

Alter Christus

*“As an **alter Christus** (another Christ) the priest is in Christ, for Christ and with Christ... Because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: he is the minister of their salvation” (Pope Benedict XVI)*

Monthly bulletin dedicated to all the Priests of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

Mary and Purity

By Archbishop Fulton Sheen

[From the Book *Those Mysterious Priests*]

Spiritual life is not so simple that one can say, “imitate Mary in her purity.” She was endowed as no other creature; chastity is a gift, as life is, and to expect either to grow without a struggle, through a pietistic devotion to her, is not realistic. She paid dearly for the privilege of the Immaculate Conception as one wonders how many would have accepted it at the cost of a sword

thrust through the heart, the Son holding the hilt. Mary’s life was one of conflict, somewhat like our own; between the Spirit and the flesh. It is precisely because of this dynamic warfare that she becomes our inspiration, not because of a static devotion to her. Our Lord’s conquest of a crucifixion is the basis of our faith. In like manner, Mary’s mastery over the trials of the flesh becomes the dynamic of our chaste living. But she cannot encourage purity unless she struggled to do

so—not in a petty battle provoked by the thousand uprisings of concupiscence which meet one in the street and the printed page, but a battle of more cosmic proportions. No woman ever fought so much to master the flesh. She, therefore, can

speak to us for celibacy in a priest, chastity in nuns, purity in the laity do not come easily. There are stresses and strains, tensions and combats almost to the breaking point. To put the Immaculate Conception, for example, up against this warfare

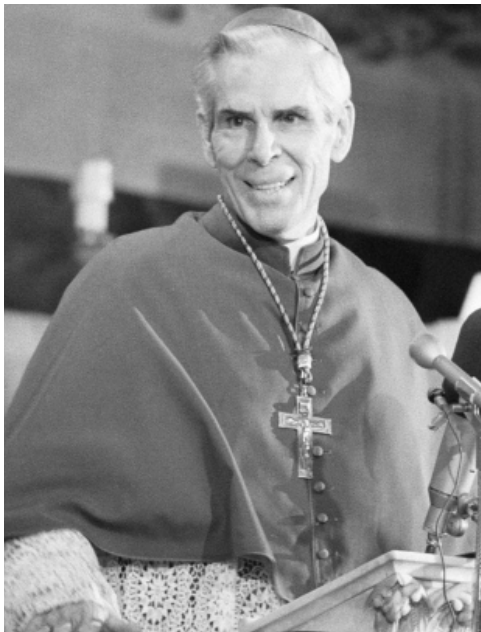
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Fulton John Sheen (May 8, 1895 - December 9, 1979) was an American bishop (later archbishop) of the Catholic Church known for his preaching and especially his work on television and radio. Ordained a priest of the Diocese of Peoria in 1919, Sheen quickly became a renowned theologian. He went on to teach theology and philosophy at the Catholic University of America as well as acting as a parish priest before being appointed Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of New York in 1951. He held this position until 1966, when he was made the Bishop of Rochester. He resigned in 1969 as his 75th birthday approached, and was made the Archbishop of the titular see of Newport, Wales.

For 20 years as Father Sheen, later Monsignor, he hosted the night-time radio program

The Catholic Hour on NBC (1930–1950) before moving to television and presenting *Life Is Worth Living* (1952–1957). Sheen's final presenting role was on the syndicated *The Fulton Sheen Program* (1961–1968) with a format very similar to that of the earlier *Life is Worth Living* show.

The cause for his canonization was officially opened in 2002. In June 2012, Pope Benedict XVI officially recognized a decree stating that he lived a life of "heroic virtues"—a major step towards beatification—and he is now referred to as "Venerable." On July 5, 2019, Pope Francis approved a miracle that occurred through the intercession of Archbishop Sheen, clearing the way for his beatification.



in the flesh is almost to court discouragement.

