



Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Blessed Virgin Mary

The first time the poet Gerard Manley mentions the Blessed Virgin Mary is in a letter to his father, who is dismayed that his Oxford-educated son is on the verge of converting to the Catholic Church. Young Gerard writes:

I shall hold as a Catholic what I have long held as an Anglican, that literal truth of our Lord's words by which I learn that the least fragment of the consecrated elements in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar is the whole Body of Christ born of the Blessed Virgin, before which the whole host of saints and angels as it lies on the altar trembles with adoration. This belief once got is the life of the soul and when I doubted it I shd. become an atheist the next day (October 16-17, 1866).

The first words of Hopkins about the Blessed Virgin acknowledge her as the Mother of the Eucharist. Already the young poet understands the eternal relation of the Incarnate Creator to the world. Mary is the point at which the Eternal Creator chooses to take flesh from a creature. Because God is eternal, the unity of God with His creatures is not bound by time, or by place. No time is future to Him; no time is past. His spiritual relationship with His saints is always present to Him; and so His Body is always the Body mothered by Mary—wherever and whenever he chooses His Body to be present.

In the letter to his father, Hopkins claims to be choosing Catholicism because

he is driven there by logic—and his arguments certainly are very logical. He finds the claim to Apostolic authority stronger in the Roman Catholic Church than in the Anglican Church, and he believes that Apostolic authority must be the foundation of the theology of the sacraments.



Nevertheless, in both his passion for the Eucharist and his insight about Mary, grace is clearly at work. He noted the day of his first confession in his diary as “Lady Day”, an English term for the Feast of the Annunciation.

Hopkins asked John Henry Newman to receive him into the Church. Newman invited Hopkins to work at the Oratory

school. Newman had introduced the Oratorian community into England, and Hopkins lived among the Oratory Fathers for seven months. During that time, while Hopkins was discerning his vocation to the priesthood, Newman's strong devotion to Mary must have impressed his fellow convert. Hopkins began to be fascinated with medieval images for Mary: the Lily, the Ark of the Covenant, the Throne, the Queen. Medieval songs about Mary remained important to him all his life; in 1882 he translated a thirteenth-century Marian hymn, *Angelus ad Virgenem*, into modern English—one of the few pieces he published in his lifetime.

Especially after he joined the Society of Jesus in 1868, Hopkins delighted in the titles of the Virgin in the Litany of Loreto. In a Latin poem to the Virgin that he wrote for Christmas of 1870, he presents a cascade of Biblical images and images from that litany. In particular, he rejoices in the paradox of Mary's Infant, too young to speak, Who is the Word of God. He has not forgotten his first insight into Mary as Mother of the Eucharist; the poem begins by comparing the reception of Communion to the physical presence of Christ within Mary.

Devotion to Our Lady of Loreto drew him to ask the Virgin's assistance every day. When his grandfather died on the feast of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Hopkins wrote to his own mother,

I had for years been accustomed every day to recommend him very earnestly to the Blessed Virgin's protection; so

that I could say, if such a thing can ever be said without presumption, If I am disappointed who can hope? As his end drew near I had asked some people to pray for him and said in a letter to someone that I should take it as a happy token if he died on Sunday the Feast of the Holy Rosary. It is a day signalled by our Lady's overruling aid asked for and given at the victory of Lepanto. This year the anniversary is better marked than usual, for Lepanto was fought on the 7th of October but the feast is kept on the first Sunday in the month whatever the day: this time they coincide. I receive it without questioning as a mark that my prayers have been heard and that the queen of heaven has saved a Christian soul from enemies more terrible than a fleet of infidels.

However, the poet's understanding of the role and work of the Virgin Mary deepened most after he read the works of Blessed John Duns Scotus, who had defended the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in the great Medieval theological school at the University of Paris. Hopkins was a seminarian in 1872 when he discovered the theologian, whose very difficult Latin writings had fallen into some neglect in comparison to the more systematic and graceful works of Thomas Aquinas. Hopkins recognized the depth and beauty of Scotus's ideas, and his writing about the Virgin took on a new vibrancy.

Hopkins often contributed a piece of poetry in one language or another when Jesuit House at Stonyhurst held its yearly exhibition of poems in many languages to honor the Virgin in May. In 1873 Hopkins contributed a poem in Latin showing how well he had taken to heart what Duns Scotus had written about the Virgin. He begins by addressing Mary as "*predestinata bis*"—twice predestined. The poem celebrates the idea that that not only was Mary chosen by God to be the Mother of the Savior, but also that from the beginning, whether Adam had fallen or not, God

intended to incarnate himself as a member of the human race—and so Mary has that high honor independent of any sins of mankind. Hopkins enshrines in his poem the theological conclusion of Scotus that by the eternal merits of Christ, His mother was defended from all sin—and he does it in considerably more lovely Latin.

But these were the days when Hopkins did not consider himself free to write poetry except on request from his superiors. He was freed from that scruple in 1879, when he dedicated "The Wreck of the Deutschland" to five heroic nuns who died on that ship on the eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. The poet prays:

Jesu, maid's son,
 What was the feast followed that night
 thou hadst glory of this nun?
 Feast of the one woman without stain.
 For so conceived, so to conceive thee
 is done;
 But here was a heart-throe, birth of
 a brain,
 Word, that heard and kept thee and
 uttered thee outright.

Hopkins remembers the leader of the group of nuns calling out loudly to remind her fellow victims of Christ and bring them to Him. She conceived him as her savior in her mind, held Him in her heart, and brought forth His influence upon other members of his body. The nun is a virgin, as Mary was, and after the model of Mary has brought Christ to others.

In a later poem, Hopkins expands on this idea as he draws double meaning from the word "*magnificat*". It means to praise; but it also means to make something bigger, which is what a mother does for her baby during pregnancy. Because May is a month when new life is springing up everywhere, Hopkins reflects on the way in which this new life reflects the new life that Mary brought to mankind by giving birth to Christ. As people accept the new life, of course, the Lord is not only praised more but the Body of Christ is present more abundantly in the world.

But his greatest work in praise of the Virgin was originally titled "Mary Mother of Divine Grace Compared to the Air we Breathe".¹ It is a poem spectacular both for its beauty and its theological depth. The poet reminds us of how we need grace as we need air, in order that we should not die. It is through Mary that God's grace gives us life. He uses the figure of light for God's grace, pointing out that without the air to filter it, sunlight would be too powerful for the human frame to bear. Since her whole existence springs from her divine motherhood, the gift of God's grace to the world is in itself the gift of Mary as the mother of those who receive grace. Hopkins marvels,

Of her flesh he took flesh:
 He does take fresh and fresh,
 Though much the mystery how,
 not flesh but spirit now
 And makes, o marvellous!
 New Nazareths in us . . .
 More Christ to baffle death . . .

The poetry of Hopkins was as hidden, during his lifetime, as Mary's life in Nazareth. Certainly he felt some kinship with her in a life dedicated to giving God glory rather than seeking it for himself. When his poems did emerge, after his death, many of the most astonishing of his works celebrated Mary. Hopkins never forgot any of the glories of the Virgin once he learned of them. He loved to meditate on them and preach about them; he folded into his prayers each new discovery about the depth of God's grace in giving us such a Mother.

Educated at Harvard and Stanford, Professor Bernadette Waterman Ward of the University of Dallas wrote World as Word: Philosophical Theology in Gerard Manley Hopkins. She also writes about Newman.

References

1. Now it is customarily titled, "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe".