wanted so badly for him the small delicacies she could so ill afford to procure. She prayed for her youngest — Pepe and Teresa — who were as lovable and troublesome and teasing as children of twelve or thirteen are apt to be in Italy, or any other country. In her wistful earnestness as she spoke of each of these dear ones to the Blessed Mother, and, asked her to commend them to the loving tenderness of her Son, she unconsciously bent lower and lower so that when she came to the tiresome Teresa, her head was all but touching the ground. It was at that moment that the opera-glass from above was trained upon her, revealing with all its prismatic clearness the perpetration of the “rank idolatry.”

There is nothing more plain and unmistakable than the teaching of the Catholic Church on the matter of God’s worship.

It may be stated as follows:-

There is only one God, who made us and all things else. We, and all things, depend upon Him for all that we have and all that we are and for all that we ever will be. He alone is our First Beginning. He alone is our Last End. He alone is our continual Preserver all the way between. Our reason and conscience tell us that we are bound to honour Him and to recognize His supreme dominion over us, and our absolute dependence upon Him. In other words, we honour Him as our God. That is what we call Divine honour, or supreme Worship, or more commonly, Adoration.

There is another way — a fuller and more Christian way — in which we may express the same thing. God, alone, is our Creator. The highest angel in Heaven could not create even a grain of dust. God alone is our Redeemer. No one but He could have paid the Divine ransom which has saved our souls. God alone is our Sanctifier. He alone is the author of the light of grace by which our souls can please God in this world, and of the light of glory by which we shall behold Him face to face in the next.

When we turn to our God to honour and thank Him as our Maker, and as our Redeemer, and as our Sanctifier, our worship is Divine Worship. It is Divine Worship because it is given to our God as our God, and to Him only. It stands to sense that it is, by its nature, unique and exclusive. That is to say, it could not be given to anyone but God. Observe how that is written in its very meaning. God alone is our First Beginning, alone our Last End, alone our continual Preserver, alone our Creator, alone our Saviour, alone our Sanctifier. Hence the Catholic Church teaches plainly, publicly, peremptorily to her people in all parts of the world that Supreme or Divine Worship is to be given to the one true God alone, and that in that worship no creature, no angel, no saint, not even the Blessed Virgin, can have any part or share.

It stands equally to reason that besides the Divine honour which we give to God, there is an honour which we give to our neighbour, because, like ourselves, he is the likeness of God. The very reason why we must love our neighbour as ourselves is because he has in him the same likeness of God that we ourselves have. Just as religion includes the love of God and in it the love of our neighbour, so, too, it necessarily requires the honour due to God, and with it the honour due to our neighbour, for any love that is not founded on honour and respect can never be worthy of the name. Obviously, the honour given to God and that which is given to our neighbour are immeasurably different — different by all the difference that lies between what is due to the Creator and that which is due to the creature. But, all the same, we are bound to both, and in dealing with God we must not dare to be selfish or seclusive or individualistic. In loving Him we must love our neighbour, and in honouring Him we must not exclude the honour which for His sake is due to our neighbour. That is what the Catholic Church calls inferior worship, that is to say, “worship” in the old sense of the term which meant reverence or respect. It is not mere civil or social respect, for it is based on a religious motive — the likeness of God — and is given as a duty of religion and from a supernatural motive. Divine worship is necessarily exclusive of any Divine worship being given to any one but God, but on the other hand it is inclusive of the inferior worship we give to our fellow-creature. That is only to say that the love of God requires the love, and therefore the honour, due to our neighbour.

When, therefore, the Church speaks of Divine worship and inferior worship, the distinction is so plain that no one can fail to understand her. Divine worship is the worship which the creature owes to the Creator. Inferior worship is the worship or reverence which a creature owes to its fellow-creature. These are two separate and incommensurable planes, and all the honour which we give to our neighbour, the angels and saints and to the Blessed Mother of God herself, stands upon the lower one, and however great it may be, never even touches or approaches the upper one. Why?

