IMAGES OF MARY

IN THE MARIAN PRAISE POETRY OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS SEEKERS WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO THE SECOND QUARTER OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Lucia Antonia Whittle

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Supervisor : Dr M M Raftery

DEDICATION

TO THE VIRGIN

Sweet Virgin Mary, when your word you gave
to be the mother of the Word made flesh
you showed the valour of a spirit brave
trading composure for a tangled mesh
No whimper of regret blemished the birth
That night in Bethlehem when the angels quired
Quietly you bore and fed the Lord of earth,
and heaven, Messiah long desired
Your tender heart was riven by the sword
that Friday when they nailed Him to a cross
Woman of silence, you sustained your Lord
eyes lifted to his eyes, no word of loss.
Then did He speak, that suffering Son so mild:
"Behold thy son" - and I became your child.

Lucia A Whittle

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Hovering on the brink of a long-desired academic achievement, I have realised that without the efforts of many people in my life - some of whom are now long dead - a doctorate in English would ever have remained beyond my grasp as I am Dutch by birth and breeding.

This is why I crave the reader's indulgence while I record the names of those who led me on this road in the sincere hope that my achievements, which in various measures were facilitated by their efforts, will lead to the advancement of others who will succeed us in their turn. Having delved into the literature of the past and seen how great a fascination it continues to exercise on the modern reader, I deem it vital that those to whom I owe my progress have their names recorded here, even though one or two of them, notably my father, were unable to speak English themselves. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of those to whom I owe any academic achievements did not themselves enjoy the benefit of the tertiary education they prized so highly, although those among them who did not attend university one and all possessed wisdom and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, and would have acquitted themselves nobly, had they been privileged to receive the support they gave me.

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Without the constant support of my husband, Seán Whittle, and my housekeeper, Mrs Elsie Sethunya, both of whom took over my domestic duties for a dozen years to allow me the freedom to pursue my studies, I could not have done so. My thanks go to my children, particularly to my son Marius and his wife Barbara for their care of me during my visits to the university and seminary libraries in Pretoria and to my ewe lambs Jacinta and Annemarie, who bore the brunt of my need for quiet when it was time to study. I wish to thank my parents, husband, siblings, children and children-in-law, my school principal Sister M Vincent Scully, my first employer, Mr George Peck, and my second-last employer, Mr Christo Jonck, for reassuring me at the various times in my academic career when I found myself beset by self-doubt.

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My introduction to English took place in Bloemfontein at Greenhill Convent after my arrival from Holland via Jagersfontein in 1953. Here I was taught English by Sister Mary Edmund; a teacher by the grace of God. At Vista University's Welkom campus where I obtained my BA degree in 1990, 34 years after matriculating, I remember with appreciation particularly the English poetry classes of Drs Frank Rumboll and Melanie Skead.

My thanks are due also to the staff of the Department of English at the University of South Africa, then led by Dr Shirley Kossick, where in order to obtain an honours degree in English I followed courses in Poetics and Criticism, Anglo-Saxon, African Literature, Shakespearean English and Victorian Literature. These I successfully completed in 1993.

Having first been introduced to the beauty of the English language in the capital of the Free State, I felt it was fitting likewise to culminate my academic career in Bloemfontein, studying for the master's degree in English under the supervision of Dr Margaret Mary Raftery, a specialist in medieval English in whom I found a kindred spirit. I was introduced to Dr Raftery by Professor Roy Muller, head of the English Department at the University of the Free State after I had appealed to him for guidance with regard to my specific academic requirements. Dr Raftery astonished me by her instant recognition of my need to resuscitate the then mainly dormant corpus of Marian praise poetry of ages past; an endeavour in which she actively supported me; and which culminated in my obtaining the degree of Master of Arts in English at this respected institution in September 1996.

Having been advised by my preceptors to pursue my studies into Marian praise poetry, my search for twentieth century examples of this literary genre with a view to obtaining a doctorate in English led me in June 1997 to the United States, where at the Marian Library of the University of Dayton, Ohio, I was welcomed with infinite kindness, courtesy and hospitality as well as the utmost intellectual support by the staff, certain of whose members are recognised world authorities on Mariology.

My thanks are due to the poets whose work was used in this thesis. The nun-poets whose work comprises its main contents will be referred to by their religious names throughout the study. Their surnames, where available, will be mentioned in these acknowledgements and in the introductory chapters. In Chapter Four, and likewise in the bibliography, their full secular names will be provided, once again where available. Therefore, wherever these are omitted this will be because it was not possible, despite exhaustive enquiries, to ascertain them. Where the work of nun-poets is first mentioned after the introductory chapters, as in the case of some post-Ecumenical ones, their surnames will initially be stated. Where available, the initials designating the

orders or congregations to which the nun-poets belong will be used throughout for identification purposes.

This having been established, I wish to thank Sister Maura Eichner SSND, Mother Francis PCC and Sister M Paul Dale OCD who personally replied to my request to be allowed to use their poetry in this study. Sisters Maura and Paul granted me permission on their own behalf and Mother Francis's permission was signed by Sister M Cecilia PCC. I received authorisation from Sister Mary E Kraft CSJ (Archivist) to use the poetry of the late Sister Maris Stella Smith CSJ and from Sister Sheila Novak SDS (Provincial Superior) on behalf of the late Sister M Thérèse Lentfoehr SDS. Qualified permission was granted by the copyright holders of the estate of Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit Powers, the Carmelite Sisters of Pewaukee, while Sister Catherine O'Brien CSC, (President: Sisters of the Holy Cross), exercised her congregation's copyright in terms of her capacity as executrix of the estate of Sister M Madeleva Wolff CSC. The South African poets Sheila Cussons and Father Bonaventure Hinwood granted approval for the use of their poetry and approved my translations thereof, though Fr Bonaventure suggested certain changes in regard to his work. These were duly effected. The religious superiors of Sister M Catherine Whittle PSN granted permssion for the use of her poetry.

Prominent among the nun-poets whose permission for publication of their Marian poetry I was unable to obtain are Sister M Julian Baird RSM, Sister Sada-Marie Fingerlin PC and Sister M St Virginia Berry BVM. My apologies are due to them and their communities and I shall continue to endeavour to obtain their permission, or that of those who hold their copyright, in respect of the transcription of their luminous poetry.

I wish, finally, to express my sincere gratitude to the librarians and staff of St John Vianney Catholic seminary, Pretoria, and Vista University's Welkom campus, who extended the full use of their facilities to me. A special word of affection and gratitude is due to Brother John Samaha SM of Cupertino, whom I met at the Marian Library, and who, since my return from the United States, has continued to send me articles of relevance to my research.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout much of the bimillennium that has passed since the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin's share in the redemptive saga of her Divine Son has been celebrated in winged poetic imagery by poets who used their country's vernacular and the aesthetic literary ploys contemporary to their day in the composition of Marian praise poetry.

"Poets in all ages since the beginning of the Christian era have been prompt in praise of the Mother of God," writes Clifford J Laube (1961:1):

> When our Blessed Lady, in reciting her Magnificat, foretold that all generations would call her blessed, she must have been aware, by a holy clairvoyancy, of the host of Christian poets who down through the years would take a leading and loving part in the fulfilment of that prophecy.

Depending on the literary period in which the poetry was written, the forms of rhetoric used by English poets to express their Marian poetry range from heavy, sonorous, highly structured heroic stanzas to Marian lyrics and free verse. The lyrics are often thoughts captured on the wing and translated into verse which may not always be structured, metrical or rhyming. Though these may comprise no more than two or three lines, they may nevertheless give scope for profound meditation, since reflection is brought about by the content of a composition rather than by its form or length.

The earliest Marian poetry we are aware of in English in its Anglo-Saxon form was composed in the seventh or eighth century by the poet Cynewulf, who drew heavily on the impressive rhetoric of the existing Latin and Greek songs of praise of the Blessed Virgin. Much of his work may have been directly translated from Latin and Greek.

When the English lyric came into its own during the Middle Ages, the writer's name was very seldom public knowledge. This may have been because the people were for the most part illiterate. Having heard a poem, they might have liked it, memorised it and recited it, having forgotten the author's name,

until some student of literature came along and recorded the poem's contents - but not its author's name - for posterity. Alternatively it is possible that the lyrics were written by religious, who were chary of divulging their names for fear of betraying their vocation, which calls for self-immolation for the greater glory of God. Whatever the reason for the anonymity, the lyrics themselves embody a lightness of touch - as distinct from a lightness of significance - which manifests a sense of identification with the Blessed Virgin on the part of the poets of the Middle Ages, leading Laube (1961:11) to say:

> The appealing impress of the Madonna was throughout the Middle Ages the ever-present poetry of Europe, the gentle symbol of its social and religious solidarity. Under its pervasive spell, a Marian fragrance found its way into legend and ballad.

Though in England the volume of Marian poetry declined dramatically during and after the Reformation, the genre received a powerful injection from the Jesuit priest-poet Robert Southwell (1561-1595), who was beheaded during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in retribution for his priestly activities. Dimensions of intense conviction and fervour mark his compositions, lending them a credibility corresponding with their articulacy.

During the nineteenth century it was mainly the Anglican poets of the New Oxford movement and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who resuscitated the genre of Marian poetry in England. By rekindling the faltering flame on the wick of the candle of Marian poetry in English, lit by Cynewulf, and brandishing it triumphantly, they created a place for Marian praise poetry within the corpus of Anglican poetic lore. They did this in disregard of the fact that Marian praise poetry had hitherto been mainly the province of Catholic poets, notwithstanding the enigmatic phenomenon in terms of which several major post-Reformation Protestant English-language poets composed at least one poem in praise of the Blessed Virgin. Their number includes poets such as John Milton (1608-1674), George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Oscar Wilde (1856-1900), the Scot Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and the Americans Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849).

This trend continued into the twentieth century with the composition of Marian poetry *inter alia* by Henry Adams (1838-1918), Wystan Hugh (W H) Auden (1907-1973), Thomas Stearns (T S) Eliot (1888-1965), David Herbert (D H) Lawrence (1885-1930), Dorothy Rothschild Parker (1893-1967), Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and William Butler (W B) Yeats (1865-1939), to mention a few of these. Some sample Marian poems from their pens are transcribed in Chapter One to highlight the attraction the Blessed Virgin Mary seems to radiate to poets, even those not normally connected with the composition of religious poetry.

The fact that there was such a magnificent flowering of twentieth-century Marian praise poetry can possibly be attributed to factors such as increased literacy and an expansion in the number of students receiving tertiary education (due partly to the admission of women). Moreover, English had become an important medium of education in several continents of the world, in each of which an indigenous brand of English-language literature consequently evolved.

The authors of the poetic utterance that comprises the bulk of this study are described in the title as "religious seekers", a somewhat pedantic-sounding appellation used in the contemporary terminology of the United States *inter alia* to describe women religious who make vows of lifelong poverty, chastity and obedience. They believe that by voluntarily depriving themselves of the solace of material possessions as well as the joy and consolation of marriage and motherhood, they render themselves more freely available in the service of the spreading of the Kingdom of God. In the interests of readability and simplicity they will be referred to in this study as nun-poets.

For the sake of academic precision, it must be explained that there is a difference between a nun and a sister or religious. A nun is one who has made solemn vows as a contemplative and has joined an order (which may be enclosed). A sister or religious, on the other hand, is a woman who has made simple vows and often lives in an apostolic congregation, such as the Poor Sisters of Nazareth or the Holy Family Sisters. What complicates

matters further is that some religious seekers have congregations for sisters who wish to serve God chiefly by means of service to their neighbour as well as orders for nuns who desire to serve God mainly in contemplation and adoration by means of enclosure and the observance of strict silence. Because this is a literary rather than a theological study, the appellation of nun-poets will be employed throughout, regardless of whether they have made simple or solemn religious vows or whether they belong to an order or a congregation. It is perhaps worthy of note at this juncture that the poetry of three contemplatives, Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit Powers ASC (Jessica Powers), "Carmel Bride" (Sada Marie Fingerlin) and Mother Mary Francis PCC (who refrained from supplying her secular name), indicates an outstanding degree of reflection. On the other hand, the work of teacher-sisters such as Sister Madeleva Wolff CSC and Sister M Maura Eichner SSND often appears to be couched in terms more calculated to communicate. It is also worthy of note that the nuns of the period customarily changed their secular names to religious ones, generally adopting the Blessed Virgin's name as their first name. This accounts for the M found in so many sisters' names. Where available, some biographical notes concerning certain of these poets will be provided in Chapter Four.

For certain poems found in this study, I am indebted to Sister M Thérèse Lentfoehr SDS, whose painstaking study of Marian poetry **I Sing of a Maiden - The Mary Book of Verse** (In Thérèse 1947) was probably the definitive work on the genre in its era. Perhaps it even retains this distinction today, since Marian poetry as a field of study appears to have been woefully neglected during the past half century. Other poems have been culled from Catholic poetry anthologies edited by Alfred Noyes, Thomas P McDonnell, Joyce Kilmer (revised by Dr James E Tobin after the former's death), Brother Cyril Robert, Walter Croarkin, Clifford Laube, Thomas Walsh and the Students of the College of St Francis. The vast majority of the poems transcribed in this study or from which quotations have been taken derive from the magazines in which they first saw the light of day. Some of these, however, may also be found in one or more of the anthologies mentioned and indeed in collections of the work of certain of the individual poets themselves.

I wish to thank the librarian and staff of the Marian Library, University of Dayton, Ohio, USA, for the wealth of Marian praise poetry they made available to me during my sojourn at their premises for this purpose in June 1997.

Sister M Thérèse SDS may not have been familiar with some of the twentieth-century authors of the era whose Marian poetry is included in Chapter One of this study. This is because the Catholic Church at that time restricted the reading of certain literary works by placing them on its censorship Index on grounds of moral unacceptability. She makes no mention of D H Lawrence, whose works were censored by her Church and by civic authorities throughout the world. There is no reference to W B Yeats, the Irish bard, whose interest lay in the occult rather than in religion. In the context of the religious nature of this poetry it is evident that the nun-poets strive to express eternal truths as they perceive these to be. Consequently their Marian poetry is more hopeful in its continuous focus on the evangelical promise of eternal happiness and more conservative in its view of "absolute" (or universal) truth than much of the other poetry of the period, including the Marian poetry of lay poets such as Yeats and Plath.

As stated, it was not possible to obtain biographies or even the secular names of the majority of the nun-poets whose Marian poetry enriches the pages of this study. However, according to Laube in the foreword to his anthology **Their Music is Mary** (1961:30-31), it has been established that the following nun-poets were all members of the Catholic Poetry Society of America, founded in 1931: Sisters Maris Stella, M Ada, M Bertrand, M David SSND, M Francis PCC, Mary of the Visitation, M St Virginia and Winifred Corrigan RC. Sister M Thérèse also belonged to the society.

As this study has been conducted in South Africa, the second chapter has been dedicated to Marian poetry written by South Africans. This section includes the Afrikaans poem **Maria** by its author, Elizabeth Eybers (1915-) and several Afrikaans Marian poems by Sheila Cussons (1922-) and Father Bonaventure Hinwood (1930-). The South African poetry originally written in

English quoted in this chapter was written by Monsignor F C Kolbe (1854-1936), Roy Campbell (1901-1957) and Sister M Catherine PSN (Nicolette Whittle 1961-).

In the interests of the integrity of this study it is deemed necessary to declare at the outset that it is to be written from a Roman Catholic perspective, in a spirit of ecumenical reconciliation with Christians from other persuasions. It is of relevance to state at this point that Mariology also constitutes an important element in Eastern Christianity and in the philosophy of some Anglican thinkers. In terms of ecumenism, emphasis is placed on those religious components which unite the disparate denominations rather than on those which divide them. Since the majority of poets whose Marian verse is to be analysed are Catholic nuns, it is inevitable that their favourable view of Mariology will come to the fore. Lest the poetry be allowed to divide religious adversaries further by deepening existing variances, an endeavour will be made to elucidate the views of the writers with due regard for the reservations in this regard harboured by Protestant readers of this study. As a rationale for the acceptability of an academic study by one who accepts the dogmas of a certain religion, it is postulated that the body of science should be sufficiently comprehensive to accommodate a study underpinned by such a creed. This is an integral part of the universal phenomenon of religious belief, as manifested by the Christian faith, which is frequently mystical in nature rather than susceptible of empirical proof.

That people of different religious persuasions experience and evidence their faith differently need cast no reflections on the integrity and validity of their writings. In the academic world at least, human tolerance has broadened considerably since the Reformation when martyrdom in the name of Christianity was inflicted upon those who professed beliefs which differed from those of the authorities. A sign of hope is the present tolerance for the religious convictions of others as now included in the body of education. It is an enriching experience to open oneself to opposing viewpoints for the sake of becoming better informed and enlightened on other creeds, as such a

knowledge, paradoxically, tends to bring deeper insight into one's own religion.

Ecumenism was one of the positive ramifications of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council and broke down much mistrust of other religions on the part of Catholics. The concept of ecumenism is poignantly expressed in the parable-style poem **Come Christmas** (1944:no page) by Sister Maura SSND. This poem shows that great mutual respect reigned between the adherents of Judaism and those of Catholicism in America, yet it was published in 1944, long before the word "ecumenism" had ever become familiar in common parlance. The brutal torture of Jews during the Third Reich, often in the name of Christianity, may have contributed to the mood of this poem as it was written at a time when the horrors of World War II had plumbed the depths of man's inhumanity to man. Sister Maura's secular name is Catherine Mary Eichner, suggesting a German background. It is possible she may have felt compelled to dissociate herself from the atrocities perpetrated by the ruling authorities of the home of her forebears by expressing her solidarity with the Jews through the powerful medium of her poetry:

COME CHRISTMAS

They waited for the street car,
the rabbi and the nun,
he was so old he must have known
his son's son's youngest son.
She and her companion were
description proof as far as dress,
one thought of Canterbury Tales
and Chaucer's prioress.

The car was crowded and the rabbi stood
jostled and awkward on tired feet;
she took his hand and paid his fare,
she helped him find a seat.
He murmured some deep blessing
and she bent low her head
as one who knew the value of
the swift prayer surely said.

There was a stir within the car
and man to man was not a stranger
seeing Isaiah prophesy -
and a Virgin kneeling at her own heart's manger.

Despite its ecumenical orientation, this poem, which is thus ahead of its time in intention, is mainly orthodox in form and use of rhyme. In this it differs structurally from the bulk of the poetry contained in this study, which is made up of lyrics and poems in the free verse that emanated from the Modernist and Post-Modernist trends that dominated twentieth-century poetry.

Graham Hough (In Bradbury 1976:320) explains the twentieth-century variety of the lyric in the following way:

> To write a series of lyrics is ... like keeping a spiritual diary ... It has little resemblance to the organisation of a large-scale literary work, with formal requirements outside the author's personal development. Much twentieth-century criticism has played down the biographical connection between the poet and his poems, and regards the work as an artefact, floating free from its creator. But this cannot disguise the fact that poetry which takes the lyric as its primary model will always tend to follow the contours of individual experience.

For its part, free verse is described by the poet D H Lawrence (In Pinto 1977:184) as:

> direct utterance from the instant, whole man. It is the soul and the mind and body surging at once, nothing left out. They speak all together. There is some confusion, some discord. But the confusion and the discord only belong to the reality as noise belongs to the plunge of water.

Lawrence thus sees free verse as primarily being a set of connotations consisting of a series of mental flashes which spark off one another involuntarily, illuminating mind and heart and producing a powerful emotional impact, while striking a sense of kinship between poet and reader, as the poet informs the reader by the message of his poetry that explanations are dross when two minds meet in the instant rapport which is created between writer and reader in literature. Such writing demands strong participation from the

reader in the process of literary communication. As Riana Scheepers (1997:11) puts it:

> It is expected from the post-modern reader that he will enter the dynamic process of literary communication pro-actively. (my translation).

Sister Maris Stella CSJ goes beyond Lawrence's concept by ascribing the authorship of her poetry to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in her sonnet: **It is the Reed** (In Noyes 1946:347):

> **IT IS THE REED**
>
> I did not cut myself this hollow reed,
> I did not seek it in the shallows growing.
> In all my life I paid but little heed
> To burnished reeds in the bright shallows blowing.
> And this that now is thrust into my hand
> Mysteriously cut and tuned for singing
> Was gathered in a strange and distant land
> And has immortal airs about it clinging.
> An unseen piper tuned its ghostly note.
> O who would dare to touch it - who would dare?
> From out the fearful hollow of its throat
> Such music pours as I am unaware
> How to devise. I did not think these things.
> It is the reed, it is the reed that sings.

The poet appropriates no credit for her God-given poetic talents but refers all merit for the beauty of the poetry to the One who inspired it; the Holy Spirit of God. The repetition in the final line gives this poem an elusive musical refrain of great poignancy, causing the reader while searching for its significance to pause before the realisation dawns that the "reed" is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. His inspiration enables the poet to write such "music" (12) as to astonish its composer as much as it will later astound the reader.

Caryll Houselander (1901-1944), a secular poet, describes the Blessed Virgin Mary herself as a "reed of God" (In Thérèse 1947:258). She is so one with God that the wind through the flute is the centre of her being. After conceiving the Son of God, she responded by singing the Magnificat, a glorious oration in honour of God. For two thousand years since, poets have sung their praise to

Mary in celebration of the fact that God in His infinite wisdom deemed it fit to make her the most blessed of all women.

From the differences we see between the tone of much of the poetry written by nuns in the earlier twentieth century before 1960 and that of some of the Marian poetry during the remainder of the century, it seems clear that among some of them a certain number of the perceptions they harboured in relation to the vocation of the religious underwent a radical change during and after the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1959-1967). Others, like Sister Maura SSND and Mother M Francis PCC, both of whom had been writing for decades before the Council, adhered to the ancient reverence, while employing the prevalent idiom. In this study an endeavour will be made to show that, as evidenced in her poetic utterance, the pre-Conciliar nun had reached a height of meditation which gave rise to the twofold anchorage of total identification with the virtues of the Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ and a gift of expression which, while frequently marked by brevity, gives evidence of the fruits of a meditation seldom experienced by poets during the centuries which separated the medieval Marian lyric from the present century, if we exclude the work of a few outstanding exponents of the genre of Marian praise poetry such as Robert Southwell (1561-1595) and the Victorian priest Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889).

Hopkins's poetry, which was first published in the twentieth century, clearly influenced the work of the nun-poets. Like his, the nuns' brief utterances frequently hit the mark so unerringly that they have a far more kaleidoscopic impact on the consciousness of the reader than the brilliantly conceived and executed, but to modern eyes and ears often lengthy and ponderous, poetry of poets such as the majority of Hopkins's Victorian contemporaries. In contrast with some other Victorians who preceded her, the pre-Conciliar nun-poet, while too well educated to permit herself the luxury of becoming pedantic, arrogant or didactic, was sufficiently comfortable with her religious beliefs and personal erudition to deliver her Marian message without apology. Like Hopkins, moreover, the nuns seem to be addressing God, the Blessed Virgin and themselves rather than the reader. Regardless of the rhetorical

brilliance which is frequently achieved, the poetry appears to be of secondary importance - the reflection is paramount.

Some post-Conciliar Marian poetry to be transcribed in this study, on the other hand, appears less concerned with the sanctification process within the nun-poet herself. Its outreach is at once more Biblical and more community-orientated than that of its predecessors. Paradoxically, however, it lacks the impact which marks the "sudden rapture of the pen" (In Thérèse 1940:43) so often discerned in the lyrics of the pre-Conciliar nun-poet. A possible reason for this phenomenon is that Marian poetry by the pre-Conciliar nun-poet was often protected by the anonymity of her religious name. On the other hand, her post-Conciliar counterpart, who tends to use her more readily identifiable secular name, may feel a shade more reluctant to share her innermost religious feelings with others.

The topic of this study, **Images of Mary**, reflects the phenomenon which decrees that each generation endows Mary with the virtues of its own period. This point is thus described by Kenneth L Woodward (1997:41):

> Astonishingly, this obscure Jewish mother absorbed and transformed the most powerful pagan goddesses. She was the Madonna who gives life, but also the Pietà who receives the dead.

The images of Mary as drawn by pre-Conciliar religious seekers of the twentieth century echo the Catholic Church's teaching of Mary as the young Virgin of Nazareth, the virginal Mother of God, the woman of sorrows. She it was who supported the Lord Jesus Christ from the moment of His Conception in her womb, throughout His life and His agonising death, until His glorious Resurrection and even beyond to His Ascension and the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, Whom He had promised to send to His young Church.

From the early days of Christianity, Catholics had supported their Church's teachings on Mariology without demur. After the Reformation Christians of Protestant denominations discarded the veneration of Mary and the saints

from their teachings, as, in their view, the practice had become excessive and thus detracted from the main role of the Lord Jesus Christ as sole Mediator and Saviour. Catholics, however, continued to venerate the Blessed Virgin. Midway through the twentieth century, in 1950, a new Marian dogma was defined by Pope Pius XII. This, the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, taught that Mary was received body and soul into heaven. In order to ensure universal acceptance of the dogma, the pontiff first consulted the bishops of the Church, and, in so doing, the laity they represented. The teaching, which confirmed a long-accepted belief in the Church, was accepted by the rank and file of Catholics without a murmur of dissent.

After the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, however, a far more critical attitude to papal and doctrinal teaching arose among the rank and file of the Catholic laity and their pastors, fanned by the writings of theologians, who adopted an ever more independent stance. According to David van Biema (1996:36), the unprecedented criticism from within the church may have been due to "inhibitions unintentionally fostered by the Second Vatican Council". To highlight this equivocation, this study, albeit a literary rather than a religious one, though it contains theological motifs, would be incomplete without the inclusion of a section specifically dedicated to Marian teaching in the twentieth century. Chapter Three has been reserved for this purpose.

The penultimate and final chapters of this study contain a very limited selection of post-Conciliar Marian poetry and an attempt will be made to contrast this work with its pre-Conciliar counterpart. It is suggested that this might provide a fertile field for scholars to explore in the future.

This study is being undertaken at a time when there are signs of a resurgence of interest in the Blessed Virgin Mary. This time the concern has a universal rather than a religion-based orientation. The forthcoming bimillennium of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ has reawakened an interest in the importance of Mary as the *Theotokos* or Mother of God and thus humankind's link to the Godhead.

"Two thousand years after the Nativity, the mother of Jesus is more beloved, powerful and controversial than ever," proclaimed the front page of *Life Magazine*'s Christmas 1996 issue.

"Mary has entered mainstream discussion at the same time that Catholics themselves, particularly women, are divided in their attitudes to the mother of Jesus" writes Sally Cunneen (1996:xv). This author declares her own allegiance to Mary by adding: "The mystery of Mary's continuing power calls out in our minds as well as in our hearts."

While comparing the Church's Marian teaching - which she rejects as a myth - to "a magic mirror like the Lady of Shalott's," Marina Warner (1976:xxiii) provides an orthodox Catholic definition of the place of Mary in the Church:

> (T)he Virgin is a protagonist in the drama of the Incarnation and the Redemption of Christ, and consequently in the personal salvation of each individual who feels himself to belong to Christian history and professes Christian beliefs. (Until the Reformation this applied to almost all Christians, but now it is restricted to Catholics, Orthodox, and High Anglicans.)

This Catholic author thus manifests a clear grasp of the doctrine she rejects. More arbitrary and less successfully focused, however, is Warner's attempt in the same passage to elucidate Mary's appeal to Catholic womanhood:

> The Virgin Mary is a manifestation of the principle the Chinese call *yin* and represents the quintessence of many qualities that east and west have traditionally regarded as feminine, yieldingness, softness, gentleness, receptiveness, mercifulness, tolerance, withdrawal.

Viewed from the stance of the traditionally conservative Catholic, the truth is far more complex. The Warner image of an overly compliant, yielding Mary serves to obliterate the New Testament image of a woman who, while she is the recipient of the highest honour God could bestow on womankind, is ever present when needed for moral support or nurturing; one, moreover, who, judging by the sparse references to her in the Gospel, is clearly unwilling to waste time in fruitless arguments or self-justification. Yet she is oratorically

able to stand her ground and prepared to be controversial in her utterance. This is manifest in her only lengthy recorded song, the Magnificat. With its echoes of the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), this oration at the same time reveals the Blessed Virgin's knowledge of religious lore. Mary's blend of strength and tenderness, founded on wisdom and love, is ably juxtaposed by Sister Catherine Whittle PSN, a South African, in the closing couplet of the penultimate stanza of her four-verse poem **The Windsong** (Catherine 1997:2).

> She strides, tender-shod, terrible-footed
> tender to the weak, mighty to the hope-filled.
> (16-17)

A feminist delusion, which is much more disquieting than any saccharine interpretation of the Blessed Virgin, has given rise to a recent spate of dissertations. This claims that Marian devotion arose as a remnant of the goddess-worship of ancient time; hence the feminist assertion that *hyperdulia*, the devotion to the Blessed Virgin, is based on legends or myths. The word itself is derived from the Greek *doulia*, meaning slavery or bondage. In Catholic practice it refers to veneration of the saints in recognition of their successful striving after perfection. Mary, being first among the saints, is given *hyperdulia*, or superior veneration. However, the respect implicit in both *dulia* and *hyperdulia* is distinct from adoration or *latria*, the worship due to God alone. The feminist assertion is irrational, since it introduces and implies approval of that same alleged Mariolatry that has caused Protestants for almost four centuries to shun Mariology and against which Catholics have vociferously defended themselves throughout. Maurice Hamington, a Catholic academic with pronounced feminist leanings, and who for one of his faith has a strongly unorthodox outlook on Mariology, goes so far as to refer to the "divinity of the triple Mary" (1995:5). The word 'triple' is used in view of Catholic regard of her as daughter of God the Father, Mother of God's Son and spouse of the Holy Spirit.

In sum, therefore, a double delusion exists. Both Protestantism and radical feminism confuse Catholic *hyperdulia* with idolatry. Feminism appears to approve of this misreading of Mary as a goddess, whereas Protestant teaching rejects it as idol-worship. Consequently Catholic doctrine finds itself in the dichotomous position of being respectively admired and abhorred by two different groups of thinkers for an idolatry which is fundamentally in conflict with its teaching that there is only one God in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Mary, though chosen by God to be His Mother, derives all her powers of intercession from the infinite generosity of God Himself. In terms of Catholic teaching, she is, however, venerated as a living example of the goodness which can result and the help which can be obtained in life and death when humankind overcomes its baser urges by freely co-operating with the will of God, regardless of cost to itself. In this regard Frederick M Jelly OP (1997:133) writes:

> As mysterious as the eschatological doctrines might be, we who are still living in the Pilgrim Church are bonded with our brothers and sisters in the heavenly Church from throughout space and time, and are helped on our pilgrimage of faith by our liturgical and private devotions in relation to the intercession and mediation of Mary and all the saints, as well as by the inspiration of their holy lives in Christ, the Crown of all the saints.

Therefore it is not Mary's alleged image as a goddess but her humanity as it was harnessed to serve the Lord God which gave rise to the plethora of Marian poetic imagery that has flowed throughout the ages, reaching one of its greatest climaxes in the work of the nun-poets of the twentieth century. As humanity's anchor to the Divinity, the Blessed Virgin is as human as any other woman. The main difference between herself and womankind, however, is centred in the fact of the Incarnation in which Mary retained her virginity at the same time as she became the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Who, the Church teaches, Himself was, is, and ever shall be, God. The Church does teach, however, that the Blessed Virgin alone among all humankind was preserved from the taint of the fall of Adam and Eve known as original sin (cf Denziger & Neuner – Bibliography) and that she remained thus free from sin until death. It is this freedom from sin which fostered her perfect fulfilment of

her multiple role of mother, daughter, sister, spouse, worshipper and friend of God. It is the belief in this paradox of personal humility juxtaposed with the aspiration to attain the highest peak of perfection in thought, word and action which accounts for many of the Marian images depicted in glowing lines in the corpus of twentieth-century Marian poetry by religious seekers. The word "images" in the title does not mean that the focus will be on imagery but rather on the perceptions, visions, depictions and representations of Mary by the nun-poets.

Most of the Marian poetry dealt with in this study was written by a number of nuns who combined a depth of sensitivity in meditation with a strong gift for English expression. The combination of these assets empowered them to write poetry in strains which not only touch the hearts of those who read their work but also give evidence of a high degree of literary fluency.

Readers may be surprised at the relative obscurity of the poetry itself. According to David van Biema (1996:36), the appellation of *Theotokos*, or God-bearer, bestowed on the Blessed Virgin at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD:

> pulled her centre stage; at the same time, the new emphasis on Jesus' less knowable side caused His role as a kind of ombudsman for humanity to shift somewhat onto His mother's reassuringly human shoulders.

In this study an effort will be made to identify ways in which the nuns metaphorically climbed onto these "shoulders" to get a better image of Jesus and who, in the process, translated their own images of Mary into the language of poetry. They were seeking identification with a woman who, while sharing their virginity, nevertheless became the Mother of God, the Mother of humankind and the Mother of their Church. To translate these images into lustrous poetry would have provided an outlet for the creative urges of these women. However, constrained by the limitations set upon them in terms of their religious vows as they were, they were unable, perhaps even unwilling, to promote their work to the extent which writers in different

circumstances might have been. The bulk of it was only published in magazines, an ephemeral medium. Though the nuns who managed to have books published were in the minority, the few who did, as well as several other nun-poets, had examples of their work included in certain anthologies of Marian poetry.

"One of the most delightful experiences is to read something that another has read, and then compare impressions with him," wrote Walter Croarkin (1940 :vi). Similarly delightful is the adventure of reading work which another has written, and of then trying to decipher the human experience and outlook which underlie the words. With a sensitivity equalled only by their simplicity, many of the nuns whose works are dealt with in this study are able to touch a core of spiritual emotion in the souls of their readers. This has as much to do with their powers of meditation, the fruits of which are found concentrated in their work, as with their literary talents. That this has been the case with Marian poetry throughout the centuries is claimed by Laube (1961:2) when he writes:

> Confessors and teachers, bishops and peasants, magistrates and menials, the learned and the lowly, pressed down though they might be by the prosaic cares of office or calling, had in common one intuitive and happy reflex. The moment their meditations turned to Mary, they would find their insights shimmering with the mingled iridescences of poetry and prayer.

The number of lay writers whose poems are included in the second chapter of this work may seem surprising, including as it does as outwardly unlikely a candidate as D H Lawrence. In this regard, the reader's attention is drawn to the words of Walter Croarkin (1940:v) when he asserts that "there is hardly a poet of the Christian Era that has not been attracted to the Mother of God," before rhetorically asking:

> What is more natural than that poets, who are so sensitive to beauty, should pay universal homage to her who is the most beautiful creature God ever made, the masterpiece of His creative art?

It should not surprise us then when Lawrence, who, as will be seen in the relevant section, was highly sensitive to the beauty he discerned in the character of his own mother, found himself correspondingly responsive to the loveliness of the Mother of God.

What other reason drove worldly-wise writers such as Lawrence, Parker and Yeats to create poetry in praise of the Blessed Virgin? Perhaps it was a growing disenchantment with the material world of success and a metaphorical need to thaw their chilled hearts by exposing them to the warmth of the Mother of the King of kings. Mary, far from puffing herself up in conceit, spent her lifetime immersed in performing the mundane domestic chores with which most women - and many men as well - are familiar. Parker lost a child she was expecting. Plath, on the other hand, gave birth to two babies and, before her tragic death, took care of them. Mary's inspired ability to combine action with contemplation must needs find an echo in the heart of such poets, whose minds might have been grappling with literary inspiration but whose hands needed to perform the actions which make life sustainable. An effort will be made to demonstrate that while the nun-poets drew grace and solace from their Marian meditations, this was not always the case as far as the poetic utterance of secular writers such as Plath and Yeats was concerned.

It is the fragility of Mary's humility which draws the strength of God like a magnet, according to Father Johann Roten, president of the Marian Library of the International Marian Research Institute at the University of Dayton, Ohio, USA. He made this comment at a lecture on Mary in Contemporary Society delivered by him during the Institute's summer school in June 1997. This is not the negative weakness ascribed to Mary by those critics who regard her as a spineless yes-woman; it is the positive and voluntary frailty of one who has emptied herself in order to become a vessel whereby Almighty God might complete His work of Redemption. In 1937, sixty years before the lecture took place, Sister Miriam Clare OSF in her poem **Maria** (In Francis 1937:26) made a similar claim when she addressed Mary as the "Rod/Of Jesse, in whose hands the Heart of Christ/is pliable as clay" (8-10). Is it likewise this fragility which has drawn so many lay poets who were not generally voluble

about religion to leave behind them a record of their individual images of Mary?

It is predicted that, while unassuming and simple in design, much of the nun-poets' poetry in this study will be experienced as spiritually uplifting by those readers who do not shy away from allowing themselves to interact with the poets. Some of the work is so profoundly moving that it may well cause the reader to exclaim with Eddy Doherty (In Carmel Bride:1957:viii):

> What did they feed those nuns that they should write like that? ... Was it contemplation ...? Was it native talent developed through long years? Or was it the inspiration of the Holy Ghost - God wooing His Virgin spouse through the words of a contemplative in a bare convent in Ohio?

If we accept Doherty's suggestion that meditation and spiritual fervour account for the strength of the poetry of Sada Marie Fingerlin, some of whose poetry will be examined in this work, we shall likewise have no quarrel with Croarkin (1940:v) when he writes that the Marian poets of his time had gone beyond writing a mere sketch of Mary as poets of earlier centuries had done:

> Each age of poets added and filled in where their predecessors had left off, until today we find the poets daringly but reverently exploring the most intimate details of Mary's soul and her relationship with Christ.

It is regrettable that much of this Marian poetry writing came to a halt about the year 1960. It is, however, a consoling reflection that it did so only after reaching heights of such beauty that the poetry which contains them deserves a place alongside some of the best Marian praise poetry ever written. In the introductory oration of his play **Twelfth Night** Shakespeare has the Duke Orsino rhetorically ask if music is the food of love. Marian poetry, being the fruit of the nuns' contemplation on matters of eternal value, could by the same token be described as the food of eternal life, which is both staggering in its simplicity and hopeful in its pain.

This is well documented in **The Ascension**, a poem by Sister M Julian Baird RSM (1954:47). This brief poetic utterance is pregnant with insight into the balm brought by the cheerful acceptance of personal loss and sorrow, when it is unaccompanied by either an inward- or backward-looking anger. It epitomises that mastery over self-pity which is best in the life of the truly committed nun as it was the best thing in the life of Mary:

THE ASCENSION

Only long afterward
John realised
with what renunciation Mary turned
from Heaven's gate to him,
and smiled.

Sister Julian's brevity, which is a characteristic of her poetry, is counteracted by her penetrating insight. It is posited that she may have been able to express Mary's renunciation so well on account of the many dry and agonising years she herself may have undergone before attaining the maturity that enabled her to reconcile herself to all the demands of a God-focused life, chosen perhaps in the fervour of youth, but having to be endured throughout painful decades of selfless service and sacrifice. Nun-poets such as herself must frequently have drawn strength from the example of self-sacrifice of the Blessed Virgin Mary during the arid years when the yoke of self-denial, however self-imposed, bore painfully down on their shoulders. They must often have reflected on the similar sacrifices made by Mary, whose relationship with Christ was that of a mother and her much-loved only child as well as that of a human person in fervent adoration of her God.

It is the nun-poets' images of Mary as well as those of many of their fellow poets of the twentieth century which will mainly be explored in the pages ahead. The study, as already mentioned, is not intended as a theological thesis but a literary one with underlying theological motifs due to the specialised nature of the poetry. The intention is to make available a body of literature which for almost half a century has been almost inaccessible.

The corpus of twentieth-century Marian praise which has emanated from their combined efforts, while varying vastly from one poet to another, is a confirmation of part of a belief expressed by Woodward (1997:41) in the following way:

> The secret of Mary's mysterious power may be just this: having no history of her own, she entices every new generation to draw her portrait.

One fully endorses Woodward's assertion that the Blessed Virgin continuously entices new generations to draw her portrait, while disputing his asseveration that Mary has no history of her own, unless self-immolation for the greater glory of God is seen to equate self-negation.

The Blessed Virgin in fact had a most stirring history of her own, although - or rather because - it was tied up with that of the Lord Jesus Christ. According to the Bible, she was invited by an angel sent from God to be the Mother of His Son. Joseph, to whom she was betrothed, perplexed by her ostensible infidelity, thought of ways of terminating their betrothal without public disgrace to her. His doubts were allayed only when God again sent an angel, this time to himself, to explain to him the Divine origin of the Incarnation. Mary gave birth in a stable because there was no room in the inn. She was warned by Simeon that a sword would pierce her heart. In the depth of night she fled to Egypt to protect her Child from Herod's sword. For three days and nights she searched the length and breadth of Jerusalem to find her lost Son. She met Him as, battered, bruised and bleeding, He carried His Cross on the road to Calvary. She stood beside this Cross and watched Him die an appalling death, nails piercing His hands and feet. She received Him when He was taken down from the Cross. She was in touch with the apostles after His death and presumably met Him after His Resurrection, bidding Him farewell when he ascended to heaven. She was united in prayer with the apostles when the Paraclete sent by Christ overshadowed and transformed them into fearless advocates of the Gospel. If, therefore, in the nature of things, Mary's history was tied up with that of her Son, this makes it no less her own.

This clearly is the feeling of those nun-poets who, empowered by their own vows to have a deeper insight into Mary's sacrifices than the average person, drew the literary images of which a limited but eloquent number may be found in this study.

This thesis serves as an introduction to the work of the nun-poets, much of which deserves further individual consideration. It is hoped that it will open doors for future scholars to explore a school of literature that deserves far greater exposure than it has apparently received for several decades. The nun-poets' poetry as well as the world-view or philosophy it contains is of a very positive nature. It is posited that they therefore provide a corrective on the general view of the Modernist period as negative, fragmented and unbelieving.

Without providing an overview of the Marian praise poetry of secular poets, it would not be possible to prove the assertion that the nun-poets' sense of identification with the Blessed Virgin is far more evident in their representations than in those of secular poets. It therefore adds a deeper dimension of interest to the genre. For this reason, Chapter One will comprise a brief synopsis of Marian praise poetry by some of the best known lay poets of the era.

CHAPTER ONE

IMAGES OF MARY BY SOME CELEBRATED TWENTIETH-CENTURY MODERNIST AUTHORS: LAWRENCE, KAVANAGH, YEATS, AUDEN, PARKER, ELIOT AND PLATH

Though Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy and a form of Anglicanism are the only three world religions to preach Mariology as part of their doctrine, Protestants and non-affiliated poets throughout the centuries have contributed to the corpus of Marian praise poetry. That Protestant Christians and non-Christians alike continued this trend in the twentieth century, is evident from an examination of the poetry of modern poets of various religions.

Though it is not surprising that Christians should write Marian poetry, it is remarkable that certain Modernist authors have done so, given the prevailing perception, whether false or true, that many had no religious affiliations. Therefore, although the scope of this study does not allow for the inclusion of the Marian poetry of all the twentieth-century poets who contributed to the corpus, their efforts in this regard are relevant and deserving of mention, since some interesting Marian poems have been produced by some of them.

In England Marian poets of the twentieth century include Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953), Robert Bridges (1844-1930), Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) and Alice Meynell (1847-1922).

In Ireland, since the majority of its residents throughout much of the twentieth century were Catholics who staunchly practised their religion, a predictably sizeable crop of Marian praise poets emerged. Their number includes Padraig Colum (1881-1972) and Katherine Tynan Hinkson (1861-1931). In this study, one poem by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) and two by Patrick Kavanagh (1905-1967) are included. Neither of these two men, arguably the greatest Irish poets writing in English during the last hundred years or more, was known for his Catholicity. Yeats was a member of the Protestant Ascendancy class, while Kavanagh's outlook on religion, as expressed in some of his poetry, brought him in conflict with the Catholic hierarchy of his

day. Yet the poems they wrote about Mary which have been transcribed in this study reveal an intimate understanding of the Marian devotion which flourished so abundantly in the Ireland of their day, though Yeats appears to have grasped none of the doctrine.

In America Marian poetry underwent a magnificent renascence, thanks mainly to the nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century, examples from whose work comprise the bulk of this study. The genre was also upheld by *inter alia* Louise Imogen Guiney (1861-1920), Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918), Thomas Merton (1915-1968), James Bannister Tabb (1845-1909) and Marguerite Wilkinson (1883-1928). In Canada Sister Maura Power SC (born in 1881) was the best known author of Marian poetry, while in New Zealand the work of Eileen Duggan contains the most memorable examples of Marian praise poetry to be published. As stated, despite on-going efforts, it was not possible to obtain the required biographical details pertaining to all of the Marian poets whose work has been used in this study. Wherever available, however, their particulars have been supplied.

Before the start of the twentieth century, the written word began to undergo a radical change from the kind of writing which had dominated Victorian literature. Though articulate and clever, this work was at times marred by overtones ranging from the didactic and sentimental to the frankly mawkish. Examples of some Victorian works seem to indicate that literature in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century was written for a certain privileged literate few, since universal literacy was still a pipedream, as, indeed, it still is in Third World regions such as parts of Africa.

By the second half of the nineteenth century in England, as elsewhere, rationalism, agnosticism and atheism were making inroads on the consciousness of many Christians. Darwinism in its challenge to a simplistic acceptance of the Biblical interpretation of the creative process caused many thinkers to reconsider their former naïve acceptance of God. Lacking, perhaps, a certain measure of spiritual insight, some were unable to reinterpret the ancient Scriptural teachings in the light of a changed

intellectual environment. This resulted in the rise of agnosticism or atheism among the educated groups from whom emerged the precursors and preceptors of the day with the predictable result that these beliefs emanated from them to those whom they led or taught. Though social consciousness gave rise to a concern for social improvements which were to lead to the implementation of social benefits, religious faith, which taught the corporal works of mercy, and which in medieval times had been almost universal, lost much ground.

The moral values taught by the Victorians, though regarded by many as hypocrisy because they were seen to impose intolerable burdens on the poor, nevertheless resulted in an externally virtuous world. This influenced Victorian literature to such an extent that even those well-known English writers whose own life-styles failed to comply with the reigning views on morality knew better than to advocate lapses from the norm such as their own in the literature of their day. In England and elsewhere the situation began to change soon after the Edwardian Era succeeded the Victorian Age. Social pressure caused Parliament to recognise the working classes and pass legislation to improve their situation. The Great War or First World War (1914-1918) abolished the deadlock on women in the labour market. With the introduction of obligatory schooling, illiteracy became a thing of the past among people of unimpaired intellect. The lives of privilege lived by the aristocracy began to grind to a halt.

Soon voices could be heard which in earlier ages might have gone unheeded as the speakers of a formerly uneducated class now found the way open to express their feelings in the written word. The end of the First World War marked the beginning of atheistic Communism's engulfment of Russia which imposed its ideologies on many other European regions. The 1920s were fraught by hectic consumerism and self-indulgence. The frenetic escapades of the Bright Young People of the era led to alcohol and drug abuse. Some renowned authors of the period became alcoholics and the sense of depression which frequently follows the artificial elevation of spirits brought about by the abuse of liquor and drugs is evident in some of the best known

writing of the period. The collapse of the Wall Street Stock Exchange led to the Great Depression which struck the world in the 1930s, putting a temporary end to the excessive lifestyles of many. Hitler was building up his infamous Third Reich which culminated in the Second World War that was to cause the deaths of tens of millions, leaving countless others orphaned, homeless, crippled or otherwise handicapped. The atrocities and horrors of the era had an effect on twentieth-century literature which became a powerful tool of the Modernist way of thinking. The revolutionary ideas of a rising group of free-thinkers found their way in book form into drawing rooms where the authors themselves might never have been accepted. As a form of literature, the Age of Modernism reigned supreme from 1914 to 1950, which period, ironically, also marks the heyday of the American nun-poet.

Poetry composed under the banners of Modernism destroyed the flaws of hypocrisy that were a negative feature of some Victorian literature. On the positive side this school of literature revolutionised forms of writing, depending less on the explicit than on the power of the connotations engendered by the written word and reader participation. On the other hand, however, there were certain flaws discernible in this form of literature. The confessional tone of its writing which at times degenerated into an almost obsessive search into the author's identity. This betrayed a sequential sense of dejection and despair, which in its more extreme forms gave the work a bitter, inward-looking slant of hopelessness and dejection.

The emotions of nihilism and self-absorption, exacerbated by the horrors experienced during the two World Wars, are notably missing from the poetry of the American nun-poets of the era, whose work manifests an existential sense of hopefulness.

A possible explanation for this situation may be found in the fact that America entered both world wars by the time these were well advanced. Not only was their war less protracted, therefore, but they were facing the foe when much of its energy had been spent. Consequently they suffered fewer military casualties. As the military battles were fought in Europe and Asia, moreover,

few of the nun-poets were personally or directly involved in the horrors which prevailed in those continents. Unlike their counterparts in other continents, they were seldom exposed in the streets to beggar victims of war and bombings, who had lost their limbs or faculties in the fray. It is also possible that the quality of hope discernible in their poetry stems from the fact that the nun-poets mostly grew up in a rather sheltered Catholic environment. The Church's hierarchy sought to protect its followers from any Modernist influences but those it considered salutary, by establishing its own church buildings, youth groups, libraries, schools and universities. These were frequently run by expatriate missionaries from the European Continent and the British Isles. Some of the latter had in their home countries been forced to fight for the privilege of practising their Catholic faith. Hence they placed a high premium on their religion, adhering staunchly to its precepts and viewing with suspicion any religious, social and moral philosophies they regarded as being in conflict with their own.

The doctrines of their faith in relation to the Blessed Virgin being relevant to much of the poetic content of their Marian praise poetry, the nun-poets' Mariological beliefs are highlighted in Chapter Three which contains a brief overview of Catholic Mariological teaching throughout the centuries. To avoid the pitfall of turning this study into a theological one, however, an endeavour has been made to keep the discussion brief and general, while illuminating the faith in terms of which the nun-poets felt encouraged to write their poetry. The religious content of their poetry supports the perception that the nun-poets of this era were steeped in Catholicism and that efforts had been made to shield them from reading writings which their elders regarded as harmful to their faith and morals and which were forbidden by the Catholic Index. It is probable that they must have been opposed to those ideas which ran counter to the precepts of the faith they strove to uphold. From the hopeful tenor of their work it seems, moreover, that they were more content with their lot than the more socially questing, analytical and critical secular poets of the era seem to have been.

On a personal level, the nun-poets were encouraged, if not obliged, in the religious climate of their day, to confess their sins frequently. This practice

was designed to lead them to a spiritually focused search for perfection in their personal lives. It gave them an insight into their own frailty bolstered by a total dependence on God's omnipotence and led them to experience a desire to follow the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary in their quest for perfection. Frequent confession also led to the wry self-knowledge betrayed in their poetry and which they share with many secular Modernist poets. The contrast between their work and that of their lay contemporaries, however, lies in the fact that the nun-poets clearly see their lives as a preparation for eternal bliss. Their breathless sense of anticipation and determined quest for sanctity enable them to endure uncomplainingly great personal suffering and provide them with a deep gratitude to - and compassion for - Christ Whose sufferings made their ultimate entrance to heaven possible. Simultaneously these lend a fresh joyousness to their poetry which is markedly absent from the work of those of their contemporaries who regard the material present as their final destination. Unlike much of the work of secular poets of the era, therefore, the Marian poetry of the nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century can be read, understood and savoured only when their deep spirituality, protected by their sheltered environment, is borne in mind. Nuns are noted for their longevity and Sister Maura Eichner SSND (born 1916) and Mother M Francis PCC (born 1921) were still writing their profoundly spiritually orientated poetry well into the final decade of the twentieth century. Whereas their work retained its spiritual quality, however, the hopefulness of youth was replaced by the acceptance of adulthood. Although a new generation of nun-poets was to write Marian poetry in the second half of the twentieth century, their work often lacked the high degree of spirituality manifested by the generation whose poetry comprises the focal point of this study.

