

CHAPTER XVII

The Occupations of Most Holy Mary after the Death of St. Joseph, and some Interactions with Her Angels.

184. All Christian perfection is included in the two states of life known to the Church, the active and the contemplative. To the active life belong the bodily or sensible operations practiced in our dealings with our neighbor in temporal affairs. They embrace a wide field and include the practice of the moral virtues, which constitute the perfection of our active life. To the contemplative life belong the interior activities of the understanding and the will, striving for the most noble and spiritual objects proper to the rational creature. Therefore the contemplative life is more excellent than the active, and is in itself more agreeable since it is more quiet, delightful and beautiful, and most closely approaches the last end, which is God, in whom the highest knowledge and love reside; thus it partakes more of eternal life, which is entirely contemplative. These two lives were exemplified by the two sisters Martha and Mary (Lk. 10:41-2), the one quiet and thoughtful, the other solicitous and bustling; or those other two sisters and spouses of Jacob, Lia and Rachel (Gen. 29:17), the one fruitful but homely and with bad eyes, the other beautiful and gracious but sterile in the beginning. Thus the active life is more fruitful, although divided into many and various occupations during which the soul is kept in disturbance and has not such clear eyes needed to raise itself and penetrate high and divine things, while the contemplative life is most beautiful, although in the beginning not as fruitful because its fruit comes later as a result of prayer and merits, which suppose great perfection and the friendship of God, obliging Him to extend his liberality toward other souls, and these are usually the fruits of very abundant blessings and of great esteem.

185. The combination of these two lives is the height of Christian perfection, but this combination is very difficult. We do not see both kinds of life united in one person, but existing in a remarkable degree separated in Martha and Mary and in Lia and Rachel, representing singly either the active or the contemplative life. In none of them could both the active and the contemplative life be properly represented because of the difficulty of combining the practice of both in one subject to any great extent. Although the saints have labored much to attain this perfect combination, and all the teachers of the spiritual life have sought to direct souls toward it, and although there are so many instructions of learned and apostolic men and the examples of the Apostles and of the founders of the sacred religious communities who have sought to join contemplation with action as far as possible with divine grace, yet they always knew the active life, due to the multitude of its interests and occupations concerning inferior objects, dissipates the heart and disturbs it, as the Lord told Martha. Although those engaged in it may seek quiet and repose in order to raise themselves to the highest objects of contemplation, they never succeed in doing so during this kind of life without great difficulty and only for a short time, except by a special privilege of the Most High. Hence the saints who desired to give themselves up to contemplation sought the deserts and solitudes, which are more favorable to that kind of life, and the others who pursued the active life and the care of souls by teaching and exhortation set aside some of their time for retirement from exterior activity and divided their days between contemplation and active life. By thus attending to both with perfection they attained the merit and reward of the two kinds of life, founded on love and grace as their principal support.

186. Only most holy Mary joined these two lives in a perfect manner; the highest and most ardent contemplation was not hindered by her occupations in the active life. In Her was the

solicitude of Martha without its excitement, and the quiet and rest of Mary without idleness of the body; She possessed the beauty of Rachel and the fruitfulness of Lia; and only this great and prudent Queen exemplified in truth what these sets of sisters mysteriously typified. Although She attended upon her ailing spouse and supported him and her most holy Son by her labor as mentioned above (148), She did not on that account interrupt or curtail her heavenly contemplations, nor was She under any necessity of seeking solitude or retirement in order to restore the quiet and peace of her Heart and raise it above the most supreme Seraphim. Yet when She found Herself alone and deprived of the company of St. Joseph, She so arranged her exercises as to spend her time entirely in the interior activity of divine love. She immediately perceived, by her insight into the interior of her most holy Son, that it was his will for Her to moderate her corporal labors by which She had attended to the needs of St. Joseph through night and day, and instead of this hard labor She now join His Majesty in his prayers and exalted works.

