

Devotion to Our Lady in the Early Church

IN the liturgy of the first three centuries of the Christian era we will certainly not find any clear traces of a cultus of the Blessed Virgin Mary: the devotion of the early Christians was wholly centred in Christ, and only in the second century do we find unmistakable examples of the veneration of saints — the martyrs, who, it was held, passed immediately into the presence of God and could, by their death, obtain graces and blessings for others (1). The idea of venerating those who on account of their sufferings were among the elect, was certainly reinforced by the veneration of the angels, which, having had a pre-Christian origin in post-exilic Judaism, was quite easily embraced by the faithful of the sub-Apostolic age (2). Quite naturally, later on the faithful turned to implore the intercession of the Blessed Mother of God; but it is only in the 4th century that we have definite traces of devotion towards the Blessed Virgin Mary: this was due perhaps to the fact that such a devotion in earlier centuries would not have been opportune at a time when the cult of Cybele, the mother of the gods, was so popular among the pagans (3).

This does not mean that in the first three centuries of our era Our Lady was not held in special honour by the faithful: her dignity as Mother of the Lord was stressed even in the first century, and from that time the theological basis on which the devotion to the Blessed Virgin was later on reared, began to be laid down. The clause 'born of the Virgin Mary' belonged to

- (1) Certain Churches in the second century had already introduced the cult of local martyrs. From the Acts of the Martyrdom of St Polycarp, who died in Smyrna in 151, chps. XVII and XVIII, we gather that (i) the Christians clearly distinguished between the adoration due to the Son of God and the veneration given to the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord; (ii) the Christians gathered the relics of their martyrs and gave them due honour; (iii) the Christians met in joy and happiness to celebrate the anniversary of the death of their martyrs.
- (2) "The host of the other good angels who follow and are made like him and the prophetic spirit, we worship and adore" (St Justin, *Apol. I*, 6). See Tixeront, *Histoire de Dogmes*, I, pages 37, 258 ss.
- (3) Mario Righetti, *Storia Liturgica*, vol. II, Milano, 1946, p. 234.

the primitive redaction of the Creed (4), St Ignatius of Antioch (5), St. Justin (6), St Irenaeus (7), Origen (8), Hippoly-

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- (4) There have been no doubts that the clause "born of the Virgin Mary" belonged to the primitive redaction of the Creed; it is found v.g. in the Creed used in the Roman rite of Baptism described in Hippolytus' Apostolic Tradition. Cfr. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. I, Spectrum, Utrecht, pp. 24-29.
- (5) Epistle to the Ephesians: "Our God Jesus Christ was conceived by Mary according to God's dispensation of the seed of David, it is true, but also of the Holy Spirit..... And the Prince of this world was in ignorance of the virginity of Mary and her child-bearing and also of the death of the Lord—three mysteries loudly proclaimed to the world, though accomplished in the stillness of God" (chps. 18-19). Later on (chp. 20) he describes Jesus Christ, "who in the flesh was of the line of David", as "the Son of Man and the Son of God". (A.C.W. vol. I).
- (6) St Justin was the first to show the parallelism between Eve and Mary as Paul had done between Adam and Jesus. In his dialogue with the Jew Trypho he says: Christ became man by the Virgin in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent's might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin. For Eve who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word of the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy when the Angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her, that the spirit of the Lord would come upon her and the power of the highest would overshadow her; wherefore the Holy Thing begotten of her is the Son of God" Cfr. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. I, pp. 211-212.
- (7) St Irenaeus extends the parallelism between Eve and Mary. According to Irenaeus the procedure of the Redemption follows exactly the course of events of the fall of man. For every faulty step which man took, having been seduced by Satan, God exacts from him a compensation in order to make his victory over the seducer more complete. Mankind receives a new progenitor in place of Adam. But since the first woman was also implicated in the fall by her disobedience, the healing process starts also by the obedience of a woman. Giving life to the New Adam she becomes the true Eve, the true mother of the living and the *causa salutis*. In this way Mary becomes the *Advocata Hevae*. The parallelism is extended even further. St Irenaeus is so convinced that Mary is the new mother of mankind, that he calls her the womb of mankind: thus he teaches the universal motherhood of Mary. He speaks of the birth of Christ as "the pure one opening purely that

tus (9), Tertullian (10), and others all honour the miraculous motherhood of the Virgin, and though some writers (11) deny her perpetual virginity, yet their more orthodox contemporaries affirm it.

Clear traces of the honour in which the Mother of God was held in the first three centuries are found in the catacombs and in the apocryphal writings. The various frescoes, belonging to the second and third centuries, found in the catacombs and representing Our Lady with the divine Child in her arms or in a

pure womb which regenerates men unto God" (Adv. Haer. 4, 33, 11) Cfr. Quasten, Patrology, vol. I, pp. 298-299.

- (8) The historian Sozomen reports (Hist. eccl. 7, 32) that Origen first used the title *Theotokos* for Mary, although we cannot be surprised that it is not found in the wreckage of his works... Origen also teaches Mary's universal motherhood: "No one may understand the meaning of the Gospel (of St John) if he has not rested on the breast of Jesus and received Mary from Jesus to be his mother also (In Joh. 1, 6)" Cfr. Quasten, Patrology, vol. II, Spectrum Utrecht, 1953, p. 81.
- (9) Let us believe then, dear brethren, according to the tradition of the apostles, that God the Word came down from heaven (and entered) into the holy virgin Mary in order that, taking the flesh from her, and assuming also a human—by which I mean rational—soul, and becoming thus all that man is with the exception of sin, He might save fallen man and confer immortality on men who believe in His name (Contr. Noet. 17). Hippolytus follows Irenaeus in thinking that the process of Redemption followed exactly the course of events of the fall of man. Cfr. Quasten, Patrology, vol. II, p. 201.
- (10) Tertullian, in his eagerness to defend the real humanity of Christ, stresses the point that His Body is not heavenly but really born of the very substance of Mary, *ex Maria*, to such a degree that he denies the virginity of Mary *in partu* and *post partum*. For Tertullian Mary is the second Eve.
- (11) Besides Tertullian, Helvidius (refuted in 383 by St Jerome, from whom alone we have all we know about this heretic), Bonosus (bishop of Sardica, condemned by Pope Siricius in 391 or 392, and founder of a sect which lasted till the 7th century), and Jovinian (also condemned by Pope Siricius in 390 and refuted by St Jerome after his death) denied the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Mother of God. Cfr. Tixeront, Histoire des Dogmes, vol. II, Paris, 1931, pp. 243-250.

