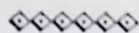


mits. The religious vows have for their end the perfection of charity, Saint Thomas affirmed.¹

Plenitude of love, he stated, is "the ultimate aim of the religious state,"² an aim which Saint Alphonsus described as the functioning of charity.³ In religion, all comes from love, all is for love, all tends toward love—in fine, all is love.

A beautiful religious life, then, is simply a life of love, of total love. The quality of a religious is measured by the heart—by the purity, the vigor, the apostolic radiation of the love of that religious.

Our Lady was a religious in her poverty, her virginity and her obedience, but she was even more so in virtue of the perfection of her charity and her incomparable life of love.



The heart of Mary "is a religious and mystical heart, the ideal religious and mystical heart" (Bainvel⁴). Who can take the measure of that "admirable heart,"⁵ that abysmal heart, that *Heart of Mary* which serves as title and shield for more than one congregation?

Fullness of grace necessarily implies fullness of charity. Who has ever loved God with a love as pure, as generous, as universal as that of Mary? She "was so filled with divine love that she surpasses all men and all angels in love for the Lord, as Saint Bernardine of Siena assures us."⁶ Saint Francis de Sales was right, then, in calling her "the queen of love." At her conception the Trinity filled her with an immense charity which, in marvelous and unceasing progress, would go from plenitude to plenitude, from height to height.

Here below, absolutely perfect love remains for all of us an inaccessible summit. The Virgin alone reached it with one sweep of the wing, as it were. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul and with thy whole mind" (Matt. 22:37). This

first commandment is for mankind not so much a program as an ideal. Our Lady fulfilled it immediately and to the letter.⁷ She loved fully and thoroughly, even to the complete exhaustion of all her capacities or potentialities for love. She could not love more; there was not the slightest deficiency in her charity. Her heart indeed contained—as far as love is concerned—the good measure which the Gospel mentions, the full measure up to the brim and running over. “Love,” it is said, “is only an episode in the life of man; with woman it is her whole life.” It was in any case the whole life of Mary. She loved—that says everything, contains everything, sums up everything. “The love of Christ wounded and transpierced Mary’s soul to such an extent that her whole being and all her faculties were enkindled by it. In her, everything was love and was directed to love,” Saint Bernard observed.⁸ Absolute mistress of her faculties, of her passions, of her senses, the Virgin made them so many instruments of love. All her activities, having God for their end, became works of pure charity.

From this plenitude flow a unicity (or oneness) and purity, two further characteristics of the love of Our Lady.

Unicity is not opposed to universality—far from it—but to multiplicity. In Mary’s soul, there is but one love. Man’s wretchedness comes from the multiplicity of his desires, his affections, his attachments; his is a heart shared, divided, agitated, wide open to every stimulus, and it becomes a hostelry instead of a sanctuary.

The heart of the Virgin is a living tabernacle, reserved exclusively for God. “Turn to the Lord with your whole heart, and forsake this wretched world,” advises the author of the *Imitation*.⁹ It was not that Our Lady loved absolutely nobody, absolutely nothing. She knew the second commandment of God: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” And her neighbor was every man created by the Most High, every soul redeemed by the blood of Christ; her neighbor was the Jewish people to whom she belonged; tomorrow it would be the Church born on Calvary from

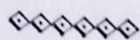
the Heart of Jesus and brought forth by her in the midst of unspeakable sufferings. Could it be possible for Mary not to love her father and her mother and her spouse, Joseph, and all her kinsfolk?

But all Mary's human affections and the tenderness of her love, transformed and divinized by grace, are in reality only one with her love for God and Jesus. All her individual loves, innumerable as they are, are only the prolongation and radiation of her charity: they had the same root, the same sap, the same trunk, the same flowering. Without loving anything outside God, the Virgin loves everything in God and for God. All humanity is included in her love for the Most High, for the mystical Christ.

Unicity of love crowned with matchless purity! Heart of Mary into which no clandestine or parasitic love has ever crept to exhaust the resources of that heart or to contaminate it. "Immaculate Heart of Mary" is one of Mary's most beautiful titles and one which has been given a special feast in the liturgy: it is as it were a feast of lilies, a crown for Our Lady. "*Ubi est major puritas, ibi major caritas*—Where the greatest purity is, there is the greatest charity."¹⁰

It is so rare to love God with pure love, solely for Himself and without egoism! The Virgin alone escaped that corrupting selfishness of love which consists in loving self at the expense of God, of His will, His glory, His good pleasure. Conceived immaculate, she preserved the original integrity and splendor of her heart until death.