187. The Lord also reminded Her that for the moderate nourishment necessary for them it would be sufficient to engage in labor only for a short time each day, for from that time on they were to eat only once per day in the evening, having until now followed another custom out of regard for St. Joseph and in order to keep him consoling company at meals. From that time on the most holy Son of God and his most beautiful Mother ate but once a day at about six o'clock in the evening. Many times their meal consisted merely of bread, at other times the heavenly Lady added fruits or herbs, or perhaps fish, and this formed the only refreshment of the Sovereigns of heaven and earth. Although their frugality and abstinence had always been great, yet it was greater after they were left alone, and they never dispensed themselves except in regard to the kind of food and the time of taking it. When they were invited to a meal they ate a little of what was offered to them without abstaining entirely, commencing to practice the advice which He was afterwards to give to his disciples for their conduct while preaching the Gospel (Lk. 10:8). The simple food used by the heavenly Sovereigns was served by the great Lady to her divine Son on her knees, having asked permission to serve it. Sometimes She also prepared it in that posture, moved thereto by the thought that it was to serve as nourishment for the true Son of God.

188. The presence of St. Joseph was no hindrance to the Blessed Mother in treating her Son with all due reverence, not missing the least point of what this reverence toward Him demanded. But after the death of St. Joseph the great Lady practiced her accustomed prostrations and genuflections (*Con.* 180) much more frequently, for there was always more freedom for such actions in the presence of her holy Angels than in the presence of her spouse who was man. Many times She remained prostrate upon the ground until the Lord commanded Her to rise. Very often She kissed his feet, at other times his hand, and ordinarily She was filled with tears of the most profound humility and reverence. She always stood in the presence of her divine Son in a posture of adoration and most ardent love, awaiting his divine pleasure and intent upon imitating his interior virtues. Though She had no faults, and was not guilty of even the least imperfection or negligence in the service and love of her most holy Son, her eyes, like those of the servant and most solicitous slave mentioned by the Prophet (Ps. 122:2), only more devotedly, were continually upon the hands of her Master in order to obtain the grace She desired. It cannot enter into human thought the divine science which aided Her in understanding and performing so many and such great works in union with the incarnate Word during the time they lived alone together without any other company than the holy Angels of their guard and service, who alone were the eyewitnesses and were moved to admiration and highest praises to see themselves so

inferior in wisdom and purity to a mere creature, who was worthy of such sanctity since She alone made a full return for the graces She received.

189. During this time Queen of heaven entered into a most sweet contention and emulation with the holy Angels themselves in regard to the ordinary and humble services which were necessary for the comfort of the incarnate Word and their humble home, for there was no one to attend to these things except the heavenly Lady and Empress and those most noble and faithful vassals and ministers, who for this purpose assisted in human forms, prompt and most careful in attending to all the work. The great Queen desired to perform all the humble work Herself, and with her own hands sweep the house and arrange its poor furnishings, wash the dishes and cooking utensils, and arrange all that was necessary; but these courtiers of the Most High, being truly courteous and more expeditious, though not more humble in their operations, usually anticipated these services before the Queen could find time to perform them. Sometimes, and at certain periods often, She would find them thus at the work which She was about to perform, the holy Angels having begun it beforehand; yet they promptly obeyed her word and allowed Her to complete the work in the affection of her humility and love. And in order that in this they would not impede her desires She said to the holy Angels: “Ministers of the Most High, who art most pure spirits in whom are reflected the lights by which his divinity illumines me, these humble and servile occupations are not proper to thy state, nature and condition, but to mine, who besides being only of earth am the lowest of all the mortals and the most obligated slave of my Lord and Son. Give me leave, my friends, to perform the ministrations to which I am bound, since I can fulfill them in the service of the Most High and gain the merit unnecessary for the furtherance of thy dignity and state. I know the value of these servile works which the world despises, and the Lord has not given me this light so I may allow them to be done by others but so I may perform them myself.”

190. “Our Queen and Lady,” responded the Angels, “it is true that in thine eyes and in the estimation of the Lord these works are as valuable as Thou knowest them to be. Yet if by them Thou dost earn the precious fruit of thy incomparable humility, take notice also that we would fail in the obedience we owe to the Lord if we do not serve thee as his most high Majesty has commanded us; and since Thou art our legitimate Sovereign we would also fail in justice by omitting whatever service is permitted us from on high in recognition of Thee. The merit which Thou dost lose by not performing these servile works Thou, Lady, canst easily recompense by the mortification of thy most ardent desire in not performing them.” The most prudent Mother answered these arguments by saying: “No, my masters and sovereign spirits, it must not be as ye desire, for if thou dost judge thyself under great obligation to serve me as the Mother of thy great Lord, whose creatures thou art, take notice that He has raised me from the dust for this great dignity, and hence my debt for such a benefit is greater than thine. Since my obligation is so much greater, my return must also be greater than thine. If ye desire to serve my Son as creatures of his hand, I owe Him service due to this very title of Mother, and because I am his Mother I am more bound to serve Him as a Son. Thus thou shalt always find me with a greater right than thee to be always humble, grateful, and adhering to the dust.”