praying position with hands uplifted (12), though they are not proofs of a liturgical cult of the B.V.M., they certainly testify to the deep veneration for Our Lady in the ancient Church. The earliest apocryphal writings also testify to a deep and sincere veneration of the purity and sanctity of the Blessed Virgin, affirming her virginity *in partu* and *post partum*, and show a preoccupation with the dominant role of Our Lady in the work of our Redemption and stress the power of her intercession for humanity (13).

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- (12) The oldest known painting of the virgin is found in the Catacombs of Priscilla and belongs to the 2nd century: the fresco represents the Virgin seated with the Infant in her arms, before her stands a young man holding a roll in his left hand, with his right hand pointing to the Virgin and a star in the sky above. Generally, the fresco is thought to represent the prophecy of Isaias. Archaeologists generally attribute to the 2nd century two frescoes representing the Annunciation, the one in the Catacomb of Priscilla, the other in the catacomb of St Peter and Marcellinus; and to the third century the frescoes representing the Virgin and Child with the Magi found in the cemeteries of Domitilla and St Peter and Marcellinus. With regard to the second type of frescoes where the Virgin is represented as an "orante", there is a very large number of possible examples, but very few can be certainly identified with the Mother of God. Cfr. Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit. X, 1982-2035; C.M. Kaufmann, *Manuale di Archeologia Cristiana*, versione dal tedesco, Roma, 1908, pp. 269-272, 322-331, 365-369; Marucchi, *Manuale di Archeologia Cristiana*, Roma, 1908, pp. 354-362; Smith-Cheetham, *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*, London 1908, *Mary St., The Virgin (in Art)*, vol. II, pp. 1148-1155; Schuster, *Liber Sacramentorum*, vol. VIII, Torino-Roma, 1932, pp. 21-22.
- (13) Among the apocryphals the most startling evidence is from the so-called "Protoevangelium" of St James which most probably was product of the middle of the second century, and certainly was in existence at the end of that century. The principal aim of the whole writing is to prove the perpetual and inviolate virginity of Mary before, in, and after the birth of Christ. The *Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis* of the sixth century condemns the writing as heretical; nevertheless, the influence of this Nativity Gospel cannot be overestimated: liturgy, literature, and art all have alike been affected by it. Cfr. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. I, Spectrum, Utrecht, 1950, pp. 118-122. See also Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit. vol. I, 2555-2579.

The first signs of a cult of the Mother of God are found in the fourth century: it was a popular veneration of the Virgin which had degenerated and was denounced by St Epiphanius (†403). An obscure sect, the Collyridians, in Arabia and in Thrace, celebrated in honour of the Mother of God an annual feast, at which only women could attend. These women assembled together round a sort of throne, mounted on wheels, and to the Blessed Virgin, as to a goddess, they offered sacrificial cakes (*kollyrida tina*, hence the name by which St Epiphanius calls the sect) which they later on ate together. Though disapproving of these extravagancies, St Epiphanius did not deny due honour to the Mother of God: "Let Mary be held in honour, he wrote, let the Father, the Son and Holy Ghost be adored, but let no one adore Mary". All his writings abound with the praises of the Virgin Mother of God and he believed that there was some mysterious dispensation with regard to her death implied in the words of the Apocalypse: "And there was given to the woman two wings of a great eagle that she might fly into the desert unto her place" (14).

The praises of St Epiphanius are echoed in the writings of all the great Fathers of the fourth century: St Ambrose (15) speaks of the B.V.M. as the model of all virtue, St Augustine proclaims her unique privilege of sinlessness (16), St Jerome

(14) Apoc. 12, 14.

(15) Cfr. v.g. the whole of the 2nd chapter of Book II *De Virginitate* and chaps. 5 to 7 of the *De Institutione Virginis*. In the third century already, Mary was considered to be the type and exemplar of the ascetic, who, consecrating his whole life to the practice of virtue, was worthy, like the martyrs, of the veneration and honour of his brethren. This is certainly hinted at in the 3rd century fresco in the catacomb of Priscilla which represents a *velatio virginis* where the bishop is pointing at the Virgin with the Divine Child as a model of virgin purity. Cfr. Righetti, *Storia Liturgica*, vol. II, p. 234; Marucchi, *Manuale di Archeologia Cristiana*, p. 357.

(16) "Excepta itaque sancta virgine Maria, de qua propter honorem Domini nullam prorsus, cum de peccatis agitur, haberi volo quaestionem—unde enim scimus, quid ei plus gratiae collatum fuerit ad vincendum omni ex parte peccatum, quae concipere ac parere meruit quem constat nullum habuisse peccatum?—hac ergo virgine excepta, si omnes illos sanctos et sanctas, cum hic viverent, congregare possemus et interrogare utrum essent sine peccato, quid fuisse responsuros putamus?" (*De nat. et gratia*, 36, 42 PL 44, 267).

foreshadows that notion of Mary as the mother of the human race which was to animate so powerfully the devotion of a later age (17), but it is St Ephraem, the Syrian deacon, who uses the most glowing language to honour the Blessed Mother of God (18).