Reverting to the second quarter of the twentieth century, we find that, although the nun-poets are not obsessed with pain. Yet they are receptive to the suffering of the sick, the poor and the under-privileged. Many of them have in fact given up monetary rewards to tend to the needs of humankind. However, they unite all pain to Christ's agony which culminated in His Resurrection. They put their trust in the human resilience, the renewed

courage brought to humankind with the regularity of the recurring dawn, which makes it possible for the individual to carry on with life despite its problems. Prayer and hope are tools used by them to gain the grace of such resilience.

Though ideologically the nun-poets held on to the traditional religious and moral norms, they were influenced in their style and the form of their poetry by the prevalent forms of poetry writing. A mortal blow had been dealt to the brilliant but ponderous poetry of an earlier age by the creation of a form of Impressionist verse. This, while failing to comply with the skilful structural, metrical and rhyming patterns of the past, has so strong a connotative power of its own that it is doubtful whether the swift traveller of the twentieth century could ever enjoy Victorian poetic lore with its laboured points and verbosity.

The nun-poets had clearly been exposed to the kind of poetry written by Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost and Gerard Manley Hopkins. The last of these was a Victorian Marian poet vastly ahead of his time whose work was not published until the twentieth century). Their poetry relies heavily on the power of connotation and writer-reader interaction. Influenced by this work, the nun-poets demonstrate a freedom of approach in respect of their writing which reveals a vitality that conflicts radically with the demure image projected by their medieval garments. The Modernist School at which they were taught their literary skills held that by depicting life in unadorned terms they were stripping away the mask behind which it considered the Victorian novelist and poet to have sheltered. This mask, according to Vivian de Sola Pinto (1977:4):

> ... is now often felt to be of a hindrance rather than a help to the poet ... based (as it is) on the pretence that there is a society which shares the sensibility embodied in traditional forms when no such society actually exists.

By his disregard for the literary taboos of the early twentieth century, the Modernist novelist and poet D H Lawrence provided a strong impetus for change to English literature in his time. A gifted writer, whose very prose at times reads like poetry, Lawrence introduced a way of writing which revealed

his mingled parentage: a prescriptive teacher mother and an affable miner father prone to mood swings which adversely affected his family. Lawrence is said to have written of his mother as follows (In Cameron 1997:22):

> Nobody can have the soul of me. My mother has had it, and nobody can have it again. Nobody can come into my very self again, and breathe me like an atmosphere. She is my first great love. She was a wonderful, rare woman - you do not know; as strong and steadfast and generous as the sun. She could be as swift as a white whiplash, and as kind and gentle as warm rain, and as steadfast as the irreducible earth beneath us.

Lawrence's writings clearly indicate that he arrayed himself with his mother against his father. Nevertheless, the honesty of his writings ensures that his reader is blinded neither to the inflexible dominance of her character nor to her dependence on the father. Lawrence himself appears to have rejected his male parent on account of his distaste for his imperfections.

In an attempt, perhaps, to safeguard her son from the effects of his father's possibly somewhat irregular behaviour, Mrs Lawrence brought him up strictly "Chapel". If any of his former religious mentors lived long enough to read his books, they may well have wondered where they had erred in their teachings. Whatever may have been lacking in his preceptors' influence when Lawrence came to taking his life's choices generally, they exercised an unexpectedly strong influence on the young novelist and poet in the matter of Mariology. This is illuminated by the hesitance of Lawrence's approach to the praise of Mary as illustrated in one of the poems (In Pinto 1977:753), which, though it went "uncollected" during his lifetime, was published after his death:

> **PIETÀ**
>
> Thou our Maiden, thou who dwellest in Heaven
> We pray for thee, Mary delightful, that God may bless thee
> Do thou, O Virgin, at day when we rise from our sleeping
> Speak soothingly for us to God, and when in distress we
> Cry for thee out of the night wherein we are prone,
> Struck down, do thou part us the darkness that we see thee.
> Be near us. And God's will be done!

One discerns in this cry of a child to its mother a lack of certainty as to the propriety of his Marian sentiments on the poet's part, which is strongly at odds with the gentleness towards the Blessed Virgin generally found in the poem. As a Protestant, he has difficulty in understanding the Catholic Church's teaching that those who now exist in close proximity to Christ in heaven after having lived lives of virtue on earth are able to intercede for mercy on the souls of humankind, offering their prayers through Christ to the Father in union with the Holy Spirit (cf Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994:#956).

Unusual but striking in its enchantment is the poem's one positive warm touch: by reversing the adjective and noun in "Mary delightful" (2) the poet imbues the Blessed Virgin with a surpassing loveliness, while in two places of the same line Lawrence's Protestant background strongly emerges. He prays "for" Mary to avoid the possible hurdle of Mariolatry. Catholics ask Mary to intercede for them to God, confident in the affirmation of the teaching of their faith which, as we have seen, holds by its doctrine on *hyperdulia* that it is good to venerate Mary, provided *latria*, the worship of God, is reserved only for Divine Providence. Catholic poets would normally have asked Mary to pray to God to bless them, in recognition of the fact that she is most blessed among women. Lawrence, on the other hand, assures the Blessed Virgin that the people are praying to God to bless her, perhaps in a bid to procure absolution from Divine Providence for praising her himself. Lines 3 to 7 constitute a child's request to its mother to be its mediator and a source of strength during the vagaries of day and preserve it from a realisation of the terrors of its nightmares. In the first half of the concluding line the poet remains confident as he demands, rather than implores: "Be near us!" He nonetheless protects himself against any possible taint of blasphemy by adding: "And God's will be done." This last line echoes Mary's own words: "Be it done unto me, according to Thy Will." (Luke 1:38).

In its stumbling incoherence, the poem confirms an assertion by Pinto (1977:5) that Lawrence has abandoned the use of the literary mask altogether because:

> (h)e has to create an organic or expressive form to express his naked, passionate experience in a world which shares his poetic sensibility, and this is a task of enormous difficulty, requiring both heroic self-confidence and technical skill of the highest order.

Although neither this alleged self-confidence nor the technical skill is very much in evidence in the awkward lines of **Pietà**, Lawrence's vulnerability is on display, accompanied by a somewhat shamefaced confidence in the protective powers of the maternal presence of the Blessed Virgin.

In Ireland during the century between the birth of W B Yeats (1865) and the death of Patrick Kavanagh (1967), the rank and file of the country's Catholics generally tended to be both devout and child-like in the observance of the precepts of their religion. This does not appear to have been the case with either Yeats or Kavanagh, however. These two poets are regarded by some as having made the most major contributions to English-language Irish poetry of their era. While Yeats was a nominal Protestant with more interest in the Irish national political struggle and in his nation's legends and myths than in the observance of any sort of Christian religion, Kavanagh's poem **The Great Hunger** was castigated by his country's censors as being both obscene and anti-Catholic.

That Kavanagh "nevertheless managed to retain both his cultural origins and a distinctly, though slightly estranged, Catholic heritage" (McDonnell 1988:100) as well as, by implication, his legacy of Marian devotion, clearly emanates from the nostalgic aura which radiates from his poems **My Room** and **A Christmas Childhood**. In each of these poems, the Blessed Virgin appears to warrant no more than a fleeting allusion in a single line. Yet despite - or more probably on account of – the poet's lack of effusion, a sense of familiarity and intimacy with Christ's Mother is established that spreads its warmth over the entire poem.

In **My Room** (In McDonnell 1988:102), the physical limitations of the poet's cramped childhood quarters are contrasted by implication with their propensity for enabling him grow to full stature emotionally.

MY ROOM

10 by 12
And a low roof
If I stand by the side wall
My head feels the reproof.

Five holy pictures
Hang on the walls:
The Virgin and Child
St Anthony of Padua
Leo the XIII
St Patrick and the Little Flower.

My bed in the centre
So many things to me -
A dining table
A writing desk
And a slumber palace.

My room in a dusty attic
But its little window
Lets in the stars.

That these stars include the Blessed Virgin Mary in her image of *Stella Maris* or Star of the Sea is implied rather than emphasised. The room is by implication populated by the five saints' figures on display. Though adding to the crowdedness, these images are exhibited as a sign of veneration of those they represent in gratitude to them for their intercession with God on behalf of humankind. This implied contrast is repeated in the juxtaposition of the "dusty attic" (16) and the brilliance of "the stars" (18).

In **A Christmas Childhood** (In McDonnell 1988:103) the poet, by linking the Christmas elements of stable lamp, farm animals, milk, music, frost and stars with those found in the farm environment of his youth, recreates the unrepeatable experience of a child's first encounter with the true meaning of Christmas. The poem's humbling simplicity paradoxically finds its climax in the last two lines with their contrast between the child-like parlance of their wording and the mature richness of the reflection that the security of Mary's maternal breast extends its motherliness to humankind, as epitomised by the poet in his youth, as much as to the Divine Infant born on Christmas day.

A CHRISTMAS CHILDHOOD

My father played the melodeon
Outside at our gate;
There were stars in the morning east
And they danced to his music.

Across the wild bogs his melodeon called
To Lennons and Callans.
As I pulled on my trousers in a hurry
I knew some strange thing had happened.

Outside in the cow-house my mother
Made the music of milking;
The light of her stable-lamp was a star
And the frost of Bethlehem made it twinkle.

A water-hen screeched in the bog,
Mass-going feet
Crunched the wafer-ice on the pot-holes,
Somebody wistfully twisted the bellows wheel.

My child poet picked out the letters
On the grey stone,
In silver the wonder of a Christmas townland,
The winking glitter of a frosty dawn.

Cassiopeia was over
Cassidy's hanging hill,
I looked and three whin bushes rode across (whinstone)
The horizon - the Three Wise Kings.

An old man passing said:
'Can't he make it talk' -
The melodeon. I hid in the doorway
And tightened the bolt of my box-pleated coat

I made six nicks on the door-post
With my penknife's big blade -
There was a little one for cutting tobacco.
And I was six Christmases of age.

My father played the melodeon,
My mother milked the cows,
And I had a prayer like a white rose pinned
On the Virgin Mary's blouse.

This poem suggests that in the poet's mind in childhood, the images of his mother "ma(king) the music of milking" (10) in her stable in his Irish home-

town of Strabane, a market town in County Tyrone, and that of the Virgin Mary are interlinked, for "the frost of Bethlehem" (12) made the "stable-lamp" (11) twinkle. Conversely, in the poet's young mind Mary wears a "blouse" (36) much like the one his mother must be wearing. It is this masculine incomprehension of feminine fashions which underscores the unchanging quality of maternity in Mary in the poet's eyes. She may have worn clothes different from his mother's but nothing can alter the maternal quality which the two women share. The music made on the melodeon (1) by his father and that of his mother (10) could refer to the lullaby sung by Mary to Jesus, whereas the prayer "like a white rose" (35) emphasises the virginity of Christ's Mother.

Descended as he was from the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy class, Yeats lacked Kavanagh's personal acquaintance with the inbred Catholicism of the Irish. This would put him on the Protestant side of the Catholic/Protestant divide. There is little information about his religious feelings available beyond the fact that it appears that his deepest interests lay in the exploration of the occult. Yeats's unrequited passion for the Irish freedom fighter Maud Gonne fanned his ardour for a free and united Ireland and subsequently inspired some of his most famous poetry and plays. He was too Irish by inclination to have less than a nodding acquaintance with the belief in the intermediary powers of the Blessed Virgin in a country where pictures and statues were prominently displayed, not only in nearly every house, but often in almost every room of a house, including the kitchen.

Yeats believed in an idea of the history of civilisation comprising twelve two - thousand-year cycles or gyres, as he termed them. References to a "Great Year" are found in several of his poems. He held that the Annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel to the Blessed Virgin Mary that God had chosen her from among all women to become the Mother of His Son, marked the beginning of the second of Judean cycle or gyre. This period, which he termed the "Galilean Turbulence", would, he predicted, terminate in 2000 AD.

The poet's preoccupation with the occult is evident in his image of Mary titled **The Mother of God** (In Jeffares 1989:364). Despite the profession of faith contained in the title, Yeats here draws on imagery of fire and terror (1) normally associated with hell rather than heaven:

THE MOTHER OF GOD

The threefold terror of love; a fallen flare
Through the hollow of an ear;
Wings beating about the room
The terror of all terrors that I bore
The Heavens in my womb.

Had I not found content among the shows
Every common woman knows,
Chimney corner, garden walk,
Or rocky cistern where we tread the clothes
And gather all the talk?

What is this flesh I purchased with my pains,
This fallen star my milk sustains,
This love that makes my heart's blood stop
Or strikes a sudden chill into my bones
And bids my hair stand up?

Both the Kavanagh and the Yeats poem are soliloquies, but Yeats's purports to be Mary's own reflection on the Annunciation, the Nativity and, implicitly, the Crucifixion, which he can only envisage as - paradoxically - fearful. The paradox emerges from the title, **The Mother of God**, a position which involves a high degree of power. His interest in the occult, which tends to draw deeply on the emotions of terror and horror, may account for his excessive emphasis on Mary's fears. In Kavanagh's poem, on the other hand, the Nativity is seen through the human eyes of a six-year-old boy, to whom the supernatural is merely a special version of the everyday event of the birth process with which, as a farmer's son, he is fully familiar.

The first "terror" (1) is the Word Mary hears, which becomes the Word of God made flesh in her womb (11). Yeats is using the old idea of conception occurring through the ear (2), common in medieval art, often represented by a light or a scroll containing Gabriel's words. Yet his view of a terrified Mary is

the opposite of the serenity with which she is regarded by Kavanagh. The three references to fear, "the fallen flare (1), the "wings" of Gabriel (3) and her pregnancy with the Son of God (5) are reflected in the physical manifestations in Mary's "blood" (13), "bones" (14) and "hair" (15) in the final stanza. Held between them in the second verse is the contrast to the eternal manifestation as contained in the everyday things Mary experienced in her exteriorly uneventful life.

Yeats's last stanza is paradoxical. It is Christ, not Mary, whose "pains" "purchase" (11) humankind's redemption. Catholic dogma concerning the Virgin birth teaches not only that Mary, though a virgin, conceived Christ, but also that her virginal integrity remained unimpaired in the process of giving birth. According to Catholic teaching, the pangs of childbirth are the punishment Eve, the earth's first human mother, and all her female descendants are condemned to suffer in retribution for her share in the sin of disobedience perpetrated by herself and her husband Adam. This teaching is based on God's words as recorded in the Old Testament: "In sorrow shalt thou bring forth children." (Gen. 3:16). The sin of disobedience manifests itself in the stain of original or hereditary sin on the soul with which every infant is born and constitutes the reason why Christians are taught to have their babies baptised. The Church teaches that Mary was exempt from hereditary sin, since it deems as unthinkable the idea that God Himself should be conceived within a womb tainted by sin. By reason of the sinlessness of the Blessed Virgin, therefore, the Church maintains that Mary was not subjected to the punishment meted out to Eve for her disobedience, and so gave birth painlessly. It is abundantly evident that Yeats has no inkling of such teachings. Kavanagh would have learnt about them in catechism at his Catholic school, but would consider them irrelevant to his discourse, as it was written not from the viewpoint of Mary but from his own in his childhood.

If in structure and style, Yeats's soliloquy should be found to be superior to Kavanagh's, it undeniably lacks the tonal warmth of the latter's work. For Yeats, if he is to believe in the Blessed Virgin at all, it is necessary to believe in her sheer terror at the Annunciation and the Nativity. To Kavanagh, on the

other hand, she is a mother whose place of honour in his mind, while perhaps grown somewhat dusty since his more religious youth, has been established by his upbringing since before he can remember. Kavanagh's context is love in family and community, in contrast with Yeats's emphasis on the emotion of fear.

Yeats finds it necessary to enumerate the multitude of Mary's housewifely tasks with a slightly patronising air. This is manifested particularly in the line in which he has her say she is among those who "gather all the talk" (10). Such a line would never appear in Kavanagh's poetry, since to an Irish Catholic of his generation it would be unthinkable that Mary was a woman of anything but silence.

To the cradle Catholic in Kavanagh, moreover, it was never a transgression to honour the Blessed Virgin, since God honoured her first. To him and to the other rural Irish of his time and background, she was family; a person of standing in his community and life. His own mother milked cows but made music in the process. Mary likewise needed to keep her home running properly. However, her domestic labours, though necessary to sustain her family, did not constitute the pivotal factor of their existence. It was God Who was the focal point in their lives and without Mary, Kavanagh seems to be reasoning subconsciously, there probably would be no Christmas in the shape in which it now manifests itself. Hence, unlike Yeats, he does not concern himself with flares and terrors (1), the hollow of an ear (2), gooseflesh (15) and wings beating about the room (3). Yeats's description of the Lord Jesus Christ as a "fallen star"(12) is particularly unfortunate, on account of its connotation of the fall from grace of Lucifer, brightest of all the angels, who is the avowed enemy of God. Kavanagh, who put all doubt about Mary's Motherhood of God behind him before he reached kindergarten age, merely recalls His religious, Christmas and Marian experiences. He does so in the words of a child, with all of a child's ability, through its total sincerity and absence of subterfuge, to touch the heart of an adult as few adults could.

This contrast has the unpredictable result that whereas Yeats's highly structured, sonorous, three-stanza soliloquy creates an impression of artificiality and hyperventilation. By contrast, Kavanagh's Mary is an organic reality, the woman at the heart of the Christmas saga, and her depiction suggests that to accept her as such appears to come as naturally as breathing to the poet.

Like Yeats, W H Auden brings "terror and fire" (30) into play when he has Gabriel give tongue in his Marian poem **Dialogue between Mary and Gabriel** (In Thérèse 1947:248). Unlike Yeats, however, he uses a well-reasoned theological argument to show the antithesis between the self-focused love of Eve, mother of the Old Testament, and the Christ-focused love of Mary, Mother of the New Covenant - between Eve who, "in love with her own will/denied the will of Love" (20-21), and Mary who, though her "flesh in terror and fire" (30) cringes, nevertheless rejoices at the thought that the Word of God "Should ask to wear (her)/From now on to their (God and humankind's) wedding day,/For an engagement ring" (36-38).

DIALOGUE BETWEEN MARY AND GABRIEL

GABRIEL
Mary, in a dream of love
Playing as all children play,
For unsuspecting children may
Express in comic make-believe
The wish that later they will know
Is tragic and impossible;
Hear, child, what I am sent to tell:
Love wills your dream to happen, so
Love's will on earth may be, through you,
No longer a pretend but true.

MARY
What dancing joy would whirl
my ignorance away?
Light blazes out of the stone,
The taciturn water
Bursts into music,
And warm wings throb within
The motionless rose:
What sudden rush of Power
Commands me to command?

GABRIEL
When Eve in love with her own will,
Denied the will of Love and fell,
She turned the flesh Love knew so well
To knowledge of her love until
Both love and knowledge were of sin:
What her negation wounded, may
Your affirmation heal today;
Love's will requires your own, that in
The flesh whose love you do not know,
Love's knowledge into flesh may grow.

MARY
My flesh in terror and fire
Rejoices that the Word
Who utters the world out of nothing
As a pledge of His word to love her
Against her will, and to turn
Her desperate longing to love,
Should ask to wear me,
From now to their wedding day,
For an engagement ring.

GABRIEL
Since Adam, being free to choose,
Chose to imagine he was free
To choose his own necessity,
Lost in his freedom, Man pursues
The shadow of his images:
Today the Unknown seeks the known;
What I am willed to ask, your own
Will has to answer; child it lies
Within your power of choosing to
Conceive the Child who chooses you.

This is the exact opposite of **The Mother of God**, since Mary in this poem occupies a much more powerful position than in the Yeats poem. Her choice to become the Mother of God is stressed, whereas Yeats's Mary seems to have had none and to have been overcome by Gabriel. This is illustrated in the second stanza. Auden's Mary welcomes where Yeats's Mary would have liked to reject; she recognises power, also in herself, to "command" (19).

The poem shows the dichotomy between the flesh and its values and the Spirit of God Who needs only a word to create the universe. That Mary is

unaware that she is about to be asked to become the bridge between the flesh and the Word of God about to become flesh is skilfully portrayed by the poet in the first stanza in the references to words and phrases such as "dream of love" (1), "children" (2), "unsuspecting" (3), "comic make-believe" (4) and "pretend" (10). In the concluding stanza, the word "child" is repeated twice. The first time it refers to Mary, who though a "child" (47) in God's sight, is treated as an equal by Almighty God in His invitation to her to consent to be the Mother of His "Child" (48), who will go down in Scripture as the Word made flesh.

This is a poem of strong antitheses such as "Love wills your dream to happen, so/Love's will on earth may be (true)" (8-9), "The taciturn water/Burst into music" (14-15), (which also contains an excellent example of synaesthesia), "Power/Commands me to command (18-19), "Eve, in love with her own will/Denied the will of love" (20-21), "What her negation wounded, may/Your affirmation heal today" (25-26), "Lost in his freedom, Man pursues/The shadow of his images" (42-43), "The Unknown seeks the known" (44). The contrasts emphasise the difference between Eve and Mary, disobedience and obedience, the Old and the New Covenants, the Divinity and humanity.

Contrast is again used by Auden in his lullaby titled **At the Manger Mary Sings** (Alexander 1981:106). Although this poem is concerned with the person of Christ rather than Mary, it provides certain insights into the disposition of the Blessed Virgin.

Structurally this lullaby has something in common with Yeats's **The Mother of God**, consisting as it does of three stanzas and being written as a soliloquy. It differs from the inward-looking quality of the Yeats poem, however, in its emphasis on Mary's worship of her Son's Divinity and her Christ-focused fear of His future agony.

AT THE MANGER MARY SINGS

O shut your bright eyes that mine must endanger
With their watchfulness; protected by its shade
Escape from my care: what can you discover
From my tender look but how to be afraid?
Love can but confirm the more it would deny.
Close your bright eye.

Sleep. What have you learned from the womb that bore you
But an anxiety your Father cannot feel?
Sleep. What will the flesh that I gave do for you,
Or my mother love, but tempt you from His will?
Why was I chosen to teach His Son to weep?
Little One, sleep.

Dream. In human dreams earth ascends to heaven
Where no one need pray nor ever feel alone.
In your first few hours of life here, O have you
Chosen already what death must be your own?
How soon will you start on the Sorrowful Way?
Dream while you may.

Why does Mary's watchfulness "endanger" (1) Christ's eyes? Is it because a baby intuitively senses its mother's anxiety? God as God cannot suffer and so cannot feel anxiety but God as the Christ child, and thus fully human, can. Like any true mother, Mary does not want her Child to feel pain or anxiety ever, so she tells Him to close His eyes (6). In the second and third verses she endeavours to shelve the agony ahead by advising the child in practical everyday terms to sleep and to dream in the peace and comfort that will one day be so agonisingly destroyed. The poem ends, again on a down-to-earth, practical note, in four stressed syllables which create a foreboding effect: "Dream while you may" (18).

The constant use of contrasts in this poem underscores the different worlds of the human and the Divine which come together in the person of Christ, as Son of God the Creator and of Mary, the created being. He is the One Who, being at once fully human and fully Divine, must suffer, to His Mother's distress.

The writer Dorothy Parker, a dramatic critic, editor, prose writer and poet, was known for her caustic wit, her brilliant epigrams ("I've been rich and I've been poor - rich is better") and her critical faculties. Her poetry, however, though often praised as being clever, cynical or witty, was not regarded as important. Yet it is of her that Brendan Gill (In Parker 1986:xvii) writes:

> The depths were there, and she would glance into them from time to time, but she was not prepared to descend into them and walk their bounds.

These depths are evident in Parker's gentle Marian poem (1986:310):

PRAYER FOR A NEW MOTHER

The things she knew let her forget again
The voices in the sky, the fear, the cold,
The gaping shepherds, and the queer old men
Piling their clumsy gifts of foreign gold.

Let her have laughter with her little one
Teach her the endless, tuneless songs to sing
Grant her the right to whisper to her Son
The foolish names one dare not call a King.

Keep from her dreams the rumble of a crowd,
The smell of rough-cut wood, the trail of red,
The thick and chilly whiteness of the shroud
That wraps the strange new body of the dead.

Ah, let her go, kind Lord, where mothers go
And boast His pretty words and ways, and plan
The proud and happy years that they shall know
Together, when her Son is grown a man.

Here, like Yeats, Parker is trying to imagine how the events such as the visit of the Magi to the Child must have appeared to Mary, a simple Jewish girl and mother. All Parker's Mary wants is to be with her Baby, and she feels the presence of these people, with their awareness that her Baby is God, as implied by their "gaping" (3) and their "gifts" (4) as an intrusion upon her privacy. Likewise, thoughts and dreams of Christ's future Crucifixion may occur to Mary. They in their horror (9-12) will mar her enjoyment of His

growth into adulthood. This, Parker would like to spare her. Thus she "wishes" her the impossibility of the last lines.

Given the irreverence which predominated many of Parker's writings, it is to be expected that the poet uses controversial descriptions as evinced by those of the "gaping" shepherds and "queer" old men (3). (It must be borne in mind that in her lifetime the word "queer" denoted eccentricity only). Her reference to their "clumsy" gifts (4) suggests an affectionate understanding of the unwieldy form of the receptacles. The introduction gives a pictorial quality to a sensitive composition whose author clearly pities the Blessed Virgin. In her compassion she asks only joy for the Mother and her Son (13-16) but her worldly wisdom conspires with the wisdom of hindsight to suggest an agonising future looming (9-12). In the concluding stanza the poet begs God to grant a respite of joyful companionship with Christ before his agonising Passion. It indicates that Parker would like to undo history for the 'plan' of the Mother must fail in the face of the Plan of the Father.

An all-encompassing plea for sailors who drowned at sea and their bereaved relatives comes from the pen of the poet T S Eliot (1985:189):

THE DRY SALVAGES

IV

Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory,
Pray for all those who are in ships, those
Whose business has to do with fish, and
Those concerned with every lawful traffic
And those who conduct them.

Repeat a prayer also on behalf of
Women who have seen their sons or husbands
Setting forth, and not returning:
Figlia del tuo figlio,
Queen of Heaven.

Also pray for those who were in ships, and
Ended their voyage on the sand, in the sea's lips
Or in the dark throat which will not reject them
Or wherever cannot reach them the sound of the sea bell's
Perpetual Angelus.

The Dry Salvages of the title is believed to refer to a small group of rocks, named *Les Trois Sauvages*, with a beacon off the North-Eastern coast of Cape Ann, Massachussets. Doubtless, those who hail from this particular part of the world are well able to visualise the promontory. Even when one is not familiar with the area, it is possible to form a mental picture of the statue on the projection and of the fishermen's wives who have stood there, huddled, throughout the centuries, waiting for their husbands to return. The primitive description of the fishermen as "those/Whose business has to do with fish" (2-3) is a reference to Christ's teaching to the apostles to become "fishers of men". Suffering, death and loss of sons and dear ones are therefore calamities shared by Mary and the womenfolk of the fishermen, as indicated in the second stanza. The third verse, though it starts off incoherently (11), ends on a note of hope which shows heaven, and the eternal life it implies, as being paradoxically within the reach of the piteous victims of the cruel death of drowning, while the Angelus sounds their death knell.

Eliot's fearful imagery of the sea's "lips" (12) and its "dark throat" (13) by which those who lost their lives at sea were swallowed alive, contrasts lugubriously with the gentleness of the "sea bell's/perpetual Angelus" (14-15). This allows the poem to culminate in an unexpected climax of hope, beauty and music. At the time Eliot was writing, every Catholic church and chapel bell was rung at six in the morning, twelve noon and six in the evening to commemorate by prayer the Angelic Salutation being given to Mary by Gabriel and the Incarnation of the Son of God eventuating. The real purpose for reciting the Angelus and therefore for the tolling of the bell was and is to remind the world of the stupendous gift of Salvation. The reference to a perpetual Angelus constitutes the poet's promise of a glorious serene eternity for those who hope to share in it.

Less hopeful is Sylvia Plath's enigmatic **Mary's Song** (1978:39), an exercise in despair whose obsessive negativism is representative of the nihilism which tarnishes some Post-Modernist writing:

MARY'S SONG

The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat.
The fat
Sacrifices its opacity....

A window, holy gold,
The fire makes it precious,
The same fire

Melting the tallow heretics,
Ousting the Jews,
Their thick palls float
Over the cicatrix of Poland, burnt-out (cicatrix: scar/seam of healed wound).
Germany
They do not die.

Grey birds obsess my heart,
Mouth-ash, ash of eye.
They settle. On the high

Precipice
That emptied one man into space
The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent.

It is a heart,
This holocaust I walk in,
O golden child the world will kill and eat.

Plath's poem on Christ and Mary with its overtones of cannibalism is filled with a sorrow at "man's inhumanity to man" which is so profound as to be almost self-consuming. She abominates the smugness of those who can profess to love God while placing intolerable burdens on His children.

Seemingly unaware that many millions share her sense of outrage at the atrocities of the Third Reich, she strikes out at the horrors with all the vigour of an adolescent but with a lack of the intellectual restraint maturity is commonly supposed to convey. Her sulphurous attack thus brings to mind the words of McDonnell (1988:15):

> The modern movement towards universal anarchy is to surrender everything to the Freudian id - or demonic subconscious - and to write automatically and without benefit of the quiet disciplines contained in the more sensitive uses of thought and meditation.

Plath imbues the poem with her own negative reading of the Redemptive process by juxtaposing the Old and the New Testament sacrificial imagery. Her references to the "Sunday lamb" (1), "sacrifices" (3) and "holocaust" (20) recall the promulgation of the Passover (Exodus 12:21-27) in the Old Testament . They prefigure Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the Cross.

The poet's reference to the "window, holy gold" (4), conjures up an image of a quiet Sunday morning in church. The lamb is the main dish being prepared for a harmonious Sunday family dinner. However, the connotations of the light of church candles (5) and the fire in the stove, far from filling her with contentment, bring into her mind the hideous extermination of Jews by the Nazis in the Polish concentration camps. There is also a clear reference to the inhuman recycling of their excruciatingly tortured remains into candles, "the tallow heretics" (7), by some who may have called on Christianity, the doctrine of neighbourly love, in an effort to whitewash their horrendous atrocities.

The thought suffuses the poet with an inexpressible sense of injustice. Her obsession with pain distorts the Christian vision, which teaches that the enemy, as epitomised by the concentration camp ovens and those who manned them, can destroy but the body. The soul belongs to God. The agonised hopelessness of Plath's interpretation of the glory of Christ's Resurrection as the inglorious end of a "golden child" devoured by cannibals (21) is countered in the - no less agonised – hopefulness found in the work of American nun-poets of her era such as Sister M Julian RSM (1954:23):

MARY STANDS BENEATH THE CROSS

Gradually
We shall grow up to pain
As Mary did
A sapling set securely by God's hand
Withstands the blast
Of prophecy, holds out
Through exiled dearth
Through triple dark,
And in the heart serene ,
Thrusts roots so deep that,
In the great upheaval
One tree stands.

This poem shows that Sister Julian, like Sylvia Plath, is acquainted with suffering (2). In her case, however, it is her positive attitude to this pain in emulation of Mary's example (3) of acceptance of whatever may befall in voluntary submission to God's Plan (4) which brings her the purification that leads to survival in the midst of chaos (10-12). The mention of the "One tree" (12) is seen here as a reference to the agony of Christ on the Cross, which, with its paradoxical healing power, makes sense of the enigma of all human suffering. Seen through the eyes of Sister Julian and her fellow nun-poets, therefore, pain is not a sterile scourge. On the contrary, it is a purifying force, pregnant with the promise of renewed and vigorous life, as indicated by the thrust of deep "roots" 10).

Though a study of twentieth-century Marian poetry would have seemed incomplete without a mention of the contributions to the genre made by some of the century's most famous secular poets, the examples examined in this chapter appear to indicate that these generally tend to lack inspirational power. In the next chapter we turn our attention to the work of some of our South African twentieth-century poets, specifically in the field of Marian praise poetry.

CHAPTER TWO

IMAGES OF MARY AS DEPICTED BY TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS: EYBERS, CUSSONS, KOLBE, HINWOOD, CAMPBELL AND WHITTLE

Twentieth-century South African poetry in English and Afrikaans has little to say about the Blessed Virgin, just as it has little to say about Roman Catholicism in general.

Marian veneration has been frowned on by adherents of Calvinism, due to the influence of their forebears, some of whom were forced to leave their homes in Europe and immigrate to Southern Africa on account of persecution by Catholic zealots. In 1997 Pope John Paul II on behalf of the Catholic Church publicly pleaded for forgiveness for this blot on the blood-soaked pages of the annals of Christian history and specifically mentioned the St Bartholomew Day Massacre. Though this atrocity occurred on 23 August 1572, almost a century before Van Riebeeck's arrival at the Cape, the passage of time had done nothing to diminish distrust of Catholicism in the Calvinist mind. When people lay down their lives for their Christian beliefs, their faith has been tried to its utmost limits and triumphed. As this has a lasting influence on the convictions of their descendants it is small wonder that the Afrikaner people, who ruled South Africa from 1948 until 1994, viewed the Catholic faith with the ultimate caution, titling it the "Roman danger". Those who adhered to the Church's precepts were treated with circumspection. As Calvinism rejects Marian devotion, little Marian praise poetry is found in Afrikaans during the first half of the twentieth century. The few exceptions include two poems both titled **Maria** and written by W E G Louw (1913-1980) and Elizabeth Eybers (born 1915) respectively, and a narrative poem, titled **Die Blinde se Geloof** (the Faith of the Blind Man), The latter poem concerns a medieval Spanish Marian legend by the poet Uys Krige (1910-1997), who during the 1930s spent several years living in Spain and was influenced by European culture.

It will be seen in this South African record of Marian praise poetry that five of the six poets whose work has been selected are Catholics. Two of the latter, Sheila Cussons (born 1922) and Bonaventure Hinwood (born 1930), in spite

of bearing English names, have chosen to write their work in the medium of Afrikaans. The only non-Catholic member of the group, Elizabeth Eybers both wrote her poem in Afrikaans and translated it into English.

Like Krige, the poet Roy Campbell (1901-1957) who was born in Durban, spent several years living in Spain. He was drawn into Spanish affairs to such an extent that he joined the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and fought on the side of Franco. A convert to Catholicism, he is much admired for his translations into English from the Spanish of St John of the Cross and Federico Garcia Lorca and from the French of Charles Baudelaire.

With an increase in young Afrikaans intellectuals and poets visiting Europe to further their education or broaden their horizons by means of travel, a deeper understanding of Catholicism emerged in their writings. Poetry in praise of the Blessed Virgin began to feature in Afrikaans literature during the latter part of the century. Possibly the most outstanding Marian praise poetry in Afrikaans was written by Sheila Cussons, who, again like Krige and Campbell, spent many years living in Spain. She in fact became a Catholic when she married her second husband, Juan de Saladrigas, and settled in Barcelona.

Since Afrikaans is a comparatively new language which gained autonomy as an official language only in the twentieth century, its literature is correspondingly young. In fact, Elizabeth Eybers is regarded as the first serious woman poet writing in Afrikaans. She made her poetic debut in the 1930s and has since written tirelessly in Afrikaans although she has lived much of her life in the Netherlands. Compassionate understanding of the Blessed Virgin's plight abounds in her Afrikaans poem titled **Maria** (In Opperman 1986:242) which she herself translated into English (In Cameron 1997:25):

MARIA

'n Engel het dit self gebring,
Die vreugde-boodskap - en jy het
'n lofsang tot Gods eer gesing,
Maria, nooi uit Nasaret!

Maar toe Josef van jou wou skei
En bure-agterdog jou pla.
Het jy kon dink eenmaal sou hy
Die hele wêreldskande dra?

Toe jy soms met 'n glimlag langs
Jou liggaam stryk - die stilte instaar _
Wis jy met hoeveel liefde en angs
sou hy sy hellevaart aanvaar?

Die nag daar in die stal - geeneen
Om in jou nood by jou te staan -
Het jy geweet dat hy alléén
Getsémané sou binnegaan?

Toe vorste uit die Ooste kom
Om nederig hulde te betoon
Wis jy hoe die soldate hom
Tot koning van die volk sou kroon?

En toe hy in jou arms lê,
Sy mondjie teen jou volle bors,
Het jy geweet dat hy sou sê:
Toe dit te laat was: Ek het dors!

***

Toe dit verby was, en jy met
Sy vriend Johannes huis toe gaan -
Maria, vrou van smarte, het
Jy tóé die boodskap goed verstaan?

MARY

One of God's holy seraphim
with joyful news came down to earth:
in humble praise you sang a hymn,
Mary, maid of Nazareth!

But when the neighbours looked askance
and Joseph thought he'd go away
could you predict the dreary load
of shame your son would bear one day?

When, with a little secret smile,
You stroked your body - could you tell,
the mingled love and dread with which
he'd have to brave the pit of hell?

And in the stable - as you lay
forsaken in your agony -
could you foresee the lonely way
that led into Gethsemane?

When gaudy monarchs journeyed far
their homage and their gifts to bring,
did you know with what boisterous shouts
the soldiers would proclaim him king?

When in your arms you held him so
as babes are cradled to be nursed
and watched His suckling, did you know
how helplessly he'd writhe with thirst?

* * *

When darkness came and flooded you,
and John came up and took you by the hand,
Woman of Sorrows, did you then
remember all and understand?

In this poem Eybers bears witness to three central forces in her life. Her deep insight into the Bible and identification with Biblical images, a legacy inherited from her Calvinist forebears, is evidenced in her reference to "gaudy monarchs" (17). In this way, with a swift stroke of the pen, Eybers enables the reader to behold the kings in their peacock finery, although the scansion of the original Afrikaans version of the poem does not allow her this latitude. Her profound understanding of human suffering is illustrated in lines such as: "... did you know/how helplessly he'd writhe with thirst?" (23-24), while the essential femininity of her insight into motherhood emerges in brief bursts such as in the lines: "When in your arms you held him so/as babes are cradled to be nursed/and watched His suckling" (21-23).

This is a poem of contrasts and of rhetorical questions to which the poet herself, by means of quick juxtaposition, implicitly replies. When seen against the background of Eybers's Calvinist heritage with its strongly anti-Catholic bias, the poem, with its stark, workmanlike quatrains, is a courageous expression of tender devotion and respect for the Mother of God.

The Marian praise poetry of Sheila Cussons is Catholic in its orientation. **Aankondiging** (Annunciation) (1988:39) is one of the first of these. The first three lines comprise a quotation from a South American Christmas carol:

AANKONDIGING

"Gabriël, waarom straal jy so?"
"Omdat ek die Koningin van die Hemel
gesien het in 'n meisie."

Haar oë is blink en haar vel soos ivoor
en haar hare hang in 'n vlegsel.
Toe sy my sien en my boodskap hoor
het sy verstyf van die vrees van die vlees
en 'n ysere wil om die vrees te bedwing
tot sy kon antwoord in sagte sillabes:
"Hier is die diensmaagd van die Here.
Laat dit met my gaan volgens u woord."
Toe het die Gees oor haar gekom,
en iets soos 'n slaap, oor haar gelaat.
Reeds was sy onbewus van my,
verenig met Hom in haar Begin -
En lank en verruk het ek haar betrag.
En, Here, hoe traag het ek haar verlaat.

ANNUNCIATION

"Gabriel, why your radiance?"
"Because I beheld the Queen of Heaven
in a young girl."

Her eyes are bright, her skin resembles ivory
her hair hangs down in braids.
When she saw me and heard my message
she stiffened through the terror of the flesh
(it took) an iron will to control the terror
before she could reply in hushéd syllables:
"Behold the handmaid of the Lord.
Let it be done to me according to thy word."
At this the Spirit overshadowed her,
and something like a slumber crossed her face.
She had already lost awareness of my presence,
united as she was with Him in her Beginning -
and long and in an ecstasy did I regard her.
And Lord, with what reluctance I did leave her.

Cussons shows an innovative disposition in making the Archangel Gabriel at once the messenger and the narrator of the poem. According to Hugo Hoever (1977: 404) angels are

> ... pure spirits endowed with a natural intelligence, will-power, and beauty far surpassing the nature, faculties and powers of man. They offer continuous praise to God and serve Him as messengers and ministers and guardians of men on earth. They are divided into three hierarchies: Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones; Dominations, Principalities, and Powers; Virtues, Archangels and Angels.

While they serve as messengers and vessels of God's goodness, the angels, unlike God Who assumed humanity, lack the ability to feel or express human emotions. Perhaps this inability to articulate to the reader what it was about Mary that made him so ecstatic accounts for Gabriel's somewhat stilted description of her.

Similarly, the possibility cannot be ruled out that Cussons, after her conversion to Catholicism, experienced a fundamental need to share her changed insight into the Blessed Virgin Mary with her own people. However, she may have decided upon a delicate approach in order not to antagonise her Calvinist readers by any perceptible exaltation of the angels or of Mary, whose figure plays so central a role in Catholicism but occupies so polemical a position in their own creed.

Mary's appearance is first portrayed. Her eyes are bright (4), conjuring up an image of a Mary hailed throughout the ages as *"Stella Maris"* or "Star of the Sea". Her complexion is like ivory (4), intimating another name of praise used of Mary in the long litany of praise appellations, many of them drawn from the Old Testament, in which her virtues are sung by Catholics: that of "Tower of Ivory". The hair which is braided (5) betrays her youthfulness in that she is not yet old enough to wear and cover her hair in the style and tradition customary to the older or married women of her day. First the poet acknowledges Mary's initial paralysing fear (7), counteracted when she rallies the resources of an indomitable will-power (8) to control this understandable emotion. Cussons thus epitomises Mary's victorious combat against the wiles

of Satan and prophesies her future support of Christ on the Cross when nearly all His friends will abandon Him for fear of reprisals, a fear she has successfully combated since the moment of the Annunciation. The words "hushéd (9) syllables" focus the reader's attention on Mary's abiding humility, though God Himself will bestow on her in a miraculous manner the Motherhood of His Son so that she may become the "Queen of Heaven" (2).

Like the Mary she describes, Cussons is timid, avoiding any injection of personal feelings into **Aankondiging**. In her poem **15 Augustus: Maria Hemelvaart** (15 August: Assumption of Mary) (1982:22) she manifests a greater confidence in her topic and a lesser degree of anxiety for the sensibilities of her readers. In addressing the Blessed Virgin, she employs the familiar pronoun "jy" (you) but when she records Christ's words to His Mother from the Cross she substitutes the more courteous and deferential "u" (thy):

15 AUGUSTUS: MARIA HEMELVAART

Ek praat gedurig met jou oor al die klein, baie
angstige dinge waaruit ek bestaan, wat my
onderskei van, sê, 'n engel of 'n orkaan.
Want jy het ook in jou hart bewaar en oorpeins,
die hart wat fladder en wonder en onseker is:
Dogter van aarde, onwete, pyn en geloof.
En die woorde stort want jy is my soort.
So, weet ek, wil jy my hê, déshabillé
in my menslikheid, sonder sy kerkhoed op.
En as ek kan, met iets van die eerbied wat jy het
vir al daardie goud en stywe sy-brokaat
aan poppe wat hoog bo altare staan en wat hande
gemaak het om ontoereikende dankies aan te vul.
En die popgesigte wat heilig wou gelyk het
het byna almal dieselfde sweem van 'n glimlag
om die mond, en miskien is dit al wat raak is:
jy wat niks verlang, behalwe dat ons besin op
die woorde: "Vrou, daar is u seun" - En geen
mag sal ons afdryf nie, solank ons ryp in jou Hart.

15 AUGUST: ASSUMPTION OF MARY

I speak to you constantly of the small, various,
anxious things that shape my existence, which
distinguish me from, say, an angel or a gale.
For you too kept within your heart and pondered,
the heart which flutters, wonders in uncertainty;
Daughter of earth, pained ignorance and faith.
And since you're of my kind, my words pour forth.
This is, I know, the way you want me, not dressed up,
in my humanity with its church hat left off.
And if I'm able, some of your own reverence,
to show to all that golden, silken, stiff brocade
on dolls positioned high above the altars, which were fashioned
by hands to fill up what is wanting in deficient thank-yous.
The faces of the dolls, designed to look so saintly,
all have in common that suggestion of a smile
around the mouth, perhaps the only accurate characteristic:
Oh you who crave for nothing, but that we reflect
upon the words: "Woman, behold thy son" - No earthly power
shall vanquish us, provided that we ripen in your Heart.

We see in this poem a more confident Cussons manifesting a sense of identification with the Blessed Virgin (7) after discovering that Mary has no personal desire for prominence (17), but wishes only to obey the will of God. Since this includes Christ's desire that Mary's "kind" (7) - humankind - regards Mary as its Mother (18), this is Mary's wish too. The poet professes the belief that the Blessed Virgin feels diffident about the attention paid to her. This is displayed in the suggestion of a self-deprecatory smile she discerns (15-16) on the painted faces of the excessively ornate, over-dressed images of Mary on old altars (11-12) and which she believes is the only element in which these images resemble the Blessed Virgin (16) they are meant to portray. The poem with its reflection that Mary is appealing, human, humorous and a very approachable Mother, not only to Christ but to all humankind, culminates in an affirmation of Mary's victory over evil on behalf of all who experience her maternal protection in their search for growth to closer union with her Son. The word "ripen" in the final line suggests an organic wholeness of Christ with His Mother and with all mankind.

With her Calvinist background, Cussons must have experienced enormous problems before accepting the idea of Marian apparitions, which are normally allegedly accompanied by a number of phenomena inexplicable in the natural course of events. The twentieth century abounded with reported Marian apparitions in many places. One centre of pilgrimage that has been declared to be the site of authentic apparitions is Fatima, Portugal, where Mary appeared to three little shepherds. Alleged Marian appearances which have not yet received the Catholic Church's official seal of approval include those reported by the German Benedictine nun/midwife, Sister Reinolda, at Nongoma and Ngome in KwaZulu Natal. It is worthy of mention that Marian apparitions continue to be reported in places throughout the world and that these have continued to draw great interest from many Catholics everywhere, despite a diminution discerned in Marian devotion during the latter decades of the twentieth century about which further comments will follow later.

In a Christmas issue of *Life Magazine* (1996:45), Robert Sullivan echoed the perplexities that must have been shared by anyone of Sheila Cussons's Protestant background when he wrote:

> Why? What do they so vitally require from this most famous of mother figures? How has she, once an unknown, grown to be such an immense personality? Why are two billion Hail Marys said daily? Why did five million people, many non-Christian, visit Lourdes this year to drink the healing waters? Why did more than 10 million trek to Guadeloupe to pray to Our Lady? Why is it thought that more girls have been named for Mary than for any other historical figure? Why the apparitions? Why the need to talk with her? Why are Mary hymns creeping into the Methodist song-book? How can it be that Mary adorns the banners of liberals who seek a greater role for women in all churches, and also those of conservatives who would keep ministries all-male? What is it about Mary?

In her poem **Die Roos in die Glas** (1982-27), Cussons's long-blooming rose seems to symbolise a departure from the natural order of things linked to the Fatima apparitions of the Blessed Virgin which are hinted at, but not fully described, by the poet. This phenomenon has so startled her that it has shaken her conviction that reports of Mary's apparitions in Fatima have been fraudulent. As she describes the combat between her brain, trained in logical

reasoning, and her poet's heart which is ever open to suggestions of mysticism, a longing to give credence to the incredible appears to be taking root:

DIE ROOS IN DIE GLAS

Mirakels besoek net kinders en skawagers
grensloos van aard, wat woorde soos feit
en verbeelding nie hoef te spel nie. My nie,
by voorbeeld, gebreinspoel en gevonnis tot
nugterheid lankal. Dus hoe is hierdie roos
in die glas wat dae gelede dor moes gewees het
nog pure geïnkarneerde lig?
En reeds is sien geen ledige sien nie, maar
'n wedloop van tyd en my hart: sal ek nog
môre Fatima haal - of uitloop met die glas
en die klik van my boeie hoor? O wat kon hulle
weet van verlies, so deel van die hemel nog
dat hulle eenvoudig bly speel het toe Sy verdwyn!

THE ROSE IN THE GLASS

Miracles happen only to children and shepherds
unhemmed by nature, with no need to spell out words like fact
and fiction. Not such as I,
for instance, long brainwashed and sentenced
to level-headedness. So why's this rose,
still in the glass, which should have wilted days ago
still pure incarnate light?
Already seeing is no vacuous sight, but
a race between my heart and time: shall I still
make it to Fatima by tomorrow - or walk out with this glass
and hear the click of my manacles? Oh what could they
have known of loss, so much a part of heaven still,
that they could simply keep on playing when She left!

The poet betrays the plainness of her instincts and her trained belief in science to the detriment of phenomena which defy explanation (2-3). She follows up this statement by deploring her rationality (4-5) and wondering aloud if, but for supernatural factors, the rose could have retained its freshness for such a lengthy space of time (5-7). Caught in this snare of indecision, she expresses her longing for the freedom of giving credence to

an event which is not susceptible of empirical proof. By throwing out the glass with its rose, she will subject herself to the imprisonment of letting her mind rule her heart by believing what common sense assures her is nonsense. (There seems to be a pun here on the sand which runs from the hourglass (10) - in Afrikaans "loop" - walks - out). Paradoxically, the poet knows that if she eliminates the still fresh rose she will feel fettered by the constraints of being dominated by fact rather than faith.

She indicates that, despite her protestations, her heart has already triumphed over her mind in this matter in the final three lines. In these she hints at some personal loss (12) of which no details are provided, while marvelling at the visionaries' child-like ability to carry on with their lives in a normal way after being deprived of a loved one, in their case the Blessed Virgin Mary (11-13). The general tone of the poem suggests that the poet has lost someone dear to her and is praying to the Blessed Virgin to intercede for her so that the person may be restored. She may have put a rose in a glass in front of the Blessed Virgin's image as part of her prayer. If this were the case it would account for the poet's change in midstream from her interest in the inexplicable longevity of the rose to the rhetorical question as to why the children could simply go back to their games after the apparitions they described as having taken place. The reference to "pure incarnate light" (7) brings Christ into the poem, showing His unity with Mary as well as the purity of God and of the Blessed Virgin.

Born 66 years before Sheila Cussons and arguably the first nineteenth- or twentieth-century poet who wrote in South Africa in praise of Mary in the medium of English, the versatile and prolific South African F C Kolbe (1854-1936) was the son of a Nonconformist minister father. He converted to Catholicism while studying in London. When released from an engagement by a childhood friend, he studied for the Catholic priesthood and was ordained in 1882. He performed his priestly functions in the Cape Province. He was also a Shakespearean scholar and lectured in literature, philosophy, science, aesthetics, art and the theory and history of music. He became entitled to the title "monsignor" because he had been raised to the rank of domestic prelate

by the reigning pontiff in 1919 (cf Bones 1980). He was a South African by birth and inclination. This is unequivocally stated in his poem **My Mother's Voice** (1919:15), a poem he wrote to counteract a criticism that his poetry lacked South African inspiration. Not only did he regard South Africa as his spiritual mother. He held the Blessed Virgin in similar regard, a fact to which his poem: **My Rosary** (1919:8) bears witness:

MY ROSARY

It is a lovely morn in Spring;
The birds of grace within me sing;
The flowers of virtue blossom fair,
And happiness fills all the air.
I drink the glorious sunshine in,
And almost lose the thought of sin.
And when my heart would shout its glee,
It takes to thee, my Rosary, my Rosary.

When evening falls and foes abound
When difficulties hem me round
When Sloth and Self-will conquer Love,
Leaving no rescue, save above;
And I, all conscious of my need,
Strongly as possible would plead;
I know thy power of victory;
I trust to thee, my Rosary, my Rosary.

Anon my heart is overcast:
The ghosts arise of sins long past,
Join hands with sins of yesterday,
And terrify all joy away.
The tempter whispers in my ear,
"You cannot pray: God will not hear."
In such a time of misery,
I cling to thee, my Rosary, my Rosary.