191. These and similar sweet and admirable contentions occurred between most holy Mary and her Angels, and the palm of humility always remained in the hands of their Queen and Mistress. The world is justly ignorant of these hidden sacraments, being unworthy of knowing them because of its vanity and pride; its foolish arrogance regards these humble and servile occupations as trivial and contemptible, while the courtiers of heaven who know their value appreciate them, and the Queen of heaven and earth eagerly sought after them as very precious.

But let us leave the world to its intentional or unconscious ignorance. Humility is not for the proud of heart, nor lowly service for purple and fine linen, nor scrubbing and washing for costly gems and silks, nor are the precious jewels of these virtues intended indiscriminately for all men. But if the contagion of worldly pride enters into the schools of humility and contempt of the world (namely religious communities), and if this kind of humiliation is looked upon by them as a disgrace, we cannot deny that such sentiments are nothing but most shameful and reprehensible pride. If we religious men and women despise the benefits of such humble occupations and count them a degradation like worldly people, how can we appear before the angels and our Queen, who esteemed as the greatest honors those very works which we look upon as contemptible and dishonorable?

192. My sisters, daughters of this great Queen and Lady, to you I speak, who are called and transported to the bridal chamber of the great King (Ps. 44:16), to true joy and exaltation: Do not allow yourselves to be robbed of your right to be called children of such a Mother. If She who was the Queen of Angels and men humbled Herself by engaging in these humble and subordinate works, if She swept and served in the lowliest occupations, what presumption shall the haughtiness, vain pride, and lack of humility in mere slaves appear to be in her sight and in the sight of the Lord God himself? Far from our community be such treason, fit only for Babylon and its inhabitants. Let us feel honored by that which the exalted Queen esteemed as a crown of merit, and let it be for us a subject of the most shameful confusion and a cause for dreadful reprehension to be found lacking in the same zealous contention of humility which She entertained with the holy Angels. Let us eagerly seek after humble and servile occupations, and let us cause in the Angels and heavenly companions the same emulation which was so pleasing to our Queen and to her most holy Son and our Spouse.

193. We must understand that without real and solid humility it is audacious to seek the reward of uncertain spiritual or sensible consolations, and to crave them is insane temerity. Let us rather attend to our heavenly Teacher, who is the consummate Model of a holy and perfect life. In our great Queen the favors and delights of heaven alternated with her humble and servile occupations, for it happened many times when She was engaged in prayer with her Son the holy Angels in sweet and harmonious voices sang the hymns and canticles composed by the most blessed Mother herself in praise of the infinite being of God and of the mystery of the hypostatic union of the Person of the divine Word with the human nature. So She could repeat these canticles to her Lord and Creator the Queen usually called upon the Angels and asked them to alternate the verses with Her, and She composed other new canticles. They obeyed Her, lost in admiration at the profound wisdom manifested in what She thus said and composed for them. Then whenever her most holy Son retired to rest, or during his meals, She commanded them as the Mother of their Creator to be solicitous in entertaining Him and furnishing sweet music in her name, and the Lord permitted it whenever She so ordered, thereby yielding to the ardor of her love and veneration with which She served Him in his last years. In order to narrate all that has been revealed to me in this regard a much longer discourse would be necessary and much greater ability than mine. From what I have implied can be inferred something regarding such profound mysteries, and motive found to magnify and bless the great Lady and Queen, whom may all nations know and proclaim as blessed among creatures (Lk. 1:48) and the most worthy Mother of the Creator and Redeemer of the world.

INSTRUCTION GIVEN TO ME BY THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN.