And it is with this plenitude, unicity and virginity of love that the Holy Heart of Mary was made.



The Virgin knew and tasted, as we do, all the varieties and nuances of charity: filial love, fraternal love, the love of friends, conjugal love; is she not "*soror mea, sponsa mea*—my sister, my spouse"? (Cant. 4:12). She loved God with a love of complacency, of benevolence, of conformity, of preference, of praise, of desire!

However, there is an eminent, an unique form of love which she alone possessed: maternal love, of all loves the most spontaneous, the most intimate, the most disinterested, the most delicate, the most devoted, the most faithful!

There is no doubt that before the Annunciation the young Nazarene Miriam loved Yahweh with all her heart and with all her soul, but that love—however perfect it was—nevertheless seemed to have had about it something that was fearful, distant, Jewish; it was a love wherein the dominant factor was adoration, submission, annihilation before the Divine Majesty; it was the love of the creature for her Creator, of the servant for her sovereign Lord.

And now the Son of the Most High had become incarnate in her virginal womb and had become her child. We have seen the sudden evolution, the radical transformation instantaneously effected by that mystery in the soul and spiritual life of the young mother. But it is especially in the region of the heart, in the realm of the affections that this moral revolution had its deepest re-echoing.

The maternity of Mary is a real participation in the very paternity of God; it is the flowing into the womb of a woman of that infinite fecundity by which God from all eternity engenders His Word. By an unutterable prodigy God gave to a child the womb of a mother and communicated to her a share in His own fecundity, the power to conceive and to bring forth His own son. To complete His work, "He shed upon her a ray"¹¹ of His paternal love, molded a new heart for her, the heart of a mother. "Communicating to Mary Thy divine fecundity, Thou didst make her the mother of Thy Son; Thou hadst need to complete Thy work and, having associated her in some way with the eternal, chaste generation by which Thou dost produce Thy Word, Thou didst need to shed upon her a spark of that infinite love which Thou dost have for that Well-Beloved who is the splendor of Thy glory and the living image of Thy substance. Behold whence comes the love of Mary" (Bossuet¹²).

At the Annunciation the Virgin became conscious of

her powers and her love as a mother. At that solemn moment took place what has been called the "maternization"¹³ of the virginal heart of Mary.

Admirable Mother! Behold her, the one privileged creature who ever had the right to take God into her arms, to press Him to her heart, overflowing with love, and to say to Him, with the Heavenly Father: "Behold my well-beloved Son" (Matt. 3:17); and again: "Ah, my little one, my little one, I love you. . . . I love you. . . . You do not know how much I love you!"

Who can ever reveal to the world the love of such a mother for such a son? Did the Virgin herself, who bore the weight of it—*amor meus pondus meum*¹⁴—measure its extent and plumb its depths? Within the hearts of mothers there are ineffable sentiments which are divined rather than expressed. We admire the immensity of the ocean without being able to discover its shores or to search its unfathomable depths. To understand the love of Our Lady for Jesus, it would be necessary first of all to detect and sound the source from which it sprang: her divine maternity.

"No one can doubt that this womb of Mary in which Love itself—who proceeds from God—rested corporeally for nine months, was entirely given over to the love of Love" (Saint Bernard¹⁵).

"That son was her God, and consequently her love took on an incredible increase. As deep calls unto deep, two affections within her had merged into a single affection, and two loves became a single love. The Virgin Mother loved her God in her son; she loved her son in her God" (Blessed Amadeus of Lausanne¹⁶).

"It is said, and I think it is true, that one would need to have the heart of a mother to understand a mother's love. I say further that one would need to have the heart of the Blessed Virgin to comprehend the Blessed Virgin's love" (Bossuet¹⁷).

Having referred to the spontaneity, the tenderness and the ardor of the love which all mothers have for their

children, Bossuet goes on to say of Mary: "that if the natural sentiments were so strong, it is to be believed that grace gave them another kind of impetuosity, and that the Father, who had associated her with His eternal generation, had at the same time poured into her something of that infinite love which He has for His Son; and that thus there never was an affection like that of the Blessed Virgin, since we see concurring in it the most loving nature possible and the most powerful grace."¹⁸

Again Bossuet writes: "There is nothing stronger, nothing more pressing, than the love Nature gives a mother for a son, and the love that grace gives for God. These two loves are two abysses whose depths cannot be penetrated, and whose extent cannot be conceived."¹⁹ Thus, then, the love of the Heavenly Father for His Son—a love eternal, substantial, infinite—is alone capable of giving us some idea of the love of the Virgin for Jesus. Maternal love, as Saint Francis de Sales explains, is the most active, the most ardent of all loves; it is indefatigable and insatiable.²⁰

May we presume to enter into the heart of Mary, that sanctuary of love, in order to cast a rapid glance at a few of its riches?