The faith that bathes my soul in light
Even when my senses murmur "Night";
The hope that bravely struggles still,
Despite all fears of mind and will;
The love that will not let me die,
Though wounded sore in days gone by;
And all that grace has done for me
I owe to thee, my Rosary, my Rosary.

The unrelenting use of personal pronouns in this Victorian composition with its archaisms such as "Sloth" (11) and "anon" (17) seems to demonstrate excessive self-absorption, betrayed *inter alia* in the repetition of the words "My Rosary" at the end of each stanza - although this could be a reference to the constant repetition of the Ave Maria prayer during the recitation of the Rosary. Paradoxically, however, the seemingly obsessive repetition of allusions to the poet's sinfulness (6; 11-12; 18-19; 30) intimates a child-like quality of repentance, showing humility and total dependence on God's grace for his own redemption. To strengthen his plea, he bolsters it with prayer, such as that recited with the aid of the instrument of his Rosary. This comprises a string in the shape of a necklace, which contains a Cross, seven single beads, one group of three beads and five groups of ten beads. Each single bead together with a group of ten represents a decade which constitutes an event in the life of Christ. On the Cross the Apostles' Creed is recited, while the Our Father and the Hail Mary prayers are said on the single beads and grouped beads respectively. Meanwhile the relevant event in Christ's life is reflected upon.

The poet admits to suffering deeply as a result of his striving after perfection. He develops the theme of personal inertia in **The Child of Mary's Prayer to Our Lady of Good Counsel** (1919:7) in which he openly admits that it is possible to weary of trying to grow spiritually through sacrifice and self-discipline:

> If restraint begins to gall us,
> and we shrink from virtue's race; (13-14)

before asking Mary to guide mankind "back from cowardice to grace"(16).

The effect of a child being rocked before it is hugged is given in the poem **The Virgin's Lullaby** (1919:1) by the indication of gentle rocking motions suggested by the variations of the alternating tetrameter and trimeter and the hug suggested by the dimeter which concludes each of the first four stanzas:

THE VIRGIN'S LULLABY

The sun's last level ray has smiled;
'Tis time to sleep, my Child.
Thou all these years hast watched o'er me,
Now I in turn o'er Thee.
And while I clasp the Babe I bore,
God in my bosom I adore.
Sleep now and take Thy rest,
My arms thy nest

While angels listen from on high
To every feeble cry,
And in Thy need complain that they
Their homage cannot pay,
The great world knows not anything
Of Thee its only Lord and King.
Sleep now and take Thy rest,
My arms Thy nest.

O eyes, with heavenly light that shine,
And yet resemble mine
O hands that cling, and lips that press
In rosy loveliness!
O golden curls and dimples sweet!
O smiles that all too quickly fleet!
Sleep now and take your rest,
My arms your nest.

I have Thee now, but year by year
The sacrifice draws near:
Creation waits for us to part,
For Thou its victim art.
The whole world's gain will be my loss;
To them the grace, to us the Cross.
My darling Baby, rest,
My arms Thy nest.

If ever in my days of tears,
When childish dread was at its worst,
Some sweet or toy was given to soothe my fears,
My mother kissed it first.
Now when rare joy at Thy command
Comes to the heart Thy grace hath nursed,
Thy blessing is the sweeter, Baby Hand,
Since Mary kissed it first.

The repetition of the final line in the first, second and fourth stanzas of this poem shows a slight twist in the third verse (24) where the poet has the Blessed Virgin, addressing the Child, use "your" (the more familiar possessive form of the second personal pronoun) in preference to the formal "thy" found in the remaining verses. Thus he shows that Mary, no longer speaking as the handmaid to Christ as her God, now addresses Him as a mother would her baby. In the fourth stanza, Mary both addresses Christ as her "darling Baby" (31) and uses the pronoun "Thee" (25) to indicate His dual position as human infant and Divine Redeemer. In addition to illustrating maternal sweetness, this poem shows a deep understanding of Mary's place in her Son's life; He is God, she is His handmaid. Yet He is Her Son and she is His Mother; all-sweet, all-gentle and all-holy. Her sweetness affects Him, although He is God Almighty, as tenderly as it affects her children on earth with all their limitations, pains and fears.

The poet Bonaventure Hinwood, like Dr Kolbe, is a South African, a Catholic priest and a published poet. Unlike the latter, however, he uses the medium of Afrikaans for his work. Some of his work has been published under the nom-de-plume Hewitt Visser. A volume titled **Soenoffer** (Sacrifice of Atonement) (1991:7) contains a strikingly modern description of the Christmas scene:

KERSMIS

'n Tienerhuisvrou langs haar timmerman
kniel voor 'n kooitjie strooi
lag in die oë wat vir hulle skitter,
saam met skaapwagters in werkklere.

CHRISTMAS

A teenage housewife and her carpenter
kneel at a mangerful of straw
laugh into eyes that sparkle for their sake
along with shepherds dressed in working garb.

As in the case of **Kersmis**, simplicity is the keynote of the Marian description contained in the first stanza of **Kerslied** (1991:6). Yet, in common with the

Marian praise lyric **Maria** by Eybers, this poem simultaneously becomes a storehouse of Biblical and maternal meditation:

KERSLIED

Kindjie, rus aan moederbors
uit haar melk verdryf u dors
Haar het U vir U berei
rein, van Adamsmet bevry:
stort U vrede in ons hart
deur eiewaan verhard.

CHRISTMAS HYMN

Infant, rest at mother's breast,
With her milk dispel thy thirst.
Her thou didst prepare for thee
pure, from Adam's stain set free:
pour thy peace into our hearts
hardened by conceit.

Fr Hinwood's poetry is marked by Biblical insight and the kind of deep meditation which manifests itself in the simplest of conclusions. Christ's dependence on the infusions of milk from Mary's maternal breast is invoked to draw down infusions of peace into the calloused hearts of arrogant humankind (5-6). Like all members of the human race, Mary is the daughter of Adam, but, unlike her siblings, she is uncontaminated by the stain of original sin, a legacy from the first parents of humankind (4). This assertion, based on Catholic Mariology, though a common concept in English-language Catholic Marian praise poetry, in Afrikaans is possibly echoed only in Sheila Cussons's work.

Though **Engelboodskap I** (Annunciation 1) (1995:no page) by Fr Hinwood depicts Mary partly as she was presented in the poem by Yeats: as a girl who cooked and did the laundry, there is no condescension in this author's depiction:

ENGELBOODSKAP I

Skilders teken haar gewoonlik
diep peinsend oor 'n boek
of op haar knieë in gebed
byna asof sy 'n engel afwag.

Het Gabriël haar dalk onkant betrap,
besig om die brood te knie
of klere in 'n kom te was,
kaalvoet en met 'n voorskoot op

en haar twee keer verras:
met helder hemelse voorkoms
en sonderlinge dringende versoek
waarop sy natgesweet moes reageer?

ANNUNCIATION I

Painters normally depict her
In deep meditation over a book
or down upon her knees in prayer
almost as though waiting for an angel.

Did Gabriel maybe catch her unawares,
busy kneading bread,
or washing clothing in a basin
barefoot and wearing an apron?

and did he so surprise her doubly;
with shiny heavenly look
and the strange importunate request
to which, though drenched in sweat, she must respond?

The first stanza brings to mind Florentine paintings of the Annunciation of Gabriel bringing the message to a Mary immersed in reading the Word of God, which, through her, is about to become Flesh. This concept was echoed in the poetry and paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite school in England in the nineteenth century. Fr Hinwood, however, suggests that it is quite likely that Mary may have been engaged in any of the nondescript daily tasks of the housewife which are noticeable only when no-one performs them. Moreover, in order to give an answer to the angel, she had to think "on her feet" - bare

though they were. The sustained rhetorical question by means of which the poet qualifies his hypothesis to allow the reader the courtesy of examining his own acquiescence, runs for two of the three verses.

Father Hinwood was not alone in his view of Mary as being as much at home in the kitchen as in the temple of the Most High. This is a very common Catholic view, as shown in this post-Conciliar Marian poem, written by Sister Mary Lucina RSM (1974:304):

THE SIMPLICITY OF OUR LADY

Our Lady is simple
she wears an apron
she goes to the well
she speaks to her neighbours
to the one who whispers:
"My husband ... other women,"
the Woman of Sorrows tells
of a different lover.

Our Lady is simple
she wears an apron
she prepares meals
she gives to the poor:
the poor who do not love
the poor who are not loved.

Our Lady lived simply
and when she died she
was dressed simply: in light.

The simplicity of the Blessed Virgin is matched in Sister Lucina's inspired verse, which, though devoid of any patent display of intensity, suggests that God so appreciated Mary's simplicity that He clothed her in light for her journey to heaven after her earthly days were done.

In Fr Hinwood's poem the picture of Mary's bare feet, the sweat in which she is drenched and the humble action of kneading bread show this simplicity,

while the angel epitomises the light in which she was bathed through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.

Mary's relationship with Adam, first referred to in **Kerslied**, is reiterated and explored more deeply in the following poem (1995:no page):

ENGELBOODSKAP II

Onverwags gekom, dié roepstem.
Nooit het sy haar ingedroom
as eindpunt van verbond,
profete, wet, draaipunt
in die Adamstorie, Gees se instrument.
Daarom na die saad verdwaas gevra.
Toe aanvaar dat sy uit Tweede Adam
se onderrib geskep is
om Hom die eiersel te skenk
dat Hy, tog joods gebore, vir almal
hul oerbeeld in die vlees onthul.

ANNUNCIATION II

Out of the blue it came, this call
Never could she have dreamt
herself to be the final part of covenant,
prophets, law, the dénouement
in the Adam story, the Spirit's instrument.
So asking, stupefied, about the seed
before accepting that she was created
from Second Adam's nether rib
to give to Him the ovicell
so that, though born a Jew, to all He might
reveal their archetype in flesh.

The intentionally stumbling movement marked by the periodical omission of article and auxiliary verb found in parts of the Afrikaans original of this poem is counteracted by the poet's argument that Mary's interaction with God was necessary in order to show that Christ, her Son, was not only human but also divine. As "Second Adam" (8), we have Christ here (as in some medieval texts) as her "father", or source at least, as well as her Son. Also, the

miraculous nature of the Incarnation parallels the miracle of Creation (specifically that of Eve) and we have the Christ/Adam, Mary/Eve paradigm, sin redeemed, so frequently encountered in medieval Marian poetry.

This enigmatic poem with its outreach to the Gentiles as well as Christ's fellow Jews is more impressionistic than the preceding examples by this poet, reminding us a little of the halting style with its underlying erudition that characterised the Marian praise poetry of the Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins in the nineteenth century, particularly of **The Blessed Virgin Mary compared to the air we breathe** (in Gardner 1986:93), in which he describes the role Mary's Motherhood played in Christ's anatomy by depicting Mary as "a Mother come to mould/those limbs like ours which are/what must make our daystar/much dearer to mankind" (104-107).

In his poem **Moeder van Smarte** (Mother of Sorrows) (1995:no page) Fr Hinwood shows how meditation on Christ's agony leads to the insight that this pain was duplicated in the heart of his sorrowing Mother:

MOEDER VAN SMARTE

Deur die skare moes sy alles,
alles van onder sien:
die waardige swye voor Pilatus,
onder die half-oop purpermantel
die geselroue lyf, hoe strome bloed
deur swartbruin dorings syfer.
Moes hoor hoe hulle die moordenaar
bo haar Kind verkies,
"Of jy's geen vriend van Rome nie".
Moes hoor die dreunsang "Kruisig!
Kruisig! Kruisig hom!"
Moes sien hoe water oor die vet,
Wit vingers in die skottel loop:
en toe die oumanswoorde lank
in haar gemoed oorpeins, begryp.

MOTHER OF SORROWS

Amid the crowd she had to see it all
all from below:
the dignified silence at the seat of Pilate,
beneath the half-opened purple robe
the scourge-raw body, how the streams of blood
trickled through black-brown thorns.
Had to hear how they deemed preferable
the murderer to her Child,
"Or you're no friend to Rome".
Had to hear the droning chant "Crucify!
Crucify! Crucify Him!"
Had to see the water run
into the basin over fat, white fingers:
at length to understand the old man's words
long pondered over in her mind.

This is a very visual presentation of Christ's suffering. It draws on the colour of the purple robe which indicates mourning and on the black-brown thorns to illustrate the blood, first red, then gradually browned and blackened as it coagulates on Christ's agonised body. The paralysing mental torment suffered by the Blessed Virgin is cruelly exacerbated by the hypocrisy of the taunt to Pilate that he will be reported as a betrayer to Caesar in Rome and its administration since Rome to her - as to all patriotic Jews including his very accusers - is the symbol of the abominations abhorred in Christ's time. The poet does not spare Pilate. By the simple detail of the "fat, white fingers" (13) he relegates him to the realm of those who will put their own comfort and the satisfaction of their own appetites before the justice and freedom of those under their control. This also shows a vision of apartheid as perpetuating the inhuman injustices perpetrated against Christ in His agony and highlights the fact that the hierarchy of the poet's Church was known as an outspoken critic of this policy. Mary finally fully understands the prediction of the old man, Simeon, that a sword will pierce her heart.

The Marian excerpt by Roy Campbell which was selected for this study represents part of **Book V** of **Flowering Rifle**, his longest poem. This work, published in 1939, was castigated by W H Gardner (1971:3:9) as a "pro-Franco, anti-Communist tirade which outraged sympathies in England and put

Campbell right outside the 'Bloomsbury' pale, although its poetry was praised by Edmund Blunden". This is the picture one gets from the poem: the sentiments that are expressed are often startling but the poetic utterance is superb. Campbell pictures Jesus as an airman about to bomb the world, which exemplifies Franco's military opponents. However, Christ's retributive hand is stayed by the sorrow of the Blessed Virgin (1957:2:248-9):

... - what should with-hold
His hand but (as the whole created world
Were Sodom, or worse Barcelona) He
Should pull the lever and let fall the sun
To bomb the whole into oblivion
Seeing that His own fierceness to Himself,
The anguish of His Mother seven-times-sworded,
And her two thousand years of grief, by deaf
Ingratitude and sin were so rewarded:
But that her pity, boundless as our sin
Or as His strength - the yet unmeasured three
Whose trigon hems the Universe within
The solar bounds of that exceeded sea;
But that her pity reaches to His arm, -
As it in strength, or as our sin in harm,
So great in mercy, terrible in charm,
And holds it back, and tempers it with tears,
As ever for these last two thousand years:
And as with failing strength her pity clings,
Into His lifted hand the impulse springs
Of growing wrath that heats His aegis white,
Which balances betwixt her failing might,
His love, and the revenging will to smite
The cause of both His unhealed, bleeding scars,
And those redeeming tears, of Life the Spring;
And there He towers, the pilot of the stars,
Above the world, a cowed and guilty thing -
As a young airman furiously might wing
Above the town in which his bride was raped
And with his children murdered, like a king
Of vengeance with his purpose fully shaped
To batter down its cursed walls in heaps,
Yet to his main objective turns his wing
And to the deed his anger cannot bring -
For there the Mother still survives and weeps.
Salve Regina! by whose love forfended
When every hope or remedy was lost
The fearful ultimatum was extended,
The ransom paid again with bitter cost!
Through Her the doom, deferred with saving pity

Apart from archaisms such as "betwixt" (655) Campbell's Baroque splendour of language and the complex rhyme pattern conspire to produce an impressive construction in true poetic tradition handed down by literary bards throughout the ages. However, his excessive stirring of emotion is betrayed in lines such as "to bomb the whole into oblivion" (638) and the hyperbolic description of Barcelona as being more depraved than Sodom (636). These have the effect of mighty waves crashing into the shore into nothingness as the modern reader tends to experience a sense of alienation when authors thrust their opinions upon him in an excessively forceful manner. From a religious viewpoint, moreover, the poet, in painting Christ as a partisan airman who destroys all who condemn Fascism, loses touch with his readers. He depicts Christ as judgemental "with a revenging will to smite" (656); an image which counteracts the Christian view of a loving Redeemer.

It comes as a welcome surprise in the wake of this that the rhetoric and exaggeration are not extended to the poet's lines concerning the Blessed Virgin, of whom he writes in an empathic, reverent, profoundly touching and even filial manner, as a woman who restrains Christ's arm, lifted in retribution "and holds it back, and tempers it with tears" (650). In this passage Campbell reveals a far greater understanding of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin than he displays while describing the Fatherhood of God. The strength of the discourse, therefore, is contained in the way the poet exhibits the dichotomy between Mary's personal fragility and the efficacy of her intercessionary powers. This shows that Campbell fully understands Catholic teaching concerning the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In painting Christ as a vindictive judge, however, Campbell intimates that God is One Who seeks to smite rather than redeem. As stated, this is seen as a flaw in the poem.

Before entering the religious life, the South African-born Sister Mary Catherine PSN (Nicolette Whittle) visited the Marian shrine in Lourdes, France, and later the Holy Land. These visits deepened her insight into various aspects of the person of the Mother of Christ. Her description of the Lourdes experience (1997:1), which is captured in her earlier work, has a pictorial quality:

LOURDES

"Ave Maria"
the gentle words
fill my soul
I remember watching the miraculous water
tinkle in the lighted dusk at Lourdes
winding pathways of flame marking the processions
the mothdark softness of the earlyevening
the glimmer of white statue in the
frowning mystery of the grotto.

the sputter of dying candles
and the peace of a new-found faith
gently touched into life
by the even gentler virgin.

Describing this photographic poem, the poet writes in a personal letter (1997:4) that it is a

> reference to that great prayer which underpins much of Marian tradition in the Christian Church, the "Hail Mary" (Ave Maria). It points the way through picture-descriptions of Lourdes to the message of faith; a faith touched from habitual and learned religion into a new and radical conversion of mind and spirit. This is inspired by the message of Mary, and her everlasting words of wisdom, humility and *kenosis* (emptying of self), brought about by much sincere prayer - 'Let it be done to me, according to Your word. Yes!'

Although **Lourdes** is clearly the work of a young person, it reveals a marked gift for description. The poet captures the fairy-like enchantment which Lourdes holds for those on their initial visit. The lesson that Mary is a strong woman rather than a simpering one is the first lesson learnt by visitors to Lourdes, remaining evergreen in many pilgrims' memories.

Those who have seen the Lourdes evening candlelight processions or participated in them can readily visualise them in the words "winding pathways of flame" (6), while the "mothdark softness of the earlyevening" (7) emphasises the velvety atmosphere which Lourdes presents to those who first visit this place of pilgrimage. The joining of the words "early" and

"evening" as one (7) is descriptive of the aura of the early evening insofar as it is set apart from the middle of the evening and the late evening. Each of these has an individual aura, since the pilgrims tend to pray until late, often holding processions and prayer vigils which sometimes last throughout the night. The words "frowning mystery" (9) of the grotto are an allusion to the sagging folds of the grey cavern walls which surround the cleft in the rock in which many believe the Blessed Virgin Mary stood during most of the 1858 apparitions reported by Bernadette Soubirous.

On account of the saint's discovery of a source of water with healing propensities at the grotto and the symbolism which proclaims that the waters of baptism likewise cleanse and heal the soul, water tends to assume a great significance in Lourdes. This explains the reference to "the miraculous water" (4) that the poet remembers watching "tinkle" in the "lighted dusk" (5). The light, epitomised by the candles, betokens restored faith. Sister Catherine contrasts the "sputter of dying candles" (10) by juxtaposing it with "the peace of a new-found faith" (11), enkindled by the example of the Blessed Virgin.

A second example of Sister Catherine's earlier work is **Castilianrose** (1997:1), which refers to the Guadeloupan Marian apparitions to the Spanish peasant Juan de Diego when Mary is said to have impressed her face and form upon the inside of his cloak, to enable him to show his bishop:

CASTILIANROSE

A glorious Castilianrose
        a colour-blushed patched cloak,
a smiling girl, laughing for joy
        her laughter falls like raindrops
                her smile shimmers in the air,
imprint your face on the cloak of my heart,
        our lady of Guadeloupe.

A patchedcloaked old peasant, with perfumed roses
        a glimpse of heaven
                amidst our poverty
A doubting bishop, a heaven-sent morning,
        a young smiling girl, singing with love.

Like **Lourdes**, **Castilianrose** has a pictorial quality and the breathless radiance which betrays the youth of the poet at the time it was written. This is epitomised in her own description of Mary as "a smiling girl, laughing for joy/her laughter falls like raindrops/(whose) smile shimmers in the air" (3-5). Startling and fresh is the poet's request to the Blessed Virgin: "imprint your face on the cloak of my heart." (6). About the use of words such as colour-blushed, perfumed, patchedcloaked (2), Sister Catherine writes that she deliberately used words "to shade colours of meaning and scent words with image-fragrance, much as an artist uses his/her workbox of paints" (1997:4).

Like her early poetry, recent Marian poetry written by Sister Catherine after a lengthy interim has never been published, but the work reveals the poet's new angle of spiritual interest. The laughter of youth discerned in **Castilianrose** has fled - in its place the phenomena of pain and tears are now explored. The descriptive power remains unmarred. This time, however, the poetry contains a message which is the fruit of contemplation and betrays the poet's sense of wonderment at the myriad images which meet in the person of the Mother of Christ (1997:2):

MARY'S PRAYER

You cracked open the nutshell of my being
and brought forth a kernel of everlasting sweetness

This simple couplet is reminiscent of the words contained in the Mass composed by St Thomas Aquinas in honour of the Body and Blood of Christ *(Corpus Christi)*, when the celebrant chants:

"You brought forth Bread from heaven"
(Panem de coelo praestitisti eis)

and the community in chorus replies:

"Containing in itself all sweetness."
(Omnes delectamentum in se habentem)
(Dominican 1962:40)

Sister Catherine describes **Mary's Prayer** as a "highly symbolic" poem (1997:6):

> the nutshell of being is the symbol of the soul. Our souls are torn apart by suffering, loss, grief and pain. God allows this, and brings much good out of our suffering. In our lives much emerges from our souls after our experiences; in Mary's case, her soul brought forth the splendour of unending holiness. Also through the "yes" she said to God, she brought forth the decision which in turn brought forth to the waiting world the Christ; the Messiah.

The image of the nutshell, writes the poet, is linked with Julian of Norwich's vision of a hazelnut. This is how Julian, an anchoress living in solitude in fourteenth century England, who is known for her accounts of sixteen showings or revelations from God, described the vision (In Walsh 1978:183):

> And in this He showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.

In the same passage, the anchoress brought this sighting of the hazelnut back to her meditations on the Blessed Virgin (187):

> Our good Lord showed our Lady St Mary at the same time, that is to signify the exalted wisdom and truth which were hers as she contemplated her Creator. This wisdom and truth showed her in contemplation how great, how exalted, how mighty and how good was her God. The greatness and nobility of her contemplation of God filled her full of reverent fear; and with this she saw herself so small and so humble, so simple and so poor in comparison with her God that this reverent fear filled her with humility. And founded on this, she was filled with grace and with every kind of virtue, and she surpasses all creatures.

This grace and these virtues brought forth by God the Creator, whose only-begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ's Eucharist is described as the "Bread from heaven/containing in itself all sweetness", comprise the "kernel of everlasting sweetness" (1) of which Sister Catherine writes.

This two-line poem and the background of spiritual reading and reflection which led up to it, give witness to the deliberate approach of a nun-poet to her craft. We shall see this frequently repeated in the work of the Americans whose poetry will be examined in subsequent chapters. A dedicated nun regards all her time as belonging to God, with hours set aside for work and time reserved for prayer and meditation. If many hours of reflection produce only two simple lines in praise of His majesty and the reflection of His splendour on His Mother, it is a matter of importance. It is the Holy Spirit Who inspires the outcome of the meditation and the maturing in poetry which flow from the nun-poet.

Sister Catherine's very human image of the Blessed Virgin is depicted in the following five-line poem (1997:1)

RUSTLEHAIRED

I see her clearly
a strong, marked face
turned in amusement towards the sun on her right.
The woman of the ages.
The woman for all time.

Striking are the adjectives "strong" and "marked" to describe the Blessed Virgin's face. Here is not the woman of a thousand statues with the creamy complexion and the locks escaping playfully from the wind-tossed veil, nor the one whose serenity has been left untouched by the vagaries of her existence. Rather here is one who knows life, knows it through and through, has suffered to the extent that the marks of grief and pain have been indelibly carved onto her face. Yet she has not forgotten how to smile, as is seen when she turns her face towards the sun "in amusement" (3). She does not fear the sun, for all its light and heat, for it has been created by her Divine Son and is therefore subject to God - as is all creation. The juxtaposition of the shared emotions, on the one hand with humanity, and on the other with her Son, makes Mary "The woman of the ages./The woman for all time." (4-5).

The Windsong (1997:1), a further example of Sister Catherine's more recent work, in symbolising the Incarnation, equates the grace of God with the air blown through a pan flute. The flute or instrument, the Blessed Virgin or handmaid of God, takes up the song; none of it is lost:

THE WINDSONG

The power of God irradiating
around a blinding figure
of Mary, the Gospa-virgin
transmuting the grace of God
through the medium of her being
As a wind-song rustles through the flute.

The windsong of mercy; of compassion, and love
of intense Spirit-energy and flowing freedoms from sin
The windsong of the Christborn
Symbolised by stable; simplicity; and humbleness
Superb in selflessness, in glory, in love;

And her; the shining light
of centuriesaged wisdom and brokenhearted love
the lamp of the Davidlineage and the facestamp of her mother
Bearer of God's lamp of Light, hopeful through the ages

She strides, tender-shod, terrible-footed
tender to the weak, mighty to the hopefilled

A powerful woman;
Her power being her humility.
Her tranquillity.
Her simplicity.

The deepening of maturity discernible in this poem and showing the influence of the poet's scriptural studies can be clearly seen when it is compared to early poetry as represented by **Castilianrose** and **Lourdes**.

The first stanza starts *in medias res*. *"Gospa"* (3) is the name by which Croatians address the Blessed Virgin. Mary, the poet writes (1997:5):

> is the woman from the Old Testament, and the New Testament - part of a link. She was foretold by the prophets and warned by Simeon. She retained her link with the human, cultural and genetic heritage of her ancestors.
>
> She bore God's light - Jesus.
>
> She is small in stature (as visible in the small rock opening in Lourdes), vulnerable with the vulnerable, a terror - because of her power and innocence - to the powerful and hate-filled. Her power is not that of the earth - it is her very humility and holiness.

In the years that have passed since **Lourdes** and **Castilianrose** were written, one of the characteristics not surrendered by the poet is her bundling of words together to create one word picture, as we see in "centuriesaged" (13), "Davidlineage" (14) and "facestamp" (14). Yet she hyphenates "tender-shod" and "terrible-footed" (16), with the intention that the double contrast between 'tender' and 'terrible', 'shod' and 'footed' is not lost on the reader.

Sister Catherine allows her poetry to take its own shape organically and unforced. The length of the lines and verses are varied at will, like paragraphs in a prose passage. To her, it seems, it is the descriptions which are important as she combines in them her insight into the human heart with an artist's eye and ear for beauty, as shown in the lovely simile: "as a wind-song rustles through the flute" (6). In this she describes the unique sound of the pan flute as the rustling of wheat in the wind, at the same time conjuring up the perfect, crystal and liberated quality of this unique and touching sound. In the final quatrain she reaffirms her allegiance to the Blessed Virgin, whom she sees as a combination of friend, mother and invincible opponent to those who would challenge the Lord Jesus Christ.

The poet motivates the choice of the wind instrument as showing Mary to be (1997:5):

> a pure vessel, acting as an instrument, which allows the power of God in all its strength to be transmitted through her to humankind without impediments of sinfulness and selfishness.

> Her will is as one with God as the air is through a flute. It is as independent and free of the will of God as the song is of the flute. Yet the two - so different - combine through choice into one. Two opposites - human and divine; or divine and human - forming one unblemished whole.

In this meditation, Sister Catherine was inspired by a poem by the lay poet Caryll Houselander titled **The Reed** (In Thérèse 1947:258) and referred to earlier:

> **THE REED**
>
> She is a reed,
> straight and simple,
> growing by a lake
> in Nazareth:
>
> A reed that is empty,
> until the Breath of God
> fills it with infinite music:
>
> and the breath of the Spirit of Love
> utters the Word of God
> through an empty reed.
>
> The Word of God
> is infinite music
> in a little reed:
>
> it is the sound of a Virgin's heart,
> beating in the solitude of adoration;
> it is a girl's voice
> speaking to an angel,
> answering for the whole world;
> it is the sound of the heart of Christ,
> beating within the Virgin's heart;
> it is the pulse of God,
> timed by the breath of a Child
>
> The circle of a girl's arms
> has changed the world-
> the round and sorrowful world-
> to a cradle for God.
>
> She has laid love in His cradle:
> in every cot
> Mary has laid her Child.

Sister Catherine's description of the Blessed Virgin's feet, too, has a forerunner in poetry, this time in a poem by Sister Crysostom, OSB (1957:292):

ECCE VENIT

The hills caught up
The rhythm of her feet,
The hills of Eden,
Everlasting hills
Caught up the singing rhythm
Of her feet
Where wisdom played
Before the world began
And all the hills on earth
Have caught it up,
The rhythm of her feet,
The everlasting singing rhythm
Of her feet.
She comes
Across the hills,
Across the singing hills,
She comes, and lo!
The word like music spills over the earth,
and over the hills,
She comes,
Maria!
Over the hills!

Her feet are strong,
The Queen of Heaven walks on fleet-shod feet
And strong;
The haughty hills are levelled,
Flooding valleys for her feet,
And for their feet
Who follow where she walks.
Her feet are strong,
For she is Queen
Where Holiness
Is King;
For she is Bride of Everlasting Rest,
Of Everlasting Fruitfulness the Bride.
Mistress of earth,
And she is quick with Life,
Pregnant with Light.
Maria!

The text from which Sisters Catherine and Crysostom derive the setting for their Marian praise poems was composed by the prophet Isaiah to describe the Messiah (Is 52:7). This reads as follows:

> How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings and that preacheth peace, of him that sh(o)weth forth good, that preacheth salvation, that saith to Sion: "Thy God shall reign!"

An insight into periods of drought in the lives of humankind is given to the reader in **The Broken Chalice** (1997:2). This poem shows Sister Catherine as finding solace in the meditation of Mary's heroically borne agony, facing the challenge of pain in life. She finds the answer to the centuries-old mystery of pain by viewing it in the light of Christ's agony and the process of the religious seeker's spiritual purification:

THE BROKEN CHALICE

Crushed from the depths of my suffering,
I turn my face to my Lord.
Groaning aloud from the depths of my misery -
If this is what it means to be human;
then let me die.

Then out of darkness flowers a tiny hope
planted there by the maiden;
She, too, stood there at the foot of her Cross
Watching her hopes being crucified;
seeing the buried fears of her years
being finalised.

She knew the depths of despair,
every agony of the human heart;
betrayed, suffering from the vice of others,
heartache,
disappointment, hunger, fear, pain
And triumphantly she conquered
through the sun of her conviction.

Come, O Maiden-Mother,
Come into this sad lost heart of mine.
Imprint it with the flower of your spirit,
pour out the fragrance of your humility, and
touch it with the delicacy of your submissiveness,
glorify it with the splendour of your love.

Unfurl within my anguished spirit
the beauty of the *Imago Dei* within me -
Raise the flag of victory of faith over the darkness
of despair and faltering blindness
of vision.

Break within me the bread of your Son,
the Spirit, that gives life;
Pour out within me the wine of the Christ-one
flowing from me through the wounds of my life.

So that, chastised, I may become humble,
as He, and you, are humble,
So that, purified, I may become the chalice of His offering,
Carved out by suffering, engraved with His teaching,
chased with His image, embossed by His love.

So that, one day, dear Mother
I may become very like you,
in that I too - heard His word,
and - inspired by you - learned (like a little child) to hear it.
and - led by you - learned to follow it,
and - taught by you - learned to teach it -
and - loved by you - learned to love it.

O Mary, dearest one
O Mary, gentlest one -
Teach me to become like you.

This poem is an example of ascending and then descending Mariology, first from a human perspective to the *Theotokos* perspective; then descending back to the human perspective. In the first five lines personal pain is dealt with. This leads to the next six lines, in which the human side of Mary's disappointments is touched on. In the following seven lines, Mary herself is sought in the Scriptures' description of her role as woman, the warning by Simeon, being referred to in the words "the agony of the human heart" (13). She feels "betrayed" (14) as she identifies with Christ's betrayal by Judas, and is "suffering from the vice of others" (14) in enduring with her divine Son the

disobedience of humankind as she fulfils her role of Mediatrix. Indeed, the Co-Redemptrix controversy (though - as will be seen - the title has not been conferred) shows that many conceive of her in this way.

The words "heartache/disappointment, hunger, fear, pain" (15-16) describe Mary's mute agony at Joseph's initial disbelief, the failure to find suitable quarters in Bethlehem and her role as a refugee-mother in Egypt, an alien country. She conquers through the "sun of her conviction" (18) - sun because her sureness is so strong that it blazes with light - by the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. It is also possibly a play on "Son" and serves as a reminder of the shining faith which has led to her acceptance of God's role for her. The remaining lines move into prayer and poetry; of supplication marked by hope and trust. They culminate in the final lines which show the poet's acceptance of Mary's role as teacher in the school of holiness, an older concept of the religious seeker's term: religious life. Her role is fulfilled more by example than by lengthy words. Her few words are rich in wisdom and compact in deepest holiness.

A literary gem in this composition is found in the seventh stanza where the poet expresses her desire to identify, after purification brought about by suffering, with the chalice handed to Christ during His night of fear in Gethsemane and used whenever the Eucharist is distributed: "carved out by suffering, engraved with His teaching/chased with His image, embossed by his love." (37-38) Christ is the goldsmith who will make this miracle come to pass, while, as Sister Catherine states, Mary is the inspiration (1997:5): "through her never-ending yes to her God and her Son. She knows every shade of suffering we know, and she came successfully through." The use of dashes in the two last stanzas in the tradition of Emily Dickinson indicates the growing process of triumph over the debilitating effects of sorrow. The repetition of certain groups of words in these final stanzas achieves an incantatory effect.

This section has been dedicated to South African-born writers of Marian poetry to show that twentieth-century Marian praise poetry occurred not only in the literary utterance of religious and secular writers in the United States and the British Isles but also in other countries where English has become an official language, including our own. As has been stated, the environment initially was wary of Rome. However, Catholics arrived and were not only absorbed by South Africa's polymerous population, but even became known for the high standard of teaching in the private schools they ran to provide their livelihood. It is striking to note that, as far as was ascertained, only Father Bonaventure Hinwood, writing in Afrikaans, found a way of linking Marian issues with the social justice/apartheid politics which were so much to the fore in other South African writing of the later twentieth century. Two further matters which deserve mention are that English Marian poetry by expatriate British priests was excluded from this section because it deals only with the work of South African-born poets, while Marian poetry by Antjie Krog, a major Afrikaans poet, was omitted because it failed to meet the spiritual parameters required for the selection.

That the poets chosen to represent South Africa are able to work at a consistently high level is clear from the variety of their poetry quoted. Kolbe's Marian poetry in part may seem somewhat parochial and more suitable for hymnals than for reflection, though he has written other work, notably a poem titled **Animula Mea** (MY LITTLE SOUL) (no date:22), which attains world standard. Roy Campbell's English poetry is world-renowned, although his controversial ideological views lost him the respect of many critics. Sister Catherine's work manifests a spiritual as well as a literary affinity with that of her American counterparts. Eybers and Cussons rank among the country's foremost Afrikaans women poets. Unfortunately, their eloquence, like that of Bonaventure Hinwood, tends to lose a great deal of its thrust in translation, because it is mainly their proficient use of language that gives their work its literary luminosity. (In my translations on some occasions I was compelled to sacrifice rhyme in favour of meaning.)

The fact that Marian poetry on the lines of the poetic utterance of the American nun-poets only came from the pen of Catholics in South Africa shows that this genre is as much a product of individual belief as of poetic talent. For this reason a brief description of the main points of Catholic Mariological teaching with specific reference to the events which surrounded it during the twentieth century will be given next.

CHAPTER THREE

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CATHOLIC MARIOLOGICAL TEACHING WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The final century of the second millennium was a spectacular one in the saga of Marian history in the Catholic Church. It was during this century that the Blessed Virgin, though hitherto a symbol of unity in the Church which had never wavered in its loyalty to the Mother of Christ, unprecedentedly became a sign of division instead.

No purpose would be served by either denying or ignoring certain religious influences which gave rise to the vast changes that took place in Marian devotion among Catholics in the second half of the twentieth century, and which in turn had a bearing on the Marian poetry of the era. For this reason it is deemed necessary to commence this study on Marian praise poetry, the vast bulk of which was composed by Catholics, with a discussion of the stage reached in Catholic Mariological teaching and philosophy as the end of the second millennium of Christianity hove into view.

In the light of Christian teaching, the Blessed Virgin Mary is the key person in the life of Christ the Redeemer, for it was her *"Fiat"* (let it be done) which was the spark which ignited His Incarnation. Hence in the ages which have followed the Birth, Death and Resurrection of Jesus, the Catholic Church has been involved in developing a Mariological doctrine. Four articles of Marian belief have been identified: the Immaculate Conception, the Perpetual Virginity, the Divine Maternity and the Assumption Body and Soul of the Blessed Virgin. Of these, all but the second have been proclaimed as dogma, which binds the faithful to believe them. The statement regarding the Perpetual Virginity, which is not regarded as a dogmatic definition, was nevertheless included in a definitory statement. In the context of Catholicism, such statements are made by a decision arrived at by an episcopal council and confirmed by the pope, in his capacity as president of the episcopal

college. They must derive from revelation which terminated at the death of the Apostles.

There is little information in the Scriptures concerning the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The few references to the Mother of the Redeemer that do exist account do not alone account for the enthusiasm with which Mary was consistently regarded in the Catholic Church until well after the midway mark of the twentieth century had been reached Neither are they solely responsible for the active promotion, by example as well as by the spoken and written word, particularly in poetic form, of the cult of Mary by religious seekers during and around the second quarter of the twentieth century. However, unlike the Protestant churches that follow Luther's dictum *'sola Scriptura'* (the Bible alone), the Catholic Church draws not only on Scripture for its doctrine, but also on its two thousand years of tradition. In an effort to explain the attachment of Catholics to their tradition to Protestant Christians, who rely exclusively on the word of the Bible for their teachings, it is necessary to refer to the phenomenon that the four Evangelists, even when describing the same events in Christ's life, did not always depict them in exactly the same way. Matthew, for example, writes that Christ, after His birth in Bethlehem, fled with His parents to Egypt, while Luke states that the family returned to Nazareth after having presented the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem. Which version is correct? Matthew may have omitted to add that before the flight to Egypt, Christ had already been presented in the temple. Just as probably, Luke may have failed to state that the family returned to Nazareth via Egypt. This is but one of the reasons why the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is so important a constituent in the interpretation of Holy Writ and, in the case of Catholic teaching, tradition. This is why it is quite normal to find the nun-poets describing events such as Mary's presentation in the Temple at the age of three or to give the names of her parents, though such information never appeared in the authorised gospels of the New Testament.

Mariology is an organic element of the redemptive saga of Christ in Catholic doctrine. "In the Virgin Mary everything is relative to Christ and dependent

upon Him," wrote Pope Paul VI (1974:23). More recently, Brother John M Samaha (1997:113) reiterated this teaching:

> Sound Mariology has always been understood in Christological terms. If the Gospel revealed nothing more than the fact that Jesus Christ, God and man, was born of Mary, this alone would be sufficient for the Church to love her and to draw theological conclusions from pondering this relationship of Mother and Son.

In fact, however, the gospels of Luke and Matthew provide us with a little more information than that about Mary, while even the few facts available to us provide scope for a rich harvest of contemplation. A meditation on any of the following events will bring enrichment: the role played by Mary in the Annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel, the visitation to her cousin, the Birth of Christ, the presentation of the Child Jesus in the temple, the finding of the Child Jesus in the temple, the wedding at Cana, the visit of Mary to Jesus while He was preaching, their encounter as He carried His Cross up Mount Calvary, her presence at the foot of the Cross as He died, her visit to His grave and her presence among the apostles after His glorious Ascension into heaven. Catholics, and particularly the members of religious orders and congregations, do, indeed reflect on these events, not only in an individual or random fashion, but also in the community, in decades of the Rosary (cf page 61) or the Stations of the Cross. The latter comprise fourteen separate reflections on the *Via Dolorosa* (Sorrowful Way) concerning stages of Christ's agony and death, representations of which are normally displayed in every Catholic church.

Such meditations lead towards the conclusion that Mary is chaste, obedient to God's will, truthful, humble, compassionate, generous of self and of service, long-suffering, uncomplaining, industrious, discreet, reflective, maternal, concerned, morally courageous, patient, faithful, supportive, always available in times of need and totally dedicated to the service of God. The reflections reveal, moreover, that sin and vice are *anathema* to Mary, who only wishes to obey God's will and gives an example to others to do likewise. This obedience is the basic difference between Eve, mother of the Old Testament,

and Mary who became the Mother of the New though she was a true daughter of Eve in all but sin. Again it is Samaha (1997:11) who comments:

> The mystery of human love reflects the mystery of God's love for his creation. Mary stands for the femininity of creation itself. Her femininity means responding love, obedience, self-giving, the readiness to live exclusively in and for the Other. The woman responds to the initiative of man and follows him, and in this total self-giving she fulfils herself. Eve failed to be woman because she took the initiative; she distorted the order of creation and became the cause of sin. The chosen people of God failed to be the handmaid of the Lord in love and obedience. But Mary, by her total obedience, restores something absolutely essential in the order of creation. She is not the representative of the woman or women before God. Mary is the icon of the entire creation as response to Christ and to God.

There can be little doubt that this claim could alienate radical feminism with its aversion to the patriarchal prejudice of which it accuses the Catholic hierarchy. It is not, however, within the scope of this study to assess possible feminist objections to the merits of this assertion, which reflects sound, traditional Catholic doctrine. Therefore, though couched in potentially controversial terms, it represents the fundamental doctrinal teaching submissively accepted by the American nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century. Their poetry proclaims that to them meekness was not a disgrace, as it is today considered by militant feminism. Rather, in the terms of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:4) it is a virtue; one, moreover, which can only be achieved at the cost of heroic self-discipline and, paradoxically, brings its own sense of liberation since it is freely chosen. Thus the vow of obedience to their superiors reflects the nun-poets' personal preference. Catholic teaching has always been based on the premise that humility, freely embraced for the sake of the glory of Christ's kingdom, liberates, whereas licence for the sake of self-fulfilment enslaves. Seen in this way, the statement by Brother Samaha, who is himself a religious seeker in the context of this study, may be said to provide an insight into the reverent philosophy of the nun-poets. This in turn casts light on certain features which might otherwise prove mysterious in their life-style and poetry alike - including their shining conviction that God is always in control.

Thus far we have considered the Biblical/Canonical texts as Mariological sources. In terms of Catholic teaching as we have seen, the Church's Canon represents the laws or disciplines enacted by an authorised ecclesiastical council and confirmed by the pope. The Apocryphal Gospels have not been enshrined in the Church's Canon as their authenticity has been neither officially decreed nor confirmed, although the possibility is not ruled out that certain of their contents could be genuine. Thus, a great deal of detail about the Blessed Virgin found in the Apocryphal Gospels is referred to in the nun-poets' Marian poetry. The **Protevangelium Jacobi** supplies such details as pertain to Mary's life before the Incarnation of her Son. Believed to hark back to 150 AD and published in 1552, it was translated into Latin from Greek by the Orientalist Guillaume Postel who had located it in a manuscript in Constantinople.

The first section of the document tells of the birth of Mary to her aged parents, Joachim and Anne; her presentation in the Temple at the age of three and her betrothal to Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, who became Christ's foster father. The second section deals with the same events as described by the Evangelists Luke and Mark. The third section describes the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem and the death of Zachary.

The **Protevangelium**, whose authorship was ascribed to James the Lesser, the first bishop of Jerusalem, was superseded by a document titled **The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew**, a version which was characterised by coarseness. This in turn was followed by **The Gospel of Mary's Nativity**, which repeats the events described in the **Protevangelium**, while lacking the coarseness of the Pseudo-Matthew version. There is no reason to doubt that there were incidents in the Blessed Virgin's life, and indeed in that of her Divine Son, of which none of the four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) had been apprised. Some of these must have been transmitted by word of mouth, perhaps not entirely accurately but still quite plausibly. Nobody can be entirely sure, therefore, how much of the content of the Apocryphal Gospels is based on truth and how much is mere legend. As will be seen, the nun-poets at times drew their images of the Blessed Virgin from

information contained in the Apocryphal Gospels. However, the bulk of the poetry used in this study pertains mainly to those Mariological aspects which have been enshrined in Catholic teaching. The majority of the nun-poets whose work has been selected for this study have written eloquently on one or more, or even all of these aspects, which will be dealt with in four separate chapters.

The four Mariological teachings of the Catholic Church are inter-related in the following way: Mary became the Mother of God upon the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Whose Divine and human natures are inseparable - hence she became Mother of Jesus Who is God as well as of Christ the man. It follows that she must have been free from sin, not only from sin committed during her life-span, but even from original sin, inherited after the fall from grace of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, for it was inconceivable that God, Who is all-good, should have dwelled in a womb contaminated by sin. Therefore, like Adam and Eve, she was conceived immaculate, a signal grace owed to God's munificence as a foretaste of the fruits of Christ's Redemption of mankind. Unlike Adam and Eve, moreover, she remained untainted by sin, on account of her wholehearted co-operation with the special grace by means of which God had distinguished her. On account of her Divine Motherhood and Immaculate Conception she was able to conceive the Lord Jesus Christ while remaining a virgin, to give birth to Him without losing her virginal integrity, and to retain her virginity forever. The Church furthermore teaches that the Blessed Virgin's body was not corrupted in the grave since corruption in death represents the wages of sin, and Mary, being free from sin, was exempt from this penalty. Mary's Immaculate Conception and Assumption body and soul into heaven are enshrined in Mariological dogmas, while the Divine Maternity and Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Virgin are contained in the Church's Christological teachings.

The Christological dogma of the Blessed Virgin's Divine Motherhood was asserted at the general Council of Ephesus in 431 AD. This council was called to disprove the teaching of Nestorius which held, among other things, that Christ's human and divine natures were separate and that Mary was

therefore only the mother of Christ in His human nature. After refuting this teaching as a heresy, the Council Fathers declared that, Christ's Divine and human natures are inseparable and that it therefore follows that the Blessed Virgin Mary is as truly the Mother of Christ Who is God and Who therefore created her, as she is the Mother of Christ in His human nature. The Greek title *Theotokos*, meaning "Mother of God" was thenceforth bestowed on Our Lady, while Nestorius's strongest opponent, St Cyril, bishop of Alexandria (c. 380-440), apprised him of the Council's decision in these words (Neuner 1973 # 605):

> It was not that an ordinary man was born first of the holy Virgin, on whom afterwards the Word descended; what we say is that, being united with the flesh from the womb, the Word has undergone birth in the flesh, making the birth in the flesh His own ... Thus (the holy Fathers) have unhesitatingly called the holy Virgin "Mother of God" (*Theotokos*). This does not mean that the nature of the Word or His divinity received the beginning of its existence from the holy Virgin, but that, since the holy body, animated by a rational soul, which the Word united to Himself according to the *hypostasis (kath' hupostasin)*, was born from her, the Word was born according to the flesh.

The Blessed Virgin's Divine Maternity was redefined and the title of Mary as *Theotokos* confirmed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD (Neuner 1973 # 614-615):

> Following ... the Holy Fathers, we unanimously teach to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man composed of rational soul and body, the same one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father as to the divinity and one in being with us as to the humanity, like unto us in all things but sin (*cf Heb.4.15*). The same was begotten from the Father before the ages as to the divinity and in the latter days for us and our salvation was born as to His humanity from Mary the Virgin Mother of God.
>
> We confess that one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son, must be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion or change, without division or separation. The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person (*prosopon*) and one hypostasis. He is not split or divided into two persons but He is one and the same only-begotten. God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as formerly the prophets and later Jesus Christ have taught us about Him and as has been handed down to us by the Symbol of the Fathers.

The Church has honoured this belief and reaffirmed it throughout the centuries. In the twentieth century, Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Marialis Cultus* (1974:5) reiterated the belief in Mary as Mother of Christ and of the Church:

> The Church's reflection ... on the mystery of Christ and on her own nature has led her to find at the root of the former and as a culmination of the latter the same figure of a woman: the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ and the Mother of the Church. And the increased knowledge of Mary's mission has become joyful veneration of her and adoring respect for the wise plan of God, who has placed within His family (the Church), as in every home, the figure of a Woman, who in a hidden manner and in a spirit of service watches over that family.

The Mariological dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary was defined by Pope Pius IX in 1854. Generally misunderstood by the uninformed as referring to the Incarnation of Christ, this doctrine proclaims that the Blessed Virgin, in common with Adam and Eve, and unlike any other human being, was free from the taint of original sin from the moment of her conception. The belief in the Immaculate Conception, which became the first - and therefore, until then, only - Mariological dogma promulgated by any pope for almost two thousand years of Christianity, had a long history. Four centuries earlier, Pope Sixtus IV approved the feast of the Immaculate Conception in the Constitution **Cum Praeexcelsa** in 1477. Never at any moment of her existence from her very conception had Mary been subject to sin. Unless this was so, God could not have used her as an instrument to conquer sin and bring about the salvation of mankind (Neuner 1973 # 703):

> In His divine providence the almighty God looked from eternity on this humble virgin. Having prepared her by the Holy Spirit, He made her the dwelling place of His only-begotten in order to reconcile to its author the human nature that had been subject to eternal death through the fall of the first man. From her He was to receive the flesh of our mortality for the redemption of His people ... all the faithful of Christ should give thanks and praise to almighty God for the wonderful conception of the Immaculate Virgin ...

The Council of Trent (1545-1563), which was called to re-examine Catholicism in the face of the Reformation, at its fifth session in 1546 promulgated in its Decree on Original Sin that the Blessed Virgin did not share in the hereditary taint of the rest of humankind, reiterating the teachings of Pope Sixtus IV in this respect. In the following year in Canon 23 of its Decree on Justification, the Council declared (Neuner 1973 # 706):

> If anyone says ... that a man once justified can avoid all sins, even venial ones, throughout his entire life, unless it be by a special privilege of God as the Church holds of the Blessed Virgin, *anathema sit* (let him be condemned).

Michael de Bay and the Jansenists disputed the teaching of the Immaculate Conception, proposing that only Christ was free from original sin. The Blessed Virgin, they proposed, died on account of the sin she had inherited from Adam and her life's afflictions stemmed from punishment for actual and original sin. In 1567 in his Bull **Ex Omnibus Afflictionibus**, Pope Pius V condemned these propositions of De Bay and the Jansenists. One of his successors, Pope Alexander VII (1655-1667), in his bull **Sollicitudo Omnium Ecclesiasticum** explained the doctrine in this way (Denzinger 1954:318):

> The devotion to the most blessed Virgin Mary is indeed of long standing among the faithful of Christ who believe that her soul, from the first moment of its creation and infusion into her body, was preserved immune by a special grace and privilege of God from the stain of original sin, in view of the merits of her Son, Jesus Christ, the redeemer of our human race.

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception, after forming part of the Church's belief for so many years, was raised to a dogma of faith by Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) in his papal bull **Ineffabilis Deus** (Neuner 1973:709):

> ... (W)e declare, pronounce and define: the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by the singular grace and privilege of Almighty God and in view of the merits of Christ Jesus, the Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin, is revealed by God, and, therefore, firmly and constantly to be believed by all the faithful.