194. My daughter, before continuing to declare other mysteries I desire thee, since thou art capable, to know all that the Most High commanded me out of respect for my holy spouse Joseph. When I espoused myself to him, God commanded me to change the order of my meals and other exterior occupations in order to adjust myself to his manner of proceeding; for he was the head of the family, and according to the common rule I was the inferior. The same was done by my most holy Son who, being true God, was outwardly subject to the one whom the world judged as his father. When we were left alone, my spouse having died, the motive for this change no longer existed, and we returned to our order and governance in eating and other matters. His Majesty did not desire St. Joseph to accommodate himself to us, but we to him, as required by the common order of my state. Nor did His Majesty interpose miracles so He could proceed without the order and nourishment to which He was accustomed, for in all things He proceeded as the Master of virtues, in order to teach what is most perfect to everyone, to parents and children, to prelates, superiors, superioresses, subjects and inferiors: To parents, so they love their children, help them, support, admonish, correct and guide them to salvation without remission or neglect; to children, so they love, esteem and honor their parents as the instruments of their life and existence, diligently obeying them, keeping all that the natural law and divine law teach in this regard, for the contrary is a very ugly and horrendous monstrosity. Prelates and superiors must love their subjects and order them like children; and these must obey without resistance, even if they are in other respects and qualities better than the prelate, because in the dignity which represents God the prelate is always greater; yet true charity shall make them one in all things (Jn. 17:21).

195. So thou mayest attain this great virtue, I desire thee to accommodate and adjust thyself to thy sisters and subjects without ceremony or imperfect mannerisms, but treat them with simplicity and dovelike meekness. Pray when they pray, work and eat when they do, and attend recreation with them; for the greatest perfection in religious congregations is founded upon conforming to the common spirit, and if they do this they shall be governed by the Holy Ghost, who directs all well-regulated communities. With this order thou canst advance in abstinence, eating less than all, though the same amount of food is placed before thee; with discretion, without making thyself singular, thou canst abstain from what thou dost desire for the love of thy Spouse and mine. If thou art not hindered by some serious infirmity, never miss or leave the common exercises, unless obedience to thy superiors sometimes occupies thee; attend these exercises with special reverence, fear, attention and devotion, for there thou shalt many times be visited by the Lord.

196. I also desire thee to notice from this chapter the cautious carefulness thou must have, according to my example, in concealing the works thou dost undertake in secret;* for though I did not need to refrain from doing all of them in the presence of my holy spouse Joseph, which would pose no danger, nevertheless I gave them this point of perfection and prudence, this modesty of itself rendering them more commendable. Yet this is not necessary in common and obligatory works, by which thou must give a good example without hiding the light;† failing to do them could be a scandal and worthy of reprehension. There are many other works which can be done in secret, and hidden to the eyes of creatures, which must not be lightly exposed to the

* cf. Mt. 6:1ff. [Ed.]

† cf. Mt. 5:14-16 [Ed.]

danger of publicity and ostentation. In this retirement thou canst make many genuflections as I did; prostrate and clinging to the dust thou canst humble thyself, adoring the supreme majesty of the Most High, so the mortal body, which oppresses the soul (Wis. 9:15), may be offered as an acceptable sacrifice in satisfaction for its disorderly movements against reason and justice, and so in thee there is nothing left to be offered and dedicated to the service of thy Creator and Spouse. By these exercises the body recompenses to a certain extent the hindrance and loss it causes the soul by its passions and earthly defects.

197. With this intention seek always to keep thy body in strict subjection, granting it only the benefits which serve to sustain it in the service of the soul, not to indulge in its appetites and cravings. Mortify and crush it by dying to all that is delightful to the senses, until even the common actions necessary for life will be burdensome rather than pleasurable, bitter rather than dangerously delectable. And though on other occasions I have spoken and manifested to thee the value of this mortification and self-denial, now by my example thou art even better instructed regarding the appreciation thou must have for any act of humility and mortification. I now command thee not to despise any of them, nor judge them as trifling, but in thy estimation regard them as an inestimable treasure, trying to earn it for thyself. In this thou must be eager and ambitious, hastening to perform the servile offices of sweeping, cleaning the house, doing all of the most menial tasks, and serving the sick and needy, as I on other occasions have commanded thee. In all of these works place me before thine eyes as an example, so thou mayest be encouraged by my diligence in this humility, joyful in imitating me, and confusion for the negligence in not doing so. If this fundamental virtue of humility was so necessary for me to find grace and be pleasing in the eyes of the Lord (having neither displeased nor offended Him from the moment I had being), and so his divine right hand might raise me up I humbled myself: How much more necessary is it for thee to cling to the dust and annihilate thyself, thou who wast conceived in sin (Ps. 50:7) and hast so often offended Him? Humble thyself to nothingness, and acknowledge that the being the Most High has given thee thou hast wrongly used, so the being thou hast shall serve for thy greater of humiliation, and thou mayest find the treasure of grace.