Because, even in the case of the poorest Catholic peasant, the attitude of mind in the giving of the one and the other is totally different. Let us get to the root of the difference. We are told that there are Turks who look upon Christ as a great prophet, and that they will even salaam to a representation of Our Lady. Let us suppose that a Turk stands before a picture of Christ and wishes to pay Him reverence. He might bow even to the ground, and he might use every gesture and every term of Oriental perfervid speech to do honour to Christ. But taking it all at its most and at its best, his reverence could never be supreme or Divine worship. Or, to come nearer home, a Unitarian might honour Christ, might even kneel before His image and use towards Our Lord, whom it represents, the most unmeasured language of love and praise. Yet his worship would not be Divine worship. And that for two very plain reasons. He does not believe that Christ is his God, and secondly, whatever his words or posture may be, he has no intention whatever of honouring Him as God. And without the belief that that which one worships is God and the intention of worshipping it as God, one's worship cannot be supreme or Divine worship, and nothing ever can make it so. And, obviously, while we believe that what we honour is a creature, and we intend to honour it as such, our worship is necessarily inferior worship or reverence, and no posture or language of love that we may use can ever make it to be more than that.

Hence, belief and intention are necessarily the essential criterion or distinguishing test which marks out the one kind of worship from the other. For this reason, the distinction is too plain and too palpable that any confusion between them could with any degree of probability exist in the minds of even the least instructed Catholics. To grasp the distinction they only require to be in possession of their senses. When we have made a tour of inspection through the Catholic countries, and when we have diligently searched through the "benighted masses," and have finally discovered some peasant who really believes that the Blessed Virgin is the God who made him and the world, and who really intends to worship her as his Maker, then — and not till then — shall we have found a genuine case of idolatry.

One can imagine the bewildered amazement of poor Nina if her critics could have descended from their balcony and have asked her if she really believed that the Blessed Virgin is the God who created her and the universe, or that the Madonna is the Saviour who died for her salvation, or the Holy Spirit who was given to her in baptism? With her innate Italian courtesy, she would certainly not have laughed outright, nor have allowed the faintest sign to show that the question had recalled to her mind the wondrous tales that Pasquale had told her of the occasional "madness" of the forestieri. "Ah, no, signora, the Madonna is not God, but she is the Mother of God. She did not die for us on the Cross, but she stood at the foot of the Cross on which the good Lord died for us. And she is now at the foot of His Throne in heaven, and she pleads with her dear Gesu, her Divine Son, who is her God, to bless and to help us poor souls who are suffering down here on earth. And she, like a good mother, prays to Him for us, and joins her prayers with our own." In saying so, Nina would point in proof to the inscription in large letters over the shrine: "SANCTA MARIA, ORA PRO NOBIS."

But then her critics, even if they graciously granted that Nina was not an idolatress, would no doubt contend that she was making the Blessed Virgin the object of most of her prayers, and that in that way she was putting Christ in the background, whereas she "ought to have gone straight to God and prayed to Him alone." But who has told them that she has not prayed to God, and to her Saviour? In that very Rosary she has just been saying she has been thinking prayerfully of the Incarnation and the sufferings and the glory of her crucified Lord. And five times over she has lifted up her heart in thanksgiving to God for all His love and mercy in the words of the "Our Father" and of the doxology, "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost." Even in every Hail Mary she has repeated God's own message to Our Lady, and in blessing the mother she has in the same breath blessed the Incarnate God for His goodness in becoming the fruit of her womb. That is not precisely putting her Saviour in the background.

And, did they but know it, early that morning when those who looked down superciliously from the balcony were still in bed, and being served with tea — or what the Italians call tea! — in their bedrooms, Nina had climbed all the way up, to the parish church, and had heard Mass and received her Lord in Holy Communion. What is the Mass if not the Supreme Act of Divine worship, which, as every Catholic knows, can only be offered to God, and to God alone? What is the Mass but the adoring of Christ as the Victim of our Salvation? And thus the people in the balcony, after the indulgence of their

long sleep and their late breakfast and their leisurely day, could afford in the evening to read Nina a lecture for putting her Saviour in the background! She could well have told them that she has prayed to her God, and that she has been glad to receive her Saviour and to make Him all her own as the guest of her soul, and to ask His loving help and mercy in all her daily struggles and difficulties. But, in it all, she has asked the Blessed Mother, whom He loved so well, to pray with her and for her, because she has felt that her own poor prayers would be none the worse, and all the more acceptable, when united with and backed by the prayers of her whom God Himself has made His Mother, and thereby has honoured in a way that goes far beyond any honour that men or angels will ever succeed in giving her.