The Church's teachings on the Blessed Virgin's perpetual virginity are threefold: Mary was a virgin when the Lord Jesus Christ was conceived in her womb through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit; her virginal integrity remained intact during the birth process and thenceforth until the completion of her human life-span.

Throughout the ages, the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity has been repeatedly praised by popes and theologians. Its first mention seems to come from the **Protevangelium** in *circa* 150 AD and was defended by many of the Church Fathers, including Origen (died 254), St Athanasius, St Basil the Great (died *circa* 380), St Ambrose (died 397), St Jerome (died 420) and St Augustine (died 430). Pope John II (whose papal reign lasted from 533 to 535), in a letter to the Senate of Constantinople in 534, called Mary "the ever Virgin Mother of our Lord and God Jesus Christ" and "the glorious and holy Mary, ever Virgin." At the 649 Lateran Council convened by Pope Martin I (649-653) against the heresy of Monothelitism it was promulgated (In Denzinger 1954:102):

> If anyone does not properly and truly confess in accord with the holy Fathers that the holy Mother of God and ever Virgin and Immaculate Mary in the earliest of ages conceived of the Holy Spirit without seed, namely God the Word Himself specifically and truly, who was born of God the Father before all ages, and that she incorruptibly bore (Him?), her virginity remaining indestructible even after His birth, let him be condemned.

Throughout the history of the Church, therefore, many popes and Church fathers have spoken out in support of Mary's virginity. During the centuries since the Reformation, however, many Protestants - and a number of Catholics who have either lost touch with their Church's doctrine or lost their

faith in it - appear to be inclined to limit their belief in this virginity to the period before Christ was born.

In the present century the Mariologist René Laurentin (1956:105) has written:

> The Virgin's bodily virginity ... is not an historical event, the account of which has been transmitted to us by Scripture or oral tradition; it is a mystery, the implication of which, in the totality of Revelation, is something discovered by the intuition of faith. Just as the manner of the Assumption escapes us, so does the manner of the virginal childbirth. And it is a mistake to leave what is essentially a revealed mystery in order to concern ourselves with physiological details which it has not been the will of God to reveal. We must forego the desire to know everything and confine ourselves to this certain fact. The birth of the Son of God, like His Conception, was miraculous: thus God preserved his mother's integral virginity.

In an unsigned article published on Internet under the auspices of the Mariological Association of America (1998:1) the author states that the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity is "not merely a reference to a historical fact" - thus differing by implication from Laurentin who wrote that it was not a historical event. The latter article continues to say that the dogma (which has not been proclaimed)

> has a deeper meaning, a spiritual dimension (and) ... speaks of the radical character of (Mary's) God-relatedness. The life of Mary exists only for, in and through God. Further, it speaks of the singularity of the Church event.

The Catholic Church's second and - thus far - final Mariological dogma is the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin body and soul into heaven. Solemnly defined by Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) in 1950, this belief had been entrenched in Catholic tradition since the sixth century or even earlier when Christians started the practice of annually celebrating the feast of the Assumption on 15 August. Many of England's most famous poets wrote on this event throughout the centuries. In the Apostolic Constitution **Munificentissimus Deus** (In Neuner 1973 # 715), Pope Pius XII wrote:

> We proclaim, declare and define as a dogma revealed by God: the Immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever Virgin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven.

On 8 September 1953, in preparation for the celebration of the first centenary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1954, Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical letter titled **Fulgens Corona** proclaimed a Marian year to be celebrated throughout the world. The lucidity of the pontiff's arguments in favour of Mary's Immaculate Conception in this encyclical must rank among the finest vindications of alleged Catholic Mariolatry ever written. In lyrical prose, the pope ascribes Mary's sinlessness to God's bounty, which was likewise responsible for bestowing the same free gift on Adam and Eve. Nevertheless, honour and veneration are due to Mary, who, unlike the first parents, fully corresponded with the graces bestowed on her, giving Satan no quarter (1953:4-5):

> ...if we consider the burning and sweet love which Almighty God without doubt had, and has, for the Mother of His only-begotten Son, for what reason can we even think that she was, even for the briefest moment of time, subject to sin and destitute of divine grace. Almighty God could certainly, by virtue of the merits of the Redeemer, bestow on her this singular privilege; that therefore He did not do so, we cannot even suppose. It was fitting that Jesus Christ should have such a Mother as would be worthy of Him as far as possible; and she would not have been worthy, if, contaminated by the hereditary stain even for the first moment only of her conception, she had been subject to the abominable power of Satan.

The pontiff counters the criticisms of others against Catholic Mariology in these words:

> Non-Catholics and reformers are therefore mistaken, when because of this pretext they find fault with, or disapprove of, our devotion to the Virgin Mother of God, as if it took something from the worship due to God alone and to Jesus Christ. The contrary is true because any honour and veneration which we may give to our Heavenly Mother undoubtedly redounds to the glory of her Divine Son, not only because all graces and all gifts, even the highest, flow from Him as from their primary source, but also because "The glory of children are their fathers" (Proverbs 17:6).

After the pope proclaimed a Marian Year to be held in 1954, Sister Mary Cathlin BVM wrote a poem in commemoration of this event which, ironically, read with hindsight, might well have been prophetic of the future of Marian devotion in the Catholic Church during most of the remainder of the twentieth century (1954:46):

PRAYER IN THE MARIAN YEAR

Not all the blackness of apparent nightfalls,
Nor all the evils of the coming years
Could stay your spirit, flashing out its sword-play
Above the fallen body of men's fears.
Honed with love to the keenest edge of courage
You dared to trust His word (the final test!)
And see an age, when numbers past the counting
Would lift your name and call its music blessed.

Now once again, O Maid of rapier vision,
Thrust hopeful steel against a darkening sky;
Foretell the victory that your Son has promised.
Who bears the "King of Kings" upon His thigh
Now slash the air and cleave our doubts asunder-
Be thou our sureness; lead us to attack.
Whose feeble swords are rusting in our scabbards.
Whose necks are crooked with ever looking back.

The poet's effective use of martial imagery to highlight Mary's strength in combating the power of evil reaches a climax in the description of her "rapier vision" (9). The personification used in the term "hopeful steel" (10) appears to guarantee a victory still to be won, not only by Christ and Mary, but also by humanity "whose necks are crooked with ever looking back" (16).

No sign of any threat to Mariology within the Catholic Church was clear in 1954, however. Catholics all over the world hastened to obey the papal injunction to celebrate the Marian Year and prayed rosaries without number in honour of the proclamation of Mary's queenship by Pope Pius XII that year. It is clear from the tone of Pope Pius XII's reference to the "Non-Catholics and reformers" in his encyclical **Fulgens Corona** (cf page 97) that there was no

thought of reconciliation or ecumenical effort among the Christian churches during the first half of the twentieth century. Each held to its own beliefs and few efforts appear to have been made to extend the olive branch towards those of other Christian persuasions. This is an inexplicable situation, in retrospect, because the Gospel of Christ preaches nothing but love, understanding and forgiveness. Perhaps it was due to the two wars which had been fought between nations and left so much bitterness and pain in people's hearts that it would not have been surprising if this antipathy had spilt over to religious adversaries.

There was no indication that the situation would change when the papal successor Angelo Roncalli, Pope John XXIII, took his place at the helm of the Barque of Peter. The new pope was a man from the people and for the people; rotund, popular, friendly and approachable, outwardly as different from the remote and ascetic Pius XII as anyone could be - yet he shared the latter's profound Marian devotion. Nevertheless it was during Pope John's brief term of office that the wheels of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council were set in motion. This would inadvertently cause the devotion to the Blessed Virgin to sustain a hitherto unprecedented set-back within Catholic ranks.

The paradoxical situation of the decline in Marian devotion occurring during the pontificates of four popes, each of whom was in his own way as devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary as Pope Pius XII had been, must rank as an enigma of history. That this was not the intention of the pontiffs is clearly indicated by their writings and by the fact that the Second Vatican Council document on Mariology, titled **Mother of the Church**, promulgated in 1964 by Pope Paul VI, reaffirmed all the Church's traditional teachings with regard to the Blessed Virgin.

One of the reasons why the bishops were convoked by Pope John XXIII for the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council was to see if the Church could not draw the Protestant Churches back to its own sheep-fold *"ut omnes unum sint"* (so that all m(ight) be one). The term in vogue was the Italian

"Aggiornamento" (update) and it came to be as important and have effects as far-reaching within the Catholic Church as the French word Renaissance had done outside of it in an earlier age. But some of the excesses to which it would give rise split the Church, deeply affecting many Catholics in the practice of their faith. Priests and religious in their droves left the priesthood and the religious life. New vocations dwindled, causing the closure of many schools, hospitals, orphanages, convents, monasteries and seminaries run by Catholic orders and congregations. A number of the laity became more independent in their actions and at times disregarded Church teachings. Practices most affected were attendance at the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacrament of Reconciliation and ordinances affecting the sacrament of Matrimony. Along with the changing trend, Marian devotion and the devotion to saints and angels went into decline. The use of images of Mary and other saints in many cases became unpopular and the practice of reciting the Scripturally-based prayers of the Rosary withered. A number of Catholics felt confusion at this developing trend and at the change of liturgical outlook which became evident. Discord raised its head at times in the church when the conservative members among the laity clashed with progressive clerics over these issues.

A traditionalist bishop, Marcel Lefevbre, rejected the Scriptural and Patristic model of the Church proposed by the Council Fathers and enshrined in **Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)** and its practical way of proceeding outlined in **Gaudium et Spes (Constitution of the Church in the Modern World)**. The bishop challenged particularly Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II on certain changes in the liturgy. He refused to accept the *Missa Normativa* of Pope Paul VI and the use of the vernacular in the liturgy. The popes of the period were deeply devout men, who were totally committed to Catholicism but recognised the need for certain changes to make their Church more universally accessible and attractive in modern times without compromising its basic teachings. The more radical members of their flock felt the dispensations granted were cosmetic and ignored deeper issues such as the need they felt existed for a revised Church stance on matters such as birth control, divorce and the institution of a married clergy.

By publicly disobeying the papacy on traditionalist grounds, Bishop Lefevbre further confused those members of the clergy and laity who, while feeling agonised by what they saw as excesses taught by more radical clergy, were nevertheless unflinchingly loyal and obedient to papal rulings. The schism between the Lefevbrist movement and the Church led Mother Mary Francis PCC (1996:133) to write:

ROLES REVERSAL
(Song for a Church in Schism)

All-provident Mother
Grown lean with hard nursing,
Take now my little raisin cake of love.

Forever singing Mother
Hoarse from futile
Lyric, for parched throat
Take my cup of tears.

All-beautiful Mother,
Shabby in torn garment,
I come to mend your vesture
Whole again.

Accept, all-holy one,
A daughter's tending,
Mother, be gathered
In your child's embrace.

It is evident from this poem, and indeed from her poetry generally, that the author of this sensitive and compassionate lyric is one of those nun-poets whose Marian sentiments as manifested in their poetry underwent no change before, during or after the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council. As will be seen, the sentiments and reverence she expresses towards the Catholic Church in **Roles Reversal** have much in common with those she feels for the Blessed Virgin, whom she likewise addresses as her mother.

Schism within the Church's own ranks had been furthest from the intention of Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) who was a man of great sincerity and religious fervour. His initiative was hailed with enthusiasm. When he died within two years of opening the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, however, his

successors were forced to face the tide of change which resulted from the Council.

Until the Council, mutual respect among clergy, religious and laity had held a high premium in the Church. A possible reason for this could have been the laity's respect for the total commitment which religious leaders profess in order to make themselves available for service to the Church. Celibacy frees them from familial and financial ties, enabling them to spend much time with those needing assistance. Bygone scandals, now publicly revealed, bear mute witness that the interests of respect at times overrode the need for transparency, but of this the rank and file of Catholics before the Council were largely oblivious. Though there are no statistics available as to numbers of conversions and catechumens who were drawn to the Catholic Church as a result of the Council, Catholics themselves know how it changed the Church from within. It does not fall within the scope of this study to determine whether the Council brought improvements, and indeed this would be impossible. Neither does the tentative return discernible among lay Catholics world-wide to devotion to Mary during the latter half of the last decade of the twentieth century have any bearing on the study.

Before the Council many of the priests and religious were generally seen by the laity as having a high regard for their vows, including that of celibacy, and as struggling to fulfil these. Their congregations in their turn endeavoured to obey their shepherds' continual reminders to them to observe the time-honoured practices of Marian devotion such as the recitation of the Rosary. After the Council these issues received less attention from many clerics and lay Catholics. Along with the wane in the veneration of Mary, the plethora of Marian praise poetry diminished dramatically.

The document in which the Council reiterated the Mariological dogmas of the Catholic Church, Chapter Eight of its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, is titled **The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church**. In clause 53 of this chapter, Mary's Divine Motherhood was reaffirmed in these words (1964:61):

> The Virgin Mary, who at the message of the angel received the Word of God in her heart and in her body and gave Life to the world, is acknowledged and honoured as being truly the Mother of God and Mother of the Redeemer.

The triple teaching of the Eternal Virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, her Immaculate Conception and her Assumption body and soul into heaven are jointly reaffirmed in Clause 59 of this chapter (1964:65):

> ...(T)he Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all guilt of original sin ..., on the completion of her earthly sojourn, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory ... and exalted by the Lord as Queen of the universe, that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords ... and the conqueror of sin and death.

These two extracts and their context show that nothing had changed in the Catholic Church's teachings on the Blessed Virgin. Why then the changes in practice?

Canon René Laurentin attended the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council as a member of a doctrinal commission. He revealed that intense controversy occurred at the Council with regard to the place of the Blessed Virgin in the Church. In a paper delivered under the auspices of the Mariological Society in Ndola, Zambia (1983:107) he elucidates some of the points of debate at issue.

According to Laurentin the Blessed Virgin was "an object of conflict" (107) when in 1963 the Council Fathers were asked whether there should be a special text of the Virgin or if a place should be given to her in the Constitution on the Church. After the question had been "passionately debated", a vote was taken. Although ordinarily the assembly was unanimous, it was divided for this vote in two equal parts, 1070 votes against 1114.

It was found that one group of the Council Fathers wanted the integration "to react against a closed, particularist, and often deviating Mariology", while the other group maintained that it would "diminish Mary and reabsorb her as a simple member of the Church". The Council was reacting not only against

"artificial excesses" but against "disassociations ... between doctrine and life, between liturgy and devotion. It was important to situate Mary in an organic manner in the Church and in the Communion of Saints" (110).

The doctrine was reinterpreted "according to a mode which was Biblical and Patristic, ecclesiological and concerned history of Salvation, liturgical and missionary, and finally ecumenical. All of doctrine was thus purged of its artifical elements" (110).

So vehement were the internal disagreements that it took from 17 May 1959 (when John Pope XXIII established an ante-preparatory commission under the presidency of Cardinal Tardini) until 21 November 1964 before the completed document was signed by Pope Paul VI and the Council Fathers, confirming, as we have seen, the Divine Motherhood, Perpetual Virginity, Immaculate Conception and Bodily and Spiritual Assumption of Mary.

Although the ancient Marian truths as taught by Catholicism throughout the ages had been upheld, however, the actual devotion to the Blessed Virgin within the Church had suffered a blow from which it would take several decades to recover. The recovery was not yet complete during the late twentieth century. Canon Laurentin, whose writings are unmarred by subjectivity, marked this trend in these words: "The reaction against previous excesses went too far. Thus we had the impression that the Virgin was abandoned in the post-Conciliar Church where statues and devotions and even liturgical feasts disappeared. There resulted a new *malaise*." (110)

During the final decades of the twentieth century, a hesitant return to Marian devotion has become apparent among Catholics. Only history will tell whether it will survive and grow again to its former strength. Because of the dwindling vocations and church attendance and the closure of thousands of Catholic educational institutions, those cloisters and convents which have not yet been forced to close their portals are struggling to survive. Far from having time to devote to the composition of poetry, nuns are fully occupied in nursing the older members of their congregations in their old age. Moreover,

many of them have become far more interested in fulfilling their own ambitions than the pre-Conciliar nun-poets appear to have been. Unlike their predecessors, they no longer seem to consider it a personally fulfilling exercise to educate generations of socially conscious, spiritually orientated men and women. Many feel betrayed at the refusal of the present pope to open the priesthood to women and some would rather serve on government and international bodies than stand in front of a class. Catholic parents, traditionally content to leave the spiritual formation of their children to the religious, were slow to recognise the changes. This may have contributed to the fact that Catholic education, always highly regarded even by members of other religious persuasions, has become all but a dead letter. For the first time, however, many members of the laity appear to be taking the lead in the return to *hyperdulia* that has been discerned in conjunction with the hundreds of reported Marian apparitions world-wide.

Surprisingly, however, to the question of whether the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council should be seen as a destructive exercise as far as Marian devotion is concerned, a profoundly thought-provoking answer is provided by the Protestant theologian Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-), a Yale professor. His writings intimate that to him as a Protestant the Council was of untold value in uniting Christians across the world and bringing Mary closer to Protestants (1996:4):

> One of the most important religious events of the twentieth century has been, and continues to be, the rise of the ecumenical movement. It began as a largely Protestant phenomenon with the heirs of the Reformation re-examining the issues that had begun to drive them apart almost from the beginning. At that stage, the question of Mary did not play a prominent role, except for the disputes between liberalism and fundamentalism over the historical accuracy of the biblical accounts of the Virgin Birth. But with the participation of Eastern Orthodox and then of Roman Catholic partners in the conversation, the question became unavoidable, and eventually it came to be seen in significant ways as epitomising many general issues that divide the churches: What is the legitimate role of post-biblical tradition in Christian teaching? What is the role of the saints, and above all, of this saint (Mary) in Christian worship and devotion? And who has the authority to decide matters of Christian teaching? Thus twentieth-century explorations have made the history of Mary a

> major issue also for the ecumenical encounter, and a careful and candid review of the issue and its implications from Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and even Jewish perspectives has illumined not only the ecumenical problem but the problem of Mariology.

In this way Pelikan reveals that while no conclusive answers are available as to the ultimate benefits or otherwise to Mariology of the Council, it has certainly led to questions being asked by Protestants concerning Mariology and this in its own way could lead to the restoration of Marian devotion, among Catholics and Christians of all denominations. This would be an event of major importance in the saga of Mariology.

With reference to the effect of the Mariological decline on the writing of Marian poetry, a survey of the rise and fall of this literary genre throughout the ages reveals that Marian praise poetry has experienced several periods of drought, but that it has survived and always resurfaced after quiet periods.

Between 1993 and 1997, Pope John Paul II received a petition containing some five million signatures from some 160 countries asking him to make an infallible pronouncement or dogma, the third in the bimillennium since the birth of Christ, which would oblige Catholics to accept as a matter of faith three new aspects of the "Mediatrix" dogma, summed up by the motto: *"Ad Jesum per Mariam"* (through Christ to Mary). These are that the Blessed Virgin be declared Co-Redemptrix with the Lord Jesus Christ, that the graces and blessings from His sufferings and death pass to humankind through her mediation and that likewise the prayers of humankind first pass through Mary before being presented to Christ the Redeemer Who is one God with the Father and the Holy Spirit. In a flippant comment on the situation (1997:39), Woodward commented: "In place of the Holy Trinity, it would appear, there would be a kind of Holy Quartet, with Mary playing the multiple roles of Daughter of the Father, Mother of the Son and Spouse of the Holy Spirit." It may come as a surprise to Mr Woodward that the second part of his assertion, though clearly written with his tongue in his cheek, has long been accepted as truth by Catholics who maintain that, in common with the rest of

womankind, she is the daughter of God the Father, that by divine invitation she became the Mother of God's Son and that through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit she became the spouse of the Spirit. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) thus refers to Mary as a "Woman-Trinity" (In Wahl 1953:268).

This belief has been beautifully expressed by the nun-poet Sada-Marie Fingerlin, writing under the *nom-de-plume* of "Carmel Bride" (1957:9):

BRIDAL CHAMBER

This is a God's most secret hiding place;
This lowliness, His fitting biding place - His ark;
New Horeb's unconsumed, yet burning, virgin bush
And He the spark.

Here is the hungering earth's *ciborium*,
Wrought in white Flame of molten gold, divinely mined,
To hold her Host of flesh, receptacle of God
Divinely lined.

Here is the Spirit - Love's fecundity.
And now to her the homeless race may homeward plod.
This unploughed field will bear the Seed that none has sown -
Mother of God.

Here is the marriage made of God and man,
For here His bridal chamber lies - Redeeming Grace.
And finding, I have entered, blind, into this deep
Most secret place.

The Word is Spouse, and all humanity
Must live and grow within her to be named God's son.
Her life, His grace; Love's torrent flowing in them both,
Wedding them one.

But who can stoop so low, so low as He,
Content to be her Jesus-Child, of Christ a part,
Has found the *thalamus* of God and entered in
Her Mother-heart.

The poet describes the Blessed Virgin as a *thalamus* (23) or hidden (bridal) chamber (14) and sings the praises of her virginity in Old Testament terms (3-4). She equates Mary with a *ciborium* (5), which is a bowl or dish for holding the wafers to be consecrated at the Eucharistic celebration and for

storing them in the tabernacle. According to Catholic doctrine, at the Consecration during the celebration of the Eucharist, the consecrated wafers and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The poet suggests that Mary's virginal body by the mystery of the Incarnation has been permitted by God to be a similar receptacle.

"(T)he Spirit - Love's fecundity" (9), though it sounds like a contradiction in terms, did in fact come to pass in the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. The poet metaphorically describes Mary's virginal womb as an "unploughed field" (11). Mary as the bridal chamber, represents the "marriage of God and man" (13). But Mary's heart is God's actual *thalamus* or inner chamber - the receptacle of a flower where the carpels are placed, although the "Word" (17), the Son of God, now becomes "Spouse" (17).

Returning to Woodward's supposition that Mary's threefold connection with the Blessed Trinity would turn it into a quartet, this would be regarded as blasphemy by the signatories of the petition, who profess that Mary is human - there is nothing divine about her own person and the special graces and privileges she has received have been showered on her by God's bounty and specifically because of Who is her Son. Her only personal merit lies in her wholehearted co-operation with God's plan, whatever demands on her person it implied. It is this quality which Catholic Mariology teaches its adherents to imitate in order that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven, as Christ taught when he gave humankind the prayer: "Our Father".

The petitioners believe, moreover, that God had a special purpose in so honouring Mary. It is their belief that to be born Christ did not need a human mother just as He did not need a human father. Since God is the Creator and Mary but a created being, God did not even need to obtain Mary's approval to have her bear His Son, even if He did have need of her motherhood. Therefore it was not necessary for God to send the Archangel Gabriel to relay His message to Mary. The fact that it pleased Him to do so, however, is proof that it was God's avowed intention to make use of the consent of humankind before He deigned to bestow His Son, Christ the Redeemer, upon the world.

The Blessed Virgin, by deferring to God's request and giving it her full co-operation, became a bridge between God and man, a human anchor to the Divinity and therefore a Co-Redemptrix (or, if this title offends, Mediatrix or Intermediary) in whose sinless womb God first became inseparably fused with humankind. From a Catholic point of view, it is posited, moreover, that the likelihood cannot be ruled out that God would favour it if mankind would return the compliment by approaching the throne of God through the intermediation of, and in union with, the prayers of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

It is a long-time belief in the Catholic Church that to accept Mary's mediating powers takes nothing away from Christ's redemption of mankind, as may be seen from the encyclical letter **Ad Diem Illum** by Pope Pius X. Written in 1904 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, this encyclical lays a theological foundation for the mediating role played by the Blessed Virgin (In Neuner 1973:199):

> From the community of will and suffering between Christ and Mary she merited to become the restorer *(reparatrix)* of the world that was lost, and the dispenser *(dispensatrix)* of all the benefits which Jesus won for us by His death and at the price of His blood. We do not deny indeed that the distribution of these gifts belongs personally to Christ by a unique right. For they were won through His death alone and He alone has the power to be mediator between God and man. Nevertheless, on account of the union of sorrow and pain between Mother and Son, of which we have spoken, it has been given to the august Virgin to be the most powerful mediator *(mediatrix)* and advocate *(conciliatrix)* for the whole world with her only-begotten Son ... Since she stands above all others, in sanctity and in union with Christ, and was drawn by Christ into the work of man's salvation, she merits for us by equity *(de congruo)*, as it is said, what Christ merited by right *(de condigno)*, and she is the primary minister in the distribution of divine graces.

Father Eamon R Carroll, a professor emeritus of theology at Loyola University, Chicago, (1997:48:138:162), summarises the Vatican response to the petition in the wake of a meeting held during the International Mariological Congress in Poland in August 1996. The meeting, which consisted of fifteen members in the commission, plus five non-Catholic (Orthodox, Lutheran and Anglican) theologians, unanimously decided that this was not the time to seek

such a solemn declaration. The article cites two reasons for the decision: (1997:48:152):

> one, that the titles 'coredemptrix, mediatrix, and advocate require further clarification; the second reason is ecumenical, along the lines of the Holy Father's *"Ut unum sint"*, stressing common ground. With respect to Mary, the pope described her as "Mother of God, icon of the Church, spiritual mother who intercedes for all the disciples of Christ and for the whole of humanity."

Father Carroll expresses his own agreement with this decision against granting the petition in these words (1997:48:152):

> There is surely a painful difference of opinion between the partisans of the petition, so zealous for our Lady's hono(u)r, and the theologians who, no less loving of the holy Virgin, regard the petition for a new definition as ill-advised.

His outlook, in line with that of his fellow Catholic theologians, is one of extreme concern for the veracity and resultant validity of the pronouncement of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. This is mingled with a desire not to offend Christians from other persuasions whom Catholics by dint of exhaustive ecumenical endeavour for four decades have tried to draw into their own ranks - with scant visible success. Those Catholics who subscribe to the petition, however, are singleminded in their desire publicly to pay to the Blessed Virgin the highest honour they believe she deserves, regardless of considerations of diplomacy. Thus they are worthy successors of a Church whose first pope was a fisherman whose literacy is unconfirmed, a Church in which the motto "*Vox Populi, Vox Dei*" (the people's voice is that of God) has been upheld throughout the ages. Hence they will doubtlessly and dauntlessly continue to make representations at the highest level to obtain the granting of their petition.

To the nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century such independence would have smacked of mutiny. Their Catholicism was an extremely demanding, yet - paradoxically - comfortable, faith, in which the hierarchy took the decisions and the congregation submissively accepted these. Unhampered by considerations of ecumenism, however, they too

possessed that deep, yet simple love for Mary which would still inspire Catholics half a century later to lobby for a cause which many might consider lost from the outset. James Metcalfe, an American Catholic writer who, during the 1950s, wrote Church verse in the style of Patience Strong and Helen Steiner Rice, expressed this love in a way recognisable by the nun-poets of his era (1952:53):

AVE MARIA

Ave Maria, full of grace
We lift our eyes to you
And pray that you will pray for us
For strength and spirit new

That you will ask forgiveness for
The wrongs that we have done
And all the sorrow and the grief
That we have caused Your Son

The Lord is with you, Mary dear
And you are far more blest
Than any other woman with
A baby at her breast

You are the Mother of our God
Our Lord and Saviour true
And no one else can pray to Him
As wonderfully as you

Please pray for us poor sinners now
Whom God has given breath
And pray for us, O Mary at
The hour of our death.

Nothing in these unassuming lines suggests that Catholics of the era put the Blessed Virgin in a position of divinity. All the poem reveals is the humility of one who begs Mary for her prayers, because she has been so richly and abundantly blessed that he believes a good word from her in God's ear will help the cause of sinners in their endeavour to achieve eternal life. He is well aware that this privilege was not won for him by the Blessed Virgin but by Christ the Redeemer on the Cross (14). It is the fact that he has continued to

commit sin (5-8) despite having been redeemed which causes him to reach out to the Blessed Virgin for mediation with the Son Who was once a baby in her arms (12) because "no one else can pray to Him/as wonderfully as (Mary) (15-16). This little verse by James Metcalfe is included here not on account of its poetic merits, therefore, but because of the clarity of its explanation of Marian devotion as it was lived by the nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century.

In more lyrical vein, the poet who signs herself Sister Agnes expresses a similar sentiment, affirming her utter conviction that those "who no longer shine with innocence" (8), among whose number she includes herself, will continue to call upon Mary for intercession (1950:217):

MAGNIFICAT
(Behold, all generations shall call me blessed.)

All generations come to her calling,
Hail Mary, Holy Mary!

In the cool of the quiet morning children sing
Bringing lily and lilac to her shrine on the green hill
(Their will is joyous and still under their Mother's eyes
And their praise is a bird in the skies with a shrill song).

Now in the terrible noon of insistent life
We who no longer shine with innocence
Cut with a knife the tough blooms of our wayward summer
To lay before her shrine in the grey grottoes,
Calling her name under the stress of sin,
Hail Mary, Holy Mary, pray for us in the rough sea of our shame.

Our cries are borne to her in the storm of the elements
And in the heart's storm.
(Twisted and torn in the stern tempest of love
We turn and cry to her, Hail Mary, Holy Mary!)
And the moon rises serenely above the deep wood
Where we stood frightened.
She is light in the dark night, blessed among women,
Fair as the moon, bright as the sun.

We have wrought her image in silver and gold
In stone and clay, as she told Elizabeth we would,
Calling her blessed through the generations.
Nations have carved her image in wood and marble
According to their vision. There is no place
Where her face has not been moulded in clay or gold;
There is no day passes but thousands pray
Hail Mary, Holy Mary, blessed art thou!

It is just as she said,
The day she bowed her head in Elizabeth's room
When her womb rang with the Word
Bounding against the pure curve of her emptiness like a bell
Giving tongue to her young blessedness.

Now we tell in our generation
What the old have told
What they will tell who come after ...
Hail Mary, Holy Mary, blessed art thou!

It was customary at many convents, chapels and churches in Sister Agnes's day to have "grey grotto" (10), containing a statue of Mary. To this shrine groups of adults and children would proceed in procession, reciting the Rosary with its fifty-three repetitions of the prayer "Hail Mary". Thus they owuld commemorate the Blessed Virgin's apparitions in Lourdes France, in 1858. (In Chapter Two we read in the poem titled **Lourdes** by Sister Catherine PSN about the "frowning mystery" of the grotto.)

In **Magnificat** Sister Agnes localises her Marian praise poem in one such imitation grotto. She distinguishes between the innocence of the children, whose youth is symbolised in the words: "quiet morning" (3) and who bring "lily and lilac" (4) to the shrine, and their elders' consciousness of guilt (8). The metaphoric description of the children's song of praise as "a bird in the skies with a shrill song" (6) is brilliant. The word "shrill" turns into the reality of everyday life a verse which would have sounded false if a meliorative adjective had instead been introduced. The crow has a shrill caw; young children have voices as yet untrained. Nevertheless, against the background of the cool, the quiet, the lily and the lilac, the green hill and the bird in the

skies, this very imperfection is seen as restoring the balance of nature and bestowing on the shrill choir song a plausible charm of its own.

The adults are in the "terrible noon of insistent life" (7). It takes a knife to cut "the tough blooms of (their) wayward summer" (9) for a floral tribute to leave at the shrine. Figuratively, too, the adults have lost the innocence of the children. Their tributes to the Blessed Virgin are toughened by their own waywardness in the summer of their lives. Yet in spite of their sinfulness they rejoice to call Mary blessed.

In the third stanza the nature imagery is developed to include the weather, notably "the storm of the elements/... the heart's storm/... the stern tempest of love" (13-15) to emphasise the spiritual pain endured by those in their middle years of life. Mary is epitomised by the serenity of the moon "above the deep wood/where we stood frightened" (17-18). In Biblical language she is praised as the epitome of light (20).

Sister Agnes fearlessly describes the metal and clay substances of which Mary's image has been wrought (21;22). In those pre-Conciliar days no Catholic was afraid of standing up for the fact that images were made of the Blessed Virgin - not as idols, but as reminders, ikons or photographs of a beloved paragon, to remind humankind to follow in Mary's footsteps. The poet glories in the realisation of Mary's prediction to her cousin that all generations would call her blessed and proudly hands on the heritage of Marian praise to the next generation. The images, says the poet, differ in their depiction "according to their vision" (25). Whatever style the image takes, however, the praise remains the same: "Hail Mary, Holy Mary, blessed art thou!" (28;37).

This brief introduction to Catholic Mariology serves as a background to the Marian praise poetry of the American nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century. It accounts for the religious sentiments expressed in their poetry which will be as foreign to some modern Catholics as they have been to Protestants since the days of the Reformation. Nevertheless, the positive

comments made by the Protestant theologian Jaroslav Pelikan in this regard (cf pages 105-106) have been noted.

In the next chapter, some of the information available to us about the background of the American nun-poets, which is of a limited and general nature, in addition to thumbnail sketches of some of the more prominent among them, will be provided.

CHAPTER FOUR

AN INTRODUCTION TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN NUN-POET AUTHORS OF MARIAN PRAISE POETRY.

Catholicism is a flourishing religion in the United States on account of the vast numbers of immigrants attracted over the years to this land whose streets, they were told, were paved with gold.

Population figures taken from the 1940 census (In National Catholic Almanac 1948:180) reveal that in New York, the Catholic population figure of 1 663 417 made up 22,3% of the total population of 7 454 995. The highest concentration of Catholics was found in Boston Massachusetts, whose 521 000 Catholics comprised 74,3% of the total population of 770,816. In New Orleans LA, Catholics comprised 66% of the population, in Buffalo NY 52%, in Jersey City NJ 52,2%, in Providence RI 56,7% and in Syracuse JY 52,5%. Chicago accommodated 1 387 164 Catholics; 40,8% of the city's total population of 3 396 808.

Religious vocations occurred correspondingly. A religious census taken in 1936 brought to light that there were as many as 256 religious bodies (including men and women), of which twenty-seven each had more than 200 000 members. From among their numbers, several nun-poets started publishing their poetry in praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

They had a ready market for their work. The National Catholic Almanac for 1948 (1948:510-519) lists 505 Catholic newspapers, magazines and periodicals in the United States and its Territories. Not all were English. For example, of the four Catholic dailies, the three published in Chicago were written in Lithuanian, Polish and Czech respectively, while the fourth, published in Milwaukee, was printed in Polish. Other Catholic publications were published in such languages as Spanish, French, German, Slovak, Croatian and Ukrainian, presumably to accommodate the many Catholic

immigrants of the era. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Catholic publications were published in English.

Several of the nun-poets joined the Catholic Poetry Society of America "to promote Catholic traditions in poetry and co-operate in the advancement of American art and culture" (National Catholic Almanac 1948:465). They appear to have submitted most of their poetry to weeklies such as *America* (America Press, New York), *Our Sunday Visitor* (Our Sunday Visitor Inc., Huntington, Indiana), *The Commonweal* (Commonweal Publishing Company Inc., New York) and *Ave Maria* (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana) among others. Fortnightly publications in which their poetry was published include *The Sign* (Passionist Fathers, Union City NJ), *The Magnificat* (Sisters of Mercy, Manchester NH), *The Catholic World* (Paulist Fathers, New York) and *The Messenger of the Sacred Heart* (Apostleship of Prayer Inc., New York).

No circulation figures are available to provide an indication of the extent of the readership of these publications. All that may reasonably be supposed is that for religious magazines, even those whose subscriber figures might have been limited, there must have been a high per capita readership at the religious communities, schools and universities which held subscriptions to them. Since poetry is an acquired taste which is not universally shared, however, the poetry was probably not being read by any but a select minority. This factor and, possibly, the religious focus of their work, combined with the fact that the nun-poets were subject to their vow of poverty and thus unable to guarantee publication personally, may have contributed to the fact that the American nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century and beyond appear to have received little recognition outside their country and are not even widely known within America itself except by a select readership. If this is so, it should be a matter for regret.

Among the hundreds of thousands of religious priests, nuns, sisters and brothers of their era, the American nun-poets enriched the corpus of Marian praise poetry with a joint contribution which was so immense that it dwarfed

any previous efforts between then and medieval times, when Marian praise poetry reached its zenith in terms of both beauty and spirituality and when Chaucer (1340-1400) in his **Prière de Nostre Dame** (In Robert 1944:5) wrote:

> Certes, if any comfort in us be
> It comes of thee, thou Christ's own mother dear.
> We have no other melody nor glee
> Us to rejoice in our adversity:
> Nor any advocate that will and dare so pray
> For us, and that for little hire as thee
> That helpeth for an Ave-Marie or tweye.

The quality of the output of the nun-poets bears witness to a study of poetry, both traditional and contemporary. The divergence and growth in maturity in the poetic utterance of several of the nun-poets over the decades would itself provide a fruitful field for study. A number of them were capable of producing both poetry that was highly structured and a more impressionistic poetry, which, like modern art, tends to be convincing only when it is composed by those who are expert in all aspects of construction within their field.

It is surprising that a group of women who were so uniform in their praise of the Blessed Virgin, whom they clearly honoured above all others - after God Himself - had so little to say about themselves and about each other. It is even more astonishing that so few other people seem to have had any comment concerning them. It is possible that this is because the readers of their day read their poetry for its spiritual content and not for the technique and genius of the work itself. This could make any surmise of reader reaction on a grand scale somewhat false. Nevertheless, there is a brief entry concerning their number in **The New Catholic Encyclopaedia** (1967:1:424) which suggests that the nun-poets' poetry had been well received:

> Singularly impressive is the appearance in the twentieth century of a group of nuns who exhibited genuine power as lyricists. Sister Madeleva, scholar and poet, established her reputation in the twenties as a lyric poet of genuine eloquence. Sister M Maura, Jessica Powers (Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit), Sister Maris Stella and Sister M Thérèse among others have been recognised as gifted minor poets

since that time. Neither fragmentary nor sentimental, their lines are melodious, brave and certain.

It is opportune to provide a short background to each of these exponents of poetry as harnessed in praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The brief biographies which follow were obtained from various sources, including the orders/congregations to which the authors belonged. Sister Maura SSND and Mother M Francis PCC replied personally to requests for autobiographical details. Mother Francis's particulars are included in spite of the fact that she is not mentioned by name in the **New Catholic Encyclopaedia** extract, as it is considered that her poetry is in the best traditions of the nun-poets' *oeuvre*. The details about the late Sisters Maris Stella, Madeleva, Miriam of the Holy Spirit and M Thérèse were supplied by their fellow religious. Regrettably, it is impossible to identify the majority of the nun-poets. The ones whose particulars were traced, are among the best known of their number.

It is Sister M Madeleva CSC (Mary Evaline Wolff 1887-1964), morever, who is generally regarded as the *doyenne* of the nun-poets, although the quality of her poetry, while of a high standard, could well be regarded as having been surpassed in beauty by the poetic utterance of certain of her peers. She was writing poetry while a student at St Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, a small institution staffed by the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. She published her poetry in *Chimes*, the college literary magazine, in 1907. In 1908 she entered the Sisters of the Holy Cross and made her perpetual vows on 15 August 1915. She obtained a doctorate from Berkeley in 1925 and became president of a new College, St Mary of the Wasatch, in Salt Lake City, in 1926.

In her literary career she set herself two rules: to publish under her name in religion and to submit her poetry to secular magazines. By the time she became president at Wasatch she had published three books. She spent a year studying in Oxford, England, where she met Wilfred Meynell, Tolkien and C S Lewis. Returning to the United States, she became president of St Mary's College, her *alma mater.* She held this position for almost thirty years.

Her published works include **Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays** (1925), **Pearl, A Study in Spiritual Dryness** (1925), **A Lost Language and Other Essays** 1951), **My First Seventy Years** (1959), **The Four Last Things: Collected Poems** (1959) and **Conversations with Cassandra** (1961).

Sister Maura SSND (Catherine Mary Eichner, born 1915) is a poet and former professor of English at the College of Notre Dame, Maryland. She received an MA at the Catholic University of America and furthered her studies at John Hopkins University and at the Universities of Notre Dame, Minnesota and London.

She published several works, including **Initiate the Heart** (1946, MacMillan), **The Word is Love** (1958, MacMillan), **Bell Sound and Vintage** (1966,*Contemporary Poetry*), **Walking on Water** (1972, Paulist Press), **A Word, A Tree** (privately printed, 1980) and **Hope is a Blind Bard** (1989, Shaw Publishers). Articles and critical reviews by Sister Maura have been published in *The Critic, Renascence, Spirit, Thought* and others.

The author received several literary awards, including one from the Catholic School Press Association (1956), the Freedom Foundation Award (1960) and the Theodore Hesburgh Award for Outstanding Contributions to Catholic Higher Education. (No date was provided for the Hesburgh Award.)

Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit OCD (Jessica Powers 1905-1988) was born on a farm in Mauston, Wisconsin, in 1905. She studied for a year at Marquette University, before working as a secretary in Chicago. In 1936 she moved to New York and joined the Catholic Poetry Society of America. She had a volume of poetry titled **The Lantern Burns** published before entering a Carmelite enclosed order in 1941. She was first stationed in Milwaukee and later in Pewaukee. Several other volumes of poetry have appeared from her pen. Her work appeared in *Poetry, Spirit, Harper's Magazine, The New York Times, America, The Washington Post* and *Commonweal.*.

In an obituary tribute to Sister Miriam, Doris Leckey (1988:485) made specific mention of the telling paradox that although the poet had observed silence for forty-seven years, the lyrical sounds of her poetry reverberated in many ears.

Sister Maris Stella (Alice Gustava Smith 1899-1987) was a Sister of St Joseph of Canondelet, St Paul Province. Born in Alton, Iowa, she attended Derham Hall High School and St Catherine, St Paul, entering the congregation in 1920. She obtained bachelor's degrees in English and music and taught at Derham Hall and the College of St Catherine. Her poetry was published in magazines such as *America, Catholic World, Commonweal, Poetry and Literary Digest* and *The Sign*. In addition, publications in book form include **Here Only a Dove** (1939. New Jersey: St Anthony's Guild), **Frost for St Brigid** (1949. Sheed and Ward NY), **Cause of our Joy** (1956. St Paul: North Central) and **The Animal's Carol** (1976. St Paul: North Central).

Sister M Thérèse SDS (Florence Mae Lentfoehr 1902-1981) was a nationally known poet, lecturer and writer. In an unsigned obituary letter, a member of her Congregation described her as "the poet with the pen, the artist with brush and composer with music" (who) "gifted every situation with this aesthetic beauty".

An expert on the Trappist writer Thomas Merton, she received her BA and MA degrees, both *cum laude*, from Marquette University. Her publications include **Now there is Beauty** (1940. Macmillan), **Give Joan a Sword** (1944. MacMillan) and **I sing of a Maiden** (a world anthology of Marian poetry. 1947. MacMillan). Her poetry appeared in *The Saturday Review, The New York Times, America, Commonweal, The Brownstone Mountain Poetry Award Anthologies* and others.

Sister Thérèse was a Charter Member of the Catholic Poetry Society of America and a founder of its Milwaukee unit. She also belonged to the Wisconsin Association of Poets and was the first woman to become poet-in-residence at Georgetown University.

Subsequent to teaching English at universities and colleges, she chose the eremetic way of life, living alone in her apartment at Racine, Wisconsin.

Efforts to obtain details of several other nun-poets whose poetry is included in this study were unsuccessful. One of these, Sister M Julian RSM, had an anthology of her poetry published, which was titled **The Refuge of Beauty** (1954. Paterson NJ: St Anthony's Guild). Another published poet about whom no information was located is Sada-Marie Fingerlin, whose anthology **As Milk is Poured** was published under the pseudonym Carmel Bride. Letters requesting their permission to publish their poetry in this study have been sent to likely-seeming addresses but no response has been received.

As stated, Mother M Francis PCC, while not mentioned in the extract from the **New Catholic Encyclopaedia**, is a poet of distinction. Upon request, she sent some autobiographical details which excluded her secular name. Born on 14 February 1921, she entered the Poor Clare Monastery in Chicago, Illinois, in 1942. Here she made her solemn profession in 1947. She was a founding member of the Roswell, New Mexico, monastery of her order in 1948 and was elected its abbess from 1964 onwards. She has served several terms as federal abbess and first federal councillor of her order.

Her published works include **A Right to be Merry** (1956. New York: Sheed and Ward) which was also published in Dutch, German, French and Italian. Her work **Strange Gods before me** (1965. New York: Sheed & Ward) was translated into German, French and Italian. Her other publications include **Spaces for Silence** (1964. Chicago: Franciscan Press). Like some of her peers, she has been writing poetry for more than six decades.

The fact that the nun-poets read, enjoyed and inspired each other's poetry, even when they were personally unacquainted, is nowhere more evident than in the poem **Jessica takes the Veil** by Sister M Thérèse (1945:79). As stated, **The Lantern Burns** by Jessica Powers had been published before she entered the religious life. It must have been around 1942, the year she made her temporary vows, received the brown habit and was named Sister

Miriam of the Holy Spirit that **Jessica takes the Veil**, was written. The poem contains a clear reference to the title of Jessica Powers's book of poetry (28) and simultaneously to Christ's parable of the virgins who had prepared to receive the bridegroom by ensuring that the oil was ready in their lamps.

JESSICA TAKES THE VEIL

This is the most perfect poem that she has written
This script of grace
Etched on the soul's living vellum with love's keen stiletto
This April flower with the breath of God on its face.

Its white rippling word is no casual song of a moment
Nor decade of years,
The measureless days of the spirit have gone to its making,
Lone midnights of reticent wisdom, of shadow, of tears.

Stripped of the moon and the hills, the bright barter of cities,
Clean of the sea,
Her song is bent to a beauty lyric within her,
The light and the lantern, the bride and the bride-song is she.

I know not her face, we have met in the darkness only
On the austere hills of song,
But I know on what roads she has come to this beautiful morning,
On what rapturous ways she will go that are bitter and long.

Today they will robe the sweet singer in garments befitting
Her bridal of prayer -
The gown the intrepid Teresa has worn before her,
Cool sandals, a mantle to hide her, a veil for her hair.

Each little bird that alights on the sill of Carmel
Will rest his wings
The stars will go begging to peer through her small cell window
To see how a mystic prays and a poet sings.

While we shall go weighted with words and blinded with seeing
Till the slow heart learns
There are times when the sweetest of music is less than silence
The sun less bright than the dark where a lantern burns.

This poem's contents reveal the way in which two nun-poets could share total *rapport* without ever having come face to face. It is this insight into the mind

and heart of one nun-poet on the part of another which makes **Jessica takes the Veil** suitable for inclusion in this study.

If the poet's intrusion into another's most intimate emotions is forgiven, the poem itself is a *tour de force* of poetic skill and a tribute from one religious poet to another on one of the greatest celebrations in the latter's religious life. Sister Thérèse has used imagery concerned with poetry and music (1, 2, 5, 11, 12, 14, 17 and 24), writing equipment (3), light and darkness (8, 9, 12, 13, 23 and 28), nature (4, 9, 10, 14, 21, 22, 23 and 28) and finally, and most impressively, of sound and silence (5, 11, 14, 24 and 27). The sound motif comprises the kernel of the composition, since Jessica is entering the Carmelite order, whose nuns make vows of silence and will, therefore, within the parameters imposed by this vow, seldom make a verbal utterance throughout the remainder of their lives. Yet she will "sing" all the better for her silence, both through her prayers and her poetry, in the quiet imposed by the order and voluntarily embraced by herself.

Sister Miriam is equated with an "April flower" (4), a young woman in the spring of her lifetime, who has felt "the breath of God" (4) on her face. It must be borne in mind that in America, where the poem was written, spring coincides with the month of April and thus with the renewal of spiritual life epitomised by Easter which occurs about this time. She has not come lightly to her momentous decision to exchange the freedom of the secular life for the "small cell" (23) in order to make herself more available for the service of God. Only a fellow religious and poet could fully appreciate the truth of the statement that it has taken "the measureless days of the spirit ... /lone midnights of reticent wisdom, of shadow, of tears" (7-8) to bring her to this momentous pact which calls for her self-immolation. This is a somewhat puzzling admission from Sister Thérèse, since it almost smacks of self-praise as she herself made similar vows.

The poem was somewhat merciless too, for it must have been embarrassing, even painful, for Sister Miriam, poet though she was, to have her most profound religious feelings blazoned publicly in a poem. Mercifully, however,

Sister Thérèse decreases the pressure in the final stanza by concluding in delicate imagery that the spiritual significance of Jessica's religious clothing is much more beautiful than any poem could describe. The mystic encounter between Christ and a woman who has chosen to serve Him to the exclusion of all else is not for public description. Even the poet who may find herself "weighted with words and blinded with seeing" (25) realises that there are moments in every life when silence is greater than speech. The glorious double paradox in the closing couplet with its intimation of silence thus achieves a wealth of feeling.

Jessica takes the Veil shows that, despite the medieval garb worn by the nun-poets, their souls contained a child-like spiritual beauty combined with superlative linguistic ability. The poem provides evidence, moreover, that an oblation of self in order to give praise to God can paradoxically bring a high degree of joy to the nun who does so. Nevertheless, the laying bare of the subject's feelings could be seen as an invasion of privacy.

In a photostated excerpt from an American **Catholic Who's Who**, which is regrettably undocumented, the following quotation from Sister Thérèse is given, which provides a mystical kind of explanation for the amazing fluency of her work:

> I remember never to have been consciously concerned with technique; the poetic lines sang themselves into my mind as if to some pre-conceived melody, the poem thus forming itself quite completely before a word was confided to paper. This, I find, is the method I have followed ever since with this difference, that now I revise constantly and tirelessly until at times the result surprises me with its newness. I believe that a poet achieves his fullest freedom under discipline. A poem must become a part of me, must live with me a long time before I write it.

This extraordinary description of literary inspiration brings to mind the story of St Godric, a twelfth-century pedlar and pilgrim, to whom is attributed the authorship of the first medieval lyric ever written: **A Cry to Mary**. St Godric said the Blessed Virgin had taught him the words and the music herself (Davies 1978:309).

As has been seen, the nuns of the second quarter of the twentieth century still wore the medieval religious habits and coifs prescribed by their founders, some of whom had founded their orders or congregations as early as in the first millenennium. Uncomplainingly, the sisters sweltered in summer, enduring the curious gazes and ridicule of many in an era in which characteristics such as cynicism and sarcasm had come to be regarded as the soul of wit and spared no-one who dared to stray from that section of the fold which adhered to the common norm, whatever this happened to be in any particular year. Outwardly impervious to criticism and ridicule, the nuns exercised their religious vocation in the traditional way, quietly emanating a certainty of purpose and conviction of faith and principles which convinced the secular Catholics of their era that they had God on their side.

The fact that, unlike Sisters Thérèse and Miriam, many of the nun-poets whose work appears in this study can no longer be identified, is both a blessing and a curse to students of their work. It is a curse inasmuch as it frustrates our curiosity as to what background provides so rich a harvest of literary talent, but a blessing because the work is so often refreshingly natural and unselfconscious. In this it shows a resemblance to the surviving Marian lyrics of medieval times. It adds to this genre, moreover, in that the nuns were clearly well informed on matters of interest in various disciplines and sciences which some of them taught.

Sister Maryanna Childs OP attests to the dichotomy between the medieval dress and the contemporary education of nuns in one of her poems (1957:264):

TO A MEDIEVAL MADONNA IN A MODERN DÉCOR

Though not with plume or quill
These lines are written, still,
Madonna, words are said
In ball-point, liquid lead,
Or tapped out by degrees
On Olivetti's keys
That glorify your name
And magnify your fame
As when your monks of old
On vellum in clear gold,
Crimson and cobalt blue
Spelled out their love for you.

This poem reveals the matter-of-fact humour of the nun-poets, unsullied by destructiveness, and their familiarity with machinery contemporary to their day, in contrast to the medieval aspect of their garments. It also shows that the only medieval characteristic setting nun-poets such as Sister Maryanna apart from many of their secular peers is the glory of the religious faith that has spanned the five or six centuries that separate their era from the medieval heyday of the religious lyric to re-emerge unsullied at the end of this period.

If the gratuitous sacrifice of wearing starched headgear and collars and dresses buttoned up to the neck and down to the ankles and wrists, irrespective of the heat outside, was a necessary discipline to silence the voice of temptation or reduce it to a nagging background ache, it never dimmed the spark of enthusiasm in the heart of the sisters, as their poetry reveals. For all their ancient mode of dress, most of them had a modern approach to the writing of poetry. By applying new poetic techniques to the timeless and universal topics resorting under the heading of religious faith, they were responsible for bringing their own image of the Blessed Virgin Mary into the twentieth century.

The sisters lived their vows of chastity, poverty and obedience to the letter and spent many hours in prayer. The remainder of their waking hours (two-thirds of their day) was used for work and study. It was those among their

number blessed with a gift for writing whose meditations sometimes found their way into poetry focused on God and on His angels and saints, particularly the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Although it is by no means representative of the kind of poetry featured in this study, the poem **To Mary Immaculate** by Sister M Wilfrid OSD, having been published in 1906, has the distinction of being the oldest poem in this study by an American woman religious to have been printed in an American Catholic magazine, the May issue of *Catholic World* (1906:232):

TO MARY IMMACULATE

Before all time, beyond all bounds of space,
Unlimited by darkness, from the Face
Of God shone the dread light no man may see
And live. But Love, athirst, by His decree
Called from the void a sea of beauty, bright
With tenderest hues of ever-varying light;
Wave upon wave of joyous life, to show
A fair dim image of Himself. And, lo!
Dark mists from hell o'ershadowing the land
Fell on men's hearts, lest they should understand;
And they, beholding, saw not; hearing, heard
Not the whispers of the Eternal Word.

Would Love then cease to love? That ne'er could be!
Thwarted, unknown, rejected, yet would He,
The mighty, changeless God, once more unseal
The fountains of His Heart - yea He would steal
Into men's hearts by bond of brotherhood,
Lie on a human mother's breast, nor should
One sorrow fall on man by Him unborne.

See how with roseate kiss, the freshening dawn
Turns into glory the far snow-capped height
(Upraised to catch heaven's first and latest light).
E'en so the Spirit with His quickening breath
Breathed upon Mary, and no shades of death
Fell on her radiant soul. Whiter than show
Was she, His new creation, which should know
No Empire of corruption. She His bride,
Whom He, her God, hath dowered with powers as wide
As the unending kingdom of her Son.

Hail Queen most pure! Look down from thy high place
On us, thine exiled children. Win us grace
(Though wrought by cleansing fires of keenest pain),
That we, in those white garments without stain,
Which to each victor soul our God will give
With thee, to see Him face to face, and live.

To the modern reader, this meticulously constructed poem represents all that was slow, over-structured and ponderous in Victorian poetry. The combination of the iambic pentameter and high-blown verbiage has a soporific effect, while the contents resemble nothing more than a monotonous catechism lesson: brilliantly clever, doctrinally sound: yet deadly dull. The lengthy introduction causes the reader to lose attention before the crux of the poet's exposition, the creation of the Blessed Virgin, is reached. The self-conscious rhyming for an effect which remains unachieved is epitomised by the phrase "dowered with powers" (28). It is perhaps the very absence of feeling in this pedestrian poem which makes the reference to the torments of purgatory (32) so deadly. Sister Wilfrid's contribution is mentioned here, therefore, not for any intrinsic poetic merit beyond a gift for vocabulary and an ability to introduce rhyme and rhythm. It is its rigidity - which many mistakenly believe all nuns to possess - which is so paradoxically counteracted in much of the remaining poetry to be featured in these pages.

How pleasant it is, in contrast, to read the work of some of the other nun-poets. Though their faith, like that of Sister Wilfrid, has lost none of its innocence, there is nothing medieval about their intellect, which is razor-sharp, honed by their continuing striving after excellence in all their pursuits, whether these be spiritually or academically motivated.

The first indication of a new wave of Marian poetry was given by Mary Agnes Stackhouse (1878-1934), whose name in religion was Sister Mary Angelita BVM, Although she was probably not very much younger than Sister Wilfrid - she would have been 22 at the turn of the century - there is a sweet, simple directness about her poem **To Our Lady in Winter** (1929:423), which, with its breezy, timeless quality, shares none of her peer's use of archaisms.

TO OUR LADY IN WINTER

Lady, a transient stranger was the snow
In your far Syrian village
Where vine and olive, in the sun's fierce glow,
Scarce asked the rich soil's tillage.

But how you would have smiled to see it, Sweet!
Here in the city's highway.
Hastening at dusk with soft and stainless feet
Down the long lanes of skyway.

It would have been so eloquent, I know,
In its untarnished pureness,
Of what you prized most dear, would not forego
For any honour's sureness.

Its soundless fall - a muting finger laid
On the great city's humming -
Would have recalled to you, O Mother-Maid,
The Spirit's noiseless coming.

You would have loved - how much! - to see it fling
A swift, a kindly veiling
Of pure compassion on each sordid thing,
Hiding earth's every failing.

Too soon it wears the grime, in lane and street,
Of traffic and of toiling;
But you, of all earth's daughters, Lady sweet,
Were snow beyond her soiling.

Like Sister Wilfrid, Sister Angelita uses snow imagery to denote purity as pertaining to the Blessed Virgin. She speaks about the soiling of the snow by "the grime, in lane and street/of traffic and of toiling" (21-22), intimating that these are symbolic of humankind's lapses from grace. She glories, however, in the fact that the Blessed Virgin, "of all earth's daughters" (23), including, naturally, herself, is "snow beyond (the earth's) soiling" (24). The Blessed Virgin's triumph is Sister Angelita's triumph also, while Mary's purity covers the impurities of all the earth. These earthly imperfections and the perfection of the eternal are juxtaposed as epitomised by the "untarnished pureness" (10) of the snow "hastening at dusk with soft and stainless feet/Down the long

lanes of skyway" (7-8). With touching gentleness, Sister Angelita addresses the Blessed Virgin as: "Sweet" (5), as though speaking to a dearly beloved member of her own family. Sister Angelita, unlike Sister Wilfrid, retains a spark of joy even when she admits that the world is far from perfect. She emphasises the positive elements, as reflected in Mary's snowy virginity, instead of the negative ones that will ever contaminate the purity of Eve's less virtuous daughters. This places her poetry, in contrast with Sister Wilfrid's rigid Victorian-inspired work, on a par with the lyrics of the Middle Ages with their timeless loveliness.

The demands of their vows of poverty and obedience, though freely given by the nun-poets, often while still in the first flush of youth, made their calling no sinecure. Obedience could be a difficult virtue to adhere to if the religious superiors were overbearing. To train a postulant or novice to attain as closely as possible to personal perfection, novice mistresses could, and sometimes did, demand excessive sacrifice from the sisters, since the religious superiors of the day lived by the rules and held no truck with psychology. It was therefore only the most determined - and, paradoxically, often the most tolerant - of their candidates who were able to attain to the required heights of perfection. The humility encapsulated in their Marian poetry attests to the fact that they never felt that they did in fact reach it. But they mirrored their lives on that of Mary to approach most nearly the desired level of holiness, within the limitations of their humanity.

This is why Sister Marie Paula Geary (1867-1940), though disappointed in her desire to become the Blessed Virgin's best poet, could goodnaturedly reveal the failure of her ambition to become any more than a skilful versifier and narrator in the following poem (1935:1):

OUR LADY'S POET

Our Lady's poet! Earnestly I prayed
That I might be the singer of her choice
That from my lips words breathing purest love
Might tell the listening world her praises sweet;
But through the months that lengthened into years,
I sought in vain for words that would make known
The songs that love kept singing in my heart
At last one day, grown weary at my task,
I slept and dreamed my Lady came to me.
In vision blest, I saw her at my side
And heard her speak - a Mother come to chide
Her captious child. "Ah, little one," she said,
"Why wilt thou seek to serve in thine own way
And not in that which I would choose for thee?
Dost think that I have need of earthly songs
Of praise? Do not the angels and the saints
Forever chant celestial melodies
That far surpass the sweetest lay of earth?
'Tis not the singer's song thy Mother craves,
Perchance the silent lips give worthiest praise.
Let others tell the world my virtues rare,
But let thy life be such that thou mayst share
In these my gifts. Live what thou canst not sing."
The vision vanished. I awoke, content
To let my heart sing silently the worth
Of her whom those more worthy praise aloud.
Our Lady's poet I may never be,
Yet, with her help, this humble life of mine
Shall be so lived that through its length of days
My thoughts and words and deeds may yield her praise.

Poetry clearly was not Sister Paula Marie's strong suit. Though she observed the rules pertaining to the construction of poetry, she learned through her endeavours the hard and sometimes painful lesson that poetry cannot be taught; true poets are born. She mars any possibility of attracting readers to her poetry by her self-awareness, which casts a shadow over the praise of Mary she professes she desires to sing. Her composition is harmed, morever, by her use of archaisms such as "chide" (11), "captious" (12), "tis" (19), "craves" (19) and "perchance" (20). The lofty tone of her obedience to the Blessed Virgin's behest is marred by the stinging reference to better poets as "those more worthy" (26). "More gifted" might have been a better tribute.

Moreover, one is left with the distinct impression that Sister Paula Marie is very complacent indeed about the Queen of Heaven's visit to her in a dream, and anxious to ensure that this distinction should not pass unnoticed by "those more worthy". If she truly took the dream as seriously as she claimed to have done, why did she persist in inflicting her uninspiring poetry on the world? Nevertheless, the value of this poet's contribution is that it somewhat endearingly betrays certain of the human traîts which the woman who has taken vows of religion shares with all other daughters of Eve. Apart from highlighting this weakness, it also shows that, despite her frustrated desire to achieve success in her poetic art, Sister Paula is defenceless in her deference to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

As explained earlier, this brief introduction to twentieth-century American nun-poets of Marian praise poetry before and after the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council does not contain the details of all those of their number whose work has been used in this study. Their hidden lifestyles, even the ones of those amongst them whose biographical details have been traced, reveal them as a race set apart from the modern reader.

Before proceeding to delve more deeply into the products of their craft, notably their use of the imagery of the Word in the form of poetry, it is deemed fit to draw an analogy between the poetic utterance of the nun-poets and many of the anonymous lyricists of pre-Renaissance days, who likewise wrote about Mary: Although little is known about them personally, their poetry provides us with a profound insight into the core of their existence: their spiritual and religious perceptions, including their profound reverence and love for the Blessed Virgin Mary.

CHAPTER FIVE

EXAMPLES OF IMAGERY OF THE WORD USED IN THE POETIC UTTERANCE OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN NUN-POETS

Many of the twentieth-century American nun-poets at a certain stage of their poetic careers have used the imagery of the Word in their poetic utterance, thus linking Christ, the Word of God born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, with the written word of Marian praise poetry.

There is a background to the "Word" imagery which may be unfamiliar to the large majority of the younger generation of Catholic church-goers. In the days before the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council authorised the Eucharistic Celebration to be conducted in the vernacular, a second gospel, known as the "final" or "last" gospel, was read in addition to what was known as the "first" gospel. Unlike the first, this last gospel never varied. Taken from John 1:1-14, the passage was read out in Latin by the celebrant, while the congregation followed the translation in the English column of their Latin-English missals. Moreover, the words: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us" (John 1:14) were pronounced three times daily, at 06:00, 12:00 and 18:00, when the Angelus bell was rung for the recitation of this prayer.

1. In the beginning was the Word : and the Word was with God : and the Word was God.
2. The same was in the beginning with God.
3. All things were made by Him : and without Him was made nothing that was made.
4. In Him was life : and the life was the light of men
5. And the light shineth in darkness : and the darkness did not comprehend it.
6. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

7. This man came for a witness, to give testimony of the light, that all men might believe through Him.
8. He was not the light, but was to give testimony of the light
9. That was the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world.
10. He was in the world : and the world was made by Him : and the world knew Him not.
11. He came unto His own : and His own received Him not,
12. But as many as received Him, He gave them power to be made the sons of God, to them that believe in His name.
13. Who are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, not of the will of man, but of God.
14. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we saw His glory, the glory as it were of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.)

(Douai translation)

This gospel explains why Catholicism teaches that Mary is the Mother of God and annually celebrates a Church feast in honour of this Divine Motherhood on the first day of the year, 1 January. John announces that in the beginning was the Word, the Word was God and the Word was God, before saying that the Word was made flesh. To state this teaching in reverse: the Word which was made flesh (and born of the Virgin Mary) was the same Word which was with God from the beginning and was God. Thus the Blessed Virgin, in giving birth to the Word, made flesh, gave birth to God and in so doing became the Mother of God or *Theotokos*. As stated earlier, this was recognised by the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD and proclaimed as a dogma.

The faith of the nun-poets who used the imagery of the Word was in accord with this teaching. Sister Madeleva used the concept in her poem **Dialogue** (In Walsh 1943:427):

DIALOGUE

A Word, a Word
Thou Lord, didst utter which Thy willing handmaid heard
And infinite, small Life within my own life breathed and stirred.

A blessed space
My Lord in me and I in Him found resting place;
In such divine repose I waited, silent and full of grace.

Answer is nigh:
O God, I lift a Child up heart- and heaven-high
And say, "This is my Flesh and Blood," Thy Word is my reply.

In this poem Sister Madeleva makes the Blessed Virgin the first-person narrator and herself closely identifies with Christ's Mother, whom she describes as the first priest to offer up the Body and Blood of Christ to His Father in heaven. Mary says: "(Jesus) is my flesh and blood"(9), asserting her Divine Motherhood, which, as it was ordained by God, is as important as God's Fatherhood of Christ. These are the words by Jesus at the Last Supper, used as a memorial of Him by the priest who celebrates the Eucharist. As Mary raises up her Son (8) so Christ will raise His arms on the Cross in a mute embrace of all humankind. All this is implied in the "Word" or God's plan in sending Christ, making His "Word" flesh in the first place (2-3). This is an excellent poem, because its fullest meaning is a hidden one as the Word of God is hidden in the Eucharist.

The imagery of the Word is used by Sister M Marguerite RSM in a poem titled **Our Lady of Literature** (1941:57), which shows that inspiration is not a gift extended to everyone. Her laborious effort at poetry contains several imperfections, including the use of the cliché that one person's loss is another's gain (13-14) to rhyme with pain (12) and the uninspired use of the word "them" (4) to rhyme with "Bethlehem" (2). Nevertheless the poem contains occasional signs of true inspiration of the kind that cannot be taught; only savoured.

OUR LADY OF LITERATURE

Sweet Lady, teach me, let me learn the art
You knew in Bethlehem
Where many words you kept within your heart,
And pondered over them.

My songs are faint, my stress and rhythm wrong,
And hesitant the chord;
One song you sang your whole life long
And magnified the Lord.

My words like metal in the rugged ore
In darkness are confined
One shining Word beneath your heart you bore
And gave to all mankind.

Those seven words you heard beneath the Cross
Were traced in epic pain
Before you faced the tragedy of loss
That meant your children's gain.

Sweet Mother, teach me; let me learn the art
You knew on Calvary;
The broken Word you pressed against your heart
Was Love and Poetry.

Several parts of this poem, notably the first and penultimate stanzas, are as hesitant and stumbling as Sister Marguerite herself admits (5-6). Yet it contains lightning flashes of brilliance such as the metaphor in the last two lines: "The broken Word you pressed against your heart/Was Love and Poetry" (19-20). Moreover, the simile comparing her own words to unmined ore (9-10) could never be either taught or learnt - it is an analogy which could only be the fruit of meditation and a sign of the kind of inspiration which Sister Marie Paula Geary, despite her greater eloquence and vastly enhanced rhyming skills, so bravely acknowledged she lacked. The very fact that the poet points out her literary faults without seeking excuses leads to the ironic result that the reader discerns a need to examine the poem for positive features, which include Sister Mary

Marguerite's confident use of adjectives as demonstrated in the words "rugged" ore (9), "shining" Word (11) and "epic" pain (14).

In contrast with Sister Madeleva's **Dialogue**, which betrays her teacher's appreciation of verbal interaction, Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit, Jessica Powers, the Carmelite with her vow of silence, praises the beauty of speechless communication with God in the silence of a chapel, saying: "There are no words here save the Word of God" (10) (In Powers 1989:47):

THE IMMACULATE HEART

Light is intensely the inhabitant
Of this unsullied place of consecration,
The Virgin's heart. Light is itself the air
And firmament and sea and foliage.
Her thoughts are Godward mirrors, one in their
orientation.

I enter this pure area where light
Dwells by divine election, and I go
Into the long noon of her adoration
Where an eternal silence drifts like snow.
There are no words here save the Word of God,
Pondered on without syllable or stir,
Nor do I speak save by determined presence.
I kneel down in the Virgin's radiation
And gaze at God with her.

This profoundly visual poem is very clearly the work of the contemplative in Sister Miriam. As Sister Thérèse wrote in **Jessica takes the Veil**, there are times when even the poet realises words are *de trop*. The Word of God alone is "pondered on without syllable or stir" (12), a mental picture which those who have seen the devout, erect bearing of contemplatives at prayer are able to conjure up without difficulty.

Though the poet is probably literally in a chapel, the poem sites her in the immaculate heart of Mary (3), a mystical conceit. Her own heart is also virginal, hence her inclusion in "the Virgin's radiation" (14). Catholics often have statues or pictures in their homes which show the heart of Mary outside of her body, radiating beams of God's life and love to humankind.

The poet's technique, though light, is far from lightweight, being suffused with reverence in its picture of Mary's thoughts as a reflection of God, "Godward mirrors" (5) which are "one" (with God) "in their/orientation" (5-6). Sister Miriam implies that the Blessed Virgin has held back nothing of herself from God, giving God free rein to work His miracles. The presence within her of Christ, "the true light which enlighteneth every man that cometh unto this world" (John 1:9) irradiates her within (7-8). The poet enters into this radiance and joins Mary in her awed contemplation of the Word of God (9-11) who is the second Person of the Blessed Trinity. An "eternal silence" (10) reigns because here God's Word is the supreme reality.

Botanical and physiological imagery is used by Sister Immaculata CSJ in her poetic utterance concerning the Word/word analogy (1959:101:635):

OUR LADY OF THE WORD

Our Lady of the Word, calyx and caul
Who wraps a Whisper round, who sheathes a Thought,
Else sears the tongue, else shrivels it as gall,
Sums every other syllable to naught.

She mates His murmur with her raptured breath,
His ceaseless purling is her pulse's stir,
Whose speech can touch her days to ecstasy,
Whose silence drowns the world of sound for her.

His echo down the hollows of her heart,
A roar through vibrant bone, through yearning vein,
An arsis for the lilt of joy can start,
A thesis for the threnody of pain.

For spirit splinters with His muffled short,
The song is shattered, rent the dream, the drum;
Hard wisdom is heritage, and Love
A bleating Lamb before His shearers dumb.

This skilfully written poem is somewhat enigmatic, in keeping with its theme of Mary's silence, which is highlighted by the use of shielding botanic imagery (calyx, caul/sheathes 1-2). Before the sheath is dry enough to drop, it is shrivelled as though by gall (3), forecasting Christ's thirst on the Cross (John 19:28). To Mary to speak without thinking is *anathema*.

The second stanza shows why silence is so strong a characteristic of the Blessed Virgin. Her rapturous breath keeps pace with the merest murmurs of her Son (5). His speech is joy to her and His silence overpowers all sound (7). His baby chatter is equated by the poet to "purling" (6) (like the running of a rivulet or stream), which "stirs her pulse" (6).

In the third stanza the poet demonstrates the extent to which Mary is moved by Christ's speech. A high note can start a song of joy in her heart (11), whereas a low one sounds a dirge (12).

In the final stanza we are shown that like a small bleating lamb, Christ becomes dumb before His slaughterers (Acts:32) (16). To Mary's receptive heart and mind, however, His inaudible cry of distress becomes magnified above all actual sound.

On a different footing, the poem can be seen as conflating various chronological moments. The first stanza brings to mind Christ's incubation in the Virgin's womb. As a foetus He is still "a Whisper ... a Thought" (2) - yet the entire focus of her being is centred upon Him, which is orthodox theology, even if the poem develops it in somewhat original imagery. In stanza 2 He is a toddler, chattering like a little magpie, and her being thrills to the sounds He produces. The third

stanza with its powerful physical imagery seeks to describe the effect His words, silence and presence have on her inmost self. The final verse demonstrates the acuteness her life-time concentration on His words has given her, so that she can capture His few utterances from the Cross and receive an awareness of His agony, despite His steadfast refusal to ask for pity.

Sister Mary of the Visitation shows that the silence of Mary who knew "the Word" (3) inspires poets to eloquence (in Robert 1944:184):

QUEEN OF APOSTLES

There is so little left us that you said,
Who knew so much! Yet what more could you say,
Knowing the Word? Your lips must still obey
The intuïtion of your soul that fed
On pondering silences, as, wonder-led,
Men came with glad-eyed worship, on a day
When God-made-Man upon your bosom lay,
Who, after, found no place to rest His head.
Because you spoke so little, our slow speech
Blessed by your silence, vibrates through the world
Until all nations, listening attent,
Have heard the truth. Our faltering accents reach
Farther than heaven's loud thunders echoing hurled:
For by your silence we are eloquent.

Although ostensibly this sonnet refers to the preachings of the apostles, it is likewise applicable to the utterances of the nun-poets. Mary's "vibrat(ing)" (10) silence, her superhuman ability to control the human urge to proclaim whatever is bothering the heart leads to the paradox that it reverberates in the hearts of the nun-poets, who in their turn proclaim the miracles connected with her Divine Motherhood to the world.

Sister Agnes CSJ develops the theme of the Word and sound in an analytical Shakespearean sonnet in which she designates Mary as the bridge between the Word of the Father and the poet's own listening heart (1944:23:568):

FOR MARY, MOTHER OF GOOD COUNSEL

My songs to your Good Counsel I confide
I lay my ear against your heart and hear
My Father's Word - All-Syllabled, divide
For my pronouncing. O now it is clear
The mighty keeping that my Father did
Who kept His Word, His Ultimate of Sound,
Pondered within your heart and yet not hid
From those who hearken to the Most Profound.
Now, Syllable by Syllable, my Mary,
Interpret to my mind the various dear
Derivations of the Word you carry
The great Root-Word you sing and speak and hear
That heeding from your heart such counselling
I shall know songs straight from the Sun to sing.

The sonnet brings home the fact that human understanding would fail to comprehend the all-powerful Divinity, even as fragmentedly as it does, were it not for the fact that the Father's Word became human and thus linked humankind to the Godhead. Mary was also a link in this chain which broke down the idea of an all-powerful, omniscient and (as suggested in the poem) "All-Syllabled" (3) Divinity into a concept humanity could grasp. Sister Agnes uses words that relate to the teaching of language, speech and music such as "Syllable" (9), "derivations (11), "Root-Word" (12), "pronouncing" (4), "songs" (14) and "sing" (12;14) in hidden reference to the "Word" of God (3; 6; 11).

A poem which lauds Mary's own hymn of praise, **Magnificat**, by Sister M Thérèse SDS (1940:43), has been selected to conclude this section on the poetic imagery of the Word, as it bears witness to the fact that the Blessed Virgin's silence, so much applauded by the nun-poets, did not hide her inability to speak but, rather, sheathed her eloquence:

MAGNIFICAT

Hers was no sudden rapture of the pen,
The poet of the Word who holds my heart;
Familiar song she sang by night, by day,
With consummate art.

Soft preluding to cradle-lullabies
Of star-eyed Babe, - and these her songs are glad -
To visioned Calvaries with their sequent woe,
And these her songs are sad.

With tremulous joy she wrote each variant theme
Upon the lilied parchment of her soul:
Love's mute abandon, and the anguished sob
Of multitudinous dole.

And all her song, safe hidden in her heart
Fraught with a golden music, kept she well
Until, for all her care, one song escaped,
And only God may tell

How on a day, the Spirit unaware
Rescued her rapture from oblivious lot
A robin listened near, as Mary sang
One fair Magnificat.

Sister Thérèse claims that the Blessed Virgin was the most gifted poet of all but, being a woman of silence, sang her happy and sad songs only to her divine Infant. Only the Magnificat, that glorious song in praise of God, inadvertently escaped from her lips the day when she replied to her pregnant cousin Elizabeth, who was the first to use the words: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Lk 1:42), which still rise up daily to the Blessed Virgin in many tongues and places throughout the world.

A note of Christmas is introduced into the poem with the image of the robin (19), featured on thousand Christmas cards and with the red breast which symbolises the loving heart of Christ Who suffered such agonies, yet rose triumphant and

brought eternal Salvation for all. The poem thus celebrates birth, joy and the eternal meaning of the "Word's" Incarnation.

In his foreward to an anthology of Catholic poetry published in 1988, the editor Thomas P McDonnell sorrowfully bids farewell to the nun-poets in these few words (McDonnell 1988:13):

> The nun as a poet was a unique phenomenon in the two or three decades just before the convening of Vatican Council II, but is nowhere to be seen today. It may be a salubrious but hard compensation that today the poet who is also Roman Catholic has to make it on one's own, but with the more probable result that he or she will be writing almost exclusively in the secularist mode in order to be published at all.

These words certainly cannot be said to apply to the work of Mother Francis PCC, who has been writing from the 1940s until the present day and whose style still brings the same enchantment that has delighted students of poetry since the religious poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins first awed an unsuspecting world.

Moreover, the observation is an extraordinary one for a student of literature to make, for the written word has in common with other fashions that it tends to return and delight new generations when least expected. As long as we do not allow the Marian praise poetry of the nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century (and beyond) to disappear from human reach, this work will never lose its charm, for literary as well as spiritual readers.

Moreover, in the light of two millennia of Christianity with its rich history of men and women who lived lives of consecrated chastity for the glory of the kingdom of God, there is no reason to suppose that religious vocations and corresponding poetic talents have come to a halt. Indeed, the immense reaction to a Marian hymn competition sponsored by the Marian Institute of Dayton, Ohio, in 1995, shows that there is still a great deal of interest in the composition of religious

poetry in praise of Mary among American nun-poets, notably by those in contemplative orders.

This gives the student of literature every reason to hope that future generations of students of English poetry will continue to benefit from the fruits of the meditations of the nun-poets.

An endeavour has been made in this chapter to show that the extent to which they felt a sense of identification with Mary in the composition of their poetry was seldom stronger than when they joined with her in praise of the Word made flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who is true God and true man. This assertion has been examined in the light of certain examples of their poetry concerned with imagery of the Word, of which particularly **Our Lady of the Word** and **Magnificat** give proof of their authors' outstanding talents.

In order to elucidate the four dogmas concerning the Blessed Virgin in their correct chronological order by means of poetry, it is now time to examine poems in honour of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

CHAPTER SIX

IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE DOCTRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AS A MIRROR OF EXAMPLE.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary originated in the Eastern Church about the eighth century, and was, as stated earlier, defined as a dogma by Pope Pius IX in 1854. The nun-poets regarded this immaculate state of Mary as a mirror of example as they saw her as "reflecting God". This conceit is frequently encountered in their oeuvre. Of course, unlike the Blessed Virgin, they had not been safeguarded from original sin. Yet their poetry reveals that they wished with all their hearts to emulate the holiness and innocence of her life. It also shows that they in turn tried to mirror God's goodness to Mary Immaculate and to a broken world in their poetic utterance.

The Catholic Church teaches that on several occasions, starting in winter, in February 1858, the Blessed Virgin appeared in a grotto in the Massabielle Rock in Lourdes, France, amid the Pyrenean Mountains, to the shepherdess Bernadette Soubirous (cf pages 71-73). When, acting on instructions from her parish priest, Abbé Peyremale, Bernadette asked that a dead rosebush in the grotto might flower so that he could believe in the apparitions, no such miracle occurred. However, the Abbé's disbelief in the apparitions underwent a change when Bernadette informed him in her Lourdes *patois* of the French language that the answer to a question about the name of the apparition had been: "I am the Immaculate Conception". This was seen as significant in the Church, given the fact that the relevant dogma had been proclaimed four years earlier, though it had been a widespread belief for many centuries among the rank and file of the faithful. Being illiterate, Bernadette was believed incapable of fabricating this reply.

The dogma held a special significance for the nun-poets since the Catholic Church in the United States of America had been dedicated to the patronage of the Immaculate Conception in the same way as the Church in South Africa was consecrated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary after this was defined as a dogma by Pope Pius XII.

It will be noted in this chapter that several poems with the Lourdes theme have been included, due to the link between this topic and the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Certain other poetry of relevance to the Blessed Virgin's early beginnings, notably the Catholic tradition that she left her home and was taken to the Temple at the tender of age of three, is likewise introduced in this section. This prefigures Christ's own presentation in the Temple.

In 1947 Sister Maryanna OP had a tender little poem published titled **Our Lady of America** in a religious magazine for children (1947:100-B):

OUR LADY OF AMERICA

Mary Immaculate, Lady blue-gowned
Slippered in moonbeams, Virgin star-crowned
Bend down from Heaven to bless this, our land,
Prairie and mountain and city and strand.
Watch over Washington, pray for St Paul,
Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles - all
Cities that linked form a Rosary chain
From Oregon's Portland to Portland in Maine!
On village and hamlet, on country and town
Mary of Nazareth, gently look down.

This little verse contains a lyrical touch in its description of the Blessed Virgin's appearance, "blue-gowned/slippered in moonbeams" (1-2). Sister Maryanna likens the towns, hamlets and cities of the United States to beads of a Rosary (7), all held together by Mary. Perhaps there is a touch of national propaganda in the "stars and stripes" issues implicit in the "blue" (1) of Mary's gown and the

"stars" in her crown (2). The Virgin's Immaculate Conception is referred to in the introduction to the poem (1).

The "blue" (10) and "stars" (10) features, this time with the addition of "red" (9) and "white" (9), also flag colours, are repeated in another patriotic poem by this author, this time written for a slightly more adult audience (In Roberts 1946:18). In this poem the reference to the Immaculate Conception occurs in line 5:

LADY OF OUR LAND

Saint George is guarding England with his dragon-slaying sword;
Saint Patrick keeps old Erin from the demon and his horde;
So through the saintly roster of patrons great and grand,
But America claims Mary as the Lady of Our Land.

Immaculate our Patroness, all-powerful with One
Whom here on earth she greeted by the loving name of Son.
The Mediatrix - fortunate are we that she will stand
Midway between high Heaven and our own most cherished land.

Our red is in her valiant heart, our white shines in her gown,
Our blue is in her mantle, and our stars gleam in her crown;
Our destiny is safe within her merciful right hand;
Our trust is firmly rooted in the Lady of Our Land!

Sister Maryanna is a skilful poet who achieves an uncontrived effect in the rhythmical pattern in this poem by taking refuge in poetic licence, as is seen in the first line of the second stanza. Whereas the normal sequence: "Our Immaculate Patroness" would have interfered with the scansion, the poet's spontaneous reversal of the first two words to read: "Immaculate our Patroness" places the stresses on the correct syllables, thus continuing the iambic heptameter pattern with some adaptations, such as the hovering effect achieved in the third line of the first stanza caused firstly by the absence of an unstressed syllable before the word "so" and again after the word "roster". In line 4 this hovering effect is used triumphantly to climax Mary's name.

In view of America's consecration to the Blessed Virgin's Immaculate Conception, it might be expected that the Marian poetry of the nun-poets would abound with poetry in praise of this dogma. This does not appear to be the case. Except for a wildly propagandist verse titled **Queen of the Stars and Stripes,** which for lack of redeeming features does not warrant inclusion in this study, there is little mention of the event in the poetry of these sisters. Whereas poetry about Mary's Perpetual Virginity and Divine Maternity proliferates and several nun-poets appear to have written in praise of the Blessed Virgin's Assumption, the poets as a group appear to be less forthcoming about the Virgin's Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. This is possibly due to the fact that the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption constitute the only Mariological dogmas in the annals of the Catholic Church. Christ's history fills the four gospels, so the authors had a Biblical background to work on when it came to the Christological dogma concerning the Blessed Virgin. The Bible, moreover, unequivocally proclaims Mary's Virginity (Luke 1:27; Matthew 1:18). Mary's personal history features largely in Church tradition and in the Apocryphal Gospels. Lacking distinctly defined parameters from the canonical scriptures in this regard, the nun-poets seem to have steered clear of writing about Mary's youth, with some exceptions, certain of which will be included in this section, otherwise mainly concerned with poetry on the Immaculate Conception.

A gentle tone, sincere emotion, colour and nature imagery and sweetness of language rob the traditional poem **Mary Immaculate** by Sister Angela Marie OP (In Roberts 1946:98) of any stiffness it might have had:

MARY IMMACULATE

Her conception morn!
The Dawn lifts the night's
Deep veil. The golden lights
Slip streaming through the dew.
Softly singing -
Swiftly winging -

A stir in yonder blue.
The heavens open! The choirs
Of angels spread their wings.
Their mighty anthem rings
With long-pent joy released.
Choir against choir!
Flame of rising fire
Of love! Then hush! 'Tis ceased.

Upon this earth 'neath Anne's
Sweet breast a seed is stirred,
Virgin-veiled; the Word
Of God bends low with grace.
Night is broken.
Love's great token
Reflects the God-head's face.

There is an almost Christmas-like excitement discernible in this poem because it tells of the way in which the "Word/ of God bends low with grace" (17-18) to pour holiness into the heart of the Blessed Virgin, as yet unborn, who will become His own blessed Mother before two decades are passed. The Immaculate Virgin has been conceived. The end of earth's darkness is in sight.

Every year on 21 November the Catholic Church celebrates its teaching that Mary was presented in the Temple. This date is mentioned in two little poems written in commemoration of the event by Sister M Julian RSM (1954:69):

THE CHILD MARY GOES TO THE TEMPLE

This single streamlet in a desert land
this one rose on a barren tree.
Anne might have kept her little daughter.

But how then had been wrought
the first link on the silver chain
of sacrifice to save us?
Saint Anne forged it
in the fire of her mother heart.

November 21st.

In the first stanza the poet speaks in a half concerned tone as though to the initiated; as if she were discussing with a mother, daughter, sister, cousin or neighbour some event in a relative's life that needs no background as its circumstances are only too well known. The flattered reader, who may have no such knowledge, is only too happy to assume the pose of the omniscient until the more official explanation is provided in the second stanza. "Anne" becomes "Saint Anne". The torments imposed on her by her self-denial in allowing her infant to leave her for the sake of God's glory are equated with the silversmith's fire. This purges impurities from the mother-heart in its natural desire to remain united with the beloved little child, and, of course, united with the sufferings Christ would undergo, to bring Salvation.

Sister Julian again praises Anne's heroic sacrifice in another poem. This time she uses incense imagery. By denying herself the joy of her child, Anne is metaphorically wafting the incense from her purified heart to the Lord God for His purposes, without self-pity (1954:70):

PRESENTATION OF THE CHILD MARY

Tearless, Anne watched her
climb up the temple stairs alone.

Wisdom like hers weeps not
for incense rising,
because for God it burns itself away.

November 21st

Perhaps the "incense" (4) is a play on the word "innocence" - the innocence of Mary Immaculate. It prefigures Christ's Godhead in its hidden allusion to the gifts of the Magi and His own Presentation in the Temple. The word "rising" (4) alludes to the Old Testament belief that incense would rise if the gift of the one who offered it were acceptable to God. Like incense, Christ rose from the dead and later ascended into heaven, while Mary was taken up into heaven.

Sister M Catherine OSU wrote a very colloquial and tender verse in which she described the Blessed Virgin's presentation (In Catholic Home Journal: no further details):

PRESENTATION

Thought for November 21

"She is such a tiny thing-"
Began her father, Joachim.
"The neighbours say she's growing tall,"
Anne contradicted him.

"I'm finishing a chair for her,"
His voice more strongly pled.
"We'll give it to our nephew's wife
With Mary's little bed."

"Her eyes are like twin pools of blue.
Her hair a sea of curls."
"What grace! Our only child to be
One of the temple girls."

"But it's so far and we are old,"
His voice broke at the word.
And Anne turned suddenly away
As if she hadn't heard.

Anne's matter-of-factness in the first stanza paradoxically underscores the effort she experiences in trying to suppress the emotions natural to a mother whose little child is removed from her. In fact all four of these stanzas reverberate with a deep underlying emotion, culminating in the final one, where Anne is unable to speak and Joachim's voice breaks. Anne is the woman, by her feminine nature more mystically orientated than her husband and thus prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for the furtherance of God's kingdom. Joachim who, more than his wife, lives in the present feels his heart breaking at the thought of parting from the child he hoped would have become the comfort of his old age. Anne fights

his weakness and her own by her stern self-denial in covering up her emotions and by changing the subject. This is a very poignant little poem which few parents who have had to give up a child, whatever the reason, will be able to read to its completion without feeling moved. In the simplest of ways it describes the greatest act of sacrifice of which a parent is capable. Yet it shows the nun-poet's conviction that when God desires the parents to give back the child He first gave them, it is more virtuous to submit than to refuse; no matter what the price.

Sister St Simon OSU wrote a small verse on this same event for children (1960:no page):

OUR LADY'S PRESENTATION

Mary, on your birthday
When you were quite small,
Did they give you presents -
A ribbon or a doll?

Did your mother kiss you
The day when you were three,
and talk about the Temple
Where God wished you to be?

You went to live in God's house
And He was pleased with you.
Oh, pray that I may always try
To do what God wants me to do.

This is an example of Mariological teaching aimed at pre-school children. Sister St Simon clearly deems little ones capable of understanding the need for self-sacrifice from a very early age, because Mary herself was chosen so early. This should not come as a surprise when it is remembered that the Old Testament records that Samson was chosen by God while in his mother's womb (Judges 13:5), while Hannah, the childless wife of Elkanah, offered her son Samuel, as

yet unconceived, to the Lord (1 Samuel 11). The New Testament records the similar fate which befell John the Baptist (Lk 1:13-16). The poet manages to avoid any taint of dogmatism that might possibly be levelled against her by phrasing the poem throughout the first two stanzas as a rhetorical question. That the answer is known by the author is implied in the request for intercession in the final couplet. Though this is a verse rather than a poem, it does tend to explain in a most delicate way that Catholics view Mary not as a goddess but as a human being first before becoming an angelic link between God and humankind.

Sister Maryanna OP addresses the Blessed Virgin throughout her poem **Morning Star** in which she strives to interpret Mary's holiness from the instant of her conception and throughout her youth. She manages to preserve the delicate balance between her own maternal tenderness at the thought of the little child and her filial respect for the greatness of the Blessed Virgin's Divine Maternity (In Robert 1946:18):

MORNING STAR

Little Temple maiden,
In your robe of blue,
Playing 'mid the lilies -
None is fair as you.
Sanctuary doves wheel
Close with wings of white;
You will wear a halo
Some day far more bright.
You will be our Mother
You will be our Queen
Wear a golden crown and
Robes of starry sheen.
None of this shall change your
Spotless heart and true -
Lovely little Morning Star,
You will still be you!

Sister Julian RSM's version of the Lourdes events, with their links to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, is invested with the brevity which came to be characteristic of her writings (1954:5):

FOR OUR LADY OF LOURDES

"Blessed are they who have not seen ..."
but who have sought
on mountain paths
your beauty poised
above a winter rose.

"Blessed are they..."
for life shall be for them
this only: your name
and the fair music of your smile.

The quoted words (1) were addressed by Christ to Thomas. They mean that those who have not seen the Lord but believe in Him are blessed (will be rewarded). Here they are made to apply to the individual in relation to the Blessed Virgin. Unlike Bernadette, Sister Julian is not a visionary, yet she seeks Mary with her whole life, heart and being (7-9). The second, shorter, quotation (6) hails back to the Sermon on the Mount and its Beatitudes.

Sister Julian does not appear to be thinking only of the Abbé Peyremale's instruction to Bernadette to request the Blessed Virgin to show her presence by causing a dead rosebush at the grotto to bloom in the heart of winter. It is the poet's own belief in miracles which has led to her obedience to the call of the religious life. The synaesthesia in the concluding line: "the fair music of your smile" (8) suggests her talent as a nun-poet to imbue actual and illusory vision with sound. She reproduces the beauty so discerned into the music of poetry to describe the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a mirror of example.

To celebrate the centenary of the Lourdes apparitions in 1958, Sister M St Francis SSJ wrote a poem in commemoration in which she refers to the Blessed Virgin as a person of royal blood who descends from her throne to become an ordinary human being and "chat" (7) with Bernadette. This anti-climax distinguishes Mary's royal status from her humanity. Bernadette is addressed as an intermediary between Mary and humankind (In Robert 1944:120):

CENTENARY PRAYER

Child of the Pyrenees, for whom the rock
Blossomed with Paradise, when Mary, Queen,
Immaculate, the Lady of the Snows,
Queen of the flashing river and the height
Queen of the rose-hung garland's incensed prayer,
Flower-clad, this Princess-Child of David's blood
Descended from her throne to chat with you,
Kneel once again before her, Bernadette,
And beg, with all the ardour that is Lourdes,
for this, our world of straining, frightened men,
The grace to seek her saving Son again.

The beautiful imagery contained in the words "the rock/Blossomed with Paradise" (1-2) is impressive both in its picture of dead rock flowering and of Mary's presence as recreating paradise, a hidden allusion to the Eve/Mary paradigm which holds that when Eve was driven from paradise, the world became rock-like and forbidding. This process became reversed at the Incarnation of the Word.

"All the ardour that is Lourdes" (9) refers to the strong aura of prayerfulness from the millions of healthy pilgrims and the hundreds of thousands of physically and mentally handicapped people they bring to Lourdes year in year out. The allusion: "straining, frightened men" (10) is a reference to the Cold War which

followed the Second World War, when Christians such as the poet, still clearly remembering the Nazi persecutions of the Jews during World War II, trembled before the atheist ideology of Communism with its implications of religious persecutions.

To feminist thinking, gender might here appear relevant, with Bernadette, a female, being told to approach Mary (8), while men (10) must seek Christ. It may be argued that the gender issue is one aspect of a larger poetic dispute. The question may be posed to which dogmatic aspects of the Blessed Virgin the nun-poets respond in a totally personal capacity, whether as a woman and a consecrated, virginal woman at that, and to which aspects they respond more generally at the extreme, including men, as in this poem.

Again to feminist thinking it might be an aspect of their representation of themselves (or to each of herself) which may seem as important as their representation of the Blessed Virgin. After all, it may be argued, Mary's images are laid down in dogma; they can merely rearrange, or - if very talented - recreate the "props" involved. Nothing prescribes their own poetic response - as long as it is this side heresy, which it would be, of course, from nuns of that era.

Were the nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century in fact beset by such preoccupations? If, as the simplicity of much of their work would suggest, the reverse is true, the questions posed in the two preceding paragraphs would be rendered irrelevant. Michael Bell asserts (1997:10):

> You can argue about all kinds of questions from within the shared premis(s)es of a world outlook but you cannot ground such an outlook itself by argument, nor in adopting it do you exercise anything that could really be called choice, since the process of its adoption is largely unconscious. It is properly the psychologist's as much as the philosop(h)er's choice.

Judging from the submissive but paradoxically liberated tenor of much of their writings, obedience to religious authority played a crucial role in the world outlook of the nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century. Catholicism is a religion in which roles are allotted according to gender, based on the philosophy elucidated by Samaha (cf p 89). Though during the latter part of the twentieth century this thinking certainly became a bone of contention and source of controversy to some Catholic women, both secular and religious, it needs to be proven that similar sentiments were nurtured by the nun-poets during the earlier years of this era. In the face of lack of such evidence, it could be argued that any Catholic feminist thinking that may have existed during the era simply had not reached the nun-poets at the time, no matter how dramatically the situation might change during the decades following the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council.

The Jesuits, it is said, believe that a child's mental and spiritual outlook is shaped for life during the first seven years of its existence. If this is so, it would explain the outwardly non-feminist stance of the nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century. These women had grown up with their religion in an age and an environment that was kept almost hermetically sealed from external influences. Their circumstances may be likened, perhaps, to the situation as it concerns the Amish people, even - in the case of the nun-poets - to the wearing of traditional dress.

For centuries Catholics had been compelled to fight for the right to practise their religion. By the time this due privilege had been won, the religion in many areas was considered a social handicap and an impediment to employment or political promotion. Nevertheless, those who professed the Catholic faith considered their religion to be a pearl of such great price that they cherished rather than challenged it. The fact that the Church was run by men was regarded as having been ordained by Christ Who chose only men for His Apostles. It is unlikely, in view of the tenor of their religious poetry, that the nuns would have been bold enough to question Christ's decision in this - or any other - regard.

Moreover, men were highly regarded during the era, as many women had lost the men they had loved to two world wars. The former were often so hard pressed to find the basic wherewithal to sustain life during the Depression and war years that gender considerations must needs have been postponed until the more immediate problem of simple survival could be resolved. Few Catholic women of the era appear to have regarded men as a threat to their identity. The large families they bore seem to indicate that they regarded marriage and motherhood as the fulfilment of their own destiny, a common reaction, it is said, when populations have been reduced by the carnages of war.

Finally, it is unlikely that those nun-poets who had voluntarily given up the married state and its consolations to serve the Blessed Trinity more closely felt any sense of rancour against the male of the species on this account. Having freely chosen to live as virgins, they were under no threat from men. On a somewhat humorous note in fact, many men of the period were wary of women religious and tended to give them a wide berth. Even some priests tended to have an uneasy respect for - and keep a healthy distance from - any nuns they might meet.

In their references to "men" or "mankind" the nun-poets do not appear to have regarded this appellation as being exclusive of womankind. To mention one small instance that was to infuriate feminists during subsequent decades of the century, Catholic priests of the era generally addressed the laity from the pulpit in the words "My dear brethren". There is no record to suggest that this appellation was regarded as inapposite or in any way offensive to the women in the congregation; neither do we seem to have proof that being addressed as males made them feel excluded from the thrust of the sermons.

As stated, the nun-poets wrote a great deal of their poetry on the Perpetual Virginity and Divine Maternity of Mary rather than on the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. This seems to manifest a clear desire to identify with the

former two attributes of the Blessed Virgin and ties up with the fact that their inborn motherliness often spilled over into their choosing teaching or nursing as their profession. The fact that the dogmas of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception did not affect them personally may be a further reason for the phenomenon that less poetry appears to have been written with regard to these two doctrines than to the others.

It is an interesting phenomenon that it was not a Catholic, but a Jew who escaped from Nazi persecutions, Franz Werfel, who wrote the famous book **The Song of Bernadette**. He wrote it after hiding in Lourdes while escaping from the Nazi threat during the Second World War. There he had promised to "sing the song of Bernadette" if God would spare his life and allow him to escape to the United States. The book became a best-seller and a film version was made with the actress Jennifer Jones playing the lead role of Bernadette. Against this background Sister Maris Stella wrote (In Robert 1944:120):

SONG FOR BERNADETTE

An image of Our Lady
stands in a shady
corner of the room.
I break the gloom
with a potted violet
tended and set
most surely for a sign
this is a shrine.
And even more-
this is a door
through which I see
things dear to me:
the niche upon the mountain
where runs the healing fountain;
the beloved one
bright as the sun
praised by a lonely
child only.

The violet-shine
has made a shrine
here in this room,
breaking the gloom
where the image stands
with folded hands.
And so I name the violet
Bernadette.

This poem which ostensibly concerns a "potted violet" (5) serves to highlight the Lourdes apparitions. The language is simple, with almost exclusively mono- and disyllabic words which emphasise the simplicity of Bernadette, whose littleness repeats Mary's own in Nazareth. Thus it recalls Mary's words in the Magnificat that God regards the humility of his people (Luke 1:52). The reference to Lourdes where "the beloved one" (15) was praised "only" (18) by a "lonely/child" (17/18) is printed in italics to set the apparition event apart from the modern classroom where the potted violet has been placed. The beauty represented by the violet in all its simplicity symbolises both the humility of the young shepherdess and the sincerity found in this unadorned poem.

Violets come in various colours. As this one breaks "the gloom" (4; 22) of the room, it is probably a white, a pink or a very pale shade of mauve. The light colours would be symbolic of the virginity of Bernadette, whose name the flower has been given as well as of the Blessed Virgin. Yet the very name of the flower, violet, which suggests mauve, is reminiscent of mourning and suffering - though these suggestions may not have been intended for the rather simple poem.

Sister Maris Stella is the author of ***Sedes Sapientiae*** (Seat of Wisdom) in which she alludes to several titles by which humankind addresses and honours the Blessed Virgin, though she omits to include that of the Immaculate Conception (In Robert 1946:396):

SEDES SAPIENTIAE

Lady, under many names you are entreated
by us, this side of Heaven, who come praying
of you succour in such trials as have been meted
to us - to one, this; to another, that; laying
before your wisdom, our unwisdom; before
your grace, our lack of it; by you came
wisdom into the lost world - and more -
into the lost heart. Therefore, your name,
O Seat of Wisdom! We have learning
but by your grace, bring to our minds this unknown,
this forgotten wisdom, that we may light burning
lamps to her; that raising in your name a stone
altar, we may raise our hearts also to you, who are
the steadfast undoer of Eve's folly and our folly.
Bright star.

This highly experimental Shakespearean sonnet in its irregular rhythm is marked by an extended use of enjambment which imposes stringent obligations on the scrupulously observed rhyming pattern. The poem represents a direct address to the Blessed Virgin. In it the poet admits that although she and her peers have been well educated (9) their learning has not prevented them from perpetrating follies similar to those which lost Eve paradise (14). Mary, the *sedes sapientiae* or seat of wisdom is wiser than they are and able to counteract their follies.

In the nun-poets' oeuvre, there are numerous references to processions in honour of the Blessed Virgin (cf pages 112-113). This pious practice was observed regularly in 1954, the Marian year proclaimed by Pope Pius XII to mark the first centenary of the promulgation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. In the next poem, Sister M Maura SSND, an English lecturer at the College of Notre Dame in Maryland, gives a very human explanation of one such procession in which she has participated. In straightforward terms the nun-poet who bowed her head to the blessing of a rabbi (cf page 7) explains the effort it took her after a day of teaching to concentrate on her prayers during one such procession (1953-54:20:108):

THIS SIDE OF THE CLOISTER:
ROSARY PROCESSIONAL

This is not a background picturesque:
(flats and sets) for cloister garth in novel or in play:
suggestion of the medieval in the costume: frustration in the spirit:
"sad and serene" in a half-resisted, half-desired hideaway.

Curl of a copper-foil moon
on a Christmas tree; no stars. The starched white frame
of wimple and of veil a cyclotron
where ash-grey, jewel wings cavort in candle flame
warm, stammering light.
The nuns walk in processional
between the hydrangea blossoms cowled in heat,
crisp holly and smooth-leaved rhododendron shrubs,
Twigs and broken brush snap like puppies at the slow-paced feet;
wax melts to candle wivern and to gargoyle. (wivern-wyvern)
The nuns pray, "Hail Mary ... Holy Mary ... (monstrous image)
and the valley prays; the tennis court; the parking lot;
terrace and lawn and road; the sweet gum prays;
the hawthorn; Spanish oak; yew and maple trees; the knot
of new-born mockingbirds nestling in the lime; a family of owls,
the squirrels, the kitten and the dog. "Hail Mary, full of grace ... Holy Mary "

This is nothing like the neat enclosure
(sets and flats) of Spanish "Cradle Song" or -French and quaint-
the nuns of "Cyrano de Bergerac," These are not nuns of time or place.
but God.

Queen and Lady, though nuns and night and prayer
are mummers at your throne, it is you who walk with them,
it is you who carry light-a quiet semaphore to God;
it is your country lane they walk; your Bethlehem;
your Nazareth; Gethsemane; and Ephesus.

Lady it is your silence
to which they walk back to the cloister, to stifling cell,
-and hot and heavy muslin of the bed.

Lady, it is your joy
that rocks the campus like a cradle
through the summer nights, so that the Little Boy
(still in exile) does not weep,
but laughs in His Father's Providence, and falls
(as Péguy says men should) content to sleep.