These developments in the veneration of Our Lady multiplied the various means by which the faithful showed their devotion to the Blessed Mother of God. In the East, even before the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.), we find churches dedicated in Her honour: the church itself where the Council was held was dedicated to Her Divine Maternity (19), while St Cyril of Alexandria, wrote: Hail to thee, Mary, Mother of God, in whose honour in towns and villages and in the islands were founded churches of true believers (20). In Palestine, when Juvenal was bishop of Jerusalem (425-458), the wife of a high Roman official built a magnificent church in honour of Mary on the road from Jerusalem to Betlehem. Other churches dedicated to Our Lady were built by the emperor Zeno (+491) on mount Garizim and at Cysicum, by the empress Pulcheria (+453) at Constantinople, but it was Justinian (+565) who surpassed all in his zeal of dedicating churches to the B.V.M. especially in frontier cities, for such churches much better than his fortresses (he said) would defend his domains from the onslaughts of the barbarians (21). In the West, the earliest churches dedicated to Our Lady seem to have been those of St Mary in Trastevere and St Mary Major, which were both erected be-

(17) St Jerome writing to Paula to console her for the death of her daughter Blesilla, imagines the daughter as saying: "...mater... putas esse me solam? Habeo pro te Mariam Matrem Domini" (Ep. 33, PL 22, 472).

(18) St Ephraem invokes the Virgin with the most honourable and loving titles: Hope of all Christians; Peacemaker; after God, our only refuge, light, power, wealth, glory; ever ready to help her faithful in all material and spiritual contingencies of this world; whose intercession before God is all-powerful and ever ready to intercede for sinners. Cfr. Ricciotti, S. Efrem Siro, *Imni alla Vergine*, tradotti dal siriano, 2a ediz., Torino, 1939.

(19) Mansi, Conc. IV, 1223, 1229, 1237, 1241, 1332.

(20) *Homilia in sanctam Deiparam*, PG 77, 1034.

(21) Procopius, *De Aedificiis*, VI, 7; I, 3.

fore the year 500 (22). After the fifth century the churches dedicated to Our Lady became more common in the West (23).

In the fifth century we also find references to the veneration of various relics of the B.M.V. : at Diocesarea one could venerate the seat on which she sat when the angel Gabriel announced unto her; her house at Nazareth, transformed into a basilica, preserved her vestments; Jerusalem possessed her cincture and veil; while Constantinople celebrated in the church of Blachernes special feasts in honour of the robe Mary wore

- (22) The Church of Trastevere was already built in the 4th century and at that time it was known as the *Basilica Julii trans Tiberim regione XIII iuxta Callistum*. The first document which speaks of the church as the *basilica sanctae Mariae quae Callisti vocatur* belongs to the seventh century. Possibly it received its title of S. Maria in the 5th century as it was at this time that at Rome the tendency arose to dedicate to the saints the various urban titles which formerly were only known by the name of the founder. The choice of the dedication was surely influenced by the Greek element of the Roman population which mainly inhabited the region across the Tiber.

Santa Maria Antiqua cannot be considered as one of the oldest churches in Rome as it was erected only in the 7th century, in a hall of the Imperial palace: the importance of this deanery is due only to the fact of its site; at the time of Leo IV the title was transferred to S. Maria Nova at the other end of the Forum, as the church could no longer be used being in a state of collapse.

St. Mary Major dates from the time of Pope Liberius (†366) who changed the ancient hall of Sicinius into a Christian basilica: *In basilica Sicinina ubi ritus Christiani est conventiculus*, as Ammianus Marcellinus attests. Xystus III (†440) rebuilt it from its foundations, dedicating it to the Blessed Mother of God and adorning the triumphal arch with mosaics representing scenes from the infancy of the Lord, to commemorate the definition of the Council of Ephesus. These mosaics were restored by Pius XI in 1931 to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the Council. Worthy of note is the fact that these mosaics were influenced by the accounts of the *Protoevangelium Jacobi*, Cfr Schuster, *Libri Sacramentorum*, vol. VIII, pp. 1-20; Righetti, *Storia Liturgica*, vol. II, p. 236.

- (23) In Spain, at Jerez and Toledo, there are two inscriptions commemorating the dedication of an *ecclesia s. Mariae* in 556 and 587 respectively. St Gregory the Great mentions that in Italy churches dedicated to Our Lady were also to be found in the less important cities like Ferentino and Valera. In France, St Gregory of Tours mentions churches dedicated to Her in Poitiers, Toulouse, Tours and Lyons. Cfr. Righetti, l.c., p. 237; Cath. Enc., Virgin Mary, Devotion to, vol. 15, p. 462.

when she was with child and of the shroud in which the Apostles wrapped her body when she died: both relics had been given to the emperor Marcion by Juvenal, and the robe had many times been carried in procession and preserved the imperial cities from earthquakes and pillage. Quite evidently, many of these relics were spurious, and yet their veneration shows how greatly the faithful esteemed and honoured the Blessed Mother of God (24).

Soon after the Council of Ephesus, the first pictures portraying Our Lady with the divine Child appeared; they were not portraits — St Augustine expressly says “*neque novimus faciem Virginis Mariae*” (25) — but they all portrayed the ideal *Theotokos* (26). The first picture of Our Lady of which we have information is the famous *Hodegetria*, ascribed to St Luke, and regarded with deepest reverence by the Greeks; it was originally sent from Jerusalem in 438 by the young empress Eudoxia to her sister-in-law Pulcheria and was later placed in the church of the *Hodegoi* erected by her. Other famous pictures of the Virgin at Constantinople were that in the church of Blachernes

(24) Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit., vol. X, 2039-2040. With regard to the feasts of the Robe and the Girdle, see Smith-Cheetham, l.c., p. 1144.