But was Mary released from strains of the flesh anymore than the pain of suffering? Was it easy for her to decide to accept pregnancy and yet “know not man” or be a virgin? It would be like a man willing to break into the houses of the poor at night to leave money about, thus gradually getting the reputation of a thief. We get only the slightest suggestion of that tension of virginity and motherhood in Joseph who desired to repudiate her (Matthew 1:18). The very fact that she did not tell Joseph, but an angel did so, is another proof of the deep anxiety in her heart. No other

woman in the world had to face the world with child while still being a virgin. Who would ever understand her explanation that the Spirit had overshadowed her? It was something like the inability of the world to

understand the celibacy of the priest because they know nothing of the Spirit. One wonders if any person striving to be pure against the assaults of the flesh, ever had a struggle comparable to that of Mary holding to the Power of the Spirit when all evidence was against her.

Another encounter between the flesh and the Spirit took place when she visited Simeon in the Temple. Clashes and scimmages lie ahead of her for her flesh is told that she will have two battles to endure to preserve her mission in life. First, the Divine Son whom she loves will be a “sign to be contradicted”; He will divide people; He will force them to choose sides and to be either with

Him or against Him. And secondly, she will be lonely and sorrowful for a sword will pierce her heart. If a celibate sometimes thinks that God asks too much of us, and that it will make him sorrowful, a Lady who

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never deserved either, showed that it could be done.

The flight into Egypt was a prototype of all who have to run away from those who would kill the Divine in us. The Three Days loss—the time Our Lord was in the tomb—was the low point in dedication to God, for at times it seems as if Divine Support is lost. Her Immaculate Conception gave her no immunity from trials. Once we see this truth, then we can understand better the conflict of spirituality and sensuality. A deep desire of God and strong sensuality are no more incompatible than a Virgin Mother or Holiness “being made sin.”

The absence of passion is no guarantee of purity because spirituality is born of tension. The icebergs that float around the cold streams of the North deserve no credit for being icebergs, but let them come down to the warm streams of the South and remain icebergs—then they have character. Sanctity is made from conflict. Since every action

calls for a corresponding reaction, the strong sensual libido of the spiritually minded person produces greater spirituality. Life is something like Jacob who had to struggle and wrestle to win favor with God. No one is crowned unless he has struggled (2 Timothy 2:5).

Mary as Spouse

Dante asked the great question: “How may man make himself eternal?” The only answer is by a fight against self by war and violence;

chastity is a cross; it is victimhood. In some mysterious way, it is related to Calvary where Mary appears as the spouse of Christ. Woman appears in Scripture in two ways: as one who pulls man down to collapse, and as one

who lifts him up to sacrifice. Eve was seduced and she seduced. But in the Genesis story there is the Creator’s pity for this frail woman who could not resist what was pleasurable and pleasing to the eye. In Mary, there is a “yes” too—not to man, but to the angel. That is why she is pictured as

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“standing” at the foot of the Cross to carry on the combat at a tree where Eve yielded.

A woman can be a spouse without being a wife. Twice, Our Blessed Lord called His Mother “Woman”; at the marriage feast of Cana and at the Cross. Mary, who notices our needs sometimes before we do, told her Divine Son that there was no wine for the marriage feast. He makes it plain to her that He can no longer act under her authority. She is now about to lose Him as a Son.

He called Mary “Woman” and not “Mother” to indicate that a new relationship between them was about to begin. Up until now she had been His Mother. But once He begins the “Hour,” she will then be not just the Mother of Jesus, but the Mother of all whom He will redeem. As the original Greek has it: “What to Me, to thee.” We are in this together. You will become the woman spoken of in Genesis; the universal Mother of mankind, and for that reason, I call you “Woman.” He is saying to her:

“My dear Mother, do you realize that you are asking Me to proclaim My Divinity—to appear before the world as the Son of God, and to prove My Divinity by My works and My

miracles? The moment that I do this, I begin the royal road to the Cross. When I am no longer known among men as the son of the carpenter, but as the Son of God, that will be My first step toward Calvary. ‘My Hour is not yet come’; but would you have Me anticipate it? Is it your will that I go to the Cross? If I do this, your relationship to Me changes. You are now My Mother. You are known everywhere in our little village, as the ‘Mother of Jesus.’ But if I appear now as the Savior of men, and begin the work of Redemption, your role will change too. Once I undertake the salvation of mankind, you will not only be My Mother, but you will also be the Mother of everyone whom I redeem. I am the Head of humanity; as soon as I save the Body of humanity, you, who are the Mother of the Head, become also the Mother of the Body. You will then be the universal Mother, the New Eve, as I am the New Adam.