The title is written from the perspective of a nun who lives inside the cloister and is giving her readers a look into the fact that mundane considerations plague not only the less spiritually focused laity but also the nuns themselves. The procession of which Sister Maura writes clearly takes place in the evening after the students have gone home.

Her background as an English lecturer and teacher probably accounts not only for the poem's inspired adjectives and delightful similes and metaphors but also for the counterpoint stream-of-consciousness references to school plays, campus and tennis courts. Some of these are printed in italics and all of them are sternly brought back to the discipline of the plain print of the religious aspect of the procession. Yet even this proliferates with the joyful presence of flora and fauna as found on a Maryland college campus.

There is a contrast between the reality of the lives of the nuns themselves and the pretence found in plays and films about the religious life, underscored in words such as "cyclotron" (7) and "mummers" (26). "Cyclotron" possibly refers to the gashed smiles on the faces of the masks depicting tragedy and comedy.

This is a very visual poem with its synaesthetic image of "warm, stammering light" (9) brought about by the flickering flames of the candles carried by the nuns in their procession. They are headed by the Blessed Virgin as their invisible signaller or "semaphore" (27) to God. The procession passes the hydrangeas "cowled" (11) like the nuns, though in their case by heat. Grotesque shapes are formed by the candle wax as it spills down. The poem is also one of sound and silence; the sound of the recitation of the Rosary; the silence in which the nuns return to their cells. They do so under discipline, yet free, because the discipline has been self-chosen to ease the "exile" (36) of Mary's "Little Boy" who is the reason why the Blessed Virgin processed through Bethlehem, Nazareth, Gethsemane and Ephesus (28-29). It is to do Him homage that the nuns now choose to proceed in imitation of those wanderings through the grounds of a

convent in Maryland. Thus this poem, instead of becoming an exercise in self-pity, culminates in a final stanza full of happiness in imitation of Mary's "joy/that rocks the campus like a cradle" (33-34). This, in its own way, is as pleasingly original a combined metaphor and simile as that of "twigs and broken brush (which) snap like puppies at the slow-paced feet" (13).

This poem underscores the nun-poet's assured outlook, which forever strains upward, trying to distill meaning from the seemingly pointless problems besetting humankind that are regarded in the nihilist orientation as meaningless and intolerable. By bowing to the inevitable and doing so with good grace, the nun-poet seeks to draw blessing from problems a less God-focused person might dismiss as a curse or a gratuitous irritation.

Like Sister Maura, the Carmelite Sada-Marie Fingerlin accepts that it lay in God's design to obtain Mary's participation in the saga of humankind's Redemption (1957:32):

MARY, THE ADVENT OF GOD

We cannot know the pain, the aching, longing want,
The hungry dark and cold, the endless, starless nights
The ancient patriarchs and holy prophets knew
Till she appeared who was the *Coming* of the Lord.
Our thirst is quenched, our hungry spirits satisfied:
A Host, a chalice, answer daily to our need;
But these had only promises, long unfulfilled,
Responding to their yearning hopes' impatient pleas.
Until this child of prophets and of prophecies,
Herself a way for God, His morning star, His dawn,
With prayers and hope filled up the last of lengthening years,
Whose soul had long ago conceived God's Holy One.

The mountains of her sanctities were bending low
In humbleness that gazed at Truth and was His slave,
A truthfulness denied by him who would not serve
This true Light-bearer and the Light, her little Child.
The valleys of her lowliness were now filled up
With grace on grace and life for all the sons of God;
Humanity's rough, crooked ways made straight and plain,
And she a voice that cried aloud to Him to come.

'Twas then the *Sign* appeared: the Virgin found with Child! Lo,
Indeed the Lord had made a new thing on the earth:
The lovely paradise to which He came again,
The Woman who enshrined the Son of God made Man.
O wilderness of God, break forth in joy and sing!
O fruitful desert, spouse intact, of Spirit-Love!
O silence in whose deeps the Father spoke His Word!
Conceived immaculate, virginity become
Divinity's complete *Adventus Domini*
The *Coming* of the Holy One Who is to come.

The contemplative mind of Sister Sada Marie interprets the isolation and dejection of the waiting period which the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs suffered without fulfilment during the millennia leading up to the Redemption that culminated in Christ's giving of Himself as a Eucharist. The believer of the New Testament does not share the tragic sensation of loneliness with the believer of the Old Testament because of the celebration of the Eucharist (5-6). The Blessed Virgin (21) is, in the first instance, the fulfilment of the Isaian prophecy (6:14-15), which she would not be but for Christ.

The poet identifies the Blessed Virgin's role in Christ's life with that of John the Baptist (19-20) (Matt 3:3). In the second stanza she contrasts Mary's willingness to serve God with Satan's proud refusal to do so (13-15). In the third verse she moves to the predictions in the Book of the Apocalypse (21) before hearkening back to the prophecies of the Old Testament (25).

It is a point worthy of note that this poet, too, makes use of imagery of the Word (27) before fittingly linking the Blessed Virgin's Immaculate Conception as a mirror of example, which formed the topic of the present chapter, to Mary's Perpetual Virginity (28) which, as a state worthy of constant emulation in terms of the nun-poets' Marian praise poetry, will be discussed next.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IMAGES OF THE PERPETUAL VIRGINITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AS A STATE WORTHY OF EMULATION.

The American nun-poets, struggling to fulfil the almost superhuman demands made upon them by their vow of chastity, no matter how voluntarily chosen, must have drawn immense solace from the virginal example of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Poetry, as distinct from mere versification, tends to reveal truths about the poets which they might normally hesitate to share with others, and the pain imposed by the voluntary vow of chastity is nowhere more evident than in the legacy of religious poetry left by the nun-poets. Daughters of Eve, mother of the Old Testament, as much as they were daughters of Mary, the mother of the New, the nun-poets must often have experienced their self-imposed yoke of chastity as burdensome. Spiritually and intellectually they accepted their choice not to run a home, bask in the love of a husband and enjoy bringing up children of their own. Nevertheless, their every natural instinct must at times have rebelled against their limitations. To this some of their poetry bears eloquent witness. On the day they made their vows glory was theirs according to their own written testimony. As the days lengthened into months and then years and their child-bearing years ran out, they must at times have doubted whether they would be able to persevere in their commitment.

Their love for the Lord Jesus Christ must have been such that they must have longed to stay true to the commitments their humanity must have rebelled against. Moreover, their generation regarded a vow given at the altar of God to be binding on their conscience and indissoluble. Hence after Christ, for whom they had given up every temporal pleasure, their cynosure must have been the Blessed Virgin who never reneged on her virginity and had nevertheless given birth to the Son of God. This fruitful virginity must have made sense of their own deprivation, however voluntary. Therefore to Mary

their hearts must have sent up continuous prayers for intercession for perseverance, and for guidance in retaining an insight into the significance of their own lives of self-denial.

Church history abounds with the stories of saints, both men and women, who retained their virginity throughout their lives as their way of sanctifying themselves for the greater glory and honour of God. However, it is only the Blessed Virgin's virginity which was tangibly fruitful, when she bore the Son of God. For centuries Catholics had accepted the value of chastity as taught by their Church. When, hampered by the limitations their humanity imposed, they had strayed from the path of virtue, they had blamed no-one but themselves. This was no longer true in the twentieth century, during which many people questioned - if they did not dismiss outright as pious cant - the Church's injunctions to pursue the way of purity. The fact that hundreds of thousands of priests and religious left the ministry of the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council shows that it would be unrealistic to suppose that their predecessors never yearned to do likewise. However, if in fact some of them did so before the Council it would have been regarded as a cause for scandal that was well kept from the rank and file of the faithful.

At the time this poetry reached its zenith, many women were living alone because of the millions of lives lost during two world wars. Single Catholic women who obeyed the Ten Commandments must have drawn inspiration from contemplating the fruitful virginity of the Blessed Virgin. It is clear from the poetry of the nun-poets that they believed the voluntary surrender of sexuality and fecundity for the sake of God's kingdom to be a vivifying force for those who identify with Mary's fruitful virginity.

Virginia Berry (Sister Mary Saint Virginia BVM), a Sister of Charity, obliquely reveals the mental agony she has endured as a result of her vow of chastity. Writing with uncompriomising directness, she courageously tackles critics of voluntary chastity in the revealing text of her sonnet titled **A Nun to Mary, Virgin**.

Born in 1909, the poet spent her teenage years in the Roaring Twenties, the age of the flapper, bobbed hair, short skirts, long beads, cigarette holders and the remorseless tongue, which prided itself on holding nothing sacred. The owners of such tongues must have been at their most acerbic when encountering the nuns of the day, dressed in the long habit and veil of the religious. To these critics, this form of clothing would have represented an outward manifestation of a senseless anachronism. That Virginia Berry was exposed to keen humiliation on this account is abundantly clear in her sonnet, where she defensively counters "men's scorn" (7) and the "sharp gibes" (10) against her on account of her self-surrender brought about by her love for God. On a deeper level, the sonnet is a cry of pain in response to the frustration of her maternal desires. Yet the poem does not focus mainly on the pain of the poet but on hope, for the holy example of the Mother of God and the miracle of the Virgin Birth give meaning to the nun's life (1936:307):

A NUN TO MARY, VIRGIN

I had gone fruitless and defenceless, Lady,
Had it not been for your strange Blossoming;
Out of the sun and rain, in still and shady
And lonely moorlands, uncaressed by wing,
My having life had been a thing to mourn for,
Passing none on nor yielding up perfume-
Without you, I had cringed beneath men's scorn for
Skylarks that soar not, trees that do not bloom.
Without you, I had had no answer to
Sharp gibes against my love and my sweet Mating-
Now as I reach to take a Child from you,
These lips send far beyond my cloister-grating
The canticle a million maids have cried,
Finding in you themselves: and justified.

The imagery of nature and procreation imagery found in "Blossoming" (2), "sun", "rain", "shady" (3), "moorlands", "wing" (4), even when negative as in "fruitless" (1), "skylarks that soar not, trees that do not bloom" (8) provides the poem with a universal quality. This draws attention to the fact that Mary, like

nature a creation of God, has become the mother of the Creator of the universe. Against the vastness of this universe, the limitation of the word "cloister-grating" which concludes the third quatrain would seem to be a contrast. This is counteracted by the fact that the words from "these lips" (12) (or probably more literally the poet's pen) send a universal message of fruitfulness from a world which critics might slate as being a sterile one.

Keen agony is revealed in the poet's stout assertion that she does not "cringe(d) beneath men's scorn" (7) and at their "sharp gibes" (10). She would not be human if she did not suffer on account of her childlessness. However, because she is able to reach out her empty motherly arms to the Christ Child held in His mother's embrace, she is able to find solace in the recitation of Mary's "canticle" (13); the Magnificat, "cried" (13) by "a million maids" (13). The word "cried" would seem to be tantamount to an open admission that no matter how joyously a woman may give herself to the religious life for the greater glory and honour of God, this is no guarantee that she is not left carrying a great deal of emotional pain on the way. However, the poet convincingly declares herself and others similarly burdened to be justified by Mary's fruitful virginity. Thus she concludes her sonnet on a note of hope.

Another astonishing exposition of a way of life which has always been regarded with incredulity by those not possessed of a religious vocation is provided by the Carmelite Sister Sada-Marie in her starkly titled **Plainsong Motet** (1957:15). This is a reference to the litany of scriptural praises of the Blessed Virgin sung in harmony by the nuns of her community when reciting their daily Office of the Blessed Virgin.

Plainsong is a chant to which prayers are sung on one note with tonal variations indicated by means of written symbols above the relevant syllable in the text. This is the way in which Catholic and Byzantine monks and nuns from medieval times to the poet's day - and still at times today - sang God's praises throughout the day from prime or morning prayer upon awakening until compline or night prayer, the last prayers recited at bedtime. A motet is a

vocal melody set to Scriptural words, for use in the liturgy of the Church. **Plainsong Motet** thus represents a paradox, since plainsong is one melodic line, no harmony, whereas a motet involves different voices, parts in harmony. There is thus a suggestion that the poet intends the paradox to signify that her own (plainsong) voice becomes a beautiful harmony (motet) when united with the Blessed Virgin, in which case the "voice" would symbolise the life of virginity. The sober image denoted by the word "plainsong" is contrasted with more exuberant musical imagery contained in words such as "singing" (2), "motif" (3), "recurrence sounding sweet" (3) and "rise in joy" (4), though this last image is counteracted by "or fall in cadences of tears" (4).

PLAINSONG MOTET

My life - an antiphon intoned today -
Whose psalm shall keep on singing through the years,
Whose motif finds recurrence sounding sweet
To rise in joy or fall in cadences of tears.

Its words are few but weighty with a gift
Of triple consecration fully made,
Words unadorned by poetry or prose
But pregnant with an abnegation, sober, staid.

To chant my chaste and chastening plainsong
I must pass by earth's richest melody,
Blend all my will and wishes into One,
And learn the Virgin Mother's strong antiphony.

To sing a purer praise at purer dawns
I must pass through the nocturnes of the night
And gather freer rhythms wrought of peace
To celebrate at Prime the liturgies of Light.

When I have closed my final vesperal,
Intone my nuptial song - I live though dead,
And fallen from my faithful hands the lyre.
I dream another rose-crowned day, with Compline said.

This is not strictly a poem in praise of the Blessed Virgin, although it contains praise for her virginity, holding her up as a pattern for emulation. The poet describes her own three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, as a "triple consecration" (6) and uses a pun on the word "chaste" (9) which underscores

the purifying force of pain. Symbolically uniting her virginity to that of the Blessed Virgin, the poet enters into dialogue with Mary in order jointly to praise God. She expresses her feeling that virginal life is "pregnant with an abnegation" (8), a paradox ostensibly constituting a contradiction in terms, and asserts that the life of self-denial is fraught with pain, implying that life's greatest joy or "richest melody" (10) has to be renounced.

Just as the simple plainsong is contrasted with more melodious music, so too are the barren aspects of a lifestyle which denies "earth's richest melody" (10) as contained in family life contrasted with the "freer rhythms wrought of peace" (15) or an existence lived in harmony with God brought about by a life of self-denial due to the surrender of an individual's most deep-rooted longings. The Blessed Virgin is indicated as singing one part of the antiphon, which embodies praises to God chanted by two individuals (or in the convent context: two groups) in reply to one another. The word "rose-crowned" with its pun on the Rosary (20) suggests the connection with the Mother of Jesus. Metaphorically the poet equates her days on earth with "nocturnes of the night" (14), music appropriate to the mood of the night, which has to be endured so that heaven, symbolised by "purer dawns" (13) may be reached. When the time comes for this to come to pass, she will "live though dead" (18) and it will be time for her bridal song to be sung as she meets face to face the Lord in whose honour she chose to forego the gifts of marriage and motherhood.

In the next poem, also written by Sada-Marie Fingerlin, the poet admits to having felt the wrench when she isolated herself from earth's blessings, equating this complete act of consecrated surrender to an invasion of her essence and existence. She describes the struggle which her capitulation cost her and her perplexity at the realisation that the Blessed Virgin paid a like price. Having discovered the cost, the poet expresses her continuing need of the Blessed Virgin's example so that she herself may likewise become fruitful in the sight of God (1957:3):

INVASION

Quasi fluvium pacis et quasi torrentem inundantem.

Isaiah 66:12

The things that I had known and loved
(Things of a child now set aside),
My fondest hopes, my dreams, desires,
My petty loves-all crucified!
For I have suffered siege and fall,
Invasion more imperative
Than mighty river's seaward tide.
Exigent past all I might give,
This inundating torrent swept
Across my soul and only left
Abysses in me, voices that cried
To be filled up-
I did not know
Or guess this was the way she trod
Who made in me a place for God.

Here was a peace, undoing all,
Which left no refuge for my pride,
When, clothed in sanctities, she came
To fill the deeps that ached and cried.
How could I know this way she trod
To make in me a place for God?

As He is infinite, immense,
My bonds and boundaries undone
She set around my finity
The freedom of the Holy One.
O Torrent, River, Presence, flow
And flow again, Mother of God,
Fecund with life, to be in me
Capacity-a place for God.

The poet admits that she suffered a profound sense of deprivation after emptying herself of the trappings of the secular life. There is an interesting paradox in the fourth line, reading: "My petty loves-all crucified!" It is possible that the poet by her introduction of the word "crucified" takes refuge in irony, as though juxtaposing the small cost of her own sacrifice in relation to the earth-shaking price Christ paid to redeem her in her capacity as a member of the human race. The sincere regret voiced by her admission of the "abysses" (11) left as a result of her sacrifice are counteracted by her child-like wonder

that Mary who made in her "a place for God" (15;21) should have followed the same road. Mary brings her solace, comfort and consolation and teaches her spiritually that the only way to open herself entirely to "the freedom of the Holy One" (25) is to empty herself entirely of her own desires. While obeying, the poet implores the Blessed Virgin to fill up with the presence of God the spaces left within her on account of the oblation of her self-love. The poet uses the expression: "she came/To fill the deeps that ached and cried" (18-19) in an effort to demonstrate that what seems to be mere emptiness can be transformed into a positive space for God, prepared by the Blessed Virgin.

On a less sophisticated but simultaneously less inward-looking level, Sister Madeleva equates her vow of chastity with a white robe fashioned by her own fingers for the Divine Infant and presented to Mary as a gift for her Son (1936:6):

SWADDLING CLOTHES

My days are all white with wonder, the wonder of stitching and sewing
Making a spotless garment for Mary's spotless Son;
My hours are bright with joy as I watch the small robe growing,
The little robe of love that will compass the Infinite One.

Love is the cloth it is made from; my heart possesses no other;
Love is the pattern, too, that I trace with unfaltering care;
Love is my double thread, the love of the Son and the mother;
Woven throughout of love, think you it will be fair?

Aye, and the mother Mary will let her Little One wear it,
He Who has never in aught save divinity been arrayed,
All upon Christmas morning - O heart of me, can you bear it,
The joy of your God appareled in raiment your love has made!

A profound innocence pervades this poem. It is Christ-focused, without a hint of self obtruding to mar the glory of the sacrifice. Though her vow of poverty is movingly implied in the words: "Love is the cloth it is made from; my heart possesses no other;" (5), the poet wastes no time mourning the time before her vow of poverty was taken when she was sufficiently affluent to purchase

gifts for the Babe of Bethlehem. To one of her deep insight, love is a more precious commodity than gifts of material value. Rather than deplore the sacrifice of her fertility, even by implication, moreover, she marvels at the generosity of God for allowing her to surrender her own human desires and longings (11-12).

As time goes on and her sacrifice endures, the symbolic robe for the little Christ grows nearer to completion. The only reward the poet seeks is that Jesus may approve of her gift and be clothed in it by His mother, Mary, who is thus made part and recipient of this creative process to complete which the "double thread, the love of the Son and the mother" (7) has been used.

Despite its simplicity, the poem culminates in a glorious finale: "O heart of me, can you bear it/The joy of your God appareled in raiment your love has made?" (11-12). On first perusal, a reader may wonder why the poet uses the personal pronoun "me" to follow the preposition "of" instead of the more frequently used possessive pronoun of the first person singular: "mine". Perhaps to the poet the expression "heart of mine" contains too many sentimental connotations of tarnished romantic associations exploited in the media. In comparison, the appellation "heart of me" appears as fresh, original and pure as the rest of this lovely little poem. It is also possible that "heart of mine" would refer to the physical organ as such while "heart of me" signifies the essence of the poet. In the process of its composition, Sister Madeleva reveals that she has retained the heart of a child. Though later poetry by this poet will show a growth in maturity and poetic dexterity, the innocent charm of "Swaddling Clothes" is unchallenged in the remainder of her oeuvre. This poem can also be seen to prefigure the Crucifixion when the soldiers cast dice for the cloak of Christ, in Catholic tradition believed to have been a seamless garment, sewn by His Mother. Thus, while this is a poem of joyous anticipation, the full history of Salvation gives it a sad premonitory value.

Sister Marian Julian RSM in her image of the Blessed Virgin's perpetual virginity, somewhat inaptly titled ***Speculum Justitiae*** (Mirror of Justice), reflects mainly on Mary's virginity as mirroring God's infinite goodness in all

things. Through the medium of a rhetorical question (5) she by implication declares Mary's virginity to be more lustrous than that of other virgins, so that it best reflects God's goodness (1954:15).

SPECULUM JUSTITIAE

All nature mirrors God;
His justice, His holiness;
all loveliness shows forth His limitless beauty,
but she, creation's Queen, mirrors Him best.

Who has known purity
more pure than snow upon her mountain tops -
than lilacs white against her spring's young green?

Hers is the height of peace above the stillest sky
bereft of cloud and bird,
the clearest blue.

All nature mirrors God,
but Mary, best.

This poem is about nature and creation of which Mary is "Queen" (4). Her purity and peace are purer and higher than those of nature, described here. By saying that Mary is more pure than snow, the poet implicitly compares it to her.

This use of snow to symbolise Mary's purity is far from original - as witness its use by Sister Wilfrid OSD in **To Mary Immaculate** (cf page 128) and by Sister M Angelita BVM in **To Our Lady in Winter** (cf page 130) - yet it can never seem hackneyed when used as epitomising the stainlessness of the Blessed Virgin's chastity. The contrast of "lilacs white" (7) is particularly descriptive, due to the poet's reversal of the normal adjective-noun sequence. It causes the reader to pause, since the thought of lilacs automatically conjures up an impression of the colour lilac. It is then realised that these lilacs are white.

Set off against the freshness of "spring's young green" (7) they emerge from the soil almost whiter than snow. This contrast also serves to emphasise the difference between the Creator Whose purity is reflected and the created being who reflects His purity in her virginity and the stainless perfection of her soul even to the absence of any stain of original (or hereditary) sin. The reversal is helpful, moreover, in sustaining the rhythmic pattern. It also reflects nature, as God's creation.

Snow imagery is likewise used in the following poem, in which Sister M Bernetta OSF waxes indignant at the thought that Mary, the virgin of virgins, after the birth of her Son was obliged to undergo the purifying ritual of Jewish mothers in terms of their religion. According to her lights, she is sincere in her use of the word "stupid" (1), a word as unsophisticated to modern eyes as it would have been regarded as direct and straightforward in her own day (In Robert 1944:64):

MARY'S PURIFICATION

Out went the stupid to wash the snow;
To cleanse the lily of Christ
Wouldn't you think that they all should know
The pearl who couldn't be priced?

Wiser to purify crystal stone,
To call the tulip unclean,
Than to wash the rose that God's hand had sown,
Young Mary, the innocent Queen.

Sister Bernetta draws the reader into the depths of her emotion by her assumption that nobody with any sense could disagree with her. In an arresting opening line she demonstrates that it would be impossible to wash snow; it would simply disintegrate. Her real meaning, however, is that Mary, being totally pure, is in no need of cleansing. By using a rhetorical question

(3-4) she appears to give the reader a chance to agree with her. However, having already castigated those who differ as "stupid" (1), this courtesy appears to be a mere formality. In the second stanza Sister Bernetta does not stoop to subterfuge but roundly proclaims that the foolishness of forcing Mary to undergo purification is more blatant than any other lapse from wisdom. Her indignation at those she believes capable of supporting the idea that the Blessed Virgin would need such a purification is staunchly expressed.

Sister M Thérèse SDS touches delicately on Mary's virginity in the following poem (1945:42):

GALILEAN MAY

Into the hills of Galilee
Our Lady went one day
Lured by the wonder-woven bloom
Dropped from the looms of May.

Slim lilies leaned to touch her gown.
Curving through delicate air
A fledgling thrush flew to her hand,
Butterflies in her hair.

She told her secret to the winds
That brushed her garment hem,
The tear-wet pitying winds that blew
Up from Jerusalem.

And as she spoke a little name
Tremulous, low and sweet,
A golden surf of buttercups
Broke against her feet.

The winds and flowers of Galilee
Grown wistful of her face
Still wait her footfall at the May
Gentle, and full of grace

This poem represents an exercise in delicacy, so ephemeral that it might be easier to determine what it does not say than what it does, but it apparently refers to Mary's Perpetual Virginity. Using nature imagery which reaches a climax in the lines "A golden surf of buttercups/Broke against her feet" (15-16), expressing as it does the simplicity of the wild flower juxtaposed with gold, the metal which is fit for a queen, the poet skilfully paints the awe of nature in the presence of so holy a lady.

In the section in which Sister Thérèse comes nearest to disclosing the secret of the Incarnation (9) she mentions it only as a secret, and one she does not care to divulge at that. Mary's virginity is suggested by the awe in which she is held by nature. Just as Mary herself kept words in her heart and pondered over them, so too does the poet. Yet the reader is left with a stronger awareness of Mary's virginity, though unexpressed, than if it had been baldly described.

In the third stanza, the Crucifixion is prefigured. Mary is still the maiden, the Incarnation a secret still to come to pass, but the winds know in advance of the Crucifixion (12), of the 'end' of the event whose beginning is this poem's secret. Because of the agony her Son will suffer in Jerusalem, the winds from this city are described as "tear-wet, pitying" (11-12).

The poem **Ecce Ancilla Domina** (Behold the handmaid of the Lord) (In Robert 1944:46) was written by Sister Francis Marie SCL. The poet, probably unintentionally, even unwittingly, contradicts the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception by her suggestion that the Blessed Virgin was chosen to be the mother of Christ by means of arbitrary selection on the basis of chastity. She nevertheless casts light on the high premium set on chastity by herself and her peers:

ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI

In hush of night God scanned earth's valleys fair
For maiden clothed in white virginity:
And Mary, from inglorious Nazareth there,
Was chosen by the Blessed Trinity.

Enthralled before that maid of destiny
Bright Gabriel for them asked her consent.
Expectantly the Mighty Triune power
Await the maiden's word in sweet content.

She bowed her head. Her soul in wonder lay.
Her fiat, sweet and low, she whispered thus:
"Behold the Lord's handmaid. Him I obey."
The Word was then made flesh.
God dwelt with us.

In addition to the doctrinal error already pointed out, there are a number of other defects, including the overtones of romantic narrative fiction found in the second stanza. In the third verse the author has managed to botch an account of an event which someone with more fluency and less self-consciousness could have transfigured into luminous poetry. The transparent attempt at simplicity in order to create an illusion of contrast in the final lines is doomed to failure on account of the use of the trite words "sweet and low" (10), while the verb concerning Mary's soul (9) is an obvious endeavour to rhyme with "obey", another unsuccessful poetic ploy. The poem's last two lines, which are really one line in iambic pentameter, are split into two for effect.

An interesting feature of this poem is the use of the word "Enthralled" (5) pertaining to Gabriel before Mary, instead of the reverse. This is reminiscent of the penultimate line of Sheila Cussons's poem **Aankondiging** (Annunciation): "And long and in an ecstacy did I regard her" (cf page 53).

Less brief than we have come to associate with Sister Mary Julian RSM's poetic compositions is her poem written to celebrate the Blessed Virgin's mystical espousal to God (1961:no page). It suggests that Mary was the first consecrated virgin to receive a ring symbolising her union with God, as nuns still do when they take their final vows today:

FOR OUR LADY'S ESPOUSALS

Goldsmith's tiny hammers
dance with joy
to shape the ring
that Mary is to wear.
Yet God's bride needs
no earth-made sign
to bind her
to his heart.
Before the stars were made
He gave her jewels
and golden gowns with greater sheen
than moonbeams might have woven,
soft stoles more colourful than rainbow lights.

She is God's own
whom Joseph shadows from the world
until the brilliance of her beauty
blinds the sky.

Let goldsmith's hammers
dancing mold
a slender circlet
for her hand.

In after-time
standing upon a moon-throne,
she will wear the stars for crown;
about slim, queenly shoulders will be thrown
the royal cloak of sunrise.

In this poem, whose physical shape resembles that of a hammer, the penultimate stanza's protrusion indicating the hand which holds it, the poet equates Mary's espousal to God with a human marriage, during the course of which the bride traditionally receives a ring from the bridegroom. Sister Julian's sensitive reference to Joseph (15) reminds the reader that he was in fact engaged to the Blessed Virgin and causes wonderment at the heights of total selflessness to which he and others who offered the gift of their virginity, like the nun-poets, were able to aspire in their unquestioning love of God.

Sister Julian may be seen as applying the jewellery theme to her own situation and that of the other nun-poets. They too were given a ring to

symbolise their union with God when they made their vows. They too will receive blessings beyond telling "in after-time" (22). Meanwhile life with its vows of poverty, chastity and obedience has its bleak moments which they will endure in the knowledge that the ring they wear, like Mary's ring in the poem, is symbolic of an eternity beckoning to be spent in harmony with God.

Sister Mary Thérèse derives comfort at the contemplation of the silence of the Blessed Virgin, protected as zealously as her virginity, and rich in fruitfulness (1945:45):

A FOUNTAIN SEALED

One brief phrase out of scripture I prefer
To other praise of her-

She was a woman who had learned the art
of pondering in her heart.

Of inner cherishing, keeping the word
By which her soul was stirred.

Beneath the literal integument
She sweetly bent

To inner meanings, limpid and profound,
That held her bound

To them for all the years that she should be,
Tasting their ecstasy.

Much as the fleeting colour of a wing
Might hold one pondering,

Or poignant words of lovers, told apart
Still rend the heart.

This is the woman I would stand before
At Nazareth's unlatched door.

This is the radiant woman I would meet
On Bethlehem's narrow street,

Serenely poised and beautifully wise,
Whose soul burns in her eyes

Holding its secret wisdom, love-annealed,
As a fountain sealed.

Sister Thérèse experiences Mary's silence much as her virginity since silence is not commonly regarded as a womanly virtue. Women like to share and bond verbally but speaking out of turn can harm the inner spiritual life and be the cause of many imperfections. Nuns are compelled in terms of their vows to keep the great silence from the time the prayers of compline, the last prayers in the evening, have been recited until after the community Mass in the morning (cf page 214). Thus the poet has no doubt gradually discovered the beauty of silence, the supernatural virtue learnt, like her virginity, from Mary's example.

The paradox of the sealed fountain in the title and the closing line intimates the fruitfulness of Mary's virginity: Christ born from a virgin's womb. It emphasises yet another paradox, that Mary, though so blessed by God, kept silent about the revelations. A third paradox shows Mary as "radiant" (19). Yet among the words she has been pondering in her heart are those uttered by Simeon, warning her of a sword that will pierce it. Thus Sister Thérèse delicately suggests that to do God's will, even when it entails suffering, brings its own sense of joy.

It is a very strong Mary that is presented in this poem, representing a very feminine (as distinct from feminist) view of a woman who understands the importance of her own role and her own suffering in the grand picture of salvation. What distinguishes this view from feminism is its implied surrender, demonstrated in words such as "beneath" (7), "bent" (8), "bound/to them" (the inner meanings of the words) (10-11). It also makes mention of Mary's serenity (21) though her heart may be rent asunder with grief (16). Here the

silence of Mary is strong, her submission independently chosen, rather than in an effort to please as Marina Warner suggests when mentioning the *yin* attribute with its more passive associations as being applicable to the Blessed Virgin.

It has been decided to conclude this chapter, which commenced with a poem in praise of the fruitfulness of the Blessed Virgin's chaste womb, in which all Christians believe, even if they disagree about Mary's continued chastity, with another such poem. This is the way Sister M Vida CSJ expresses this belief (1958:58:27):

FIAT

"Fiat" the holy Virgin said
And divine and human natures wed
One spring when Nazarene flowers were fair
And barren earth of grace was bare.

That sweet contact of heaven and earth
Flowered into life and birth
At the maid's accepting word:
"Behold the handmaid of the Lord."

The immaculate, the undefiled
Was by the Spirit fructified;
And from that pure and spotless womb
Came the Root of Jesse's fairest bloom.

Which might on shining harps of gold
Be in song most loudly told;
But no, in silent secrecy
God wrought that profound mystery.

By Mary's passive "Be it done"
God gave to earth His only Son;
By her "Fiat" God in flesh was clad,
And Mary became the Mother of God.

Though somewhat inept, this poem radiates sincerity and is clearly intended to be a hidden attempt at a catechism lesson rather than an exercise in poetic

skill. The metrical pattern is shaky, relying too much on quavering and hovering effects, while the quality of the rhyming is poor (undefiled-fructified; secrecy-mystery; clad-God). Line 4: "and barren earth of grace was bare" is a clumsy, not to say an odd one, lines 15 and 16 are distinctly amateurish as an answer to the assertion which precedes them. The end of the third stanza should preferably have been left unmarked by a full stop, since it runs into the fourth verse.

Despite these imperfections, the concluding two lines of **Fiat** constitute a fitting end to this section in which poetry in praise of the Blessed Virgin's perpetual virginity has been dealt with. That this acceptance was a strong rather than a passive acceptance of Mary's Divine Maternity has been posited in the discussion of **A Fountain Sealed** found in this chapter. The expression: "Let it be done unto me in accordance with God's Word" (Luke 1:38) likewise comprises a suitable introduction to the next chapter, in which the glorious Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin will be examined in the light of the nun-poets' oeuvre.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IMAGES OF THE DIVINE MATERNITY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AS MOTHER OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND HER MOTHERHOOD OF THE HUMAN RACE.

The nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century considered Mary to be their own mother and themselves to be her children; not merely in terms of Church teaching but also because this belief they had been taught had assumed emotional dimensions. Nowhere is this demonstrated more strongly than in their poetry to Mary as their mother, in which they offered her every aspect of their lives. This poetry includes compositions such as **Our Lady of the Home, Our Lady, Queen of the Classroom, Our Lady of the Loom and Thimble, Queen of the Stars and Stripes, Queen of the World, Our Lady of Victories, Our Lady of the Libraries, Our Lady of the Word, Our Lady of Lullabies, Our Lady of Literature, Our Lady of Quietness, Our Lady of the Refugees, Our Lady of the Lab, Our Lady in the Atomic Age and Our Lady of the Apocalypse.**

This trend of addressing the Blessed Virgin in the time-honoured tradition of a young bride telephoning her mother for cooking advice would be perplexing unless it were borne in mind that many of the traditions to which these nun-poets had been bred had been forged in Victorian times and were based on the Decalogue. In many cases the nuns came from traditional Catholic homes where they were taught the fourth Commandment in the Exodus version (20:12) "Honour thy father and thy mother". (Protestants use the version from Deuteronomy 5:16, in which this Commandment is listed as the fifth one). Family ties were cherished and the sisters, when leaving their homes, knew they might not see their families again for decades, if ever. Their correspondence was censored and limited. Such steps were taken to wean them from their families, so that they could singlemindedly serve God. However, their extreme love for their parents and siblings whose virtues shone brighter in retrospect needed an outlet and was therefore focused on God, the Blessed Virgin, the saints and the angels. The discipline and innocence of their lifestyle ensured that this love remained child-like, even

when the nun herself became highly qualified academically. This accounts for poetry such as **To Our Lady of the Lab"**.

Motherliness at first sight seems to sit ill on one who is simultaneously hailed as a perpetual virgin. The word conjures up visions of physical affection, an attribute apparently consistent with the presence of conjugal felicity. This characteristic would appear to be applicable to Mary, the young girl and perpetual virgin, were it not for the fact that no-one who has seen even a baby girl playing with a rag doll could doubt the fact that motherliness is a quality inborn in women and an integral element of their femininity, although some very masculine men tend to share a strong nurturing quality. The maternal quality of the Blessed Virgin is demonstrated in her alacrity to assist her pregnant elderly cousin, her wrapping the Child in swaddling clothes, the gentleness of her reproof on finding Jesus teaching in the temple after her long search, her sweet concern for the bridegroom at Cana, her meekness while Jesus was teaching, her vigil beside the Cross and her support of His apostles until the Holy Spirit came upon them. Mary, without losing her virginity, was thus a mother through and through. That some nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century admired this motherliness is seen in the following pictorial sonnet. In this poem Sister Agnes CSJ, describes Mary as a mother bird in her concern for Christ and humankind (1954:91:251):

MARY COMPARED TO A MOTHER BIRD

This single-hearted Mother is all eyes;
A circling bird on daylong, nightlong wings
Yearning above a bone-branched paradise
Where nests her young among our straw-gold strings.
Or, shuttling through the wind, she weaves a roof
Seamless as peace against all wild-flown thieves,
Then soars above crossed boughs in constant proof
That all her love lies latched there under leaves.
Here, now she hovers, now in mid-air floats,
Dips from the sun's gold dish a sacred fare,
Then drops the bright bread to the open throats,
Her song a mild and flowing sanctus where
She magnifies the tree from leaf to root.
(Safe swings the nest, sings blessed is the fruit.)

The bird imagery which abounds in this metaphoric sonnet is self-evident, as is that of the tree. Even though the two are used in conjunction, there is no evidence of mixture, not even in the last line (14) in which the nest swinging in the boughs of the tree is juxtaposed with the fruit which grows on its branches. This makes the "fruit" (14) not merely that of the tree, but of the womb of the Blessed Virgin.

A looming apprehension is indicated in the sight of the "bone-branched paradise" (3) which conjures up the vision of Mary's dead Son on the Cross and accounts for her yearning (3). "The roof/Seamless as peace" (5-6) constitutes a reference to the Catholic tradition that the robe Christ wore before He was crucified was a seamless one, woven by His mother. The crossed boughs (7) prefigure the wood of the Cross on which her Son will die and this is repeated in the alliterative statement that "all her love lies latched there" (8). The "sacred fare dipped from the sun's gold disc" (10) symbolises the Eucharist, the consecrated Body of Christ, which in the form of bread will bring life to the open throats (11) of humankind. Her *sanctus* (holy) song (12) refers to the Latin version of the part of the Eucharistic celebration where the people proclaim God's holiness. When she magnifies the tree from leaf to root (13) her Magnificat in praise of God and His bounty is recalled.

The Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary started at the moment of the Annunciation, described here by Sister Agnes Mary MSBT in an unusual six-line composition similar in form and style to the poetry of Sister Mary Julian RSM. Sister Agnes juxtaposes the Blessed Virgin's simplicity and the inconceivable honour lavished upon her by God when He became incarnate in her virginal womb. According to the poet, Mary advanced from childhood to womanhood in one brief instant without Gabriel's mediation as God visits her (in Robert 1946:299):

MOTHER'S DAY

A little girl
Knelt down to pray
Wrapt in humility;
A woman rose-
Magnificat!
She clothed Divinity.

The metaphorical use of the word "clothed" (6) not only emphasises Mary's Motherhood in sublime imagery but also draws attention to the fact that the Blessed Virgin had to perform many housewifely tasks in order to raise the Son of God to manhood.

Like Sister Agnes Mary, Sister Julian RSM is brief and to the point in her description of the distillation of God and man within Mary (1954:33):

DOMUS DOMINI
House of the Lord

Nazareth was home to her
until an angel voice shook down the stars
and Love's wing
shadowed the sun.

Heaven and home are one now;
exile is not.
Light dwells in her :
wherever she walks, is God.

The brief poetic utterances of this author never cease to amaze on account of the depth they contain. Angel and light imagery fill the first verse. Nature, epitomised by "the stars" is subservient to the "angel's voice" (2) which shook them down. This characterises the supernatural. The light transfers itself to Mary who now holds the King of heaven and earth in her small person. She has become the "house of the Lord", *"Domus Domini"*, and heaven lives within her.

Repetition is used to emphasise the belief of Sister Mary Aurea BVM and her generation that Mary is mother not only of Christ but also of the Church, the

Mystical Body, of which Christ is the head and the human race makes up the members (1951:no page):

MOTHER OF THE MYSTICAL BODY

Canst thou forget that breathless day
When hidden in thy womb there lay,
("Ave" and "fiat" being said,)
We the members, Christ the Head?

Canst thou forget that happy morn
When thou didst see thy newly born
Asleep within a manger bed
We the members, Christ the Head?

Canst thou forget the bitter woe
Of that Good Friday long ago,
The Cross, where agonizing bled
We the members, Christ the Head?

Oh Mother, thou canst not forget
His suffering members bleeding yet,
Till time to timelessness has fled,
We the members, Christ the Head.

This poem represents a reflection on an epistolary text by the Apostle Paul, (Romans 12:5). In the first stanza, the reader is faced with the assertion that Christ, even while still dwelling in Mary's womb, was already the Head of His Church and the Redeemer of all humankind. When He was born in the stable, all His children were part of this event, as they were united in His death, described in the third verse. Now that He has been victorious, Mary's other children, humankind, are still suffering and in need of her motherly care. The rhetorically questioning air of the poem keeps it lively and draws a response of alertness from the reader.

The repetition of the final line of each of the four stanzas confirms the message that every human being is a member of Christ's Body and as such a child of Mary, taking part in Christ's glory as well as in His agony. In response to the first three quatrains containing the extended rhetorical question as to

whether Mary remembers that humankind was conceived in her womb, the fourth quatrain asserts that Mary is indeed aware of, and unable to forget, her motherhood of suffering humanity for all eternity.

In line with her compassionate mission, the first thing Mary decided to do after the Annunciation was to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who, the angel had told her, was likewise pregnant. This is how Sister M Angeline SSND pictures the journey of a Mary suffused by excited anticipation as marked by her "quickened breath (which)/told of God's pact in silence." (4-5) (1942:156:334):

IN NAZARETH

There was a gayness, Mother mine, around you
That day in Nazareth,
Bent wings had hushed the fear within that bound you,
And now your quickened breath
Told of God's pact in silence ... Morning found you
Seeking Elizabeth.

There was a hill you traversed in dawn's brightness.
Remember brambles there?
They slashed you, cut you, broke your heavenly lightness
In the sweet morning air,
Yet ever did the Holy Spirit's whiteness
Enshroud you with His care.

And we who walk a dawnlit slope, wind blowing,
In these our White-Host years,
Catch at your hand with eyes shut tight, safe-knowing
Though the wild tempest rears,
We'll garner in our Mary-way, your sowing
Despite our fears.

Sister Angeline's poem was published in December 1942 at a time when the Second World War, "the wild tempest" (16) which cost 55 million lives, had been raging for three years and no-one knew how it would end. The poet finds comfort in the thought of the Blessed Virgin's courage at a time when she had every reason to fear the future as an unmarried mother in a place and era in which adulteresses were stoned to death. This courage continued to manifest itself throughout the remainder of Mary's life.

The first stanza relates directly to God, Gabriel being His messenger; the second to the Holy Spirit. The third stanza concerns Christ. The allusion to "our White-Host years" (14) possibly alludes to the Host which contains the Eucharist, symbolising the Redemption of humanity. The members of the Church, the Body of Christ, share in the Eucharist, the "White-Host" (14), which is a repetition of the Redemption event. This shows that Mary's confidence in God at the time of her uncertainty (7-9) was not misplaced. Humanity, in reaching out to the Blessed Virgin for aid will "garner" her "sowing" (17). The poet does not clarify whether the "dawnlit slope" (13) stretches upwards or downwards. If downwards, the confidence is there that Mary will offer safety in the midst of danger.

When Mary reaches the house of her cousin Elizabeth who is pregnant with John the Baptist, sent to go before the Lord and make straight His way, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. In a bustling narrative poem, Sister Mary David SSND gives a conversational picture of the event (In Robert 1944:4):

PLAIN CHANT OF THE HILL COUNTRY

It may have been a sunset such as this,
Flushed with expectancy, that saw her come
Unheralded along the dusty road.
You might have thought it just another day
Relapsing into quiet: glow withdrawn,
And birds and zephyrs nestling down together.
As was his custom, Zachary had gone,
Before the lighting of the lamps, to see
That all the poppies and the lily plants
Were fortified with water for the night.
This way it chanced (or so you might have thought)
Elizabeth was left alone to spend
A moment dreaming on the western clouds
That were so like "the shadow of His wings."
Toward such a sunset did Elizabeth,
Whose name was "House of God," look down the lane.
From such a sunset, dear and unannounced,
Came forth the maiden Mary unto her.
Deep in the silent evening it happened:
Because her night had fashioned patient years,
Elizabeth knew the Day-Star ... felt the Dawn.

This narrative poem shows the omniscient writer at work. It describes neither chance nor just another day (4) but pictures the event of the Visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth and the setting of the Magnificat.

The poem shows empathy on the part of the nun-poet, destined to remain childless on account of a vow of chastity, with the elderly Elizabeth who has been barren for many years (20). Instead of turning Elizabeth bitter, however, the poet writes of her (and also, perhaps, of herself) that her "night" of barrenness has "fashioned patient years" (20). This maturity has provided her with a depth of insight which enables her to identify Mary as the "Day Star" (21) with her promise of the "Dawn" (21), Christ the Messiah.

With a typical woman's touch, Sister David ensures that Zachary, Elizabeth's husband, is safely out of the way (7). He is the uninitiated one among the women, for did he not disbelieve an angel? (Lk 1:18). The mystical element present in many women allows them to believe in miracles which Zachary's masculine mind would be inclined to dismiss outright as fabrication. The cousins are bound together, moreover, by the sons in their wombs in a world apart, shared on account of their pregnancies. So with the omnipotence of the writer, Sister David sets Zachary watering the lilies and the poppies before relegating him to performing the chore of filling the lamps up with oil. That will keep him out of the way of two women who have more important matters to discuss. Unable to conceal her satisfaction at this situation, the poet slips in the bracketed aside "(or so you might have thought)" (11) which reveals her intention. It is this quality of implied first hand experience that makes this poem seem to come alive.

Pregnancy and birth are woven into the poem by means of nature imagery. The sky is "flushed with expectancy" (2) and "birds and zephyrs (are) nestling down together" (6). This latter pun might well elude the speedy reader. The birds signify the two expected infants while the personified west wind or "zephyr" (6) symbolises the Holy Spirit who upon this occasion will cause an embryonic John the Baptist to leap for joy within his mother's womb and inspire the Blessed Virgin Mary to proclaim her glorious "Magnificat". The

water imagery (10) foretells the fact that John will baptise the people in preparation for Christ's public ministry. John will also "fortify" the Lord at His Baptism "with water for the night" (10) of His suffering. The light is a prophecy of the light of the revelation of the gospel which will be spread all over the world (8), paradoxically by an event at which the sun was eclipsed, causing the world to turn dark.

The evening is "silent" (19), prefiguring the silence of Mary which will mark her out as a woman of enormous strength. Mary arrives "unheralded" (3), just as she, a virgin, and her cousin, an elderly woman, had no cause to believe they would become pregnant, yet each is expecting a son.

The entire poem is a hymn in praise of simplicity and humility, as indicated in the imagery of the "dusty" road (3). The arrival of the King of kings is not awaited in majesty and pomp but in simplicity and silence.

In December 1961, during the course of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, an Advent song by Mother M Francis PCC was published. It has been included here both because its lyrical tenor is reminiscent of the earlier poetry and since the subject of Christ's development in the womb of His blessed mother has immediate relevance to this section (1961:16:32):

QUEEN OF CRAFTSMEN: AN ADVENT SONG

Blow on exquisite blow
The crystal hammers of her love
Fasten the careful joinings of His bones.
Prophets have sung this craft:
How man may number
These bones, but may never break an one of them.

What blueprint guides you, Queen of architects,
To trace sure paths for wandering veins
That run Redemption's wine?

Who dipped your brush, young artist, so to tint
The eyes and lips of God? Where did you learn
To spin such silk of hair, and expertly
Pull sinew, wind this Heart to tick our mercy?

Thrones, Powers, fall down, worshipping your craft
Whom we, for want of better word, shall call
Most beautiful of all the sons of men.

Worker in motherhood, take our splintery songs,
Who witness What you make, in litanies:
Queen of craftsmen, pray for us who wait.

The theme of this sensitive poem is the formation of the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ in the womb of His mother. To achieve the metaphoric effect, the themes of architecture, art, weaving, clock-making and jewellery-manufacture have been used in combination. Mary is described as a jeweller (1-2), an architect (7), a carpenter and joiner (3), an artist (10), a clock-maker (13) and a weaver (12) - a comprehensive spectrum of skilled crafts in the pursuit of all of which she proves herself a past mistress in order to give birth to the Child Jesus. He, paradoxically, is the Creator to whom in reality all these appellations of craftsmen belong. The concurrence of the words "exquisite" and "crystal" (1-2) conjures up an image of sparkling beauty, which is kept contained on account of the words "careful joinings of His bones" (3). This brings in the image of the highly-skilled carpenter, another paradox, since Mary's spouse, Joseph, who is actually the carpenter in the family, has no physical kinship with the child within her womb. The reference to "Thrones, Powers" (14) alludes to two of the nine ranks of angels.

It is not unusual for a poet to address the subject in the terminology of the field in which the he or she finds him- or herself. Mother Mary Francis, however, addresses the Blessed Virgin in all these roles. The clock which is wound so that it may "tick our mercy" (13) links with Advent, the four weeks of anticipation which culminate in rejoicing at the celebration of Christmas.

Wood imagery is applied to the poet's own craft; that of poetry, which she describes as "splintery songs" (17), a description which is too modest in the light of the glossy perfection of this excellent Marian praise poem. The poet

regards herself as a lesser poet than the Blessed Virgin because Mary's prayers are more effective (18). Thus she adds another talent to Mary's collection of skills.

Sister Maryanna Childs OP expresses maternal tenderness in an Advent poem in celebration of Mary's Motherhood of the Lord Jesus Christ, which demonstrates that her devotion to the Blessed Virgin is an outflow of her love for the Christ Child whom she bore; rather than the reverse (In Robert 1946:16):

ADVENT PRAYER

Like foolish folk of old I would not be,
Who had no room that night for Him and thee.
See, Mother Mary, here within my heart
I've made a little shrine for Him apart;
Swept it of sin, and cleansed it with all care;
Warmed it with love and scented it with prayer.
So, Mother, when the Christmas anthems start,
Please let me hold your Baby - in my heart.

Sister M Ada CSJ concurs with Sister Maryanna that the heart should be prepared for the arrival of the Lord and also for the Blessed Virgin. Not being entirely sure that she might not have behaved like the "foolish folk of old" (1) of **Advent Prayer**, however, she looks more deeply into the message contained in the inability of Mary and Joseph to find a room for the Child to be born. This is illustrated in **Expectancy** (1943:70:326), the first of three short poems by this author, each of which fits in well with the theme of the love of the Mother and her Child. This one refers to Mary's pregnancy, in imitation of which the poet wishes to prepare her heart to welcome the Lord Jesus Christ and His mother.

EXPECTANCY

It may not be on Christmas Eve
When silver bells are ringing,
There may not be a starry sky
With hosts of angels singing.

It may be very dark the night
When she and God together
Come seeking out my little heart
To shield them from the weather.

His mother may not be in blue-
I may not even know them-
Perhaps I'd best give all the world
The courtesy I'd show them.

And lest they take me by surprise,
I think it ample reason
To leave my heart's expectant door
Flung wide in every season.

Sister Ada sees more deeply than Sister Maryanna in this instance. By leaving open her "heart's expectant door" (15) to all mankind "in every season" (16) she shows that the Nativity story should be interpreted universally. Anyone would have been only too happy to welcome Mary and Joseph had they known Mary was to bear the Messiah. The underlying message of the stable incident is, however, that the members of the human race should help to lighten the load of everyone who is overburdened. Sister Ada understands this message in its totality, whereas Sister Maryanna interprets it selectively.

Mother and Son, united in everlasting mutual love, complement one another, according to the words of the second poem in Sister Ada's trio. This poem, in its sustained use of comparisons, resembles a conceit employed in the nineteenth century in an untitled Marian powm whose first line reads: **Herself a Rose which bore the Rose** by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) (In Rossetti, William 1911:174). Typical lines include the following:

She gracious, He essential grace
He was the fountain, she the rill
Her goodness to fulfil. (11-13)

In **Child and Madonna** (1946:no page) Sister Ada uses the same ploy to excellent effect:

CHILD AND MADONNA

You are the Butterfly-
She is the Rose
With petals uplifted
For your repose.

You are the Nightingale.
She is the Air
Breathing Your music on
Souls everywhere.