(25) De Trin., 8, 5, PL 42, 949.

(26) Many of these Madonnas are attributed to St Luke: but the first mention we have of St Luke's being an artist is in the Menology of Basil II A.D. 980; actually none of the Madonnas so called of St Luke are anterior to the 5th century. They all exhibit the same hieratic type which established itself in Byzantine art. As Venturi (La Madonna nell'Arte, Milano 1900, p. 26) says: “E' il tipo di Giunone con la regolarità e la dignità delle pitture e sculture pagane, dai grandi occhi, il naso diritto, il mento ateniese; perchè al tempo stesso che nasceva l'idea della Donna eletta da Dio, nasceva anche l'idea della sua beltà, che si tentò di conformare, per quanto era possibile in quell'epoca, al tipo classico della beltà femminile”. “This type”, writes Dean Milman (History of Christianity, iii, p. 394) “gradually degenerates with the darkness of the age and the decline of the art. The countenance sweetly smiling on the child becomes sad and severe. The head is bowed with a gloomy and almost sinister expression, and the countenance gradually darkens till it assumes a black colour. At length even the sentiment of maternal affection is effaced, both the mother and the child become lifeless, the child is swathed in stiff bands, and has an expression of pain rather than of gentleness, or placid infancy”. Cfr. Righetti, Storia Liturgica, vol. II, p. 239; Smith-Cheetham, l.c., p. 1153.

and the one known as the Virgin of the Spring (27). By the sixth century, pictures of Our Lady could be found everywhere in the East: in private houses, in the cells of the monks, in the hermitages, even in prisons. In the West, these pictures of the B.V.M. were not so popular but were not rare though they did not form an object of liturgical veneration: the layout of the churches themselves precluded such veneration. The oldest known picture of Our Lady in the West is a typical Byzantine Madonna belonging to the 5th or 6th century and venerated at St Mary Major.

We have already mentioned the 2nd and 3rd century frescoes of the Catacombs: other paintings of the B.V.M. in the catacombs belong to the 4th and 5th centuries, the more important being that in the catacomb of St Agnes in Rome (28) and that in the crypt of the church of St Maximin in Provence (29).

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- (27) The Hodegetria represents the Virgin standing and holding Our Lord on her left arm, carrying a roll in His left hand and blessing with His right. His nimbus is cruciform, Hers a plain circle. The picture seems to have been destroyed by the Turks at the capture of Constantinople in 1453.

The *Blachernitissa*, so called because preserved in the church of Blachernes built by Pulcheria in a suburb of Constantinople, represents Our Lady with arms extended as an orante.

The Virgin of the Spring, so called from the miraculous spring Leo the Thracian caused to be included within the church erected by him outside the walls of the imperial city in honour of the

B.V.M., represents Our Lady as an orante but with the divine Babe on her lap. The picture seems to have been the *Nicopoeia* which was sculptured by Dandolo in 1204 and is still preserved in St. Mark's, at Venice.

Cfr. Smith-Cheetham, l.c.

- (28) Found by P. Marchi in an arcosolium of the *Coemeterium Maius*, it represents the Blessed Virgin in the figure of an orante and with the child Jesus; on the left and right of the figure there is the Constantinian monogram turned towards the Child to show that He is the Christ.
- (29) The picture is actually not a fresco but incised in marble: an inscription above the head of the figure reads: *Maria virgo minister de templo Jerosale*. It is the only picture which refers to an incident in Mary's life told only in the Apocrypha. The feast of the Presentation originated in the East probably in the 8th century and it was only introduced in the West in 1375. Cfr. Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit., vol. X, 1986-1987.

Mosaic pictures of the Madonna are of extreme rarity in the East, as the Mohammedans destroyed all the Christian mosaics they could lay hands on (30); these mosaics are more common in the West, the oldest being that in the chapel of St Venantius in St John Lateran (31). Also worthy of mention is the mosaic representing the Queen of Heaven enthroned in the centre of the apex on the cathedral of Parenzo in Istria (32).

Mention should also be made of the gilded glasses from the catacombs, and of sarcophagi (33).

- (30) As an example of mosaics from the East we can mention that in the Church of St Sophia in Constantinople representing the Holy Child standing in front of His Mother, whose face is youthful and characterised by a calm beauty. She is supported by St Paul and St John the Baptist on either hand. A mosaic in St Sophia at Salonica, representing the Ascension shows the Virgin among the Apostles: of all the figures She alone is nimbed and wears the conventional veil and purple dress. Cfr. Smith-Cheetham, l.c.
- (31) This work is due to Byzantine artists who worked in Rome during the pontificates of Pope John IV and Theodore (640-649). The upper portion of the mosaic shows a medallion bust of Christ supported by Angels; immediately below stands the figure of the Virgin with arms outstretched, as the central figure, with six apostles on each side. Earlier mosaics found in the West represent the B.V.M. in the Gospel scenes of the Annunciation, Presentation in the Temple, Nativity, Adoration of the Magi, Christ among the doctors (i.e. the mosaics of St Mary Major). Cfr. Schuster, l.c.; Smith-Cheetham, l.c.
- (32) The Virgin is throned and nimbed, supported by angels, and holding her Son in her lap, looking rather as a diminutive man than as a child. The mosaic is due to bishop Euphrasius, A.D. 535-543.
- (33) Full details about the various figures of the Virgin on gilded glasses, and sarcophagi may be found in Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit., vol. X, 1982-2035; Kaufmann, *Archeologia Cristiana*, l.c.; Smith-Cheetham, l.c. As an example of gilded glasses we may mention one found in the catacomb of St Agnes, which represents the B.V.M. in the figure of an orante supported by the Apostles Peter and Paul. Among the sarcophagi, worthy of mention is that preserved in the Church of Sancta Engracia at Saragozza: it belongs to the 4th century and represents the Blessed Virgin supported by the Apostles Peter and Paul, while from above a hand takes hold of her right as if to take her up to heaven. The sculpture evidently depicts the Assumption as described in the apocryphal *Transitus Mariæ*. With regard to this sarcophagus, see Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit., vol. I, 2990-2993.