“To indicate the role that you will play in Redemption, I now bestow upon you that title of universal motherhood; I call you—Woman. It was to you that I referred when I said to Satan that I would put enmity between him and the Woman,

between his brood of evil and your seed, Which I am. That great title of 'Woman' I dignify you with now. And I shall dignify you with it again when My Hour comes and when I am unfurled upon the Cross like a wounded eagle. We are in this work of Redemption together. What is yours is Mine. From this hour on, we are not just Mary and Jesus, we are the New Adam and the New Eve, beginning a new humanity, changing the water of sin into the wine of life. Knowing all this, My dear Mother, is it your will that I anticipate the Cross and that I go to Calvary?"

Mary speaks seven times in Scripture. Now she speaks for the last time. The sun is out; no longer need of the moon. The Word has spoken; no longer need of words. And what a beautiful valedictory: "Do whatever He tells you" (John 2:6). This is Mary's role in the Church; she does not stand in the way of Christ; rather she encourages obedience to His Will.

Three years now pass, and all that Our Blessed Lord told His Mother at Cana is fulfilled. The Hour is come, the wine has changed to blood. He has worked His miracles and men have crucified Him. Unfurled on either side of Him, as if to put Him

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in their class, are two criminals. The world will allow only the mediocre to live. It hates the very wicked, like the thieves, because they disturb its possessions and security; it also hates the Divinely Good, because He disturbs its conscience, its heart and its evil

desires.

Our Blessed Lord now looks down from His Cross to the two most beloved creatures that He has on earth—John and His Blessed Mother. He picks up the refrain of Cana, and addresses Our Blessed Mother with the same title He gave her at the marriage feast. He calls her "Woman." It is the second Annunciation. With a gesture of His dust-filled eyes and His thorn-crowned head, He looks

longingly at her who had sent Him willingly to the Cross, who is now standing beneath it as a cooperator in His Redemption and He says: "Mother, there is your son." Then, turning to John, He does not call him John; to do that would have been to address him as the son of Zebedee and no one else. But, in his anonymity, John stands for all of us; Our Lord says to His beloved disciple: "Son, there is your Mother."

Here is the answer, after all these years, to the mysterious words in the Gospel of the Incarnation which stated that Our Blessed Mother laid her "first born" in the manger. Did that mean that Our Blessed Mother was to have other children? It certainly did, but not according to the flesh. Our Divine Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is the only Son of Our Blessed Mother by the flesh. But Our Lady was to have other children, not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit!

At the Cross we are in the presence not so much of Jesus and the Mother of Jesus, but of the Son of Man and the Woman. This is the beginning of a new humanity. Christ is the New Adam and Mary is the New Eve. As the old humanity started with

nuptials of Adam and Eve, so the new humanity starts with the nuptials of the New Adam and the New Eve. As Eve was the "mother of the living" in the old order, Mary becomes the Mother of those who possess Christ's Life in the new order.

During His public life, Jesus had said that in His Kingdom, blood would not count. The new family would be those who obeyed the Father's will. A fatherhood, motherhood, sisterhood and brotherhood would spring out from the identification of human will with the Father's Will. In the order of blood, no man can give away his mother; in the order of the spirit, it is possible.

In the Old Testament what mattered was generation and progeny; it was a shame to be without children, hence the problem presented to Our Lord about a woman with seven husbands (Mark 12:18-25). In the New Testament it is not children in the flesh that matters, but identification with the Divine. Wider loves than were ever possible in the line of blood became possible in the order of Melchizedech. Jesus had already said that some in this regenerated humanity would be eunuchs for the Kingdom of God which is a celibate

priesthood. Here He harks back to Isaiah: "...the eunuchs must not say, 'I am nothing but a barren tree.' For these are the words of the Lord: The eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, who choose to do My Will and hold fast to My covenant, shall receive from Me something better than sons and daughters, a memorial and a name in My own house and within My walls; I will give them an everlasting name, a name imperishable for all time" (Isaiah 56:3-5).

The Virgin Mother is given another son in John, in a fulfillment of another prophecy of Isaiah which portended religious women with vows of chastity: "Sing aloud, O barren woman who never bore a child, break into cries of joy you who have never been in labor" (Isaiah 54:1).