You are the Grain of Wheat
She is the Field,
Snowily beautiful,
Bearing Your yield.

You are the Word of God.
She is His Song.
Help me to sing You both
All my life long.

Unpretentiously the poet addresses the Lord Jesus Christ. Conjuring up images of nature, she tells Him about some of the ways in which His blessed mother complements Him in all His endeavours.

The first stanza relies on the sense of sight. Beauty is symbolised by the butterfly and the rose in which it finds rest. The description of the rose's "petals uplifted" (3) to ensure the butterfly's repose is no less arresting for its simplicity. Most "Madonna and Child" pictures and statues have the Blessed Virgin cradling her Child. Thus she literally becomes His repose (4). In the second verse the Blessed Virgin becomes the "channel" for Christ's music, a representation of her mediatory role. Hearing is epitomised by the song of the nightingale and the air in which it resounds to reach "souls everywhere" (8). The third stanza refers to Christ as the Grain of Wheat which at the Last Supper He changed into His Body and Blood. The Eucharist has been celebrated ever since. Its yield is Salvation. The final quatrain starts off with

two glorious lines: "You are the Word of God./She is His Song." The closing lines could almost be deemed an anti-climax in their simplicity, if they did not offer a child-like form of solution to a theological question that has divided religions and people for the past five centuries.

The third in this trio of Mother and Son poems by Sister Ada is about a lullaby and has the enchanting quality of a legend (1942:68:327):

OUR LADY'S SONG

Our Lady made a lullaby
A long, long time ago,
When winter winds blew down the sky
And stars were hanging low.

And as she sang our little Lord
Smiled up into her eyes
As though it were enough reward
For leaving Paradise.

Then suddenly the wind did sing
Our Lady's lovely lay,
And on its wild, enraptured wing
It bore her song away.

And so it comes through all the years
As clearly as of old-
The song that dried God's human tears
At midnight in the cold.

In this poem Sister Ada shows the genius of the poet who can take a simple, universal truth, such as the keening sound made by the wind, and read into it a legend which could as well be true as false. Like the scientist, the poet is an investigator. Moreover, many poets, and even some scientists, do leave room for mystery, apparently believing in miracles as well. The tenderness of the appellation "Our little Lord" (5) is matched by the mental picture of His smile (6), which is easy to imagine, since smiling, new-born babies are often said to have a look of heaven about them. This physical sweetness must be one of the reasons why so many people love infants so tenderly.

Sister Agnes Mary MSBT epitomises Mary's universal warm maternal care, not only for the Christ-Child but for all humankind, in a revealingly titled, tender little poem (In Robert 1944:78):

WISHING

(A child at the Crib) -
'It's very cold tonight, dear God,
I wish You had a coat
Of thickest fur
To keep You warm.
But, Jesus, you have her -
Your Mother dear -
To hold You tight
Within her arms
This Christmas night.'

(Mary to the child) -
'Tis you are cold, dear little one;
Your feet are wet with snow
And you have come a long, long way;
Jesus has told me so.
A coat of fur you wished for Him,
But greater will He do.
My Babe, the very Lamb of God,
Will give Himself to you.'

The poet's personal desire, not only for Mary's motherliness, but also for the love of her Divine Son, is touchingly revealed in these simple lines. There is a touch of Irish in the words: "Tis you are cold, dear little one" (10) in the first line of the second stanza, indicating possible Irish roots on the poet's part, which may account for the child-like quality of her humble faith expressed in this unassuming dialogue. This is a child's poem, in keeping with the importance of the Babe of Bethlehem, and brings home to the reader that many nun-poets were teachers with a gift for teaching children about God.

The versatility of the poetic gift of Mother M Francis PCC extends to include Nativity poetry (1957:59):

CHRISTMAS CAROL

Mary sang like falling snow
And loved like violins
At the wedding of love and sorrow
In Bethlehem.

Angels crashed bewildered skies
And stars blazed into hymns,
But Mary looked in Jesus' eyes
In Bethlehem.

The night got down upon its knees,
The moon with wonder dimmed
When Mary laid her Jesus down
In Bethlehem.

Back in the bright and noisy inn,
The keeper's heart was grim
For Mary's face burned in his heart
In Bethlehem.

And all love has a wound in it,
But joy with tears can limn
Since the wedding of love and sorrow
In Bethlehem.

The poem is introduced by two lovely, Christmas-festive similes, "sang like falling snow" (1) and "loved like violins" (2). The combination of purity and melody (1-2) in this poet's description of Mary's lullaby to Jesus forms a contrast with the crashing cymbals of angels in the personification of "bewildered skies" and "stars (which) blazed into hymns" (5-6). Other contrasts, too, characterise this poem, particularly in the repetition of "the wedding of love and sorrow/In Bethlehem" (2-3;19-20). The personification of "night (getting) down upon its knees" (9) emphasises the reverence due to the occasion. The keeper's "grim" heart (14) etched with the memory of Mary's shamed and frightened face on his refusal to allow her to lodge at his inn brings back to the reader countless occasions when the mind was allowed to overrule the heart when mercy was required. The poet will not depart on a negative note when such a joyous occasion is recalled, however, but consoles the reader with the reflection that "joy with tears can limn" (18) since, or rather because of "the wedding of love and sorrow/In Bethlehem"(19-20).

The third line in the first stanza (3), which is repeated, slightly altered, in that of the final verse (19), has a jolting, arresting quality, which has the effect of emphasising the contents of the respective verses.

Sister M Madeleva is one of the nun-poets who refer to the Blessed Virgin as Mother of the unblemished Lamb of Sacrifice (9). She develops this image to include Christ's role as loving Shepherd of His sheep. She draws her image from the perspective of the stable of Bethlehem, making Mary the first–person narrator (1956:18):

A WORD FOR SHEPHERDS AND ANGELS

I spoke to Gabriel and was not afraid;
But to these herdsmen, hardy keepers of sheep,
And their singing midnight skies, what reply shall be made?

I may say to them - it were a gracious thing to do -
"My Son when grown to a man, my Child asleep,
He will care for flocks; He will be a Shepherd too."

Then mayhap their hearts will be opened as mine, with pain;
They may understand how my first-born my only One
Will be our unblemished Lamb-and slain, and slain!

Angels and shepherds and I have known, have heard
Tidings to shatter the earth and amaze the sun.
Angels and shepherds, tonight I bring you the Word.

This is another excellent poem from Sister Madeleva, in which Christ is pictured as the Shepherd (6), the Lamb (9) and as God ("Word") (12). In order to be "Shepherd" of "flocks" of men (6), He must be "slain" (9) at the Crucifixion, when the earth will "shatter" (11). Even at the crude cradle fashioned for Mary's Son, Sister Madeleva permits the mother an insight into the cruel death He will suffer, repeating the words "and slain" in order to bring the sound of keening to their mournful import. The earth will "shatter" (quake) and the sun will be "amaze(d)" (eclipsed - more personification) (11) when this comes to pass. Therefore, just as Mary speaks to two different groups, one epitomised by Gabriel who is in God's confidence and the other the

shepherds, ignorant of God's plan, so Mary's "Word" speaks of two things: Nativity, but also adulthood and Crucifixion, for the Salvation of the flock, for this is the ultimate meaning of Christmas, of the Birth of the "Word".

Mother M Francis PCC attributes to Mary the Queenship and Motherhood of the world as well as of the Lord Jesus Christ in **Cause of Our Joy** (1956:6:28). In its first stanza, which attributes creational skills to Mary on account of her co-operation with the will of her Son Who created her, this poem hearkens back to the poem **Queen of Craftsmen: An Advent Song** by the same author:

CAUSE OF OUR JOY

When thou mad'st God a flesh to wear
And gave Him two small eyes to see
Earth-craft He did some aeons back,
Thou madest laughter, too, Marie.

Our mirth grew strong within thy womb
Along with that small Saviour sweet,
And all our songs were born that night
A little God lay at thy feet.

Sorrow we had full-plenteous
Without thee, and we found the way
Of lonely pain with never need
For thy dear hand to beck or stay;

But singing and laughter only came
When thou agreedst to queen the earth
And heavens, too, with mothering
Alike our Saviour and our mirth.

Cause of our music and our glee,
Lady, our joy flows all from thee!
Mother of all hilarity
That ever wast or shall e'er be.

As far as style is concerned, one of the acid tests distinguishing the true poet from the mere versifier concerns the ability to experiment and improvise and

to have recourse to poetic licence. Mother Francis passes this test with flying colours. By addressing the Blessed Virgin by the French version of her name: "Marie" (4), she not only manages to continue the rhyme pattern and shift the stress to fit the rhythm, but also makes a virtue of necessity by creating a bond of loving familiarity with Mary in the most favourable sense of the word. This is needed because the poem's main theme concerns humour, joy and laughter which can be shared only with one with whom one has a special affinity. If the Blessed Virgin is to be the cause of the poet's joy, the poet need have no qualms about using a pet name for her. The laughter alludes to the word "joy" (18) which presupposes mirth. The cause of the laughter is the fulfilment of the promise of Salvation. The poet does not believe that Mary's supernatural holiness diminishes her very human capacity for laughter, hence the appellation: "Mother of all hilarity" (19), a startling addition to the litany of titles in praise of Mary. In the final line Mother Francis's poetic skill is shown again, for a more awkward line was seldom composed; yet it succeeds on account its author's poetic insouciance, to which fact her use of words such as "madest" (4) and "agreedst" for "didst agree" (17) likewise bears witness.

The fact that very little is known about the years during which Jesus grew up in Nazareth, cared for by His mother and foster-father Joseph, did not deter the nun-poets from recording their own reflections on His childhood. Sister Mary Imelda believes Mary brought Him up amid extreme happiness, until she effectively realised that her Son was bound for public life after finding Him in the temple in Jerusalem (1931:11:116):

THE HEART OF MARY

She regarded the sovereignest wisdom of His Godhead lapped in the dark words of His manhood" - (Cloud of Unknowing.)

She pondered all things in her heart,
The Mother fair.
Ah! Would that I might read the thoughts
Enshrined there.

How often did she gaze on Him-
The Fount of grace,
The visible Reflection of
The Father's Face.

And wonder that the Source of joy
In tears should weep,
And God's Eternal Thought should smile
In childish sleep.

The Wisdom hid in God from all
Eternity
She'd learned by heart, caressing Him
Upon her knee;

And gently washed the little face
And hands of Him
Whose utter purity doth awe
The Seraphim.

What baby words did Mary teach
Her little One
That Word Who was with God ere time
Had yet begun?

'tWould seem that "Abba" would be lisped
Most easily
By Him Who did His Father's love
In all things see.

But when great Wisdom, twelve years old;
Did question men
And seem to learn - ah! Mother, thou
Didst wonder then!

This poem is one of contrasts, to show the dichotomy between Divinity and humanity, Christ's two natures in their completion. As He was growing up, He needed His mother to link the two natures. Mary gazed on Him, pondering what lay ahead. As children do, He sometimes cried while awake (10), yet smiled in His sleep (12). He taught her God's wisdom (13-15) while she was petting Him, her little Child (16). God Who is all-pure (17-18) had His face and hands washed by her. Creator of all, He allowed her to teach Him to speak (21-24). The choice in the seventh stanza of the word: "lisped" (25) for *"Abba"*, the Aramaic word for father, which does not contain an S, is a flaw in an otherwise beautiful discourse. Perhaps the poet was familiar with the

Prayer for the Conversion of England composed by Cardinal Wiseman of Westminster in which the same error is committed when the reference to children "lisping" the name of Mary is made. The final stanza shows the significance of the finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple. He was gone for three days, just as He would be gone from His death on a Friday to His glorious Resurrection on the third day. Having felt the sword twist as she searched for Him, Mary accepted that her nurturing task had been completed and that the Mother-Child relationship was shifting back to the Creator-created one, in which she would be forced to take second place. Marvelling at the learning He displayed in the temple, she did so in a spirit of humility.

Venturing further into the realms of Christ's childhood, Sister M Josephine OSU believes that His was a very normal boyhood but attributes strong leadership skills to Him (Marian Library:no details):

AT NAZARETH

Those were simple, sunlit days at Nazareth
When happy voices floated on the air,
When in and out the cottage and the workshop
Children followed Jesus everywhere.

His Mother, Mary, watched them all benignly,
Noting with tender eyes each childish need.
On one she smiled; to one she whispered softly;
To this one's bruise, to that one's tears, gave heed.

And then an avalanche of doughty warriors:
They stormed the carpenter with mock alarms,
And seized their prey, his curly wooden shavings,
And forced his willing hands to mend their arms.

O Jesus, lead us too. Your other children
To Mary's loving care and Joseph's skill.
They'll bind our wounds and mend our broken weapons
So we can battle on, brave-hearted still.

Lacking in ostentation, this poem, which sounds quite plausible, demonstrates that part of the genius of the nun-poets was their ability to paint word pictures

of events in the life of Christ, some recorded, others - as in this case - purely imaginary, in a way which makes them come alive for the reader.

Like the nun-poets, one would imagine Mary's modest home in Nazareth was run the way all men and women of good will would wish to run their own. But the nun-poets went beyond this; they visualised just how it would have been in all its simplicity and harmony, even imagining details that might not have occurred to anyone else. It is unthinkable that Mary would not have attended to a bruise or to a child who cried (8) or that Joseph would have denied them the "curly wooden shavings" (11) from the carpentry floor or have been too busy to "mend their arms" (12). It is the Catholic in Sister Josephine who asks Christ to bestow not only His own blessings, but also those of His Mother and foster father upon humankind (13-14), in order that they may persevere in living their lives in God's grace. Mary's Motherhood of humanity is strongly suggested in the second stanza.

The Catholic Church has an ancient tradition of *"Stabat Mater"* (the Mother stood) poetry, which recalls the Blessed Virgin's vigil beside the Cross of Her Son. Even today, particularly during Lent, a version of this hymn is still sung as part of the Way of the Cross, pictured by the fourteen Stations of the Cross, displayed in every Catholic Church. It epitomises the sense of desolation recalled at Christ's agony and death, which will be sublimated at the Resurrection. This brief explanation serves to emphasise that there was no question about the orthodoxy of Sister Beatrice, whose poignant description of Mary's vigil on Mount Calvary on the first Good Friday follows (1931:10:592):

AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

"There stood at the Cross, His Mother,"
O'erwhelmed with grief:
Crushed was she as was no other,
Nor sought relief

Her soul in desolation
Clung to Him,
Until the consummation
Wrought by sin.

She saw His side opened wide
By lance's dart;
Beheld the saving tide
Flow from His heart.

Soon viewed the Cross relieved
Of burden blest;
Then to her heart bereaved
Her Child she pressed.

She joined in love most brave
The silent train;
Saw Him sealed in borrowed grave,
The mighty slain.

The very lack of volubility which characterises this poignant poem starkly lays bare the loneliness of Christ's mother at the foot of the Cross. The reader searches in vain for exclamations of commiseration or expressions of horror. The relentless rhythmical meter of the poem varies mainly between trimeter or heptameter in the uneven lines and dimeter in the even ones. This has the effect of inducing a certain baffled tolerance of the intolerable torments imposed on the innocent Lamb of God on account of the reader's powerlessness to prevent them. The dreadful facts which are bleakly given by the poet without comment or embellishment speak for themselves. This lack of overt emotion has the paradoxical effect of creating an aura of almost unbearable loneliness, particularly in the fourth stanza. Despite its lack of intensity, this is one in which the image is created of an immense void of loneliness amid which the Blessed Virgin presses to her heart the lifeless body bearing the marks of extreme cruelty on the part of the torturers. This is all that is left of the Body of Christ Which she bore thirty-three years earlier. The poet emphasises that in death, as in birth, earth has been miserly towards Jesus. We know that His first hours were spent in a manger. Sister Beatrice reminds us that a "borrowed grave" (19) was His final resting place. Thus Mary appears to have lived her life in vain.

Though simply phrased, the four-lined poem **Mater Dolorosa** (Mother of Sorrows) by Sister M Julian RSM is written on a more modern, more sophisticated level in comparison with the previous poem, a narrative, in which images were used. This poem, on the other hand, depicts a moment (not a documented one) in purely imagist terms, which is almost Eastern in its enigma (1954:12):

MATER DOLOROSA

She is telling the drop-crystal beads
of the world's wild weeping,
but her fingers caress
the Cross of its tears unshed.

In this enigmatic little poem, Sister Julian uses the imagery of the Cross and beads of a rosary jointly with the weeping and tears of anguish.

In terms of imagery, the use of the beads of the Rosary as crystal, fashioned in the shape of drops, which suggests tears (1), is an unusual one. Both beads and Cross are part of the Rosary and thus of prayers, accompanied by tears. By association, the "unshed" (4) tears signify prayers unsaid. This impression is reinforced by the mention of humanity's grief, alliteratively expressed as "the world's wild weeping" (2). The tears remain "unshed" (4) due to humankind's hard-heartedness, sin, refusal to repent, or inability to believe compassionately in the crucified Christ. These are the reason for the Crucifixion, as Christ came to save the lost sheep.

Sincerity is likewise the keynote of an unpretentious poem written during the Second World War by Sister Mary Antoinette, OSB (In Robert 1944:5). This poem, while staking no claim to poetic immortality, shows the sense of identification shared with the Blessed Virgin on the part of multitudes of mothers of soldier sons, whatever their national affiliation. A point to note is the fact that the poem contains seven stanzas; possibly symbolic of the Seven Dolours of the Blessed Virgin: the prophecy of Simeon, the flight into Egypt,

the three-day loss of Jesus, the meeting with Christ on the way to Calvary, Mary's vigil at the foot of the Cross, the descent of the Body of Christ from the Cross and the burial of Jesus Christ.

MOTHERS' SORROWS

Dear Mother of my Saviour,
I come in love to thee;
For thou dost know the sorrow
That has befallen me.

My child, my son, has left me
To serve in cruel war;
My heart would break in anguish -
Oh! I can bear no more.

* * *

Then thou, dear soul in sorrow,
Behold my mother-heart,
It too has known great anguish
And felt the burning smart.

My Son too was in service
For three long toilsome years;
And often love and longing
Broke forth in silent tears.

My Son, Divine and human,
Has fought the war of sin;
And He bore countless hardships
The victory to win.

A cruel death His portion,
Ah, who can ever know
The grief that tore my mother-heart,
The depth of my sorrow?

May thy sad heart take courage
In sorrows that we share
And place thy son forever
In my unfailing care.

In the first two verses it is the dead soldier's mother, in the final five stanzas the Blessed Virgin, who speaks. This accounts for the asterisks between stanzas two and three in this poem, a pedestrian one in which "sorrow" (24) is

made to rhyme with "know" (22) and "heart" (10) with "smart" (12). The emotion, despite the mediocrity of the poem, is genuine. **Mothers' Sorrows** hopeful note in the final stanza is aimed at lifting an unbearable burden from the shoulders of the supplicant, just as Mary's confidence in God was justified when Christ from the dead.

Not only the mothers of soldier sons are crushed by defeat and agony. Many others are suffering, albeit in different ways. Thus they too are able to draw comfort from the example of the Blessed Virgin, according to Sister Mary Eulalia (1934:19:575):

YE WHO MOURN BE COMFORTED

As eyes that love grow tender after tears,
So sorrow gives the hand a gentle touch;
Then, Mother of all Sorrows, still the fears
That hold the world in unrelenting clutch.
Sustain the weak, and calm unquiet hearts
And minds as restless as the shifting sand.
More potent far than all the finer arts,
Is vibrant language of the heart and hand.
O give them courage now to dig the field
And gather fruits of labour, trusting God.
Beyond all thought will be the harvest yield;
For lifeless wheat will blossom at His nod.
As limpid water crimsoned into wine,
To show the power of the Living Vine.

In this sonnet, Sister Eulalia shows that she has a poet's eyes which make sense of what to another may seem like nonsense; otherwise the fact that "eyes that love grow tender after tears" (1) would have eluded her and she could not have linked it up so positively with the purification process that takes place "when sorrow gives the hand a gentle touch" (2). These words bear witness to a deep spirituality on the poet's part for, while acknowledging that sorrow does occur, she tries to downplay it or give it a meaningful purpose, lest she offend the Lord by demurring against His will. She sees the weaknesses of mankind evinced in "the weak", "unquiet hearts" (5) and "minds as restless as the shifting sand" (6). Her own heart, the reader discovers by implication, is less easily disturbed, since she has found the

answer in the admonition *"Ora et Labora"* (pray and work), or in her own words: the "vibrant language of the heart and hand" (8), for work, and the fruits it brings, will be the reward. In the final lines the words "Lifeless wheat will blossom at His nod (and) limpid water crimson(ed) into wine" (13-14) refer not only to the multiplication of the loaves and fishes after the Sermon on the Mount and the changing of water into wine at Cana. They also symbolise the bread and wine which - according to Catholic teaching - in the Eucharist are consecrated to become the living Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ as sacrificed on the Cross. The expression "crimsoned into wine" (13) in this poem is reminiscent of a line used by Francis Thompson (1859-1890) in his Marian poem ***"Assumpta Maria"*** (1937:222):

> Lo, a wonder and a terror
> The sun hath blushed the Sea to wine. (82-83)

Sister Mary St Virginia interprets the sacrifices imposed on the Sisters of her convent by juxtaposing them with the promise of a glorious etermity, comparing these to death: "Night" (14) before the Resurrection: "Morning" (14) (In Noyes 1946:358):

> **CONVENT CEMETERY**
>
> Twilight; and pine trees keep the blessed enclosure,
> Transpose the secular breeze to compline, hush
> The garden to the ultimate composure,
> Bar out the alien day, cloister the thrush,
> Guard the Great Silence's unyielding grating
> While maiden bodies - each within a cell
> Whose solitude is a native land - are waiting
> Through the long vigil for the rising bell.
> An interlude composed for nuns the night
> Immuring, in the shadows above the river,
> The brow that crumbles - granting time's last fetter -
> Beneath familiar crucifix and white
> And maiden mother close to Christ forever
> Night will be good; and Morning will be better.

Though ostensibly this poem refers only to the dead sisters buried in the cemetery, there is a point to be made for the assumption that it simultaneously deals with the living. The nuns are seen as having been given an important task by the Blessed Virgin: always to keep their vigil, as she did, in the face of loneliness. Life and death are equated with the song of the "thrush" (4) which must be "cloister(ed)" (4), a pun on the monastic life as well as on the seclusion of the grave, and the "hush" (2) of the "Great Silence" (5) of the convent as well as of death. Even the living nuns are already experiencing death in anticipation, each alone in her "cell" (6) in solitude to be awoken for the "rising bell" (8), which also intimates the resurrection, while this concept is repeated in night and day imagery in the final line (14). Mary is present with Christ and will welcome the sisters when their life span has been spent (13). To die has no horrors for the poet and to rise again holds the promise of glory (14). They are thus in solidarity with the sisters already buried in the cemetery. In the case of the living "The brow that crumbles" (11) may be seen as the forehead wrinkling in old age. However, followed as it is by the words "Beneath familiar crucifix and white" (12), it suggests that the poet is referring to the nuns already buried, whose graves are their "cell" (6) and whose "vigil" (8) indicates their sojourn in the grave until the resurrection of the body takes place at the end of the world when the "rising bell" (8) is sounded.

Unlike these sisters, the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the tomb on the third day after his burial. For forty days and nights He appeared to His disciples, and no doubt to the Blessed Virgin, although the Bible, ever taciturn concerning Christ's Mother, fails to record this specifically. For His Mother, consoled though she must have been during this period of remission, this second parting must have been a new blow. Mother Francis PCC records this renewed sense of loss for Mary after bidding her Son farewell during His Ascension. She believes that the Blessed Virgin dealt with it in a human and appealing way, by keeping very busy with household tasks so that time might pass quickly and she might soon be reunited with Christ (1958:8:230):

OUR LADY OF THE ASCENSION

Fold your love like hands around the moment.
Keep it in conference with your heart, that exit
Caught on clocks, by dutiful scribes recorded
Less truly than in archives of your soul.

Turn back from His going, be His still-remaining.
Lift the familiar latch on cottage door...
Discover His voice in corners, hear His footsteps
Run down the porches of your thought. No Powers

However hoarse with joy, no Dominations
Limp with adoration guess what whispers
Of: "Mother, look!" and "Mother, hurry!"
Glance off the cottage walls in shafts of glory.

How shall your heart keep swinging longer, Mary?
Quickly, quickly, take the sturdy needle
Before your soul crowds through your flesh! - the needle
And stout black thread will save you! Take the sandal
Peter left for mending. After that,
The time is short, with bread to bake for John.

Like Sister Eulalia, this author believes in the therapeutic power of work. This must have been the nun-poets' own saving grace whenever the yoke of their vows chafed more painfully than usual. The very first line with its pun on time: "hands around the moment" indicates that only by keeping busy one can endure times of difficulty, loss and loneliness.

Sister Francis fears that Mary, having returned home after watching her Son rise up to heaven, is crushed by such intense loneliness and so beset by her memories of His boyhood spent in this place (10-11) that her painful longing will cause her "soul to crowd through (her) flesh" (15). "Powers" (8) and Dominations" (9) refer to two of the nine ranks of angels.

This is not what Christ wants to happen now, suggests the poet. The infant Church He founded needs a woman's touch to get started properly. Mary's maternal and moral support to the apostles will be invaluable to the progress of the fledgeling Church. She has never failed Jesus. This time again she

must put duty above her own maternal longings and find work for her industrious hands so that their rhythmical sewing movements will lull her agonised heart and help her cope with her loss. But all around her she can feel the memories of her holy Child who left His impress on her home and her heart.

This poem comes close to spelling out the moral and evangelical message the nun-poets felt called upon to deliver in their writings. Here in a very understated way, Sister Francis is telling her readers, religious and laity, that the correct way to cope with pain is to labour, tiring oneself so totally that night will not bring terrors but peaceful slumber until the day, while death will bring a form of rest until the day of the resurrection of the body in which Christians are taught to believe.

In the Blessed Virgin's case, her deliverance came with her Assumption body and soul into heaven; an event which gave rise to glorious poetry throughout the centuries, and which, like the Immaculate Conception, appears to have been given a somewhat limited place in the writings of the nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century. This will be seen in the next section, in which poetry in honour of the Blessed Virgin's Assumption will be examined in the light of their oeuvre.

CHAPTER NINE

IMAGES OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY INTO HEAVEN.

That the quantity of poetry on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven to be found in the oeuvre of the nun-poets is negligible, is a surprising phenomenon. It might have been expected that this would have been a fruitful field for poetry, given the fact that throughout the centuries the Assumption was one of the favourite topics of poetic lore. It was explored by several medieval anonymous authors of the Five Joys poems. Marian praise poets of the stature of Richard Crashaw wrote on the Assumption, as did Francis Thompson (cf page 213).

It is also worthy of note that the Five Joys poems, also popular as a form of Marian poetic lore during the Middle Ages, do not seem to have formed a subject popularly used by the Marian nun-poets. Perhaps this was because the Five Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary differed from those of medieval times and were recalled in poetry on the Rosary. Whatever the reason for its omission, the expectation of the definition of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin as a dogma in 1950 did not lead to an anticipatory spate of Assumption poetry by the nun-poets.

Catholic tradition maintains that when Mary's days on earth had ended, she, surrounded by the apostles, fell into the sleep of death. Only the apostle Thomas was missing when Mary was carried to the tomb and buried. When he finally arrived, he broke down on hearing of her death and begged to be allowed to visit her tomb. They took him to the place. When they opened it, they found that the body had gone. In its place a sheaf of lilies, symbolic of purity, was found. This information is supplied to illuminate some of the allusions found in the examples that follow.

In a perceptive poem, Sister M Ethna OSF writes (1961:11:258):

DEATH OF OUR LADY

Mary has fallen
Gentle seed to earth
That a new plant of life glorious
Might rise triumphant

Seven times has she planted in sorrow
And watched it blossom joy.
Oh-we have known her beauty
Because her seed has fallen.

Each sorrow held her
Within a canyon of silence
But God entered her valley
To sing His fiat of glory.

Serenity breathes from this organic poem. The image of the dying seed (1-2) heralding the growth of a new plant (3-4) in the first stanza is reminiscent of certain likenesses made by the Lord Jesus Christ in his preaching and found in the New Testament. Like the first stanza, the second comprises a contrast; this time between the seven sorrows of Mary (5) (cf pages 209-210), all of which in varying measure led to the glory of the Resurrection of Christ. The number "seven" appears repeatedly in both the Old and the New Testament.

The depth of Mary's strength lies in the profundity of her silence. This silence emerges more eloquently when "canyon" (10) with its connotations of immensity is used in preference to its British synonym "valley" (11), which conjures up an image of a space less vast within its parameters. An interesting feature is God's *"fiat"* (12), with its suggestion that Mary is to be drawn into His abode, in completion of her own *"fiat"* to Gabriel at which He took up His abode in her womb. The number "seven" (5) appears repeatedly in the Old and New Testament alike. In the case of this poem it refers to Mary's Seven Dolours, which form the topic for a Catholic spiritual meditation.

Sister M Angeline SSND pictures the reverence of the apostles carrying the body of the Blessed Virgin to her last resting place on earth in three quatrains in ballad measure (In Robert 1944:196):

MEMORIES OF THE ASSUMPTION

They bore her in a reverent group
To a holy place
Left her body in the earth -
Her body, "full of grace."

But Thomas, tardy, slow of foot,
Absent when she died,
Spent with sorrow, craved to see
Her of the Crucified.

There was a swift intake of breath,
A hurried silent prayer:
Startled they opened the new-made tomb
To find but lilies there.

The poet employs poetic justice by noting the tradition that the apostle Thomas, who is remembered for his incredulity and suspicion after Jesus's first apparition, was absent when the Blessed Virgin died. His pained requests to see her and the compliance of the apostles at the same time create an atmosphere of credibility around the tradition of the substitution of lilies for the body of Christ's mother.

Each of the three stanzas is marked by a different tone. The first is one of quiet patient endurance borne in a spirit of Christian fortitude and hope in the Resurrection as Mary's death is described in evangelical terms. The second quatrain describes the pain of Thomas's loss, epitomising the emptiness in the world when this most blessed woman left its vastness to join the Blessed Trinity. Excitement characterises the concluding stanza with its festive presence of flowers, epitomising the Christian messages that pain purifies and is followed by joy and that there has to be death before rebirth into glory can take place. What happened inside that tomb is not clear. All tradition records is that the body left the tomb and lilies grew in its place.

Sister Mary Denis OP has left us an image of Mary being borne heavenwards in flight by angels. This verbal picture was painted after the poet had watched a flight of birds circle in perfect formation above a factory chimney crest (1961:296):

FLYING BIRDS
On the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption

In a compact body, keeping perfect rhythm
Above the smoking factory chimney's crest,
Regardless even of the beauty of the green fields,
Waving trees, and joyous, shouting children,
The birds circle the heavens in their morning flight.
So, surely, must the Angels have borne aloft
Our Lady on that first Assumption Day!

Intent on the Beauty of Him on Whom they desire to look,
They ignore the things of earth and gaze on her
Whom clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet,
They bear to joyful reunion with her Son -
With Him Who is also her God.

The detail of the glorious flight of birds juxtaposed with the grime of the smoking chimney bears witness to the fact that Sister Mary Denis shares one of the crowning gifts of the nun-poets as a group. This is their poetic ability to transform both natural and material phenomena, normally taken for granted, into creations of infinite beauty, while simultaneously tracing their symbolic connection with heavenly things. The poet acknowledges the existence of the earthly grime of sin as embodied in the "smoking factory chimney's crest" (2). At the same time she uses its smoke as a symbol of the perfect sacrifice of the unblemished lamb in the Old Testament and incense wafting upwards to honour the Eucharist, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, of the New Testament in fulfilment of the Old. This incense, moreover, recalls the Altar of Incense set before the Holy of Holies (cf Exodus 30:1-8). The emphasis shifts from birds to Angels, bearing "aloft/Our Lady on that first Assumption Day!" (6-7) as they carry the Blessed Virgin towards her glorious reunion with Christ Who is at once her Son and her God. The reference "clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet" (10) has been taken from Revelation/Apocalypse

12:1, and comprises the first reading for the Mass of the Feast of the Assumption.

The journey to heaven borne by angels as suggested by several nun-poets seems free from stress, sure of destination, comfortable and festive; a suitable reward for Mary who spent her entire life supporting, affirming and consoling the Lord Jesus Christ. There is variety in the assumptions of the nun-poets when it comes to the picture that will meet Mary when she reaches her celestial destination. Sister Dominic wonders whether the meeting will take place in heaven amid the music of heavenly choirs (1947:37):

THE ASSUMPTION OF OUR LADY

What lovely song shall Heavenly choirs upraise,
What harmonies beyond the Seraph's art...
To tell the grace and hymn the wond'ring praise
Of One who held all Heaven in her heart?

If this poem sounds incomplete, the reason is that it forms one of the links in the chain of a larger poem in which each of the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary warrants a verse. Although, standing alone, it lacks the thrust of the poem in its entirety, it has been included in this section on account of its relevance to the theme. It is interesting to note the religious paradox that describes Mary as one who held heaven in her heart (4) suggesting that heaven is the Presence of God.

Sister St Francis SSJ expresses her uncertainty as to whether the Blessed Virgin received a grand reception in heaven due to her exalted status as the Mother of God, or whether her celestial stay betokens only a continuation of her human family life with Joseph and the Child Jesus (In Robert 1946:125):

ASSUMPTION

Oh, did you tread a golden road,
With Love on either side,
While Seraphim bowed low before
God's lovely human bride?

Or did you walk an olden road,
A cottage round the bend;
With Joseph's smile and Jesus's kiss
A-waiting at the end?

This shamelessly tear-jerking poem teeters on the whimsical and cloys with its suggestion of old cottages (6) and family values which are more enduring than sojourns with kings (7-8). In it, the poet ignores the Catholic teaching which lays down that these values, however intrinsically worthy, are adhered to on earth, often in the face of grave difficulties, in order that an eternal reward in heaven may be gained.

Sister Francis SSJ does not look to see the truth as it presents itself in the current situation but instead espouses a travesty of truth as it prevailed in the past. Her image of heaven is overdone in the aspect of glory, into which she introduces no tenderness, while her backward glance at the harmony and holiness of the little home in Nazareth is too loving; the poet fails to discern that it has served its purpose in the fulfilment of its promise. Christ's impoverished upbringing is of untold value to the poor as a sign of hope, while it teaches the rich to help the poor in their plight. However, this is only part of the message. Christianity teaches that, regardless of one's earthly circumstances, the acceptance of these in the spirit of Christ will lead to an eternity spent in happiness in heaven in the presence of God, not in a little rustic cottage as the poet whimsically suggests. (It would go beyond the scope of this study and the writer's powers to speculate on a contemporary theological definition of heaven as being itself the Presence of God). If it was the poet's intention to juxtapose the cottage image with that of heaven in order that the reader might draw a proper conclusion after examination, this endeavour fails because the images are too slanted. All Sister Francis succeeds in, therefore, is producing an erratic poem which capriciously attempts to play on the reader's feelings rather than to make an integral statement.

Because of the unique characteristics of the nun-poets as a group, works by true poets are often found side by side by those of mere versifiers. This, as

we have seen earlier, has the unexpected result that some excellent poetry may on occasion be found to be almost meaningless in thrust, whereas, just as possibly, some very hackneyed lines sometimes reveal a startling truth. Even though some of the nun-poets were mere versifiers, Sister M Julian RSM is indisputably a poet in the true tradition of the nun-poet. Yet she too produces a sentimental effect in her poem about Mary and her Son meeting in heaven (1954:51).

THE ASSUMPTION

When Mary came
God dimmed the lights of Heaven
to a twilight tenderness, remembering
a little Lad run through the evening shadows
to her arms.

God let the twilight deepen into dark
so He could see again, forever,
her face uplifted to Him in His death.

It is difficult to specify the exact distinction between mawkishness and poignancy. In the interaction between reader and writer; it may depend on the sincerity of the writer's intention. If the poem is written because the author is involved with the *personae*, in this case Jesus and Mary, and describes them with true empathy as a result, there is every opportunity that the endeavour to present a moving picture of the true situation will be crowned with success. If, however, as it appears in both preceding poems, the writer is bent on injecting a little moral message of her own without specifying her intention, the attempt is doomed to fail.

The vow of poverty she has voluntarily embraced seems correspondingly to obstruct the clarity of vision of Sister Julian, who in her depiction of the Assumption gets no closer to reality than Sister Francis does. Wallowing in retrospection, she paints a gloomy picture in her curious assumption that Christ would desire for all eternity to be enshrouded in darkness, while having the Blessed Virgin gaze upwards at Him in the way she did as He hung dying

on the Cross. That this hideous state has culminated in His glorious Resurrection and Ascension into heaven is overlooked in the poem.

The weakness of the poet's premise does not extend to her diction, as Sister Julian possesses an admirable mastery of the English language and the true poet's gift of expression. The beauty of her lines "God dimmed the lights of Heaven/to a twilight tenderness" (2-3) commands respect; even awe, at the exceptional quality of her poetic utterance. However, the use of the cloying expression "a little Lad" (4) with its overtones of Frances Hodgson Burnett is unworthy of a poet of Sister Julian's stature and ill devised to serve as an appellation for the world's Redeemer.

A more credible image of the Blessed Virgin's Assumption into heaven is verbally painted by a nun-poet with the appropriate religious name of Seraphim. In her poem **Queen of Heaven** (In Francis 1937:106), Sister M Seraphim OSF states that earthly ties were broken (1) and that Mary was happy to obey Christ's injunction to "scorn" (4) the "lonely shore" (6) of earth to prepare for an eternity of bliss as a reward for her constant labour, unwavering loyalty and extreme mental agony:

QUEEN OF HEAVEN

Exultant, thou didst shed all earthly ties,
Swift in thy flight, as lark at break of morn;
Higher than lark's - thy flight through parting skies -
When heaven's Son bade thy chaste feet to scorn
Forever more
Earth's lonely shore

Thy royal guard led thee to Paradise
Martyrs in snowy robes received their queen;
Anthems of praise rang through translucent skies
And censered fragrance breathed of peace serene
As God leaned down
To place thy crown!

In this poem, God, Who created everything and therefore has everything at His disposal, desired to gladden the Blessed Virgin's heart upon her Assumption into heaven. Sister Seraphim's likeness paints the respectful

parting of the skies (3) as Mary ascends to take her place within the celestial realms of God, just as the waters of the Red Sea parted to lead Moses and the Israelites to the Promised Land. In heaven itself she is rapturously welcomed by those who have shed their blood for the promotion of the Kingdom of God in an air redolent of "censered fragrance (10). The understated simplicity of the conclusion "As God leaned down/To place thy crown!" (11-12) imparts a pedestrian finish to the poem, implying a sense of relief that the poem is finished or offering an oblique apology for the profound emotion contained in the preceding lines.

Sister Mary Thuribius implores the Blessed Virgin, duly crowned as queen of heaven, in turn to sway the sceptre on earth, by creating God's kingdom within the heart of the human race (1958:no page):

TO MARY, QUEEN OF THE WORLD

O You, who wear a diadem of stars,
yet visit our drab earth from time to time;
holding converse with children poor, unkempt
yet pure of heart, Great Lady, through the bars
and prisons of man's making and the grime
of sin; the darkened regions of contempt,
come! Be our radiant Queen! Light up the way
once more. Bend down in beauty while we pray
upon our littleness: let there be seen
God's triumph in all hearts. Reign here, blest Queen!

The poet makes reference to the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to children in the world, some of which are accepted by Catholic authority and included in Church teachings. What these children have in common is not only their poverty (3) but also their purity of heart (4). Sister Thuribius succeeds in producing an integrated poem by comparing their unkemptness (3) to the "grime of sin" (5-6) wilfully committed by humankind. This she contrasts with their spiritual loveliness which links them to the Blessed Virgin (7). She concludes her poem by imploring Mary to infuse this spiritual loveliness into the heart of the human race.

During a hospital stay coinciding with the feast of the Assumption, Sister M Claire OSF tries to concentrate on the Blessed Virgin Mary, while endeavouring to draw a modicum of sense from her plight on this day, which is overcast, since autumn, or "fall" as the Americans call this season, is fast heralding the end of the American summer. Both endeavours are blessed when a break of blue parts the gloomy skies, confirming the ailing poet's conviction that Christ has prepared a special treat for His Mother on her feast-day (1954:49):

FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION
(In Hospital)

All day grey clouds have drifted to and fro
Above dank trees within my narrow view,
While roof-tops drip in streams of sullen hue
Like wave-lengths of a sea-storm's afterglow.
All nature seems to fail so sadly now
To give Our Lady joyous devoir due
In summer, when the heart would lift anew
In song upon a blossoming apple bough.

But He, who will no prayerful hope disdain
Wistful for His mother's loveliness,
At sudden twilight cleaves in sweeping twain
The curtains grey and, smiling through to bless,
Creates from skies devised in heavenly art
An evening gown of blue for Mary's heart!

The rhyming in this sonnet is somewhat forced in the final couplet, with lthe almost ludicrous effect created by "an evening gown of blue for Mary's heart" (14). Perhaps, though, Sister Claire meant to express the belief that the gown would gladden Mary's heart, but the rhythm pattern did not co-operate.

As Sister Claire lies in bed, gazing through the narrow window which is her only link with the outdoor world, she regrets the rain which causes the roof-tops to "drip in streams of sullen hue" (3) and the "grey clouds" (1) which have brought it. Christ comes to the rescue, indicating the reward (6) of eternal glory for His Mother - and by implication for the poet in her refusal to become obsessed by her own illness and her determination to celebrate within her

agony the feast in honour of the Blessed Virgin. He does so symbolically by "cleav(ing) in sweeping twain/the curtains grey" (11-12) to bring a blessing and showing the vista of a blue sky; blue being the colour associated with the Blessed Virgin's apparel.

Sister Bertrand OM uses point and counterpoint, also resembling antiphonal singing, in her description of the Blessed Virgin, who, though she resides in heaven, remains concerned with the needs of humankind (1938:no page):

OUR LADY OF MERCY

Our Lady walks the parapets of heaven
(Her feet were sandalled once against the dust)
Our Lady's hands are beautiful with blessings
(The Nazareth beggars blessed them for a crust.)

She leans her head across the brilliant rampart -
(The latchless door at Nazareth stood wide)
Our Lady's hands are beautiful with blessings
(And angels watched the beggars there and sighed.)

She hears the mystic litany of angels,
A prayer no mortal knows and none could say,
But they who have no need can find no mercy -
"Most gracious advocate, turn thine eyes this way."

In this formally crafted antiphonal, Sister Bertrand reveals that she is in awe neither of the "parapets of heaven" (1) nor of its "brilliant rampart" (5). Though these are important to her, they are not more important than her counterpoint references to the situation in Nazareth (2; 4; 6; 8). As such she succeeds in creating the integral image of the Assumption which eluded Sister Julian Baird's reflection on this event (cf page 223).

In the third stanza of her poem the poet acknowledges that the angels sing a litany to Mary but adds that those without stain of sin need no mercy. In memory of Mary's merciful deeds upon earth towards those in need of bread, however, she encourages humanity to pray the *"Salve Regina"* (Hail Holy Queen), a prayer sometimes ascribed to the pen of St Bernard of Clairvaux

and at other times to that of St Herman the Cripple. The entire prayer is transcribed here for easy reference:

SALVE REGINA

Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,
Hail our life, our sweetness and our hope
To thee do we cry up, poor banished children of Eve,
To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears,
Turn then, oh most gracious Advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us,
And after this, our exile, show unto us the blessed Fruit of thy womb, Jesus,
Oh clement, oh loving, oh sweet Virgin Mary.

Reference to this prayer and its possible author is similarly contained in a poem of the same name in its Latin translation by Sister Mary St Virginia, BVM, whose poem on the pains of virginity, titled **A Nun to Mary, Virgin** was used earlier in this study (cf page 170). The poet reaches across the centuries for the hand of St Bernard of Clairvaux and across the present for that of Sister Bertrand to derive consolation from the words of the *"Salve Regina"*, showing that to those whose lives are wrapped up in God, time divisions lose their significance as eternity beckons. Once again she uses sonnet form, but with enjambments and caesurae, even using full stops in odd, experimental places (In Robert 1946:346):

SALVE, REGINA

Even as children all of us learned of sorrow,
But some of us learned with method in a school
Where even children study why tomorrow
Will bring them tears. Thus I, too, heard the rule
From a voice explaining that any exile must languish
Away from home when night draws down on him;
I was given the formula for the hour of anguish.
Saying it now while day grows grey and grim,
Across the years I hear Saint Bernard singing -
Out of the valley of tears wherein I grope -
His burden of grief: Just as I now am bringing
My grief to her, our Sweetness and our Hope.
And shadows lift today as long ago,
Above New York as once above Clairvaux.

No reference is made to the Assumption but the poem, like the one on consecrated virginity by this poet, reveals an insight into the terrible loneliness the nun-poets suffered on leaving their homes and families and becoming part of a religious community in which not all members were at all times benevolently disposed to each other.

Exile has haunted the lives of the nun-poets; not only in the convent but also because to them, Christ-focused as they are, the world is but a valley of tears. From childhood on Sister St Virginia has been taught the *"Salve Regina"* but it has taken years for its true import to dawn on her growing mind. That the recitation of this ancient prayer brings meaning into her present sense of isolation is the message of her twentieth-century version of this prayer to the Queen assumed into heaven. It concludes this section dealing with the pre-Conciliar Marian poetry to make way for an investigation into poetry in praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary written by American nun-poets after the Second Vatican Council.

CHAPTER TEN

A SELECTION OF POST-CONCILIAR MARIAN PRAISE POETRY BY AMERICAN NUN-POETS.

Marian devotion in the Catholic Church declined dramatically after the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, in spite of the fact that all the Church's ancient teachings with regard to the Blessed Virgin had been reinforced in its documents. The reaction to excessive *hyperdulia* itself became disproportionate. The spirit of iconoclasm of the age extended to the removal of time-honoured Marian images from churches, the cessation of the public recitation of the Rosary and of the recitation of prayers in honour of the Blessed Virgin at the conclusion of the Eucharistic celebration.

This assertion should not be dismissed as a false illusion of reactionary Catholics fostered by their fanaticism. As stated earlier (cf page 104), Canon René Laurentin, one of the world's foremost Mariologists, himself wrote that, in the wake of the abandonment of statues, devotions and "even" liturgical feasts of the Blessed Virgin, he and others ("we") had felt that Mary had been abandoned in the post-Conciliar Church and that this had led to "a new *malaise"* (1983:107). A similar perception was voiced in many studies, one of which, an article by Charles W Neumann, was titled **The Decline of Interest in Mariology as a Theological Problem** (1972:12-38). Church historians and theologians offer a hope of healing the "disease" or "theological problem" as they say that the Catholic Church in the wake of its Church Councils traditionally undergoes a period of adjustments before the revised paramenters become integrated into its life, and universal obedience to its Magisterium becomes re-established.

Along with the decline of interest in Mariology which commenced in the early 1960s, the publication of Marian poetry of the American nun-poets began to grind to a halt, approximately coinciding with the time a dramatic exodus of religious and clergy became discernible. It cannot be measured whether it was only the writing of Marian poetry, the publication thereof, or both, which

diminished. By 1998, the general situation in America was that poets writing such work had to finance it themselves if they wanted it published. If the cost could be recovered, they would gain on the transaction but any loss would be for their own account. To determine whether this practical issue caused the decrease in the publication of Marian praise poetry by members of religious orders, unable on account of their vow of poverty to finance their own printing and marketing costs, calls for a study different from the present literary one.

Mother M Francis PCC is one of the few nun-poets known to have managed to have her Marian poetry published at intervals throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. In the quest for post-Conciliar poetry by nun-poets, moreover, it is her name which emerges as one of the few stalwarts who wrote before, during and after the Council and whose poetry seems to have retained all the fluency of the best work of the pre-Conciliar nun-poets.

Enough pre-Conciliar Marian poetry has been transcribed in these pages to demonstrate how pained many religious must initially (and some even later) have felt at the end to public veneration of a woman whom they saw as a motherly figure, a paragon of virtue, a role model and the Mother and confidante of Christ. It was in emulation of her example and on account of the love for her Son which they shared with her that they were living this life, dismissed as unnatural by critics but which they themselves regarded as supernatural by themselves. and most pleasing to God. They had no alternative but to conform to the mixed signals that were being sent out by their shepherds. Some of these expressed no protest at the abandonment of Marian devotion in their parishes, notwithstanding the fact that the Church's doctrine regarding Mariology had remained unchanged and that every pontiff until the end of the century frequently wrote and spoke in praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Mother Francis PCC, however, managed to retain the pre-Conciliar gift of drawing good from a situation which appears to have no redeeming features wiithout closing her eyes to reality. It is this quality of hope gained from successfully seeking out the redeemable aspects from among unfavourable

circumstances which is probably the most enduring characteristic of the nun-poets' oeuvre. To Sylvia Plath, as we have seen, the lamb cooked for a harmonious Sunday dinner after church turns to ashes in her mouth because of its connotation with the inhumanities perpetrated in Polish concentration camps. To Mother Francis, on the other hand, the destruction of bitterness and war is lit up by the spark of child-like hope that as long as she does her duty and leaves God and His blessed Mother to do the worrying, all things will work together unto good in the end. It is not clear when the following poetic gem from her pen was published. Though heavy with pain, it nevertheless sparkles with realism, hope and common sense (Marian Library:no details):

HAVE FAITH AND REJOICE

Light Mary's pure name to bonfires
on the rubble
Of earth's despair! For in our
darkest season
Of bitterness and war, there sounds
no trumpet.
But Mary laughing with her
little Child.

The bitterness (5) to which Mother Francis refers in this brief poem may well allude to the pain, not only of war, but also that experienced by Catholics with a strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin at the diminution of the veneration of Mary. Nevertheless the poet continues to believe in Mary's powers of intercession with God. These she ascribes to the complete ease and understanding which exists between Christ and His holy Mother (4).

The Second Ecumenical Vatican Council was still in progress in 1962 when Mother Francis's poem **Annunciation** appeared, giving yet further evidence of the poet's versatility as she employs aviation imagery to describe the encounter between the Blessed Virgin and the Angel Gabriel (1963:81):

ANNUNCIATION

Swifter than jet-cleaved air is ribboned, love flies
By flawless automatics of the heart
Back to this hour, girl, and angel, curving
Wings of its own against her lifted face.

Here is the home of hours and of angels
Toward which time groped, and flowing eternities.
Ever will love return and close this hour
Warm on its starkest cry and brightest song.

Haven and hangar built by God for hostel
On the macadam bleakness of whatever
Threatens or comes, love praises best this hour
With petals of silence strewn along its lintel.

The aviation imagery of this poem denotes freedom; also indicated by the angel's ability to fly and Mary's being at liberty either to accept or to refuse God's messenger's request to her on behalf of the Lord to become the Mother of His only Son. The lack of introduction which characterises this poet's oeuvre is demonstrated as the poem is started off with the excellent simile: "(Love flies) swifter than jet-cleaved air is ribboned" (1). In this simile an almost visible picture is painted of the swift progress of a jet through a summer sky. Love flies even faster to cross two millennia and see the often-told story of Mary and the angel, the light of whose curved wing is reflected in the curve of the face lifted up to him.

In the second stanza it is stated that time did not exist when these two held their discussion. Yet time and eternity met at that very moment, which henceforth represented the very focus of temporal and eternal agony and joy.

