

## Behold Your Mother

*This excerpt on Our Lady is from the recently published book **Christ Within Us**. The book is a diary of Father Larkin's reflections over a ten-year period on the fundamentals of our faith which lead to a vibrant and meaningful spiritual life. Father Larkin is also the author of **Silent Presence**.*

Mary and the Church are like symbol and reality. "In her the Church holds up," Vatican II declared, "that which she, the Church, wholly desires and hopes to be."

For member and non-member alike Mary stands for the Catholic Church. To think of her is to think Catholic.

This identification has led to exaggeration in some respects. Yet both Vatican II and the post-Vatican II Church have been at pains to preserve the truth of Mary's immensely important role in the Church. They have striven to re-state the truths about Jesus and Mary in ways that show their interrelations and keep God, and the one mediator, Jesus Christ, and Mary, the mother of the Church, in proper focus.

Vatican II signaled the return to the sources of our faith, to the Scriptures above all. We have been coming to understand better the biblical roots of the prophecy that "all generations would call her blessed." (Luke 1:48.)

The most recent effort to express along these lines the role of Mary in salvation history and in the life of Christians today is the pastoral letter of the American bishops published on November 21, 1973. It is entitled "Behold Your Mother, Woman of Faith."

I would like to state parenthetically my pardonable pride in noting the fact that the principal theologian whom the bishops "called upon to aid us in restating the teaching of the Church" (N. 4) is a Carmelite classmate, Fr. Eamon Carroll, O. Carm., of the Catholic University of America.

Both Marian doctrine and Marian devotion are the issue of this pastoral. The

intention is obviously to bury once and for all the false accusation that Vatican II "downgraded" devotion to Mary.

The pastoral seeks to achieve this goal by showing how the Church's understanding of Mary is an indicator of Catholic "orthodoxy" and "orthopraxis." Orthodoxy means right thinking; orthopraxis means right living of the faith. The way we regard Mary in doctrine and in life is a good test of our Catholic faith.

The bishops state this fact at the conclusion of the letter when they say that "we are deeply convinced that the correct appreciation of the 'mystery of Mary' leads to deep and perfect understanding of the mystery of Christ and His Church." At the same time, they point out, she is a perfect Christian, "the model of virtues for the whole community of the elect" (N. 146).

St. Paul could write to the Corinthians: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Cor 13:5 RSV).

The bishops recall the Church's teaching on Mary to flesh out these words of St. Paul. Do we really believe that the risen Christ living in each of us through the power of the Spirit is the Man Jesus, born of the Virgin?

Notice, the Christ is the Man Jesus. It is easy to think of Him as an abstraction, so supernatural, so divine that He merges into the Father and the Holy Spirit as if He were not one of us at all. To think of Mary as His mother makes it difficult to forget His humanity.

The pastoral cites some words of one of the most speculative of contemporary theologians, Karl Rahner, who was asked to explain the recent decline in Marian devotion. Rahner's reply was that the temptation today was "to turn the central truths of the faith into abstractions, and abstractions have no need of mothers."

If Mary is real in our consciousness, it is easier for us to think of Jesus as eating and drinking, working for a living, celebrating at the wedding feast. Without Mary Jesus easily becomes a purely heavenly figure.

We can do little more than call your attention to this pastoral and to urge you to read it. It revitalizes the ancient truths of our Faith, not just by repeating them but, by rethinking them in their rich biblical roots. For this reason the document is ecumenical. It is also American, in that it sets down salient facts about America and Our Lady.

Biblically, Mary is the "Daughter of Zion." This title is an Old Testament phrase used to describe the community of Israel, especially after the Exile. These people were the remnant," the poor and lowly but faithful followers of Yahweh. Mary is the "Daughter of Zion" par excellence. Because of her simplicity and lowliness she responded in faith and the Word of God took flesh in her womb.

In the ancient church she is the "Mother of God," *Theotokos*, so proclaimed to identify the true nature of her Son, the God-man.

Today she is in Paul VI's words "Mother of the Church," the one who teaches us the way of faith. She is the woman of faith, valiant beyond words. In the closing words of the pastoral, we pray: "May her pilgrimage of faith strengthen us in our individual Christian vocations. May her motherly intercession make us worthy of the promises of Christ."