What we have said till now is no clear evidence of any liturgical cultus of the B.V.M. : the only sure conclusion is that, from the earliest centuries, Christians had the utmost regard to Our Lady and held her in great honour.

We cannot say when it was that the first formularies in honour of the Blessed Mother of God found a place in the liturgy of the Church. But it is certain that this happened before the Council of Ephesus (431), for the antiphon *Sub tuum praesidium*, the oldest extant prayer to the Virgin, has been found in a Copt papyrus of the 3rd century (34) ; and the St Ephraem hymns in honour of Our Lady were most probably written not for private reading but for recitation during the liturgical services : their literary structure would otherwise be difficult to explain. As regards the prayer *Communicantes* of the Canon of the Mass (35), though some have held that originally it ran *Communicantes gloriosae Mariae Genitricis D.N.J.C.* and about 383, as a protest against Helvidius, the words *semper Virginis* were added, and the word *Dei* was inserted after the Council of Ephesus ; yet we have no certain proof that this prayer existed in the Roman canon before the 5th or 6th century. It is missing in the *Euchologion* of Bishop Serapion of Thumis (4th century) and in the eighth book of the liturgy of the Apostolic Constitutions (4th century) and in the *De Sacramentis* of St Ambrose (36), and it is only found in the oldest extant manuscripts of the Roman canon which at all events are not anterior to the sixth century.

The first hint we get of the celebration of a feast in honour of the Blessed Mother of God is in a sermon preached at Constantinople in 429 by Proclus in the presence of the patriarch Nestorius. The faithful had gathered to celebrate the praises of Our Lady—"The Virgin's festival (*partenike paneguris*) incites our tongue to-day to herald her praises"—especially the chastity of her who was "handmaid and mother, Virgin of heaven,

(34) Cfr. Mercenier, *La plus ancienne prière à la Vierge* in *Quest. lit. et paroiss.*, 1940, 33.

(35) Cfr. Righetti, *Storia Liturgica*, vol. II, p. 240.

(36) Till a short while ago the authorship of the treatise was undisputed. The work seems to be a stenographic report of his preaching, which was not restricted by the laws of the *arcana*, in marked contrast to the *De Mysteriis*, Cfr. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, New York, 1950, p. 52, note 10.

he only bridge of God to man, the awful loom of the Incarnation, in which by some unspeakable way the garment of that union was woven, whereof the weaver is the Holy Ghost and the spinner the overshadowing from on high; the wool the ancient fleece of Adam; the woof the undefiled flesh from the Virgin; the weaver's shuttle the immense grace of Him who brought it about; the artificer the Word gliding through the hearing" (37). The preacher speaks especially of the mystery of the Annunciation, but the feast which was being celebrated was not that of the Annunciation, for it originated later. One must conclude that the celebration took place some day during Christmas week. In the fourth century it was the custom to commemorate all that had reference to the Incarnate Word during Christmas-tide. St John Chrysologus (+450) on the days preceding Christmas Day took as subjects for his sermons the history of St John the Baptist, and the Annunciation and Conception of Our Lady (38). St Basil, bishop of Seleucia, a few years later, preached another sermon in which he extols the praise of the Mother of God, making, however, no reference to any particular event in her life (39). Balai, a Syriac writer of the fifth century, in his hymns uses the most glowing language about the Virgin and speaks about a memorial feast of the Mother of the Lord (40). From the evidence we have, one must conclude that the first feast in honour of the B.V.M. was a commemoration of her virtues with special reference to her perpetual virginity, but with no special reference to any particular event in her life. This feast most probably originated in Antioch about 370 and was known as *Mneme tes agias Theotokou kai aeiparthenou Marias* (41) it was celebrated on the 26th or 27th December in some churches, while in others just before Christmas. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that even to-day Catholics of the Syriac rite still celebrate on the 26th or 27th December a feast *De Laudibus Deiparae* (42), and that a *Solemnitas Sacntae*

(37) Laudatio in SS. Dei Genitricem Mariam, PG 65, 678, 681.

(38) Sermo CXL, PL 52, 575 ss.

(39) Orat. XXXIX, PG 85, 425 ss.

(40) Cfr. Catholic Enc., vol. 15, p. 461.

(41) This is A. Baumstark's conjecture. Cfr. Cath. Enc., l.c.; Righetti, p. 241; Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit., vol. X, 2036.

(42) Cfr. Righetti, l.c.

Mariae was celebrated after Epiphany in the Gallican Church in the sixth century, according to St Gregory of Tours (43).

Here a reference ought to be made to the famous *Acathistus* hymn which was sung on the Saturday of the fifth week of Lent on the occasion of a feast instituted in 626 to commemorate the relief of Constantinople from an attack by Persians and Scythians during the reign of Heraclius through the intercession of the Blessed Mother of God (44).