In the final quatrain, the poet employs a novel description of Mary as the *Theotokos*: "haven and hangar built by God for hostel". The alliterative repetition of the letter "H" is reminiscent of the hush that falls when a mother rocks her crying baby to sleep, even if she should find herself "on the macadam bleakness of whatever" (10). The use of the word "lintel" (12), could refer to threshold-like obstructions on a runway. It also has Old Testament connotations with the blood smeared to indicate the Chosen

(saved) People of God. If the word "hour" (11) refers to six o'clock in the morning at the first recitation of the Angelus which recalls the event of the Annunciation, "lintel" could symbolise a threshold as start of the day. The scientific and technological imagery brings home the fact that God created so perfect a universe that man at his most educated can but marvel at the perfection of its symmetry. Mary, being the most perfect human being created by God, admirably fits into this environment, just as she belonged to the Galilee of her day.

In 1963, Mother Francis PCC had a poem titled **Advent Prophecy** published, in which she used contemporary space terms in juxtaposing the Isaian prophecies concerning the Virgin Birth of Jesus with the reality of the present,. The poet reduces (or elevates) the marvels of space discoveries to elements in the eternal plan of God Who made the decision to allow Mary to participate in His intentions for the human race. He alone is its Creator (1962-63:113):

ADVENT PROPHECY

Where tortured atoms writhe beneath the scalpel
Of our investigations, I see her coming,
Branches of flowering pity in her arms,
Healing the day with glances. And the atoms
Fall down to kiss her feet, and are made whole.

I hear the clash of prophecies converging
On the faint stir of Life beneath her heart.
Down on our loud boulevards, I see her coming.
Lift up your heads! Blow all your factory whistles!
And point the hour on your telechrons!

Not to Ain Karim. To the laboratories
Where astronauts sit trim in new space jackets,
I see her coming, space held in one hand,
Her smile forgiving all the bright moon-rockets
Their errors, with the moon beneath her feet.

Girl of Isaiah's vision, could he see you
Carry your Son into our plastic jungles
And cure our tuneless music with your singing?
Hour Isaias never dreamed is striking:
Under the neon lights, I see her coming!

Lift up your heads! You tall TV antennae,
Lean down and prostrate for her coming! Jet planes,
Hum the glad antiphons of our redemption.
Once over hills, now through the chromium maze,
The young girl light with Child shall come and save us.

The intimation that the Old Testament is shown to be fulfilled in the New in terms of the allusion to Isaiah (16) refers to the following prophecy: "... the Lord Himself shall give you a sign: 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son : and His name shall be Emmanuel'." (Isaiah vii:14). The virgin is Mary, whom Mother Francis shows to be as much at home in the laboratories of scientists as on the way between Nazareth and Ain Karim on her journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-40).

From here the poet swoops to the Book of the Apocalypse which describes Mary as "A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (5) (Apoc 12:1). It is clearly Mother Francis's intention to demonstrate that all the power and might of science are negated in the light of God's omnipotence and the wealth of the universe which He has poured down on the Blessed Virgin, "space held in one hand" (13). Just as the universe was subject to God before science was discovered, so it is still. Therefore science should pay homage to the envoy of Him Who created all things. Mary has not lost face by the space expeditions, writes the poet, as the moon remains steadily below her feet (15).

The poet does not believe that Isaiah, for all his clairvoyance, could have had a picture in his mind of Mary carrying her Son "in our plastic jungles" (17) and that she would cure humanity's "tuneless music with her singing" (18). Nonetheless, the young girl who is - unlike other mothers - not heavy, but "light" (25) with Child will come and save humankind. Mother Francis, who is the soul of orthodoxy in her poetic utterance, surely cannot be saying that Mary brought Salvation, as this suggests, but that Christ, brought by Mary through God's Omnipotence, is synonymous with Salvation.

An oblique reference to the contemporaneous silence among the rank and file of Catholics in respect of the Blessed Virgin Mary may be discerned in the following praise poem in which Mother Mary Francis PCC pays homage to Mary's name, which in exquisite imagery she symbolises as a "silence full of bells" (8;19) (1974:41):

THE VIRGIN'S NAME WAS MARY

Your name is as oil poured out
On our smarting spirits,
On our groaning hearts.
O Mary,
Your name is oasis in our wasteland of waiting.
It is wine after the black bread of regret.
After love's white fast.

Your name is like a silence full of bells.

Mary, your name is a pause in song.
It is the moment before flight.
Your name is a waterfall of fragrance,
It is a crystal dance of sound,
Mary.
Your name is a basilica of cool darkness
For the frightened, the deserters
Who have no place to pray.

Your name is as oil poured out
On the troubled waters of the world.
Your name is like a silence full of bells.

In this rapturous outburst which combines ancient psalm imagery with the present environment, the poet acknowledges the agony of her "smarting spirits/... groaning hearts" (2-3). By 1974, the year in which this poem was first published, the recitation of the "Hail Mary" had become practically a dead letter in many formerly devout Catholic circles. Though to the poet this silence betokened only a "pause in song" (9), this pause has all the horror of a "wasteland of waiting" (5) and a fast on "the black bread of regret/after love's white fast" (6-7). The black bread of regret signifies fasting. "Love's white fast" (7) may perhaps refer to the Communion wafer. An older generation of

Catholics were obliged to fast from midnight until the time they received Holy Communion, out of reverence for the Eucharist.

The poet says Mary's name is "the moment before flight" (10). In other words: Mary's name, though seldom mentioned at the time the poem is written, will again find favour in years to come. The people who have turned their back on the Church will find maternal solicitude if they turn to her, for Mary's name is "a basilica of cool darkness/for the frightened, the deserters/who have no place to pray" (14-16), and it is "as oil poured out/on the troubled waters of the world" (17-18).

Synaesthesia is used to create an effect of festivity in describing Mary's name as "a waterfall of fragrance" (11) and "a crystal dance of sound" (12). Paradox is employed to juxtapose the peace brought by Mary (14) with the fears of humankind (15-16). The Old Testament imagery in "oil" (1), "wine" (6) and "oasis" (5) brings home the fact that the New Testament, which commenced with the Incarnation, came to fulfil the Old.

The reason why hope is engendered by the thought of Mary is discernible in the following poem by Mother Francis on the Blessed Virgin's apparitions at Guadeloupe (Marian Library:no details):

LINES TO OUR LADY OF GUADELOUPE

"Am I not here who am thy Mother -
What dost thou fear?"

Deep in the tangled brushwood of my hours,
You are a sudden clearing, *Madre mia*,
Amid the choke of thorn,
Incredible rose.

And where my fears sit huddled in their trembling,
You are a soft word spoken, O Maria,
In heart's cacophony, a splendid chord!

Brave alabaster out of hope-shards builded,
What need I dream of beauty, I who know
Curve of your cheek, the raven hair - low winging,
Soft swell of lip, the delicate flight of brow!

Exuberance, be hedged in Christ oh! sweetly
By this rumorous smile's so wistful bands;
And sorrow, find your meaning, find your haven
In this gentle fold of olive hands.

Authentic glimpse of heaven, *Madre mia*,
Your image my supernal dividend
On sorrow, and my pledge past all devising
Of paradisal day. What shall I fear
Of pain, of death, of diverse ignominy
When you are here, Maria, when you are here.

Published in 1968, Mother Francis's version of the Guadeloupe events serves to explain why hope continues to exist in her heart. It was a courageous act to publish a poem of this nature in the Catholic climate of the day, in which the authenticity of reported visions, apparitions and miracles was questioned and doubted. However, the poet's belief in the apparitions was of help to her in encouraging her to bear witness to it in print.

She explains her confidence in the inspirational consolation of the Blessed Virgin by comparing Mary to "a sudden clearing" (2) "deep in the tangled brushwood of (her - the poet's) hours" (1), an "incredible rose" (4) "amid the choke of thorns (3), "a soft word spoken" (6) "where (her) fears sit huddled in their trembling" (5) and "a splendid chord ... in heart's cacophony" (7).

Mother Francis acknowledges the hope arising from heartbreak as well as the healing propensities of the virtue of hope in invoking the Blessed Virgin's mediation by using the arresting metaphor: "Brave alabaster out of hope-shards builded" (8). She praises the Blessed Virgin's beauty as it is imprinted on the cloak of Juan de Diego in poetic terms (9-11) (cf page 73). Both joy and sorrow should be contained, says the poet. "Exuberance (should) be hedged in Christ .../by this rumorous smile's so wistful bands" (12-13) in respect for the sorrow of the smile on the image, while pain should be interpreted "in this gentle fold of olive hands" (15). "Rumorous" means a loud

sound, resounding; and seems a contradiction in the face of the wistfulness, leading to the question of whether it might be a misprint for "humorous", since a smile could be both humorous (or even luminous) - but surely not rumorous - and wistful.

An interesting feature of the poem is the use of the Spanish term for "my mother": *"Madre mia"* and the use of the Spanish version of the Blessed Virgin's name throughout the poem. Mother Francis says the image imprinted on Juan de Diego's cloak is simultaneously her "supernal dividend/on sorrow" (17-18) and her "pledge" (18) of heaven. Hence she will fear neither, pain, trouble nor death, provided Mary remains within call. The repetition of the words "when you are here" indicates at once the return of the fear of pain, trouble and death when Mother Francis leaves the precincts of Guadeloupe and the strength of the comfort she finds there.

Like **Advent Prophecy** (cf page 234) the following contribution by Mother Francis PCC describes Mary as a contemporary queen, able to cope with modern inventions and deal with modern difficulties. She does not turn away from her children, in spite of the fact that they have chosen to adopt frenetic life-styles (Marian Library:no details):

QUEEN OF THE WORLD

Lady, your hard throne lurches
On our careening lives.
What sovereign sits
So perilous on exaltation, Mary,
As yours, borne on your children's *gaucherie*?
Summon to homage all the painted fans
Of eyelashes, impel the exhibited knees
Down to obeisant dust before your slender
Security of love, queen!

"Queen!" a husky-throated
World will sing on faltering pitch forever
Because you dare to speed our sweating highways,
Ride our air pockets, swim our brine of tears.

Filigree lady, you outwear the leather
Of disillusion. You unsnarl despair
To hope's bright skein. No perilous exaltation
Is yours who sit in state our blundering.

The imagery of the "hard" throne, which lurches/on our careening lives" (1-2) shows the change that has taken place in Marian devotion since the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council. The *"gaucherie"* (5) or awkwardness of the Blessed Virgin's children renders her exaltation "perilous" (4).

The poet is seen to ask the Blessed Virgin to call for homage from "the painted fans/of eyelashes" (6-7) and to force the "exhibited knees" (7) (for it was the era of the miniskirt) down on to the ground. The husky throats (10) of humankind are caused by the undiscerning use of alcohol, nicotine and drugs which have destroyed the ability of the owners to sing melodiously. Nevertheless the songs they sing so hoarsely to the Blessed Virgin will be heard by her, because she participates in all their activities (12-13) and pities the tears they shed which are enough to fill an ocean (13). The final stanza explains why Mother Mary Francis is never devoid of hope. It is because she believes her "Filigree lady" (14) to be stronger than the disappointments she encounters. According to the poet, the Blessed Virgin painstakingly "unsnarl(s) despair/to hope's bright skein (15-16). Her hope is founded on reality, which sets her on the firm footing needed to put the minds of the members of the human race at rest and renders the devotion to the Blessed Virgin secure. The last line appears as if it has a word missing before “our” but according to the original text this is not the case. If, as seems indicated, moreover, a word such as “above” or “despite” should be inserted, the meter would be distorted. Poetic licence, a ploy frequently used by the poet, therefore seems to be indicated.

This further contribution from Mother Francis PCC explains to us the root of her own undying store of confidence. Her hope proved not to be in vain. While individual parishes were eliminating Marian devotion from their liturgical celebrations, Catholic bodies world-wide persevered with their research to relate the Blessed Virgin Mary to Christ and the Church, while the popes of

the period wrote and preached unceasingly on the need to continue the ancient devotion to Mary.

In 1992 the Collection of Masses of the blessed Virgin Mary was translated into English. Three years later the Mariological Society of America, which has its headquarters in the Marian library of the University of Dayton, Ohio, USA, announced a search for Christ- and Church-related Marian hymns for use in the liturgy to celebrate the publication of the Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary. There were three criteria, the hymn should present a portrait of Mary as is found in the Collection or the Catechism of the Catholic Church, rhyme and rhythmical patterns should be observed and it should be suitable for singing as a hymn text during the celebration of the Eucharist.

The fact that more than 900 entries flooded in from all over the world, including South Africa, the Philippines, Europe and Australia, makes it all the more remarkable that three out of the five winning entries were written by American nun-poets, Sisters Marie LeClerc Laux SSND, Dolores Dufner OSB and Marie Colette PCC. This fact is mentioned as a matter of interest only. Their contributions are not included in the present collection because of the dampening effect of the criteria particularly those imposed by rhythmical and rhyme patterns. These turned the poems into Evangelical versification and robbed many of them of any poetic luminosity they might otherwise have possessed. Oddly enough, among the most appealing of the entries were those which disregarded the injunctions on metrical and rhyming patterns. Obviously they could not qualify as the winning entries. Nonetheless some were remarkable, because they expressed the kind of faith that had seemed to have been lost over the years. Among these examples is an account of the Cana miracle, written in 1995 by Sister M Paul Dale OCD. Though her poetry lacks the lustre of the work of her pre-Conciliar peers, it shares the freshness, originality, insight and faith of the best examples of their writings. Stylistically, this poem has little to recommend it. As the Marian promotional hymn for which it was intended, however, it would need only a little gloss in metrical patterning and rhyme to succeed. Sister M Paul OCD has interpreted the Biblical message with sensitivity (Marian Library Competition Collection):

STONE JARS

Stone jars by the door
And people galore
Were part of the picture that day.
The wedding went on
Apostles joined the throng
And the mother of Jesus did say:

"My Son, I have noticed that something is wrong
The couple seems troubled, the wine is all gone.
You know how I love them; this day means so much,
So give them Your Blessing, the joy of Your Touch."

He said: "Not this hour,"
Though He had all the Power
The Divine and the human had wed.
He seemed not to care
But His Heart was aware
Of the meaning of what Mary said.

"Oh servants, be ready to obey His word,"
And something of reverence in Jesus' Heart stirred.
He said: "Fill the water jars up to the brim,
Then draw for the steward, and give some to him."

The couple seemed happy; they'd found some more wine.
The chief steward marvelled that it was so fine.
The apostles all marvelled at their Master's Power
And their Faith began growing at that blessed Hour.

Stone hearts, and the poor,
And lives that are sore
May be in the picture to stay
But the Song Mary sang
And that Jesus began
Is still working its marvels today.

The first refrain (7-10) is spontaneous. The poet creates a sense of kinship between Mary and Jesus which would slip into twentieth century mother-son relationships with ease. The poet believes Jesus knows and loves His mother and that it is her fondness for everyone (9), even those who enjoy their liquor, which makes Him so receptive to her importunity.

To her request Jesus first replies in the negative. As His human and Divine powers have fused (13) He may be thinking beyond the embarrassment of the

hour. More than likely He would have preferred His first miracle to be one of healing but Mary, being human only, looks on the pain of the embarrassed host as being of cardinal importance at the moment and Christ respects her insight and yields to it (18). It is this everyday quality of Mary so sensitively described though in such everyday words by Sister Mary Paul Dale that has drawn millions to venerate the Blessed Virgin throughout the ages.

Another nun-poet who wrote an account of the wedding at Cana, is Sister M Terese Donze ASC. Her version, which was published in 1974, should be read while bearing in mind that she was up against an instinctive resistance against Mariology. Not wishing her contribution to reach the hearts of a handful of Marian loyalists only, she resorted to certain ploys to make certain the poem would be read until the end. One of these was the use of the title she chose (1974:33:1308-1309):

WOMEN'S LIB

His mother was the first to note
the wine was running low. And since
the six disciples came on Jesus'
invitation, might he not
feel some of the responsibility?

"They have no wine," she said. Just that.
"I know it," said the Man. "My hour
has not yet come. I cannot act.
My hands are held. This hour is yours
and has to come before my own.
My Father's work awaits your will.
He'd have a woman now undo
What once another woman did."

Then Mary stood in speechless awe
as, swaying back through endless years,
an echo seemed to leap and roll
until it reached an ancient grove
where, close beside a fateful tree,
a woman stood, in sin and shame,
and listened to a promise that,
in some dim distant day,
a woman like herself would help
to lift the curse her deed had wrought.

"Woman!"-
The word surged forward like a wave.
"Woman!"-
The word crashed over Mary's soul.
Her years fell from her at the sound,
and agelessness wrapped round her like
a robe. The Mother that she was
to Him stepped down in humble awe
before the Woman that He called.
A nobler Eve, her love leaped up
at once to stand beside His own.
No longer Mother now. Instead,
the Woman told in prophecy,
new Adam's fair and sinless Bride.

It was her hour. She understood,
She would not play her Adam false-
though now the chance was clearly hers-
and wrest from Him His rightful place;
but rather, took the power He gave
and placed it back into His hands.
"Do what He says," she told the boys
who came in answer to her call.

Then all the mighty flood of grace
that waited on a woman's word
was loosed. And God's own hour had struck.

This poem gives a strong indication of the change of heart that occurred in the mind and faith of the religious between the pre- and post-Conciliar eras. It specifically demonstrates the fact that, whereas the traditional nun-poets had a deep humility which taught them to accept without question all they had been taught, those of the post-Conciliar era asked questions and displayed no visible qualms about recording their doubts for posterity.

Sister M Terese ASC clearly possesses strong faith but she also asks questions. In the first stanza she reveals that she belongs to the generation which for the first time suggested that it was because some of His apostles accompanied Jesus to the wedding that there was not enough to drink (2-5) and that it was therefore in a spirit of justice that Christ performed His first miracle. This shows a need to interpret the Bible in a spirit of practicality. In this case it seems to rob the miracle at Cana of some of its mystery, an

important concept in Johannine theology. The second stanza contains a dialogue between the Blessed Virgin and her Son in which He is seen to explain that her co-operation is required to set Him free from a kind of paralysis that can only be lifted if she counteracts Eve's disobedience by her own obedience. The third stanza is an impressive piece of narrative, reminiscent of a Cecil B de Mille Hollywood Biblical extravaganza, which seems to lack the conviction of the earlier nun-poets' works. This theme is developed in the fourth verse when, from Christ's mother, the Blessed Virgin finds herself becoming "new Adam's fair and sinless Bride" (37), a concept earlier preached impressively by Church Fathers including St Irenaeus but which in the present context tends to be more of an anti-climax on account of the build-up of fire and brimstone.

In the fifth stanza the melodramatic ring to the line "She would not play her Adam false" (39) should not blind the reader to the fact that this verse contains a message to atheists, many of whom find it impossible to believe in a God Who permits humanity to endure so much affliction. They fail to see that the Creator has given the created human person a free will. As God is Truth Itself, He cannot withdraw this gift. Paradoxically, this makes Him vulnerable when an individual abuses the gift of free will, as did Adam and Eve. Mary, the poet explains, simply "took the power (God) gave/and placed it back into His hands" (42-43). It is an inspired statement but in the context of the poem it is not quite clear what has given rise to it.

The poet's intimation that Christ could not have performed a miracle without intervention from the Blessed Virgin is a personal one, not backed up in the Biblical suggestion that Christ was reluctant (but not powerless) at that particular juncture to embark upon His public life. However, it was His filial concern for Mary in her compassion for their shamed hosts which caused Him to perform His first miracle. It is this downright humanity of Mary which has led Catholics throughout the ages to venerate her. They believe(d) that Christ may not always desire to perform miracles in their lives because they are aware they do not deserve such generosity on account of their stubborn sinfulness. However, the Blessed Virgin, by virtue of her perfection and her d

meritorious history as the Mother of Christ, is able to present their appeals to Him and obtain their needs. That is why thy they turn to her with filial piety.

Twenty years separate this poet's version of the Cana Miracle from that of Sister M Paul OCD. The latter version, though written two decades later, shows a reversal to the simple faith of the pre-Conciliar Marian nun-poets and might well turn out to be prophetic of future Marian poetry.

The difference in these two versions of Christ's first miracle poses a question: to what extent is interpretation of the Bible advisable and at what stage does it become a re-write? From the belief confessed by Sister M Terese ASC, it is clear that she has deep faith in Scripture and in her Church's teachings. At the time when she wrote her Cana poem, she would have come under severe criticism from within the ranks of the members of her Church for taking so steadfast a position on the side of the Blessed Virgin. Yet she blunders in her flawed description of Mary's gyration from mother to bride (37), though the message has a certain affinity with the writings of the Church Fathers. She creates an impression of romantic fiction to propitiate the critics of Mariology and render them more receptive to her strong Marian message. No Catholic employed in writing Marian lore during the 1970s would under-estimate the extent of the triumph she scored in actually having a Marian poem published in the religious environment of her day. The mood among a certain sector of Catholics of the period was one of ridicule of those who sided with the Church's ancient teachings on Mariology. By attempting to mollify such critics by means of literary ploys from her ready pen and by romanticising the facts, the poet was not in fact interpreting Mariology. Rather, she was obliquely apologising for it to the very Women's Libbers she sought to appease and propitiate (as witness the title).

Sister M Paul OCD makes no such apology. Moreover, while she acknowledges that the apostles accompanied Jesus, she does not accuse them of the indignity of coming uninvited and drinking everyone else's wine to boot - though her open-ended mention of them does not rule out this

possibility. Unlike Sister M Terese ASC, therefore, she succeeds as a Marian apologist where she fails as a poet.

The literary lightness of the defective poetry of Sister M Paul OCD must not blind the reader to the fact that she, too, has a profound insight into her faith and is well acquainted with its teachings. Like Sister M Terese ASC, therefore, she is aware of the numerous teachings of the Fathers which name Mary as the new Eve and Christ as the new Adam.

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council defined this teaching in the following way (**Dogmatic Constitution of the Church. *Lumen Gentium*:** 1964:63):

> ... Mary, a daughter of Adam, consenting to the divine Word, became the mother of Jesus, the one and only Mediator. Embracing God's salvific will with a full heart and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally as a handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son, under Him and with Him, by the grace of almighty God, serving the mystery of redemption. Rightly, therefore, the holy Fathers see her as used by God, not merely in a passive way but as freely co-operating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience ... Hence not a few of the early Fathers gladly assert in their preaching: "The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience, what the virgin Eve bound through her unbelief, the Virgin Mary loosened by her faith ... Comparing Mary with Eve, they call her "the Mother of the Living ... and still more often they say: "death through Eve, life through Mary".

This text explains the theological thinking behind Sister Terese ACS's poem and that of Sister M Paul OCD which follows (Marian Library Competition Collection):

> **TWO EVES**
>
> The first Eve stood beneath the tree that God told her about
> And listened to the serpent, who tempted her to doubt
> The New Eve stood beneath the Cross that seemed so cruel and bad
> And saw the awesome Sacrifice that made all mankind glad.

The first Eve stood all guilty, and filled with shame and fear
She brought us all the troubles and hardships that are here
The New Eve stood, all holy, the honour of our race
She brought to us our Saviour, that we might see God's face.

Two women, oh so different, have altered every life
Two trees, oh so different, brought heaven after strife
The first Eve was our mother; her traîts with us remain
But now we have the New Eve, and life is not the same.

Blessed be the new Eve, who brings us so much gain
Blessed be her Jesus, Who for our ransom came
Blessed Virgin Mary, we'll love you all our days
Because of you we're joyful and living for God's praise.

This is a poem of contrast which, for all its poetical ineptness, reveals so deep a grasp of Marian teaching that even the pedestrian verse fails to obliterate the message.

There are two Eves, the first (1) and the New (3). The first Eve, says Sister Paul ruefully, "brought us all the troubles and hardships that are here" (6). Gently she shares blame for Eve's actions in the third stanza: "The first Eve was our mother; her traîts with us remain" (11). In other words, Sister Paul does not abandon Eve to her shame. She is the mother of humankind, right or wrong, and all people are jointly responsible for the misery in which she has landed firstly herself, and, in the process, the rest of the human race. Perhaps, given her temptation, Sister Paul seems to be implying, all humans would have made the same mistake - all but Mary. She makes this statement in favour of the Blessed Virgin in a line that reads like an understatement: "But now we have the New Eve, and life is not the same" (12). The fourfold repetition of the word "blessed" in the final stanza has an incantatory effect.

A third post-Conciliar Cana poem, this time again written by a nun-poet named after the Blessed Virgin and St Paul, Sister Mary Paula Kolar FSP, was also entered in the Marian hymn competition, though a date on the poem states that it was written on April 24, 1983: The metre clearly shows that it was written as a hymn rather than a poem.

AT CANA

O gracious Queen at Cana you showed a mother's heart
To help a wedding couple, you took a leading part,
Knowing what would happen if the wine ran out,
So to your Son near, you turned without a doubt,
That He would find a way, embarrassment to spare,
The newly married couple, for whom you showed a care.

The HOUR was not timely, your Son said in reply
But in your heart of Mother, you knew you could rely
Upon His loving goodness, to remedy the need.
The miracle He worked then; all marvelled at the deed.

O Mother pray for us too, your children here on earth,
Teach us how to live right and cherish our true worth,
Because your Son Who loves us with a love sublime,
Waits for us to join Him in life beyond earth's time.

This poem with its faulty grammar: "Teach us how to live right" fails to impress. All that saves it is the poet's strong faith. Sister M Paula FSP was clearly hampered by the rhyming and rhythmical patterns, which she obeyed with precision. Her theme concerns the difference between time and eternity. The Blessed Virgin is the link between them.

Identification with the sense of exile the members of the Holy Family must have experienced on account of their flight into Egypt is found in **Home**, another poem by Sister Mary Paul Dale entered in the Marian hymn competition. Like **Stone Jars**, this poem has a colloquial, yet heart-warming quality, as Sister Mary Paul compares her own pain-filled journey heavenwards with the flight into Egypt in poorly scanning, haphazardly rhyming verse (Marian Library Competition Collection):

HOME

Off to a strange land and to a strange tongue
Off to the pyramids under the sun
Off in the night, at the angel's voice.
Fleeing to save her Son.

Where would they land up and how would they live?
She glanced up at Joseph so eager to give
She glanced at the few things that they brought along
Fleeing to save her Son.

They had been told of Herod's intent,
But God graced their footsteps wherever they went,
With people who helped when provisions were spent
And who warmed to their most gracious ways.

O Mary, you know what it's like to start new,
Not knowing the strangers or things around you
Wondering what the Lord wants you to do,
Fleeing to save your Son.

The foxes have holes, and birds have their nest.
But we travel lightly; our home is the best
Waiting for us when the heart seeks its rest,
Grateful to meet your Son.

Teach me, sweet Mother, a pilgrim to be,
Trusting in God for whatever I need,
Serving the Lord in each thought, word and deed
Sharing the Love in your ways

My home's in Heaven, and I'm on my way
Fleeing or wrestling with evil each day,
Joseph and Mary, by you I'll stay
Happily with your Son.

An entertaining feature detected in the style of this ballad is the juxtaposition of formal and colloquial language. The poet writes from the heart and scatters her pearls of wisdom to fall where they may. She frankly borrows from the lyrics of **The First Noel**, a Christmas carol, in the first two lines of the third stanza (9-10), before turning her attention in a very down-to-earth manner to the logistical details (11) and concluding with dignity in the words "and who warmed to their most gracious ways" (12). This seesawing between colloquial and dignified speech has a comical effect, no doubt unintended by Sister M

Paul OCD. Yet the sincerity it implies on the poet's part, even if it does not result in great poetry, is quite heartwarming.

Though it lacks the gloss of the poetry of the pre-Conciliar nun-poets, wisdom is hidden in Sister Mary Paul's outwardly haphazard poetry as we again see in the second verse, which starts off with an expression of consternation in respect of an uncertain future (5) but allows calm to prevail immediately as "she glanced up at Joseph so eager to give" (6). A wealth of meaning is hidden behind these bald words: Joseph, who gives the Blessed Virgin and her Child the benefit of his love, hard work, respect, protection, he is the man they can trust to take care of them while in exile.

The direct appeal to the Blessed Virgin in the fourth stanza (13) is in the nature of a heartfelt sigh from the poet for her own plight and displays the condition of infused contemplation which characterises her spiritual state. As this verse is developed, however, the emphasis shifts from Sister Mary Paul's concerns, to focus attention on the far greater difficulties Jesus, Mary and Joseph were forced to endure in their search for refuge.

The fifth verse opens with a reference to the words uttered by Christ as an introduction to the statement that He "ha(d) nowhere to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20). By her use of the pronoun of the first person plural nominative "we" followed by the verb and adverb "travel light" (18), the writer identifies with the Holy Family's plight in having been forced to flee without luggage from Herod's crazed vengefulness. The Holy Family only have their precious Baby with them, while the vow of poverty of the religious restricts the poet's own baggage when moving between one destination and the next to one small suitcase. The final stanza betrays the author's American origins in the Country and Western wording of its second and third lines. Despite their poetic paucity, the concluding three lines in their fervour constitute a fitting climax to a poem full of warmth and feeling. In spite of its structural flaws, therefore, Sister M Paul Dale's poetry may be said to be memorable because it touches the heart. It shares this distinction with the similarly faltering lines of D H Lawrence's **Pietà** (cf page 30).

This poignant quality is demonstrated in her entry titled: **To Touch Him**, which must find an answering echo from anyone who has ever suffered illness or nursed a loved one (Marian Hymn Competition Collection):

TO TOUCH HIM

Lead me, sweet Mary, to stand by your Son,
Touch the hem of the garment you made
I'm praying for healing to flow from Him to
this body and spirit God made.

Hear me, dear Mother, and bolster my soul,
to take away faintness and fear.
I've given to doctors my savings and hope
and now to the Master draw near.

Be with me, Mother, for I am so weak
Embarrassed that others should see
The pain and the neediness deep down inside,
That has stricken and limited me.

Just let me touch Him, or brush by His side,
Hidden from everyone's gaze.
Somehow I feel certain that I will receive
A healing to show forth His ways.

Lead me, sweet Mary, to stand by your Son,
Touch the hem of the garment you made.
I'm praying for healing to flow from Him to
this body and spirit God made.

In this poem, Sister Mary Paul observes a strict rhyming pattern which leads to an economic, tightly-knit poem. Rather than match a word with an unrhyming one and thus breaking up the unity of the verse, she will repeat the same word, as may be seen in the case of "made" in the last stanza. Even so, the pattern shows a slight clumsiness because of the emphasis on the words which if recited aloud might have to be shifted to the wrong syllables in order to make the rhyme pattern work. Once again, however, it is the intention which is the saving of this poem. The poet is down on her knees for healing and courage and in her fear remembers Mary, who wove Christ's garments (2;18) which is only one of the manifestations demonstrating

Christ's Mother's strong links with her Son. Sister M Paul OCD sees Jesus as being occupied with momentous affairs but pictures Mary as the only one metaphorically able to tiptoe in to interrupt Him in the midst of these and beg for mercy on her client's behalf, as she did in Cana. Everyone knows about the Biblical story of the woman who touched the hem of Christ's garments (Mark 5:25-34) and was cured immediately of an embarrassing and painful ailment which had tormented her for many years. It takes a nun-poet, however, to bring in the very probable detail that Mary made the garment and thus to ask her to intercede with her Son with whom she is on such loving, easy terms for a miracle cure for the petitioner.

From the very beginning of this thesis, the poetry of Catherine Eichner, Sister Maura SSND, has been under the spotlight. She it was who wrote the gentle, ecumenical poem about the rabbi and the nun in the bus (cf page 7). Her composition about a Rosary procession (cf page 163) contains imagery which goes almost unchallenged in the oeuvre of the nun-poets.

While not, perhaps, as brilliant in its meditational content as that of nun-poets such as Sisters M Madeleva CSC, Miriam of the Holy Spirit OCD, M Therese SDS and "Carmel Bride", Sister Maura's poetry comes very close to being among the most universally appealing Marian praise poetry of the century.

This does not mean to say her poetry is the best of the nuns' contributions. Far from it. From the point of literature, Sister Maura's determined light-heartedness and her longevity as a poet (although these are very impressive factors) cannot hope to touch the exalted heights of meditation reached by the contemplative poet-nuns.

Nevertheless, for the man in the street her brilliant epigrams bear witness not only to her literary talent but also to her ability to find beauty and a touch of wry humour born from her innate common sense and tough endurance in the midst of pain. These attributes represent the very hallmark of the universal

appeal exercised on the reader by the Catholic nun-poet of the second quarter of the twentieth century. Moreover, her endurance as a poet, which encompasses six decades, bears witness to her perseverance, the staying power which is the crowning virtue of all. It is this which makes sense of all the pain and loneliness suffered by these gifted poets throughout their lives, for the greater glory and honour of God.

The last poem by Sister Maura to be transcribed in the present collection was published in May 1982, 38 years after **Come Christmas** saw the light of day. Having been born in 1916, Sister Maura must have been about 66 years old in May 1982 when **From a Woman's Life** appeared in *Sign* Magazine.

The poetry shows that there was little left of the bubbling humour and the unerring verbal targeting of Sister Maura's poetry of yesteryear. Whereas in her heyday she would have needed space to express herself, sixteen lines in trimeter sufficed for this late composition. This is the more memorable because Sister Maura SSND has stopped playing to the gallery and is writing only to help others find in the Virgin Mary the constant source of strength she has consistently known her to be throughout a life lived in trying to follow the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ:

FROM A WOMAN'S LIFE

What Mary knew was just
enough for the usual day:
pull water, flint fire, bake
bread, smile, pray

the dark orations, sleep, wake,
wait. When pain honed a nerve,
when birth or dying clotted
an hour, she leaned to the curve

of living, resilient to fear,
laughter, suffering.
Partings are a little death.
Each one's journey is a thing

wholly without precedent.
She looked at the sky
for compass. None. She, too,
created a road to travel by.

The simple, economic diction used in this little poem, unusual in the way its stanzas run into each other, is a far cry from the eloquent imagery of yesteryear. The gap left by the youthful laughter is now filled in by the profundity of Sister Maura's developed insight into life. Yet her conclusions are aimed at the simplicity that has flowed from the infirmities, loss of friends and relatives and indignities attendant upon old age (5-7).

Sister Maura still finds her role model in the same Blessed Virgin of whom she had a mental picture of queen of the world in the days when she herself still seemed to be in charge of her own health and talents.

A younger Sister Maura would most likely have given the French version of line 11: *"Partir, c'est mourir un peu"* instead of its somewhat lame-sounding English translation. After all, as a Notre Dame Sister and thus a member of an order whose motherhouse was situated in France, she would no doubt have had a knowledge of French. However, Sister Maura, having aged in dignity and grace, was growing ever closer to the simplicity epitomised by the grave.

The conclusion drawn from this poem, so uncharacteristically free from quotable quotes, is that humankind's free will is the compass (15) and that like Mary, all members of humankind must discover their "own road to travel by" (16) on the way to eternal life.

The differences between Sister Maura's pre- and post-Conciliar poetry are self-evident. Laughter has faded, sobriety has set in, and many good friends and relatives have gone the way of all flesh. The only desire that remains is to go to God when one is called with the dignity shown first by the Blessed Virgin, who has remained close to the poet throughout her life.

Her sober verse marks the end of an era of Marian poetry which duplicated the joyous lyric of the Middle Ages because the heart of the nun-poet of the second quarter of the twentieth century, as witness the quality of her Marian praise poetry, was the heart of a child. This is not to say this was an immature, ignorant or simple-minded heart. On the contrary, it was a heart which possessed all the wisdom God grants to the "lowly" (Luke 1:51) and which was filled with the "good things" God grants to the "hungry" (Luke 1:52). The nun-poets laboured constantly, in ways both spiritual and physical, and in the fruitfulness of their literary output, to return to the innocence of childhood. They did so in obedience to Christ's injunction that unless people receive the kingdom of God as little children, they will not enter therein (Mark 10:15).

Can their kind of innocence ever be recaptured? No-one can see into the future. However, from much of the poetry transcribed in this chapter it is evident that the joy, laughter and sheer child-like grace of the pre-Conciliar nun-poet was not regained after the Council in the same century, even by the pre-Conciliar nun herself, except, arguably, in the case of Mother M Francis PCC.

When the sands of time began running out for the twentieth century and it looked as if the days of the nun-poets were numbered, little appeared to be left to remind us of their lives beyond their literary heritage which includes their glorious Marian praise poetry. Should one feel sad that this period of literary flowering is over? It may not be irrevocably over, it may simply have come to a halt which may prove to be only temporary. One thing at least is clear: the Blessed Virgin Mary was seen as a role model by a group of possibly the most talented religious poets of the century. Perhaps, if ever Catholics and all other Christians find it in their hearts to readmit Christ's mother into their lives, the hush which followed the literary abundance produced by the nun-poets may well emerge as having been, like Mary's name, "a silence full of bells" (Francis PCC 1974:41).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES AND RESEMBLANCES BETWEEN THE MARIAN PRAISE POETRY OF PRE- AND POST-CONCILIAR NUN-POETS.

A close examination of the Marian praise poetry of pre- and post-Conciliar nun-poets in order to find contrasts and similarities reveals the fact that there are few comparisons to be made. The pre-Conciliar nun-poets were in a category of their own, gifted as they were with the joint talents of contemplation and poetry writing. The two flowed into one another. This produced Marian poetry of such luminosity that the work of the post-Conciliar nun-poets is outclassed by comparison.

Not all pre-Conciliar poets stopped writing before the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, as has been demonstrated. Sister Maura SSND and Mother Francis PCC, among others, continued producing their Marian praise poetry until the 1990s. The reason they are categorised in this study as pre-Conciliar poets is that their poetry indicates that their perceptions had been formed and stabilised during this era and that their work reaches a height of beauty which post-Conciliar poets, who lacked their talents, were unable to attain.

The pre-Conciliar poets drew on two thousand years of Catholic teaching with its emphasis on the veneration of the saints, particularly that of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The post-Conciliar poets, on the other hand, drew almost exclusively on the Evangelical truths for their inspiration. Their work is starker, containing narrative poems, sometimes of considerable length, which lack the pre-Conciliar richness and in which no conclusions appear to be drawn.

Sister Robin Stratton OCD, in the introductory stanzas to her poem **Here is a Woman** (1979:29) shows that she feels no need to go in search of the traditions which led to the establishment of the Carmelite Order of which she is a member. This leads to a starkness and sense of isolation in this poem

which is utterly foreign to the Marian praise poetry of Sister Robin's pre-Conciliar counterparts.

According to Hoever (1977:290), the Order of Carmel takes its name from Mount Carmel which was the first place dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and where a chapel was erected in Mary's honour before her Assumption. He adds:

> On (16 July 1251) pious tradition says the Blessed Virgin appeared to Simon Stock, general of the Carmelites at Cambridge, England, showed him the scapular and promised supernatural favours and her special protection to his Order and to all persons who wear her scapular.

The scapular is narrow strip of cloth in which room has been left for the head, which falls in front and at the back of the wearer, being worn over the shoulders (Latin: *scapulae*) and under the outer garments. Being part of the monastic habit, it symbolises the yoke of Christ (Latin: *jugum Christi*) (cf Matthew 11:29). Lay Catholics affiliated to a religious order wear a scapular consisting of two small squares of cloths, attached by tapes, again worn over the shoulders to fall on the chest and the back.

Sister Robin OCD professes no belief in the "pious tradition" which would almost have been equated with a theological reality by her pre-Conciliar peers. She describes the era when - if ever - she did believe in it as a time in her life when she was but a child "in the land of Carmel's journey" (1). She thus reveals that some of the perceptions of her pre-Conciliar peers strike her as somewhat immature. It will be seen from Sister Robin's poem, moreover, that the post-Conciliar nun-poet, unlike her predecessors, tends to steer clear of bestowing glowing terms of endearment on the Blessed Virgin, who by the pre-Conciliar poet is addressed as "Lady" or "Mary, dear Mother". Sister Robin OCD writes of her simply as "Mary" (4,9) or a "woman" (5,7). Even on the literary level, such a utilitarian form of address tends to sacrifice much of what was lovely in the work of the earlier nun-poets. An extract from Sister Robin OCD's poem follows:

When we were children in the land of Carmel's journey
We read that the solitaries on Mount Carmel
Enlightened by the Spirit on the day of Pentecost
Met with Mary and the disciples
And claimed this woman as their Lady-patroness
It was their way of sharing love and closeness
To this woman of the Fire.

But we've no need to go in search of long-lost tales
About disciples - Mary -
And the solitaries of the Holy Mount that Wind-blown day
To understand
The link that makes us one in Fire
Down through the ages. (1-13)

The author, possibly unintentionally, puts her finger on the very flaw that makes post-Conciliar poetry fail to come alive in a mystical sense when she discards the *naïveté* of her pre-Conciliar peer (and herself, in earlier days) with an almost indulgent air by describing them as "children in the land of Carmel's journey" (1). She shows a need to rationalise each truth in terms of her own logic: "It was their way of stating love and closeness/to this woman of the Fire" (6/7), which seems to intimate that the solitaries concocted the legend. Sister Robin OCD thus discards the feasibility of a continuing apparitional link between Christ and the Church during the ages which separate the present from the Ascension of Jesus and the deaths of the apostles and the Blessed Virgin. The pre-Conciliar nun-poets, on the other hand, appear to have based their perceptions on the premise that, because God is omnipotent and because Christ performed so many miracles throughout His life on earth, a few additional marvels done by God in recent centuries would not tax their credulity beyond its limits. As demonstrated in their poetry, the pre-Conciliar nun-poets had no trouble believing in Marian apparitions, whether in Guadeloupe, Lourdes, Fatima or, for that matter, Carmel. Accordingly, their poems in this regard have a breathless, festive air of anticipation for the great day their readers will meet the Blessed Virgin - and her Divine Son - in heaven, face to face. This quality is lacking from the more pragmatic Marian poetic utterance of their post-Conciliar peers, to its detriment.

It is on a literary as well as a mystical level that the poetry of the two categories is poles apart. When a pre-Conciliar poem on Carmel by Sister Sada Marie Fingerlin, **Rosa Carmeli** (1957:37), is juxtaposed with **Light of Carmel**, a post-Conciliar one by Sister Antonia Teresa OCD, it shows that the former possessed the ability to produce poetry by the grace of God, a talent to which the latter could lay no claim (Marian Library: Competition Collection):

LIGHT OF CARMEL

Dressed in brown her flowing robe
Encompasses all who share her hope
The child she bears a light to all
The Son of day awaits your call.

The promise of hope she now extends
To those who call her by name: "a friend"
Covered with grace, her scapular shields
To those in need, her love she yields

Draw near to the font of Carmel's grace
In peaceful silence, seek your place
Carmel's Queen will guide you there
Her grace and blessings with you she'll share.

This perfunctory verse is a superficial effort, shorn of depth, of literary fluency and of any claim to lasting beauty. Though Sister Antonia Teresa OCD, in contrast with Sister Robin OCD, appears to share all the traditional beliefs of the pre-Conciliar nun-poets, she does not have their poetic talents. In order to achieve a rhyme scheme, she inserts meaningless clauses and sentences into her poem, such as "all who share her hope" (2) and "The Son of day awaits your call" (4). Such lines leave the reader wondering whether the author is referring to a call for mercy, salvation or some other grace. How different, by contrast, is the following Carmel poem by Sister Sada Marie Fingerlin (See Carmel Bride 1957:37):

ROSA CARMELI
Rose of Carmel, Mary Mother
Till our birth in heaven
Carry us, thy one Christ child,
Within thy Spirit's womb, O Maria!

Thou root of Jesse budding forth
The Floweret Divine
Be ever nigh and make of me
Dependent as child of thine

Hard press the thorns among which grew
Earth's only lily - thou.
Keep pure thy little ones who dwell
'neath thy protection now.

Thy counsel grant to all who call
In each uncertainty
And solace thou our griefs and woes
Through all adversity

Thy warriors we, our armour thou
To us thy own strength lend;
When battles press most fiercely, may
Thy Scapular defend.

O Virgin pure, our Mother kind
Thy One Christ-Child are we
Our only hope of mercy, thou
Bright star above life's sea.

Thou key and gate of paradise
So act on us, thine own,
That we, who share thy life, may share
The glory of thy crown.

Rosa Carmeli, florida Maria,
Intra tua nos gere viscera,
Et post mortem transfer ad
Aethera O Maria.

By comparison with the post-Conciliar Carmel poem, there is an infinite aura of subtlety and mystique, which is paradoxically integrated into a compact unity, contained in the Carmel poem by Sada Marie Fingerlin. Like **Light of Carmel** this is a simple scanning rhyme, consisting of quatrains. However, in

this case, the rhyme pattern, though simple and monosyllabic, is uncontrived, yet each line is fraught with meaning. Perhaps the poet achieves this effect because she is not afraid to divert from the normal sequence of words, e.g.: "To us thine own strength lend" (18).

The poem consists of six quatrains in ballad measure. The metre thus comprises iambic tetrameter in the uneven lines and trimeter in the even lines. The post-Conciliar poem, on the other hand, consists of relentless iambic tetrameter throughout. This has a soporific effect on the reader.

The poet addresses Mary in the lofty imagery of the Old Testament, calling her: "Thou root of Jesse, budding forth/The Floweret Divine" (5-6), rather than using hackneyed terms such as "Carmel's Queen" and "a friend" which are resorted to by Sister Antonia Teresa.

Sister Sada Marie has the pre-Conciliar poet's gift for encapsulation, the ability to compress the utmost meaning into very few words, as shown in the line: "Thy warriors we, our armour thou" (17), six words which contain a paradox and knit two inter-related concepts into one integral entity. This is an accomplishment the post-Conciliar poet cannot boast of possessing. In this case, the encapsulation simultaneously stresses the interaction between Mary and humankind.

This poet does not shy away from startling the reader: "Thy one Christ-Child are we" (22). The shock effect wears off as the reader recalls the Pauline text (Romans 12:5): "... we, being many, are one body in Christ ...".

The pre-Conciliar poet, therefore, also knows her Old and New Testaments but she uses the texts to enrich her poetry without stripping it of its mystical quality and connotations. Her poetry is enhanced by her Latin quotation at the end of the poem. A free translation of this is given in italics as an introduction. This ploy ties up the entire poem into a unified entity.

Rosa Carmeli shows that there is a richness to be found in pre-Conciliar Marian poetry, which is notably lacking in its post-Conciliar variety, which denudes Marian poetry of its richness and mystique by reducing it to the bare, "sun-bleached" bones which comprise the poetic leftovers of a disposition that prizes rationalism above all else.

That the bleakness has nothing to do with length but is only a matter of the quality of the poetic utterance is demonstrated by the pre-Conciliar Mother Francis PCC in a poem which, though only twelve lines in length, is nevertheless enriched by several universal themes, expressed in glorious imagery (1996:167):

FESTIVALE: TWO MOVEMENTS
(For Our Lady's Assumption)

When stars fall back in wonder, and the sun
Shields his golden eye against such fire
As Mary is, returning to her son

What bourdon stops, of sea-roar underscore
The lightning's corno, while the morning chimes
Against the noon, the night, the evermore!

II

But there is pianissimo for heart
And love is dulcet where the flowers stand
In open-petalled wonder at her tomb.

Call back the flutes and violins of spring
And find them still too clangorous for love
Singing its silence at her empty grave.

This poem, written in iambic pentameter tercets, calls on the universal themes of light (1; 2), sound (4; 5), music (7; 10; 11; 12), time (1; 2; 5; 6) and flowers (8; 9) to convey its message that Mary is God's most marvellous creation (3) and delightful in every way to God. Mother Francis is one of the most representative members of the pre-Conciliar school of nun-poets - not only because she has outlived so many of her peers. In her poetry she retains the ability to reach heights of lyrical perfection commensurate with the loftiness of

the religious spirituality which sees God as the Master and Creator of all. He it is Whom the pre-Conciliar nun-poets seek to serve everywhere they find themselves - whether this happens to be in the laboratory, the classroom, the kitchen, the chapel or in outer space is immaterial. One created being went before them who in her life and love fulfilled God's behest with every fibre of her being - Mary, the Mother of Christ and of the human race. Their love for her radiates from the lines of the poetry they wrote in her praise.

That their post-Conciliar peers, in their Marian praise poetry, do not reach similar heights of literary fluency is not merely a matter of talent or inspiration. The faith of the pre-Conciliar poet is as much in evidence in their poetry as is their literary skill, and vastly enhances it. The pre-Conciliar poets, moreover, were skilled linguists; grammarians with a spontaneous gift of expressing every Christ-focused virtue they saw to emulate in Mary, which talent they enhanced by exhaustive studies in English. Several of them received master's and doctoral degrees at a time when not every young man or woman was fortunate enough to receive the opportunity of completing even high school education. In their rhetoric they use figures of speech such as climax, personification, rhetorical question, incantation, synaesthesia, paradox, alliteration and onomatopoeia. These are ploys which are seldom encountered in post-Conciliar Marian poetry.

The efforts at rationalising of the exponents of the latter school, such as the intimation that Christ needed to change water into wine because the apostles, being crude fishermen, had consumed more than their allotment, is not only impossible to verify. It also tends to deprive their poetry of the delicate mystique and paradoxically reasonable enigma with which the poetic utterance in honour of the Blessed Virgin by pre-Conciliar nun-poets is so liberally endowed.

Judging by the poetry we have seen in this study (which represents but a tiny fraction of their output of Marian praise poetry) it is posited that the pre-Conciliar Marian poets' work reached a height of beauty and fluency that has not been surpassed by any group of religious writers during the final century

of the second millennium, including the post-Conciliar nun-poets. Their work shows us that they were possessed of deep faith, hope, love, intelligence, humour, humility and endurance. That these were all qualities possessed by Mary, the Maid of Bethlehem, is the truth they constantly sought to emphasise in their poetic utterance. It is posited, therefore, that, unlike the Marian praise poetry of their post-Conciliar peers, their work in this regard contains a message of life and hope for the world.

CONCLUSION

This study represents an endeavour to introduce some examples characterising the luminous lyrical poetry written in praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary by women religious in the United States of America. This genre reached its acme during the second quarter of the final century of the second millennium AD. It culminated in the publication, mainly in religious periodicals of the era, of a plentiful number of some of the most delightful Marian lyrics to be written since medieval times - with the possible exception of the work of the nineteenth century Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins, from the flame of whose poetic genius several of the nun-poets clearly lit their own literary candles.

The truly gifted author has the power to make a positive or negative contribution to the opinions and disposition of the reader. The nun-poets' message of hope, which regards mental and physical suffering as a purifying force, diametrically counteracts the nihilistic orientation overshadowing some of the Modernist and post-Modernist writings predominating English-language literature during the twentieth century. It is therefore submitted that this almost unknown school of poetry deserves a far larger readership than it has apparently hitherto enjoyed.

The Marian poem composed by the nun-poets, whether as a lyric, ballad, sonnet or in any other form, serves to balance the scales poised between inner hope and despair, shedding light on the resilience and positive disposition inherent in many people of the era. This led them to continue rebuilding a world plunged into chaos throughout the century on account of incessant wars and persecutions of individuals, nations, religions and ideologies.

By radiating their literary message of hope, based on the Christ-focused virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the American nun-poets of the second quarter of the twentieth century have effectively contributed to the existential distribution of hope in their country and thus, given the international status of

the United States, to the world. Their contribution to the body of literature represents a vivifying force aimed at combating the paralysing undermining and annihilating effects of despair as represented in much contemporaneous literature.

Care has been taken in this thesis to demonstrate that it was the nun-poets whose perceptions were formed before the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council who produced Marian praise poetry of this very high quality. Some of them continued to write until the time research for this study was in progress. These writers have nevertheless been referred to as pre-Conciliar nun-poets, for, though their style may have matured or otherwise developed, their Marian sentiments have not undergone any corresponding change. Hence their poetry never loses its essential quality of hopefulness, an attitude notably missing in the climate of turbulent violence and fear which characterises the twentieth century. An investigation into some Marian praise poetry by their post-Conciliar peers shows that this pales into insignificance by comparison with their own, lacking all claim to literary immortality.

It is therefore posited that the saga of twentieth-century literature would be incomplete without the powerful infusion of hope as found in the poetic utterance of the American religious seekers of the second quarter of the twentieth century.

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