The Cross is the scene of nuptials and generation. All through the Old Testament, the relations of God to Israel were those of husband and

wife. The prophecy of Hosea is built on the thesis that the Bridegroom would never leave His Spouse, Israel. Our Blessed Lord called Himself the Bridegroom (Matthew 9:15). He now meets His Bride, the Woman at the Cross. As from the side of the first Adam is drawn Eve, so now from the New Adam on the Cross

is begotten the New Eve, which is the Church or His Body. As St. Augustine describes this mystical marriage: "Like a Bridegroom Christ went out from His Heavenly chambers. He went with a presage of His Nuptials into the field of the world. He came to the marriage bed of the Cross; there, mounting it, He

consummated His marriage. And when He perceived the sighs of His creature, He lovingly gave Himself up and joined Himself to the woman forever."

Mary is first "Woman," or the New Eve, in relation to Christ, the New

If a mother can never forget the child of her womb, then Mary will never forget those whom she helped bring into the Church. Mary was the Woman who undid Eve, and thus became the symbol of the Lamb's Bride and the Lamb's Wife, which is the Church.

Adam. Then she is called “Mother” but the Motherhood is of John. She who was the Mother of Jesus the Son of God now became the Mother of the son of Zebedee. But John is unnamed in the word from the Cross, and stands for all the children of Mary yet to be born. It is likely that Mary when she conceived Jesus by the Spirit, enjoyed an ecstasy the likes of which no women ever felt in love. But under the Cross, where it was foretold a sword would pierce her heart, one wonders if she did not undergo a labor-pain surpassing all the agonies of birth from the beginning of time. If a mother can never forget the child of her womb, then Mary will never forget those whom she helped bring into the Church. Mary was the Woman who undid Eve, and thus became the symbol of the Lamb’s Bride (Ephesians 5:22-23; Revelation 22:17) and the Lamb’s Wife (Revelation 19:7-9; 21:9), which is the Church.

Here is one of the reasons why women cannot become priests. Man and woman play a role in Divine Covenants, which are based on the analogy of marriage. We meet nuptials everywhere in Scripture;

the nuptials of man and woman in Eden; the nuptials of man and woman in Israel and God in the Old Testament; the nuptials of Divinity and humanity in Mary; the nuptials of Christ the Bridegroom and the Church the Bride and the nuptials of the Lamb and the Church in heaven. In marriage it is man who gives the seed; it is the woman who receives it, nourishes it, brings it to life and educates it. “The sower of the good seed is the Son of Man” (Matthew 13:37). “The seed is the Word of God” (Luke 8:12). The man in his capacity as the seed-giver preaches the Word of God, administers it in sacraments; and for that reason he is the symbol of Christ, or the Word Who is the seed. The woman receiving and nourishing the seed is the symbol of the Church which receives: “Husbands, love your wives as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself up for it” (Ephesians 5:25).

Preaching and sacraments are forms of communicating seed; they belong to the male, but their end is to lead the bride to the fulfillment of her womanly function. There is no question here of superiority or inferiority, or “more” or “less.” As

a matter of fact, the giving of the seed is instrumental, but the passive reception is to give birth, nourish, love and educate.

Mary is called “Mother” by Our Lord in speaking to John and thus receives the maternal function among the “children” begotten through the mystical union with the New Adam. Earlier the Lord had called His disciples “My children” (John 13:33) and promised that He would never leave them orphans because He was coming back to them (John 14:18).

Mary the spouse acquired by the price of His Blood, has been vivified by His Spirit; in her bosom, the Maria-Ecclesia or Mother Church

is born by baptism, nourished by the milk of the Word (1 Peter 2:2), fortified by the Bread of Life. John was the “youngest”—the first son of the Church. John designated as the “disciple whom Jesus loved” is the personification of the true disciple who has received the Spirit of Christ. John represented total fidelity of all Christ’s disciples. That is why only after the Resurrection did Jesus call His disciples “brothers” as He said to Magdalene: “Go to My brothers and tell them I am now ascending to My Father and your Father, My God and your God” (John 20:18). Mary the symbol of the Church-Mother, receives the disciple and the disciple receives her as his own.

