

An Icon of Mary

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Recently I was searching through Net Flicks to see what movies were available, and I was surprised to discover *A Man for All Seasons*. So I decided to watch it for the one hundredth time. Isn't that a great scene in which Richard Rich is seeking a position in the affairs of state, but Thomas counsels him to be a teacher? More says "A man should go where he won't be tempted." Thomas understood that to devote oneself to teaching is really to commit to a relatively hidden life.

More says to the young Richard: Why not be a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher. Perhaps a great one.

Riche: And if I was, who would know it?

More: You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public...

I've read a number of biographies of Thomas More over the years, and I recall reading about William Gonell or John Clement. Who has ever heard of these two people? Yet Thomas had great admiration for them. They were teachers, hired tutors, and they played a very important role in assisting him in the educational upbringing of his children. More entrusted the souls of his children to these two men — and there is no doubt that More prized above all else the

souls of his children. That's why he speaks so highly of these two.

Bossuet tells us that there is something holy about a trust (in the sense of a thing that is entrusted to somebody's care). He writes, "...our obligation to take care of it for him who has entrusted it to us is a matter not only of faithfulness but also in a sense of religion." More's children were the trust of William Gonell and John Clement, and there is no doubt that Thomas saw these two as eminently trustworthy human beings.

Whenever I watch that scene in *A Man for All Seasons*, I often wonder about how different the life of Richard Riche would have been had he accepted the position that St. Thomas offered him at that moment. I think they should do a movie on that. We can only imagine how different history would have been--they might not have been able to find anyone to perjure himself so that More could be found guilty of treason. Or perhaps that would have been easy. But Richard Riche might have become an unknown saint, a glory of the Church.

But that really sums up the vocation of a teacher. It is a hidden life, there is really no temptation to vanity, nobody knows you, except your students who, after they leave the school, tend to forget you, at least at some level. And it's all about being given a trust. About one hundred and eighty souls are entrusted to us every year, if we teach high school.

But that's the life of our Blessed Mother as well. She lived a hidden life, we know very little about her, and to her was entrusted the Second Person of the Trinity. And she is the pre-eminent teacher, because parents are the first teachers. The final blessing of parents in the rite of baptism calls attention to this fact: "May he bless you, the fathers of these children. With your wives **you will be the first teachers** of your children in the ways of faith. **May you be also the best of teachers**, bearing witness to the faith by what you say and do..."

Mary is the pre-eminent teacher, because she is "Mother"; she is the Mother of divine grace, and she is the most trustworthy member of the redeemed. She has to be, since God the Son has been entrusted to her. She is the Immaculate Conception, full of grace, both intensively and extensively.

Her dignity as Mother of God is really without bounds. It is a very exalted dignity, obviously, and corresponding to it is her humility, which was also without bounds. If God raises the humble, then no one had a greater humility than Our Lady, because no one was raised to a higher dignity. She knew her nothingness more completely than any of us, as we see in the Magnificat.

And because she is Theotokos, God-bearer, who gave the Second Person of the Trinity his flesh and blood, all those who are incorporated into Christ through Baptism belong to her. She is their mother, and yet **they are entrusted to us, as their teachers**. Mary entrusts her children to us.

This is an inconceivably noble vocation. It's a very holy vocation, because as Bossuet says, there is something holy about a trust. But above and beyond that, it is a trust **that comes from the Blessed Mother herself**. So to be a Catholic teacher is an especially noble vocation, certainly far more so than Catholic teachers are generally aware. It is a vocation to achieve a level of trustworthiness, that is, to prove ourselves trustworthy to this Mother. Again, I recall being struck by how much admiration and gratitude Thomas More had towards those hired tutors; but at the end of our lives, imagine the joy that will be ours if we are to discover that Our Lady looks at us with tremendous gratitude and genuine admiration for proving ourselves worthy of the trust that our students are?

St. Augustine, in writing about the motherhood of the Church, counsels us to be mothers. Be woman, be the Church, be mothers to the world. That is why devotion to Our Lady is so important. We are to be mothers to these, her children that she entrusts to us. In other words, we are to be more and more like her. And so we have to get to know her, we have to allow her to be our teacher. She will teach us how to be a "mother" to our students.

But we learn this from her through a connatural knowledge. This kind of knowledge is more akin to the original Hebrew understanding of what it means to know. The French have two words for knowledge, *savoir* and *connaître*. *Savoir* is 'know how', as in knowing how to fix a car, or knowing how to get from one place to another. But *connaître* is connatural knowledge, the knowledge of a person. The two words that make it up come from two words, the Latin word for 'with', and *natus*, 'to give birth'. When a woman gives birth, the child comes forth from her interior, where the child was conceived and nurtured for nine months, almost the length of a school year. Connatural knowledge is a knowledge that rises up within the interior of a person, as a result of an intimate union with another. And it is love that brings about union, because love is unitive, and so connatural knowledge is the fruit of love.

To love Our Blessed Mother is to know her. We have to want to know her more fully, and that intimate knowledge of her will be the result of love for her. The more we love her, the more we will desire to know her, and the more we come to know her, the more our love for her will increase, and the more our love for her increases, the more our own character will reflect her, who is the mother of our students. And the more this happens, the more conformed to Christ we become, because she loved him perfectly, and he loved her perfectly, he honoured her, glorified her; and his flesh was originally hers. He gave to the Father, for us, what she gave to him: his body and blood. Their lives are intimately interwoven.