But here, perhaps, some doctrinal pedant may say that in these, her private devotions, she was not obliged to ask the prayers of the Blessed Virgin or the saints. As if it were a question of obligation! As if almost all the best and noblest things in life and worship were not things which are done out of the fulness and freedom of the heart, and are uplifted far above the level of mere obligation! When the Catholic Church tells us that it is salutary and helpful to do so, we are not narrow-souled enough to think or speak of “obligations,” any more than we do when we ask the prayers of our fellow-Christians here on earth. A good son starting for the front is not obliged to ask the prayers of his mother. But it is enough for him and for us that we shall please our God and obtain more easily what we desire if we follow God’s precept of praying one for another, knowing that a mother’s prayer pierceth the clouds, and that the prayer of the just “availeth much.”

If I wish to go to Liverpool I can get there easily and rapidly by train or motor-car. Of course, I can be seclusive and can avoid my fellow-men and all such helps, and make the journey on foot, if I am fool enough to do so. There is no “obligation.” If any Catholic were so silly and so un-catholic as to exclude Our Lady or the saints from his private prayers, he knows, or ought to know, that it is he and not they that would lose by it.

Thus, in all that Nina felt and said, in the fervour of her simple faith, when praying at the shrine, she was but utilising and bringing practically home to the pressing needs of her daily life the sublime and consoling doctrine of the Communion of Saints as taught by the Catholic Church. She was realizing with faith-lit eyes the beautiful and blessed bond of mutual honour and love and helpfulness in which the good God has interwoven His children on earth, in purgatory, and in heaven, uniting all to all from the poorest peasant mother here below to the glorious Mother above who stands as close to His throne as she did to His Cross—the great sign appearing in Heaven, the “Woman, clothed with the sun, and the moon beneath her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Apoc. xii. i.).

Let us go a stage further. If the group of critics in the balcony could not only have come down and interrogated Nina, but, better still, have gone up the hill and asked the meaning of it all from the parish priest in the presbytery (as a matter of fact, one of them later on actually did so in characteristic fashion) they would no doubt have received fuller explanations of the current objections which came readily to their lips. “Why make so much of the Virgin Mary? After all she is only a creature!”

“Only a creature!” But that is precisely the reason why we honour her as we do. We honour our God because He is our God and has all that is good in Himself. We honour the creature because it is God’s handiwork, and has received from God all that it has. To praise a book is to praise the author, and to praise a picture is to praise the artist, and the praise of the work is the praising of the workman. If the Blessed Virgin had not been created by God, and had not received from His hands all that she possesses, Catholics would have no honour to give to her. Put God and what He has done for her, even for a moment, out of our mental view, and all her glory, and all the honour which we give her instantly collapse. Nay, it is just the fact of her being a creature, and having received so much from her Creator that is the very basis and rationale of all Catholic devotion to Mary.

We honour her gladly and abundantly, but if we honour her at all, it is because God has made her what she is and “He that is mighty” has done to her “great things and holy is His Name.”

More than that, it is just that very fact of Our Lady being a creature that is the essential charm of all her glory. The perfection of any being must lie in its harmony with the law of its essence. Just as it is the special glory of God to exist of Himself, so it is the special glory of the creature to exist not of itself, but from God, and to hold all that it has in

dependence upon Him. If we could ascend to heaven and behold all the splendour, the beauty, the power with which God has clothed His Blessed Mother, and if we could ask her what in it all is it that she herself prizes most, she would certainly answer that that which is the very joy of her joy and the very glory of her glory is the consciousness that in it all there is absolutely nothing which she has not received from the loving hands of her Maker, and that for all that she is and all that she has, His own everlasting and unchangeable love is the glorious source to which she owes it, and the magnificent title and lease upon which she holds it. The whole Catholic Church, from the highest angel in heaven — with his clear intuition — to the poorest peasant on earth — with his implicit recognition — rejoices with Our Lady that she “is only a creature.”