The first feast in honour of Our Lady commemorating a particular event in her life was, most probably, the feast of the Assumption (45). The origin of the feast is unknown but most probably it originated near the tomb of the Blessed Mother of God (45a) as a consequence of the pilgrimages the faithful made to the place: in fact, the greater part of the older feast-days originated in this manner, either near the tomb of the martyr or in the holy places of Palestine (46). From the *Liber Pontificalis* (47) we know that the Emperor Maurice (582-602) fixed the celebration of this feast for the whole Eastern Empire on the 15th August; in the West, at this time, the feast was celebrated in Gaul on the 18th January and in Rome and Spain on the

(43) De gloria martyrum, I, 4, PL 81, 710.

(44) More than a hymn, it is an Office in honour of the Mother of God which was to be recited standing, hence the name. The whole office was said on the Saturday of the 5th week of Lent, but portions of it were distributed over the first four Saturdays of Lent. When recited in its entirety, it was divided into four parts or stations, between which various psalms or canticles were sung sitting. Cfr. Cath. Enc., vol. I, p. 92.

(45) The feast has had various names; for a long time in liturgical books it was known as the *Dormitio* or *Pausatio* of the B.V.M. and these terms correspond to the Greek name of the feast—*Koimesis*. The same can be said of the terms *Depositio*, *Transitus*, *Natale* found in martyrologies and calendars. The Greeks also use sometimes, *Metastasis* or *Analepsis*, which correspond to our *Assumptio*, which term has for a long time definitely been used to indicate exactly the nature of the feast. Cfr. Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit., vol. I, 2996-2997.

(45a) With regard to the tomb of the B.V.M., there are two traditions, one for Ephesus and the other for Jerusalem: the latter is more probable. Cfr. D.A.C.L., vol. I, 2995-2996.

(46) Cfr. Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit., l.c.; Righetti, p. 242.

(47) II, 508.

15th August (48); later on, the feast was in the West universally observed on the 15th August. We can say with certainty that in both East and West the feast in the sixth century had been already celebrated solemnly for a long time, and therefore we must date its origin at least to the fifth century (49). Tillemont (50) thinks that the feast of the B.V.M., for which there was a great concourse of people, mentioned in the life of S^c

- (48) St Gregory of Tours, in *De glor. mart.* I, 9, PL 81, 713, says: "Huius festivitas sacra mediante mense undecimo celebratur" (the 11th month was January, as the Gallicans commenced their year in March). Morin thinks that it was not the feast of the Assumption, but only a commemoration of the Divine Maternity of the B.V.M. It seems that the feast was derived from the Syrian feast of the 25th January, mentioned in the *Transitus Mariæ* which the Copts celebrated on the 21st, through gallic-copt monasteries founded by Cassianus at Tours. The Bobbio Sacramentary (7th century) has two Masses in honour of the Virgin in January, one *in S. Mariæ solemnitate* celebrating the Maternity of the B.V.M., and the other *in adsumptione S. Mariæ* celebrating the corporal assumption of Our Lady according to the accounts of the Apocrypha (the gospel of this Mass is that we used before the new Mass of the Assumption was introduced). The Gothic-gallican missal has only the second Mass. But one must mention a Gallican inscription of 676 which mentions the feast of the Assumption as being held on the 15th August.

As regards Rome, the Gelasian Sacramentary has a Mass on the 15th August *in adsumptione sanctæ Mariæ*: the title is undoubtedly Gallican in origin, but the Mass formulas have no reference at all to the Assumption. A century later it became the feast of the *Dormitio* or the *Natale Sanctæ Mariæ*, as the old Roman lectionary of Warzburg reads, and the resurrection of the B.M.V. (cfr. the prayer before the procession: *festivitas... in qua sancta Dei Genitrix mortem subiit temporalem nec tamen nexibus mortis deprimi potuit*).

In Spain, though the Assumption is found represented in a sarcophagus of the 4th cent. (see note 33), there certainly was no liturgical celebration at that time: no mention of such commemoration is found in the *Peregrinatio Etheriæ* which belongs to the 4th century. The first testimonies of the celebration of the feast are found in St Isidore (†636) and more clearly in St Heldephonus (†667). In Spain the feast was derived from the East in the seventh century, as it was from the beginning celebrated on the 15th August. Cfr. *Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit.*, vol. I, 2998-2999; Righetti, pp. 250-252

- (49) *Dict. Arch. Chr. Lit.*, vol. I, 2999.

- (50) *Memoires*, tom. I, p. 476; also Baumer, *Hist. du Breviare*, trad. Biron, v. I, p. 367.

Theodore (+529), who lived near Jerusalem, was actually the feast of the Assumption. A hymn of James, bishop of Sarug (523), hints that on the 15th August the Church in Syria commemorated the death of the Blessed Mother of God (51). The apocryphal *Transitus Mariæ* (52) speaks of three feasts of Our Lady one of which was celebrated on the 13th or 15th day of Ab (roughly August). After the sixth century, though there were still some doubts as regards the fact of her bodily assumption (53), the feast continued to increase in solemnity and soon became the principal feast of the B.V.M. (54).

(51) Cfr. Righetti, p. 249.

(52) Attributed to St John the Evangelist or to Melito bishop of Sardis (2nd cent.), it was written towards the end of the 4th century with the object, it seems, of counteracting a heretical composition of the same title and subject. A *Transitus Mariæ* is mentioned among the apocrypha prohibited by the Gelasian Decretum, but it is problematic whether this is to be identified with our recast *Transitus* or not. The work was very popular, as the various versions which reached us testify. The book certainly influenced the homilies of the later Fathers, but we cannot conclude that the institution of the feast of the Assumption is due to an apocryphal writing. The *Transitus Mariæ* is on the other hand, a witness to the belief of the Church in the 4th century—a belief which is also attested to by the sarcophagus of Saragozza (see note 33), which seems to have been made before the *Transitus* itself was written. Cfr. D.A.C.L., vol. I, 2993.