As many of you know, my ministry as a Deacon is to those who suffer from mental illness, and most of my time in ministry is spent at the Queen Street Mental Health Center. It's a real blessing to spend time with these patients, and I have to say that there have been times when I came away from that place convinced that the Lord has given me a message through one of these patients.

When I first started out there, I felt the presence of my mother. She died in 2001, but before that she worked at Street Haven with Peggy Ann Walpole, and for some reason I knew that I was going to meet someone at CAMH on Queen street who knew my mother. It was only a matter of time. And sure enough, not too long after I started, I sat next to this woman with schizophrenia, and I was inclined to ask her if she ever spent time at Street Haven, and she did, and she knew my mother, remembered her, and loved her. Recently I was with her and out of the blue she said: "Deacon Doug, you're such a tweety bird. You're such a little tweety bird". I asked her why she said that, and she didn't know. She said the thought just came to her. I said, "That's so interesting because my mother used to say that all the time about my daughter, when she was a baby: 'She looks like a little tweety bird, with the big head and the little body'". My daughter is a Little Person, and she really did look like tweety bird when she was a baby. So I said to my friend: "I think my mother has just given me a sign, through you, that she's here with us".

On another occasion I was with a lady who has a real love and hunger for the Eucharist, and she takes out her teeth just before receiving, places them right in front of me on the table, and then puts them back in. She's such a good lady, and we were born on the same day. But one day I thought, "The Lord has more than once spoken to me through these humble ladies," so I decided to ask this lady: "What do you think the Lord is trying to tell me?" She looked at me and said: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee, Blessed art Thou among women..." And she went on to finish the Hail Mary. I looked at her and said: You mean He's trying to tell me to get back to Mary. "Get back to Mary", she said.

I found that very interesting, because I'd felt that for a while. I sensed that the Lord was calling me back to a more intimate and fervent devotion to Our Lady—and the Lord always uses the weak and despised of this world to confound the strong.

Since an increasing love of the Blessed Mother is accompanied by an increasing desire to know her, where do we find a source that will meet that desire? I think one of the greatest works in the history of the Church is *The Mystical City of God*, by Venerable Mary of Agreda. It certainly has been a controversial work, in many ways. There are certain parts of it that seem rather puzzling and hard to believe. But it really is a beautiful work, a very inspiring work. But here's an idea that came to me recently that I think will help anyone who decides to read such a work. I've been studying iconography for about a year now, and there's a very profound iconology that comes out of Eastern Orthodoxy. If you come at an icon from the perspective of a realist, you'll miss the true significance, the beauty, and power of the icon. There is no external light source, for example, and so there are no shadows on the ground, the light comes from within, from out of the flesh and clothing of the saint depicted; for the Lord God is their light. The arms of the Christ child, for example, are longer than they would be in reality, the face of the infant Christ or Mary will exhibit the wisdom of an adult, and so the face is not baby like; perspective is reversed, so that things closer up are smaller, and the farther away they are, the larger, etc.

All these things have symbolic meaning. The icon is not meant to be a pictorial representation that is historical, but a spiritual portrait, and above all it is a means of encountering, an opening up onto the glorified saint. Consider primitive religions. The villages and houses were built as microcosms, with the four walls representing the four directions, the north, south, east and west, and the center axis of the village was a pole, or a tree, or a platform or pyramid with a staircase, which was considered the sacred place where heaven and earth meet. We see this theme taken up again in the second story of creation with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, at the center, and what is that tree but a source of grace, representing the gift of bodily immortality. We see this symbolism again taken up in Church architecture, the altar at the center on which is offered the sacrifice of the Mass, for the cross is the new tree of life, the source of divine grace where earth is reconciled to heaven. So too, the icon is a little world, a microcosm, with four sides and a center, and in that center is the image, which is an opening, a place where we meet the glorified saint. The icon is a sacred space, a place, a point of access. If we come at the icon with the artistic perspective of a realist, we miss the point.

So too, *The Mystical City of God* is an icon, a written icon, and if we come at it as if it is a literal history, we will probably miss it for what it really is. The icon depicts Mary with three "stars" on her veil that symbolize her perpetual virginity, and we'd be wide of the mark if we were to believe that she really did have these on her clothing, or that her veil was a crimson red, or that Christ's body was really that large as a baby. *The Mystical City of God* is an icon, absolutely brilliant, a very inspiring work. The same thing happens to me when I read from that work as when I stand before an icon. If we fail to see it as an icon, we may not finish it, but dismiss it as nonsense or pure imagination. If you see it as an icon, I think you're in for a very beautiful experience of Our Lady. It's a peak into what otherwise remains hidden to the world.

There are so many beautiful moments in the life of a faithful Catholic teacher, and these moments too will remain hidden from the world, at least while we are here. But these are great moments that we can share only with certain people, not everyone, and the Lord provides those friends in whom we can confide and who can share in the joy of those great moments in the life of a teacher. And this is really a repetition of the life of our Blessed Mother. But we can be one of those special friends to whom Our Lady shares her secrets, those glorious moments that are hidden from the world. All we have to do is to really desire to know her more intimately and she will show us the way. I think that work, *The Mystical City of God*, is a very good source if you wish to encounter our Lady.