All that any mother here below experiences in her soul with regard to her child is found in the heart of Our Lady, but on an infinitely superior plane, strengthened a hundred-fold, sublimated. Spontaneity, profundity, disregard of self, tenderness, delicacy, intimacy, fidelity, devotion—such are the principal indestructible marks of maternal love.

Love is a spontaneous, necessary and almost irrepres-sible sentiment in a mother; to such a degree is this true that a mother without affection is considered an unnatural woman, a monstrosity. "Nobody ever hated his own flesh" (Eph. 5:29). But is not the child the very flesh of its mother—a living branch detached from the trunk, the duplication, as it were, of her own personality? Even the animals experience that instinct with regard to their offspring. At the first leap of life in her womb, a woman immediately feels her heart beat with a joy and awe which

it has never known before and which she cannot repress without doing violence to her nature. Love springs from the source within her.

This transport of love for God, at once spontaneous and voluntary, the Virgin experienced at the first moment of her conception. Instinctively and under the dominance of the Holy Ghost, she went straight to God, her final end, and attached herself to Him forever by an immutable act of charity.

Spontaneity of love appears again, but under a new form, at the moment of the Annunciation. The whole affective being of Mary was stirred and shaken to its very depths by contact with the Son of God upon His becoming incarnate in her womb. At that very moment, she felt an ardent and devouring flame leap up from her heart. Having been made a mother and the Mother of the Saviour, she became conscious that her vocation was more than ever to love God, but in the person of Jesus. Maternal love, both of nature and of grace, obligatory yet free, a love human and divine, was mingled and merged in a fire of charity. Yes, the Virgin Mother loved Christ because she had need to love Him, because she could not *not* love Him; she loved Him because that Christ was at once her God and her child.

Another characteristic of mother-love is that it is firmly rooted. It is united, in fact, to what is most intimate, most secret, most sacred in woman, and with Our Lady to what is most virginal: to the very sources of life. There is no sign here of those infatuations, superficial and fleeting, which last as long as the rose, the space of a morning. The love of mothers resists everything—time, forgetfulness, ingratitude, death. It has about it something that is immutable and eternal.

That love, which is of the depths of motherhood, the Virgin experienced a hundred and a thousand times more than any other mother. "Who," Saint Paul cries out, "shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8:35). The love of Jesus and Mary is the eternal embrace of two loves

which nothing will ever break. Certain plants are so solidly rooted in the soil that they cannot be pulled up without at the same time drawing up the roots and the clay. Such was the mystical and indissoluble union of the hearts of Jesus and Mary—the heart of the mother and the heart of the Son—which the Church has willed to honor in her liturgy.

But perhaps the most striking characteristic of a mother is her disregard of self. Loves which are not in one way or another contaminated by selfishness are rare in the world. "There is in all motherhood when conscientiously and willingly assumed, a love which tends to free a woman from the bonds of selfishness. In becoming a mother, she agrees to live for another rather than herself" (Riquet²¹). "It seems clear that the maternal heart—usually at least—escapes the moral gangrene of selfishness. A mother loves, gives herself, devotes herself, sacrifices herself in forgetfulness of self. She looks for nothing in return, she claims nothing. Her heart is not an article of commerce, nor her love an interest-bearing investment. That little bundle of flesh which squirms in the cradle, which does not know her, which death may perhaps snatch from her on the morrow and from which she will receive in return for all her devotedness neither a thank-you nor a smile, she loves—she loves it with all her heart—for the very need of loving it and because it is her little one!

The disinterested charity of Mary for the Most High revealed itself still more wonderfully in her maternal relations with Jesus. What did she ask in return? What was the price of her immense, heroic love? Nothing except to be able to love increasingly, until death, and to love exclusively for the joy of her child and to the delight of His Heart. She had no concern with her personal satisfactions, her interests, her renown; these were not her affair; they were to be left to God. Her own concern was to love Jesus, to serve Him day and night, to live only for Him, and to associate herself with His work of redemption. In her eyes all else was nothing. Hers was a life of pure love.

And what shall we say of the maternal tenderness of

Our Lady? Is not that sweetness, that rapture, that emotion, that intensity of love the attribute of every mother's heart? What woman does not thus love her child? "To love greatly," said Saint John of the Cross, "is more than to love simply: it is, as it were, to love doubly."²² A woman has a wealth of sensitivity in her heart and flesh, and usually sentiment enters in great measure into her feelings. She scarcely knows how to love except with depth, with fervor, and with strong emotion and with the total gift of herself, body and soul.

