



Giorgione - Pala di Castelfranco, *The Madonna and Child Between St. Francis and St. Nicasius*. 1503.

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP in our little house on Applewood Drive in Youngstown, New York, our next-door neighbor happened to be a professor of philosophy at a nearby Catholic university. During my own college years, when I was home, he would sometimes tell us stories about his experiences in teaching at the university. Once he told us how he had asked his class the question: How many of you believe in angels? About half the class raised their hands. Then he asked: How many of you believe in demons? And then almost everyone in the class raised their hands. Now, it isn't very difficult to see how absurd and illogical a position it is to hold that demons exist, but not angels. What is a demon but a fallen angel? For someone to believe that there are demons without believing in angels would be as if someone believed in darkness but not in light, or

believed in blindness but not in sight.

But this story does manifest something that seems to be common in our experience of reality in our fallen world. From our encounter with affairs in the world and also from our own inner experience, we can be left with the impression that evil is more real than goodness; that evil is more powerful than goodness. When we reflect on the mystery of Our Blessed Mother and the grace of her Immaculate Conception, we can discern the great deception and lie of this position. God's light and goodness have completely triumphed in one of His free creatures. In the Blessed Mother there is not found even the least shadow of evil or sin. All is goodness and light. Evil has been completely defeated, because goodness is the more powerful and efficacious force.

“We are not the principal agents of our own sanctification. We have a savior.”

We see in a most striking way the greater power

of goodness over evil when we contemplate our Blessed Mother at the foot of the cross. When we attempt to look with the eyes of faith into the heart of Mary as she stood beneath the Cross, what do we see? What were the sentiments of her heart? Was she full of bitter reproaches against God for what He was permitting her Son to suffer? Was she full of anger and resentment because of the hostility of the Jewish authorities, because of the cruelty of the Romans, because of the betrayal of Judas and the cowardice of the Apostles? These would have been natural and understandable reactions. But these clearly could not have been the sentiments of our Blessed Mother's heart. But then we have to ask ourselves: how is it possible that she was not consumed by these emotions? The only possible answer is that by the light of God in her soul she could see the deeper reality of what was happening; she knew she was witnessing the greatest act of God's love. She also knew that she was witnessing not only the redemption of all men, but she was witnessing her very own redemption. All the great graces and privileges that the Blessed Mother enjoyed were the fruit of Christ's re-



demption—they were bought at the price of His blood. The tremendous grace and gift of the Immaculate Conception was the fruit of Christ's passion. Mary was also redeemed by the blood of Christ even though in a higher and more excellent way. In the midst of her suffering, her soul must have been filled with deep gratitude and thanksgiving; her son also suffered and died for her. The complete and total conquest of evil and the complete and total triumph of the good did not have its ultimate source in the Blessed Virgin, but in God.

For those of us who are striving to live good and faithful Christian lives, there is no escaping the experience of our struggle with sin. The common experience of anyone who has attempted to live a genuinely devout Christian life is that there are within us very tenacious tendencies to evil. We may see very clearly our pride and selfishness, our impatience and disordered anger, our disordered affections and attachments to pleasure. The sheer tenacity of these inclinations in us and our seeming inability to remove them can easily be the source of sadness and discouragement and can also leave us with the sense that evil is stronger than goodness.

If we look at the testimony of the saints, of those who overcame to a significant degree those evil tendencies within them: on the one hand, they will tell us that yes, it cost them something and most likely it cost them quite a bit, to oppose and fight against these evils within. But on the other hand, they would not have the least hesitation in testifying that they are well aware that they are not the ultimate source and cause of the growth of goodness within them. Even their ability to carry on the struggle in a persevering way, was a gift of God, a fruit of the redemption of Christ. Sanctification is principally the work of Christ in the soul, not our own. No one was more aware of this truth than the Blessed Mother. She understood that she was not the ultimate source of her own goodness. All was gift, all was received from the all-powerful goodness of God. When it comes to combatting our own sinful

tendencies we can make the mistake of putting all the weight on our own shoulders; we can think and act as if all depended on us. We are not the principal agents of our own sanctification. We have a savior.

Some years ago I was reading a book of a popular psychologist and in the book he related that in his work as a psychologist, very often people would ask him: “Why is there evil in the world?” In reflecting on this, he was struck by the fact that no one ever asked: “Why is there goodness in the world?” We tend to be plagued and preoccupied with the mystery of iniquity. Perhaps we would live happier lives if we could become preoccupied by the even deeper mystery of goodness. One of the images of our Blessed Mother

that we find in the Scriptures is that of a Garden Enclosed—she is a garden of God’s bountiful goodness and beauty in which there was never any deception, there was never any negativity, never even the least shadow of sin or evil. She is the highest reflection of the mystery of God’s goodness and if we can spend more time within this Garden Enclosed we may find the most efficacious means of combatting the evils we find within and around us.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”. The darkness has not overcome the light, because the darkness *cannot* overcome the light; the darkness *does not have the power* to overcome the light. There is nothing more powerful than light and truth and love. ❖

The Story of Our Lady of Lebanon

On the first Sunday of May, the Maronite Church celebrates the feast of Our Lady of Lebanon. Who is our Lady of Lebanon? Does this refer to a little known apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Middle East?

The feast of Our Lady of Lebanon actually refers to a 28-foot tall statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Harissa, Lebanon, only 30 minutes north of Beirut. It was completed in May of 1908 and dedicated by Patriarch Hoyek, who had commissioned its construction in 1904 in honor of the 50th anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. It was he who placed this feast on the Maronite calendar.

The shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon is one of the most popular places of pilgrimage in Lebanon with countless Christians and Muslims visiting every year. It has even been the site of some miracles and alleged apparitions.

Given all that Lebanon has been through in modern history and what it continues to go through today, we see God's Providence in having a visible sign of Our Lady's love and protection for the people of Lebanon built in so prominent a place. May Our Lady of Lebanon's prayers be with us all! ❖



Note: Our next issue will be in September. Thank you for all of your prayers and support!