In the Syrian version of the *Transitus*, we find mention of three feasts of Our Lady, one on the 25th January (*de seminibus*), another on the 15th of Iyar (May) (*ad aristas*), and a third on the 13th or 15th of Ab (August) (*pro vitibus*). Cfr. Cath. Enc., vol. 15, p. 461; Righetti, p. 248.

(53) In a letter *ad Paulam* falsely attributed to St Jerome, probably belonging to the 8th century, we read: "multi dubitant utrum assumpta fuerit simul cum corpore an abierit relicto corpore..." and this is said "ne forte si venerit in manus vestras illud apocryphum de transitu eiusdem virginis dubia pro certa recipiatis". (Ep. ad Paulam, 2, PL 30, 126). Cfr. D.A.C.L., vol. I, 3000; Righetti, 250-251.

(54) Pope Sergius (687-701) instituted a procession on the day of the Assumption. According to the *Liber Pontificalis*: "Constituit ut diebus adnuntiationis domini, dormitionis et nativitatibus sanctae Dei genitricis semperque virginis Mariæ ac sancti Symeonis quod Ypapanti greci appellant, letania exeat a sancto Adriano et ad sanctam Mariam populus occurrat". In the eighth century it was one of the very few feasts with a double night vigil; in 847 Leo IV added an octave to the feast, and in 863 Pope Nicholas I, in his Instructions to the Bulgars, classes it as equal to Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Cfr. Righetti, l.c.

The feast of the Nativity of the B.V.M. most probably began to be celebrated soon after that of the Assumption; the earliest document commemorating the fest belongs to the sixth century and it is a hymn commemorating the event as told in the apocryphal Gospel of St James (55). In the West, it was not celebrated before the seventh century, though at this time the birth of St John the Baptist was already commemorated (56). The first reference to the feast at Rome is in the *Liber Pontificalis*, which attests that Pope Sergius I (687-701) instituted a litany on the feast (57).

At this point a reference to the feast of the Immaculate Conception would not be out of place. Though the "Protoevangelium" of St. James hints at the immaculate birth of Our Lady, the feast of the Conception itself only originated in the 8th century in Palestinian Monasteries (58), the date being fixed on the 9th December, most probably in relation to the date of the birth of the Virgin—8th September (59). The oldest genuine document which speaks of this feast is the canon or hymn for the feast composed by Andrew of Crete († c. 720) (60); it was a

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- (55) The hymn belongs to St Romanus, a great ecclesiastical lyricist of the Greek church, who was a native of Emessa in Syria, deacon of Berytus and later on at the Blachernes Church at Constantinople. He wrote his hymns between 536-556.
- (56) The fact that the Nativity of St John the Baptist was celebrated in the Roman church before that of the Virgin is easily explained, as the account of the Nativity of the Baptist is known from the Gospels, while that of the Virgin is only told in apocryphal writings. Mention of the feast of the Nativity in the West is found in the calendar of Sonnatius, bishop of Rheims (†631), and in nearly all lectionaries and calendars of the Carolingian times. Cfr. Cath. Enc., vol. 10, p. 712-713; Righetti, p. 263, 264.
- (57) See note 54.
- (58) The feast of the Conception of Our Lady may have arisen from an analogy with the Feast of St John's conception, which in the East is still celebrated on the 23rd September and dates from the 5th century. Cfr. Cath. Enc., vol. VII, p. 676.
- (59) Evidence is lacking to show why the 8th September was chosen for the commemoration of the Nativity of the B.V.M.: perhaps considering that with the birth of Mary the work of our Redemption began, it was thought convenient to celebrate the mystery at the beginning of the ecclesiastical year which, according to the *Menologium Basilianum*, began in September. Cfr. Righetti, p. 263.
- (60) He wrote liturgical hymns in the second half of the seventh century when a monk at the monastery of St Sabas near Jerusalem; later on he was archbishop of Crete. Cfr. Cath. Enc., l.c.

minor feast, in relation to the great feasts of the Nativity, Annunciation, and Assumption, and in the eighth century it was not universally celebrated in the East (61). We may note here that this Eastern feast did not actually celebrate the Immaculate Conception of Mary but the miracle narrated in the apocryphals: in fact, the feast was known to the Greeks as the Conception of St Anne the Ancestress of God (62). In the West, the first references to such a feast are from Ireland (63), but this Irish feast stands alone and outside the line of liturgical development. We must trace the development of the feast in the West from pre-Norman England (64), where it was celebrated

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- (61) John, first monk and later bishop in the isle of Euboea about 750, in a sermon, speaking in favour of the propagation of this feast, says that it was not yet known to all the faithful. (PG 98, 1499). It was extended to the whole Eastern empire by Leo VI the Philosopher (+903). Cfr. Cath. Enc., l.c.
- (62) In celebrating the feast of Mary's conception the Greeks of old did not consider the theological distinction of the active and passive conceptions, though v.g. John of Euboea speaks also of it as an object of the celebration. "On this day, he says, is the conception of Mary the holy Mother of God whom Christ the Son of God has built Himself with the pleasure of the Father and the cooperation of the life-giving spirit" (PG 96, 1500 quoted by Righetti, p. 256, n. 105). Their object in celebrating the feast was less the purity of the conception than the holiness and heavenly mission of the person conceived; the miraculous events which preceded Mary's conception as told in the *Protoevangelium Jacobi*, may have been the reason for the celebration: even to-day the lesson of the Matins for the feast of the Conception in the Greek Church contains allusions to this apocryphal. Cfr. Cath. Enc., vol. VII, pp. 676-677.
- (63) The first traces are found in the martyrology of Tallaght, composed about 790, and in the *Feilire* or Calendar of St Aengus (c. 825), and it is called the *Inceptio* or *Conceptio Mariae Virginis* or "the great feast of the Virgin Mary". It was celebrated on the 3rd May, according to Thurston, through copt-alexandrine influence. Cfr. Righetti, p. 256; Cath. Enc., l.c.
- (64) The evidence is found in a calendar of Old Minster, Winchester: (*Conceptio S'ce Dei Genitricis Mariae*) dating from about 1300; a calendar of New Minster, Winchester, written between 1035 and 1059; a pontifical of Exeter of the 11th cent., which has a *Benedictio in Conceptione Sanctae Mariae*; and a Canterbury pontifical of the first half of the eleventh century, which has a similar benediction. Cfr. Cath. Enc., l.c.