Yet this sentiment must not turn to sentimentality or to empty sensuality. Mothers nearly always escape this peril. Motherhood seems to bring with it a purifying power, so that in going through a mother's heart passion is despoiled of all dross and impurities, still keeping intact its ardor and impetuosity. Sensual love, which is too often oppressive and gross, can become refined and spiritualized by contact with the love of a mother, and instead of being the snare that it was, becomes a charm and a delight.

With her extreme and exquisite sensitivity, Our Lady would not have been a woman and a mother, she would not have loved with all her soul and all her strength, if she had not placed all her emotional powers at the service of her charity. Will and sentiment, the spiritual and the sensitive, the human as well as the divine—all were admirably fused and harmonized in her heart.

The Virgin loved Jesus divinely, passionately; but because her passion was untroubled and calm, it kept its original innocence. What virginal tenderness was in that mother as she leaned over the cradle, gazed at her little one, took Him into her arms, lulled Him to sleep, fed Him, and embraced Him.

No doubt as the Child grew in age and in wisdom, Mary's marks of affection were shaded by discretion and gravity. Although her tenderness was more rarely manifested, it remained nonetheless full of freshness and vigor. A mother's love is appeased only by growing deeper.

Delicacy, which is very much akin to tenderness, is to

love what the velvety skin is to the peach. It is one of the charms of a woman; it is especially developed in a mother.

Delicacy implies care—and this is somewhat on the negative side—not to wound, not to offend, to displease, to disturb; and then—the second aspect is positive—constant watchfulness to gratify, to serve, and to please. It consists in politeness of manner, tactfulness in actions, amiability in conversation, service in human relationships.

Rich in these refinements of love, Our Lady lavished them on Our Lord. Between these two hearts, made to understand each other so well, there was not the slightest disagreement, misunderstanding, or offense; not a speck nor a cloud came between them; there was nothing but pure love in an exchange of maternal and filial joys. In regard to Jesus, Mary also could have said: "I do always the things that are pleasing to Him" (John 8:29).

It was the delicacy of a young mother who, in Bethlehem, tried to warm her newborn Son on her breast, to wipe away His tears, to lull Him to sleep.

It was the delicacy of Mary at Nazareth, where she tried to brighten a poor habitation with her motherly smile and to make the carpenter's work less difficult. "The whole life of Christ was a cross and a martyrdom," the *Imitation* reminds us.²³ Night and day, Our Lord had the frightful vision of sin. What must have been the inmost sufferings of our Saviour at the sight of that rebellious pagan humanity, adorers of false gods; in the midst of that people whom He came to save, and from whom He received only unbelief, indifference, ingratitude and hatred!

Fortunately He had His mother there with Him—His mother, the first Veronica of His bruised Heart, His mother who loved Him, who did not cease to love Him and with such love—for all others! That maternal affection was a consolation, a support, and an ineffable beatitude, as it were, to Him in His mental agony. She was an even greater comfort than the angel of Gethsemani.

She was present again on the hill of Calvary, with her mother's heart to compassionate the final sorrows of her

Son. It is so hard to die alone! She was present to listen to His last farewells, to receive His last sigh, and to close His eyes. "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" After that cry of anguish and of utter desolation, the Saviour could then lower His glance to His mother and murmur low: "Ah, she at least has not forsaken Me!"

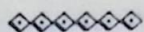
We often hear—although it has become more rare—of the intimacy of the family circle: the union of spirit and of heart in a common life. To understand it, we must go to Nazareth to contemplate the Holy Family.

From the instant in which the Virgin conceived the Son of God, she entered into and established with Him a union of profound, active, indissoluble love which will never cease either in time or in eternity, a beautiful life of love, a life united, a fusion of two beings lost in a common contemplation: "*Jam non ego, vivit vero in me Christus*—It is now no longer I that live but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Who can ever tell what those thirty years were, spent in Nazareth in constant heart-to-heart communings one with the other?

This union of love persisted during the public life of the Saviour and even after the Ascension. There is no separation either of time or of place for those who love deeply. Spiritual intimacy does not require physical presence. Absent in body, lovers are united in soul. So Our Lady continued to bear Jesus in her mind and her heart as she had formerly carried Him in her womb.

