

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 relax her 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 to 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. Thenceforward 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 prostrations and genuflections 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. Although 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. With the holy Angels the Queen of heaven entered into a sweet emulation and strife in regard to the ordinary and humble services which were necessary for the comfort of the incarnate Word and their humble house, for there was no one to attend to these things except the heavenly Lady 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 scrub the house and arrange its poor furnishings, wash the dishes and cooking utensils, and set the rooms in order; 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, thou art such pure spirits that ye reflect the light of the Divinity for my illumination, and therefore these low and servile occupations are not suitable to thy state, nature and condition. These pertain to me, who besides being only of earth am the lowest of the mortals and the least of the servants of my Lord and Son. Permit me, my friends, to perform the service to which I am bound since I can thereby gain merits, which due to thy station and dignity ye do not need. I know the value of these servile works which the world despises, and the Lord has given me this knowledge not 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; but if Thou dost thereby earn the precious rewards of thy humility, take notice that we would be deficient in obedience to the Lord if we would knowingly omit any of these works permitted us by the Most High. The merits which Thou dost lose in not performing this service Thou, O Lady, canst easily make up by the mortification of denying thyself the desire of executing them." The most prudent Virgin answered these arguments by saying: "No, my masters and sovereign spirits, thou must not look upon these works in such a light, for if thou dost consider thyself bound to serve me as the Mother of thy great Lord, whose creatures thou art, remember that He has raised me from the dust to this great dignity, and hence my debt of gratitude for this benefit is greater than thine. Since my obligation is so much the greater, my return must also be greater than thine. If ye desire to serve my Son as his creatures, I likewise must serve Him on this account, and I am more bound to do so because I am the Mother of such a Son. Thus thou shalt always find me more obliged than thee to be humble, grateful, and annihilated to the very dust in his presence."

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 childish 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 strive after them is daring foolishness. Let us rather look upon our heavenly Teacher, who is the consummate example 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 proceeding to narrate other mysteries I desire thee to understand well all that the Lord commanded of me out of respect to my holy spouse Joseph. When I espoused myself to him God commanded me to change the order of my meals and other exterior duties in order to accommodate myself to his circumstances, for he was the head of the family, and according to the common rule I was the inferior. The same conduct was also followed by my

most holy Son, the true God, for He subjected Himself before the eyes of the world to him who was thought to be his father. As soon as we were alone after the death of my spouse, who was the occasion of this change in our lives, we changed our order and custom in eating and other matters. The Lord did not expect St. Joseph to accommodate himself to us, but rather that we accommodate ourselves to him as the common order among men required. Nor did the Lord resort to miracles in order to escape the necessity of taking food or of following ordinary human occupations, for in all things He acted as the Teacher of all virtues and all perfection, being an example to parents and children, to prelates, superiors and superioresses, to subjects and inferiors: To parents so they would learn to love their children, help them, nourish, exhort, correct, and lead them on in the way of salvation without remissness or carelessness; to children so they would learn to esteem, love and honor their parents as the instruments of their life and existence, diligently obeying them and keeping all that the natural and written laws teach in this regard, and repudiating the contrary, disobedience, as an ugly and horrendous monster; to prelates and superiors so they would love their subjects and direct them as their children; to inferiors so they would obey without resistance, even if they would in other respects be of higher and better condition in life, for insofar as his dignity represents God the prelate is always superior, though true charity must always teach both to be of one spirit (Jn. 17:21).

195. In order for thee to acquire this great virtue I desire thee to conform and accommodate thyself to thy sisters and inferiors without ceremony or imperfect mannerisms, and treat them with dovelike meekness and sincerity. Do thou pray when they pray, and work, eat, and take thy recreation with them, for real perfection in a convent consists in conforming with the common spirit, and acting thus thou shalt be guided by the Holy Ghost, who governs all well-regulated communities. Following this order thou canst make progress in abstinence, eating less than others though the same amount of food is placed before thee. Without being singular thou canst, with a little discretion, abstain from what thou dost desire for the love of thy Spouse and of me. If thou art not hindered by some grave infirmity, never absent thyself from the common exercises, unless perhaps obedience to thy superiors sometimes prevents thee. Be present at all common exercises with special reverence, attention and devotion, for thou shalt be most frequently visited by the Lord at such times.

196. I desire thee also to learn from this chapter to carefully conceal the special works thou dost undertake* in imitation of my own, for though I had no need of refraining from any work in the presence of St. Joseph, yet I was careful to add retirement as an additional observance of perfection and prudence, since retirement of itself makes good works more praiseworthy. But this is not to be understood of ordinary and obligatory works, since thou must give a good example without hiding the light,† avoiding any danger of scandal or cause for complaint. There are many works which can be done in secret and unobserved by the eyes of creatures, and which are not lightly to be exposed to the danger of publicity and ostentation. In thy retirement thou canst make many genuflections; prostrate in the dust thou canst humiliate thyself, adoring the supreme majesty of the Most High and offering thy mortal body, which oppresses thy soul (Wis. 9:15), as a sacrifice for the disorderly inclinations against justice and reason. Thus thou shalt not reserve any part of thy being from the service of thy Creator and Spouse, and thou shalt force thy body to make up for the loss which it causes to the soul by its passions and earthly affections.

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

† cf. Lk. 11:33 [Ed.]

197. With this object in view seek to keep thy body always in strict subjection, allowing it to partake only of those comforts which serve to keep it in proper condition for the activity of the soul without pandering to its passions and appetites. Mortify and crush it until it is dead to all that is delightful to the senses, so even the common actions necessary for life appear to thee more painful than agreeable, and taste more of bitterness than of dangerous enjoyment. Though I have already on other occasions spoken to thee of the value of this mortification and humiliation, thou must now, by this example which I have given thee, be still more convinced of their great value. I now command thee not to despise any of these acts or deem them of little consequence, but esteem all of them as precious treasures to be gained for thyself. In this thou must be covetous and avaricious, eagerly grasping the occasions of doing servile work such as scrubbing, cleaning the house, engaging in the most menial services, and attending upon the sick and infirm as I have said before. In all of these works place me before thine eyes as an example so my carefulness and humility can urge thee on, full of joy to be able to imitate me and shame for any negligence therein. If I who never displeased or offended the Lord since the beginning of my existence judged this virtue of humility so necessary in order to find grace in his eyes and be raised up by his right hand, how much more is it necessary for thee to humble thyself to the dust and annihilate thyself in his sight, who wast conceived in sin (Ps. 50:7) and hast so often offended Him? Humiliate thyself to nothingness, and acknowledge that the being the Most High has given thee thou hast but ill employed, and hence thy very existence should be a subject of humiliation to thee, for thus thou shalt at last find the treasure of grace.