with considerable solemnity. Partly smothered after the Norman Conquest, later it was extended to the continent, but the attempts to introduce it officially provoked contradiction and theological discussion bearing on its legitimacy and its meaning—discussions which continued for centuries and were definitely settled only in 1854. But the account of this is outside the scope of the present article.

The first certain references to the celebration of the feast of the Annunciation belong to the seventh century; these are the *Chronicon paschale* of Alexandria for the year 624 (65), a decree of the Council of Trullo (629) (66), the canons of the Council of Toledo held in 656 (67), the reference to the litany instituted by Pope Sergius already mentioned, and the seventh century manuscript of the Gelasian Sacramentary. The testimony of earlier centuries is uncertain (68).

(65) PG 92, 488.

(66) The Council proclaimed that the feast of the Annunciation could be celebrated in Lent and that on that day as on Saturdays and Sundays the Sacrifice of the Mass would be celebrated, while on all other days the Mass of the Presanctified was to be celebrated. D.A.C.L., vol. 1, 2244; Mansi, Concil. XI, 968.

(67) The Council notes that the feast is celebrated "per diversas mundi partes... et spatio remotis et terris", and decrees that as it was difficult to celebrate the feast on the 25th March on account of Lent, following the example of other churches, the feast should be transferred to the 18th December. Later on, the Roman Church on the 18th December celebrated the feast of the *Expectatio Partus* which is nothing more than a reduplication of the feast of the Annunciation. Cfr. D.A.C.L., vol. I, 2243-2244; Righetti, p. 263-264; Mansi, Concil., XI, 32-34.

(68) The three sermons of St Gregory the Wonder-worker (3rd cent.), a sermon of St Athanasius, another of St Peter Chrysologus, and two homilies of Athanasius of Sinai are not considered authentic. From the sermons of St Leo the Great we cannot infer at all that the mystery of the Annunciation was commemorated by a special feast. The council of Laodicea (4th cent.) prohibits the commemoration of martyrs in Lent and makes no mention of the Annunciation. But the *Peregrinatio Etheriae* says that on the 40th day after Easter—*die quadragesimarum post Pascha*—all went to Bethlehem to celebrate the vigil and Mass in the Grotto of the Nativity. This means that on that day there was no memory of the Ascension, which according to the *Peregrinatio* was celebrated on the same day as Pentecost, and no celebration in the church of the Imbomon (the place from where Christ ascended into heaven). Cabrol conjectures that *Etheria* is referring to a celebration of the

We have purposely omitted all mention of the feast of the Purification, because originally it was a feast of Our Lord (69) : it is only in the seventh century that the feast in the West takes on a Marian character (70). As a feast of Our Lord, it certainly dates from the 4th century in Jerusalem, as a clear reference to a commemoration of the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple is found in the *Peregrinatio Etheriae* (395), but it became universal in the East only at the time of Justinian (71).

We can, therefore, confidently affirm that by the 7th century the position of the B.V.M. in the liturgical formulae of the Church was firmly established.

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feast of the Annunciation. In the 4th century there was certainly at Nazareth a Basilica of the Annunciation, as excavations have clearly proved, and this very probably brought about a celebration of the mystery: we have already mentioned that the various holy places have had a great influence in the establishment of the various feasts of the ancient church calendar. Cfr. D.A.C.L., vol. I, 2243-2247.

- (69) Its original name still kept in the Greek Church was *Ypapante* or *Ypante* rendered in Latin as *occursus* or *obviatio* and meaning the meeting of Our Lord with Simeon and Anna in the Temple. The Gelasian Sacramentary has the three prayers of the Mass, entitled in *Purificatione S. Mariae*, but all three prayers refer to the presentation of Jesus in the Temple. Even the invitorium, antiphons, and responsories of the present-day Office remind us that it was originally a Feast of Our Lord. Cfr. Righetti, pp. 83-87.
- (70) The Marian character may have been partially imposed on the feast by Pope Sergius. The *Liber Pontificalis* is not exact in saying that this Pope instituted a letania for the feast of the *Ypapante*, as this procession already existed though we cannot say when it was first instituted; probably what Sergius did was to extend the procession of the *Ypapante* also to the three great feasts of the Virgin: this procession ended at St Mary Major's. Cfr. Righetti, l.c.
- (71) The *Peregrinatio Etheriae* speaks of the feast as the *Quadragesima de Epiphania*: it was celebrated "valde cum summo honore... nam ea die processio est in Anastase et omnes procedunt et ordine aguntur omnia cum summa laetitia ac si per Pascha". In the sixth century it was celebrated in Palestine and at Constantinople, as the monophysite patriarch of Antioch (†518) testifies. According to Niceforus (Hist. Eccl., VII, 28) it was Justin who decreed the celebration of the feast in the whole Eastern empire in 527; while Theophanes attributes this to Justinian in 542 as a thanksgiving after a pestilence: probably Justin introduced the feast and Justinian rendered it more solemn. Cfr. Righetti, l.c.