There remains devotion, the last characteristic of maternal love. Every woman has that quality in her veins: the natural need for giving herself, spending herself, sacrificing herself for her child. Vowed body and soul to the service of Jesus from the moment of the Incarnation, Our Lady had no longer lived, worked, labored, prayed, suffered, or had love for anything except her Child: she was a voluntary collaborator in His work of redemption. With Him, and for love of Him, she pledged herself to that royal way of the cross which would lead them both, united in a

single sacrifice, to the summit of Calvary. She too, "loved . . . to the end" (John 13:1).



Love of God and love of neighbor are two loves indissolubly united, the second commandment being only the logical and necessary consequence of the first. "He who loves God should love his brother also" (I John 4:21). "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar" (I John 4:20).

One of the most endearing aspects of the heart of Mary would escape us, if we did not mention her charity for the human race.

Here again we reach the ineffable. The love of the Virgin for us can be conceived of only by comparison with her charity for the Most High. It is with the same love, with the same heart, that she embraces God and all the children of God, her brothers and sisters in the Lord—with the same purity, the same intensity, the same ardor. Her affection for us is only the prolongation and expansion of her love of God. Nobody escapes the radiation of her tenderness. She loves all that God loves: every creature, in each of whom she perceives some reflection of the wisdom, the power and the goodness of the Lord. The heart of Mary is open to all; there is room for everyone. If Saint Paul had solicitude for all the churches (cf. II Cor. 11:28), from the moment of her conception Our Lady was mindful of all human generations.

But it was especially from the time of the Annunciation that her love for us took prodigious growth and was clothed with a new form. Before this solemn hour she was only our "sister," a big sister; and it was as a sister that she loved us—we were all children of the same Father who is in Heaven.

At the Incarnation, Mary became Mother of the Word and mother of humanity. With Christ—members of whose

Mystical Body we are—she bore us in her virginal womb. From that moment she felt for Jesus and for all His immense human family, not only the responsibilities of a mother but the love of a mother. A new, unheard-of charity—flowing into her from the infinite love of the Father—suddenly, like a seatide, flooded her whole being and her whole life! It was the natural consequence, let us repeat, of her twofold maternity, divine and human.

Her maternal love for Jesus, her first-born—a selfless love, a love of tenderness, of delicacy, of fidelity, of devotion, of intimacy—this is the love she has for the innumerable multitude of her adopted children. All these children of God, who have become her children, whom once she bore with Christ in her virginal womb, she now bears with that same Christ in her maternal heart. Her sisterly love has changed into a mother's love.

Our Lady! . . . Our Mother . . . our true Mother. . . . *Salve Mater!* And such a mother! Such a heart and such a love! Saint Alphonsus says: "If the love of all mothers for their children, of all husbands for their wives, and of all saints and angels for their devoted servants, were united, it would not be so great as the love that Mary bears for one soul alone."²⁴

Doubtless she enveloped us already with her maternal gentleness when, at Nazareth, in the rapture of her young motherhood, she conceived us at the same time she conceived Jesus; but it seems evident that Mary never loved us so much as on Calvary, when she brought us forth in the midst of terrible sufferings. It is in suffering that maternal love attains fulfillment. "Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15: 13). At Golgotha, Our Lady gave more than her own life; she sacrificed that of her divine Son.

"Mother of mercy—*Mater misericordiae*"—whose goodness radiates over all generations! Is it not she who soothes, who smiles, relieves, encourages, cares for, cures and sometimes brings back to life? Is she not the universal provider? No one ever rose with empty hands and afflicted soul after

having knelt and invoked her. She is the "Mother most admirable, Mother most amiable—*Mater admirabilis, Mater amabilis*"—bowing down over mankind day and night to help her poor children in all their physical miseries and mental sufferings. *Consolatrix afflictorum. . . . Causa nostrae laetitiae.*

But it is especially in the supernatural domain and in the matter of eternal salvation that the tremendous and conquering intervention of Our Lady is proved. Her twofold maternity is indeed the very foundation of her apostolate, "*Regina apostolorum*—Queen of Apostles"—which extends even to the remotest parts of the earth and will last until the end of time. Can the heart of a mother remain insensible to the frightful danger which threatens her children? After having done so much, prayed so much, suffered so much for them, how can she let them fall into the eternal flames of hell?

She will, then, be the "help of Christians—*auxilium christianorum*"; the "refuge of sinners—*refugium peccatorum*"; the "hope of our salvation—*spes nostra salve*"; while awaiting the time when she will be the "gate of Heaven—*janua coeli*"; a gate wide open, a door, as it were, through which the immense multitude of the elect will pass, to beatitude.