Nor does the fact of her createdness mean any lessening of her dignity or of the honour which Catholics rightly pay to her. Of course, she is “only a creature.” What else could she possibly be? There is no thinkable mid-term between the Creator and that which is created. If she were more than a creature she would be a second God, which would be not only a monstrous impossibility, but a blasphemy against which every Catholic would shut his ears in abhorrence. But within the domain of creation God has a free and ample hand, and while that which He creates must ever be finite and dependent on Him, and infinitely less than Himself, no one may set limits to His Bounty and say, “Thus far, and no farther.” If all the glory of the angels in heaven were concentrated into one alone, and if the glory of that one were multiplied by God a hundredfold for each grain of sand on the seashore, and for each drop of water in the ocean, that angel so glorified would still be “only a creature.” The Blessed Virgin might be, as St. Cyril of Alexandria said, uplifted above the Cherubim and the Seraphim, and her glory might be, as some spiritual writers have said, greater than that of all the angels and the Blessed put together, and yet she would be, not only a creature, but one who rejoices in her createdness as the very foundation of all her happiness. Hence the phrase “only a creature” does not go far in the way of disparagement. If the reward which our God has prepared in heaven for even the least soul that enters there is above all that eye hath seen or the heart of man can conceive, it is plain that all that Catholic preachers or writers have ever said or written about the glory with which God has crowned His Mother, so far from being excessive, must ever fall utterly short of the reality.

Then there is that other question, “Why do you make so much of her?” With all reverence, be it said, that is a question which ought to be addressed to God Himself rather than to us. It is He that has made so much of her — made most of her — and we, in all that we do are only, in our own feeble way, following His example. Out of all the daughters of men, God chose her to be the Mother of His Son. Of all the honours that could be conferred upon a creature in heaven or on earth, there is none which can be compared unto that! When we put together all that the Catholic Church from the very beginning has done to do her honour, and all that Councils, Fathers, theologians, saints, and the pious faithful have said in her praise, it is all as nothing to what God Himself has done when He chose her as the one in whom the Incarnation was fulfilled and declared her to be “Mary of whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ.” Our best, at the most, goes but a tiny way where God Himself has gone so gloriously far!

And here, the sincere Protestant would no doubt say, “We do not complain of your praising the excellence of the reward of glory which God has given to His saints, or to the angels, or to the Virgin, for that, of course, is something which in itself can hardly be exaggerated. What we condemn is that you turn them into mediators, and attribute to them what belongs to God alone.”

But surely not. If to pray for others, and to ask others to pray for us is to turn ourselves and others into “mediators” then indeed are we all mediators, and Holy Scripture has told us to be so, saying, “Pray one for another that you may be saved” (St. James v. 16). The mother who prays for her son at the front is “mediating” with God for him, and the boy himself, whose heart is praying all day long that he may be spared to see her dear face again, is, in his own genuine way, “mediating” for her.

Mediation of that kind, far from violating God’s loving law, fulfills it, and just because it is a law of God’s love it holds good in heaven as on earth, and more in heaven than on earth. If I can ask my neighbour here on earth to pray for me, I can ask my neighbour in heaven. If my neighbour on earth can pray for me so can my neighbour in heaven, and if the gracious God wishes him to pray for me, He, in the light of His countenance, can make him know my request. But in

reality all such praying and asking for prayers is not what is properly called “mediation.” It is intercession, and all we, whether in heaven or on earth, being brethren, are intercessors each for the other, interceding for one another and asking one another to intercede for us. Hence our neighbour here on earth, and our neighbour in heaven — that is to say, the Blessed, the angels, and the Mother of God — are not rival givers with God — for there is but One Supreme Giver of all good gifts — but fellow-askers with ourselves, and the reason we ask them to pray for us is not that they can give more readily than God — which would be absurd — but that they can obtain more readily than ourselves, because it stands to sense that their prayers are more perfect than our own. In God’s sight they are “just” to a degree that we are not, and it is the prayer of the “just” that “availeth much” (St. James v.16).

Mediation in the real sense of the word — in the sense of redemption — is a totally and widely different matter. It means the reconciliation of man to God by which we are redeemed and made partakers of His grace here and His glory hereafter. In that sense it means our salvation, and that is wholly and solely the finished work of the dear Lord who paid the price of our iniquity on the cross. Just as He is our one and sole Saviour and Redeemer, so He is our one and sole Mediator. No gift in the order of salvation can ever reach the soul of man, except through Him and the merits of His sacred Passion. Hence all prayer that is made here below, and all prayer made by the saints, the angels, or the Blessed Virgin above, to have any value at all, must be made through the One Mediator, “through Christ, our Lord.” The whole reason on which we believe in the power and the efficacy of the prayers of the blessed, and especially of those of Our Lady, is precisely that their prayers and her prayers are offered for us to God the Father, through the merits of the One Mediator. It is thus that the One Mediatorship of Christ is the doctrine upon which is based the whole teaching and practice of the Catholic Church concerning the intercession of the Blessed Virgin and the saints. And every act of such intercession by its nature puts into use, and glorifies the Divine Mediatorship.

When, for instance, we ask Our Lady to pray for us we know that if she prays for us at all she must do so through her Divine Son and Saviour. So far then from derogating from the sole Mediatorship of Christ we are actually asking her to have recourse to it, and pray through it on our behalf.

Then, as to “going to excess, and giving to them what belongs to God alone,” the sincere Protestant, if he wishes to be fair, must take our doctrines not merely as they may exist in his mind, but as they exist in our own. The volume of praise and honour and invocation and of continual intercession in which the Catholic Church on earth turns to the angels and the saints and the Blessed Virgin is undoubtedly great, and it would be for the honour of God, if it were still greater! But the whole of it, from the beginning to the end, is based and bounded and governed by three great convictions that are ever present, and are immovably entrenched in the conscience and consciousness of every Catholic. I know of no Catholic, in any part of the world, who has ever denied them or ever called them in question. The first is that the angels and saints and the Mother of God are creatures who have and hold from God, their Creator, all that they are and have. The second is that they can give to us nothing which they do not first of all receive from His loving hands. The third is that in all the glory which they enjoy, and in all the gifts of grace which they obtain for us, there is or can be nothing which does not come to them and to us through the one sole source of all salvation, our Mediator, Christ, and through the merits of the Blood which He shed for us on Calvary. Such, I take it, would have been, in substance, the exposition of the Catholic doctrine, which the enquirers would have received from the Curato or any other Catholic priest in Christendom. It might be in other words — far more eloquent words — but the great principles and their meaning would be absolutely the same.

In conclusion, a word as to the sequel of the incident. It is very possible that all these explanations which in one form or another are so familiar to Catholics, would have failed to reassure the people in the loggia. Prejudices and preconceived ideas bound up and entwined with early associations are not so easily refuted or uprooted. Happily Divine Providence has other ways of working and holds in reserve methods which are often more winning and convincing than those of verbal argumentation. And so it happened that the youngest of the daughters took it into her head to explore the village. Being the youngest, and therefore the most independent of control, she was pleased to wander at large, alone and unescorted — to the amazement of the villagers! — through the labyrinth of canyon-like streets with their cavernous doors and mystic staircases. She discovered Nina, and became a welcome visitor in the small household. In her trans-atlantic Italian she

talked with all and sundry whom she met, and asked innumerable questions. At all times her charity was even greater than her curiosity — which is really saying a great deal! She even cross-examined the Sindaco, and interviewed and theologically heckled the parish priest. She saw Catholicism at work in the life and the homes of the people. In the light of her sympathy and personal good-doing, she came to understand much that her family could not see through the opera-glass from the loggia. In the years that followed, God's grace did the rest. It was to her somewhat racy account of what she saw and heard when, in her own quaint phrase, she "spiritually struck oil in that dilapidated old village in the Abruzzi," that I owe the knowledge of the incident which I have ventured to cite by way of illustration. And not a little of what is written above in explanation of Catholic doctrine is but the echo of her inimitable rehearsal of the dramatic and plentifully gesticulated discourses which she loved to elicit from the good Curato.
